

What gang aren't: Contrasting gangs with other collectives

Martin Bouchard, PhD
mbouchard@sfu.ca

Karine Descormiers, PhD

Alysha Girn, MA

Final Draft, October 2022

Citation:

Bouchard, M., Descormiers, K., Girn, A. (2024). What gangs aren't: Contrasting gangs with other collectives. Ch. 3 In *Oxford Handbook on Gangs*, edited by D. Pyrooz, J. Densley, J, Liverso. New York: Oxford.

Summary

This chapter aims to compare and contrast gangs with delinquent peer groups, organized crime groups, and other collectives to tease out what, precisely, makes a gang, a gang. We propose several dimensions to consider when aiming to determine whether a collective looks more like a gang or another form, some focus on how collectives approach crime and others focus on the organizational aspects of collectives. In the end, these dimensions combine in unique ways that capture the wide variations observed in gangs worldwide. The chapter discusses the measurement of each dimension, hoping to stimulate future research in this area, but also to help scholars and practitioners recognize what gangs are and what they aren't, when they see them.

Introduction

All gang scholars have encountered and potentially struggled, with the problem of defining gangs. Many settle on being practical about it (“here we use X definition”), others creatively avoid it (“we don’t use a definition, but a set of criteria”) and yet most still approach the study of gangs and groups with no specific definition in mind, relying on a potential common, but implied understanding of what gangs are, and what gangs aren’t. We personally are guilty of having done all three across a number of publications.

The reasons to pay attention to what gangs are and aren’t numerous. For one, there appears to be a “gang effect” – becoming a gang member has been shown to increase one’s criminal involvement beyond what would have been otherwise expected (e.g. Thornberry et al. 1993, 66; Pyrooz et al. 2016, 376; Bouchard and Spindler 2010, 927). The gang environment provides a series of additional encouragements and resources that are decidedly criminogenic, and that are specific to these types of collectives. This group process also appears to be more intense for “gangs” compared to peer groups (Bouchard and Spindler 2010, 927). If this is something about ‘what gangs are’, then, being able to determine whether a collective is indeed a gang and not peer group that dabbles in delinquency becomes extremely valuable.

For another, considerable resources are invested in tackling the ‘gang problem’ in most jurisdictions (Klein and Maxson 2006, 211). Budgets of course directly depend on counting gangs – the size of the problem. And the size of the problem depends on how one defines and measures “gangs”. A jurisdiction could decide that any collective involved in some form of criminality would constitute a gang and could proceed to design interventions that target gangs at large. Yet, if applying broad definitions, time and resources could be invested in tackling groups that are not involved in serious crime or otherwise, pose a significant threat. In addition, the differences between the different types of collectives may not be obvious. Properly diagnosing the nature of a jurisdiction’s gang problem, then, is of paramount importance to appropriate resource investment and deployment¹.

The study of *what* gangs are, cannot be detached from *why* they exist in the first place. From the perspective of the prospective member, gangs may provide an outlet for fostering friendships, shaping identity, responding to a variety of threats, and providing the opportunities and resources to earn money for thrill-seeking adolescents. Gangs, in short, provide a perceived subcultural solution to several human needs (Cohen 1955, 121).

The specific form and flavor that gangs take help to determine whether youths remain embedded in gangs through adulthood and whether they preserve some stakes in conformity. It impacts the extent to which they will experience violent victimization (Pyrooz et al. 2012, 99), and the risks of premature death (Pauls 2017, 12; Pyrooz et al. 2020, 5). Youths involved in peer groups who like to dabble in minor drug dealing and property crime may get out unscathed. But those who are involved in gangs that routinely enter conflict with others may experience victimization and trauma at levels that would be challenging to recover from (Beresford and Wood 2016, 149-50; Kerig et al. 2016, 648).

The problem is that a broad definition may treat these distinct and different groups and experiences as the same. If any delinquent youth collectives are considered gangs, then we risk designing interventions that completely miss the mark. We risk throwing the book at a simple manifestation of adolescence, instead of carefully teasing out the elements that make some of these potentially more harmful, and consequential. It is normal, then, that criminologists have been interested in defining and measuring what gangs are.

¹ We also encountered the opposite issue – jurisdictions assuming there were no “gang issues” when there were. Neither of these contexts is amenable to appropriate gang interventions.

The chapter is named what gangs “aren’t”. Part of the exercise is to be able to tell, when one encounters a group, whether we are dealing with a peer group, a gang, or a criminal organization. At the extreme of the continuum, the differences may be obvious; there are no mistaking high schoolers at the local park who sometimes get into trouble, with members of the la Cosa Nostra. It is however much more challenging to distinguish between that peer group and another that some would consider to be a local gang. Both, after all, could be formed of teenagers who may belong to the same school; getting together in groups of the same size and be involved, in the aggregate, in many of the same legal and illegal activities. What, then, can help distinguish between the two?

Our work is aimed at shedding light on the grey areas in between those extremes, the space where “gangs” tend to belong. Doing so requires an inquiry beyond how gangs differ from peer groups, but also on the other end of the spectrum to consider how gangs differ from criminal organizations.

This premise comes with a few assumptions about how we approach the study of gangs. First, we see groups, gangs, and criminal organizations as loosely belonging to the same spectrum of collectives involved in crime, even if the nature of their involvement and the presence of organizational features vary widely. In essence, we adopt the same approach as others have done before in seeing these collectives not necessarily as distinct species, but as manifestations of collectives being observed at a different stage (Ayling 2011, 13-20; Densley 2012, 48), or simply at a different point on the continuum of organization (Bouchard and Spindler 2010, 925; Decker and Pyrooz 2013, 3). Through this process, we build on the foundation laid out a long time ago by Thrasher: “There is no hard and fast dividing line between predatory gangs of boys and criminal groups of younger and older adults. They merged into each other by imperceptible gradations, and the latter have their real explanation, for most part, in the former” (Thrasher 1963, 281).

Yet, even if this approach helps resist adopting rigid labels, we recognize the benefit of identifying the stage a collective is at (e.g., the “recreational” vs. the “crime” stage (Densley 2012, 48)), or where it fits on the spectrum of organization (e.g., from “informal-diffuse” to “instrumental-rational” organization (Decker and Pyrooz 2013, 2)). In this essay, we refer to the low organization, recreational stage collectives as “peer groups”, the slightly more organized and crime-focused entities as “gangs”, and the more structured, criminal enterprise-focused collectives as “criminal organizations”.² From Densley (2012, 48-49), we preserve the concept of evolutionary phases; most gangs would have first started as peer groups, and then a minority of gangs would further evolve into bona fide criminal enterprises. The evolution can be observed in the intensity of a collective’s delinquent involvement, and perhaps how much of their identity, as a group, revolves around crime, both symbolically and economically³ (Densley 2014, 524).

This does not imply that we see clearcut distinctions between them. In fact, part of the essay will demonstrate how, on some dimensions, some gangs may appear more similar to peer groups, whereas other gangs may be indistinguishable from criminal organizations. Some “gangs” may indeed be gangs and yet, be disorganized, while others will adopt more organizational features without necessarily qualifying as criminal organizations. While there is room for variation within categories, we believe the following seven

² We prefer the latter term as opposed to “organized criminal group” (OCG) or other similar terms as it avoids adding the qualifier “organized” to label these collectives. While many may show signs of organization, this aspect of their structure can be measured, and the qualifier “organized” may or may not apply. We do use OCG when we summarize a study that uses it.

³ For Densley (2012, 48), the level of organization adopted by a gang will help serve the nature of the criminal involvement of their members. For us, the relationship between organization and crime may be less rational, at times. Some organizational features may be adopted for symbolic reasons, with no implications for criminality.

dimensions effectively help to distinguish gangs between either peer groups, criminal organizations, or both.

Aims

Our goal was to comb through the existing evidence on gangs and to establish the various dimensions upon which these collectives may be assessed. We found that gangs can be distinguished from either peer groups or criminal organizations along seven dimensions:

- 1) The willingness to use violence or its threat
- 2) The group's commitment to crime
- 3) The importance of economic goals
- 4) The scope of criminal activity
- 5) The group organization/structure
- 6) The age structure of membership
- 7) The social structure of cooperation in and outside the group

As summarized in Table 1 below, we divide the dimensions into two broad categories, the dimensions that belong to “crime”, and those that belong to how collectives are “organized”. These two dimensions have been at the core of gang definitional debates for a long time (Curry 2015, 8; Klein and Maxson 2006, 163-165; Pyrooz and Densley 2018, 231). Here, however, we use these dimensions inspired by research invested in describing the different types of gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006, 174; Spindler and Bouchard 2011, 269-70), recognizing that both categories need to be considered to do justice to the variations in gang behavior.

The vast majority of dimensions are amenable to measurement on a scale, or a continuum from “low” for peer groups, to “high” for criminal organizations. In general, we avoided dimensions that were so specific to one type of collective that it would not make sense to evaluate how that dimension plays out in others. For instance, criminal organizations may be the only collectives invested in criminal governance or widespread corruption of public officials. The more generic dimension of “scope of criminal activity” is meant to capture these types of scenarios. Yet, the dimension of willingness to use violence or its threat is not as easily amenable to scaling. Instead, when used on its own⁴, it is meant as a discrete marker to differentiate between groups and gangs; the proportion of violence in a collective is not assumed to increase as we move from gangs to criminal organizations. For all other dimensions, it is reasonable to expect a continuum where a measure that captures the dimension increases, in some way, from peer groups to criminal organizations. The bulk of the chapter provides an overview of each dimension with some of the research that informs it.

⁴ It is possible to distinguish the violence used by gangs from the violence used by criminal organizations when merging this category with another dimension, such as organization. The more sophisticated the use of violence, the more likely an entity is to be a criminal organization.

Table 1. Seven Dimensions to Differentiate Groups from Gangs, Gangs from Criminal Organizations

Dimension	Measurement	Peer Groups	Gangs	Criminal Organizations
CRIME				
Willingness to use violence or its threat	Discrete	No	Yes	Yes
Group commitment to crime	Continuum	Small	Increasingly important	Very important
Importance of economic goals	Continuum	Small	Increasingly important	Essential
Scope of criminal activity	Continuum	Micro-local	Mostly local	Beyond local
ORGANIZATION				
Group organization/structure	Continuum	No to little organization	Some organization	Relatively organized
Age-graded membership structure	Continuum	Homogenous	Limited range	Wide range
Cooperation in and outside the group	Continuum	In	Mostly in, some out	In and out

The distinctions we made between cells in Table 1 are all simplifications. We have done enough research on gangs, groups, and organizations to know that there is wide variation within each category. Yet, for minds that can imagine an “average” or typical entity within this range, the table may help make some basic distinctions clearer. Ideally, we hope that the proposed dimensions inspire gang scholars to integrate some of these measures into their empirical research. From there, we will be able to propose quantitative ranges to go along with the qualitative labels provided here.

In proposing these dimensions, we always had measurement in mind: researchers or practitioners who encounter individuals who belong to collective entities should be able to tell, by locating the group along these dimensions, whether it is dealing with a group, a gang, or a criminal organization⁵. An added bonus will be to help us think through definitions: could it be that by being able to locate where gangs fit along these dimensions, we would be able to get close to a definition that can fairly represent the range of gangs that exist? We aimed to make clear statements and where appropriate, clear recommendations to capture each dimension.

Seven dimensions to tell groups, gangs, and criminal organizations apart

- 1) The willingness to use violence or its threat

A common difficulty in trying to distinguish between peer groups and gangs is that both groups tend to be involved in similar types of crimes. For instance, in a sample of self-nominated gang and peer group

⁵ Notable by its absence, is the often-mentioned dimension that would capture specialization; the extent to which collectives tend to focus on a single activity. While it could very well be that there is a stronger tendency for gangs to be more involved in cafeteria-style offending than peer groups, the evidence for criminal organizations is not as strong. There are examples of organizations that specialize in one activity (e.g., Reuter 2014, 360) and others that don't (e.g., Tremblay et al. 2009, 35), but to our knowledge, no strong patterns either way. Without clear evidence, we prefer to keep the dimension out of this table. We would expect a u-shaped curve on the specialization scale where both peer groups and criminal organizations are more likely to specialize than gangs.

members, Spindler and Bouchard (2011, 274) found as many as 16 combinations of structure and criminal behaviour within the data, with individuals from categories being represented in every single combination.

Yet, some aspects of their criminal involvement still differed. Part of it is the importance that crime takes generally (i.e., how much are members thinking about committing crimes and getting involved in criminal activities?), including the importance of economic aims (i.e., how much is making money from crime a central concern of the group?). Another aspect has to do with the scope of crime, especially when it comes to market crimes: many types of collectives may be involved in drug markets, but involvement beyond the local gets us closer to criminal organizations, rather than gangs or groups.

In this section, we are focused on another dimension that, for us, is at the core of what is a gang: the willingness to use violence. In countless studies, both qualitative and quantitative, scholars found at least some general overlap in the nature of crimes committed by collectives that considered themselves to be peer groups, and those that self-nominated as gangs, as both were involved in crimes such as, drug dealing, vandalism and burglary. Yet, to be involved in violence, especially in collective violence in the name of the group, was something that stood out as a marker of difference between groups. Violence is a resource that is not necessarily accessible to all collectives, or to all members within collectives (Densley 2012, 53). This point is well articulated in Aldridge et al.'s (2012, 36) research study that focused on testing different aspects of the Eurogang definition. The authors begin their argument by pointing out that a general concept such as, "involvement in illegal activity as part of its group identity" was too broad of a dimension to truly define gangs (Aldridge et al. 2012, 36). Instead, a feature of gangs that separated them from other youth group formations was whether the group had a reputation or a willingness to resort to violence. Through this criterion, the gang is not required to *specialize* in violence; it was only required to be a recognized possibility.

Similar findings were reported in Ashton and Bussu's (2020, 280) study of how adolescents at risk of gang involvement define gangs and other groups. Respondents saw peer groups as definitely involved in a variety of criminal acts, but only perceived gangs and more organized groups to go deeper into violent crimes (Ashton and Bussu 2020, 287). Lopez et al. (2006, 308) reported very similar findings in their comparisons of "gangs" vs "crews". Gangs were defined by participants as organized groups with long histories of existence and initiation rituals, while crews were described more loosely as friends who had common interests, with shorter periods of existence, and no explicit initiation rituals (Lopez et al. 2006, 309). Like others, the study by Lopez et al. (2006, 309) showed how gangs and crews differed primarily in terms of violence. Crews shared many characteristics with gangs, but engagement in shooting and serious assaults was not among them. Carson et al.'s (2017, 306) use of the G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) study confirmed that periods of delinquent group involvement were marked with increases in nonviolent offending, but it was only periods of actual gang membership that were associated with increases in violent behavior.

This is not a surprise, of course, that violence is central to what gangs are as it's often been at the heart of theories of gang behavior (Decker 1996, 244), or gang definitions at large (Curry 2015, 12). But we see it as an essential distinction between peer groups and gangs, emphasizing its importance for future work on gangs, especially for scholars and practitioners who hope to exclude peer groups from consideration.

Violence is also ubiquitous for criminal organizations. We see no large enough difference between gangs and criminal organizations' *willingness to use violence* to consider this dimension along a continuum. Violence has been part of the definitions of organized crime for a long time (Reuter, 1983, xi; Varese, 2017, 45). This is because violence is often a necessary aspect of managing illegal business. In the absence of legal dispute-resolution mechanisms, violence becomes part of the portfolio of strategies used to settle

disputes or overtake the competition (Bouchard et al. 2021, 181; Chung 2008, 309; Reuter and Tonry 2020, 10). We also do not believe that measuring the willingness to use violence on a continuum, or quantifying it, would reveal that this dimension increases as we go from peer groups to gangs, and finally to criminal organizations. Gangs, in other words, may be just as willing to use violence as criminal organizations.

The nature of violence, however, may differ between groups. Instrumental violence may be more frequent in criminal organizations than in street gangs due to the importance of economic goals (Decker and Pyrooz 2013, 4), and this more specific distinction in ways that violence is used may prove fruitful in distinguishing gangs from other collectives in many jurisdictions. Yet, we stopped short of identifying gangs specifically with expressive or symbolic violence and criminal organizations with instrumental violence, as we find too many instances of instrumental violence in street gangs (e.g., turf wars), and symbolic violence in criminal organizations⁶.

But this distinction may help tell groups from gangs in cases where data on involvement in violence, and/or willingness to use it, would be available. From a measurement perspective, this dimension requires access to data on the diversity of crimes committed in the context of the gang. Data that are not amenable to make a direct connection between criminal activity and whether and how it is associated with a collective entity would not be suitable for this task. Data extracted from police files where motive can be determined (Papachristos 2009, 85) can be used to measure this dimension. Interviews with gang members, ethnographic observations, as well as self-reported data on criminal involvement in the name of a group may better tackle suited the “willingness” aspect of this dimension (e.g., Ashton and Bussu 2020, 281; Decker 1996, 246; Descormiers and Morselli 2011, 300; Pyrooz et al. 2012, 18).

2) The group’s commitment to crime

A clear distinction between peer groups and gangs is the increased importance of criminal involvement. Contrary to the willingness to use violence, this more generic category is quantifiable. And the generic aspect is key here: it matters little, in this dimension, what specific criminal activity members commit⁷. What matters is the amount of time they spend thinking about crime and doing crime.

Nowhere is this distinction clearer than in Densley’s (2012, 47) analysis of the organization of London gangs. Densley’s (2012, 46) paper is especially useful in its representation of the full spectrum of gang organization we are tackling in this essay. The article describes the natural progression of gangs from recreational neighborhood groups to delinquent collectives, and finally to full-scale criminal enterprises. Densley (2012, 47) argues that crime and enterprise are not specific gang ‘types’, but rather represent sequential stages in the evolutionary cycle of gangs. In the early “peer group” stages, crime is recreational, opportunistic, and irregular (Densley 2012, 42). It is when crime evolves to be slightly more regular, requiring some planning and organization that entities are said to have reached the next “gang” stage (Densley 2012, 51). Once fully evolved into a criminal enterprise, the group’s commitment to crime is so strong, that it requires more structure and organization than at any other stage (Densley 2012, 54). Ashton and Bussu’s (2020, 287) study on the differences in criminal involvement for various types of collectives confirmed that a group’s commitment to crime tended to increase as one moved from groups to gangs and to organized crime groups, with the latter being the most clearly focused on “serious” money making and

⁶ Examples of symbolic or expressive violence in criminal organizations include outlaw motorcycle gangs using the “power of the patch” to intimidate law enforcement agencies or citizens (von Lampe and Blokland 2020, 520; Tremblay et al. 2009, 37), and Mexican criminal organizations using symbolism such as “narco-messages” after a murder (Atuesta 2017, 100).

⁷ This is also why this dimension is treated separately for economic aims; we encountered many collectives that qualify as gangs, are almost fully committed to crime, but only engage in violent crime or assaults. This aspect makes them gangs more than groups, but the lack of economic motives makes them more like groups.

firearms. Similar findings were uncovered in studies of gang typologies (e.g., Klein and Maxson 2006, 183; Spindler and Bouchard 2011, 276): criminal involvement increases with organizational level for most types of collectives.

In considering group commitment to crime, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that most collectives, even the most organized ones, do not exist solely for the purpose of committing crimes. While the commission of crime may be essential to include in members' motives to belong, there is typically more to membership than simply access to criminal opportunities. As shown, Table 1 summarizes it as "very important", but not necessarily the only dimension of importance for criminal organizations. For instance, mafia scholars have demonstrated in numerous ways how "crime" is but one aspect of what belonging to La Cosa Nostra means (Haller 1990, 227; Paoli 2002, 54), and the same is true for many outlaw motorcycle gangs (Quinn and Koch 2003, 294; von Lampe and Blokland 2020, 535).

Indeed, the question for this dimension is a matter of degree. For each collective, one could ask the following question: *If we removed criminal involvement from the portfolio of activities committed by the group, would the group dissolve completely?* We can imagine that many peer groups and gangs would survive this test, but few, if any, criminal organizations would. Peer groups and gang are often described first as groups of friends (e.g., Ashton and Bussu 2020, 286; Densley 2012, 48). While criminal organizations embrace values of brotherhood, it is only a secondary portion to the glue that bonds the collectives together.

We can easily imagine ways to quantify this. A measure that taps into the proportion of time spent planning and committing crime appears to be a suitable way to operationalize a group's commitment to crime. We also see how qualitative approaches may be incorporated to capture how members speak to the role of crime within the group, and how it exists potentially alongside other functions and collective interests.

3) Importance of economic aims

A focus on the importance of economic aims can help distinguish groups, gangs, and criminal organizations. In their essay on gangs and organized crime, Decker and Pyrooz (2013, 3) emphasized the symbolic aspects of gangs as a key dimension separating gangs from organized crime. Indeed, less tangible aims like the need to belong or gaining respect or protection are common motives expressed by gang members when joining gangs (Descormiers and Corrado 2016, 1346). We understand the intention, but we see so much symbolism in criminal organizations that we resist the temptation to classify them as entirely focused on the economics of crime. Economic aims are indeed more important in organized crime – after all, criminal organizations offer their members the possibility of an alternative criminal career in crime or earning a living. Within criminal organizations, the allure of gang membership is highly tied to the prospects of economic wealth (Augustyn et al. 2019, 470) Membership needs to be worth their financial while or else they would move on as independent traffickers. However, economic aims alone do not entirely explain an individual's decision to join a criminal organization (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000, 773). Symbolism is also a key element of almost any sustainable criminal organization, from the colors and vests worn by motorcycle gangs to the long process and customs associated with becoming a "man of honor" in La Cosa Nostra (e.g., Paoli 2002, 80; Quinn and Koch 2003, 286).

Given this, we formulated this dimension not as a fight between symbolic or economic, but as a continuum measuring the importance of economic goals for a group. In Densley's (2012, 55) stages but also in research comparing peer groups and gangs (e.g., Ashton and Bussu 2020, 280; Bouchard and Spindler 2010, 930), we can see a clear tendency for economic aims to increase in importance. Spindler and Bouchard's (2011, 273) comparison of group and gang members' criminal involvement, for instance, found that 51% of group members could be classified as falling under the "minor crime" category, with the most prevalent activity

being “regular cannabis use”. Self-reported gang members, for their part, clustered mainly in the “Market” and “Serious” categorizations (Spindler and Bouchard 2011, 273). Yet, the authors still found that 25% of gang members could be classified as being involved in minor delinquency, reminding us of the variation that exists within each category, but also that economic aims tend to increase as we go from groups to gangs (Spindler and Bouchard 2011, 276).

The importance of economic aims is likely to reach its peak within criminal organizations that are largely involved in profit-related crimes, such as drug trafficking. This will manifest itself in criminal organizations formulating plans for economic growth at the group level, such as expanding and diversifying markets. These plans are absent from peer groups, and not consistently present in gangs.

Measuring the importance of economic aims can be done from surveying gang members about their group’s commitment to profit-making activities. It is one thing to collect data on crimes committed by members of the same group, and another to ask about perceptions and intentions. A group may be caught by the police when they are involved in shootings, robberies, or assaults, but they may otherwise be highly focused on the business side of operations. An ideal research design would include both components: digging through police data, and interviewing gang members on their approach to the business aspects of criminal involvement.

4) The scope of criminal activity

One dimension that is more rarely touched upon is the difference in the scope of criminal activity between groups, gangs, and criminal organizations. For us, scope is important to distinguish from the mere consideration of the types of crimes collectives are involved in. Anyone, at any stage, may be involved in drug dealing, and drug supplying at large; yet, only the most advanced forms of collectives will be involved in drug dealing beyond the retail level, de facto excluding peer groups who tend to be constrained to their own neighborhoods. And when it comes to transactions at the importation, or exportation level, further distinctions between gangs and criminal organizations emerge, with only the latter having the resources and breadth of activity to be players on the international scene. Only criminal organizations, in other words, may demonstrate true market power and political influence (Varese 2017, 52; Curry and Mongrain 2009, 17). Only criminal organizations may be involved in corrupting law enforcement officials and customs agents.

This dimension is particularly helpful in distinguishing between collectives that are involved in illegal markets. Broadly speaking, it is entirely possible to find all versions of the collectives we consider in this chapter to be involved in drug supply in some form. The type of crime they are involved in, then, wouldn’t be helpful in differentiating between groups, gangs, and criminal organizations. Yet, the scope of criminal activity may be performed at entirely different levels, making this aspect potentially useful to tell the groups apart. Groups are generally local in scope, local in the “micro places” sense of the term. Taking their typically young age into account, and the rather opportunistic and sporadic criminal involvement they have, we should not expect their crimes to go beyond their immediate environment. The scope of criminal activity tends to increase as groups evolve to the gang and criminal organizations stages – neighborhood, retail-level deals turn into city-level deals and beyond. Yet, some of these boundaries may be blurred where the involvement of gangs goes beyond the local level, without necessarily implying the involvement of criminal organizations. For example, Robinson et al. (2019, 695) described the contemporary drug dealing practices of ‘County Lines’, an illicit drug supply model where gangs utilize young people or vulnerable individuals, to cross police borders and courier drugs. This has been viewed as a form of gang evolution as gangs establish themselves as brokers between national wholesale, and local street dealing (Robinson et al. 2019, 695; Harding 2020, 32).

From a measurement perspective, encountering a collective involved in transactions beyond the retail level is a sign that we are beyond the peer group, recreational level. Scholars don't always have to decide on what the cut-off points are for retail, mid-level, and wholesale transactions. Bouchard and Ouellet (2011, 76), for instance, used a continuous measure of transaction size (in dollar amounts) to control for market level in their study of drug dealers and detection. The scope of criminal activity can also be measured by the size of drug transactions, the number of areas in which the group is active, or the relative distance between the source of the illegal products they buy, and their destination (Bouchard and Ouellet 2011, 82).

Organizational dimensions

5) The group organization/structure

We now move to the dimensions that relate more to the organizational aspects of collectives. In many ways, organizational components can hardly be separated from the criminal dimensions of gangs. They arguably have a symbiotic relationship or, at the very least, they influence each other. In which direction? Some like Densley (2012, 49) argue that external threats and the necessities of the crimes themselves – especially those with financial stakes like drug supplying – create incentives to organize, build systems, and become predictable. However, Densley (2012, 48) meant this in the evolutionary sense, going from one stage to the other. We can also appreciate how gangs may come up with some organizational features that may not be attached to any specific criminal needs.

Gangs vary in their levels of organization. Most show very little levels of organization (Decker et al. 2008, 163; Bjerregard 2010, 26), but it is not that uncommon to find gangs with a moderate degree of organizational structure (Bouchard and Spindler 2010, 930; Decker 2001, 22; Decker and Curry 2000, 477; Pyrooz et al. 2012, 99; Esbensen and Weerman 2005, 25) such as having a leader and some form of hierarchy. Bjerregaard (2002, 44) studied 'organized gangs' and described them as possessing the characteristics typically associated with traditional street gangs, but having names, leaders, regular meetings, a stash of guns and an association with a particular territory. Within the literature on criminal organizations, we see criminal organizations as seemingly highly structured, with governance systems, rules, charts, and promotional ladders (Finckenauer 2005, 75; Varese 2017, 51; von Lampe 2016, 31).

At what point do "organized gangs" become in fact "criminal organizations"? And where do peer groups fit into all of this? Our reading of the literature suggests that peer groups do not typically adopt any organizational features (see Table 1). This is, for us, an important marker of the difference between groups and gangs. Some characteristics of almost any group, like convergence in time and space, for instance, are not a sign of organization. The first, early attempts at organization for crime will determine if the group successfully transitions into a gang. Most will scatter before they reach that stage.

As for the difference between gangs and criminal organizations, examining the literature from the point of view of "organized crime" reveal some convergence with gang scholars in the way that scholars describe the groups they study. Decker and Pyrooz's (2013, 1) distinction between the instrumental-rational, and the informal-diffuse perspectives is useful to illustrate the difference between gangs and criminal organization in this dimension. The instrumental-rational perspective suggests that gangs have a vertical structure, enforce discipline among their members, and are successful in defining and achieving group values. Furthermore, the instrumental-rational perspective states that gangs include age-graded levels of membership, leadership roles, coordinated drug sales, and ties and influence in the political process. Conversely, the informal-diffuse perspective posits that gangs are diffuse, self-interested, and self-motivated aggregations of individuals most of whom sell drugs for themselves. The informal-diffuse perspective also states that leadership is functional and situational, membership is transitory, codes of conduct are limited to secrecy and loyalty, and most importantly, gang members distribute drugs for

individual reasons as opposed to collective purposes. With these perspectives, Decker and Pyrooz (2013, 3) argue that it is more useful to conceptualize gangs along a continuum, with informal-diffuse at one end, and instrumental-rational at the other end. Once individuals become extremely organized and institutionalized, groups depart from the “street gang” criteria, and enter the definitional parameters of an organized crime group.

Another angle to distinguish gangs from criminal organizations refers to governance. While both groups can be heavily involved in the drug trade, only criminal organizations have the power to regulate and control the production and distribution of drugs (McLean et al. 2019, 409-410; Decker et al. 2022, 83). Campana and Varese (2018, 1391) stated that criminal organizations utilize an extra-legal governance structure, which was defined as the ability to generate fear within a community, coerce legal businesses and influence official figures. McLean et al. (2019, 410) expands upon this and suggests that although criminal organizations set rules on product control, they also set the rules within the underworld, and have the power to regulate access. That said, we believe governance is too specific a dimension to properly differentiate between the three types of collectives considered here, and instead prefer to treat it as one aspect of the broader dimension of organization.

How do we measure “organization”? Scales are provided in Bouchard and Spindler (2010, 925), as well as in Decker et al. (2008, 165) and other work on the organizational structure of gangs. We would argue to maintain the idea of scales. But we believe that close attention needs to be paid to which items make it on the scale. We need to make sure, in short, that all items do indeed inform on gang organization, as opposed to behaviors that any group is likely to display, simply by virtue of forming a group. In Bouchard and Spindler (2010, 927), for instance, few “group” members reported their group having organizational features, but as many as 22% reported having a meeting location. While informative to know that a group has a regular meeting point, this item may not help us distinguish groups from gangs. We prefer Decker et al.’s (2008, 164) variation, in that regard: “Does the gang have regular meetings?”, an item that shows a willingness to plan.

The scales would need to be applied and validated on criminal organizations to be used in this spirit of considering all collectives as variations of one large family, and, in the spirit of this chapter. This could mean expanding the list of items to include features that may be found in the most organized form of collectives, like the existence of promotional ladders, or of layers of protection between leaders and lower-level members. More importantly, we need to be careful in making inferences on group organization based on a single member’s perceptions of an organization. Young or recent members may not be aware of many of the organizational aspects of the gang, especially for larger gangs (Pyrooz and Decker, 2019, 115)

6) The age structure of membership

A clear distinction between gangs and criminal organizations has to do with the age of their members. There is tendency for the age range of members to increase as we move from peer groups to criminal organizations. The wider the age range, the more likely we are dealing with a more fully developed collective entity. Peer groups tend to have young members of the same age; gangs may also show little variation in age, but many will show a tendency for age-graded structures. Within criminal organizations, veterans are present to provide guidance and mentorship for young recruits, perhaps also to run the business aspects of the gang while younger members do lower-level jobs, and perhaps take more risks in terms of police detection. When these differences stay within a 3-4 year “cycle” to another (Tremblay et al. 2016, 39), or even within a decade, we may still be dealing with “gangs”. Yet, when a collective entity starts to show even wider ranges, often with veterans pushing into their forties or fifties, with recruits 20, 30 years younger, we may be dealing with a collective that evolved into a criminal organization.

It is not uncommon for Mafiosi or Hells Angels full patch members to be well over 50 or 60 years old, while younger recruits are in their twenties and thirties. Not adolescents by any means and yet, still rookies and newbies in the context of the collectives to which they belong. The participants in Ashton and Bussu's (2020, 282) study described organized crime groups as having elders, where the organization had a clear hierarchy, with an inner circle at the top where elders acted to 'groom' younger members. In addition, people were associated with organized crime groups through family connections, a sustainability mechanism that betrays the "established" or "resilient" status of organization.

Measuring the age range of members of criminal collectives is of utmost importance to understand the relative complexity of their organization. Members that belong to youth groups and gangs with a limited age range would be less likely to experience a long and successful criminal career, due to the lack of mentorship. Those who are mentored by veterans are most likely to receive the training and criminal opportunities necessary to continue beyond adolescence (Ouellet et al. 2022, 255).

7) The social structure of cooperation in and outside the group

Our last dimension is not as well-researched by gang scholars as the others. Instead, it recently emerged as gang scholars paid more and more attention to the social networks in and around gang members (Ouellet et al. 2019, 244; Papachristos 2006, 113). There is something fundamentally social about gangs; from the reasons why members join, why they stay, and why they leave gangs. The higher stakes involved in many gang crimes, and the requirement for continuity imply a higher need for secrecy and trust in one's associates as a driver of action. And the mechanisms of trust – how its created as well as its effects – are best understood when paying attention to the social relations among members.

This is what we refer to as the social structure of cooperation, the patterns in the social interactions of members of collectives in the context of planning and committing crimes. Membership to a specific group or gang shapes who, and how many partners are available to cooperate with. For our purposes, we focus on a single aspect of cooperation, the relative frequency with which members of collectives cooperate with outsiders, that is, with individuals who are not considered to be actual members of their own collective.

Here we argue that the social structure of cooperation will differ as we move from peer groups to gangs, and then to criminal organizations. All require social networks, but all use networks differently. To understand how, we go back to a concept that has been used to describe gangs for a very long time – cohesion (Klein and Crawford, 1967, 65; Papachristos 2013, 49). Cohesion refers to how close and connected the members of a group are to each other. Not all members of a group necessarily interact on a consistent basis, and not everyone may collaborate for crimes; variations in patterns of interactions for criminal collaboration have important implications for the resilience and criminal productivity of gangs (Ouellet et al. 2019, 254).

We propose that collectives will move from a structure of criminal cooperation that is mostly closed on itself in peer groups, to one that opens gradually to outsiders as groups evolve into gangs, and then into criminal organizations. This measure is focused not so much on the interactions that qualify as social in nature; rather, it is focused on co-offending, on cooperation for criminal activities. We believe the patterns would apply to criminal activities at large; criminal organizations are more likely to forge alliances than gangs in the drug trade, and gangs themselves would risk these alliances with outsiders more often than peer group members (whose involvement in the drug trade may never even require considering cooperation with outsiders). Contracted violence would follow a similar pattern; while gangs may be just as likely as criminal organizations to be involved in violent conflicts, criminal organizations would be more likely to cooperate with outsiders to achieve their goals.

How do we measure this? Ideally, social network data would be available. Network data allow researchers to better model the mechanisms that explain recruitment into gangs, the movement of individuals in and out of these organizations, and the decisions to collaborate with certain individuals over others (Bouchard 2020, 426). Yet, patterns of ingroup versus outgroup cooperation have been studied by social psychologists for a long time despite the absence of detailed network data. Regardless of the nature of the data available, the first step in studying ingroup and outgroup cooperation is to determine the boundaries of the collectives themselves – who is a member of this group, and who isn't? Ouellet et al. (2019, 244) proposed a network-based approach to determine gang boundaries, but traditional lists based on criminal intelligence (Malm et al. 2011, 116) or detailed police incident data may also work (Papachristos 2009, 85) unless the validity of membership attributions is questionable or appears to be biased (see Densley and Pyrooz (2020, 24-5) for the value of valid gang police data, and suggestions on improving them).

Then, we need data on collaboration that will tell us if cooperation occurs within, or outside the gang. With network data, scholars can provide specific measures such as the E-I index of each collective – a score that captures a group's pattern of collaboration on a scale of mostly external to mostly internal (Ouellet et al. 2019, 19). Without network data, but with membership data, or detailed interviews with gang members, we can still measure the proportion of collaboration that occurs outside, rather than inside the gang. Opening up to outsiders is, for us, both a risk that a collective takes, but also a sign that the business is done at a higher level, a level that supersedes considerations for membership.

Concluding thoughts: Putting it all together

Taken as a whole, we believe the seven dimensions we proposed can help make sense of gangs encountered in developed nations. We hope the list brings some level of clarity of what could be important to investigate in trying to understand the nature of a gang landscape in any jurisdiction, and also help frame expectations. For instance, observing that a group is involved in selling drugs is not on its own “organized crime”, or “gang behavior” simply because, say, three or more individuals are involved. And, at the risk of stating the obvious, a gang is not a gang because it has been labelled at some point, as a gang. It could be a group still, or it could have started as a gang, but eventually evolved into a criminal organization. Resilient gangs that survive the initial challenges of turnover in membership and turnover in leadership have, one way or another, found a way to create sustainability, and attract new recruits while preserving veteran leadership (Ouellet et al., 2019). But they may not be “gangs” anymore, a realization that has important implications for the type of interventions that are practical and reasonable for them (Gravel et al. 2013, 234-235).

The dimensions in Table 1 may interact in non-linear ways. For instance, we argued that the willingness to use violence may not help differentiate gangs from criminal organizations when considered in isolation. Yet, the fact that criminal organizations are better organized and potentially have more resources may lead to a higher degree of sophistication in carrying out violent acts. They are more likely to have the resources to hire contract killers, more likely to aim for high-level targets, penetrate legitimate businesses, and more likely to travel, if needed, to execute a plan. Scoring similarly on one dimension, then, doesn't imply similarity in all regards. Developing a scoring system and validating it against police or self-reported gang data would be natural next steps from the ideas proposed in this chapter.

Applying the dimensions to some of the well-known groups, gangs, and criminal organizations is another logical next step. And it may lead to surprises. Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000, 759) gang, with its large size and layers of organization would score more points in the “criminal organization” category than in the “gangs” one. The same would happen for many gangs active where we are from, in British Columbia, Canada. Groups like the Red Scorpions gang and the United Nations gang (Bouchard and Hashimi, 2017, 211), for instance, are often referred to as “gangs” but would score most of their points in the criminal

organization column. And this is exactly the way it should be. We believe that the term “gangs” may be overused to describe collectives that should sometimes be referred to simply as peer groups while, at other times, these collectives have fully made the transition to organized crime. Defining concepts that are meant to capture a wide variety of styles, structures, and behaviors such as “gangs” and “organized crime” are bound to fail, one way or another. However, in the process of going through the exercise, there were some aspects of what gangs, and what gangs aren’t, that started to emerge.

Our point is not to say that measuring collectives along these seven dimensions would change most of what we know is a gang, and what isn’t. There will be some definitional puzzles remaining for the next generation of gang scholars to come. Instead, we argue that at least some of the assumptions of what constitutes a group, a gang, and a criminal organization may be shaken up once looked at under the scrutiny of specific dimensions like the ones we proposed in this chapter. We may “know” that the presence of adult mentors and gang veterans within the same collective signals a higher degree of sophistication while failing to realize that this attribute would also qualify them under the label of criminal organization. If we are serious about the business of defining and labeling gangs, then we need to look closely at the collectives we encounter for what truly set them apart.

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