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Abstract | This paper provides insight into the processes and risks associated with disengaging from involvement in organised crime. It seeks to offer an understanding of what membership of an organised crime group entails, the motivations for leaving, processes of disengagement and potential repercussions that may be encountered as a result. Suggestions for promoting disengagement are also canvassed. Given the expansive nature of organised crime that takes place in Australia and globally, the different contexts of membership and personal involvement, and the cultural and social factors involved, disengagement is clearly complex and difficult to manage. Improved understanding of the processes and risks will enable policymakers to assist in the disruption of organised crime groups through the implementation of strategies designed to facilitate easy and effective disengagement from serious criminal activity.

Disengagement from involvement in organised crime: processes and risks

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The study of criminal careers is critical to the understanding of offenders' involvement in crime (DeLisi & Piquero 2011). Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the pathways individuals take into participation in organised crime and how they may later disengage from their involvement (Smith 2014; Thompson et al. 2014). Life-course criminology and the crime desistance literature examine theories of persistence and desistance through adolescence and into adulthood but do so primarily through the lens of street and volume crime (eg Kazemian & Maruna 2009; Laub & Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001). Disengagement from organised crime is less well understood (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen et al. 2010a). Understanding how and why people seek to leave organised crime groups can potentially lead to the development of improved processes and interventions to support those who no longer wish to participate in serious criminal activities.

A note on terminology

At the outset it is necessary to distinguish between various terms used in the literature to describe the transition from organised crime.

Desistance

The permanent termination of offending, known by some as desistance, is considered to be the point at which an offender rejects criminal behaviour for an ongoing prosocial lifestyle. 'Desistance' has a variety of meanings but generally refers to the complete cessation of criminal offending (Kazemian 2007). It has also been defined as the process leading to the termination of offending (Laub & Sampson 2001). Desistance does not, however, always entail a complete departure from crime, as offenders may undergo lengthy periods of law-abiding behaviour prior to reoffending, either permanently or sporadically. It has been said that true desistance only comes with death (Tonry, Ohlin & Farrington 2012). In this case, desistance is a measure of criminality and not a measure of belonging to or leaving an organised crime group. Theoretically, an individual may belong to an organised crime group but, after time, desist from offending while maintaining an association with criminal elements.

Disengagement

A more accurate term to describe the process of rejecting a criminal lifestyle is 'disengagement'. This has been described as the process of separating, or changing behaviour, identity or performance. The process may be passive, in that the individual matures and adopts more prosocial norms, or an active rejection of the group. Disengagement is the process of undergoing personal change, leaving a group and formally transitioning from current member to ex-member (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Sweeten, Pyrooz & Piquero 2013).

The process of disengaging may involve hesitation and uncertainty, the time in which individuals may demonstrate dual identities as they attempt to leave yet are drawn back (Decker, Pyrooz & Moule 2014; Kazemian 2007). Where the network is familial or geographically based (eg a neighbourhood), individuals may believe they have left the group, but they still maintain regular contact with relatives and friends who are in the group (Pyrooz & Decker 2011). Alternatively, where the association has been fluid and informal, individuals may not consider themselves to have been a member at all. While self-identification is key to disengagement, the perception of membership status may not be as definitive for others. For example, law enforcement or rival gangs may not acknowledge or recognise disengagement and continue to treat the individual as a member of the organisation (Decker, Pyrooz & Moule 2014).

Disassociation

'Disassociation' describes the quality of being withdrawn from association with organised criminal groups. This may not necessarily result in denunciation of the criminal lifestyle or a change in behaviour, but it may indicate some form of detachment from the group or its activities. The state of having disassociated from organised crime is, however, a complex distinction to make (Campbell & Hansen 2012; Decker, Pyrooz & Moule 2014). Disassociation for some may be a clear point in time at which they have severed all ties with the organised crime group and desisted from the commission of further criminality (Pyrooz & Decker 2011). For others, it may be a feigned or temporary departure—a statement made in an attempt to avoid ongoing law enforcement scrutiny or action.

Organised crime groups

Internationally, the definition of an organised criminal group is provided in article 2 of the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime:

> a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit (United Nations 2004: 5).

The definition employed by the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission is broader and includes 'all crime of an entrepreneurial nature and/or that committed to support a criminal enterprise, whether by a group or an individual' (ACC 2015: 10). Fijnaut et al. (1998) also note that organised crime groups are:

> groups focused on obtaining illegal profits, [who] systematically commit crimes that seriously damage society and are reasonably capable of shielding their criminal activities from the authorities (Fijnaut et al. 1998: 26).

It is important to understand these different interpretations of organised crime groups when considering how individuals seek to disengage from criminal associations, because the size of the group, the nature and seriousness of its criminal activities, and its geographical reach are all relevant in determining how individuals go about ceasing their participation.

Prior research

The lack of relevant research on disengagement from organised crime has been identified by several authors. Vere van Koppen et al. (2010a) note that, while the basis for life-course and developmental criminology has advanced, there has been little exploration of these issues in connection with adult organised crime offenders (see also Disley et al. 2012; Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Thompson et al. 2014). Campbell and Hansen (2012) also refer to an absence of knowledge on desistance in relation to drug traffickers and, similarly, Lauchs, Bain & Bell (2015) observe that we know little of patterns of desistance for outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs). Sweeten et al. (2013) acknowledge the sizeable body of work on transitioning into gang membership compared with that on transitioning out of criminal gangs and, interestingly, note that life-course criminology tends to emphasise the importance of the commencement of life states, at the expense of understanding what occurs at the conclusion of those states (Sweeten et al. 2013).

Positive life events such as relationships, children and employment are known to strengthen social bonds and have been the focus of desistance research to date. Less work has been directed at considering adverse events associated with the conclusion of life states, such as divorce or the loss of employment when associated with the onset of involvement in organised crime (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen & de Poot 2013).

Although there may be some overlap, organised crime typologies differ from street or volume crime typologies in a number of ways (Vere van Koppen et al. 2010b). While DeLisi and Piquero (2011) suggest

the construction of theoretical classes of criminal careers may be ineffective in criminal career research, specialisation based on typologies may assist researchers in understanding factors and features of criminal careers. Street crime often displays simple characteristics: limited organisation, local context, small scale, predictable or high-rate offences, and low skill requirements (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen et al. 2010b). On the other hand, organised crime exists as a complex amalgam of relationships and networks involving both legal and illegal activities and employing specialised skills and systematic organisation, often operating transnationally and with the aim of avoiding law enforcement detection (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen et al. 2010b). Evidence suggests that individuals involved in organised crime are older, commence their criminal career later in life and persist in criminality for longer (Disley et al. 2012; Vere van Koppen et al. 2010b). They also have different skill sets, experiences, contacts and opportunities (Vere van Koppen & de Poot 2013).

Social opportunity theory, a fusion of opportunity theory and social network theory, suggests involvement in organised crime is a function of social networks, in which individuals with specific skills, professional roles or necessary contacts become involved in crime because of the availability of opportunities created through their social bonds (Kleemans & de Poot 2008). Understanding how social ties facilitate organised crime can assist in promoting opportunities for desistance. Network theory also describes organised crime as flexible networks of individuals who converge as groups to commit criminal activities (see Morselli 2009). Actions that target the development and maintenance of criminal social ties, such as regulating relevant professions and keeping membership records for social clubs, may generate outcomes that encourage disassociation and disengagement (Smith 2014).

Desistance theories have tended to focus on street crime in relation to adolescent offenders (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen et al. 2010a). Life-course criminology explores the characteristics of offending from the onset of deviance and throughout the criminal career to desistance (Laub & Sampson 2001). The generally accepted age-crime curve depicts patterns of offending commencing in youth, rising to a peak in adolescence and then declining throughout adulthood (Farrington 1986). There is also a growing body of work on gang desistance which, while still focusing on younger offenders, and not on the older demographic of organised crime offenders, provides a useful comparative framework for understanding organised crime desistance (eg Bolden 2012 and 2013; Decker et al. 2014; Pyrooz & Decker 2011; Sweeten et al. 2013; Weerman et al. 2015). This work explores the relationship between desistance from crime and disengagement from gang activity. In their study 'Disengaging from gangs and desistance from crime', Sweeten et al. (2013) link gang membership and offending behaviour to explain how a reduction in gang embeddedness has an impact on desistance. The links between gang involvement and organised crime are further illustrated by Wright (2006), who argues that organised crime can be viewed through a gang lens and examines the conditions under which recruitment from gangs to organised crime groups occurs (see also Chambers 2016; Jahnsen forthcoming; National Gang Intelligence Center 2015). Gang theory is also used by Lauchs, Bain & Bell (2015) to explain OMCG membership. This research provides an insight into disengagement from deviant groups generally and has particular relevance to organised crime desistance. It must be noted, however, that, while there are common elements between gangs

and organised crime, gang literature focuses on youth street crime, which is a markedly different theoretical classification to organised crime (DeLisi & Piquero 2011).

Although little is known about disengagement from organised crime, substantial research has been conducted on disengagement from other deviant groups, including terrorist cells, religious cults, racial supremacist groups and gangs. These studies demonstrate that, despite differences in ideology, motivation, structure and purpose, there are factors and processes common to individuals wanting to leave deviant groups (Pyrooz & Decker 2011). Terrorism in particular offers insight into disengagement processes and, increasingly, parallels are being drawn between terrorism and organised crime (Perri, Lichtenwald & MacKenzie 2009; Toros & Mavelli 2013). However, the motivations of each group, and therefore their recruitment and disengagement pathways, differ; terrorists are primarily motivated by political or ideological goals, and organised crime offenders are largely driven by financial gain (Perri, Lichtenwald & MacKenzie 2009; Toros & Mavelli 2013). Bovenkerk (2011) compares the options available for individuals to disengage from four different criminal organisations, including organised crime groups, and in doing so highlights the commonalities of disassociation present in these various groups. Harris (2015) conducted a small study focused on the psychological factors relevant to disengaging from deviant groups and also demonstrated the consistencies and shared factors across different groups. Gjelsvik and Bjørgo's (2012) study on disengaging from maritime piracy reviewed existing research on the theme of disengagement and argued that there is evidence that disengagement processes are generic across different groups. This again raises the issue of whether considering criminality by typology is useful in organised crime, given that groups with different deviant features and criminalities demonstrate similar organisational tendencies when it comes to disengagement factors (DeLisi & Piquero 2011).

While there is a substantial body of research on the nature of offences that constitute organised crime, organised crime frameworks and the damaging effects and significant costs of organised crime, there is a distinct lack of research on the reasons and processes by which individuals leave organised criminal activity. Although key criminological theories focus on street crime, and most work on desistance and disengagement concentrates on adolescent youth gang offenders, some of these findings are transferrable to organised crime. For example, the social and psychological factors that can trigger identity and behaviour change in individuals, and therefore affect their concept of membership, appear to be common regardless of crime type and offender age (Pyrooz & Decker 2011).

Understanding membership of organised crime groups

Before we can understand the process of disengagement from organised crime, it is necessary to consider what membership of an organised crime group entails (see Smith 2014 for an examination of how individuals become members of organised crime groups). The concept of membership of organised crime groups is problematic, both theoretically and legislatively (Ayling 2011; Bolden 2012; Bolden 2013; Jahnsen forthcoming; Weerman et al. 2015), as membership may be formal or informal. Formal membership may be conferred through a ritual process of pledging allegiance to a specific entity and agreeing to abide by the rules of that group. For example, OMCGs often have formal joining requirements, strict rules of behaviour such as wearing identifying patches, and respect for a hierarchical structure of chapters (ACC 2013; Barker 2014). However, loose familial networks of

offenders, such as those described by Amir (2011), may have no membership requirements other than adherence to a shared culture and relationship ties.

The network structure of many organised crime groups may mean individuals only participate in some activities as temporary affiliates where their specialist knowledge is required; or they may participate in similar activities for a range of different groups (Morselli 2009). Individuals may not even consider that they are members of an organised crime group – for example, a truck driver and café owner who facilitated connections between his customers and his professional contacts (Vere van Koppen & de Poot 2013). Evidently, membership is not a clear status. If it is difficult to determine what membership really is, it is also difficult to determine what disassociation is and when it occurs.

Obstacles to leaving

The barriers encountered by those wanting to disengage from organised crime are varied. By its very nature, an organised crime group relies on trust, secrecy and the concealment of its operations and collaborations (Bovenkerk 2011). The departure of a member presents a risk that the group's expectation of loyalty and bonds of confidentiality may be broken, leading to the disclosure of information that puts the group in jeopardy (Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015). Disassociation may sometimes constitute such an act of betrayal that the group will seek to exact violent retribution rather than let the member leave and breach the perceived code of honour and loyalty that binds the group (Harris 2015). Once a member has left the group, avenues of protection and security are also dissolved (Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015). Often, the fear and potential for reprisals can be enough to deter many members from seeking to leave the group.

Deviant groups exist outside the bounds of normal society and are often described as close-knit 'families' with strong bonds formed among members (Harris 2015). Leaving such a group means leaving the social relationships and severing close friendships, particularly if the group insists departed members have no further contact (Harris 2015). Members have often invested years of their life in the group and during this time become isolated from the wider community and external interactions (Harris 2015). The stigma associated with having been a member of a criminal group can also disrupt and prevent the formation of new social ties, increasing the individual's isolation after disengagement and disassociation (Harris 2015; Wright 2006). Further, an ex-member's access to legitimate employment opportunities can be limited, providing few prosocial prospects for creating a new life and identity outside of the criminal group (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Lindley 2016).

Leaving can also come at a cost. Individuals are typically lured into the organised crime lifestyle by the offer of money, excitement, status and power, which will typically cease when they leave (Bovenkerk 2011; Campbell & Hansen 2012). Their identity is based on their membership of a group and the social relations and dependence on the group that brings. The loss of friendship and social ties with long-term associates, as well as the isolation from the community and lack of legal alternatives, can act to dissuade many individuals from leaving the group.

Motivations for leaving

The motivations for disengagement are complex and affect individuals and groups differently

(Campbell & Hansen 2012; Harris 2015). The factors influencing disengagement are multiple, varied and interdependent and can best be considered through the use of a cost-benefit analysis. Research suggests that only when the predicted benefits of leaving outweigh the detriments of remaining in the group will members proceed with disengagement (Campbell & Hansen 2012; Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Harris 2015).

Harris (2015: 31–77) explains the trigger that instigates the disengagement process as a form of 'cognitive opening' that allows individuals to assess their self-identity against the group identity and act to resolve the disparity. Resolution in favour of the individual's values can decrease the level of group influence and therefore result in disassociation. While maturation is probably the most prominent factor in desistance and disengagement research, this primarily applies to younger, adolescent offenders (Laub & Sampson 2001). Despite this, maturation factors still have importance as an explanation for disengagement of the older cohort of organised crime offenders (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Vere van Koppen & de Poot 2013).

Family and relationships are one of the strongest motivators for disengagement (Decker et al. 2014; Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). The presence of an intimate partner and children can exert pressure on the individual to choose between family obligations and their commitment to the group (Harris 2015). Where members of groups find themselves preferring a more conventional lifestyle, development of family life external to the group can also weaken group ties through the strengthening of legitimate social and institutional ties (Disley et al. 2012). Gjelsvik and Bjørgo (2012) found that the presence of strong family pressures can encourage disengagement. Similarly, Campbell and Hansen (2012) note that disassociation may be needed to protect family members and members themselves from criminal threats.

The impact of violence on group members is also a strong predictor of disassociation (Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). Members who have been subject to threats or intimidation, or who know someone who has been violently victimised, report these incidents as a deterrent to continued membership of groups (Bolden 2013; Campbell & Hansen 2012; Pyrooz & Decker 2011). Similarly, attitudes towards the use of violence can change, causing individuals to reconsider their willingness to participate in violent acts (Harris 2015). This is demonstrated by reports of violent acts having 'gone too far' or not serving the appropriate purpose (Disley et al. 2012: 34; Harris 2015). Whether the violence is inflicted by enemies, fellow members or the individual in question, aggressive behaviour serves as a compelling reason for members to disassociate from criminal groups as they become increasingly aware of the risks arising from violent conduct.

Box 1: 'Patching out' in OMCGs

In December 2015, a leader of an OMCG was shot dead by another member of the same group during a meeting to discuss the conditions necessary to leave the club (Benny-Morrison 2015; Benny-Morrison 2016a). The killer, an Army veteran, then killed himself (Benny-Morrison 2015). Renouncing membership of an OMCG, otherwise known as 'patching out', can require members to hand in their club colours, remove club tattoos, pay financial penalties and give their bike to the club (Benny-Morrison 2015; Benny-Morrison 2016a; Benny-Morrison 2016b; Jahnsen forthcoming). While departure can be negotiated, there is also a risk of repercussions. Police report that disputes about members not meeting the patching out rules have resulted in kidnappings, serious assaults and, in this case, murder (Benny-Morrison 2016a).

Police have reported that up to 20 members have already left one OMCG or are planning to leave (Benny-Morrison 2016a). One member disclosed that members were forced to choose between being a member of the club and retaining their employment, as some occupations such as tattooing are now the subject of regulation and licensing restrictions (Benny-Morrison 2016a).

The exile of an OMCG president on character grounds left the club in an unstable position (Benny-Morrison 2015; Benny-Morrison 2016a; Benny-Morrison 2016b; Willacy & McClymont 2015). Although the member had resided in Australia for 47 years, he did not hold Australian citizenship and was refused re-entry into Australia in 2014 under provisions of the Migration Act 1958 (Willacy & McClymont 2015). This legislation has resulted in 81 OMCG members having their visas cancelled or denied (Dutton & Keenan 2016).

Disillusionment is another theme of disengagement with several different facets. Disagreements about the group's leadership, objectives or actions can exacerbate internal conflict and lead to a negative view of the group (Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015; Pyrooz & Decker 2011). Further, if the group does not live up to individual expectations, or if members feel they are making personal sacrifices that are not being met with equivalent benefits, the justifications for leaving may be present (Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). A change in role or status has also served to encourage disengagement from a group by reducing an individual's reputation and identification with other members (Campbell & Hansen 2012; Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). The psychological effect of disillusionment thus widens the 'cognitive opening' and generates increasing uncertainty about being a member of a deviant group. Even the stress and burnout associated with group membership can be an important factor in disillusionment (Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). In short, in making a decision to leave, individuals must weigh up the various detrimental factors that personally affect them against the benefits their membership offers.

The process of leaving group membership

There is considerable evidence that it is difficult, if not almost impossible, to leave organised crime groups (Bovenkerk 2011; Brenneman 2014; Decker et al. 2014). The ways in which individuals go about disengaging from organised crime groups depend largely on the characteristics of the group (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Harris 2015). Tightly controlled and socially closed groups such as OMCGs can resent members leaving and consider departure as abandonment of the group, requiring a hostile response (Harris 2015). On the contrary, however, research has also shown that much disengagement occurs in an easy and cordial manner, with members either negotiating departure or just drifting away from the group (Bolden 2013; Campbell & Hansen 2012; Harris 2015).

The precise methods used often depend on the position and role that the individual in question

occupies within the group and their reasons for leaving. The more central and embedded the member, the less likely they will be able to walk or drift away easily (Harris 2015; Pyrooz & Decker 2011). Peripheral members, however, who do not serve a key role in the group, can often disengage through lessening their involvement and drifting away from the group over time (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012). This type of covert departure can be more or less successful depending on the type of group. The latter types of disengaging members are less likely to be victims of repercussions – although, if a clean and affirmative break from the group is not made, doubts may remain about their membership status (Harris 2015). Harris (2015) provides an example of an OMCG member who attempted to distance himself by limiting social interactions and walking away from the group; however, the failure of this approach resulted in a public departure and denunciation from the group. Public departures can also be negotiated successfully (Bolden 2013). Campbell and Hansen (2012) offer the instance of a drug trafficker who left after reaching a consensus with his suppliers and who, despite initial fears, suffered no sanctions.

Despite this, a public departure can be confrontational, and some groups respond with violent retribution, threats and harassment or demands for the surrender of assets (Harris 2015). An abrupt departure, also known as 'knifing off' (Maruna & Roy 2007) is often achieved by severing all ties and leaving the area to avoid reprisals from the group. This is demonstrated in Brenneman's (2014) study of Central American gangs, where the penalty for desertion is death. While there are examples of lethal reprisals overseas, such as the 'morgue rule' in which those who leave an organised crime group must be murdered (Brenneman 2014), much of the discourse about 'blood in, blood out' is considered to be myth, perpetuated by groups to discourage disengagement (Bolden 2013: 474; Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015).

Organised crime entities operate under a veil of secrecy designed to avoid law enforcement attention and to ensure their systematic operations can continue (Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015). The very nature of the group requires considerable trust and loyalty, and members often devote substantial resources to ensuring those in the group can be trusted (Harris 2015, and see Smith 2014 on recruitment practices generally). Departing members can be viewed as traitors, and there is considerable risk that the group's secrets may no longer be safe.

Amir (2011) demonstrated that members of organised crime groups can disengage with few complications as they grow older. This is also supported by Harris (2015) and Bovenkerk (2011), who describe older members as having the option to retire or become honorary members. This type of disengagement appears to be less a determination to leave the ideology and behaviours and more about decreasing involvement in organised crime in accordance with ability and stamina.

Box 2: Ageing out in Israel

Israeli organised crime is generally based on a hierarchical, familial network of extended kin or ethnic/cultural connections. The scope of criminal activity can include illegal immigration; monopoly over industrial or financial services; cartel behaviour; and the management of vice such as prostitution and drugs. Disengagement from organised crime has been shown to occur through migration (to live off illicit income), imprisonment, death or ageing. Older offenders may continue to demand respect as leaders of both the criminal and social family and control both legitimate and illegitimate activities. However, Israel has embraced United States style Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) laws, which can be used against the senior members of organised crime groups. This allows for specific targeting of criminal elders with the aim of bringing down the organised crime group. Those elders who willingly retire often take over legal group businesses and continue to receive support from the group. Conservative elders may face competition from younger members and be forced out of the criminal enterprise to allow room for new leaders who are willing to undertake more progressive and risky criminal activities. These elders may provide consultation or mediation services to the group to resolve internal or external conflicts, thereby maintaining a respected, representative role. Where there has been a perceived transgression against the group, a member may be forced out and abandoned.

Source: Amir (2011)

Religious conversion associated with a change in personal ideology can also underlie the decision to disengage (Bolden 2013; Bovenkerk 2011; Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012). Brenneman (2014) discusses the role religion plays in recreating identity and reforming ex-gang members seeking to avoid almost certain death from criminal violence or social cleansing. Turning to God is considered to be transformative and allows ex-members to rebuild their character and adopt prosocial behaviours to contribute to society.

Box 3: Disengaging from piracy in Somalia

Although maritime piracy is haram (forbidden) in Muslim Somalia, many join pirate groups in order to make money in the absence of suitable employment and in the face of poverty. Ideology is not a strong motivation. Somalia has a strong clan system but weak state control. While many members of pirate groups are recruited by family and peers, these social ties are also a robust means of encouraging disengagement from piracy. Community disapproval, particularly on religious grounds, is a strong influence in the decision to leave, as indicated by an ex-pirate: 'we listened to their sermons… they talked about piracy, what our religion says about it… this affected on our decision to go back and quit piracy' (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012: 109).
The objections of close family members is also a significant cause: 'she wasn't happy with what I was doing and she asked me to quit' (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo: 107). Disillusionment with the risk and danger, for little or no profit, is a push factor: 'They did not pay me… since they had no successful raids I did not get anything' (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo: 107). Many of those who leave piracy do so covertly, with fear of reprisals, and some use the proceeds to leave the area and sever ties with the group. Ex-pirates feel the stigma of their criminality within their communities but are assisted in leaving by family and supported in their reintegration. The Alternative Livelihoods to Piracy Project offers opportunities including vocational and business skills and small monetary grants to support disengagement from a life of piracy and provide a legal income: 'we got trained in how to make and open a small business… today I make so much from it that I can feed my family and kids' (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012: 110).

Source: Gjelsvik & Bjørgo (2012)

Problems following disengagement

Even after leaving organised crime groups, ex-members can encounter problems relating to their previous identity. If the process of disengagement and formation of a new identity is not publicly recognised, ongoing law enforcement action can be perceived as persecutory and oppressive (Decker et al. 2014; Harris 2015; Kazemian 2007). Members who leave deviant groups can also be subject to victimisation from rival criminal groups or enemies (Harris 2015). Evidence indicates, however, that victimisation does decrease after disassociation (Sweeten et al. 2013). The community may also not distinguish ex-members from their previous status, thus creating barriers to forming friendships and restricting opportunities for reintegration, such as through employment and social acceptance (Brenneman 2014; Campbell & Hansen 2012; Disley et al. 2012; Wright 2006). The effect of this type of stigma can result in labelling and secondary deviance (Bolden 2012; Decker et al. 2014; Harris 2015).

Further, organised crime can prove to be a profitable business, and ex-members may not have access to legitimate income alternatives outside the group. Ex-members can find it difficult to find employment in the wider community due to a lack of education and transferrable skills (Brenneman 2014; Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012). Having lost most of their relationships as a result of their departure, ex-members can be isolated and face problems including addiction and inability to lead a conventional lifestyle (Brenneman 2014; Harris 2015). Those members who retain ties with organised crime will potentially struggle to disengage successfully and to reconstruct their identity as an ex-member of a group, often falling back into group membership and activities (Bolden 2013; Decker et al. 2014; Harris 2015).

Promoting disengagement

Given the wide variety of types of organised crime groups, the different contexts and nuances of membership and personal involvement, and the cultural and social factors involved, promoting disengagement from organised crime is a complex challenge. In developing policy frameworks and intervention strategies, it is important to understand why and how members leave organised crime groups. Unfortunately, however, there is little research on the pathways that exist for members to disengage from organised crime. Literature on other deviant groups indicates disassociation is largely influenced by the dynamics of the group and the characteristics of the individuals involved (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012), which would indicate that disengagement strategies should be designed with specific organised crime groups and individuals in mind.

Creating disillusionment

A review of existing disassociation research indicates that there is potential to cause disruption to certain groups by inducing disillusionment factors, with the aim of weakening the group's foundation (Harris 2015). Strategies that can interrupt leadership and group efficacy can create internal conflict, thereby reducing embeddedness. Evidence also suggests that there are periods during which intervention is likely to be more successful – for example, after a violent or traumatic incident or when the group is failing (Bolden 2013; Disley et al. 2012; Harris 2015). Taking advantage of such factors that are known to trigger disengagement processes, such as violent confrontations, may provide opportunities to instigate strategies to reduce social ties within the group, and thus to motivate individuals to consider leaving.

Increasing risks

As it is known that the motivation to leave a criminal group is influenced by a process of weighing up the costs against the benefits, there is also capacity to increase the risks associated with group membership (Campbell & Hansen 2012; Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Harris 2015). Policies targeting unexplained wealth and asset confiscation have the potential to drastically affect individual members of organised crime groups. Existing law enforcement strategies such as the regulation of certain businesses, new deportation legislation and anti-association powers also show that controlling member relationships can hinder illegal activities (Ayling 2011; Dutton & Keenan 2016; Jahnsen forthcoming; Willacy & McClymont 2015).

Disengagement programs

Existing research on leaving deviant groups indicates that the effectiveness of exit or disengagement programs has not been suitably evaluated; however, it appears that institutional interventions are not overly successful (Bovenkerk 2011; Decker et al. 2014). Informal and individual processes, including mentoring by ex-members, enhancement of family ties, education and employment programs, reintegration assistance, religious support, and prosocial modelling appear to be more successful in supporting effective disengagement (Bolden 2012; Disley et al. 2012; Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2012; Harris 2015; Kazemian 2007; McNeill 2002). For example, Lindley (2016) noted that developing legitimate occupational opportunities would promote disengagement from maritime crime by Somali pirates. While the key to disrupting organised crime may be to disrupt the activities and organisation of the group, it seems that supporting and encouraging disengagement through the development of social capital and support for a new identity may be promising if managed in a holistic and community-minded manner.

An example of promising approaches to disengagement from participation in the activities of OMCGs is the public support offered in Scandinavian countries to facilitate those wishing to leave. Jahnsen (forthcoming), for example, describes a number of 'exit' or 'defector' programs that promote collaboration between all levels of the public sector aimed at assisting disassociation. These programs offer traditional police protection for those who fear retaliation; other programs attempt to combine protection with assistance in breaking former social ties and starting a new life. Assistance is offered in the form of housing and labour market integration programs, education, access to drug rehabilitation programs, and different kinds of therapy. In Denmark the authorities also offer economic support to individuals wishing to remove visible gang-related tattoos (Jahnsen forthcoming: 14). Similar programs are offered in the United States for former gang members aiming to make a break from their criminal past and remove tattoos signifying gang affiliations (Bakir Poljac & Burke 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the processes and risks associated with disengaging from involvement in organised criminal activities. Although prior research on the reasons and explanations for disengagement from conventional crime offer some assistance in understanding how disengagement occurs among members of organised crime groups, the parallels are not exact, particularly concerning the seriousness of organised criminality and the measures meted out to those who express a desire to leave group membership. Organised crime group members also demonstrate different traits and personal characteristics compared with those who engage in less serious and less organised crime. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw parallels between these two types of criminals in terms of the ways they are recruited into criminality (Smith 2014) and the ways members disengage.

Further research on disassociation from organised crime, while potentially difficult to undertake, is necessary to determine the best way to promote disengagement. There is also a need to more fully explore adult-onset involvement in organised crime and the factors that contribute to adult desistance. This type of research will go some way to providing the information needed to assist in the disruption of organised crime groups through the implementation of improved desistance strategies and tools.

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