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Abstract | This study explores changes to the internal culture of a sample of Australian outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs). We analysed data from 39 in-depth interviews with former OMCG members in Queensland to discern changes in recruitment practices, hierarchies and governance processes, as well as values, norms and relationships experienced and observed while members of an OMCG.

Structurally, clubs changed little, although participants described how members were increasingly using the structures and systems of clubs for their own benefit. Changes were noted in recruitment practices, which were seen as increasingly geared towards enlisting violent, criminally-inclined men. There was also a perceived erosion of loyalty and camaraderie within OMCGs, with a shift towards younger, newer members who were seen as self-interested and financially motivated. These changes were contributing factors in decisions of many former members to disengage from OMCGs.

The changing culture of outlaw motorcycle gangs in Australia

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Outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) first emerged in the United States after the Second World War as informal support networks for returned servicemen (Harris 2016). In Australia OMCGs emerged in the late 1960s for male motorcycle enthusiasts who were attracted to the freedoms and thrills of a life outside of society's laws, norms and values (Lauchs & Gilbert 2017; McNab 2013; Veno 2012). Despite their devolved structure, with local branches or 'chapters' operating with substantial independence, OMCGs developed strict, military-inspired hierarchical structures, and have fostered broader 'outlaw' cultures characterised by violence, machismo and recklessness, but also camaraderie and loyalty.

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Given their hostility to authority, particularly police, OMCGs have also become synonymous with crime, and research has shown that over three-quarters of OMCG members have criminal records (see Bright & Deegan forthcoming; von Lampe & Blokland 2020 for reviews; see Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020 for Australian research). Much of the criminal activity of members has historically been a by-product of their everyday lives within the outlaw cultures of OMCGs. As a result, most offending has consisted of what von Lampe and Blokland (2020) call 'lifestyle crimes', including fighting, traffic violations, drug possession and disorderly conduct.

Importantly, while OMCGs were established to provide members with a 'brotherhood' and freedom outside the constraints of society, ethnographic and autobiographical accounts have noted longstanding factional conflicts within a number of clubs between two broad groups of members (McNab 2013; Quinn 2001; Veno 2012; Wolf 1991; Wood 2003):

- predominantly older 'traditional' members who seek to preserve the original outlaw values and practices of OMCGs; and
- predominantly younger (eg <30 years of age) and newer members who use OMCG membership to obtain status and money, sometimes by engaging in higher-level criminal enterprises.

Critically, research suggests that younger members are becoming dominant in OMCGs across Australia, both in numbers and in authority. Lauchs (2017) notes a generational change in the profile of men joining Australian OMCGs. He discusses the emergence of 'Nike Bikies'—younger members who are attracted to OMCGs less for the camaraderie, freedom and love of motorcycles, and more for status and opportunities for illicit profit through organised crime activity. Empirical research by Voce, Morgan and Dowling (forthcoming) supports this change, noting an increasing prevalence of members with recorded histories of serious and violent offending during their teens and early twenties. Similarly, Australian OMCG members have been increasingly implicated in a variety of higher-level criminal enterprises, including drugs and weapons manufacturing, trafficking and distribution, extortion, fraud and money laundering (Monterosso 2018). However, debate continues over whether members are engaging in this activity independently of OMCGs, or whether OMCGs are directing it (von Lampe & Blokland 2020; for relevant Australian research see Ayling 2011; Lauchs 2018; Lauchs & Staines 2019; Goldsworthy & McGillivray 2017; Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020).

This raises the question of how, and to what extent, the internal cultures of OMCGs (ie their structures, processes, rules, norms and values) have changed with the influx of younger, more criminally-inclined members. While not established for the purpose of criminal enterprise, OMCGs encompass characteristics that facilitate it, including their size, paramilitary hierarchical structures, criminally-inclined membership, reputations for violence, and hostility to outsiders (Barker 2011; Quinn & Koch 2003; Wolf 1991). However, the size, profile, structures and rules of OMCGs could also make it difficult for them to operate effectively in illicit markets which, by virtue of their volatility and risk, increasingly require agile and flexible organisational structures (Bouchard & Morselli 2014; Morselli 2009). Involvement in these markets is also inconsistent with certain values and club rules that have historically characterised OMCGs, most notably their rejection of some types and methods of drug use, and their broader rejection of many societal norms, including materialism and capitalism (Lauchs & Gilbert 2017; McNab 2013; Veno 2012). As such, the growing power of younger members in Australian OMCGs has likely influenced the internal culture of OMCGs.

Aim and methods

This study, undertaken collaboratively by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Queensland Police Service (QPS), examines how and to what extent the internal cultures of Australian OMCGs are perceived by former members to have changed over time.

Sample and data

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of former OMCG members in Queensland. Detailed information on the interview process is available in Webster and Chiu (2020).

In 2014 the QPS introduced a formal process for individuals to officially declare that they had disengaged from an OMCG. Unique to Queensland, members in the state wishing to formally declare their disengagement are required to sign a statutory declaration to that effect, and subsequent to confirmatory intelligence checks, they are officially recorded by QPS as having left. At the commencement of the research there were 195 former members recorded by QPS as having disengaged through this process. Over 300 former members who have chosen not to formally declare their disengagement have also been recorded by QPS based on police intelligence.

Interviews were undertaken by a sworn QPS officer, using an interview tool comprised of closed and open-ended questions. Participants were asked about how and why they joined an OMCG, their experiences while members, the impact of membership on their personal lives, and how and why they chose to leave. Importantly, participants were not asked about specific offences they committed, witnessed or had knowledge of while members.

Interviews were undertaken with 52 former OMCG members. This study examines the transcripts of interviews with 39 of these former members, who consented to their interviews being audio-recorded. Most (*n*=35) were members of OMCG chapters based in Queensland, and two clubs account for around half of participants (*n*=19). Several participants had held offices of authority within their clubs, including five former chapter presidents and two former chapter sergeants-at-arms.

Participants encompass a mix of older and younger individuals (mean age at interview=47.9 years; median=47.5; range=25–66), with experiences in OMCGs from the early 1970s until 2020. Eight participants first joined a club prior to 2001, 16 between 2001 and 2010, and 14 between 2011 and 2019. (The joining date of one member was unknown.) Participants were members for an average of 6.9 years (median=5.5; range=0.2–27.0 years), although there were eight members who spent 10 years or longer in a club (or clubs). Five participants left before 2010, 21 between 2011 and 2014, and 12 between 2015 and 2020.

Analytic strategy

A phenomenological approach was taken to answering the research question, which involved drawing on the lived experiences of former OMCG members and, specifically, their personal accounts of the internal cultures of their clubs. These experiences were examined across a series of themes derived inductively from interview data:

- recruitment—how and why members join, switch and are recruited by OMCGs;
- hierarchies and governance—how and by whom OMCGs are managed, and formal systems of rules; and
- values, norms and relationships—informal belief systems and principles guiding behaviour, including how members relate to one another.

The terms 'OMCG' and 'club' are used interchangeably throughout, reflecting the language used by participants.

Limitations

As this is a sample of former OMCG members, it may over-represent those with negative perceptions of both their time as members and how OMCGs have changed over time. The 52 participants interviewed as part of this study account for around one in 10 former members known to the QPS. We are cautious to not generalise our observations beyond the sample of former members or to the wider population of OMCG members, chapters and clubs.

To counter any reluctance to answer questions asked during the interview, participants were assured during the informed consent process that the research was not interested in obtaining any information about criminal activity and no questions would be asked about specific instances of offending. Additionally, the interviewer had extensive knowledge of and prior experience working with OMCG members, and was able to establish a relationship of trust and rapport. Finally, participants were informed that their information would be anonymised on transcription, that their names and other identifying details would not be used in any research outputs, and that their identities would not be revealed outside of the research team. These measures mitigated the possibility of non-disclosure.

Results

Recruitment

Most OMCGs have historically had well-defined recruitment processes centred on testing the reliability, loyalty and 'outlaw' values of potential members (McNab 2013; Veno 2012). Individuals wishing to join a club have typically been expected to spend time, from a few months to a few years, getting to know members by regularly attending clubhouses and events, and going on rides. After this period, an associate (sometimes known as a 'hangaround') would be deemed suitable for membership, and would become a 'prospect' or (as they are typically known in clubs originating in Australia) a 'nominee'. This period typically lasts between one and two years, during which they undertake menial tasks around the clubhouse, run errands and generally follow the orders of full members. After the prospect or nominee period, all full members of a chapter would vote on whether to elevate that person to full membership.

A number of changes were noted by interview participants in relation to these recruitment processes (see also Voce et al. forthcoming). Consistent with prior research (Lauchs 2017; Voce, Morgan & Dowling forthcoming), most participants highlighted a clear contrast between older, more traditional members and younger, newer members, who were perceived as more aggressive, status-driven and profit-motivated. A number of participants expressed this view about why younger men were joining OMCGs:

> Well, a lot of these young guys get pulled into the business, and you can make big dollars selling stuff you shouldn't be selling…Why go to work 40 hours for $1,500, when you can get that in one deal and sit out the rest of the week? And that's what the big thing is to young guys. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> They're wannabes, think it's all about tough boy image, whole image man, thug life image, gangster, gold, gelled hair, steroids, drugs, hot pussy on their arms, that's the enticement. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> I see a lot of new, younger members joining for financial reasons. They can move product, they think they can become king-pins, yeah. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> …they think they're gonna get rich and live the high life. I've had a few guys in the past who've said 'I'd love to join you guys and make some money'. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

Some participants believed younger men were attracted to OMCGs based on how the clubs are portrayed in popular media, which they argue falsely glamorises OMCGs as avenues for making money and obtaining status.

> Now, it's the wrong perception, they're joining for the wrong cause, they think it's this, you know, they see shows on TV like *Sons of Anarchy* and they think it's all like that, which it's not. (Participant who first joined in early 1970s)

Additionally, some clubs and senior members in office-bearing roles were said to be actively targeting more criminally-inclined men, and exploiting this glamorised image to recruit them:

> Like, prison rec yards are a breeding ground [for new members]… (Participant who first joined in mid-2010s)

> I mean, [name omitted], that's what he's done, he's created this gangster image…they'll [new members] just get brought in, they'll be put on the ground, and used as foot soldiers to sell the dope. (Participant who first joined in late 1990s)

Some participants also described their former clubs as misrepresenting the degree to which they adhered to more traditional values in order to attract new members:

> …they feel like they fit in somewhere, they've been fed the propaganda, it's a brotherhood or family or some bullshit. (Participant who first joined in the late 1990s)

> …they get them in there young, and they're 'Yeah, come in, join in, have some colours man, yeah you're part of the team, yeah,' and then the kid will do something really big, and they'll be like 'There you go, you're fucked'. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

As a result, many participants noted a slip in the standards recruits were expected to meet to achieve membership, and a relaxation of recruitment processes (including recruiting directly from within prisons, as noted above). According to some participants, their former clubs evaluated potential members based largely on their skills in violence and money-making. Many also noted an increase in membership turnover, and more members switching clubs in search of better opportunities to advance and make money:

> They [the club] were allowing just anyone to join. If you were in custody, and you had a few tattoos and were willing to be mates with a club member, that was it, you were in the club. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> I know a couple of guys who've been through four, five clubs. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> It had already started changing when I joined. They [the club] had taken in members from other clubs, while I was a member, and that was basically because of drugs and money… (Participant who first joined in late 1990s)

Hierarchy, governance and internal processes

Most OMCGs have a similar hierarchical structure, where each chapter is overseen by a president, with other office-bearers (ie vice-presidents, secretaries, treasurers, sergeants-at-arms, road captains) managing more specific roles within the club (Lauchs & Gilbert 2017; McNab 2013; Veno 2012). However, decisions regarding formal business (eg admitting and expelling members, elevating members to office-bearing positions) are made democratically, with all full members being afforded a vote. Reflecting their military origins, OMCGs have also traditionally operated according to strict rules governing members' behaviour towards each other and the club.

Just as there appears to be a growth in turnover among members generally, many participants also described an increasing rate of turnover in office-bearers within OMCGs. Interview participants suggested that younger members were increasingly filling the office-bearing positions vacated by older members, in some cases using the club or its reputation in pursuit of their own interests:

> There are a lot of guys thinking they're gonna get up the ladder quick and be a big-time gangster. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> A club gives you access to a social circle, but the responsibilities of it, pressures from police, your family, employers, is ten times worse now. And that's 'cause of the guys joining now, the gangsters. The older guys are leaving and don't have control anymore. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> Some of the younger, newer faces starting to get positions of authority down there think they're bloody Al Capone. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> …you get a guy with a bit of oomph, and he brings his cousin or brother, you get three of these guys together and they're family, they're tighter than your members are. All of a sudden, they're at the top. These guys come through and they spearhead to the top, the opportunists. (Participant who first joined in early 2000s)

Importantly, interviews indicated that, despite the increasing number of younger, more criminally-inclined members in positions of authority, the systems and structures that have historically characterised OMCGs have not changed. According to former members, office-bearing positions still serve largely the same formal functions, and many rules are still in place, including those governing:

- regular attendance at club events, including national runs;
- membership fee payment;
- prohibitions on heroin and crystal methamphetamine (ice) use;
- the display of club patches and tattoos; and
- democratic decision-making mechanisms for significant chapter- and club-level issues.

However, former members described how aspects of OMCG structures and systems were increasingly being exploited or circumvented entirely, predominantly by younger office-bearers. While participants were not asked about specific offences, many did allude to the fact that younger members were increasingly using the structures and systems of their former clubs to facilitate, direct and secure support for their criminal activities:

> I never did anything illegal, and there were a lot of guys that wouldn't. But once you put the colours on, the club would try and make you. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> In holding that position [chapter president], you have income from a lot of members making money illegally, so that money works its way up the chain, I get a cut, higher ups get a cut, all the way back to the nationals. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> I know there's clubs out there that make people move product, I've seen it, I've seen it with mates in other clubs. And if you don't move the product, you still own the product, and you have to pay for it somehow. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

Interviews suggest that this has occurred alongside a broader increase in the importance placed on generating revenue for clubs. Some participants noted that, over time, the costs associated with membership (ie taking time off from employment to participate in club activities such as national events) have become prohibitively expensive. Internal fines for perceived or real infractions of club rules also contributed:

> …the fees are manageable, but the fines for ridiculous things on top of that are huge. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> Nationally, everything was turning to money. And if you didn't turn up it was big fines. Stuff that used to be a bit of fun and cost a bit of bob was starting to cost hundreds and thousands. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> The last national run we went on cost an arm and a leg…If anything being in a club costs you money. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

Some participants also noted that OMCGs have become increasingly exploitative of members in their attempts to increase revenue, and office-bearing members in their former clubs were abusing their positions of authority to profit personally:

> I always had to pull money out of nowhere, had to pay your club dues no matter what. If you didn't have the money you were told to steal it or get it any way you could. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> To me, the bikie club is a bit of a pyramid scheme, one person gets rich, and you feed your fees to this one person at the top, who extorts everything left, right and centre. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> It's all a pyramid scheme so that people up the top can exploit. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> Yeah that was an issue, the fees mainly because it builds up if you ain't got the money. And with these fees and that, you know, you're owing so much, and you get penalised and then you have extra put on top and then it keeps going. And then when it builds up, you start owing and then they start running you, and you have to do this and do that, you've got a task to do and that will take this much off it. That's where they will use it, but they will only take little bits at a time, so they can carry on using you. (Participant who first joined in mid-2010s)

However, not every element of the structures and systems of OMCGs was described as being exploited. For example, criminal activities were not generally discussed openly at clubhouse meetings, or governed through the democratic decision-making mechanisms that govern other aspects of club business. Conversely, former members described how some rules and processes were increasingly being ignored or manipulated, such as chapter presidents only calling members they know will vote in support of a motion to clubhouse meetings. The most common and flagrant rule breaches, however, concerned those prohibiting particular drugs:

> …if we had a national president coming, our chapter president would say 'Don't let them see rocks [ice], make sure they just see powder [cocaine]'. People used crack pipes but that was all behind the scenes. (Participant who first joined in late 2000s)

> There was a bit of ice getting around the club, and that's one of the rules, no intravenous drug use, no ice… (Participant who first joined in early 2000s)

> …there were some high-ranking members in the chapter, apparently who were into the ice, which is a big no-no. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

Values and relationships

Many of the changes described above are illustrative of an apparent shift in the values and norms of OMCGs. According to some older interview participants, the emphasis on camaraderie and loyalty had gradually disappeared from within their clubs, while members who had joined more recently described how the reality of contemporary club culture did not live up to their expectations:

> You know, they talk about camaraderie, brotherhood, that's not real anymore. (Participant who first joined in mid-2010s)
>
> That fake brotherhood sort of thing. It's only a brotherhood if you do what you're told. It's not real. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

Participants perceived younger members as increasingly self-interested, indiscriminately violent, and motivated by material gain, while showing little interest in more traditional club activities and values:

> There used to be a code that you'd never go to someone's work, or fire shots into someone's house. But these kids now just don't give a shit. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)
>
> I don't see members joining to ride. A lot of new members I see don't have bikes. It's gone away from that towards a business now. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)
>
> …these guys coming through now, these Nike Bikies, didn't want to ride a bike, didn't want to wear a set of colours. They wanted to be associated for the weight of the deal…The blokes out in colours were not the guys doing the big drug deals or standovers, they were the guys in the bloody cars or not even going on the national runs, and that's what broke my heart in the evolution of the bike club, it was just disgusting. (Participant who first joined in early 2000s)
>
> These guys [younger members] were just plastic gangsters, mate. I mean, there's a difference between being able to hold your hands up and being a stand-up guy, and being able to hold your hands up and being a loose cannon. (Participant who first joined in late 1990s)

As a result, many older participants in particular complained that internal disputes concerning money, status and revenge had become more common, and there was a marked drop in cohesion among members:

> There was too much backstabbing. They'd [other members] say that they were there for you, and then at the end of the day, they were there for themselves. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)
>
> …seeing all the treacherous shit over the years, seeing guys [other members] get set up over drugs and money, get fucking bashed and flogged and thrown out, and having bikes and cars taken to cover drug debts. (Participant who first joined in late 1990s)

Increasing conflict between older and younger members was also raised by some participants, often concerning younger members disregarding club rules and norms. Some older members also described how they had taken steps to try and keep younger members out of crime and maintain traditional values and practices within their clubs:

> And I was trying to have a talk with the [chapter] president about it, instead of setting the goals on fast cash, like drug money, drug runs, how about creating jobs, you know, for the youth that we bring in. And that, sort of, makes a business of the club…then we can have a whole club as a family… (Participant who first joined in mid-2010s)
>
> One of the young guys was doing business and obviously wanted the weight of the club behind him. I said to him we had rules, you fucking use the club's name, you're out. (Participant who first joined in early 2000s)

Despite this resistance from older members, interview participants described how the relationships within their former clubs had become increasingly exploitative. Many joined OMCGs for friendship, enjoyed the opportunity to ride motorcycles and socialise with peers, and valued the trust and loyalty they shared with other club members (see Voce et al. forthcoming). However, former members described a feeling of being disposable, and that they and their club had become a vehicle through which younger members could further their own interests. In fact, some participants described how clubs had deserted members when they become an inconvenience or were no longer deemed productive, such as when they were arrested or hospitalised:

> …they don't give two stuffs about you, all they want is your money, and they want you to push the shit they have to push. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> I've seen it all the time, they [new members] get in, they're in there pushing product, the moment they stop pushing they're out, and you've lost everything, and the club doesn't care, it's just there for profit. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> Former member: You're not the purpose. So don't ever think you're more special than you are.
>
> Interviewer: What's that purpose?
>
> Former member: Financial gain for the ones above. And if you can't do that you're not worth anything. (Participant who first joined in mid-2010s)

> …clubs just use you mate, it's all just show-pony stuff. They just use you to get them out of trouble. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

Motives for leaving

Not surprisingly, given the views shared by former members with respect to the changing culture of their former clubs, many described having become disillusioned with their club. The decline of the brotherhood and the growing entrepreneurialism were important motivating factors—alongside other factors internal and external to the club—in the decision of many interview participants to disengage from OMCGs:

> The change in direction and culture of the club is a big thing, cause I believe there's not really any brotherhood in there anymore. To me, one percent clubs are, who can wear the most gold chains, who's gonna buy X amount of merch to sell to someone else, who's gonna pay for it and who's gonna make the most money. (Participant who first joined in early 2010s)

> …so I was gonna leave. And the reason I was gonna was, they wouldn't know what being a one percenter meant. Had no idea about being your brother's keeper. I had three of those patches given to me and I wouldn't throw them on my vest. The whole being a one percent club stopped in about 2005–06. That's why I left…'cause I was objecting to being in…fucking drug dealer's outfit. (Participant who first joined in early 1980s)

These former members criticised the growing emphasis on profit, coupled with escalating inter- and intra-club conflict, and increasingly controlling behaviour. These factors increased attention from law enforcement, which several former members argued exacerbated the move away from the social aspects of club life:

> When we got to the clubhouse, the president changed, and became far more militant and controlling, created the clubhouse as a fortress, made everyone go and buy as many guns as possible. The place was fortified something ridiculous. Threats of violence with other gangs became out of control. (Participant who first joined in mid-2000s)

> As soon as I heard they were going to make it [OMCGs] a criminal organisation sort of thing, I just didn't want any of that drama… (Participant who first joined in late 1990s)

> VLAD [*Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment Act 2013*] laws introduced, getting harassed by police, just too dangerous. You join to ride around, hang with your mates and party, now you can't do that so it's useless. What's the point? Why bother? Just go join a social club or something. (Participant who first joined in early 2000s)

Discussion

This study explored changes to the internal culture of a sample of Australian OMCGs and provides rare insights from the perspective of former members. Specifically, it examined changes in the recruitment practices, hierarchies and governance processes, and internal values, norms and relationships of OMCGs. Ethnographic and autobiographical accounts have noted longstanding tensions between traditional and newer, younger OMCG members (Quinn 2001; Veno 2012; Wolf 1991; Wood 2003), with more recent research suggesting that the latter are becoming dominant in many Australian OMCGs (Lauchs 2017; Voce, Morgan & Dowling forthcoming). The results provide further, qualitative support for this trend, and highlight a number of co-occurring changes within OMCGs.

Several findings emerged with respect to the changing nature of OMCGs in Australia. For one, former members observed changes in the recruitment practices of OMCGs. Participants noted a shift in the dispositions and motivations of more recent OMCG recruits, with younger members increasingly joining and switching clubs for the status-building and illicit money-making opportunities membership is perceived to offer. Meanwhile, there was a common view among participants that clubs were targeting recruits, and poaching members from other clubs, based on their violent and criminal credentials, as opposed to their rapport with current members or their professed loyalty to the club and its values. Interview participants were critical of the fact that recruitment processes have been relaxed to expedite the induction of new members, with nominee periods reduced or even eliminated entirely. It is not clear whether this is driven more by internal or external factors; however, the increased instability in OMCG hierarchies and the conflict between older and younger members suggest the influx of younger, more criminally-inclined members may have altered the power balance within some OMCGs and been a catalyst for the changes observed to recruitment practices.

Participants noted little in the way of structural change, and most rules and processes were still formally observed. However, there appeared to be increasing exploitation of OMCG structures and systems for the personal benefit of this new generation of members. There was a common perception of a gradual 'changing of the guard', whereby younger members are gradually wresting formal positions of authority within OMCGs from older, more traditional members.

Interviews indicate these changes are illustrative of fundamental shifts in the informal value systems that have traditionally governed the behaviour of OMCG members and their relationships with one another. According to participants, their former clubs were now less collectives of like-minded individuals brought together by shared outlaw values and a love of motorcycles, and more groups of self-interested individuals looking to use the club, and each other, for their own (often material) gain. Although it is undoubtedly true that members with these motives have always been present in the OMCG milieu, former members described a growing number of disputes over money, power and revenge, despite their efforts to uphold the original values of their clubs.

Finally, many of the former members described becoming disillusioned with the club lifestyle, because of what they perceived to be the declining brotherhood, camaraderie and loyalty, and a general shift away from the aspects of OMCGs that initially attracted them. Interestingly, disillusionment has emerged with notable consistency across the broader literature on violent, criminal and deviant groups, where it has been found to be the most common 'push factor' associated with disengagement (eg Carson & Vecchio 2015; Douglas & Smith 2018; Tonks & Stephenson 2019; Windisch et al. 2017). Further research is needed to examine the patterns of and motives for disassociation from OMCGs, and the role played by the changing internal cultures of these clubs.

While these results do not establish a causal link between cultural changes in OMCGs and any involvement they have in organised crime, it is clear that OMCGs have come to mirror organised crime groups in some respects. The growing instability in these clubs reflects the instability in organised crime groups, with the latter often forming quickly to exploit opportunities for illicit profit before dissolving as a result of police activity, competition, internal disputes or illicit market downturns (Bouchard & Morselli 2014; Morselli 2009). Collaborations in these markets are typically coercive or self-serving, and partners can be quick to abandon each other when market conditions change or it is in their material interests to do so. Interviews suggest that these are emerging characteristics of OMCGs, as recruitment efforts increasingly focus on the violent and money-making credentials of recruits, a growing number of members join and switch clubs for self-serving reasons, and relationships between members become more exploitative and contentious. Further research is needed to explore and substantiate this link.

The cultural changes observed in this study tentatively suggest a number of implications for policing and government responses to OMCGs. The tenuous and self-serving connections some members now have with their clubs, coupled with the increasingly competitive atmospheres within them, make disruption activities traditionally used to deter organised crime potentially relevant to OMCGs. Jurisdictions across Australia have introduced various pieces of legislation to criminalise OMCGs and interactions among their members, restrict their involvement in key industries, and deny them critical club infrastructure such as clubhouse fortifications and club insignia (Ayling & Broadhurst 2014). Coupled with dedicated police operations and task forces targeting OMCGs (eg Strike Force Raptor in New South Wales and Taskforce Maxima/Hydra in Queensland), many of these measures have sought to make OMCG membership less materially attractive to current and prospective members, deny them any tangible benefits from membership, and disrupt the ability of these clubs to organise. While the success of these measures is a matter of ongoing debate in the research literature (Ayling 2011; Goldsworthy & McGillivray 2017), the current findings offer some support for the mechanisms they attempt to exploit, particularly in relation to younger members motivated by money and status.

Relatedly, the current findings point to the potential effectiveness of more proactive and preventative efforts to encourage members to avoid or disengage from OMCGs. Early interventions with potential members should focus on dispelling any romanticised views of OMCGs as brotherly organisations selflessly dedicated to living outside the norms of society. Indeed, the data collection process of this study demonstrates the critical role former members could play in delivering credible and personal accounts of disillusionment to dispel these views. Given the increasingly material motivations young men have for joining OMCGs, and consistent with best practice in exit programs for street gangs (Hastings, Dunbar & Bania 2013; Roman, Decker & Pyrooz 2017), early intervention and exit programs should also work to address the material needs of OMCG members by facilitating access to education or training, employment and financial assistance.

This study has examined changes to the internal cultures of Australian OMCGs, based on the perceptions of former members. The findings give unique insights into a closed, secretive and at times violent and criminal set of clubs, and highlight important trends relevant to law enforcement and other government agencies.

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URLs correct as at December 2020

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