ABSTRACT

Widely accepted findings in developmental and life-course criminology cannot be extended to criminal careers of organized crime offenders. While most offenders begin offending at a young age, criminal careers in organized crime are generally characterized by a late onset typically characterized by relatively serious offending. Different patterns exist for different groups, including early starters, adult-onset offenders, and offenders with no previous judicial contacts, but all studies find a significant share of adult-onset offenders. Social relationships, including family, friendship, and work ties, are importantly related to becoming involved in organized crime. Involvement mechanisms are diverse; both conventional and criminal capital are important. Children of organized crime offenders have a high risk of intergenerational continuity of crime. Factors that promote desistance for most offenders, such as employment, sometimes have different meanings for organized crime participants, as some occupations provide criminal opportunities and some work settings foster offender convergence. Widely used concepts such as specialization and desistance are less applicable because of the distinctive nature of organized crime offenses and careers. The most urgent issue for future research is to incorporate the roles of co-offenders into analyses of individual criminal careers.

In 1988, Albert J. Reiss Jr. published an inspiring essay in Crime and Justice about co-offending and criminal careers. He concluded that research
on co-offending “is disproportionately concentrated on juveniles and has focused almost exclusively on documenting how pervasive it is and on speculating on its role in the etiology of delinquency. The etiological questions therefore remain murky, and the consequences of groups for criminal career development remain unexplored. We need, therefore, to devote far more attention to detailed studies of offending careers and to pay special attention to co-offending in those careers, treating each individual’s career in terms of its intersections with others” (Reiss 1988, p. 165).

Knowledge about criminal careers has increased significantly since 1988. Primarily through analyzing large longitudinal data sets, the emerging field of developmental and life-course criminology has contributed significantly to our knowledge about the start, continuation, escalation, and ending of criminal careers (e.g., Blumstein et al. 1986; Farrington 2003; Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003; Blokland, Nagin, and Nieuwbeerta 2005; Jolliffe et al. 2017; Farrington, Lazemian, and Piquero 2019; Weisburd et al. 2020). The building and analysis of large longitudinal data sets were accompanied by major methodological innovations, such as the development of group-based trajectory modeling (Nagin and Land 1993; Nagin 2005; Nagin and Odgers 2010) and the growth and institutionalization of a large research community with its own professional associations and scientific journals. In Lakatos’s (1970) terms, developmental and life-course criminology is one of the most successful criminological “research programs” of recent decades and has solved many “scientific puzzles” through sustained and combined research efforts.

Research programs share several basic assumptions and methodologies (e.g., Farrington 2003). This shared focus, however, may sometimes result in implicit disregard of aspects of and theoretical explanations for the phenomena studied. One of the strong points of developmental and life-course criminology, analyses of large longitudinal data sets, may have resulted in a focus primarily on young offenders, high-volume crime, and the individual characteristics of offenders. Older offenders can be studied in longitudinal studies only after passage of considerable time and only if they can be traced and are willing to cooperate with additional data collection sweeps. Follow-up periods, however, typically are short, additional data sweeps are costly, and sample attrition, self-selection, and an (unintended) neglect of adult criminal careers are recurring problems. It is also difficult to include more serious offenders and offenders who start their careers late in life (“adult onset”) in these samples. Finally,
large longitudinal data sets have serious problems in taking account of the social contexts of crime and of co-offending, as it is difficult enough to keep track of dynamic and stable characteristics of individuals over time. Although some of these characteristics may be related to the wider social context of individuals (e.g., criminal friends, partners, school, or work), each individual is basically treated as an “atom” without further consideration of the “molecules” they are part of or the “chemical reactions” taking place in their social or criminal context.

For research on organized crime, co-offending is the heart of the matter. It is also a defining characteristic. Although there is continuing debate on how organized crime should be defined, many definitions revolve around co-offending and criminal groups (the “who”) and criminal activities with serious harm for society (the “what”; e.g., Paoli and Vander Beken 2014; Von Lampe 2016). Many writers agree that at least two or three co-offenders need to cooperate for a prolonged period in some (serious) criminal activities, but there are divergences between wide and narrow definitions. They differ regarding views on the structure of co-offending (from stable, pyramidal organizations to flexible criminal networks with fluid co-offending relationships or even single criminal “entrepreneurs”) and on the types of criminal activities that qualify as “organized crime.”

Many definitions of organized crime are available (see, e.g., Paoli 2002; Finckenauer 2005; Hagan 2006). Although most contain similar dimensions, including co-offending or groups and activities causing serious harm to society, precise definitions vary. This also applies to the studies discussed in this essay. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime defined an organized criminal group as “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 offenses, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2004, p. 5). Most Dutch studies adopt Fijnaut’s definition: organized crime groups “primarily focus on illegal profit, systematically commit crimes that adversely affect society, and are capable of effectively shielding their activities, in particular by being willing to use physical violence or eliminate individuals by way of corruption” (Fijnaut et al. 1998, pp. 26–27). Many studies of Italian and Italian-American mafia groups use narrower definitions, placing more restrictions on the structure of cooperation or types of criminal activities.
When reviewing theoretical and empirical research on organized crime, it is important to remember that the phenomena studied have shifted over time. Studies in the 1960s tended to focus on rural Italian mafia groups and Italian-American mafia families in large cities such as New York (e.g., Cressey 1969). The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the rise of “transnational organized crime,” involving large-scale drug trafficking, international fraud, human trafficking, and human smuggling (Kleemans 2014b, p. 32). The mafia studies relate primarily to the control of territories or economic sectors by criminal groups; criminal careers, therefore, are often conceptualized within the context of the power and career structures of these criminal organizations. The subject of the more recent work can be characterized as “transit crime” (Kleemans 2007).

The major business of many organized crime groups—particularly in democratic and industrialized Western countries—involves international illegal activities: drug trafficking, smuggling illegal immigrants, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, arms trafficking, trafficking in stolen vehicles, and other transnational illegal activities such as money laundering and tax evasion (e.g., cigarette smuggling and customs fraud). Transit crime involves making money through international illegal trade rather than through protection, extortion, or the abuse of monopoly power (“racketeering”). The structure of cooperation is far more diverse, and offenders often cooperate in smaller groups and in flexible and fluid criminal networks (e.g., Bouchard and Morselli 2014; Bouchard 2020). Co-offenders and criminal networks remain important but are far less restrictive than in careers in criminal organizations that control geographical areas or economic sectors.

Stable, durable criminal organizations such as Sicilian mafia groups, Japanese Yakuza groups, Hong Kong Triads, and Russian mafia groups exist or have existed in recent history (e.g., Gambetta 1993; Paoli 2003; Varese 2011, 2014). However, in many democratic and industrialized Western countries such organizations no longer exist or are the exception rather than the rule. The main reason for this is that illicit markets, often international—often in combination with strong government and effective law enforcement—hinder the emergence of large and stable criminal organizations. Many of the traditional mafias originated during periods before the emergence of large and profitable international illegal markets. The prime example is the boom in international narcotics trade in the 1970s and 1980s.
In addition to stable and durable criminal organizations often involved in racketeering and more flexible criminal networks often involved in transit crime, organized crime scholars also study local illegal markets, involving drugs, prostitution, illegal gambling, and loan-sharking (e.g., Reuter 1983). It can be debated whether all these activities qualify as organized crime in terms of either structures of cooperation or scales of associated harms. Territorial control may be an element of these activities, particularly in relation to local drug markets, and there may be considerable overlap with gang research (e.g., Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz 2013; Pyrooz et al. 2016). These activities are often portrayed in literature from North America as organized crime, but they are often far removed from the core of the organized crime literature. This is true both of structures of cooperation (smaller and more fluid networks) and the scale of activities (in terms of harm, e.g., including lower-level drug dealing and less serious and more local criminal activities).

This essay is structured around the three most important lines of research on criminal careers in organized crime. Their systematic study has increased significantly since the publication of “Criminal Careers and Social Opportunity Structure” (Kleemans and De Poot 2008), which presented quantitative and qualitative analyses of a large population of organized crime offenders active in the Netherlands. Several quantitative studies of larger populations have since been carried out, basically following the primary lines of developmental and life-course studies on high-volume crime (Savona et al. 2017). These studies were mainly carried out in a small number of countries where large data collections were undertaken: the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Australia. The United States has a proud tradition in gang research, mainly highlighting street and prison gangs (e.g., Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz 2013; Pyrooz et al. 2016). Given, however, that the types of offenses and offenders studied in this literature and the literature itself are mostly separate from the organized crime literature, we exclude gang research. More studies based on qualitative research have been published, often based on autobiographies, biographies, and case studies (Savona et al. 2017; Kemp, Zolghadriha, and Gill 2019). Studies of criminal careers in organized crime have produced three lines of new findings.

The first line studies individual sequences of offending in developmental and life-course criminology and applies this approach to organized crime offenders. As is found among general offender populations,
organized crime offenders tend to follow various criminal career patterns and include early onset, late-onset, and first-time offenders. In organized crime studies, however, adult-onset offenders are consistently found to be the largest group. Criminal careers in organized crime are generally characterized by a relatively late onset, in the adult years; juveniles are almost absent. This is an important finding. The very phenomenon of adult onset is often debated or denied (e.g., Sohoni et al. 2014), and, more revealingly, it often involves serious criminal activities rather than minor crimes. Organized crime offenders more often have previous judicial contacts than does the general offender population, and those previous contacts are often far more serious. These quantitative studies show that criminal careers in organized crime are very different from those found in the literature on high-volume crime.

A second line of research focuses on how people become involved in organized crime. Many organized crime activities require both criminal and conventional capital. Since organized crime groups depend on a wide variety of capacities, knowledge, and contacts, individual involvement mechanisms are diverse. Family relationships, other social ties, the “social snowball effect,” leisure activities and sidelines, and work ties help explain why individuals engage in criminal groups. Some offenders are deliberately recruited by a criminal group because of their criminal or conventional capital; others have more self-initiating roles. Labor market characteristics illustrate this diversity of involvement mechanisms. Italian mafia groups embedded in disadvantaged areas seem to benefit from the ample availability of unemployed and disadvantaged people. For other types of organized crime, employment in particular occupations may provide opportunities for involvement, and work settings may function as “offender convergence settings.”

A third line of research deals with concepts from developmental and life-course criminology such as desistance, specialization, life events, and co-offending that are associated with continuity and discontinuity in criminal careers. Such concepts are less easily applicable to organized crime because they are hard to use or have a different meaning for organized crime offenders and their careers. Theories of desistance, for example, predicting that important life events, such as getting married or obtaining a job, will lead to a decrease in offending, do not apply to organized crime; many organized crime careers start only in later adulthood after the typical age of getting married or starting a job. A concept such as specialization is also less appropriate: what is considered a single offense in high-volume crime
(such as a burglary or violent offense) is much more limited in time and space than are organized crime activities, which may last for longer periods and be carried out within the context of a criminal group.

This essay follows these three lines of research on criminal careers in organized crime. Section I discusses various pathways in organized crime and highlights the case of adult onset, drawing on studies in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Italy and recent research on motorcycle gangs. Section II identifies involvement mechanisms and discusses the roles of social ties, life events, intergenerational transmission, and employment. Section III reviews concepts related to continuity and discontinuity that are widely studied within developmental and life-course criminology and applies them to the study of organized crime. Section IV offers conclusions and proposals for future research.

I. Criminal Careers and Adult Onset

What happens to general findings and received wisdom from developmental and life-course criminology when we study different populations of offenders? Two key findings that have been challenged by research into organized crime relate to the well-known age-crime curve and Moffitt’s (1993) dual taxonomy. The age-crime curve describes a steep rise in the prevalence of offending in the early teenage years, reaching a peak between ages 15 and 17 and declining over the rest of the life course (Farrington 1986, 2003; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, pp. 124–44). Moffitt’s taxonomy partitions the aggregate age-crime curve into a large group of people who engage in crime and antisocial behavior during adolescence (“adolescence-limited offenders”) and a small group who are antisocial from an early age and remain active in crime and other forms of antisocial behavior throughout their lives (“life-course persistent offenders”). Moffitt’s taxonomy exemplifies theories that seek explanations for criminal careers in early life and stable individual differences. She argues that early problem behavior is an indicator that antisocial and criminal behavior is likely to continue later in life. Such “asymmetrical” theories posit that individual differences between offenders exist from the start or are developed early in life and treat adult onset as an anomaly that does not exist or results from measurement error (cf. Sohoni et al. 2014).

Criminal careers studies have found various developmental trajectories of criminal activity over the life course but focus mainly on young offenders and high-volume crime (Piquero 2008; Farrington, Lazemian,
and Piquero 2019). Older offenders are largely absent. Research on criminal careers in organized crime, however, contradicts the idea that crimes committed at advanced ages are usually preceded by an adolescent criminal career. Significant groups of adult-onset offenders have been found in many organized crime studies, older offenders comprise a large part of the study population, and very young offenders are largely absent.

These different findings can easily be explained. High-volume crime, such as property and violent crime, is open to everyone and often requires little expertise, skill, planning, or collaboration. Organized crime poses different requirements (Kleemans and De Poot 2008, p. 75). First, social relations are of great importance, as they provide access to suppliers and clients and create a basic level of trust. The relevance of social relations cannot be overstated in a risky, unregulated environment in which the financial stakes are high and that lacks rules and mechanisms that make legal transactions much easier, such as entering into contracts, paying via the official banking system, and reconciling disagreements via mediation or the courts (Reuter 1983). For these reasons, existing social ties are used or illegal business relationships must be built. Not every potential offender has suitable social ties, and building up these relationships takes time and energy.

Second, not all offenders have access to transnational contacts, and some have this kind of access only later in life. Transnational social ties are often salient, as many types of organized crime involve international smuggling: drug trafficking, smuggling illegal immigrants, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, arms trafficking, trafficking in stolen vehicles, and other transnational illegal activities such as money laundering and tax evasion (e.g., cigarette smuggling, European Union fraud).

Third, both collaborations with co-offenders and ties to licit society are important. Criminal activities are often complex, and more co-offenders are required for their successful execution. Contacts with the licit world are important for transport, money transactions, and shielding activities from the authorities. Contacts with co-offenders are thus needed to provide both “criminal capital” and “conventional capital.”

Kleemans and De Poot (2008) used the theoretical concept of “social opportunity structure” to describe social ties that provide access to profitable criminal opportunities.1 Social opportunity structure is unequally

1 The notion of social opportunity structure combines concepts from differential opportunity structure (Cloward and Ohlin 1960), opportunity theory (Clarke and Felson 1993), and social network theory (e.g., Burt 1992; Morselli 2005).
distributed across the population. Some people have social ties that give them direct access to illegal opportunities. Examples include people with transnational contacts that are needed to connect source countries of narcotics to Western consumer markets, and people whose occupations involve mobility, transport, and logistics. Social opportunity structure is unequally distributed across age. Some younger offenders lack necessary social ties, which partly explains why some become involved in organized crime only at later ages. It also explains “late starters,” people without any appreciable criminal history or people who switch from legal occupations to organized crime careers.

To describe the general findings regarding criminal careers in organized crime, we have selected from major quantitative studies in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Australia. Three important methodological considerations warrant preliminary mention. First, all samples are selective and differ concerning why offenders were included. Cullen (2011) argues that criminological research is dominated by adolescents rather than “real,” older offenders. Because organized crime often involves criminal activities later in life that can be discovered only if the police investigate them, police priorities to a large extent influence the populations researchers can study. This may also be true for other types of crime (our position), but concerning organized crime, it is a fundamental issue. Investigative agency priorities may have a larger effect on whether specific activities appear in organized crime data sets than in data sets on high-volume crime. There are no convincing reasons, however, why the risk of arrest (mainly for property and violent crime) should differ very much between adolescent offenders, so investigative agency effects should be less important. It makes little sense to try to generalize findings about organized crime careers to larger populations or to take quantitative findings too literally. Large samples, however, even if not generalizable to other populations, often incorporate large numbers of offenders and diverse criminal activities and may focus attention on underexposed phenomena, different types of offenders, and different types of groups.

Second, quantitative methods reduce criminal activities to data points, limiting capacity to take account of contextual information. Organized crime activities, for example, often span longer periods but are still “data

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2 In a systematic review of studies of recruitment into organized crime, Savona et al. (2017) distinguished among quantitative studies (12), mixed-method studies (8), and many qualitative ones (often with small sample sizes). They included gang research and focused on recruitment.
points” in a longitudinal data set reflecting criminal careers. Furthermore, criminal activities can be measured in several ways (e.g., incidents, arrests, prosecutions, convictions) in different studies and may have different meanings for different activities.

The third methodological consideration is that it is more important in studies of organized crime careers to focus on qualitative findings than on differences in quantitative findings. The latter may, to a large extent, result from sample and measurement differences. Within these data sets, however, interesting comparisons can be made.

A. Criminal Careers Research in the Netherlands

Large scale work on criminal careers has been done on the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Italy. We examine these literatures in succession. We also discuss work on outlaw motorcycle gangs.

1. Criminal Careers, Persisters, and Adult Onset. Twenty years ago, the Dutch minister of justice promised the parliament to report periodically on organized crime in the country. The Organized Crime Monitor, a systematic, large-scale, and ongoing study into the nature of organized crime, is the result. One hundred eighty criminal investigations have been analyzed. Criminal groups (and investigations targeting groups or networks) come in different shapes and sizes. On average in the Netherlands, 10 to 15 offenders work together, but investigations targeting criminal networks of over 100 offenders also exist. Netherlands criminal groups are generally not characterized by a stable, pyramid-shaped organization. Cooperation takes place in more flexible structures that can be characterized as criminal networks with clusters and cliques. Some are dense and operate locally; others are more fluid and operate internationally. While many Dutch criminal groups are involved in production and trafficking of drugs, the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor also includes groups involved in other illegal activities, including human trafficking, weapons smuggling, organized fraud, and money laundering. The main sources of these data are files of closed Dutch police investigations of criminal groups, often spanning 2 or more years, combined with interviews with experts such as public prosecutors and police investigators (Kleemans 2014a). These empirically rich case studies provide qualitative contextual information about offenders’ criminal careers. These data were combined with rap sheets from the Dutch Judicial Documentation System on individual characteristics and official judicial records.
The first large-scale study was based on quantitative and qualitative information about 979 offenders involved in 79 different cases that were analyzed in the context of the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor (Kleemans and De Poot 2008). That study described differences with the general offender population, different types of criminal careers (including a substantial number of adult-onset offenders), and various mechanisms through which offenders become involved in organized crime. Two main conclusions stood out. First, juveniles were almost absent; most offenders were in their 30s, 40s, or 50s, or older. Second, a substantial group of adult-onset offenders was present in the data set: these were offenders with no appreciable criminal history who apparently became involved in crime only later in their lives. This finding proved to be robust in follow-up research, on different criminal activities (drugs, fraud, and other activities) and for different roles in criminal groups (leaders, coordinators, and lower-level offenders; Van Koppen et al. 2010). Follow-up studies in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Italy, which we discuss below, confirmed the presence of a substantial group of adult-onset offenders in organized crime. This was unexpected because adult onset is considered to be an anomaly in mainstream criminal career research, let alone concerning more serious forms of crime such as organized crime.

Kleemans and De Poot (2008) analyzed the careers of 66 leaders and “nodal” offenders to find out how their careers had developed. This group consisted of 32 adult-onset offenders and 34 with longer careers. A substantial share of leaders were adult-onset offenders who had switched from legal occupations to organized crime. Among the 32 offenders, 19 had backgrounds in legal trade including import and export; 13 had other prior occupations, including the business sector, the construction industry, assembly, hotels and catering, financial services, and government. Kleemans and De Poot identified three types of adult-onset leaders and nodal offenders: people who moved into criminal activities from legal activities (opportunities arising during day-to-day work, particularly in organized fraud cases); people whose career switches from legal to illegal commodities were motivated by the high profits to be made trading in prohibited commodities such as narcotics; and people who seized on criminal opportunities after experiencing significant life events such as financial setbacks and problematic debt situations.

Kleemans and De Poot (2008) also analyzed the criminal careers of 92 “starters,” suspects who had no previous judicial contacts and had not...
“progressed” from high-volume crime to organized crime. Five involvement mechanisms were identified: deliberate recruitment by criminal groups; social ties and the social snowball effect; work ties; leisure activities and sidelines; and life events, including financial setbacks. We return to this topic in Section II.

The quantitative and qualitative research into adult onset and criminal careers provided a compelling case for taking the apparent anomaly of adult onset seriously and for focusing on more than individual differences and long-term risk factors. Kleemans and De Poot (2008) stressed the importance of “social opportunity structure,” social ties that provide access to profitable criminal opportunities. As social opportunity structure is unequally distributed across the population and across age, it might also explain involvement, developments, and success in organized crime.

In follow-up research based on the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor, these analyses were extended to larger populations (Van Koppen et al. 2010; Van der Geest, Van Koppen, and Kleemans 2020; Van Koppen et al. 2019). Comparisons have been made with the general offender population (Van Koppen, De Poot, and Blokland 2010). Several studies have found that certain professions provide opportunities for organized crime activities (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 2008) and have focused on the relationship between work and organized crime (Madarie and Kruisbergen 2020; Van der Geest, Van Koppen, and Kleemans 2020; Van Koppen et al. 2019).

2. Adult Onset and Different Types of Careers. A follow-up study by Van Koppen et al. (2010) used a larger data set and more qualitative information about different roles in criminal groups and different criminal activities. A semiparametric group model was used to cluster 854 offenders involved in 120 different organized crime cases into groups with similar developmental trajectories. The most important finding relates to the substantial group of adult-onset offenders (40 percent) and a group without any previous criminal records (19 percent). The other groups were early starters (11 percent) and persisters (30 percent). No earlier trajectory study found such a large share of adult-onset offenders. One possible explanation is that particular roles in criminal groups relate to adult-onset offending, for example, lower-level offenders. Another possibility is that particular types of criminal activities account for adult onset. Organized fraud might, for example, be related primarily to adult onset, while drug trafficking might primarily be related to early starters and persisters.
No clear relationship was found, however, between adult-onset offending and particular roles in criminal groups (e.g., leaders, coordinators, lower-level offenders, others) or particular types of criminal activities such as drug trafficking and organized fraud. Closely similar distributions across trajectory groups were found for each type of criminal activity and each type of role. Adult onset characterized offenders in different roles and involved in different types of crimes. These findings turned out to be quite robust. Although the quantitative findings should not be generalized beyond the analyzed cases, within this data set they are very relevant. The neglected case of adult onset turns out to be not an anomaly but to characterize a substantial share of the studied population.

Because this study was based on official records, the dark number problem might explain the substantial share of adult onset. We can never know whether criminal records accurately reflect all criminal behavior of an individual, and an individual who was first arrested as an adult may have committed undetected crimes as a juvenile. It might be argued that organized crime offenders are more successful in avoiding authorities and more often incorrectly identified as an adult-onset offender.

That argument is unconvincing. Adult onset was systematically found across offenders performing different roles from leader to lowest-level actor and across offenders involved in diverse activities from drug trafficking to organized fraud. That adult onset is real is shown by qualitative life histories in which offenders shift from licit careers and licit occupational backgrounds to organized crime (Kleemans and De Poot 2008). Interviews with imprisoned organized crime offenders also confirm the existence and explanations of an adult onset (Van Koppen and De Poot 2013).

Van der Geest, Van Koppen, and Kleemans (2020) recently replicated these findings, using a larger data set of 1,921 individuals from 180 organized crime cases in the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. The main focus was on socioeconomic factors such as employment and income (which are discussed below). Offending trajectories were described, including, in contrast to the earlier study, minor offenses dealt with by sub-district judges. In this large sample, organized crime offenders had their first judicial contact on average at age 27. Compared to the traditional age-crime curve (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), offending stayed relatively high and started dropping to a lower level only at age 50.

3. Differences with the General Offender Population. To learn how organized crime offenders differ from the general offender population, Van
Koppen, De Poot, and Blokland (2010) analyzed the careers of 746 organized crime offenders included in 120 analyzed cases from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. They used an age-matched comparison group from the general offender population, which means that two offender groups with the same age distribution were compared.

An unexpected finding was that many people in both samples had no judicial contacts before adulthood. However, organized crime offenders more often had previous judicial contacts than the general offenders, and those contacts were far more serious. Organized crime offenders thus differed from general offenders in the seriousness of their initial criminal behavior (instead of age of onset, which for both groups was in their mid-20s). The general findings were robust when distinguishing between drug crimes and organized fraud cases. These findings imply that adult onset is not unique to organized crime offenders but is largely overlooked in much research on high-volume crime populations because of data restrictions and heavy reliance on prospective longitudinal studies. A recent systematic review of prospective longitudinal studies suggests that adult onset is present in these data sets but has been largely neglected (Jolliffe et al. 2017).

B. Criminal Careers Research in the United Kingdom

Francis et al. (2013) analyzed the criminal careers of organized crime offenders in the United Kingdom. Their data came not from criminal investigations but from the Police National Computer (PNC) database, a registry of all offenders sanctioned in England and Wales. Because organized crime offenders are not separately identified in the PNC, they selected 4,112 individuals convicted in 2007–10 of offenses “associated with an involvement in organized crime” in terms of crime type, sentence length (a minimum custodial sentence of 3 years), and being sentenced along with at least one co-offender. Francis et al. (2013, p. 15) acknowledge limitations of this complex and indirect selection procedure. The majority of offenders (73 percent) were selected on the basis of a conviction for a drugs-related offense and around 10 percent for having a conviction for a violent offense. Compared with Dutch Organized Crime Monitor data, the sample of “organized crime offenders” is probably more skewed toward high-volume and serious crime. The focus on a minimum custodial sentence of 3 years probably overrepresents recidivists of serious crimes. Similarities in findings for the organized crime
offenders and a comparison group of serious crime offenders point in this direction.

The sample was compared to two groups: general offenders and serious crime offenders. The serious crime offenders had received a minimum 3-year custodial sentence between 2007 and 2010 but were not sentenced with a co-offender, and their conviction offense was not among the 185 identified as “likely” or “possibly” related to organized crime. The average age of the organized crime offenders at the time of the conviction for the inclusion offense was 32 years, older than the general offenders but similar to the serious crime offenders. Only 1 percent of organized crime offenders and serious crime offenders were under age 18 at the time of their inclusion offense; this was much lower than for the general offender group (19 percent). Fifty-seven percent of organized crime offenders received their first sanction (court conviction or caution/warning/reprimand) before age 18 and 43 percent at age 18 years or older. Organized crime offenders had more prior sanctions than general offenders (nine compared with three), and serious crime offenders had even more (11).

Analysis of offending frequency by age indicated several routes into organized crime: “Two-thirds of organized crime offenders had offended at a relatively low rate throughout their criminal careers. These included a proportion who had offended very little before adulthood: for example, 1 in 10 did not reach their offending peak until into their 30s and showed no fall in the rate of offending as they got older. Organized crime offenders who followed the more conventional pattern of offending, peaking in late teenage years before rapidly declining, made up less than one in five (18%) of the sample” (Francis et al. 2013, p. 6).

C. Criminal Career Research in Australia

Fuller, Morgan, and Brown (2019) used two intelligence databases (the National Criminal Target List and the National Police Reference System) to create a sample of 2,172 offenders identified by law enforcement as being affiliated with an organized crime group (using a broad definition) and having an Australian criminal history. The majority had their first criminal offense as adults: 25 percent before turning 18, 59 percent at age 20 years or over, 30 percent at age 25 or over, and 10 percent at age 30 years or over. Offending was most common, and remained relatively stable, throughout their 20s and early 30s. Offending frequency gradually
increased during this period, as did the seriousness of offenses committed. The findings of a substantial share of adult onset offenders and persistence in offending in the adult years are consistent with the findings from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Age at first offense and prevalence of offending varied by crime type. Certain offenses, especially those associated with organized crime, were more common among older offenders (Fuller, Morgan, and Brown 2019, p. 10). For example, those who committed drug offenses tended to be older than those who committed violent or property offenses.

D. Italian Mafia Groups and Criminal Careers

Savona et al. (2020) analyzed the criminal careers of Italian mafia members using the unique PROTON Mafia Member data set. It contains information on all individuals who have received final convictions for mafia offenses since the 1980s. The data set includes information on more than 11,000 individuals and 182,000 offenses. The study uses a three-level approach, analyzing the macro-, meso-, and microdimensions of criminal careers. The Italian mafia provides an interesting case for criminal career research, as individual careers are nested within specific mafia families that are part of wider mafia structures (the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Neapolitan Camorra, the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, and the Apulian mafias). These different mafias often have distinctive geographic characteristics and histories.

At the macrolevel, members of the different Italian mafias have different types of criminal trajectories, although significant fractions exhibit late onset and late persistence (Campedelli et al. 2019). At the mesolevel, members of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Neapolitan Camorra, the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, and the Apulian mafias have very similar patterns, although some distinctive differences emerge. At the microlevel, Italian mafia members commit their first recorded crime, on average, at 25 (median 22). However, entrance into the mafia organization (marked by the first mafia-associated offense) usually occurs later, on average at 34 (median 33). When analyzing differences between individuals with an early or a late entrance into a mafia group (compared to a baseline group), early recruits have fewer years of education and a different criminal profile: they were more versatile in the types of crimes committed before entering the mafia organization and committed less serious offenses (compared to offenders who joined at an “average” age). For late recruits, the opposite pattern was typical (compared to the baseline group).
The authors conclude that violent and versatile offenders with less education tend to enter the mafia groups at younger ages. Offenders are usually recruited by the local mafia group in the province or region of birth.

E. Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs and Criminal Careers

Blokland and Von Lampe (2020) review studies on outlaw motorcycle gangs. Some “motor clubs,” particularly in various European countries and Australia, have very high levels of members with criminal records. Some of these clubs or their members are involved in organized crime activities such as drug production, drug trafficking, and extortion. Club activities and other members play significant roles in members’ daily lives, raising the questions of whether and how the clubs influence the criminal careers of members. Two recent studies have produced pertinent findings.

Blokland et al. (2019) compared criminal career data of a sample of 601 police-identified Dutch outlaw motorcycle gang members and an age-matched comparison group of 300 non-gang-affiliated motorcycle owners. Dutch outlaw bikers are more often convicted than the average Dutch motorcyclist of minor, more serious, and violent crimes. Criminal careers differed during the juvenile and early adult years, but also—and more so—during the adult years. The results support an “enhancement” hypothesis that combines two effects: selection of crime-prone individuals into motorcycle gangs and facilitation of criminal behavior while there (for a more general review of peer influence and delinquency, see McGloin and Thomas [2019]).

One problem of gang research is that membership is often treated as a binary variable, contrasting those in a gang to those not in a gang, without further differentiation. Such comparisons amplify possible selection effects. A more relevant comparison concerns members of more and less criminal gangs (called “radical” and “conservative” gangs in the motorcycle gangs literature). Van Deuren, Blokland, and Kleemans (2020) used differences in early criminal careers of members of radical and conservative motorcycle gangs to examine their effects on members’ adult criminal careers. Using a sample of 2,090 police-identified gang members, they employed quasi-experimental methods (i.e., matching weights) to control for selection bias in order to examine the effect of membership in a radical motorcycle gang on adult crimes, particularly more serious and organized ones. Membership in a radical motorcycle gang was
associated with increased offending compared with membership in a conservative one. Members of radical gangs were twice as likely to be involved in organized crimes and were sentenced to prison twice as often. This supports the enhancement hypothesis: gangs select more crime-prone individuals as members, but membership facilitates criminal behavior.

F. Conclusions on Criminal Careers in Organized Crime

Criminal careers in organized crime are different from those that typify the literature on high-volume crime. First, offenders involved in organized crime are generally older, and juveniles are nearly absent. Second, organized crime offenders more often have previous judicial contacts than does the general offender population and for far more serious offenses. Third, criminal careers in organized crime are generally characterized by a relatively late onset (in the adult years); all studies find significant shares of adult-onset offenders. Fourth, criminal career patterns differ for various groups, including early starters, adult-onset offenders, and offenders with no previous judicial contacts. Fifth, differences seem to exist between early starters and adult-onset offenders, particularly regarding education and work as well as criminal profile. Different involvement mechanisms may be at work.

II. Involvement Mechanisms and Recruitment

This section discusses the social embeddedness of organized crime and involvement mechanisms. Specific topics relate to the intergenerational continuity of organized crime and transmission in family structures and the relationship between work and organized crime.

A. Social Embeddedness

Social ties are an essential element in understanding successful involvement in organized crime (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999, p. 19). Family and friendship relations and introductions to third parties are important, as they help create a basic level of trust in a risky, unregulated environment. Existing social ties are used or illegal business relationships must be built. Strong social bonds, such as family relationships and marriage, provide a solid basis for trust but may not offer contacts and capabilities that are needed for particular criminal activities. Many organized crime activities need both “criminal capital” and “conventional capital.”
Some offenders have strong connections with other offenders (criminal capital) but lack access to people whose conventional jobs, businesses, or specialized knowledge provide access to production locations, storage, (transnational) transport, money transactions, and investments. Many involvement mechanisms relate to social relationships associated with criminal capital or conventional capital.

Kleemans and De Poot (2008) analyzed, in addition to the careers of 66 leaders described earlier, the careers of 92 “starters,” offenders who had no prior judicial contacts and who had not “progressed” from high-volume crime to organized crime. They distinguished five involvement mechanisms: deliberate recruitment by criminal groups; social ties and the social snowball effect; work ties; leisure activities and sidelines; and life events, including financial setbacks.

The first mechanism, deliberate recruitment, makes clear that members of existing criminal groups look for potential co-offenders for various reasons. The types of co-offenders needed depend on the nature of the criminal group and the nature of envisaged criminal activities. An organized crime group that produces and transports drugs, for example, may need international truck drivers.

The second mechanism, social ties and the social snowball effect, is a general mechanism with many different, concrete manifestations. It is related to the dynamic nature of many criminal networks and to the transfer of knowledge and contacts. Once individuals become involved in organized crime through social ties, they become less dependent on other people’s resources (such as money, knowledge, and contacts) and can attract people from their own social environment (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999, p. 33). This social snowball effect differs from traditional views on recruitment, which assume that criminal organizations recruit outsiders to do dirty jobs, who may then climb the organizational ladder by proving their capability. Stable organizations with (some) territorial control exist or have existed in specific areas and periods, so specific circumstances may also influence how people become involved or get “recruited.”

The other mechanisms involve kinds of social links that may be forged between potential co-offenders. The third arises in work settings (discussed in Sec. II.C). The fourth relates to leisure activities and locations where people from different social and criminal worlds meet. This may occur in local cafés, shooting clubs, drug outlets, and similar places between people who usually live in different social worlds and do not meet
one another in their ordinary daily lives (Kleemans and De Poot 2008, p. 81). The fifth mechanism involves negative life events, such as a financial setback, losing a job, a problematic debt situation, or bankruptcy. This may create or deepen contacts with “generous” moneylenders or “employers.”

Savona et al. (2017) produced a systematic review of the social, psychological, and economic factors relating to criminalization and recruitment to organized crime. A practical problem in reviewing these studies is that many focused on the functioning of organized crime groups in general; only some focused on recruitment or on criminal careers of individual offenders. The contexts of these studies vary widely, ranging from mafia groups which control territory to transnational drug trafficking networks and local gangs. Savona and his colleagues nonetheless paint a vivid picture and describe findings for different types of organized crime groups. The main findings relate to social and economic factors; psychological factors play a minor role in their studies. These factors are highly interrelated and sometimes apply more to one type of organized crime group than to others.

The most important factors are consistently shown to be violent attitudes and behavior, criminal background, low economic status, and particular social relations:

First, violence characterizes OCGs [organized crime groups] activities and is often used to reinforce one’s status within the organization. Second, people who turn to OC [organized crime] usually have a significant criminal history and/or a prison background resulting from their proneness to violent and risk-taking behavior. Third, people living in poor and socially disorganized areas experience the lack of access to legitimate means to attain commonly accepted goals. These mechanisms affect individuals’ satisfaction and success, promoting the search of illegal alternatives to overcome these difficulties. Fourth, social relations also play a crucial role in the involvement into OCGs. Social proximity and interactions with members of OCGs promote the participation in OC. This includes kinship and other blood ties, allowing to enhance mutual trust and loyalty. (Savona et al. 2017, p. 46)

Savona and his colleagues highlight differences associated with different types of organizations. Many of the studies relate to Italian mafia groups and gangs. They often rely on kinship and blood ties and use initiation rituals to reinforce their group identity. These rituals and cultural
factors also apply to some gangs, although we do not think most gangs and their activities qualify as organized crime in terms either of structures of cooperation or the harms their activities cause. For other types of organized crime groups, Savona et al. (2017) stress other factors. Recruitment into drug trafficking organizations is mostly driven by monetary returns. For other types of organization, individuals enter during adulthood “as they develop specialized expertise and social ties with criminals only later in life” (Savona et al. 2017, p. 46).

B. Intergenerational Continuity

Anecdotal evidence from case studies, biographies, and autobiographies shows that the social embeddedness of organized crime has implications for its intergenerational continuity (Savona et al. 2017; Kemp, Zolghadriha, and Gill 2019). Besemer et al. (2017) show in their systematic review and meta-analysis of intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior that a specific focus on organized crime families is often lacking in more general quantitative studies. Several exploratory studies with small samples suggest that children of organized crime offenders are at high risk of intergenerational continuity of involvement (e.g., Sergi 2018; Van Dijk, Kleemans, and Eichelsheim 2019; Spapens and Moors 2019).

Sergi (2018) explored proceedings of the Youth Tribunal of Reggio Calabria in southern Italy aimed at protecting children in families in which one or both parents are investigated for mafia offenses. The study, focusing on sociocultural transmission of ‘Ndrangheta culture, shows that the prevention of this transmission has become an essential part of child protection measures. Parental authority can be revoked by the Youth Tribunal. Analysis of case files shows that the tribunal makes explicit connections between parental failures to educate children and the children’s risk of becoming involved in deviance and crime.

A recent project in the Netherlands extensively investigated the nature and extent of intergenerational continuity of crime among children of organized crime offenders (Van Dijk, Kleemans, and Eichelsheim 2019). It studied 25 organized crime offenders based in Amsterdam and 48 of their children age 19 or older. Ninety one percent of the 23 sons were known offenders according to police data, 52 percent had committed more than four crimes, and 43 percent had been imprisoned one or more times. Sons had earlier ages of onset than their fathers (sons:
16 years, fathers: 23.5 years). The story with daughters was different. Half had criminal records, primarily for only one minor crime.

A qualitative in-depth analysis was carried out of all members of 14 of the 25 families in police files, justice department files, and child protection service files. Intergenerational transmission seems to be facilitated by mediating risk factors, including the mother’s inadequate parenting skills, the father’s “notorious” or violent reputation, and deviant social learning. Finally, the results suggest a wider effect of both violence committed outside the house and domestic violence on intergenerational transmission. Violence also appeared in the children’s leisure activities (boxing) and in socialization into what is seen as normal behavior. The father’s crimes tend to result in a violent reputation for the whole family, which attracted criminal friends and co-offenders for sons and had an adverse effect on child-protection services’ access to these families. There seemed to be a “family cycle of multiplying violence and retreating agencies” (Van Dijk, Kleemans, and Eichelsheim 2019, p. 359). Child-protection workers appeared to be hesitant to approach these families and did not use interventions that are normal in less serious cases. The “closed” family systems and use of violence and drugs may be part of a deviant lifestyle and subculture in organized crime families in the Netherlands.

Spapens and Moors (2019) studied seven families in the southern Netherlands that had produced a criminal group leader in at least one generation. The starting point was the generation that produced a criminal leader (based on investigations completed in the second half of the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s); at least three generations were studied. Data were collected from local and regional archives, the population registration database, interviews with practitioners who had been involved with the families, and police files. Most male and female family members in almost every generation had criminal records, but intergenerational transmission of leadership roles had occurred only in two families. Assortative mating appeared to be the explanation: family members selected partners and friends from their own closed and deviant subcultures and seemed to favor those with criminal records. The seven families quickly took advantage of emerging crime markets, particularly the sudden booms in synthetic drug production and indoor cannabis cultivation beginning in the 1990s.

Van Dijk et al. (2019) reported on a large-scale study of intergenerational continuity of crime among children of organized crime offenders, based on a national sample of children of organized crime offenders.
Judicial and police data on 478 convicted organized crime offenders and their children (>16 years) were examined to study offspring’s involvement in criminal behavior; factors that might influence that involvement; and the relative risk, compared to a general population comparison group, of intergenerational continuity of offending. Nearly half of the children of organized crime offenders had a criminal record. Sons were significantly more at risk of offending than daughters (59.3 percent vs. 29.8 percent) and committed more serious crimes. The risk of offending seemed to increase strongly with age, which might explain the slightly lower rate of children with criminal records, compared to the pilot study on 25 Amsterdam-based organized crime offenders and their children (of 19 years and older; Van Dijk, Kleemans, and Eichelsheim 2019). Children of female organized crime offenders were at significantly higher risk of offending, compared to children of male organized crime offenders. To examine the relative risk of intergenerational continuity of offending, a comparison was made with a randomly selected group of parents and children from the general population with similar age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. The results showed that having an organized crime offender as a parent was a strong and significant predictor of offspring offending. Children of convicted organized crime offenders were three times more at risk of criminal behavior in general, and 10 times more at risk of drug-related crime, compared with children in the comparison group. These were higher odds than the odds ratio found by Besemer et al. (2017) in their meta-analysis on intergenerational continuity of general offenses (pooled OR = 2.4).

Children of organized crime offenders seem to be at a higher risk of intergenerational continuity of crime. General explanatory mechanisms include the cycle of deprivation, mediating risk factors (family factors, individual factors, mesofactors), assortative mating, social learning, and self-fulfilling prophecy (police bias; Farrington 2002). The cycle of deprivation does not apply to these children, at least in financial terms; however, deprivation in terms of drug use and other lifestyle characteristics might play a role. As in other studies of intergenerational continuity, mediating risk factors are found on various levels as are social learning and cultural transmission. Van Dijk, Kleemans, and Eichelsheim (2019) suggest that the problematic socialization environment characterized by violent role models, violent conflict resolution styles, and exposure to domestic and other violence may explain the increased relative risk of...
intergenerational continuity. Processes of assortative mating seem to be strongly present and may be related to the social embeddedness of organized crime activities. Finally, police bias may play a role, as children of organized crime offenders may be more visible and receive more police attention than other children do. By contrast, preventive actions by youth care institutions are hindered by “closed” family systems and their violent reputations.

C. Work

Employment may have diverse effects. Savona et al. (2017) show that mafia groups embedded in disadvantaged areas draw on the ample availability of unemployed and disadvantaged people. For other types of organized crime, employment and particular occupations may provide opportunities for involvement and work settings may function as offender convergence settings (cf. Felson 2006, pp. 98–99). Five studies, based on the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor, have provided interesting insights into the relationship between work and organized crime (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 2008; Van Koppen 2013; Madarie and Kruisbergen 2020; Van der Geest, Van Koppen, and Kleemans 2020; Van Koppen et al. 2019). Research based on police files has also touched on the relationship between work and organized crime (Salinas and Regadera 2016) as have studies based on offender interviews (e.g., Decker and Chapman 2008, pp. 88–113; Van Koppen and De Poot 2013; Wang 2013; May and Bhardwa 2018).

Wang (2013) used information on the criminal careers of 182 incarcerated drug traffickers in the United Kingdom from interviews conducted by the Matrix Knowledge Group (2007). Weak conventional capital (e.g., legitimate employment) seems to be associated with an early onset into trafficking careers. This is triggered by an offer coming from a friend or family member or self-initiation. The level at which offenders entered drug trafficking depended on both criminal capital and conventional capital: “A satisfactory financial situation increases the likelihood of becoming a middle or upper level starter. Legitimate employment is also associated with entry levels, but it is only significant when comparing lower level to middle level starters. However, the content analysis suggests that the type of legitimate jobs might have some impact to facilitate access to higher level positions in the illicit drug trade” (Wang 2013, p. 91).

Kleemans and Van de Bunt (2008) examined the relationship between employment and organized crime, using police files of 1,623 organized
crime offenders involved in 120 different investigations. Many organized criminal activities were embedded in work relationships and work settings. Particular professions were frequently encountered. First, professions providing international contacts and international travel may lead to the discovery of opportunities for criminal activities and routine activities that facilitate these opportunities. This may explain the frequent occurrence of people engaged in professions related to mobility, transport, and logistics. Second, individual freedom of movement and autonomy seemed to be important. This might explain the frequent involvement of directors of small businesses, independent professionals, and employees of larger companies and banks who have considerable autonomy. Autonomy and freedom of movement make it easier to combine licit and illicit activities. Third, the social character of some professions may be important, as frequent meetings with different kinds of people present opportunities for finding suitable co-offenders.

Other research based on the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor confirmed that many organized crime offenders owned a business, often one related to their criminal activities. Some offenders started their company with legal intentions but found that the business provided criminal opportunities. Other businesses served only as cover for criminal activities. A business can be used for criminal purposes in three ways: for logistic support (e.g., storage), to legitimize criminal activity (e.g., to cover drug transports), and for money laundering (Van Koppen 2013; Kruisbergen, Kleemans, and Kouwenberg 2015).

Airports provide a prime example of a work setting that can facilitate organized crime activities (Kleemans and Van de Bunt 2008). Madarie and Kruisbergen (2020) analyzed the role of work in logistical nodes, such as airports (11 cases) and ports (5 cases), using information from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor. Three tactics to smuggle drugs without getting caught were described. First, by evading security checks, for example, by hiding drugs in prepared luggage or people (swallowing balls of drugs or hiding them close to or in their bodies). Second, by completely avoiding security checks, for example, by using contacts with people who—through work privileges—are not subject to them. This can include recruitment of ex-colleagues. Third, by neutralizing security checks, for example, by corrupting police or customs officers.

Social and work-related embeddedness was described in detail. People are approached through social contacts and a social snowball effect occurs. The most frequent occur through family and work relationships.
Involvement of colleagues can be facilitated by a permissive culture that allows offenders to approach potential co-offenders relatively easily. Work-related factors include autonomy, mobility, and similarities between licit and illicit activities (which makes combining them easier). Mobility also stimulates the discovery of new opportunities. Two other work-related factors include social capital and work-specific expertise and skills. These may make particular employees especially attractive to criminal groups. Contacts with employees at logistical nodes are relatively scarce but of great importance for the successful execution of drug smuggling activities.

Interview studies also show that individuals employed in specific sectors, such as logistics or finance, or certain positions (i.e., working independently or unsupervised), are more vulnerable to involvement in organized crime activities (see, e.g., Van Koppen and De Poot 2013; Wang 2013; May and Bhardwa 2018).

The qualitative studies make it clear that relations between work and organized crime should be studied in more depth. Unemployment and lack of income may attract people to illegal activities (the standard view in life-course criminology and in part of the organized crime literature). However, the qualitative studies demonstrate that specific types of employment and specific work settings provide opportunities for illegal activities and for combining licit and illicit activities.

The relationship between work and organized crime has been analyzed in-depth in an analysis of the offending careers of 1,912 offenders in the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor (Van der Geest, Van Koppen, and Kleemans 2020; Van Koppen et al. 2019). A detailed description was provided of the shape and content of offending careers and of the relationship of these offending careers with socioeconomic factors such as employment and income.

Five important conclusions emerged. First, organized crime offenders were, on average, 27 years old at their first judicial contact, and offending remained relatively high until it started dropping at age 50. Second, no effect of employment on crime was found for the total sample, but interesting differences emerged for different roles in criminal organizations. A significant positive effect of employment on offending was found for leaders and coordinators; this is a different pattern than is found in the general literature on employment and offending. Employment increased offending by 31 percent for leaders and 46 percent for coordinators. Employment had a small preventive effect for those in other roles, accounting
for a 7 percent reduction in offending. Third, no effect of employment on offending was found for subgroups distinguished by type of organized crime activity. Fourth, trajectory analyses distinguished six groups: high-frequency offenders (3.9 percent), early onset offenders (11.2 percent), mid-onset offenders (9.7 percent), late-onset offenders (12 percent), low-frequency offenders (29.8 percent), and sporadic offenders (33 percent). Fifth, offenders with lower offense frequency trajectories seemed to do better on employment outcomes. No effect of employment on offending was found for any of the trajectory groups.

A study based on the same data set focused, among other things, on the effects on offending of employment, self-employment (having your own business), and employment on the payroll (Van Koppen et al. 2019). Fixed-effects models showed the effects of employment, self-employment, and employment on the payroll. Being employed, in general, was not associated with offending for organized crime offenders. Having your own business, however, was associated with a 30 percent increase in offending for the full sample and a 60 percent increase for leaders.

III. Continuity and Discontinuity
Many questions regarding continuity and discontinuity in criminal careers in organized crime remain unsolved. First, the diversity of criminal career patterns seems to be at odds with the dominant adolescence-limited offenders versus life-course persistent offenders patterns from developmental and life-course criminology and requires further exploration. Second, concepts from the general criminal careers literature, such as “specialization,” “escalation,” “life events,” and “desistance,” are hard to use or seem to have different meanings for careers in organized crime. Third, co-offending and the social embeddedness of criminal careers in organized crime are barely understood and difficult to study, particularly for larger populations of offenders and using quantitative research methods. As a result, the role of co-offending “has been one of the most ill-studied of all criminal career dimensions” (Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2007, p. 120). For careers in organized crime, this is also true, even though co-offending is a key issue and an “anomaly” for high-volume crime, the age-co-offending curve tends to decrease after adolescence (Van Mastrigt and Carrington 2019).

The analyses of larger organized crime data sets paint a diverse picture of criminal careers, including early starters and adult-onset offenders,
and careers with varying intensity over the life course. Criminal careers often start after adolescence and continue over a long period, if they ever stop (or if offenders get killed). General theories of desistance, which stress important life events (Laub and Sampson 2003), are at odds with the temporal careers and life circumstances of organized crime offenders, who often combine careers in organized crime with work, relationships, and children. Concepts such as “specialization” and “escalation” seem to have little salience when analyzing these criminal careers. Specialization is a murky concept, as it depends on the length of a criminal career, the offense categories used, and the roles in these calculations of data concerning one-shot versus continuous criminal activities. Organized crime offenders commit nonorganized crimes, but many of their crimes are related to organized crime and are committed with co-offenders. To give an example: Is an offender who has committed one burglary, been convicted for one bar fight, and now mainly traffics cocaine from South America to Europe a “generalist” or a “specialist”? And, is an offender involved in trafficking all kinds of drugs from mainland Europe to the United Kingdom a “specialist” or a “generalist”? Finally, it is far from clear whether it is useful to study individual specialization, when organized crime offending by definition requires co-offenders and criminal networks. Criminal groups and collaborations are as, or even more, important than is the individual offender. Efforts to examine specialization by organized crime offenders, despite all these methodological issues, conclude that there is little evidence of specialization (Francis et al. 2013; Fuller, Morgan, and Brown 2019).

Organized crime offenders generally differ from the general offender population in one way: from the onset of their careers they commit more serious offenses. A comparison between Dutch organized crime offenders and the Dutch general offender population, for example, showed that offenders who were ever involved in organized crime were twice as often sentenced to prison following their first judicial contact (Van Koppen, De Poot, and Blokland 2010). Compared with general offenders they spend almost twice as long behind bars.

Many concepts related to criminal careers generally are difficult to apply to organized crime offenders. Analyses of career continuity and discontinuity should therefore rely more on qualitative analyses of offenders’ life course than on quantitative analyses of criminal records. Data for qualitative analyses are available from intensive police investigations, statements of defectors, interviews with offenders, biographies, and autobiographies.
Morselli (2005) produced seminal work using a social network perspective. Drawing on two extensive case studies (based on an autobiography and testimony from an FBI informant), he proposed that developments in criminal careers can be explained by deliberate choices people make to invest in particular relationships. He devoted attention to “brokerage” across structural holes in social networks (cf. Burt 1992); people connecting disconnected parts of networks have a “strategic position” that offers diverse strategic and economic benefits.

Challenges in using biographies, autobiographies, and life histories include representativeness and reliability (hereafter we refer to both biographies and autobiographies as “biographies”). These sources may over-represent exceptional, and long, careers and more talkative informants who sometimes have hidden motives for publishing their stories or their version of the story. And do biographies paint a reliable picture of actual individual behavior and mechanisms in larger criminal networks? In a biography, the individual is the center of the universe; in organized crime, the individual is only one part of the story amid a larger network of interacting offenders. Biographies, interviews, and intensive case studies may nonetheless reveal important theoretical mechanisms that explain the development of careers in organized crime.

Some of these mechanisms resemble patterns described in general reviews of research on involvement mechanisms and recruitment. Others may be specific to organized crime and progression from high-volume crime to more profitable organized crime activities. Strategic investments in relationships, as Morselli (2005) suggested, may be one of these mechanisms. Kleemans and De Poot (2008), using cases from the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor, distinguished four types of “growth mechanisms” in the careers of nodal offenders who progressed from high-volume crime in adolescence to organized crime in adulthood. The first was the versatile but regionally constrained “local hero.” For these offenders, versatility is a product of the illicit and licit opportunities local embeddedness provides, but also of the constraints and limited contacts of the local context. The second category involves progression through an increase in scale, often related to specialization, particularly in international drug trafficking. The third relates to progression through financial capital accumulation. Offenders who can accumulate capital become more central players in criminal networks, are able to invest in drug transports (while refraining from hands-on activities), and become
“background operators” (by investing in semilegal or legal activities and generating legal income). The fourth relates to expertise, contacts, and network formation. Individuals assume central positions in criminal networks when other offenders and criminal groups need their contacts and expertise. The behavior both of the individual offender and of actors in the wider criminal network are important.

Morselli, Tremblay, and McCarthy (2006) argued that mentors are crucial in finding profitable criminal activities and learning to cope with the risks of a life in crime. The study, based on a survey of adult male offenders held in provincial Quebec prisons, focused not on organized crime but on profitable criminal activities. A substantial proportion of respondents reported that an influential individual, whom they characterized as a mentor, introduced them to a criminal milieu. Morselli, Tremblay, and McCarthy (2006) do not focus on stakes in conformity as an explanation for engaging or not engaging in criminal activities. Instead, they focus on how offenders obtain access to profitable criminal activities and learn to live with the risks of crime. This implies working toward greater, continuous benefits and either reducing risks or learning to live with them. Both adaptations are crucial for a continuing adult career in crime. How individuals, co-offenders, and criminal networks cope with them needs a lot of research effort, as do when, how, and why offenders desist from organized crime.

IV. Conclusion, Discussion, and Future Research
The emerging research on criminal careers in organized crime presents challenges to mainstream developmental and life-course criminology concerning basic assumptions. Large-scale, quantitative studies demonstrate that criminal careers in organized crime are different from those shown in the literature on high-volume crime. Organized crime offenders are generally older, and juveniles are nearly absent. Their careers are generally characterized by a relatively late onset in the adult years, and all studies find a significant share of adult-onset offenders. Finally, different criminal career patterns exist for various groups, including early starters, adult-onset offenders, and offenders with no previous judicial contacts.

Access to profitable criminal opportunities through social relations (“social opportunity structure”) is a vital issue in criminal careers research that is often overlooked by focusing primarily on adolescence and high-volume crime and by failing to encompass adult offenders engaged
in more profitable organized crimes, white-collar crimes, and cyber-crimes. In terms of social harms and criminal incomes, it is hard to explain why these important crimes fall outside the focus of mainstream developmental and life-course criminology. Practical research problems and principal reliance on large longitudinal studies provide understandable explanations.

The presence of many adult-onset offenders in organized crime challenges the conventional idea that a criminal career, particularly in organized crime, should be preceded by crime in adolescence. Early onset offenders are found in organized crime, but other types of career patterns, including adult- and late-onset offenders, are evident in various countries and data sets we discuss. These groups of offenders cannot be treated as an anomaly but require serious theoretical and empirical attention.

The findings we present apply to various types of organized crime, ranging from locally rooted Italian mafia groups to international transit crime, including smuggling networks. Future research should attempt to find explanations for late-onset offending. Traditional theories explain why young people engage in delinquent and criminal behavior but not why adults—often with a family and a conventional job—participate in serious criminal activities. To study late-onset offenders, longitudinal studies must follow organized crime offenders for considerable periods of time and be able to address recurring problems such as sample attrition and self-selection.

Qualitative research suggests that different involvement mechanisms affect early starters and adult-onset offenders, particularly regarding education and work. Involvement mechanisms include social ties and the social snowball effect, work ties, leisure activities and sidelines, life events (including financial setbacks), and deliberate recruitment by criminal groups. The first mechanism, social ties and the social snowball effect, is a very general mechanism and has various, concrete manifestations, depending on the context. One concerns intergenerational continuity in organized crime: children of organized crime offenders are at much higher risk of intergenerational continuity of crime than is the general population.

Recruitment by criminal groups also depends on the structure of criminal groups and the types of expertise required for specific activities. Savona et al. (2017) demonstrated interesting differences between locally rooted Italian mafia groups and other types of criminal organizations. The mafia groups often rely on kinship and blood ties and use initiation
rituals among affiliates to reinforce their group identity. Other factors characterize other types of organized crime groups. Monetary considerations mostly drive recruitment for drug trafficking organizations. For other types of organizations, Savona et al. (2017, p. 46) conclude that individuals enter during adulthood “as they develop specialized expertise and social ties with criminals only later in life.”

Employment may also have different effects for involvement in organized crime. Savona et al. (2017) show that mafia groups, embedded in disadvantaged areas, benefit from the ample availability of unemployed and disadvantaged people. For other types of organized crime, employment and particular occupations may provide opportunities for involvement and work settings may function as “offender convergence settings.” Qualitative and quantitative studies demonstrate that specific types of employment and specific work settings provide opportunities for illegal activities and for combining licit and illicit activities. Future research should try to unravel the role and context of employment for involvement in different types of crime. It should attend not only to the general effects of employment but also distinguish between various types of occupations and various sectors.

Explanations for crime and for criminal careers are often sought in stakes in conformity. This applies to risk factors and protective factors, which are central in developmental and life-course criminology, but also to standard explanations for why people start, continue, or stop committing high-volume crime, stressing important life events. Important as these life events may be, they operate differently in organized crime careers and the life circumstances of organized crime offenders. Steffensmeier and Ulmer (2005) argue that desistance cannot be explained only by stakes in conformity and that lack of profitable criminal opportunities may also be relevant. Future research should explore how life events relate to organized crime offending in general and to adult-onset organized crime offenders in particular. It should take into account that the timing of crime onset differs from early starters and that it often coincides with an adult life of marriage, family, or work.

Large longitudinal data collections have become increasingly common but mostly target only one part of the total offender population and a specific time span (adolescence and early adulthood; Farrington 2003). They neglect the most serious types of offenders and the most serious forms of crime.

The distinctive patterns that research on criminal careers in organized crime documents should be studied in depth along with other theoretical
mechanisms and questions. The fundamental question about early starters in crime should not be how they differ from the general population in terms of risk and protective factors but why and how some of them gain access to profitable criminal opportunities after adolescence and others have unsuccessful criminal careers.

More qualitative studies with larger emphasis on criminal careers in organized crime are needed. Large-scale quantitative studies are based on police records that are by definition selective and influenced by police priorities. Qualitative research could focus on describing and explaining involvement, continuity, and discontinuity of criminal careers through the use of rich police investigation files, testimonies from cooperating witnesses, and offender interviews. Life histories can be reconstructed that include both individual pathways and the social contexts of offending and criminal careers. Selective police priorities should not be viewed as a deficit (“police bias”) but as a potential asset. A wealth of knowledge can result from a specific and selective focus on, for example, dominant Italian mafia groups in particular territories or on outlaw motorcycle gangs and their involvement in organized crime activities.

One important question is whether “organized crime” should be used as an “umbrella concept.” It could make sense to differentiate between different types of criminal groups (e.g., locally rooted mafia groups involved in racketeering vs. more flexible networks involved in transit crime) and different types of criminal activities.

There may also be many similarities among organized crime groups and participants in diverse other criminal activities. This also applies to parallel phenomena, such as white-collar crime and cybercrime. White-collar crime research addresses adult-onset offenders, various types of careers (including early and late starters), and the importance of work settings (e.g., Weisburd and Waring 2001; Levi 2008; Leeper Piquero and Weisburd 2009; Van Onna 2018). Van Onna (2018), for example, analyzed criminal careers of 644 prosecuted fraudsters and found a large share of adult-onset offenders (78 percent) and diverse career patterns, including “typical criminals” who started early in high-volume crime. Criminal careers of cybercrime offenders may be similar to those in organized crime, as they may also be characterized by a different meaning of employment.

Finally, the most urgent priority for future research on criminal careers in organized crime is to incorporate the role of co-offenders in explaining individual criminal behavior. Co-offending research centers on youths because young people often commit crimes with others (Reiss and Farrington 1991; Lantz and Ruback 2017). Theoretical explanations usually
rly on an adolescent context. Criminal careers in organized crime are
analyzed almost exclusively by using quantitative data, without taking into
account the clustering of offenders within groups. Future work should in-
corporate co-offending in criminal careers models. Richer qualitative re-
search could also be helpful in explaining the mechanisms through which
individuals influence the criminal behavior of others. The thriving field
of developmental and life-course criminology can take a next step and
respond to Reiss’s call by taking co-offending in criminal careers more
seriously.

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