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# “It’s All about Who You Know”: Investigating the Involvement Process in Regard to Organised Criminal Groups within Australia

Adrian Leiva

School of Social Sciences, Liverpool Campus, Western Sydney University, Sydney, NSW 2170, Australia; a.leiva@westernsydney.edu.au

**Abstract:** Research on organised crime is as diverse and multifaceted as the criminal phenomenon itself, yet comprehensive academic insight on the process by which individuals become involved in organised criminal groups (OCGs) remains limited. Existing scholarly work has explored the involvement mechanisms into specific illicit activities (e.g., drug trafficking), the role of trust within co-offending relationships, and the potential for disengagement from OCGs. With consideration for the current research landscape, the present study examined involvement regarding OCGs through the lens of a conceptual ‘process’ by developing a framework using data obtained from interviews with police officers from three Australian law enforcement agencies and an analysis of transcripts from court proceedings in Australia. The study provided the first comprehensive examination of the involvement process of OCGs within an Australian context. The results of the study contributed to the development of an involvement ‘process’ conceptual framework which comprises the following three key stages: motivations and pathways to involvement, mechanisms for establishing co-offending relationships, and continued engagement with or disengagement from OCGs. The conceptual framework proposed in the present study should be viewed as an ideal process and provide the foundation for future research, with methodological replication in other jurisdictions contributing to a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of the involvement process of OCGs.

**Keywords:** organised criminal groups; trust; co-offending relationships; recruitment; law enforcement



**Citation:** Leiva, Adrian. 2024. “It’s All about Who You Know”: Investigating the Involvement Process in Regard to Organised Criminal Groups within Australia. *Social Sciences* 13: 473. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13090473>

Received: 16 August 2024

Revised: 3 September 2024

Accepted: 3 September 2024

Published: 6 September 2024



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## 1. Introduction

Unlike conventional or impulsive forms of criminal behaviour, involvement in organised crime is generally less accessible and is often dependent on relationships that can provide access to co-offenders, illicit commodities, and criminal markets (Morselli 2005; Gambetta 2009; Van Koppen 2013). Involvement in organised crime can be attributed to various pull factors, including kinship ties, individual circumstances, and criminogenic environments (Van Koppen 2013). Although academic scholarship has provided significant insight into the complex phenomenon of organised crime, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the process of involvement in organised criminal groups (OCGs). Although it has been noted that the establishment of co-offending relationships is critical to the success of OCGs, detailed examinations on the origins of such relationships are rarely conducted in the field of criminology (Von Lampe 2012). Moreover, there is a dearth of research on involvement with OCGs within Australia.

The present study sought to investigate the involvement process regarding OCGs through the development of a conceptual framework. Data for the framework was obtained by conducting interviews with police officers from three Australian law enforcement agencies and analysing transcripts from court proceedings in Australia. The conceptual framework developed and proposed in the present study should be viewed as an ideal ‘process’ that attempts to make sense of an often complex and multilayered criminal and social phenomenon. Similar to the employment process of legitimate organisations,

the conceptual framework attempts to understand the involvement process of OCGs in much the same way, involving a sequential procedure with key stages and defining factors. The proposed conceptualisation of involvement represents a unique process of criminalisation whereby co-offending relationships are formed as a result of personal attributes and organisational requirements.

### *Defining Organised Criminal Group*

From the outset, the definition of 'organised crime' remains a significant debate amongst scholars and practitioners. These debates are often linked to a failure to recognise the diverse ways organised crime can be conceptualised, and each approach can "lead to different assessments of the very same situation" (Von Lampe 2015, p. 34). However, a definition suitable for a study on involvement with OCGs will focus on numbers, size, and the composition of the OCG (Von Lampe 2003). This paper will adopt the UN definition of organised crime and OCG, as it incorporates both the organisational structure and main objectives of an OCG (Schloenhardt 2008). Article 2 of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (United Nations 2000) ('the Convention') defines an OCG as the following:

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

As a signatory to the Convention, the data and findings will be influenced by Australian law enforcement and legislation.

## **2. Involvement in Organised Criminal Groups**

### *2.1. Pathways*

While there has been limited research on the involvement process regarding OCGs, there is extensive research on the factors leading to involvement in organised crime and OCGs. Previous studies emphasise the influence of familial and social networks (including friends, professional environments, and leisure activities) (Ianni 1974; Paoli and Reuter 2008; Malm et al. 2010; Campana and Varese 2013; Von Lampe 2015; Varese 2017). Familial and cultural ties are pervasive in organised crime, with academic inquiry noting the importance of such ties in the establishment of co-offending relationships (Landesco 1968; Cressy 1969; Reuss-Ianni and Reuss-Ianni 1972; Gambetta 1993; Behan 1996; Decker and Chapman 2008; Lo 2010; Van Koppen 2013; Arsovska 2015; Sergi 2019, 2022, 2024; Brancaccio 2017; Varese 2011, 2013, 2017; Campana and Varese 2022). Involvement through these associations is often based on the notions of familiarity, conformity, and loyalty (Gambetta 1993; Decker and Chapman 2008; Paoli and Reuter 2008; Varese 2017). Familial and cultural ties can be used to overcome the inherent risks associated with the misidentification of criminal partners, especially if criminality is at the centre of such relationships (Kleemans and Poot 2008; Gambetta 2009; Van Koppen 2013; Campana and Varese 2022). Exposure to criminality through these associations enables steady monitoring and normalises the activity (achieved through cultural transmission and criminal incentivisation) to the point that an individual sees no other alternative (Gordon 2000; Sergi 2024). Much like adherence to a certain set of criminal codes or values, familial and cultural ties can increase compliance and reduce cooperation with law enforcement (Smith 1980; Raub 2004). Within these spaces there is a greater sense of solidarity, which can be viewed as a response to external threats through shared norms and values (Misztal 1996; Von Lampe and Johansen 2004).

Social ties are noted as an important prerequisite for involvement in OCGs, and the nature of these ties dictates whether an individual will engage in criminality within the structure of an OCG (Ianni 1974; Paoli 2004; Kleemans and Poot 2008; Malm et al. 2010; Campana and Varese 2013; Von Lampe 2015; Varese 2017). Of note, ties (or extended ties) to individuals criminally active in OCGs or exposure to social spaces based on illicit behaviour (e.g., drug taking) may lead to involvement in OCGs (IBAC 2015; NCA 2016). It is

suggested that social and criminal connections are often interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and can provide individuals with access to profitable criminal opportunities (Von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Kleemans and Poot 2008). The importance of social ties is exemplified in the social bonds between airport workers (which included Australian Customs Service employees and baggage handlers) involved in the importation of illicit drugs into Australia (IBAC 2015). Individuals within the importation network had pre-existing ties established through schooling, the local community, and professional environments. Therefore, it is unlikely that a stranger will be approached on the streets and asked to be involved in an OCG (Ianni 1974; Desroches 2005; Decker and Chapman 2008; Van Koppen 2013). Fundamentally, criminally viable social ties can increase the risks associated with involvement while also providing OCGs with trustworthy and dependable co-offenders. These mechanisms highlight the importance of social opportunity structures (Kleemans and Poot 2008).

Involvement in OCGs, and the establishment of co-offending relationships, is dependent on the need for both trust (which can be based on existing ties or developed over time) and associates who have the capacity and willingness to engage in criminality. Individuals who are criminally inclined, have specialised knowledge, or who have access to sectors critical to criminal activity (e.g., financial, legal and telecommunication) may be identified and targeted by OCGs (Moore 1987; Van Koppen 2013; Van Koppen and Poot 2013; IBAC 2015; NCA 2016). Of note, 'professional facilitators' have the ability to enable, conceal, or advance the illicit activities of OCGs through their employment in legitimate institutions (e.g., financial, legal) (Von Lampe 2003; Kleemans and Poot 2008; Kleemans and Bunt 2008; Van Koppen 2013; Van Koppen and Poot 2013). For example, a study conducted by the Independent Broad-Based Anti-Corruption Commission (Victoria) (IBAC 2015) found that OCGs will target public sector employees who have access to sensitive information or systems, decision-making processes, and property and goods with high resale values or that facilitate criminal activity. Alternatively, individuals who possess skills or connections that are purely criminal in nature (e.g., counterfeiting, weapons supply, extortion) may also be targeted or seek out opportunities to engage in criminality (Kleemans and Bunt 2008; Van Koppen 2013; Van Koppen and Poot 2013). Of note, in high-level drug trafficking networks, individuals who can enable drug trafficking or facilitate poly-drug trafficking are often sought out for their connections and access to commodities (Bright et al. 2012; Hughes et al. 2016, 2017; Morgan and Dowling 2023).

Financial motivation plays a key role in an individual's decision to join, especially if an individual is experiencing vulnerability or financial hardship (NCA 2016; Calderoni et al. 2020). Several studies have highlighted the low educational achievements of OCG members (Sales 2015; Carvalho and Soares 2016; Savona et al. 2017), which often correlates with a lack of legitimate job opportunities, and which may encourage individuals to become involved in OCGs (Gambetta 1996; Wang 2013; Jhi and Gerber 2015; Brancaccio 2017). Personal vulnerabilities can also be attributed to dramatic events or changes in an individual's life, including family and relationship breakdowns, alcohol abuse, gambling, and unemployment (Kleemans and Poot 2008; Hobbs 2013; Calderoni et al. 2020). Personal vulnerability, coupled with poor economic conditions and low socio-economic status were identified as facilitating the establishment of co-offending relationships within OCGs (Albini 1971; Behan 1996; Decker and Chapman 2008; Van San and Sikkens 2017). Vulnerability and financial motivation often go hand-in-hand, and some individuals may feel that both economically and emotionally they have nothing to lose from engaging in criminality (NCA 2016). This may lead to the development of 'pro-criminal attitudes' whereby individuals no longer view their involvement in criminal behaviour as illegitimate or harmful (Kleemans and Poot 2008; Hobbs 2013; Calderoni et al. 2020).

## 2.2. Establishing Co-Offending Relationships

OCGs must balance both the need for trust and an individual's capacity and willingness to engage in criminality. An individual's ability to display their criminality is crucial in the establishment of trust and co-offending relationships (Cook et al. 2007; Gambetta

2009; Brancaccio 2017; Blokland et al. 2019). Individuals involved in organised crime tend to have long, violent, and prolific criminal careers that generally proceed the establishment of co-offending relationships (Requena et al. 2014; Kirby et al. 2016; Blokland et al. 2019). Gambetta (2009) notes that individuals may ask a potential co-offender to provide evidence that they have engaged in criminal behaviour. Alternatively, individuals may be asked to engage in behaviour that a law-abiding citizen would avoid in order to demonstrate their commitment and reliability (Fiegal 2009; Gambetta 2009). However, if criminal observation is not possible, 'criminal convergence settings' (or places where non-criminals are unlikely to be found) can also be used as criminal identifiers and amplifiers (Blumstein et al. 1986; Gambetta 2005, 2009; Morselli 2009). Intermediaries and brokers can also be used to ensure an individual is criminally inclined, competent, and trustworthy, generally through the use of a referral system within convergence settings (Finckenauer and Voronin 2001; Gambetta 2009).

Individualised trust goes beyond criminal intentions and skills and relates specifically to the trustee as an individual. For example, trust may lie in previous observations of the individual's behaviour, characteristics, and dispositions, with a rational assumption that the individual will act accordingly in the future (Misztal 1996). An individual's reputation, coupled with criminal associations, can assist in the development of ties between offenders (Von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Gambetta 2009). Van Koppen (2013) notes that illicit ties that form spontaneously, or those established through intermediaries, are reliant on publicly formed and held opinions about an individual that flows through the underworld's 'grapevine system'. However, if public information is limited, an individual can display their 'trustworthiness' by demonstrating that they lack a better alternative to criminal behaviour. Gambetta (2009) suggests that there are several ways to display 'incompetence', all of which consist of displaying some form of limitation, including character, skills, knowledge, and legitimate ties. Someone with a 'trustworthy' reputation is classified as being 'straight', unlikely to 'bend under pressure', and have maintained that reputation through their actions and behaviour (Decker and Chapman 2008).

Fear, intimidation, and violence are often used by OCGs to prevent and deter cheating, disengagement, and cooperation with law enforcement and other OCGs (Gambetta 2009; Campana 2011; Varese 2017). Co-offending relationships formed through threats and violence are often tenuous and based on unequal levels of criminal motivation, requiring constant fear to be maintained (Cook et al. 2007; McGloin and Nguyen 2012; Hobbs 2013). Violence as a means of control is central to organised crime, and theorists often posit that it would be impossible to control and govern illegal markets without the ability to inflict violence when needed (Cook et al. 2007; Gambetta 2009; Campana and Varese 2013). Since OCGs cannot rely upon a judicial system to ensure compliance or recover debt, violence remains the most effective approach, as the threat of violence increases the 'credibility of the promise of the trustee' due to fear of punishment (Gambetta 2009). While the use of violence may have its disadvantages (i.e., increased law enforcement attention), some OCGs with a reputation as 'enforcers' are able to provide illegal private protection to other groups, including dispute settlements, the enforcement of contracts or agreements between parties, and the imposition of fines (Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001; Campana 2011).

The use of threats and violence can also be found within familial networks, whereby 'hostage taking' is utilised by OCGs to ensure individuals remain committed to both co-offenders and the overall group (Smith 1980; Raub 2004). Although familial ties are based on familiarity and trust, safeguards must be implemented to ensure that co-offending relationships (even those between family members) are maintained. 'Hostage taking' assumes that familial ties and knowledge of an individual's family are central to the co-offending relationships within an OCG. Therefore, if an individual feels dissatisfied with an OCG and wishes to either disengage or cooperate with law enforcement, the offender's familial ties with others in the group will put members of their family at risk. The OCG will, if necessary, punish (threatened or actual) the individual's most immediate relatives, who are seen as 'hostages' within the familial and criminal group structure. The potential

of violence being inflicted on both the individual and their family encourages compliance, commitment, and trust amongst co-offenders and within the group (Cook et al. 2007; Gambetta 2009; Gambetta and Ermisch 2010).

### 2.3. Disengagement

'Disengagement' is defined as a process in which an individual may undergo personal or social changes and transition away from an OCG (Gjelsvik and Bjorgo 2012; Sweeten et al. 2013; Douglas and Smith 2018). Although self-identification is key to disengagement, perceptions of involvement may not be as definitive for those external to the individual or the OCG. For example, law enforcement or rival groups may not recognise disengagement and continue to assume that the individual is involved in the OCG (Decker et al. 2014; Douglas and Smith 2018). Conversely, other studies focus on 'disassociation', which may involve some form of detachment from the OCG and its activities (Campbell and Hansen 2012; Decker et al. 2014). Disassociation from an OCG is very rarely clearly defined, as some individuals may sever ties at a clear point in time; for others, it may be a feigned or temporary departure (Pyrooz and Decker 2011). While some individuals may 'disengage' or 'dissociate' from one OCG and become involved in another, this is also very seldomly clearly defined, as some individuals may be involved in criminal activity across multiple OCGs at the same time or may not perceive themselves as part of a particular OCG. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain when dissociation from one group occurs and involvement in another begins.

It has been noted that, while research on life-course and developmental criminology is significant, rarely have these issues been applied to organised crime offenders (Kleemans and Poot 2008; Van Koppen et al. 2010; Disley et al. 2012; Thompson et al. 2014). Specific research on organised crime reveals a lack of knowledge on why certain individuals disengage or dissociate from OCGs. For example, Campbell and Hansen (2012) noted limited insight in regard to desistance in relation to drug traffickers. However, research on disengagement and desistance from gang activity has provided a useful comparative framework for understanding organised crime desistance (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Sweeten et al. 2013; Decker et al. 2014). In particular, this framework emphasises the importance of social and psychological factors that can lead to identity and behavioural changes in individuals (Douglas and Smith 2018). Alternatively, disengagement may occur when an OCG ceases to exist as a result of either law enforcement intervention, internal conflicts, or collective decision-making (Kenney 2007; Kleemans and Poot 2008; Cronin 2009; Bovenkerk 2011; Harris 2015).

Family and relationships are noted as significant factors for disengagement (Disley et al. 2012; Decker et al. 2014; Harris 2015; Douglas and Smith 2018). This is particularly common amongst young offenders, who gradually disengage from criminal behaviour as they complete their schooling, move away from home, and find a job or a partner (Sampson and Laub 1993; Bovenkerk 2011). Harris (2015) explains that an intimate partner or child may force an individual to choose between family obligations or their commitment to the group. Individuals may prefer a more conventional lifestyle, and the development of a family life (outside of the group structure) may weaken criminal ties through the development (or redevelopment) of legitimate social and institutional relationships (Disley et al. 2012; Douglas and Smith 2018; Sergi 2024). For example, Gjelsvik and Bjorgo (2012) found that strong familial pressure can encourage disengagement. The individual decision to disengage from an OCG may be based on the need to protect family members from potential criminal threats and violence (Campbell and Hansen 2012).

Individuals may also seek to disengage from OCGs due to the impact of violence, especially those who have been subject to threats or intimidation or have known someone in the group that has been the victim of violence (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Disley et al. 2012; Campbell and Hansen 2012; Bolden 2013; Harris 2015). Other research notes that an individual's attitude to violence can also change, with individuals reconsidering their willingness to participate in violent behaviour on behalf of the group (Harris 2015). Douglas

and Smith (2018) note that whether the violence is perpetrated by the individual, fellow members of the group, or enemies, violence is a key motivator for disengagement, as the risks associated with violent behaviour become more apparent. If violence is a core component of an OCG, individuals attempting to disengage will often seek assistance from law enforcement agencies, providing information in exchange for safety and security (Gambetta 2009; Gjelsvik and Bjorgo 2012; Harris 2015; Douglas and Smith 2018).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Interview Data Collection

The author sought to interview police officers who had experience investigating organised crime and OCGs through specialised units, including drugs and firearms squads, homicide squads, and organised crime squads. Access to this population was dependent on first identifying and then securing agreement to participate. In the absence of other practical sampling options, police officers were identified by their respective agency as likely candidates for participation in the research. Within social scientific terms, the interview phase of the data collection consisted of a purposive convenience sampling of research participants. Overall, 15 police officers from state police agencies were recruited and interviewed. The names of the law enforcement agencies, police officers, squads, and units were omitted at the request of participating agencies to ensure the confidentiality of officers. The study adopted an in-depth semi-structured interview approach. It was important to ensure that the interview questions did not compare law enforcement agencies, especially with regard to the effectiveness of policing methods. The interview questions focused on addressing the aims of the research, particularly informant knowledge on the involvement process regarding OCGs. The following questions were asked to the interviewed police officers, which led to further discussions and follow-up questions:

- How would you characterise/describe contemporary organised crime in Australia?
- How would you characterise/describe contemporary organised crime in your state?
- How are individuals recruited or how do they become involved in organised criminal groups?
- Do organised criminal groups seek individuals with specific skills, relationships, etc.?
- How is trust established between members/associates?
- Is there any evidence to suggest that offenders desist from organised crime?

#### 3.2. Court Transcript Data Collection

Transcripts of court proceedings were collected using the AustLII (the Australasian Legal Information Institute) online database. For inclusion in the study, the OCG would need to consist of three or more offenders engaged in profit-driven crimes (United Nations 2000). Criminal cases that involved less than three offenders or illicit groupings that engaged in non-profit motivated crimes (e.g., terrorism, child pornography) were excluded. OMCGs, while not inherently profit driven, are included in the present study. Australian law enforcement agencies target OMCGs due to their involvement in organised crime. Research has shown that OMCGs are criminogenic environments, with members participating in serious crime at a higher rate than the general public (Lauchs and Staines 2019). Furthermore, it has been noted that OMCGs function as a pool of co-offenders and as a market for criminal enterprises, with members taking advantage of the violent reputation of OMCGs in specific activities (Van Deuren et al. 2021).

The keywords that were used to generate results in the AustLII database were 'criminal syndicate', 'criminal network', 'criminal organisation', and 'organised criminal group'. Such keywords reflect the various descriptions of OCGs in both the literature and jurisdictional legislation. Furthermore, cases were limited to those that occurred between 2010 and 2023 to ensure a contemporary understanding of the involvement process regarding OCGs. The keywords were entered into the AustLII database and limited to the following 'court databases': 'district court', 'county court', and 'supreme court'. Searches were limited to the aforementioned databases, as cases involving OCGs, and their associated criminal activities are often referred to intermediary and superior courts in each jurisdiction

due to the complexity of cases and the severity of crimes committed by criminal groups (UNODC 2012).

The selection of keywords generated a total of 5318 cases. Due to the number of cases collated, the author used a purposive sampling method which aimed to identify 100 relevant cases. This process involved identifying whether the case transcripts provided substantial insight on an offender's background and involvement in an OCG, which was typically detailed in the 'personal background' section of the transcript. Cases were excluded from the final sample if there was insufficient information on the offender's background and involvement in an OCG. A lack of information would make it difficult to draw out and thematically analyse the data. A sample of 100 cases would provide considerable insight on the involvement process and thus result in data saturation for the present study.

#### 4. Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. For the first step in the analytical process, the author relied on the qualitative techniques of 'open' and 'axial' coding and 'content' and 'thematic' analysis. 'Open' coding consists of reading the data and identifying themes, or 'chunks' of data, which summarise the phenomenon under investigation. On the other hand, 'axial' coding consists of identifying relationships between the themes or chunks of data identified. The next stage involved data display. This stage of the process helps make sense of the data and identify ties and relationships between the themes. Through the process of questioning and structuring the data into themes and sub-themes, connections between the themes became evident and the conceptual framework was developed. The final stage of the analysis involved drawing conclusions. By linking the identified themes, the author proposed a conceptual framework.

#### 5. Limitations

Several limitations in the data must be acknowledged. The present study was limited to two data sources, namely interviews with police officers and court transcripts. It is likely that other methodologies and data sources might provide additional insight and information on the involvement process (i.e., ethnographic research or interviews with offenders). Furthermore, the information collected from police officers and the court transcripts may be incomplete. Of note, the information held by law enforcement agencies and the evidence presented in court is generally collated for one purpose, i.e., to obtain a conviction at the end of an investigation. Therefore, the data utilised tended to focus on information that is required for a successful conviction. The limitation of missing judicial information stems from the methodology employed by law enforcement agencies to gather evidence for a conviction (Berlusconi 2012). Lastly, due to the clandestine and secretive nature of organised crime, it is likely that police investigators may incorrectly classify a grouping of offenders as an OCG due to the lack of evidence available. The misclassification of an OCG may skew the results, suggesting a motive or pathway that is not intrinsically linked to organised crime.

#### 6. Results

##### 6.1. Stage One: Motivations and Pathways

###### 6.1.1. Familial and Cultural Networks

Consistent with the existing literature on organised crime and OCGs (see Decker and Chapman 2008; Gambetta 2009; Lo 2010; Van Koppen 2013; Arsovska 2015; Brancaccio 2017; Varese 2017; Sergi 2019, 2022, 2024; Campana and Varese 2022), involvement was typically associated with familial and cultural networks. The data indicates that familial ties are a primary motivator and key pathway for involvement in OCGs. Familial ties (and by extension cultural ties) are based on familiarity, conformity, and the assumption that kinspeople are dependable and trustworthy. Police officers noted that some OCGs have several generations of offenders involved, with grandfathers, fathers, and children being engaged in criminality (POI 5; POI 9). Such ties are utilised to ensure security,

stability and the perpetuation of the group and its activities. Trust ultimately “depends on who is dealing with who and the normal issues associated with trust for example how long someone has been known to another” (POI 15). This was exemplified in the case of the Centro Chapter of the Bandidos OMCG. At its core, the group was formed around familial and cultural ties. It was noted that core members of the Centro Chapter went to school together and socialised at Church and within the local community. Their ties were strengthened when they migrated to Australia at the same time, and they stuck together in what police officers described as a ‘small insular community’ (POI 14; POI 15). It was noted that law enforcement penetration of such groups is extremely difficult, “as they rarely engage with anyone outside of their inner circle and certainly never trust anyone outside of this circle” (POI 15).

Findings from the present study noted that familial conformity was a key motive and pathway into OCGs. Police officers explained that Middle Eastern OCGs established co-offending networks using pre-existing relationships and trust between individuals and families from within their own cultural communities (POI 2). Police officers attributed involvement through familial and cultural ties to “blind loyalty” and “indoctrination”, where involvement is “bred through family lines” and it is rare for family members not to engage in criminal behaviour (POI 1; POI 3). If familial and cultural ties are a key part of an individual’s identity and network, it is assumed that there is a sense of commitment to the family and certain expectations are placed on the individual. The personal responsibilities and expectations attached to kinship ties may outweigh the risks associated with engagement in criminal behaviour. For example, in the case of *R v Eliadis* [2017] QLDSC 193, the offender had engaged in criminal behaviour based on the expectation that he would assist family members, both in Australia and Greece, with personal and business activities. Similarly, in the case of *Abbas Bodiatas Taleb and Amoun v R* [2013] NSWCCA 115, the applicant was part of an organised criminal group that involved his father, older brother, and two cousins. There was an expectation that he would engage in criminal activities alongside his older brother, who the applicant looked up to as a surrogate father during their father’s incarceration.

It has been noted that OCGs are likely to be formed by people who share the same ethnicity and nationality, especially if they were previously known to each other in the community (Campana and Varese 2022). For example, in the case of *DPP v Wahab* [2018] VCC 1892, key offenders in the criminal group had pre-existing relationships formed through community groups based on shared cultural identity. Furthermore, in the case of *DPP (Cth) v Barbaro and Zirilli* [2012] VSC 47, core members of the drug trafficking group were of the same nationality and from the same local community, with ties to a transnational OCG. Similarly, in the case of *Abdulrahman v R* [2015] NSWCCA 238, the accused was a part of the Assyrian Criminal Network (‘The Last Hour’), whose membership was limited to individuals of Middle Eastern ‘ancestry’. Familial and cultural ties can also extend overseas. Police officers have explained that it is common for individuals involved in OCGs to contact family and associates overseas and bring them to Australia on student visas to work with the group. Such individuals “fail to attend study and become ‘Unlawful Non-Citizens’, remaining in Australia until they are located by law enforcement and deported” (POI 15). Of note is that the concept of family varies depending on the culture and traditions of an ethnic group. For example, within the Vietnamese community, the concept of family is much broader than the traditional understanding (POI 3; POI 6).

#### 6.1.2. Social Networks

Social networks that can motivate and lead to involvement in OCGs may be personal, professional, or illicit in nature (POI 11). It is noted that such ties primarily occur through “word of mouth” between friends, professional associates, or members of the local community (POI 7). These social ties reinforce the idea that it is unlikely that an OCG would approach and engage with someone that is not previously known to them or is not introduced through a friend or an associate. An informant noted that, on most occasions, “they



rely on someone's personal dealings with a person" (POI 2). Such associations provide OCGs with access to individuals they view as dependable and trustworthy. For example, in the case of *Majeed vs. The Queen* [2013] VSCA 40, the accused, who, at the time of the offence had lost his employment as a courier after a dispute with his employer, was approached by a friend who encouraged him to become involved in money depositing on behalf of a criminal group in return for commission. Similarly, in the case of *R v R v Kuzmanovic; R v Kuzmanovic; Ex Parte Attorney- General (Qld)* [2015], a friend asked the accused to assist in the movement of massive amounts of drugs and money on behalf of a criminal enterprise. This reinforces existing knowledge on the importance of social ties as a key factor for involvement in OCGs.

The role of social networks in the involvement process is exemplified in the case of *NP v R* [2008] NSWCCA 205, where the appellant told police that a previous business associate had organised a trip to Europe to organise the importation of ecstasy as part of a criminal group. The appellant was told he would operate as an intermediary between his business associate and the criminal group in Europe. Similarly, in the case of *Standen v Regina* [2015] NSWCCA 21, co-offenders were brought together through extended ties: "the appellant's alleged co-conspirator, Bakhos Jalalaty, conducted an import/export food business. His wife (Ms Jalalaty) had worked with the appellant in the AFP and the appellant had met Jalalaty through her". Furthermore, in the case of *DPP v Cao* [2018] VCC 948, the accused met an individual at a friend's house who offered to help pay for his debts in exchange for minding a 'grow house' for a criminal group. OCGs and potential co-offenders will ask around to confirm an individual's identity, reliability, and criminal motivation. The transfer of trust is a key factor in the involvement process, with OCGs becoming more "sophisticated" and setting up "surveillance exercise" to ensure an individual can be trusted (POI 4).

Legitimate businesses may also provide individuals with a pathway into OCGs, especially if the business in question can be utilised to support criminality and increase illicit profits. Involvement via legitimate businesses is evident in the case of *Tsang v DPP (Cth)* [2011] VSCA 336, where the accused and a business acquaintance used their legitimate computer business to import drugs into Australia with the assistance of an international organised criminal group. Similarly, in the case of *Tu v R* [2011] NSWCCA 31, the defendant, through her business ties with another individual, was able to establish an importing business "...by inveigling her way into an existing legitimate business... the latter business was involved in the importation of food stuff of various kinds". By using an account belonging to the business, the defendant was able to import drugs from China into Australia (disguised as food) by cooperating with an international organised criminal group. On the other hand, in the case of *DPP v Ale* [2019] VCC 432, the accused came into contact with members of the Comanchero outlaw motorcycle gang while working as a marketing and event manager at a commercial gym. It was through these ties that the individual became a patched member of the Comanchero outlaw motorcycle gang and eventually the head of the 'Last Kings' criminal group.

### 6.1.3. Target Identification

The findings reflect the importance of identifying and targeting individuals deemed criminally viable to OCGs (see [Cook et al. 2007](#); [Gambetta 2009](#)). Individuals may be targeted by OCGs for a variety of reasons, including having criminally advantageous skills, a capacity and willingness to engage in violence, and access to sensitive data or commodities. Findings from the present study found that this was common amongst individuals who can procure pre-cursor chemicals, manufacture illicit drugs, and source and traffic illicit commodities. For example, in the case of *R v Peterson and Dislakis* [2016] VCC 1092, several individuals were involved in the criminal group due to their ability to import methylamphetamine and source pseudoephedrine, as well as manufacture methylamphetamine. Similarly, in the case of *The Queen v Lowe* [2014] VSC 543, the defendant was a science graduate from Melbourne University who was targeted due to

their ability to set up a clandestine laboratory as well as manufacture methylamphetamine. The defendant was also responsible for teaching others in the group how to successfully manufacture drugs. Other co-offenders were also targeted in order to undertake certain tasks, including renting suitable properties for the clandestine laboratory and purchasing mobile phones for the group.

Consistent with the literature, OCGs will also seek to identify and target individuals who can be used to gain access to transport and logistical systems, particular businesses, and government departments. There is often a need for enticement or corruption, which can be understood as the involvement of an otherwise law-abiding individual in criminal behaviour through bribery or other incentives (POI 1; POI 14). This was evident in the case of *NSW Crime Commission v Stevermver* [2015] NSWSC 1355, whereby the defendant was contacted by a criminal group involved in illicit drug supplying and importation. The defendant ran a flight training school, which meant he had access to aircrafts and the ability to fly them. Subsequently, a number of aircrafts were purchased by the criminal group, with the defendant acting as a conduit by transporting drugs into Australia. Similarly, in the case of *DPP v Karam and Ors* [2013] VSC 133, the accused was 'employed' by an organised criminal group to facilitate the clearance of illicit drug shipments by taking advantage of his contacts within the shipping docks of Melbourne. In other cases, OCGs will cultivate people in certain industries (e.g., bars, brothels) or government agencies with access to sensitive information, systems, or procedures (e.g., post office, archives, public transport) (POI 5; POI 8; POI 10).

The findings also suggest that juveniles are targeted by OCGs. Police officers have explained that some OCGs (for example, OMCGs) will target juveniles at schools, sporting organisations, or at gyms (POI 3). OCGs will actively seek out juveniles to do their "muscle work", including stealing motor vehicles, transporting, and storing illicit commodities, and carrying out murders (POI 2). Juveniles are 'schooled up' by older, more streetwise criminals in an apprentice type role (POI 6). Individuals are taught how to traffic drugs and conduct home invasions, and they also learn the lingo and how to develop criminal contacts: "the appeal there was obviously that sense of belonging, which those youth didn't have due to their cultural disconnect" (POI 6). OCGs, in particular OMCGs, will use social media platforms to 'show off' the wealth and lifestyle that is afforded by organised crime, as "social media is also used as a marketing/branding tool for some org crime syndicates" (POI 13). As a result, some juveniles aspiring to obtain a similar lifestyle are more susceptible to involvement and will actively seek opportunities to become involved in OCGs. Some groups provide vulnerable youth with a sense of belonging and power that they might be lacking in other aspects of their lives (e.g., children from broken families). Other juveniles may lack self-esteem and thus might see engagement in a criminal group as 'cool' (POI 3; POI 10, POI 14).

#### 6.1.4. Forced Criminality

In a departure from the existing literature, the findings highlight the role of forced criminality as a pathway into OCGs. Forced criminality is dependent on the use of intimidation, threats, and violence to ensure an individual engages in criminality at the behest of the OCG. The findings indicate that forced criminality is often the result of a gambling or drug debt owed to an OCG. Police officers have explained that it is common amongst Asian OCGs, especially in regard to gambling debts. Individuals will often "run up a big debt", someone will "pay off" the debt, and, in return, the individuals will have to work for the OCG (POI 4). For example, in the case of *DPP (Cth) v Teoh and George* [2018] VCC 155, the defendant's father was in considerable debt to a Malaysian money lender and paying considerable interest on the debt owed. The defendant was helping with the repayment of the debt and was offered a role in drug importation through the money lender. The defendant's involvement in drug importation was financially motivated, with the aim of assisting his family with the problems arising from his father's gambling debt. This is also evident in the case of *DPP v Mo* [2012] VCC 2126, where the accused was coerced into pro-

viding money to support a drug manufacturing and trafficking operation by an organised criminal group the accused owed money to. In both cases, violence was threatened if the owed debt was not repaid, or the defendant did not partake in criminal activity.

In other cases, individuals become involved in OCGs through drug debt. Intimidation, threats, and violence are common tactics used to ensure the debt is repaid through engagement in illicit activities. This was evident in the case of *DPP v Wahab* [2018] VCC 1892, whereby the defendant stored illicit drugs for a criminal group in order to reduce their drug debt. The defendant was threatened with violence if he did not comply with the demands of the group. Furthermore, in the case of *DPP v Tawfik* [2018] VCC 1665, the defendant was forced to engage in drug supplying to repay a substantial drug debt and, “despite his efforts to break contact with his co-offenders, was not able to due to pressure and reported threats of violence”. Violence and threatened violence remain the key driving forces underpinning involvement in OCGs through forced criminality. This is encapsulated in the case of *DPP (Cth) v Holmgrimsson* [2015] VCC 704, where the defendant imported illicit drugs on behalf of an OCG to repay an AUS 20,000 debt. Alternatively, some OCGs will offer to “buy out” an individual’s debt with the expectation that the individual will engage in criminal activity on behalf of the group. For example, in the case of *R v Pinyosap, Surachai* [2014] NSWDC 349, the defendant was forced to travel to Thailand and traffic drugs back to Australia in several suitcases.

OCGs will use the threat of violence and actual violence to ensure an individual remains committed. Police officers have explained that the effectiveness of threats is highly dependent on an individual’s exposure to offending (POI 4). Incremental exposure to offending often ‘blindsides’ an individual to the point where they are far too entrenched to simply ‘walk away’. An informant highlighted the dangers associated with incremental offending, explaining that it can start with minor tax avoidance and progress to not paying duties on cigarette importations before, suddenly, the individual is refitting a boat for deep-sea large-scale drug importations (POI 6). Individuals often do not reflect on what they are doing until they reach a critical point and suddenly realise that “they’ll either spend the rest of their life in jail or that their life is jeopardized because they can’t get out without being either shot or a family member suddenly put at risk, and obviously extracting themselves from that long term exposure from that network is even harder” (POI 7). However, without the ability for an OCG to coerce or leverage an individual into criminal behaviour, forced criminality is likely to be ineffective. Therefore, without the ability to enact violence, or the lack of a violent reputation, it is unlikely that an individual will be forced into criminality.

## 6.2. Stage Two: Establishment of Co-Offending Relationships

### 6.2.1. Criminal Intentions and Capacity

Much like the existing literature, the findings suggest that working relationships within OCGs can only exist if there is a common purpose or shared criminal goal, with trust being “dependent on the working relationship and barely extends beyond that with other individuals of the group” (POI 11). Prior to the establishment of working relationships, some OCGs (e.g., outlaw motorcycle gangs) will force new ‘associates’ to engage in criminal offences together in order to establish ties and align them with the goals of the group (POI 13; POI 4; POI 9). Sometimes, OCGs will require individuals to commit acts that are “extremely embarrassing or detrimental to them or their family’s reputation” (POI 12). The group will then keep this as a type of ‘ransom’ to ensure that the individual remains loyal and committed to the shared goals of the organised criminal group. While there is always a level of distrust between offenders, especially if there are no pre-existing relationships, it depends on how far individuals are willing to trust one another and achieve the shared goals (POI 7). Profits, primarily illicit in nature, remain a key motivator for OCGs, and co-offending relationships (and by extension involvement in the OCG) are formed on the understanding that individuals have a capacity to and willingness to engage in criminality.

The potential for 'easily obtained' profits and material goods are a significant factor for involvement in organised crime, especially for low-level offenders or those who have experienced significant lifestyle changes (e.g., losses of employment) (POI 12). Traditionally, involvement in OCGs was permanent and you would not leave unless you were killed or removed by law enforcement intervention (POI 10). More recently, organised crime has shifted to a 'gig-based' economy, where individuals are paid for the work they do, which can range from a single criminal operation to several months of work, as "you get paid \$3000 or \$5000 for it and then you can be on your way and that might be the extent of the participation for some, you know some might be happy with that, and then others probably will come back for second or thirds" (POI 7). Much like legitimate employment, individuals may start off at the lower levels of an organisation and then, with ongoing participation, "they take on more responsibility and more of the organisational sort of roles and become more involved and then yeah entrenched" (POI 7). Informants recounted various cases where individuals "get involved in one transaction" but, after they start and they reap the rewards, "they continue on" (POI 3). Informants explained that most offenders recognise that their behaviour is inherently wrong and, while there is some ambiguity around the morality of their behaviour, they recognise that "it's not something they want to be caught doing" (POI 8).

Overall, there is a distinct correlation between co-offending relationships, shared criminal intentions, and position within an OCG. Findings suggested that the notion of mutual criminality has less relevance at the lower levels of a group in comparison to the upper echelons or core group of offenders (POI 2; POI 4; POI 9; POI 15). It was noted that 'foot soldiers' or 'associates' are less bound by shared criminal goals. Therefore, ties are weaker and disengagement is more likely to occur, either as a result of personal factors or law enforcement intervention (POI 6). In the case of 'middle-managers' and upper echelon offenders, there is more at stake if shared goals are not achieved (i.e., lost investments). As a result, co-offending ties and working relationships are maintained to ensure that the shared criminal goals are achieved (POI 6). The establishment of ties through shared criminal goals is often fragile in nature, and changes amongst offenders can occur on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis (POI 4). While there is always a level of distrust amongst co-offenders, especially if ties are tenuous, criminal intentions ultimately depend on how far individuals are willing to trust one another to achieve the shared criminal goals (POI 6). Co-offending relationships established through criminal intentions and capacities can be reinforced through the reputations of co-offenders.

#### 6.2.2. Individualised Trust and Reputation

Consistent with the literature, the findings suggested that a reliable and trustworthy reputation is highly sought after by some OCGs (POI 12). Such a reputation can be established through long-standing personal relationships (POI 15), by demonstrating loyalty, engaging in criminal behaviour together (POI 9; POI 11), and commitment to a group, as "once you have done time and kept your mouth shut, your level of trustworthiness improves significantly" (POI 14). This was supported by another police officer, who noted that a lack of compliance with law enforcement provides substantial credibility to an individual, as "everyone else stayed staunch and no one else was given up so that gives them some credibility down the track in terms of trust. So that is a really big one I believe" (POI 3). Once individuals are able to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to the group, they will be given more important roles and often riskier tasks in order to continue building that reputation within the group; they are then "reimbursed and with the reimbursement they're utilising that money to buy stuff which people on the outside see them as having a strong criminal reputation" (POI 9). Through pre-existing relationships, trust can be transferred via 'word of mouth' or mutual contacts. The transfer of trust is commonly used to avoid undercover law enforcement and is fundamentally surmised as "my friend says you are a top bloke and that you can do certain thing therefore that's currency, there is a level of credibility there that can be transferred" (POI 7).

Engagement in criminality is a strong signifier that there is a willingness to do what is asked, regardless of the potential risks. For example, it was noted that there are “instances where people will go to prison for 5–6 years for their crime and once their out they go straight back to the organised crime group who are waiting with open arms, so that’s the trust, so you took a hit for the group” (POI 1). Imprisonment is viewed as a mark of ‘honour’ amongst certain OCGs, with the prison system being viewed as a key setting for recruitment, as “there’s time to talk about your skill set and what you do”, making it like a recruitment arm within the prison system (POI 1; POI 8; POI 14). However, a trustworthy and reliable reputation is not always a key prerequisite for the establishment of co-offending relationships (POI 13). Individuals who are considered unreliable or less skilled are often restricted to lower levels in the organisation. Such individuals will engage in minor offences (e.g., drug supply) and are at an increased risk of detection by law enforcement (POI 11). Stratification reduces the disruption caused to an operation if lower-level offenders are detected and removed by law enforcement. In contrast, smaller OCGs will seek out criminally dependable individuals, relying on pre-existing relationships and ties (POI 4). Such individuals are likely to hold key positions, be well connected, and have access to illicit commodities and markets (POI 10).

### *6.3. Stage Three: Continued Engagement or Disengagement*

When asked about the potential for disengagement, police officers explained that it was rare for individuals to disengage from OCGs and attributed it to the influence exerted by network pressure and the threat of violence. Familial and cultural expectations function as key factors for both the formation of criminal ties and continued engagement in OCGs (POI 2). Such expectations pose significant challenges for individuals who wish to distance themselves from criminality, especially if such elements are intertwined with their sense of identity and source of income. Informants noted that it will take generational change to reduce the influence of familial and cultural expectations (POI 1). If familial and cultural ties form the nexus of an OCG, individuals often play a more integral role and thus have more to lose if they attempt to disengage (POI 15). Disengagement can result in violence, loss of familial or cultural connections, and significant lifestyle changes. However, an informant explained that desistance is only likely to occur if key members of the OCG, or whole parts of the group, were to be arrested; then they would “lay low, or they’ll stop offending or maybe even get back into it again” (POI 9). In other cases, individuals may desist if they have established an intimate relationship and changed their way of life, but, generally, criminality is instilled in them from a young age and they become career criminals, as “rarely do they get out and the only time they stop is when they get arrested” or are killed (POI 8).

Furthermore, threats and potential violence also prevent individuals from disengaging or seeking assistance from law enforcement. Police officers explained that this is often the case with members of outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs), whereby threats and violence are used to protect and insulate core members of a group and prevent individuals from defecting. In a particular case, members of a particular OMCG threatened to use violence when several low-level offenders, who were trafficking drugs on behalf of the OMCG, decided not to ‘play the game’ anymore: “of course it came undone, people ended up getting charged and the club was implicated” (POI 8). The use of threats poses considerable risks to the OCG, as it is assumed that, without the potential for credible violence, individuals may turn to law enforcement for protection, thus revealing the criminal activities of the group. Therefore, attempts at disengagement are rarely brought to the attention of law enforcement, except for when individuals are assaulted or killed. If violence is not an option, individuals will be ostracised from a group and, in most cases, will “continue to commit crime, as a way of life, just no longer with an OCG” (POI 12). However, informants also noted that, when disengagement did occur, it was the result of legitimisation and law enforcement intervention.

On occasion, 'successful' individuals will attempt to legitimise their illicit profits in order to disengage and distance themselves from criminality. Police officers have noted that well-placed individuals within OCGs, especially those in key positions, will look to legitimise their illicitly gained wealth through legitimate businesses (POI 5; POI 8). Informants have explained that, while some legitimise themselves, in reality "they become a bit more hands off of the running of the group, so that gives the impression that they're not involved in organised crime, but the reality is that they're still controlling the OCG" (POI 1). It was noted that such individuals "still maintain their crime connections and are susceptible to falling back into a life of crime if an irresistible opportunity presents itself: old habits die hard" (POI 12). However, an important aspect of legitimisation is the 'maturing' of offenders. Informants explained that some individuals 'grow up' and realise that "this is not the life they want" (POI 12). Others will attempt to legitimise once law enforcement intervention occurs and they realise that involvement in organised crime is no longer worth the risk as "they've turned around, they've got jobs, and they've got families" (POI 1).

In line with the literature, the findings suggest that disengagement from OCGs may be attributed to increased law enforcement initiatives. This approach has been particularly effective in promoting disengagement from OMCGs. This has been attributed to increased police powers, specialised task forces, and state legalisation (POI 14). Informants explained that OMCG members and associates in particular jurisdictions were feeling the 'heat' from law enforcement after changes to state legislation, "whether they're getting stopped when they're travelling in their personal cars or on their bikes or there's visits to various places and they think yep it's all too much, there's too much heat, we're getting locked up, we're getting turned over, we don't want to do this anymore" (POI 3). The findings also suggest that law enforcement intervention is most effective when applied to offenders who have 'matured' and are seeking to disengage from organised crime. Police officers noted that the commencement of relationships, children, "post- incarceration with a desire not to return to jail [and] particular incidents like assaults" can encourage disengagement (POI 12). Such factors can be compounded by law enforcement intervention and specific strategies that target OCGs.

## 7. Discussion

Based on interviews with police officers and analyses of court transcripts, this paper has highlighted the key "stages" of the involvement process regarding OCGs within an Australian context. The existing literature has examined aspects of the proposed framework in isolation, including pathways into OCGs (Kleemans and Poot 2008; Decker and Chapman 2008; Van Koppen 2013), trust and co-offending relationships (Gambetta 2009; Malm et al. 2010; Van Koppen 2013; Calderoni et al. 2020), and disengagement (Bovenkerk 2011; Gjelsvik and Bjorgo 2012; Sweeten et al. 2013). The findings from this study demonstrate that the conceptualisation of involvement with OCGs should be examined beyond pathways into criminality and should also consider motivations, co-offending relationships, and the factors which contribute to continued engagement or disengagement. The proposed conceptual framework provides an ideal understanding of involvement with OCGs within Australia.

The first stage of the proposed conceptual framework focuses on the motivations and involvement pathways regarding OCGs. As the initial stage of the process, the criminal motivations of individuals are manifested, either as a result of internal decision-making or external pressures, and often intersect with the involvement pathways into OCGs. Consistent with the existing literature on organised crime, familial and cultural ties serve as a primary motivator and key pathway for involvement. These ties are rooted in familiarity, conformity, and the implicit trust that is often assumed within kinship networks (Gambetta 1993; Decker and Chapman 2008; Paoli and Reuter 2008; Varese 2017). The concepts of "blind loyalty" and "indoctrination" as driving forces behind familial involvement in OCGs align with the notion that familial expectations and responsibilities may outweigh the

risks associated with criminal behaviour. The multi-generational involvement in some OCGs can perpetuate the group's operations across generations, ensuring the security and stability of the group. This reinforces the idea that OCGs are not merely criminal enterprises but also social entities deeply embedded in the cultural and familial fabric of the communities from which they originate (see Varese 2017; Sergi 2019, 2024; Campana and Varese 2022). Additionally, the study further illuminates the role of social networks in facilitating involvement in OCGs, highlighting how personal, professional, or illicit ties can serve as conduits for recruitment (see Von Lampe and Johansen 2004; Kleemans and Poot 2008). The findings suggest that social networks not only facilitate initial involvement in OCGs but also reinforce the individual's commitment to the group. The role of trust, as a key factor in these networks, is particularly salient (see Desroches 2005; Gambetta 2009; Van Koppen 2013). The integration of legitimate businesses into these networks further illustrates how OCGs exploit social and professional ties to expand their operations and increase their profits.

The study's findings on target identification aligns with the literature on the strategic recruitment practises of OCGs (see Von Lampe 2003; Kleemans and Poot 2008; Van Koppen 2013; Van Koppen and Poot 2013). This selectivity is driven by the need to enhance the group's operational capabilities, whether through drug manufacturing, trafficking, or logistical support (Bright et al. 2012; Hughes et al. 2016, 2017; Morgan and Dowling 2023). Of note, target identification highlights the importance of enabler roles in organised criminal groups within Australia (Morgan and Dowling 2023). As a key motivator and pathway, this approach often involves the corruption or coercion of otherwise law-abiding individuals (see Hobbs 2013; Calderoni et al. 2020). The ability for OCGs to manipulate individuals for their gain is also evident in the targeting of juvenile offenders. The use of social media as a recruitment tool contributes to this involvement pathway, as groups and individuals glamorise the lifestyle associated with organised crime, making it appealing to alienated and disenfranchised youth (see NCA 2016; GI-TOC 2022). Conversely, a notable departure from the existing literature is the concept of forced criminality, whereby individuals are motivated to engage in criminality as a result of intimidation, threats, or potential violence. This pathway is generally associated with debt-related coercion. The threatened use of force, combined with incremental exposure to criminal activity, gradually entraps an individual, making it increasingly difficult to extricate themselves from the OCG. The effectiveness of forced criminality as a motivator and pathway is heavily reliant on a group's ability to instil fear through threatened violence and actual violence (see Cook et al. 2007; Gambetta 2009; Campana and Varese 2013). However, the study also suggests that, without the capacity to enact violence, or without a violent reputation, an OCG's ability to coerce individuals into criminal behaviour may be limited, thereby reducing the influence of violence as a key motivator for involvement in criminality.

Stage two of the framework theorises the complexities surrounding the establishment of co-offending relationships within OCGs. At this stage, groups must balance an individual's capacity and willingness to engage in criminality with the need for trust. The findings emphasise the critical role of shared criminal intentions and individualised reputations within co-offending relationships. Consistent with the literature, the results suggest that co-offending relationships are often formed when there is a common purpose or mutual criminal goal amongst participants (see Blumstein et al. 1986; Finckenauer and Voronin 2001; Morselli 2009; Gambetta 2009). In some cases, OCGs will ask individuals to engage in criminal activity as a mean of aligning themselves with the goals of the group. This mechanism of control is a key factor in the sustainability of co-offending relationships, as it creates a binding obligation for the individual to remain committed, thus reinforcing the group's cohesion and reducing the likelihood of defection (see Fiegal 2009; Gambetta 2009). Trust, while crucial, can be viewed as conditional and limited, extending only as far as the working relationship demands. This suggests that the ties between individuals are primarily functional, serving the immediate needs of the OCG rather than reflecting deeper, more enduring social ties. For example, the shift towards a 'gig-based' economy suggests

more fluid and episodic involvement in OCGs, whereby individuals engage in criminal activities on a temporary basis, receiving payment for specific tasks without necessarily establishing ties with co-offenders. However, this incremental involvement can lead to deeper entrenchment in an OCG, as individuals take on more responsibilities and form ties with core offenders within the group (see [Gambetta 1993](#); [Densley 2012](#); [Van Koppen 2013](#)).

This stage also underscores the importance of individualised reputations, often built through long-standing personal relationships and demonstrated loyalty. This reputation is not only a marker of trust between co-offenders but also a form of social currency within groups, facilitating the transfers of trust through mutual contacts (see [Misztal 1996](#); [Gambetta 1996](#); [Huemer 1998](#)). For example, ties established through the prison system can be used to prove their criminal credentials and assist in the establishment of co-offending relationships. However, the findings also revealed that trust is not always necessary at this stage of the involvement process. Individuals who are deemed to be less dependable or criminally advantageous may be relegated to roles that are less crucial to the operation of the OCG. This stratification within a group serves to protect the core operations from law enforcement intervention and disruption. It is likely that threatened and actual violence is used to ensure that such individuals remain committed and do not cooperate with law enforcement (see [Gambetta 2009](#); [Campana 2011](#); [Varese 2017](#)). However, in smaller OCGs, the reliance on pre-existing relationships and the need for criminal dependability are more pronounced, with core positions being filled by individuals who are well connected and have access to illicit markets and commodities (see [Kleemans and Bunt 2008](#); [Van Koppen 2013](#); [Van Koppen and Poot 2013](#)). The findings suggest that, while some relationships are transient and opportunistic, others are deeply entrenched and sustained by mutual dependence and shared goals. The factors highlighted within this stage are integral to the formation and maintenance of co-offending relationships, shaping both the dynamics of involvement and disengagement within OCGs.

The third and final stage of the framework conceptualises the notion of continued engagement or disengagement from OCGs. The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of co-offending relationships and disengagement. Consistent with the literature, this stage of the framework details the challenges individuals may experience when attempting to disengage from an OCG, which have been attributed to external pressure, threats of violence, and deep-rooted familial and cultural expectations (see [Gjelsvik and Bjorgo 2012](#); [Sweeten et al. 2013](#); [Douglas and Smith 2018](#)). These factors not only contribute to criminal motivation and the formation of criminal ties but also play a crucial role in maintaining an individual's continued engagement in an OCG. One of the primary obstacles to disengagement is the influence of familial and cultural expectations, which are often intertwined with an individual's identity and livelihood. The findings noted that these expectations create significant barriers for those seeking to disengage from criminality, as the repercussions of disengagement can be severe, ranging from violence and loss of familial connections to drastic lifestyle changes. Within this stage of the framework, violence and threatened violence emerge as significant deterrents to disengagement. The use of threatened and actual violence serves as both a protective measure for OCGs and as a warning to those considering disengagement. Therefore, without the credible threat of violence, there is a risk that individuals may turn to law enforcement for protection, thereby exposing the criminal activities of the OCG. Consequently, attempts at disengagement often remain hidden from law enforcement unless they result in violence or death.

The existing literature indicates that disengagement is often the result of personal development, violence, disillusionment, and law enforcement intervention (see [Pyrooz and Decker 2011](#); [Bovenkerk 2011](#); [Harris 2015](#)). The findings from the present study suggest that, while disengagement from OCGs is rarely brought to the attention of law enforcement, it can be attributed to legitimisation and law enforcement intervention. The concept of 'maturing' plays a crucial role in the final stage of the involvement process, with some offenders coming to the realisation that organised crime is no longer appealing or 'worth the risk'. This realisation, often coupled with significant life events, such as



forming relationships, starting a family, or potential violence, can lead to a genuine desire to disengage. Of note, [Sergi \(2024\)](#) explains that the cultural determinism associated with criminality (in particular the 'ndrangheta) is narrower for each successive generation as there is increased individual agency and opportunities outside of organised crime. The study also demonstrates that law enforcement intervention is most effective when it is directed towards individuals who have 'matured' and are inclined to disengage due to personal circumstances and disillusionment towards involvement in an OCG. For such individuals, the combination of significant life events (e.g., gainful employment, starting a family) can serve as a powerful motivator for desistance from OCGs. The findings highlight the significant barriers to disengagement from OCGs, especially those rooted in familial and cultural expectations, coupled with the ever-present threat of violence. Although legitimisation and law enforcement intervention were identified as two potential disengagement pathways, most individuals experience a range of challenges when attempting to disengage. The findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to both continued engagement and successful disengagement as well as the importance of tailored law enforcement strategies and community initiatives that address the specific circumstances and motivations of individuals involved in OCGs.

## 8. Future Directions

With consideration of the aims and findings of this study, future research should seek to replicate and contribute to the research paradigm that was utilised and the conceptual framework that has been proposed. Fundamentally, future research should aim to examine the involvement process in other jurisdictions, as varying social, political, and economic environments can impact the motivations, pathways, and co-offending mechanisms ([Skaperdas 2001](#); [Paoli 2004](#); [Varese 2017](#)). Replications of this study could provide a meaningful comparison that may contribute to the proposed conceptual framework. The author acknowledges that the proposed framework should be viewed as an 'ideal' process and should form the conceptual basis for future research. Of note, future research should aim to examine the involvement process regarding OCGs by employing alternative research methodologies. Varying research paradigms could offer new and extensive insights on the involvement process regarding OCGs, the modus operandi of OCGs, and organised crime more broadly.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the ethics committee of the University of New South Wales (UNSW). Approved Human Research (Questionnaire and Methodology)—Negligible-Low Risk (HC16351).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study—Negligible-Low Risk (HC16351).

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to ethical and legal considerations detailed in HC16351—Approved Human Research.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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