

# American Based Biker Gangs: International Organized Crime

Tom Barker

Received: 1 January 2011 / Accepted: 15 March 2011 /  
Published online: 6 May 2011  
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**Abstract** Many American based motorcycle clubs have evolved into biker gangs involved in organized crime nationally and internationally. Using the information contained on the national websites of seven biker gangs—Hells Angels, Outlaws, Bandidos, Mongols, Warlocks, Sons of Silence and the Vagos, this article provides a listing of the gangs by chapter in the United States and internationally. These gangs have exported organized crime to the world as they have formed criminal networks with new chapters established outside the Continental United States.

**Keywords** Gangs · Organized crime · Outlaw motorcycle gangs · One-percent biker gangs

## Introduction

The number one controversy in any discussion of one percent biker clubs, aka, Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs (OMGs), is are they motorcycle clubs and a Brotherhood built around the love of motorcycles, or criminal gangs whose members happen to ride motorcycles. Club spokesmen vigorously deny that the clubs are criminal organizations or gangs. These same spokesmen readily admit that some members commit or have committed criminal acts, however, they insist that there are a few bad apples in every organization and the organization is not responsible or to be blamed for their behavior. However, many of these so-called “bad apples” are career criminals and psychopaths selected and recruited because of their known reputations for violence and/or criminal behavior. Australian biker expert, Arthur Veno, says, “Violence is central to club life. It’s implicit in the rules, the way members live, and their interactions with other clubs (p. 139, 2009).” After selection, the prospective member is observed and scrutinized through a probationary period to ensure that

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T. Barker (✉)

Department of Criminal Justice, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY 40475, USA  
e-mail: tom.barker@eku.edu

they embody gang values that include the willingness to use violence and commit crimes for the club. Yet, the G-word [gang] is taboo among club leaders.

The supposed “brotherhood” of 1% bikers is actually more rhetoric than reality. One percent bikers have more to fear from their brothers than anyone else. If a 1% biker is killed or injured, his assailant is most likely a fellow brother from his own “club” or another brother from the biker subculture. At one time the original 1% motorcycle clubs may have been more clubs than gangs, but that has changed., especially since the clubs qua gangs became involved in drug trafficking in the 1960s (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman, 2002; Barker, 2007; Veno & Gannon, 2009).

### Clubs to Gangs Evolution

The nature, structure and culture of the 1% biker subculture attracts bikers with criminal or potential criminal dispositions—criminally exploitable ties—and facilitates and supports the criminal networks that arise in these clubs (Barker, 2007). The selection and socialization processes ensure the perpetuation of the deviant culture and values of crime and violence. Many clubs or club chapters only invite for membership prospects that demonstrate criminal propensities, some making the commission of crimes a prerequisite for membership. Given the selection and socialization practices many clubs have evolved into social criminal organizations, i.e.; organizations that indirectly support the criminal activity of its members (von Lampe, 2003). Over time this indirect support facilitates the individual and group criminal behavior of its members and leads to the formation of gangs organized for profit through criminal activities, including organized crime.

American-based biker gangs such as the *Hells Angels*, *Bandidos*, *Outlaws*, *Mongols*, *Warlocks*, *Sons of Silence* and *Vagos* are involved in organized criminal activities on a national and international scale. According to law enforcement authorities in countries with these gangs, including Interpol, Europol and the United Nations, the 1% motorcycle clubs in their jurisdictions are more gangs than clubs.

The patch or gang symbol worn on their “cut”—vest—facilitates criminal activities. A former secretary of the *Hells Angels* Oshawa Canada chapter, who was also a paid police informant, testified that members join for the “power of the patch” which gives them protection when they engage in criminal activities. Patch holders also pay the club 10% of their criminal proceeds and contribute monthly dues for a legal defense fund for members facing prosecution (Pazzano, 2009). A Brookville, Canada cocaine dealer admitted that Ontario *Hells Angels Nomads* chapter used the “power of the patch” to collect a “tax” from all drug dealers within their territory (Seymour, 2010). This extortion technique is common among criminal street gangs, prison gangs and traditional organized criminal gangs such as the Mafia.

### Biker Gangs in the United States

A common characteristic of U.S biker gang leaders/officers is arrest or conviction of a felony. Every past national president of the *Bandidos MC* has been convicted and sent to prison usually for drug offenses. The same thing has happened to the last

three national presidents of the *Outlaws MC*. Numerous *Hells Angels MC* national and chapter presidents, including the iconic leader, Sonny Barger, are convicted felons. Barger is a three time convicted felon. In June 11, 2007 the Spokane, Washington *Hells Angels* chapter president was convicted of racketeering acts, including mail fraud and extortion. Two other current and former Angel leaders were convicted along with him. The federal prosecutor was quoted as saying the case “blows up the myth that (the Hells Angels) create—that they just get together to sell T-shirts and ride motorcycles (Johnson, 2007).” In July 2006, the former Sergeant-at-Arms of the San Diego *Hells Angels* chapter pled guilty to conspiracy to commit racketeering and conspiracy to commit and distribute methamphetamine and received a 14-year sentence. A Shasta County, California *Hells Angels* sergeant at arms, a registered sex offender, was arrested for the murders of two young girls—12 & 15—over 20 years ago (Herendeen, 2006). After finishing a 13-month sentence for drug and weapons possession his DNA was run against DNA found at the girls murders and found to match. Members of the Washington Nomads *Hell's Angels*, including the chapter president and the former West Coast regional president were charged with racketeering offenses (Bowermaster, 2007). The government alleged that the Washington *Hells Angels* Nomads are a highly organized criminal organization.

In October 2006, the national and international *Bandidos* president was sentenced to a 20 month prison term after he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit racketeering (McDonald, 2007). The same federal judge one month later sentenced the 65 year-old president of the Bellingham, Washington *Bandidos* chapter to 4 years in prison after he pleaded guilty to racketeering.

In 2007, a combined investigations by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies led to the indictments of fifteen members and associates of the *Outlaws* in Massachusetts and sixteen *Outlaw* members and associates in Indiana and Michigan (DOJ 1, 2007). The indictments charged the gang members with violent crime in aid of racketeering, illegal drug distribution and gun violations. The indictments charged that *Outlaws* in Indiana, Massachusetts and Michigan engaged in violent assaults on *Hells Angels* members resulting in beatings, shootings and fatalities. The Massachusetts task force seized 18 guns, including an AR-15 assault weapon; 116 g of cocaine, and \$100,000 in cash. The *Outlaws* “Black Region” president that oversees Michigan and Indiana was also arrested along with two former vice presidents.

The Indiana and Michigan cases were resolved by guilty pleas. Fourteen *Outlaws* from chapters in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Indianapolis, and the Detroit chapters of Eastside, Detroit Westside, Downriver and Bay City pleaded guilty to violent crimes in aid of racketeering, illegal drug distribution and firearms violations. One pleaded guilty to possessing a firearm following three prior felony convictions (DOJ 2, 2009).

In October 2009, 55 members and associates of the *Pagans MC* were indicted on 44 counts that included kidnapping, racketeering, robbery, extortion, and conspiracy to commit murder (DOJ 3, 2009). Five *Pagan* officers, including the national president and vice-president, were among those indicted. The biker gang members were accused of conspiring with a prison guard to murder a *Pagan* who was cooperating with the authorities. A 20 year friend of the national vice-president, an electrical contractor from Northern Virginia was indicted because he asked for *Pagan* help in collecting two bad debts worth \$30,000. The “respectable”

businessman supplied the *Pagan* enforcers with the names addresses and physical descriptions of the two men who owed him money. Several of those indicted were accused of conspiring to murder an individual requested by the president of the *Avengers MC*. Trafficking in cocaine and operating an across state gambling operation, selling raffle tickets on a motorcycle, were included in the allegations. The illegal motorcycle raffle was an annual event earning the Mother Chapter [designated national headquarters] \$50,000 a year. The robbery and extortion charges arose from a common practice among biker gangs, forcible taking the colors [patch] from rival gangs. As of February 2010, 18 defendants have pleaded guilty to a variety of charges including stockpiling explosives to use in their war with the HAMC [*Hells Angels Motorcycle Club*], intimidating other clubs, extortion and selling drugs. A *Pagan* vice president pled guilty to racketeering charges and conceded that the *Pagans* were, or were at one time, a criminal organization. The treasurer of the Charleston, West Virginia *Pagans* chapter pleaded guilty to setting up a plot with a prison guard to kill a *Pagan* in prison because it was believed he was cooperating with the authorities. He was also the second officer to admit that the “club” was involved in racketeering activities. The electrical contractor who asked for help in collecting bad debts pleaded guilty and received a 38-month prison sentence. He said in court that asking for the *Pagans* help was “the worst decision and the biggest mistake of my life (Clevenger, 2010).”

Slightly less than a year later “Operation On The Road Again” by federal agents resulted in the arrests of 17 *Pagans* and their associates for racketeering, extortion, witness tampering, drug distribution and firearms offenses. Those arrested were members or affiliated with clubs in Long Island, upstate New York and New Jersey. Among the charges were allegations that the Rhode Island *Pagans* were going to attack the *Hells Angels* with home made grenades in retaliation for an earlier attack.

In June 2010, twenty-four members of the *Outlaws* and four *Pagans* were indicted by a Virginia federal grand jury for a wide range of criminal activities including attempted murder of rival *Hells Angels*, kidnapping, assault, robbery, extortion, witness intimidation, narcotics distribution, illegal gambling and weapons violations. The *Outlaws* national president Jack “Milwaukee Jack” Rosga and six chapter presidents and several vice-presidents, treasurers, and enforcers were arrested. Those arrested came from seven states—Maine, Montana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Included within the allegations is a racial assault on a black male in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The *Pagan* members are included in the indictment because allegedly they joined the *Outlaws* in an assault against rival gangs.

The *Hells Angles* and other well-known biker gangs, are not the only 1% biker gangs engaged in organized criminal activities. On the West Coast in 2006, Operation Green 22 was carried out by 700 law enforcement officers against the *Vagos MC*. The coordinated effort involved officers from the BATF, and local police and sheriff’s departments. Twenty-five members and associates of the *Vagos MC* were arrested for charges ranging from murder, attempted murder, weapons and drug violations. Those arrested included seven chapter presidents, one-vice president, one secretary, one treasurer, and seven sergeants-at-arms (Risling, 2006). The *Vagos* are currently challenging the *Hells Angels* in Arizona, a state the Angels consider their territory. In the last 2 years there have been shootouts between the two gangs in

Mesa, Prescott, Bullhead City and Chino Valley. There is every reason to believe that this conflict will continue.

Four ATF undercover agents infiltrated the *Mongols MC* over a 4-year period in “Operation Black Rain” in Southern California, resulting in a 2008 indictment. The Federal Racketeering indictment alleges 86 counts of murder, attempted murder, assaults, hate crimes, gun violations and drug trafficking and led to the arrests of 61 *Mongols* ([www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac/pressroom/pr2008/142](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac/pressroom/pr2008/142)). Among the allegations are that *Mongols* killed and assaulted numerous *Hells Angels* in California. The indictment alleges that senior *Mongol* members, including the national president traveled to Atlantic City, New Jersey to meet with *Pagan* members to form an alliance to allow for *Mongol* expansion into the Northeast. Furthermore, according to the indictment the *Mongols MC* is ... “racist and hostile to the presence of African-Americans in bars or clubs where Mongols are present, or African-Americans in the presence of females associated with Mongols or Mongols members.” As of September 2009, thirty-four *Mongols* have plead guilty to a variety of crimes all involving the furtherance of a criminal enterprise and knowing that the criminal enterprise, the *Mongols MC*, and its members and associates would commit racketeering offenses. In effect, admitting that the motorcycle club is a gang.

The violence between 1% “brothers” here and overseas goes on unabated. The violence often results from long standing feuds and hatred. The feud and hatred between the *Hells Angels* and *Mongols* in 2002 erupted on the floor of Harrah’s Casino in Laughlin, Nevada when hundreds of bikers went after each other with hammers, wrenches, four-cell MAG flashlights, aka death lights; knives and guns. Ball peen hammers are one of the favorite weapons of biker gangs, especially the *Hells Angels*. Ball peen hammers can inflict terrible injuries but they are legal and can be carried openly. The bloody melee left one *Mongol* and two *Angels* dead with numerous injuries. After the police got things under control they found fourteen guns, 107 knives, two hammers, two wrenches, and nine flashlights. The incident was such bad publicity for the casino that Harrah’s sent out a letter to previous guests that everything was under control and it was safe to return. There is nothing but pure hatred between the two gangs who vow to kill each other on sight. Members of the *Hells Angels* and the *Mongols* fought in a Las Vegas wedding chapel in December 2008 after both groups showed up at separate weddings. Two members of the *Mongols* were stabbed and the chapel was trashed.

Violence and hatred between the HAMC and the *Outlaws* has existed since the late 1960s. A favorite *Outlaw* patch reads ADIOS—Angels Die in Outlaw States. Two *Hells Angels*, one a prospect of a Canadian chapter were arraigned and later convicted of shooting five members of the *Outlaws* at Custer State Park in South Dakota (Walker, 2006). Both gangs were in the area for the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. It was the first violence between 1% biker gangs at the rally since 1990 when a bar brawl between the *Outlaws* and the *Sons of Silence* left an *Outlaw* shot and two *Sons of Silence* members stabbed.

In September 2008, the president of the San Francisco *Hells Angels*, Mark “Papa” Guardado, was shot to death outside a bar in the Mission District of San Francisco. His death was reported to be the result of gang warfare but no one was charged until 2009 when Christopher Ablett a 36 year-old member of the *Mongols* was indicted on federal and state charges. The July 26, 2009 federal indictment charges Ablett with

murder in the aid of racketeering and use of a firearm in a murder. The assassination is just one more murder between the two violent gangs. *Mongols* and *Hells Angels* have been murdering each other for decades. Their rivalry and hatred for one another is well known and marked by violence and murder.

At times biker violence extends to non-bikers, particularly blacks who are often the targets of racist bikers. A member of the Massachusetts *Outlaws* was convicted of interfering by force with the federally protected rights of a black man in an Ashland, Massachusetts's restaurant (DOJ 4, 2009). Two outlaws attacked the man and beat him with fists and a ball peen hammer for staring at them.

### **Biker Gangs Outside the U.S**

Italy gave the world the Mafia; Asia spawned the triads; Russia and the collapsing Soviet empire gave birth to the new eastern mob.

But America gave the world the bikers.

Sher & Marsden, *Angels of Death*

Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs have been called the “only organized crime group developed in the United States (without ethnic ties) that is being exported around the world (Smith, 1998: 54)”. Many biker gangs have established ties and working relationships with international organized crime groups such as La Cosa Nostra, Columbian Cartels, and even the Chinese Triads. International organizations such as Interpol, Europol and the United Nations recognize the criminal potential of American-based Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.

Interlocking networks with indigenous OMGs in other countries allowed American-based OMGs to link common criminal enterprises and the benefits derived from these, allowing these clubs now gangs to enter the global marketplace of crime. The law enforcement community first recognized the international implications of American-based OMGs in the early 1980s. Since that time, the Angels have expanded internationally and other U.S. OMGs have established chapters in countries outside the United States. As one experienced prosecutor of biker gangs put it:

Biker gangs like the Hells Angels are nothing more than multinational corporations—and they're certainly interested in pursuing business opportunities around the world....(Pat Schneider, Assistant U.S. District Attorney, Phoenix, Arizona quoted in Sher & Marsden, 2006:421).

The business opportunities for these biker gangs are crimes for profit.

### **American Based Biker Gangs with Chapters Outside the Continental United States**

According to the official club/gang 2010 websites, there are seven American based biker gangs with four hundred and eighty-four chapters located in countries outside the United States (see Table 1). They are the *Hells Angels*, *Bandidos*, *Outlaws*,

**Table 1** American based biker gangs outside the continental United States by country

1. Argentina	3	22. Italy	6
2. Australia	30	23. Japan (Okinawa)	1
3. Austria	7	24. Liechtenstein	1
4. Belgium	20	25. Luxembourg	1
5. Bohemia	2	26. Malaysia	1
6. Brazil	3	27. Mexico	4
7. Canada	37	28. Northern Ireland	1
8. Channel Islands	2	29. New Zealand	2
9. Chile	1	30. Norway	24
10. Costa Rica	1	31. Portugal	3
11. Croatia	1	32. Philippines	1
12. Denmark	23	33. Poland	7
13. Dominican Rep.	1	34. Russia	13
14. England/Wales	40	35. Singapore	1
15. Finland	10	36. South Africa	5
16. France	36	37. Spain	7
17. Germany	116	38. Sweden	25
18. Greece	1	39. Switzerland	6
19. Hungary	1	40. Thailand	7
20. Holland	9	41. Turkey	1
21. Ireland	9	TOTAL—484	

*Mongols, Vagos, Warlocks* and the *Sons of Silence*. As testament to their international expansion, the *Hells Angels, Bandidos* and the *Outlaws* have more chapters outside the United States than in the U.S.—*Hells Angels* 64 U.S. chapters, 183 outside the U.S.; *Outlaws* 93 U.S. chapters, 161 outside the U.S.; *Bandidos* 102 U.S. chapters, 125 outside the U.S. (Table 2). These chapters are located in forty-one countries across the globe. Germany with 116 chapters has the largest American based biker gang presence with chapters of the *Hells Angels, Bandidos, Outlaws, Sons of Silence* and the *Warlocks*. England/Wales is next with forty chapters of *Hells Angels* and *Outlaws* and one *Warlock* chapter. Canada has thirty-seven chapters of *Hells Angels* and *Outlaws*. There were two *Bandidos* chapters until one chapter killed eight members of the other chapter and the U.S. *Bandidos* disbanded the surviving chapter

**Table 2** American based gangs by chapters—us & outside conus

Gang	United States	Outside Conus
Hells angels	64	183
Outlaws	93	161
Bandidos	102	125
Mongols	76	3
Vagos	24	3
Sons of silence	13	6
Warlocks	13	2
Total	385	484



members after they were convicted of the murders. The *Mongols* claim to have a chapter in Canada, but there is no evidence to support the claim. It appears to be a ploy to rattle the Canadian *Hells Angels*, the dominant biker gang in Canada. France has thirty-six chapters of *Hells Angels*, *Outlaws* and *Bandidos*. Australia has thirty chapters of *Hells Angels*, *Bandidos* and *Outlaws*. The remaining chapters are spread throughout Europe and Asia with a concentration of American based biker gangs in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

## Conclusion

The international expansion of the American-based biker gangs has had a profound effect on the nature and composition of many clubs, particularly the *Hells Angels*, *Bandidos* and the *Outlaws*. Each of these gangs has more chapters and members outside the United States than they do inside the US. Often, new international members do not meet the established criteria for membership, for example, there are instances where some members do not even own motorcycles or are former police officers. The international chapters have gained in influence and power. All new *Hells Angels* full patch members must be approved by the *Hells Angels* world council meeting at the yearly international run. The Canadian *Bandidos* chapters that were to cause the *Bandido Nation* so much grief were only approved by the US *Bandidos* after pressure from their European allies. The gangs hold regional, national and international meetings attended by the key officers—presidents, vice-presidents, sgt-at-arms, and secretary treasurers. At these meeting major policies and procedures are set, chapters are approved or disbanded, members are approved and the criminal activities are planned.

The American based biker gangs have become more criminal as they and their drug links expand beyond the US borders. They have become more violent toward each other as they fight over territory and drug markets. The American based OMGs have become serious organized crime threats in their new hosts. This expansion and spread of organized crime activities and violence is on going and leading other American based OMGs to consider establishing chapters outside the United States.

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**Tom Barker** is a Professor of Criminal Justice in the Department of Criminal Justice at Eastern Kentucky University. He has been a dean, police academy instructor and police officer. He has authored or co-authored 15 books and numerous articles. Barker has published extensively on biker gangs. He is a past president of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the Southern Criminal Justice Association.