



# Public nuisance, public enemy, public servant? Introduction to the special issue on outlaw bikers in Europe

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## Abstract

This essay presents an introduction to the special issue on outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe. Apart from providing an overview of the papers contained in the special issue, it presents a classificatory scheme for the analysis of the links between outlaw biker clubs—also known as outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs)—and crime. Against the backdrop of the history of the outlaw biker subculture in Europe, this paper proposes a five-fold typology of criminal activities that can potentially be ascribed to biker clubs as organizational entities, and it presents three different scenarios for an overlap of criminal structures and the formal structure of an outlaw biker club.

**Keywords** Outlaw motorcycle clubs · Outlaw motorcycle gangs · OMCG · Biker · Organized crime · Europe

Outlaw motorcycle clubs have been a common sight across Europe for several decades. More recently they have gotten caught in the cross-hairs of police and policy level anti-organized-crime campaigns. According to Europol, outlaw biker groups are “considered a national threat and a national policing priority in 17 EU Member States and six Europol partner states” (Europol 2018). Criminologists have not been ignorant of the phenomenon either, but it is only in the last few years that studies on outlaw bikers have developed into a discernible line of research.

## Historical development of the outlaw biker scene in Europe

Historically speaking, the outlaw biker phenomenon in Europe is largely the product of cultural influences from the United States. The initial formation of European outlaw

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motorcycle clubs and of the entire subculture of outlaw bikers can best be understood as an imitation of what had developed in California in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, with the inspiration coming from both American service men stationed in Europe and from Hollywood movies like *The Wild Angels* (1966), *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) (Ahlsdorf 2009; Klement 2016).

However, Europe was not entirely virgin territory. The European outlaw bikers followed in the footsteps of violent working-class youth subcultures of the post-war period, such as the *Halbstarcken* in Germany (Ahlsdorf 2009) and the *læderjakker* in Denmark (Klement 2016) that centered on riding mopeds and motorcycles, wearing leather jackets, congregating at public places, drinking, vandalizing and generally creating a nuisance (see also Blokland et al. 2017; Geurtjens et al. 2018).

It was this label of rough and rowdy young men defying bourgeois conduct norms which was initially applied to outlaw bikers in Europe, just as it had previously been applied to outlaw bikers in the United States since the 1940s. The 1960s and 1970s saw a consolidation of the European outlaw biker scene with the formation of distinct clubs. These clubs were homegrown creations more or less closely modeled after *the* iconic outlaw motorcycle club, the Hells Angels. While many of these clubs followed their own paths, some aspired to actually become charters of the Hells Angels. The first European branch of the Hells Angels was established in London as early as 1969, followed by the Zurich, Switzerland, charter in 1970 and the Hamburg, Germany, charter in 1973 (Barker 2015, p. 106). A further consolidation of the outlaw biker scene in the form of smaller clubs merging into larger clubs, and in particular, local clubs patching over to major international clubs, has occurred since the 1990s. Typically, this has gone hand in hand with rising inter-club tensions, namely between the Hells Angels and the Bandidos, the latter gaining a foothold in Europe in 1989 by absorbing a biker club from Marseille, France (Caine 2010, p. 37).

Another development closely linked to conflicts between biker clubs is the phenomenon of so-called puppet and support clubs that are affiliated with, and function under the supervision of larger outlaw motorcycle clubs. Support clubs are outlaw motorcycle clubs themselves whereas puppet clubs are made up of members who do not need to own a motorcycle but are nonetheless subsumed to the category of outlaw bikers (Klement 2016).

## Police perceptions of outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe

Police perceptions of outlaw motorcycle clubs have changed quite dramatically over the last few decades. Authorities in the United States started to classify outlaw bikers as an organized crime threat in the 1970s (California Bureau of Organized Crime and Criminal Intelligence, 1978). Around the same time, law enforcement agencies and criminologists in Europe began to see signs for the maturing of juvenile bikers into adult criminals (Kreuzer 1975).

As early as 1984, Interpol convened a meeting to discuss the international expansion of the Hells Angels and other outlaw biker clubs. Of the eight participating countries, six were European: Denmark, France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (Barker 2015, p. 135). Not surprisingly against this backdrop, the biker problem also played a role in the constitution of Europol. Even before it was

officially set up in 1999 and was functioning only in a limited capacity as the Europol Drugs Unit, the European police office showed an interest in outlaw bikers. In 1996, a project was launched for assessing the involvement of outlaw motorcycle clubs in drug crimes. The coordination of the project, dubbed “Operation Monitor,” was entrusted to Denmark which had also made the initial proposal. From the start, the non-EU countries Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein were invited to participate (Europol 1997). “Operation Monitor” showed that while European countries were generally willing to address the biker phenomenon as a crime threat, experiences and perceptions varied greatly. The project required the participating countries to complete two questionnaires. A three-page questionnaire pertained specifically to Hells Angels and Bandidos and requested information on chapters, supporters and members. For each member, countries were supposed to provide detailed personal information apart from the position in the club. A second, ten-page questionnaire sought to collect information pertaining to criminal activities, including drug offences, but also other types of crimes; and it asked for information relating to legal businesses such as tattoo parlors, debt-collection services and motorcycle dealerships (Heitmüller 2016). The report that was prepared based on the survey revealed that only a small minority among the participating countries had not detected any presence of outlaw motorcycle clubs, and that in most countries with outlaw bikers, some links to criminal activity had been established. However, many countries did not see themselves in a position to provide extensive data on outlaw bikers; partly because they did not see bikers as a significant problem and, accordingly, had no data to share, partly because of national privacy laws (Europol 1997, p. 7). In fact, in the section on the criminal convictions of Hells Angels and Bandidos members, the “Monitor” report relied exclusively on data furnished by Danish authorities (Europol 1997, p. 69).

In this context, it should be noted that Denmark has been at the center of attention in Europe since the 1970s because of violent tensions within the outlaw biker subculture that have repeatedly flared up, at times with deadly consequences. A feud involving a biker group that eventually formed the first charter of the Hells Angels in 1980 cost 13 lives, and the subsequent so-called Great Nordic Biker War resulted in the killing of eleven individuals between 1994 and 1997 in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. The Nordic Biker War pitted the Hells Angels against the Bandidos which had established their presence in Scandinavia in 1993 (Klement 2016, p. 8).

Today, outlaw motorcycle clubs in Europe are tied to a wide range of criminal activities, including extortion and drug trafficking, and “extreme forms of violence” (Europol 2018). However, as reflected in the contributions to this special issue on outlaw bikers in Europe there continues to be a debate on the exact nature and extent of the link between outlaw bikers and crime. While some see biker clubs morphing into crime syndicates, others suggest that their high visibility has made them convenient, though undeserving targets for wholesale police repression (Albrecht 2018; Larsson 2016).

## The links between outlaw bikers and crime

In the ongoing debate on the links between outlaw bikers and crime, three questions need to be addressed. First, to what extent are outlaw bikers involved in crime? Second,

what is the nature of these criminal activities? And third, what function, if any, do outlaw biker clubs as organizational entities have with respect to these criminal activities?

It is generally assumed that outlaw bikers are crime prone individuals. However, not all members of notorious outlaw motorcycle clubs have criminal records. For example, an analysis of the criminal register in Sweden for a sample of 100 members of the Hells Angels and Bandidos showed that “75 of them have been formally charged, and nine more are suspected on good grounds” (Brottsförebyggande rådet 1999, p. 51). The Norwegian police provided similar data in 2010: “Of the 113 Hells Angels members and prospect members in Norway, 85 or 75% have been convicted of criminal offences. Of the 48 Bandidos members and prospect members in Norway, 30 or approx. 62% have been convicted of offences. For Coffin Cheaters, these figures are 14 of 25 members, or 56%” (National Police Directorate 2010, p. 14).

These numbers indicate that most members of outlaw motorcycle groups are indeed involved in some form of crime while at the same time, a substantial number of outlaw bikers have no criminal record. This can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, one could surmise that there is no inherent link between membership in outlaw biker clubs and involvement in crime, assuming for argument’s sake that under the intense scrutiny outlaw bikers face in countries like Sweden and Norway at least some of the crimes a criminally active member commits would come to light. Otherwise, if outlaw biker clubs are criminal organizations, all members should be implicated in criminal activities. On the other hand one could also speculate that outlaw bikers tend to keep a distance from the actual commission of crime while pulling the strings from the background, namely with respect to crime committed by members of puppet and supporter clubs (see Morselli 2009).

For those outlaw bikers who have a criminal record it is important to understand what types of crimes they are implicated in. These fall into two broad categories: expressive acts and instrumental acts (Quinn and Koch 2003). Five types of criminal activities should usefully be distinguished with regard to the underlying purpose and with regard to the relations between those who commit, and those who are affected by these crimes. The first two types of criminal activities are specific to the outlaw biker subculture, the latter three capture the main types of organized crime related activities (see von Lampe 2016):

1. “*Adventurous activities*” (Albini 1971, p. 46) – expressive acts committed for fun or thrill, or as demonstrations of masculinity, such as bar fights. These crimes are opportunistic in nature and are not directed against specific groups of victims.
2. *Warfare crimes* – acts of violence directed against members of other outlaw motorcycle clubs in disputes over territory or in the context of long-term inter-club feuds.
3. *Market-based crimes* – crimes characterized by supplier-customer relationships involving the provision of illegal goods and services for profit such as the sale of illicit drugs or illegal debt collection.
4. *Predatory crimes* – crimes characterized by offender-victim relationships involving such offences as theft or fraud, for example the theft of motorcycles.
5. *Illegal governance crimes* – criminal activities that are inherently linked to the exercise of power within a criminal group, or to the control over territories and

illegal markets, for example in the form that outlaw biker club members are disciplined for breaking club rules, or a ‘street tax’ is collected from drug dealers operating in an area claimed by an outlaw motorcycle club.

In two cases an inherent link between the criminal activity and the outlaw motorcycle club as an organizational entity is quite obvious. The first case is presented by warfare crimes, for example the bombing of a rival club house. These are crimes that by their very nature are geared to benefit the club (and by extension to hurt another club). Of course, the link is less clear when an overzealous member takes matters into his own hands. The second case where illegal activities of members can be attributed to the club as a whole pertains to those illegal governance crimes that are integral to the inner workings of the club, more specifically the internal disciplinary system. When, for example, the club tattoos of someone who is leaving the club “in bad standing” are forcefully removed (Marsden and Sher 2007, p. 289), the crime follows the logic of the protection of the exclusivity of the club insignia as a brand.

The other types of crimes that are variously associated with outlaw bikers cannot as easily be attributed to outlaw motorcycle clubs as organizational entities. Outlaw bikers may get into barroom brawls, steal, sell drugs or extort drug dealers entirely on their own, and it would mean jumping to conclusions to automatically take what members do as actions of the respective biker club. This is a problem that not only presents itself with regard to criminally active outlaw bikers but also in a more general sense with respect to criminals who associate with other criminals. Importantly, not all organizational structures made up of criminals are geared towards the commission of crimes. This seeming paradox lies at the heart of many misguided analyses in the realm of organized crime.

For many observers - journalists, law enforcement officials and also some academics - it is difficult to understand that criminals may come together for reasons other than co-offending. These non-economic reasons include, for example, male bonding, a sense of belonging, the social prestige that comes with being part of a select group of people, mental support for being different from mainstream society, mutual assistance, and having access to valuable information and contacts. Mark H. Haller, writing about the American Cosa Nostra, famously pointed out that conflating illegal businesses like drug trafficking operations and associations of criminals like the Mafia amounts to treating a Rotary Club as one and the same as a department store (Haller 1992, p. 7).

To avoid comparing apples and oranges it is important to distinguish three different types of structures by the primary functions they serve: entrepreneurial structures geared towards material gain; associational structures serving social functions for its members, such as providing a sense of belonging, status and mutual aid and support; and quasi-governmental structures that are centered on the exercise of power (von Lampe 2016). Outlaw biker clubs are first and foremost associational structures (see Wolf 1991). The question is to what extent they also serve other functions. This is an empirical question which cannot be answered in a simple yes-or-no fashion. Rather, it is a matter of degree. In the literatures on motorcycle clubs, street gangs, and organized crime there are several clues about how the criminal activities of outlaw bikers might be tied to their respective clubs (see Fig. 1).

One scenario could be termed the “rotten apple scenario” in reference to how such cases are typically framed by outlaw motorcycle clubs. In this scenario individual

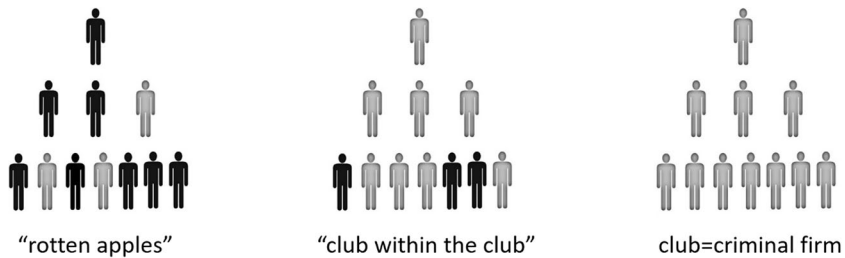


Fig. 1 Scenarios of a link between outlaw biker clubs and crime

members, perhaps acting alone or together with other members or non-members, commit crimes independent of the club. This resonates with Haller’s assessment of Mafiosi being “largely independent entrepreneurs” (Haller 1992, p. 5). How this plays out in practice may vary widely. In one extreme, bikers commit crimes without knowledge, consent, and support of their club. In the other extreme, individual crimes are tolerated or even welcomed by the club, especially when proceeds from these crimes end up in the club coffers. Yet, the perpetrators are still autonomous in their decisions whether or not to commit a crime, what crime to commit, how and when.

In another scenario, perhaps best termed the “club-within-the club” scenario, there is a large overlap between the club structure and an illegal entrepreneurial structure, however, both need to be treated as analytically distinct (Morselli 2009). This would be the case, for example, when drugs are distributed through the club, i.e. from the club leadership down through the ranks of members, prospects and hangarounds, while the relationships and interactions between the participants follow a logic that is different from the formal club structure. For example, the authority derived from positions in the formal club hierarchy does not necessarily translate into directive powers with respect to the drug business. This phenomenon has repeatedly been observed in gang research (Decker et al. 1998; Densley 2014). James Densley, for example, writing about drug distribution through London street gangs, concludes that “drug sales are fundamentally an individual or small-group activity, not coordinated by the collective gang. The gang instead provides the reputational and criminogenic resources to sustain the enterprise” (Densley 2014, p. 533). This means that in cases where most or even all members of an outlaw motorcycle club are engaged in the same illegal activity it is not a given that the club represents an entrepreneurial structure. Rather, there is a possibility of the existence of a parallel structure within the club that functions as a business.

In a third scenario, finally, the outlaw motorcycle club functions as a “criminal firm,” i.e. an organization that is geared towards the commission of crimes. Perhaps the most obvious examples for this scenario are biker wars where clubs as clubs plan and carry out violent acts against rival clubs. Another realistic scenario is that outlaw motorcycle clubs perform the role of quasi-governmental structures and, as organizational entities, set and enforce rules and tax entrepreneurial activities in the territory under their control. Such a scenario is realistic because quasi-governmental structures can function more efficiently when they have a formal hierarchy and their members are easily recognizable. This facilitates the acquisition of reputational capital, reduces the risk of internal conflicts in the exercise of power, and prevents the position of the group being undermined by free riders who fraudulently pose as representatives of the group (see Gambetta 1993; Reuter 1983). What is less plausible to assume is that outlaw

motorcycle clubs function as illegal firms engaged in market-based or predatory crimes, for example the selling of drugs or the stealing of motorcycles. Theoretically speaking, bureaucratic organizations such as outlaw motorcycle clubs are not well adapted to an illegal environment that for a variety of reasons tends to be populated “by localized, fragmented, ephemeral, and undiversified enterprises” (Reuter 1983, p. 131).

## The contributions to this special issue

Against the backdrop of the complexity of the question about the link between outlaw bikers and crime, the contributions to this special issue on outlaw motorcycle gangs in Europe provide valuable insights in a number of different ways.

Arjan Blokland, Lonneke van Hout, Wouter van der Leest and Melvin Soudijn, in their study “Not your average biker: criminal careers of members of Dutch outlaw motorcycle gangs” address the fundamental question of the criminal tendencies of outlaw bikers. Drawing on official records they investigate whether prospective outlaw bikers in the Netherlands are more crime prone than other motorcycle enthusiasts, and whether membership in an outlaw motorcycle club correlates with increased criminal activity.

Amir Rostami and Hernan Mondani examine to what extent outlaw biker clubs provide a structural context for criminal activity. In their paper entitled “Organizing on two wheels: uncovering the organizational patterns of Hells Angels MC in Sweden” the authors analyze the co-offending patterns of members of the Hells Angels, its puppet club Red & White Crew and its support club Red Devils, drawing on co-offending data and gang membership data.

Yuliya Zabyelina provides a systematic analysis of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club (*Nochniye volki*). While being part of the outlaw motorcycle subculture, the Night Wolves present themselves more in the role of public servant than public nuisance or public enemy. In her article “Russia’s Night Wolves Motorcycle Club: from 1%ers to political activists” the author traces the evolution of this biker club and investigates its role in Putin’s system of power.

Paul Larsson, in his essay entitled “Policing bikers: confrontation or dialogue?” raises the issue of the relationship between outlaw bikers and the state with respect to police strategies in Norway. He outlines two competing models, one of confrontation and repression, and one of dialogue and continuous face-to-face interaction between police and bikers, and places these strategies in the broader context of policing styles.

Tore Bjørgo likewise deals with responses to outlaw bikers. However, rather than limiting the discussion to police strategies, he provides a more comprehensive discussion. In the essay “Preventing organized crime originating from outlaw motorcycle gangs” the author applies his holistic approach (Bjørgo 2016) in examining how nine different crime prevention mechanisms can potentially contribute to a reduction in outlaw biker related crime.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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