

Understanding the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

Understanding the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

International Perspectives

Edited by

Andy Bain

Mark Lauchs



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*For Aly, Mikey, Corrie & Ryan with Love
Daddy*

*To friends and family
Mark*

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Foreword

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While there is a public fascination with motorcycle gangs, there has been a dearth of academic attention to the topic. Public fascination extends from the involvement of Hells Angels during the Altamont Speedway Free Festival in 1969 to the public celebrity of Sonny Barger. Barger is a founding member of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club in Oakland, California. Barger has been the subject of numerous books and movies and at one time taught sociology within the California State University system. As recently as 2015, Yavapai, Arizona, hosted a Poker Run in Barger's honor, despite no apparent local connection. Hells Angels boasts over 200 chapters worldwide, representing six continents, with 10 new chapters becoming active in 2016 (and counting).

Andy Bain and Mark Lauchs provide a useful tonic for this circumstance in their edited volume, *Understanding the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs: International Perspectives*. This new edited volume includes information about outlaw motorcycle gangs in the Americas, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Far East, Australia, and New Zealand. In addition, this book provides a look at many of the fads that pervade the world of the outlaw motorcycle gang. This book concludes with a chapter that examines various strategies and recommendations for policing such groups.

This book is welcome at this time for a variety of reasons. There is growing recognition that offending in groups defines the modal categories of most crimes (Paoli, 2015; Schaefer, Rodriguez, & Decker, 2014; Decker & Pyrooz, 2013; 2014). It is particularly the case that crimes with an international context involve groups. This is true of street gangs, drug smuggling groups, organized crime, white collar crime, and human trafficking. The reasons for such group behavior are many and worth noting, as they illustrate many of the key themes found throughout this book. First, crime is an increasingly complex venture, particularly in an international context. Law, customs, formal structures, and

currencies (to mention only a few) all make offending considerably more difficult and require a good deal more expertise than in the days of open-sea piracy or ram-raiding. Second, offending ventures that span country borders have opportunities for enhanced profits. Having contacts in multiple countries facilitates offending across borders, particularly the transfer of both cash and goods. Third, just as globalization affects legal transactions, science, education, the arts, and employment, it affects the criminal enterprise. Fourth, and closely related to the third point, the internet and social media facilitate such group cooperation in ways not thought possible just a few years ago. In addition to facilitating offending, internet communication and social media also facilitate the cultural transmission of fads, styles, and practices. How else would Norwegian schoolchildren know to mimic the ways and styles of American rappers or would Japanese youth emulate the behavior of emo and hip hop singers? Fifth, group behavior among motorcycle gangs evokes long-standing mythic belief systems about camaraderie, brotherhood, and the open road.

But how do motorcycle gangs differ from other forms of crime committed in groups? The most logical comparison would be with street gangs, a group that motorcycle gangs are sometimes (mistakenly) compared with. Street gangs tend to have younger members, shorter tenures in the group, and engage in a diversity of crime, much of it (property and violent) non-purposive. While both groups have symbols of membership and many of their members find their way to prison, motorcycle gangs are far more organized and more heavily focused on a narrower range of criminal offenses (drug sales and intimidation) than are street gang members. To be sure, both groups display symbols of membership and this is a feature that distinguishes these groups from other forms of organized crime. Drug smuggling groups are similar in age to motorcycle gangs, but lack the long term membership and in particular the symbols that characterize membership in a motorcycle gang, such as tattoos, logos, and most importantly—a motorcycle. Human traffickers are also different; their behavior is more episodic and less focused than that of motorcycle gangs. In addition, members of human trafficking groups spend less time as a member of the group than do motorcycle gang members. Traditional organized crime groups also do not publicly display symbols of membership; indeed, secrecy is a primary feature of such groups. Perhaps this is why family ties are a much more important characteristic of such groups. While physical violence and intimidation are a part of organized crime, they are employed in the pursuit of profit, the key motivation for organized crime groups.

The study of street gangs has been advanced by focusing on several distinct processes and characteristics that apply to the study of other crime groups. These include (1) definitions of the group, (2) processes of joining, (3) key

activities—criminal and non-criminal—by members of the group, (4) group processes within the group, and (5) leaving the group. We know a good deal about operational *definitions of motorcycle gangs* and what distinguishes them from gangs and other crime groups such as Security Threat Groups (STGs), a nomenclature used by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and many states to refer to what would otherwise be known as prison gangs. In the distinction between motorcycle gangs and other gangs, it is the significance of the motorcycle and how group culture is built around the bike that is important. Unlike work in the area of street gangs, the definition of motorcycle gangs is straightforward and has not been the subject of extensive debate and disagreement between and among law enforcement, legislators, and scholars. The *process of joining* a street gang and a motorcycle gang show some similarity. For both groups joining is a process and often involves violence and proving oneself by engaging in menial tasks in service of more senior members of the gang. For motorcycle gangs, however, the rules about which symbols of membership can be worn are much stricter than in a street gang. There are major differences between key *activities in a motorcycle gang* and a street gang. For street gangs “representing”—demonstrating toughness, holding down territory on the “set”—are both key activities. While street gang members engage in high levels of crime, much of it is non-utilitarian and rarely involves the demonstration of a specific expertise. Money that is made selling drugs as a street gang member rarely goes back to the gang at large and is typically kept by the street gang member who was responsible for raising the money, through drug sales, extortion, or robbery. Activities within motorcycle gangs are far more constrained by group rules. While street gangs rarely have meaningful written rules or formally prescribed punishments, such are common among motorcycle gangs. Indeed, new clubs may not be “certified” as affiliate members of a larger motorcycle gang (Hells Angels, Vagos, Mongols, etc.) without rules and a “constitution” that reflects the principles of the larger gang. Crime among motorcycle gang members is far more tightly controlled and profits from drug sales or extortion (two of the most common forms of crime within a motorcycle gang) and profits are controlled by the gang hierarchy. Motorcycle gangs have a much more formal and effective hierarchy than do street gangs. Because of the expense involved in the purchase, alteration, and upkeep of the motorcycle, generating resources is important for motorcycle gang members. Illegal activities provide an important source of this revenue. It is in the area of *group processes* where the similarities between motorcycle and street gangs are the strongest. The “brotherhood” within each group is a key component of membership, though ties among motorcycle gang members are stronger and more persistent than for street gangs. Each group requires a high degree of in-group loyalty and

commitment and the willingness to act on behalf of the group is an important value which gets tested in practice on a regular basis. As violence is a core activity for each group and always boils just below the surface, it is important that both street gang and motorcycle gang members be prepared to “have the back” of fellow members. Such solidarity creates circumstances where threats and violence can be generalized to the entire group such that a challenge to one member is viewed as a threat against all members. Less is known about *leaving* motorcycle or street gangs than in other areas of activity. The empirical evidence is that large numbers of both groups do end their affiliation (much more so among street gang members) and move on. For motorcycle gang members this appears to be the case among those who have been “honorable” members of the club for a period of time and who move or seek to move on with their lives. For street gang members, the evidence appears to support the conclusion that there are multitude routes out of the gang. Indeed, some argue that the average length of street gang membership in the U.S. is under two years (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014). It is important, however, to underscore that there is variation across motorcycle gangs, as one would expect from a category that includes hundreds of groups spread across more than twenty countries.

This edited volume joins two notable recent books on motorcycle gangs. The first is *Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs: A Theoretical Perspective* (written by Lauchs, Bain, & Bell, 2015) and the second *Vagos, Mongols and Outlaws* by Charles Falco (2013). The Lauchs et al. book is one of the few books in the area of organized crime groups that focuses on theory. The book explicitly contrasts motorcycle gangs with street gangs, much as I have done here. As such it is a very important book and one that should be read by all who want to understand motorcycle gangs and how they contrast with street gangs. Falco’s book is more ethnographic, based on nearly three years of membership and activities with a motorcycle club in Victorville, California. The book is full of thick description and examples.

A major contribution of the current volume is the international focus of the chapters. This promises to be a significant advance in our understanding of motorcycle gangs, their relationship to the culture and country they are located in, and comparisons between motorcycle gangs and other criminal groups. This book focuses specifically on gangs in Australia, New Zealand, the Far East, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Germany, as well as South America. Such groups in the U.S. are a typical comparison point, and this book is no exception. Much has been learned in the study of street gangs by comparing them to the circumstances of the United States, though such comparisons have also posed challenges (Klein, Kerner, Maxson, & Weitekamp, 1999). Primary among the challenges of such comparative work was the be-

lief in Europe (and elsewhere) that street gangs in the U.S. were so very different from the troublesome youth groups found in Europe that there was little room for common ground. There was also a concern about stigmatizing youth with the label “gang member,” particularly as most who would be so labeled were members of ethnic or religious minorities, many of whom were recent immigrants to their new home country. What emerged from years of discussion and research was a two-fold understanding that, (1) American youth gangs were not as distinctive as believed in Europe and didn’t generally conform to the media view of them that dominated European consciousness and (2) European street groups indeed exhibited many of the characteristics found among American street gangs. What evolved was a consensus definition about what a street gang was and what its primary activities were that suited a wide variety of contexts. Getting past stereotypes of groups, especially groups involved in deviance and offending that have been the subject of massive media attention, is a key to the successful description and understanding of such groups. This Bain and Lauchs volume does us a great service in this regard and nowhere is its contribution felt more than in the area of a comparative study of motorcycle gangs. This book is evidence that the study of motorcycle gangs and gang members has moved beyond sensationalized media stereotypes and has become a serious topic of study among criminologists. While this entire volume supports this claim, the chapter by Tom Barker, which considers the critical question of whether motorcycle gangs are “clubs” or “criminal gangs,” is particularly important in this regard. Such a consideration is key to whether criminologists should compare such groups to other offending groups, and Barker’s answer is a resounding “yes” with strong empirical and *a priori* support. Blokland and his colleagues (in chapter 4) consider this question in the Dutch context as well. Their chapter traces the evolution of biker gangs in the Netherlands and their relationships with other biker groups through Northern Europe. This excellent chapter documents the adaptation of the group to Dutch norms, as well as the influence of other biker groups on their evaluation. The role of cultural transmission and social imitation is an important contribution made by this chapter. The inclusion of a chapter on the role of women in this volume is another sign that the study of motorcycle gangs has “arrived.” In too many studies of organized crime groups, women are either not dealt with or treated as appendages. In this, Davies Robinson and Bain provide an important correction to such a tendency. The comparative tone of the Crane and Silverstone chapter (United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain) is a further example of how the study of motorcycle gangs has established itself as an integral part of the discipline. Comparative criminology has suffered from “one off” comparisons between the U.S. and some superficial aspects of offenders in another country. The use of

a British framework for comparison has higher face validity than a U.S.-based schema. Similarly, the chapter on motorcycle gangs in the Americas details the spread of such groups to new locations, and builds on an understanding of how groups involved in crime can be adopted and adapted to fit new locations. The brief case study of Mexico, for example, is solid evidence of this process and how it works. One of the strengths of this chapter (and one found throughout this book) is the importance of cultural and structural context in understanding such groups. While it sounds obvious that none of these groups exist in a cultural, linguistic, or structural vacuum, one seldom finds these contexts explicated in work on the spread of new crime groups. In this context, an important chapter is Lauchs' treatment of "Nike Bikies." Such groups have a counterpoint in the study of street gangs, "wanna-bes," or groups that manifest many of the trappings of such groups but may fall short of being fully the same. This Bain and Lauchs book is a useful reminder of the importance of context. This book applies this comparative lens to Asia, New Zealand, and the Far East, expanding the focus of the comparative approach beyond "just" Europe and the U.S. Another strength of this book, one that is found in several of the chapters, is a consideration of the appropriate institutional response to motorcycle gangs. While approaches must be tailored to fit the cultural and institutional contours of their countries, much can be learned from the efforts of other countries to control or limit the harm such groups can bring to bear.

There is much to be learned from this Bain and Lauchs volume. It signals the "arrival" of a criminology of motorcycle gangs, which can now contribute further to our understanding of their nature and level of organization as well as group process in groups involved in crime. This volume is a welcome addition to the literature and a very interesting treatment of the topic.

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