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The independent's edge in an illegal drug distribution setting: Levitt and Venkatesh revisited

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ABSTRACT

Popular imagery and scholarly research have differed significantly in their perceptions and understanding of the structure and scope of organized crime and gang settings. While the common image is that of the corporate-like or formal criminal organization, past research has been more likely to argue and demonstrate in favour of market and network flexibility. In this study, we pursue this latter line of inquiry by demonstrating the market and network features that shape illegal drug distribution settings. In doing so, we rely on the Quebec Hells Angels accounting books for a one-year period, which brings us within the same empirical domain as Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000) study of the Black Knights in 1990s Chicago. Our study sways from the main premise that oriented the Black Knight's case study—namely that performance within the illegal drug distribution structure was directly tied to that organization's rigid hierarchical structure. While the Hells Angels can be analyzed as a corporation, this does not mean that Hells Angels members are, by definition, at an advantage because of their organizational status in the illegal drug distribution setting in which some members are active. What our findings indicate is that a participant's ability to adapt to market dynamics and take on a core network position within an illegal drug market (cocaine, in this study) matter most. Overall, we demonstrate that: 1) Quebec's cocaine market was structured primarily around traditional market forces; 2) the transaction network around the Hells Angels was not centralized around a single person or small group of people; 3) Hells Angels members were not the most active participants; and 4) being a Hells Angels member did not increase one's volume of transactions within the network—quite differently, core network positioning did.

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Criminal hierarchies, markets, and networks

Powell's (1990) network nuance within the hierarchy-market debate is alive and well in research on organized crime and illegal markets. A common feature of organized crime and general gang imagery is that of the corporate-like criminal organization. This notion is at the centre of law-enforcement strategies and popular culture, however, one of the first things that you learn when you begin to study organized crime and gangs is that the criminal groups that are inherent to such phenomena are much less organized than we generally believe. Research over the past four decades has consistently confronted the myth of the corporate-like criminal organization that has often persisted in media and law-enforcement imagery of this phenomenon. The roots of this debate

carry us back to Cressey's (1969) study of Cosa Nostra dominance during the 1950s and 1960s. Cressey's premise was that, through its formal bureaucratic order of bosses, underbosses, and soldiers, the Cosa Nostra was able to take control of over ninety percent of North American illegal markets. This claim served as the principal catalyst for organized crime research over the next four decades, with alternative sociological studies demonstrating the network-based features that underlie such perceived formal settings (Blok, 1974; Ianni, 1972; Albinì, 1971; Hess, 1998/1970) and economic studies demonstrating the importance of considering price and market characteristics that made such settings more competitive than proffered by Cressey and the popular imagery that followed (Caulkins and Reuter, 1998; Reuter and Haaga, 1989; Reuter, 1983).

If there is a common thread uniting empirical research in this area, it is that competition and information-based relations prevail over the monopolistic and formal hierarchies that were argued to dominate illegal markets in 1960s research and current popular perceptions. In this regard, gang research follows the organized crime tradition quite closely, with similar debates on the scope,

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structure, and size of group configurations. The general assessment from most research reveals the loose structures in which gangs and gang members interact (Klein and Maxson, 2006; McGloin, 2005; Decker et al., 1998). Even in contexts with a rare presence of a single dominant gang, the difference between the reputation of such a gang and the actions of its members as a collective must be taken into consideration. Research as early as Thrasher's (1927), Short and Strodtbeck's (1965), and Suttles' (1968) studies of Chicago gangs confirmed that, aside from confrontations with other gangs, individual members typically act beyond the realms of the gang. Thus, a gang could have many members, but this does not necessitate that co-members interact with each other in a given criminal activity. Cliques and resource sharing may emerge around the activities of some members, but aside from offering a common identity and franchise, the constitution of the overall gang itself is generally amorphous. Later studies lend additional support for such early observations (see Spergel, 1995; Sanders, 1994; Virgil, 1988).

That gangs were less cohesive than expected by the idea of a "gang subculture" has been repeatedly addressed. Fleisher (1995), for example, maintained that the Crips versus Bloods division was often blurred during his fieldwork in Seattle, with members from "opposing" sides often found in amicable contact with each other. Another feature that is often associated with gang organization in popular and law-enforcement circles is that of leadership. But contrary to popular beliefs, leadership in a gang setting is more likely transient and versatile. Klein and Maxson's (2006) assessment of this is consistent with this outlook: "Most gang scholars have found leadership to be functional, shifting, unstable, and shared among many gang members. It often depends less on physical strength or criminal prowess than on verbal skills, opportunism, social capacities, and – in the case of traditional gangs – various age levels. Except in speciality gangs, leadership is usually not the hierarchical, command-oriented positional concept stressed by popularizers of gang matters" (p. 195). In the words of one of Klein's (1971) early interview respondents: "We got no leaders, man. Everybody's a leader, and nobody can talk for nobody else" (p. 96). Even in research on gang violence, the less formal mechanisms that have commonly believed to structure attacks and retaliations between street gang members has been displaced by a relational outlook in which individual actions are influenced by a wider network that shape rivalries and violence. In Papachristos' words, it is precisely this network "structure that kills" and institutionalizes violence (2009: 116).

Past research has thus informed us that, whether in regard to criminal organizations or gangs, common perceptions often blur the assumptions that researchers follow. When it comes to such illegal activities, the hierarchy often dominates popular imagery and law-enforcement perceptions, while network and market patterns are more likely to prevail across empirical research. In this study, we pursue this line of inquiry by examining the market and network features that shape an illegal drug distribution setting that was comprised of Quebec Hells Angels members and a wide array of other participants with no organizational affiliations. In doing so, and because of our reliance on a rarely employed data source (a criminal organization's accounting ledgers), we question a seminal research on street gangs and more general criminal enterprise. One of the few studies to uphold the corporate outlook of criminal enterprise over recent years was Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000) analysis of the Chicago-based Black Kings' illegal drug distribution accounting ledgers. Levitt and Venkatesh revealed a highly stratified tournament setting in which formal leaders and specialists within the Black Kings gathered the bulk of profits over the many foot soldiers that were taking the high risks selling drugs on the street. While the economics of the Levitt and Venkatesh study has proven to be sound and uncontested, their underlying framework overlooks much of the research that has been developed by organized crime scholars and crime network specialists.

In illegal drug distribution settings, the tightly-knit and vertically-ordered criminal corporation has rarely been found. Contrary to the popularized premise that organizational members have an obvious edge when it comes to criminal enterprise, this obvious assumption often falls flat when examined in research. Quite differently, the criminal enterprise edge is a feature that is more in tune with independent participants that are able to position themselves and pool resources within the core of illegal market activities. The criminal entrepreneurial edge, in short, is the result of networking and not formal organizational features.

Black Kings and Hells Angels

The Black Kings were typical of many sizeable street gangs that emerged from major US cities during the 1970–1990s. The uniqueness of Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000) study within gang research was the new focus that it offered on the economics of gang members' involvement in illegal markets and the competitive strategies and specific career paths that emerged from within the gang. Another unique feature was this study's main data source – the accounting data from the gang's drug-selling activities – which became the starting point for the now provocative question: "Why do drug dealers still live with their moms?" (Levitt and Dubner, 2010). By examining these financial ledgers and adding the contextual knowledge gathered by Venkatesh (2006, 2008) in his more extensive ethnographic research on this gang and the wider community, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) followed a straightforward economic maximization principle and demonstrated the trade-off between drug dealing returns and legitimate work opportunities, while also exploring how such challenging optimal decision-making was also influenced by increased levels of violence during gang wars. As the authors stated, this Chicago gang was consistent with the illegal enterprise outlook that previous researchers identified in their own fieldwork on other American street gangs that generated high revenues in reaction to blocked or unattractive legitimate work opportunities (Hagedorn and Macon, 1988; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992). Levitt and Venkatesh were also consistent with these previous studies in stating that gang members essentially offered its members an edge in illegal drug distribution and other illegal market settings (e.g., prostitution).

While we do not contest the originality and major contributions of the Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) study, we do argue that the case of the Black Kings is a likely outlier in the wider range of research on criminal groups and organizations. Our central concern is with the study's underlying premise that performance and success were regulated within the gang and that status within the gang hierarchy was one of the main factors accounting for the competitive edge in the more general drug distribution setting. We argue that, while membership in a gang or criminal organization may offer an individual a reputational strength, illegal drug trades and other illegal markets are too often compiled by a mix of formal group members and non-members for the latter to be overlooked. The current study thus widens the focus of analysis around a criminal group's participation in an illegal drug market by including participants that are not formally linked to that specific group, but that nevertheless contributed to the ongoing flow of drug distribution.

This is done by examining another illegal drug distribution organization's accounting data from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The case study focuses on the Hells Angels in the province of Quebec (Canada). Avoiding the corporate hierarchy assumption that Levitt and Venkatesh followed and that reflected much of the official discourse surrounding the Quebec Hells Angels allows for alternative factors to be taken into consideration. Essentially, we seek, rather than assume, structure in this drug distribution case. While some participants in an illegal market may prosper because of their

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