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Citation: Densley, James, McLean, Robert, Harding, Simon and Deuchar, Ross (2019) Progression from cafeteria to à la carte offending: Scottish organised crime narratives. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 58 (2). pp. 161-179. ISSN 0265-5527

Published by: Wiley-Blackwell

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12304> <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12304>>

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents insights from qualitative research into organised crime (OC) in Glasgow, Scotland. Interviews were conducted with a sample of 42 current and former offenders with a history of group offending in an attempt to understand variation in the onset, maintenance, and cessation of OC careers. Offending narratives revealed different OC trajectories. Drug dealing was the primary *modus operandi* of OC groups, but some offenders exhibited versatility and progression to wider criminal activity or a mix of illegitimate activity and legitimate business. Implications for future policing strategies and suggested additional research are outlined in response to these findings.

**Keywords:** organised crime; drug dealing; Scotland; criminal capital; narratives.

## **Introduction**

Organised crime (OC) is part of everyday life in many of Scotland's communities, concluded a recent report commissioned by the Scottish Government (Fraser et al. 2018). Based on interviews with practitioners and community stakeholders, the study found diversification in criminal activity within territorially-defined communities and said poverty and inequality were its key drivers. The government's report thus filled a gap in knowledge relating to the broader community experiences of organised crime in Scotland. Absent from the report, however, were the voices of the offenders embedded within organised criminal networks, and actively engaged in OC. No one asked them what they did and how 'organised' their criminal activities really were.

The current study aims to move beyond the prevailing perceptions of police, practitioners, and community service providers, and instead engage with the voices of the offenders themselves. In so doing, we present narratives of OC, analysed in a life-course perspective (Farrington 2003), that reveal pathways from amateur general practice to professional specialty in crime. Narratives have always been central to criminology (e.g. Shaw 1930; Sykes and Matza 1957), but in recent years a truly narrative criminology has been characterised as an 'emergent paradigm' (Presser 2009: 178). Based on multiple qualitative interviews with 42 organised criminals based in Glasgow, the current study provides information regarding the lived experience of OC in Scotland, including its origins in unstructured street gang offending, thus identifying gaps in knowledge and offering suggestions for future research and policy.

## **Literature Review**

### **How Crime is Organised**

Organised crime is a broad and at times ambiguous concept (Von Lampe 2016), but in recent years scholars have settled on a definition of OC as a productive activity, involving the provision of illicit goods and services (Varese 2010). OC *produce* and *trade* illegal drugs, for example. Another aspect of OC is the *regulation* of illicit production and exchange. In this view, OC attempts to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully (Varese 2010). The supply of private protection is one example (Nozick 1974; Tilly 1985; Gambetta 1993), whereby OC seeks to bring order to the underworld (Schelling 1971). In the United Kingdom, Campana and Varese (2018) found that most OC activities were conducted in the absence of governance-type OC, but illegal governance did still exist; a finding consistent with other studies in high crime areas in Britain, including London (Densley 2013) and Glasgow (McLean et al. 2018).

Research on OC, for obvious reasons, overlaps with research on group offending, a subject criminologists have long been interested in (Shaw and McKay 1931). Debates focus on the convergence and divergence of ‘gangs’ and OC, namely the threshold level of organisation needed for gangs to become OC and what criminal activity should be included in the definition (see Bouchard and Spindler 2010). Research indicates gang organisation exists on a continuum (Densley 2014), with ‘instrumental-rational’ (organised) groups at one extreme, and ‘informal-diffuse’ (disorganised) groups on the other (Decker et al. 1998, 2008). For this reason, organisational structure is largely a *descriptor* rather than a *definer* of gangs and OC, provided a group satisfies a minimal threshold of members and maintains a collective identity (Klein and Maxson 2006). Also, for this reason, some more organised gangs constitute OC groups (Decker and Pyrooz 2013; Densley 2012a)—the two categories are not mutually exclusive. Scholars, in turn, have emphasised the idea of ‘disorganised’ crime (Ruggiero and South 1997; Hobbs 2001) and how criminal actors are differentially embedded within criminal networks.

Group activity, like group structure, also exists on a continuum. Murder is distinct from ‘hanging out’, which is the gang’s most common pastime (Klein and Maxson 2006). Still, one of the most established findings in criminology is that gang members commit crime more than their non-gang counterparts (Thornberry et al. 2003; Pyrooz et al. 2016). Gang members are known to engage in ‘cafeteria style’ offending (Klein 1995: 132), seldom specialising in a single form of crime. This has been true since the first gang studies. As Thrasher (1927: 3) observed, gang crimes can include ‘truancy to serious crimes, disturbances of the peace from street brawls to race riots’. But ‘specialty gangs’ and cliques that concentrate solely on drug sales, auto theft, or burglary, have been reported and bring the gang closer to OC (Klein and Maxson 2006).

Von Lampe (2016: 74) identifies three main categories of organised criminal activity: (a) *market-based crimes* pertaining to the provision of illegal goods and services; (b) *predatory crimes*, which entail the exploitation of others; and (c) *illegal-governance crimes*, such as protection, that involve the exercise of power to regulate the behaviour of subordinates. Von Lampe (2016: 80) explains that differences between these ‘have implications for the way crimes are committed, which in turn, may have implications for how offenders are organised and how crimes and offenders fit in the broader social context.’

### **Organised Crime in Scotland**

In Scotland, OC presents primarily in the form of drug supply (Densley et al. 2018; Scottish Government 2008, 2009, 2013). However, Police Scotland recognise that organised criminals are involved in other forms of crime and about half of all OC groups exhibit versatility in their criminal offenses (Scottish Government 2016). Taken as a whole, these activities include, but are not limited to, fraud, forgery, money laundering, organised theft, counterfeit goods, muscle for hire, smuggling, human trafficking, and cybercrime. An

estimated 60% of organised criminals also mix illegitimate activity with legitimate business, including licensed premises, restaurants, building/construction companies, garage repairs, taxis, care homes, child care, nail bars, car washes, funeral care, catering, hospitality, and cleaning services. Over 720 such businesses have been identified by Police Scotland (Scottish Government 2016).

Scotland has a long history of ‘organised’ group offending (Davies 2013), particularly in and around the country’s largest city, Glasgow. An estimated 70% of the country’s OC is situated in the region, with over 65% of OC activity directly related to drug supply (Scottish Government, 2015). Glasgow is regularly associated with urban crime ‘families’ and ‘firms’ in media outlets (Findlay 2012). These groups are often seen as offering a route to financial reward that is very appealing to some people, particularly young men experiencing marginalisation and seeking respect (Deuchar 2009, 2013, 2018). Yet, the organisation and influence of these groups is often overstated and in reality, they are far less cohesive and reliant on kinship than the ‘family’ designation implies.

Glasgow also has more ‘gangs’ (McLean 2018) or ‘young teams’ (Smith and Bradshaw 2005) than London (Harding 2014). These gangs, which engage in sporadic territorial violence as a means of expressing constrained masculinities, are well documented in the ‘post-industrial’ era (Fraser 2015). In some cases, they act as peripheral groups for projecting criminal trajectories into more serious forms of (organised) crime (McLean 2018).

Prior research has documented how reputations for violence earned in gangs could lead to opportunities for employment in the illicit economy (Holligan et al. 2016), and how gangs formed part of the same street culture that more organised criminal enterprise in Scotland grew out of (McLean 2018; McLean et al. 2018). In some cases, gangs provided a pathway into more organised forms of criminality (Fraser 2015). As McLean (2018), argues

organised criminals seldom arise from nowhere, as supported by (auto)biographical accounts (Boyle 1977), but rather harness and refine criminality over sustained durations, often with trusted co-offenders. To better understand these criminal trajectories, the current study looks at the lived experience of OC in Scotland, from the perspective of the offenders themselves.

### **The Current Study: The Narratives of Organised Criminals**

In recent years, criminology taken a ‘narrative turn’ (Harding et al. 2016; Presser 2016; Presser and Sandberg 2015) and narrative criminology has gained considerable purchase in the work on persistent offenders (Carlsson 2013; Steffensmeir and Ulmer 2005) and desistance from crime (Harding et al. 2016; Maruna 2001; Stone 2016). Narrative criminology takes a constitutive view of narrative as shaping experience, rather than as an objective record of events or a subjective understanding of those experiences (Presser 2009). Narratives are central to individual identity construction (Presser 2016), to the extent that people act according to their narrative identities (Maruna 2001) and even the ‘lies’ they tell themselves (and others) are indicative of underlying motivations (Sandberg, 2010). Narratives capture both agency and structure (Fleetwood 2016), thus they are an important tool for understanding individual pathways to offending, the lived experience of offending, and, for ex-offenders, the process of desistance—central tenants of life-course criminology (see Farrington 2003).

Existing research has focused largely on the narratives of incarcerated populations and the ways in which institutional settings shape the narratives. For example, cognitive behavioural theory in prison can create a common discourse about criminality (e.g. Fader 2013) and prisons offer a conversion narrative for inmates who want to create a new identity (Maruna et al. 2006). The current study is different because it is focused on active offenders



narrating their lives in community settings. It illuminates the different ways in which people with an offending pre-history in ‘gangs’ or groups then transition into OC.

### **Method**

Data were gathered between 2012 and 2016 as part of a broader qualitative study of crime in Glasgow, Scotland (see BLIND). Participant criteria was defined as: (a) previous experience of gang or group offending; (b) previous engagement in practices identified by Police Scotland as serious and organised crime, that is, the provision of illegal goods and services for profit (Scottish Government 2015); and (c) aged 16 years and older. We acknowledge that focus on participants embedded in gangs and OC is a source of bias, but this is a unique ‘hard-to-reach’ sample population (Bhopal and Deuchar 2016). Frontline practitioners attached to key outreach projects acted as initial gatekeepers, who, in turn, helped identify potential participants who met the set criteria. This yielded a sample of 12 ex-offenders. Yet this sample size was considered small and possibly skewed, thus interviewees were asked to recommend potential participants meeting the set criteria. This snowball sampling technique yielded 30 additional participants. This resulted in a total of 42 participants being interviewed.

In total, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 interviewees: 36 men and 8 women, all were aged between 16 and 35 years. All respondents described themselves as indigenous to Scotland, although not all were white. In addition, all were raised in Glasgow ‘schemes’, characterised by high levels of deprivation (see Miller 2015). In-depth life history interviews were conducted to capture narratives of offending. Life history interviews are common in the study of offenders (e.g., Giordano 2012), in part because they progress chronologically to explore how the past, present, and future shape individual identity and involvement in crime (McAdams 1993). The format allows interviewees to convey, unrestricted, their distinct subjective experience of offending, in their

own voice. However, narrative theory papers often need to unfold over long detailed quotes with considerable background context-setting. Owing to space constraints, we use smaller excerpts and focus on generalised patterns that came out of the narratives. For instance, participants reflected upon criminal trajectories arising from childhood and it was found they all shared one thing in common—prior or current involvement in drug supply.

While participants had engaged in a range of criminal activities, all had been involved in drug supply at some point in time, at varying levels. Drug supply can therefore be used as an example to indicate the level of harm posed and degree of OC activity in which participants were involved. Despite a considerable range in the quantity/bulk that participants purchased and distributed, it was found that all had prior experience of engaging in retail-level supply. Twenty-six males and three female participants went on to engage in wholesale practices. Seven of these participants progressed onto importation and trafficking of drugs into the country at some stage of their criminal career. Heroin, cocaine, and to a lesser extent ecstasy, were the most common Class A drugs sold, with over 80% of the sample doing so. Cannabis was the most popular Class B drug, and all study participants had sold it at some time, but amphetamines, barbiturates, and other drugs were also discussed.

Whenever possible, multiple interviews were scheduled for participants. These ranged between one to five interviews with each participant. On average, interviews lasted about one hour. Almost all interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, although three interviews were group interviews. Whenever feasible, data were triangulated through discussions with other interviewees or participants voluntarily providing corroborating evidence. Interviews were recorded via audio devices before being transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically (Creswell 1994).

Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's home institution. Owing to a focus on crime, participants were given an information sheet and made verbally aware of the

researcher's obligation to report any scheduled offences. As such, when discussing criminal behavior, interviewees either spoke in the third person or agreed not to disclose anything that *only* they knew. Identifying details of criminal activity (specific dates, addresses, and victim profiles, for example) were also omitted. As a result, we really only learned about things that others knew and could have reported if they were so inclined. All research participants gave informed consent but for reasons of confidentiality, interviewees are identifiable only by pseudonyms and some contextual details have been changed.

## **Findings**

### **The Early Years: Group Offending, but not OC**

Interviewees reflected on growing up in and around Glasgow's depressed housing schemes, where it was not uncommon for youth to form 'gangs' or to associate with delinquent peers. However, their narratives revealed that much of the activity in such groups was recreational and non-delinquent. People simply 'hung-out', 'had a laugh', and socialised—a finding consistent with previous studies of gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006). At the same time, however, the narratives highlighted how such groups routinely engaged in recreational violence around issues of territoriality with other like groups. Vandalism and other types of anti-social behaviour were by-products of this activity. Further, our interviewees reported occasional participation in acquisitive crimes like street robbery:

We would get the troops together and go up town (city centre) for a barney.... You'd make a tidy (good) wee earner [in addition] .... [apart from fighting other gangs] we would wander around the main streets, usually where the old [nightclubs] would be. That way everyone going there would have to pass you .... We would rob them [as they] made their way [to the nightclub]. Wasn't hard, cops and adults never got involved either, was good. – Robert

Despite being more of a collective activity, interviewees described robbery as being largely opportunistic and not well planned. For example, Robert said he and his 'gang' would only

engage in robbery as an addendum to seeking fights with other gangs. They would situate themselves *en route* a popular destination for nightclub goers. Robert elaborated on how victims were selected, who was involved, and how stolen goods were distributed:

We were already up the toon for [a fight] so everyone was usually tooled up (carrying weapons) and mad wi' it (intoxicated). We would [encourage] each other to do shit. We didn't care ... We would look for stragglers, or goons (individuals perceived as weak), saying that sometimes cunts might just have had something you wanted. Would stop them and say "gies a pound", but we'd take everything .... Never did it to birds (females), but if we had birds with us then they might .... Anything I got I kept. Sometimes I might share what I stole, but everyone just got in a frenzy and would be robbing people all over the street. – Robert

As Robert suggested, group 'submergence' (e.g., LeBon 1960), in combination with alcohol use, encouraged delinquent behaviour. But again, this was not 'organised' crime in so much that it was irregular and opportunistic and stolen goods were not shared, but rather retained by the individuals who acquired them. Still, some interviewees discussed more serious property crimes such as breaking into cars and joyriding, or burglarizing houses and selling stolen property:

[I recall] breaking into about three houses a night at one stage when I was at my worst. Wasn't always houses but. Might...be a shed or a car, you know what I mean mate .... I did keep most of the stuff [I stole]. Sometimes sold shit, get me .... I didn't really do it for money, aye. I liked the buzz it gave me .... [I] always did it wi' my best mate if it was a house. If it was a car radio or shit in the [car] boot, would just be me or whoever I was with. – Christopher

As Christopher stated, residential burglary may have provided a good income or other material gains, but his motive was primarily thrill-seeking, something noted in other studies of this crime (Katz 1988; Wright and Decker 1994). Again, such activity was rarely carried out alone, but it was far from 'organised'. Christopher would usually involve his best friend,

and others like him described working in pairs or small groups, mostly so that someone might 'keep the edgy' by acting as a look out.

### **Moving On Up: Drug Sales and Criminal Capital**

Only in drug sales did the narratives reveal true levels of organisation, but it never started that way. For instance, Brock, a former offender (and one of our gatekeepers) who was a self-proclaimed 'born again Christian' now working voluntarily with a church-based outreach programme to support offenders, described the way in which he initially began dealing to fund his own growing drug habit that unravelled over time:

I loved drugs, you know what I mean? Like some people pure love drugs and end up hooked man, you can tell the type, know aye ... I [had previously] smoked weed. Like most of my mates at that time, know, was what folk done ... probably when I started taking swedgers (ecstasy) I [offended more regularly].... cause you're fleeing know, you're thinking you're invincible ... I had always been well known as well [so] just took advantage of it, know man, wasn't really thinking. – Brock

Careers in drugs sales typically begin with informal 'social supply' to friends and associates and, in some cases, 'minimally commercial supply' on the individual level (Coomber & Moyle 2014):

We meet up down the woods to take buckets .... People would take turns getting the [cannabis]. I used to get it from [an elder sibling], but they (my peers) had to pay me back.... or sometimes we would all chip in. I got it but, so didn't pay. – Matthew

[As a teenager] I didn't really sell weed, like how the cops think people deal, know.... [was] more like my dad sold weed and gave me some. Him and my uncle (X) had a grow going on.... He gave me the scraps basically (laughs) .... I'd share it wi' me and my mates, [but] would sell the rest off, know, on tick (credit), or to pay for stuff I wanted (e.g., clothing, shoes, etc.), kind of like trading. – Mitchell

Both Matthew and Mitchell went on to serve prison sentences following high-level drug seizures by police, thus they quickly graduated up from their initial forays into the drugs game. At first, as suppliers, only their personal expenses were covered, but over time they learned that drugs could be sold for profit or traded directly for other goods and services, laying a foundation for future criminal ventures. Phil explained why this was the case:

Most of the guys I know punt drugs around. It's easy cash, steady as well .... people always want [drugs] and you're no having to get involved in crazy shit to get hold of [drugs]. If you have a steady source, you're sorted .... Can buy and sell like you would wi' Asda, or fucking Makro. ... Don't get me wrong; other things might pay better. ... Aye drug supply isn't as [profitable] as everyone [assumes] it to be. Doing well in a good trade (e.g., plumber) would prob's get you no' far off what most the middle guys are earning, without risking getting the jail and shit .... [but] you need to actually graft (work hard). [Dealing drugs] is eas[ier] 'cause the customers come to you mate. – Phil

Demand for drugs in Glasgow was high, agreed all participants in this study. And with such a steady flow of customers, it was easier to enter the drugs game than it was to gain meaningful legitimate employment, especially when people had existing 'criminally exploitable ties' (Von Lampe 2016: 110):

At [16 years old] I felt I didn't have any other options really, [Having just] done a stint in [prison].... [I] had a criminal record.... Was struggling [to secure legitimate work] .... My pal's dad was [selling] Pure (high grade cocaine) back then .... Wasn't that easy to get .... he (Donnie's pal) knew I was struggling .... Had a wee boy to provide for .... [My pal] came [to speak to] me, asked if I wanted to [work alongside him], sell[ing drugs]. Said "aye" .... Took off quick .... A few thousand a week, cash right in your hand, is big money at that age. Hard to stop once you start. – Donnie

'[Grew] up wi' the boys .... [We] were muckers. They had my back ..... Had fuck all growing up ..... we were all in the same boat .... like "fuck this shit, let's just sell the smack (heroin)", that's where the money is at, fuck it, who cares .... My dad and my mate's mum were [heroin addicts] anyways .... Fucked up thinking back but, [be]cause we were destroying our own [community]. Fuck sake man, I even became

my dad's dealer .... [We built] good connections ..... After a few years, we had flooded [our local community] with [heroin]. – Mick

The statements above outline a common theme that emerged throughout the interviews, that having been raised in and around marginalized communities and other criminals, many of whom were family members, participants had ready access to illegitimate opportunities (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin 1960). However, for some progressing from social supply to more regular drug dealing from a permanent location came with considerable risk that had to be planned for in advance, as Brock made reference to in his own narrative:

[I sold heroin] from my flat in [X] Street mate, just above the old grocers, remember it aye .... One wi' the double door that opened out ... I had a good set up .... camera on the door. Replaced the door as well with the big metal fucker, know man, the one with the double locks. You would have seen them if you had went to Stevie's. He got the same kit .... [I] would take the bags to the door, always had to [the customers to] give the code, then slip through the letter box ... aye, one time a cunt tried to put a sawn off through the letter box, I always stood to the right but when putting it through in case someone like grabbed me or shite know, para isn't always bad - Brock

Further, Phil emphasized that, while drug supply brought in a decent and steady income, most mid-level dealers would supplement their earnings with additional criminal activities:

Aye, like I said but, [some]times [you have to] do other shit for cash if you are hard up but. – Phil

William articulated how his good name or 'rep' in the criminal underworld was rewarded with other criminal opportunities that incurred some risk but paid well considering how little time and effort was exerted in their commission:

You get a rep[utation] if you're doing well for yourself .... I had already had a rep from fighting before .... The guy I was buying my gear (drugs) from asked if I wanted to do an earner on the side as well, know, extra [income] .... Was just to collect money that he was owed, know what I'm saying, pure fucking easy .... Most times it

went fine, just gave people a wee warning .... [Sometimes though, I] had to stab guys.  
– William

While William leveraged his ‘criminal capital’ (McCarthy and Hagan 2001) to engage in debt collection, other interviewees participated in what Klein (1995) called ‘cafeteria style’ offending, as Ian and Craig explained:

You just get known man, don’t you? Your name gets about .... [I had been] punting (drug dealing) for years, done alright from it .... A few cunts messed around wi’ us once and got done right in .... People know no[w not] to fuck about .... That got us heavy known .... My pal got the jail for [that incident] .... [not long after which] a few older guys we spoke [with regularly] suggested doing some drop offs for them. Was a canter (easy) .... if we got stopped [from police] it might have been different. – Ian

We mostly shifted coc[aine], ecstasy, some weed, types of amphetamines, well anything really, anything we got passed our way .... wasn’t all we done. [I] wouldn’t say that. Get bored, don’t you, always wanting to make a faster buck here or there, aye .... getting older, [we were] on the scene a lot .... Tried armed robbery, was too fucked up man .... Tried [fraud involving third party delivery services] .... [was] a good earner for a [while] .... [Also sold cigarettes] we’d got [smuggled] in, well no’ us directly like, more through a guy, for a bit .... [carried out false] insurance claims as well, know, with the mobiles .... Just meet people in this game that are into all sorts. End up giving it a try and see if it works for you, don’t you? – Craig

Ian failed to specifically identify what objects or items were being ‘dropped’ exactly, but firearms are likely because when asked to elaborate, Ian implied that a ‘shoot out’ with police would have ensued. Ian did explain that the opportunity to transport valuable commodities within the criminal world only came about because he was ‘known’ for prior delinquency and a particular incident in which rivals ‘got done right in’. Another example that illustrates that latent criminal structures create ‘criminally exploitable ties’ (Von Lampe 2016: 110). In addition, Craig pointed out that his own gang experimented with a number of criminal ventures, all very different, as they sought to secure income, establish a reputation, and experiment with other types of criminality which may have proved to be more profitable.



## **From Generalist to Specialist: When Crime Gets Organised**

As Craig and Ian said, criminal opportunity often arises from time spent ‘on the scene’, but also by virtue of a change in the level of group organisation:

The boys do get more sophisticated in what they do, yeah. [I] would say that. Over time, they may start with selling drugs, but quickly are involved in lots of things .... Some of the stories they tell, I think “how did they even get into that?” – Stacey

It’s like playing football, mate. More they played it, [the] more they get experience of their position .... They also get chances to try out new positions as well but. – James

The above statements by practitioners Stacey and James imply that, in agreement with (ex)offenders themselves, while more gang organisation brings more criminal opportunities, realising these opportunities tends to bring about an increase in gang organisation. The process is reciprocal. Both causes feed into one another. James’ sports analogy regarding the acquisition of specialist skills is important here. James states that entry into the criminal underworld, aka ‘the game’, often comes through the most common and culturally practiced crime type: in Scotland, this is drug supply. Over time, those ‘playing the game’ gain a firm understanding of how the rules work and how best to gain advantage over other players. Yet with time, and a holistic understanding of the game, experienced players will be asked by others to try out ‘new positions’. These new positions operate on the same principles as the game overall, but they are unique. While playing these new positions, some criminals find that they are in fact well adapted to them. Others learn they are not. In the latter case, they reject other roles as unknown to take up another position or, in most cases, their original position; the one they are most familiar with: drug supply.

Interviewees with the longest criminal careers had typically specialised in drug sales, as Stuart, a convicted ex-offender involved in a highly-publicised drug seizure, explained:

Was purely the moving of goods (drugs), nothing else. I had been doing this in one form or another, as far back as I can remember .... Got a record for some daft crap when I was a teenager like most [people] .... Fights, stealing cars .... I eventually just concentrated on moving stuff .... I never sold directly, too risky, no' worth my time. The one time I got involved [directly], I got arrested. – Stuart

Stuart stated that he had been involved in the supply of drugs since childhood. While his teenage years saw him become involved in what he now considers 'daft crap', Stuart moved on to concentrate solely on the supply of illegal drugs, at which point, other activities, even retail-level dealing (which necessitates direct handling of drugs), were 'too risky' and no longer 'worth [his] time'. This proved to be true because the one time Stuart handled drugs directly, he was arrested and subsequently incarcerated.

Experience of drug supply and avoiding police detection, as well as the financial profits to be earned via the high-end movement of drugs, were both factors which steered Stuart and those he worked alongside to become specialised and focused on one specific activity. Dennis expanded on the need for specialisation of criminal skills and activities:

Like anyone who does anything, do it enough and they become an expert. Same wi' us. Bringing [drugs] in[to Britain] takes heavy efforts, you know .... Can't be running fingers in every pie going, just get nowhere. – Dennis

Dennis argued that in order to advance to the higher echelons of OC, it is highly advantageous to become specialised in one or two areas, as opposed to having 'fingers in every pie'. This would only lead to a diffuse effort of energy being expended, consequently resulting in 'get[ting] nowhere'. A sizeable number of the interviewees alluded to the fact that specialising in drug dealing often involved renting apartments from associates to grow cannabis or selling harder drugs from those who were willing to allow their homes to become 'crack houses':

Sure, I got asked to get involved [in a cannabis grow] with [gang A] ... they had been doing well. Like gettin' rented flats, more from [associate landlord] ... put up a couple of partition walls, false walls and do a few grows.... In every room... [except] living room and kitchen. Windows [and curtains] in them rooms would be open.... So cunts aren't gettin' pure suspicious, being nosey, aye... rent [the homes] for a bit, [then] move.... – Greg

Well, basically [Brother C] or [Brother A] usually go scope the place first and if it is cool then they start dealing. ... you get a feel for the place. — Mary

While Greg indicated that cannabis growing could be done within rented accommodation by drawing upon cooperative ties with landlords, Mary's kinship ties with her brothers supported the opportunity to collaborate on finding a secure operational base for consolidating specialisms in drug dealing proper. However, drug dealing was not the only area of speciality among the sample. Other interviewees got involved in fraud, false insurance claims, and money laundering. Our interviewees also talked about other organised criminals involved in protection rackets and modern day slavery and prostitution rings:

Most of the people I know are in the drugs trade in one way or another. Don't think most people would disagree with that mate. I have known of a few guys that do other stuff, like that's their field mate, get me .... [One group], right fucking hard bastards from [Housing estate in Greater Glasgow], have a heavy rep[utation] man [for sorting] shit [out, with disputes], know .... Like, take care of problem people. – Gordon

Met a boy that [friend X] introduced me to. Guy seemed sound enough. No problem .... Then my mate turns round [after we left his company] and says "that's [name]". I was like "fuck man you might want to have said, 'cause I'm slagging the cunt off and all that (laughs)" .... [The person in question] runs a prostitution ring up [greater Glasgow area] .... rumours his mob are into human trafficking, that shit .... working with [oversees OCG X]. They cunts don't fuck about. – Richard

Nah man, I was never involved personally, only sorted out a few punters causing hassle for [censored name's] girls (escorts), that's it .... [I will] help a mate out .... Up to him what he is into .... [but prostitution] just isn't my scene. – Alex

Many of our interviewees who could be considered as being involved in OC, also blurred the legal and illegal spheres via the (co)ownership of legitimate businesses. For example:

The [prosecutors] said I made six figure sums on a regular basis from “the illegal supply of narcotics” in the high court. That was bullshit mate .... I had three businesses. They all brought in good income .... Aye, fair enough, the first property I might have started out with dough (money) from drugs. After that, but, most, aye most, the cash was honest, mate .... Fucking judge was having none of that. They fucking [label] people. – Dennis

As Dennis said, legal businesses would often be purchased with income secured through illegal business. However, while participants spoke of desisting from crime to become ‘legit’ business owners, or knowing of, or having worked with, others who did the same, greed, declining financial revenues, ‘owing favours’ from their prior criminal life, or attacks from still active rivals, more often than not combined to pull people back into criminal activity:

Once you’re in, you’re in. You don’t get out of this life that easy .... I tried to leave all that rubbish a few times. I had a good thing going with a couple of tanning salons I bought, well co-owned wi’ others .... Enemies get jealous but if they see you doing well .... A few of my premises ended up being vandalised .... I know who fucking did it. Bastards. – Steve

Former offender Dale, who made his initial wealth from drug sales before purchasing and operating a small, yet successful, construction company, added:

Cunts (the public and police) might have been saying I was doing this or that (criminal activity) .... [but] years went by without me being involved in fuck all man. I wasn’t a crook man. I always had wanted to be straight .... My company was doing pure well .... [The economic] recession fucked that .... Still have bills know .... [eventually] I got back into the game (selling drugs) .... No[t] that I wanted to be. I planned to leave after I got enough money to get me back up and running. – Dale

Life in OC created a dichotomous position for many interviewees. For Steve and Dale, OC was always means to an end—enough money to leave a life of crime and go ‘straight’. But

the ‘ties that bind’ were too strong (Pyrooz et al. 2014). Only in Brock’s case did we find an example of genuine desistance that had come about as a result of religious conversion. In accordance with wider insights into the impact of religious and spiritual engagement on offenders’ lifestyles (Maruna et al., 2006; Deuchar, 2018), we found that Brock’s narrative included the emergence of a ‘redemption script’ where he expressed remorse but also had found meaning in his experience of crime in relation to his current role in helping and supporting others:

Even though I might not do the things I [once did] anymore, I certainly don’t regret them.... I’m no’ happy wi’ them, but no regrets.... how can I? If I never went through those times I would never have become who I am now .... [nor] could I use them experiences to help others who are in the position I [once] was - Brock

## Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the lived experience of OC in Glasgow from the perspective of the offenders themselves. It is important to recognise the small-scale nature of this research and therefore to be cautious about applicability claims. Still, the current study adds depth to an emerging literature on the nature and extent of OC in Scotland (e.g., Fraser et al. 2018). The narratives indicate a differential progression into OC. In other words, people ‘progress’ to the next level in different ways and, in some cases, the next level is not always ‘up’. These different trajectories into OC were bounded by issues of time and age, experience and networks, opportunities and preferences.

Many interviews described a *linear* progression or lateral movement from street gangs and neighbourhood crime into OC, characterised by the sense that a life of crime was inevitable because it was all anyone ever knew or had available to them. However, only some people became embedded in OC and got closer to its core and that was often predicated on their *de facto* embeddedness in existing criminal networks, which served as a transfer market

of sorts. A minority leveraged existing ‘violence capital’ to *go in hard*, becoming a sought after fixer or hired muscle as they got more skilled in violence, but they remained at the periphery of OC. Others followed the rabbit down the hole to *go in deep*, experiencing submersion, but not necessary success in OC. Still others narrated an *elective* progression. They had ‘criminal capital’ in the bank or instant trust credit owing to kinship ties (see Densley 2012b) and because of this they were able to be more selective about the type of crime they did and with whom they did it. Further, if they had skills to ‘sell’ on the open market, adult criminals would cover their start-up costs, not unlike venture capital firms in the legitimate sphere.

Some early entrants into OC *go in wide* and participate in a range of different types of criminal activity. This can be seen as a rather desperate move to make money fast—a scattergun ‘try anything’ kind of approach. However, after finding themselves spread too thin and out of their comfort zone, specialisation becomes a form of risk mitigation. Only if an OC group becomes fully established with viable networks of skilled participants does diversification work to sustain the business model. Then, diversification takes on a different meaning, and beyond criminal diversification it entails holding some legitimate business interests and washing money from illegal activity through legal books.

Illicit drug sales were found to be the primary *modus operandi* of organised criminals, which is consistent with recent Scottish Government-funded research (Fraser et al. 2018). This was for a number of reasons, including an extension of early experience with social supply, the social aspects which accompany drug supply and use, and access to pre-existing crime networks. However, there is some selection bias here in the data, which is a limitation and means that more ‘hidden’ crimes like human trafficking remain precisely that. Still, it is safe to conclude that OC has its roots in the group offending networks that engage in small scale (social) drug supply and, in some cases, acquisitive crimes such as robbery. Future

studies thus are encouraged to take seriously such lower level criminal activity because our research suggests it has implications for later criminal trajectories.

Embeddedness within criminal networks was also important for progression into crimes beyond drug dealing, including armed robbery, fraud, and debt collection. Versatility in crime can be attributed to a combination of factors, including new associations, a growing criminal reputation, experimentation, boredom, and the fact that with physical and intellectual maturity comes the ability to compete with and potentially displace already established adult criminals and criminal groupings. Yet while not all activities were financially profitable, such as those actions associated with hyper-masculine violence, these actions could actually prove to be profitable in terms of social and cultural capital acquired (e.g., Deuchar 2009; Deuchar and Holligan 2010). This capital in turn could enable continued criminal progression.

Such findings would suggest that regardless of the niche within the given market that organised criminals may operate, it is one in which they are often specialists, or where they exert an effort to be perceived as experts. The narratives indicate that the most serious or 'successful' organised criminals would eventually reject cafeteria style offending, in particular crimes without financial rewards, and accept a life of *à la carte* crime. As offenders became highly specialised in one criminal trade, other criminal activity such as fraud, tax evasion, fraudulent insurance claims, etc., simply became a means to conceal and protect the primary business from outsiders. These types of crimes were more likely to arise, as opposed to violent crimes, because many organised criminals tended to balance illegitimate work with (co)ownership of legitimate businesses, whether evidenced in legal documentation or not, because they were often held in the name of fringe players and loose associates less likely to attract suspicion from police.

This brings us to some implications for research and practice. Having identified different routes into OC, further research is needed to understand who is more likely to enter in a given way and why. Are some routes into OC closed off for some people? What are the intervention points? Do we need different forms and types of enforcement and intervention for different types of progression? Which of these different routes is associated with the greatest risk of violent offending or victimization? Is the repertoire of criminal activity which different types of OC engage in determined by these different types of progression and entry?

The Scottish Police Authority (SPA 2013: 1) estimates OC costs the Scottish economy approximately £2 billion per annum, and has highlighted the need to identify specific ‘roles and responsibilities performed by selected individuals’ so that tactics can be tailored to deliver the most ‘appropriate and proportionate policing response’. In its ten-year strategy, *Policing 2026*, Police Scotland (2016: 22) recognised that the force faced considerable demand in the years ahead in respect of ‘investigations into serious crimes’, thus it needed to ‘scale and develop’ (25) its capabilities to meet new demands in this area. The Serious Organised Crime Taskforce (SOCT) is one component of this effort, focused on four distinct elements: *diverting* individuals (particularly young people) from engaging in OC; *detering* OC; *disrupting* their activities; and *detecting* their members by boosting policing capacity and improving coordination to give them ‘no place to hide’ (SPA 2013: 3).

The insights in this paper could provide more depth to the existing knowledge-base of the SOCT and the ongoing strategic policy discussions by senior officers within Police Scotland, the SPA and wider partner agencies involved in tackling OC via the Scottish Crime Campus. The findings could hold the capacity to support Detectives and members of wider agencies with their ongoing vision to dismantle drug supply networks by providing them with a new evidence-base. This evidence-base suggests the need for a multi-pronged approach where organised criminals are targeted but where supportive, desistance-centred interventions



are also focused on minor offenders within local communities which avoid the tendency for them to become criminalised.

By focusing on neighbourhoods with high numbers of reported incidents involving young men engaging in street-level group offending networks and focusing their energy on vandalism, anti-social behaviour, territorial violence and/or acquisitive crime such as street robbery, mentoring interventions most likely need to become targeted on educating these individuals about the impact of violence and avaricious (albeit) low-level crime while also actively *diverting* them from the allure of the drug market as a by-product of gang evolution and criminal capital.

Conversely, in areas where offending behaviour has evolved into the social supply of drugs, Police Scotland's focus may need to be more on the need to *deter* young men from becoming more deeply immersed in OC through working with local partners and preventing drug trading growing into enterprise and governance (Densley, 2014). Finally, where patterns of gang activity have evidently become more organised and there are increased incidents of drug dealing proper alongside (in some cases) crimes including money laundering or online fraud, this may indicate an increased presence of OC. Detectives will thus clearly require an emphasis on the need to *deter* OC by supporting private, public and third sector organisations to protect themselves and each other; to *detect* and prosecute those involved in OC; and make a concerted effort to *disrupt* OC.

It is also clear that further research is needed into the extent to and ways in which young people can be extracted from illegitimate opportunity structures that exist in disadvantaged neighbourhoods through interventions that may include psycho-social and also spiritual components, as a means of enabling law enforcement and wider practitioners to more effectively improve the safety and wellbeing of people, places and communities in Scotland

(Police Scotland 2016). It is hoped that the research contained within this paper will help to stimulate such research.

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