



How 'Outlaws' React: a Case Study on the Reactions to the Dutch Approach to Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

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Abstract

The impact of organized crime measures remains largely unknown. Moreover, for practical and ethical reasons, the perspectives of the individuals who are subjected to organized crime policies are often not included in research. Based on semi-structured interviews with 24 current members of the Dutch Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC), this study fills this knowledge gap by examining how HAMC members reacted to the multi-agency approach to outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) in the Netherlands. The results of this study illustrate that the reactions of HAMC members can be divided into four categories: (1) conforming, (2) adapting, (3) resisting, and (4) continuing. The analysis furthermore shows that a variety of different reactions to the OMCG approach coexist within the same club, charter, and even within the same individual member. These findings indicate that crime policies can spark different, sometimes contradicting reactions, within a group that from the outside appears to be a uniform and top-down coordinated organization. Future evaluation studies should take the multifaceted nature of reactions to crime policies into consideration.

Keywords Outlaw motorcycle gangs · Hells Angels MC · Organized crime policies · Multi-agency approach · Evaluation

Introduction

Organized crime is a growing societal problem that causes serious damage to society, ranging from economic costs, health problems, and a negative impact on victims (Levi et al., 2013). Many European countries, such as Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands have,

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therefore, taken measures to prevent and combat organized criminal activities. In the past, organized crime measures primarily relied on criminal law. More recently, however, countries have placed a greater emphasis on civil and administrative law measures (Nelen & Huisman, 2008; Spapens et al., 2015). In this so-called multi-agency approach, various actors, particularly at a local level, raise barriers to hinder and frustrate organized criminal activities (Van Ruitenburg, 2020).

Although various measures have been introduced to address organized crime, the impact of these measures remains largely unknown. The few studies that examined the consequences of organized crime measures predominantly focused on agent-level output measures, such as the number of arrests and closed establishments and the amount of drugs seizures, leaving questions regarding the impact of and context behind the measures unanswered (Castle, 2008; Nelen & Huisman, 2008; Pardal et al., 2023; Snippe et al., 2021). Furthermore, due to practical and ethical challenges, prior research often lacks the perspectives of the individuals who are subjected to organized crime policies (Abraham et al., 2021; Nelen, 2008). However, this perspective may provide novel insights into how crime measures impact the behaviour of the individuals involved.

The present study fills this knowledge gap by examining how members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) reacted to the Dutch multi-agency approach to clubs that are labelled as ‘outlaw motorcycle gang’ (OMCG).¹ Confronted with a growing governmental concern regarding inter-club violence, members’ involvement in serious and organized crime, and the clubs’ untouchable image, in 2012, the Dutch minister of Justice and Security announced a multi-pronged approach to OMCGs. The aim of this multi-agency approach is to hinder members’ criminal behaviour, discourage membership, and address the untouchable image of the clubs by, among other things, focusing on the criminal prosecution of individual members, closing club-houses, and prohibiting OMCG-related events (House of Representatives, 2011–2012, 29 911, nr. 59).

Although the Dutch policy to OMCGs has been around for over a decade, the consequences of this approach are still poorly understood, also in other countries (Dowling & Morgan, 2022; Klement & Blokland, 2021; Van Ruitenburg & Blokland, 2022). Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 current members of the Dutch HAMC, this case study aims to increase knowledge on how members of OMCGs reacted to the various aspects of the Dutch multi-agency approach. This article is structured as follows. First, we provide an introduction to the Dutch multi-agency approach to OMCGs, placing it within its wider historical and theoretical context. We then describe the methodology of the study, including the sample, scope of the interviews, and data analysis. The results are presented in four sections, each covering a different category of reactions. Following the conclusion, we discuss the limitations of the data and argue why future studies benefit from taking the perspective of the (groups of) people that are subjected to crime reduction measures.

¹ In this article, we use the term ‘outlaw motorcycle gang’ to align with the (inter)national governmental and scientific discourse. However, we emphasize that this does not necessarily mean that all clubs and chapters are rightfully classified as such. Members of the Hells Angels MC do not consider themselves members of an ‘outlaw motorcycle gang’, but of a ‘motorcycle club’. Because the goal of this article is to highlight the perspective of club members, we do not use the term in the empirical parts of this article.

The Multi-agency Approach to Organized Crime

The theoretical underpinnings of the Dutch multi-agency approach to organized crime are rooted in the new criminologies of everyday life that arrived in the final quarter of the twentieth century (Garland, 2001). In the seventies and eighties, attention shifted away from the dispositional traits of offenders to a nondeterministic view of crime (Clarke & Cornish, 1985: 162). For instance, Cohen and Felson (1979) suggested that crime is the result of the convergence in time and space of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. This theory breaks with prior criminological theories in the sense that in the latter, the criminal is no different from other citizens, and that crime is assumed to be committed by anyone who has the opportunity to do so.

Opportunity also plays a crucial role in Cornish and Clarke's (1986) rational choice perspective. Instead of looking at the social or psychological factors underlying the criminal behaviour of individuals, the authors put forth a framework that focuses on the decision-making process of the offender. In this framework, crime is viewed as the outcome of a rational choice of the offender, balancing the costs and benefits of a particular (future) crime. The goal of the rational choice perspective is not to postulate a new *theory* to explain how offenders make decisions, but to present a *perspective* for the limited purposes of improving crime control policies and developing policy-relevant research (Clarke & Cornish, 1985: 178).

Over the years, state agencies widely adopted this perspective by giving shape to various situational crime prevention (SCP) measures, all aimed at influencing the decision-making process of the offender in everyday life (Bullock et al., 2010). SCP does not focus on those who offend, but on changing or managing the crime setting in such a way that the (future) offender chooses not to offend (e.g., because the rewards of the criminal behaviour are too low or the risks of getting caught are too high). Whereas SCP measures demand a crime-specific approach, the rational choice perspective has also set the stage for what has become known as crime scripting. Crime scripting draws attention to the criminal logistic process of specific crimes as a tool to pinpoint fruitful points for tailor-made SCP interventions by various public and private agencies (Cornish, 1994; see also, Deghanniri & Borrin, 2019).

The crime-specific approach also influenced the Dutch government in its fight to (organized) crime. In the 1990s, the Dutch government, inspired by the administrative approach to the Cosa Nostra in New York, realized that a repressive, criminal justice approach to organized crime was insufficient to hinder the opportunities for criminal organizations. As a result, it was stressed that the responsibility for fighting (organized) crime lies not only with the police and public prosecution service, but also with other institutions, such as local administrations and the private sector (Fijnaut, 2002). For instance, to prevent the import of drugs through the port of Rotterdam, the Dutch government currently, in collaboration with private organizations, focuses not only on detecting and prosecuting drug criminals, but also on increasing the number of container checks, improving port security, and running campaigns to raise the willingness of port employees to report crimes (Staring et al., 2023).

In the past two decades, crime-specific approaches came to fruition via the adoption of barrier models. Similar to crime script analysis, a barrier model maps how a criminal depends on the opportunities throughout all stages of the criminal process and how various partners play a role in preventing the crime from taking place (Van de Bunt & Kleemans, 2011; Spapens, 2011). In the 2000s, barrier models were developed in the Netherlands to combat various crimes, including human trafficking and money laundering. This approach is also adopted internationally as the European Network on the Administrative Approach

(ENAA) recently developed the first two European barrier models on Organised Property Crime and Synthetic Drugs (ENAA, 2020).

Raising Barriers to Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

OMCGs are officially registered organizations rooted in legitimate society, with clearly defined membership roles, rules, and social obligations. Traditionally, club membership is seen as a choice for life and it plays a central role in the lives of the members (Von Lampe & Blokland, 2020). Despite the legal roots of OMCGs, the involvement of members in a wide variety of crimes, such as violence, damaging, and drug crime, has resulted in the police and governments' perception that the clubs are criminal organizations that need to be addressed (Blokland et al., 2017; Van Ruitenburg, 2020). Official authorities across the globe have taken various measures to combat OMCGs. For instance, Norwegian authorities try to hinder clubs by drawing on a combination of strategies, including measures relating to fire, food, and alcohol regulations, and by confiscating club clothing and drivers licenses of members (Larsson, 2019). Also well-documented are the various Acts adopted to tackle OMCGs in Australia, for instance, to limit the presence of OMCG members in the tattoo and security sector and the legislative provisions that make it possible to restrict members from associating with other people (see for an overview, Ayling, 2011; Bartels, 2010; Gottschalk & Markovic, 2016; Lauchs et al., 2015: 66–69).

The Dutch government started to address OMCGs in 2012, by launching a barrier model to fight individual OMCG members and the clubs as a whole by using administrative, fiscal, civil, and criminal law measures. The multi-agency approach to Dutch OMCGs is not focused on frustrating one specific (organized) crime *activity*, but on regulating social *organizations* that have been closely associated with a criminal behaviour (Geurtjens, 2022: 30). In other words, from a SCP perspective, OMCGs are seen as the opportunity structure, crime setting, or criminal logistic process to be frustrated (Huisman & Jansen, 2012; Van Ruitenburg, 2020). The Dutch multi-agency approach to OMCGs is based on various focal points. In short, besides a zero-tolerance approach and the prosecution of criminal OMCG members, local authorities are urged to put in place administrative measures to prevent members from establishing clubhouses, organizing events, and wearing colours, whereas pub owners are urged to ban members from entering cafes. Furthermore, state authorities aim to divert OMCG members from civil service, including the military and local fire departments (Van Ruitenburg & Blokland, 2022).

The measures are aimed at influencing the decision-making process of the members and reducing the opportunity structures for crime. In terms of opportunity-reducing techniques, the attention of public agencies to OMCGs was to extend guardianship and generally increase the risks of crime involvement. More specifically, there were increasing concerns that intra-club violence among OMCGs is planned and coordinated from within a clubhouse. By closing current clubhouses and by preventing the establishment of new ones, the government aimed to increase the effort for members to meet with fellow club members and reduce the opportunities to plan and commit (violent) crime (Geurtjens, 2022: 133; Van Deuren, 2023). Furthermore, local governments put effort in hindering OMCG members from cafes, because of the fear that OMCG members would try to take over their cafes by intimidating and extorting owners, while OMCG-related events were prohibited in order to take away the public stage for OMCGs, to reduce provocations between warring clubs, and ultimately to prevent severe public disorder as happened in parts of Scandinavia and elsewhere (Barker, 2015). Increasing efforts were also made to ban club colours

from the public domain as a way to limit the violent reputation of OMCG membership that individual members use to extort victims and witnesses (Van Deuren, 2023: 90, 99). Most recently, various (chapters of) Dutch OMCGs have been banned by civil law, including HAMC Holland, Satudarah MC, Bandidos MC Holland, and No Surrender MC.² Besides the more symbolic meaning of these bans, this civil measure was set to take away the organizing capacity of the (banned) clubs, increasing the effort to organize club activities altogether.

Current Study

Because OMCG members hardly open up to outsiders, apart from a few notable exceptions (Boland et al., 2021; Dowling et al., 2021; Kuldová, 2019; Veno, 2003; Wolf, 1991), most academic research into OMCGs is based on analysis of register data, police files, court judgements, and policy documentation. The current study extends prior OMCG research by interviewing members of the Dutch HAMC on the ways in which the members react(ed) to the barriers that have been raised to the organization and their individual members. In doing so, this study aims to improve our understanding of how (organized) crime control strategies influence and impact the individuals subjected to these measures.

Methodology

Sample

In May 2021, the first author received an e-mail by a member of the Dutch HAMC. In the e-mail, the member uttered his discontent about the Dutch approach to the club and, more specifically, how the club over the years has been framed as a criminal organization in policy documents, media reports, and academic articles. In his response, the first author informed the member about the possibility to arrange an in-person meeting, to hear the member's story and to learn more about how the individual members are affected by the Dutch approach to OMCGs. In June 2021, the authors attended a meeting with two HAMC members and the club's lawyer. This meeting sparked the idea to interview multiple club members to examine more closely how the multi-agency approach impacts the club and its members. After the meeting, the member, who continued to serve as a contact person throughout the study, informed all Dutch HAMC charters about their willingness to participate in this study.

Ultimately, the authors conducted interviews with 24 current members of HAMC, all of whom were male and between the age of 38 and 69. Almost all of the respondents (95.8%) were Dutch and the majority of them (83.3%) were employed at the time of the interviews. These members belonged to ten different HAMC charters located in various cities and provinces in the Netherlands. The interviewed respondents have been members for an average of 17 years, and the sample included both full-patched members (46%) and board members with various roles, such as president ($N=4$; 16.7%), secretary ($N=4$; 16.7%),

² Judicial rulings from the Supreme Court indicate that the prohibition of Bandidos MC Holland and Hells Angels MC Holland do not include the separate and local chapters or charters of both clubs (Supreme Court 24 April 2020, ECLI:NL:HR:2020:797; Supreme Court, 15 July 2022, ECLI:NL:HR:2022:1114).

Table 1 Background characteristics of the Hells Angels sample

Variables	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	24	100%
<i>Age in 2021</i>		
38–49	2	8.3%
50–55	9	37.5%
56–60	9	37.5%
61–69	4	16.7%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Dutch	23	95.8%
Non-Dutch	1	4.2%
<i>Average duration Hells Angels membership in 2021</i>	17 years (range 4–43 years)	
<i>Role within the club</i>		
President	4	16.7%
Secretary	4	16.7%
Road captain	3	12.5%
Sergeant at arms	1	4.2%
Full-patched member	11	45.8%
Unknown	1	4.2%
<i>Employment status</i>		
Employed	20	83.3%
Unemployed (declared unfit, retirement)	4	16.7%

road captain ($N=3$; 12.5%), and sergeant at arms ($N=1$; 4.2%). Table 1 presents a descriptive overview of the background characteristics of the 24 respondents.

Interviews

To schedule the interview, the 24 members were contacted individually by email and/or telephone. The planned interviews were equally divided among the three authors: sixteen interviews were carried out by two authors and eight interviews by only one of the three authors. All interviews, except for two, were tape-recorded. In case the interview was not tape-recorded, the authors made extensive notes during the interview. Prior to the start of the interview, all members signed a consent form, in which they provided consent to participate in the study, to the interviews being tape-recorded, and to the anonymous transcripts being used for publication. The interviews ranged in length from 45 min to two and a half hours, with an average length of 106 min. The interviews took place at a location as preferred by the respondent, often the home of the member or a neutral place such as a bar or a hotel lobby. The interviews were conducted between October 2021 and June 2022.

The interviews were semi-structured using an extensive topic list that was built around the various goals and measures of the Dutch multi-agency approach towards OMCGs. All interviews started with a question relating to the respondent's motivation to participate in the study. Subsequently, respondents were asked about various key interview topics, including (1) demographic and social background, (2) club membership and rules, and (3)

the ways in which the respondents were affected by the approach personally, and how the club and the members responded to (administrative) measures that led to, for instance, the closing of clubhouses, prohibiting of club-related events, and the banning of colours. During the interviews, the respondents were free to add anything they deemed to be important. At the end of each interview, the respondents were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview. Five respondents requested the transcripts of their interview.

Data Analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by two research assistants and pseudonymized by the authors. The data was analyzed using an extensive and pre-structured coding scheme using ATLAS.ti. This scheme was constructed along the lines of the topic list and was tested by the three authors by analyzing one and the same interview simultaneously. The three coded transcripts were then compared and discussed, after some minor alterations to the coding scheme were made. After this step, the transcripts were evenly divided among the three authors to be coded individually. After deductively coding the transcripts, the three coded data sets were merged into one ATLAS.ti file. The quotations belonging to the code groups 'individual reactions' and 'club reactions' were again coded, this time taking a more inductive approach, looking for patterns or categories within the coded text fragments. During this analysis, the 'reactions' were re-coded into new overarching codes. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

Results

This section presents how members of the Dutch HAMC reacted to various focal points of the multi-agency approach in the Netherlands. While grouping the different reactions, we were able to distinguish four ideal typical categories of reactions: (1) conforming, (2) adapting, (3) resisting, and (4) continuing. Firstly, *conforming* involves reactions where a member accepts the consequences of a specific measure and conforms his behaviour to the specific measure. This is not to say that the member perceives the measure as just or lawful, the member only decides to act accordingly. *Adapting*, secondly, covers reactions in which a member adapts to a measure, as a way to continue club-related undertakings. Thirdly, *resisting* relates to reactions in which a member does not accept the measures and actively resists. Finally, *continuing* covers reactions in which a member continues with his club-related activities and expressions, without adapting their behaviour to the measures taken.

Conforming

In 2020, local administrations of over 200 municipalities in the Netherlands adopted local provisions stating that it was no longer allowed for members of a banned club to wear colours or other club-related clothing in public areas, even when the club was not (yet) irrevocably banned by the Supreme Court. In this way, local authorities wanted to eliminate the visible presence of clubs, including that of the HAMC, from the Dutch streets.³

³ This local provision was set to fill a gap in Sect. 140(2) of the Criminal Code. The Criminal Code criminalises the continuation of the activity of an organization banned by the court, yet only if the club prohibition is established irrevocably by the Supreme Court.

The local colour ban was a frequent topic during the interviews, especially since many of the respondents had experienced closely how the police enforced this local regulation, for instance during traffic stops. Although the respondents felt ‘frustrated’ (R29), ‘angry’ (R31), and treated ‘unjustly’ (R101), various members nonetheless conformed their behaviour to the local colour ban.

One respondent, for instance, explained that he took notice of the various municipalities in the Netherlands that adopted the colour ban in their local regulations and which municipality did not. When he was riding his motorcycle in a municipality *with* the ban, he took his colours off, only to put the jacket on again when he entered a municipality *without* a colour ban. The member explained that the reason for his conforming behaviour was to prevent any confrontations and heated discussions with the police:

Yes, look, I am aware that if you continue to do that [wear colours, TvR] and they stop you, you sometimes get into a discussion and tensions with a police officer. So, I am the type of person who thinks, well, you know, maybe it is best to conform to it to prevent yourself from getting into trouble. (R25)

In the same way, another respondent felt ‘forced’ to stop wearing his colours because he, other than what is generally described about members in the media and policy documents, simply had to abide society’s rules:

Look it is said [by state authorities, TvR] that we [HAMC members, TvR] are placing ourselves outside the law. I am not placing myself outside the law at all, I mean I also have to abide by the law and if I don’t abide by it, yes there are consequences. Well, one of those consequences is that if I ride with my colours, I lose my colours. Yes, I don’t want that. But I don’t want that confrontation either. And I know that we are in our right as far as the colours concerned, but being right and getting right are two separate things. (R47)

The respondents, furthermore, mentioned how they left their colours at home when they went out for a drink in the city, specifically to avoid difficulties with the police. Members, for example, expected the police to start trouble with the members, but members also did not always trust *themselves* to not cause problems: ‘sometimes I really feel like shit, and then I go out for a ride. Then I do not wear my jacket. Because when it happens on that moment [confiscation of jacket, TvR] then it might escalate, so I choose to not do it [wear his jacket, TvR]’ (R101). Other members stated that they left their colours at home more often, not so much to avoid confrontations with the police, but simply because they did not want to lose their colours, not even temporarily (R42).

Independently of the municipal colour ban, members also explained to be more reluctant to wear any visible reminders of the club as a result of the widespread negative media attention towards the club, something that is partly the result of a government-initiated media communication strategy to alter the image of the clubs in society (LIEC, 2014, 2017). In this respect, one respondent gave the following telling example:

I think until one-and-a-half, two years ago, I was wearing my colours almost day and night, when I went out the door I had them on. I still smoked back then, so I could put my shag and my cigarettes in my jacket, I had my phone with me, it [the jacket, TvR] was my handbag, because I always had it on. At a certain point, this changed, because even in the queue of the supermarket, at a certain point you get the reaction: ‘Oh, look, there is a Hells Angel in the queue. Yes [...] this does leave a bad taste in one’s mouth. (R36)

In line with this member, another respondent explained how he is more careful when wearing his club t-shirt, for instance when he walks the streets with his wife. His wife, the member explained, works as a teacher, and with all the media attention around the club, he wants to prevent that she gets into trouble at school for living together with a Hells Angel (R48).

Up to this point, conforming to the colour ban is only described as an individual consideration. Various members, however, also explained to conform to this ban on charter level. For instance, one member mentioned that on a charter level, it was decided to avoid any trouble with the police: 'At the club's request, we said, let's not face it, because it has no added value and let's not wear a vest now. Although I do regret that' (R30). A member of a different charter similarly stated that they did not want to face any of 'that bullshit'. He continued to explain that he thinks that the police wants to lure the members out to build a criminal case against the club and their individual members, and so they as a group decided to stay low:

Maybe one day one of our guys decides to not do it [wear the colours, TvR], the police then enforce the ban and as a result a brawl might occur, because well, a member does not hand in his colours. So, therefore we said, you know, let's just leave it [the colours, TvR] off, then we won't give them [the police, TvR] a reason to do something. (R32)

The members also showed conforming behaviour to several other focal points of the Dutch multi-agency approach. For instance, a respondent explained how they as a charter, in reaction to the civil ban at first ruling (19 May 2019), removed all club expressions from their clubhouse. Furthermore, three respondents personally experienced the consequences of the focal point that aimed to divert members away from working in the public sector, such as the local government. All three cases serve as an example of a different type of reaction. That is, in one case, the respondent decided to conform to the aim of the measure by leaving the organization on his own volition. R36 explained how his employer, an organization that worked for a municipality, at some point was informed about his HAMC membership and was more or less instructed to fire him. In response, the respondent balanced his options in the face of losing his job, and eventually decided to leave the organization:

I was given a choice here: 'either you stay and then we [the employer, TvR] will start a procedure to fire you or you leave the club. But we have known you long enough to know that you won't leave the club. Or you leave voluntarily and we provide you with a compensation' [...] I still have some time to go in my working career, I still have some working years to go. Quitting the club, no. So eventually my lawyer made sure that I received a reasonable financial compensation, and I quit. (R36)

These examples show that the first category of reactions entails a form of acceptance. Certainly, HAMC members do not agree with the various measures, but some do accept the consequences, conform to it, and move on. At the same time, there are also members who accept the measures, but take a more active stance and adapt to it.

Adapting

During the interviews, it became clear that some members adapted their behaviour in response to the local colour ban. Although the aim of the ban was to prevent members from

wearing their club colours in the public domain, a number of respondents explained how they adapted to the measure in order to continue wearing their jacket. One of the respondents (R29), for instance, mentioned that he decided to wear another neutral jacket over his colours in public areas, allowing him to wear his club colours without others being able to notice it. He decided to do so because he was afraid of losing his jacket for good, but also because he had no money left to start a legal procedure against the possible confiscation of the jacket. The same member gave an example of a ride out during which he and the other members of the charter decided to cover their colours when passing through a municipality with a colour ban, in the same way how members also covered club symbols attached to their motorcycles with pieces of tape (R37 and R33). In line with many other respondents, the respondent felt 'frustrated' with this course of events: '[...] we just have this rule that when you are on motorcycle, you wear your colours you know. And this something you are proud of, of course. And I can't stand injustice, so for me it is very frustrating that I now have to wear it underneath my jacket' (R29). The interviewed members also stated that they sometimes take a detour to get around municipalities with a colour ban.

From the interviews, it also becomes clear that other measures of the multi-agency approach restricted the ability of members to give practice to club membership. Although the COVID-19 pandemic also played a role, respondents explained that in recent years, it has become more difficult to physically get together due to closing down clubhouses and prohibiting HAMC-related events. Overall, members nowadays meet less often, with less people at the same time (R42). At the same time, members adapted to the measures and became more 'inventive' by meeting at venues other than their clubhouse and by staying 'low profile' by not wearing 'patches' (i.e., their club jacket) when they gather for a club meeting (R32-2). One member described this situation as a game of 'hide and seek' between the club and the police (R101). In this context, a respondent explained that they avoid going to the city centre as a group, to instead meet in what he called a 'storage' owned by one of the club members:

No, so we are no longer allowed to have a clubhouse. So we have a storage that belongs to one of our guys and there is also a company in there and that's where we have our motorbikes and that's where we're allowed to have a theme night once in a while [...] or I something like that. (R29)

Another respondent similarly explained that it became more difficult to openly have a clubhouse: 'If you want to start something new and you are really going to call it a clubhouse, they will close it' (R101). Yet, this did not stop the members from looking for another place to meet. While the member stated that the charter officially does not have a clubhouse, he said that they did find a new place where they meet for club meetings. When it comes to social events, other members explained how they likewise had to 'improvise', be more 'creative', and 'adjust and adapt', for example, by drinking coffee at each other homes (R28), by organizing barbecues in member's gardens (R36), or by meeting in bars (R30 and R49). Indeed, two interviews were conducted in a room inside a member's home, decorated with Hells Angels insignia, that was sometimes used by the members to get together.

In the previous paragraph, we described how a member (R36) made the choice to leave his employer after it became known that he was a HAMC member. In doing so, this member conformed to the aim of the measure to not have club members working for the government. In a second case, a member (R28) and his employer decided on a different, more adaptive approach. The member explained that the employer was visited by the police to inform him that they employed a HAMC member. In this case, the member also decided to

leave the organization on his own volition, because he 'did not want to damage' the organization. Yet, this time the employer agreed to hire the member back as a self-employed person to continue the work relation like nothing happened.

Interestingly, members that did not work for state agencies also adapted their behaviour in their own working context. After losing several clients because of his membership, one member, a self-employed worker, explained how he used to be open about his background vis-à-vis clients, but nowadays remains silent about the club, because he is afraid to lose more clients. For the same reason, he stopped wearing his colours to work and likewise requested his fellow members to not wear their colours when they visit him at work: 'also because of the hassle with employers, I said to them: 'When you come to my place of business, don't wear your jacket. Or underneath your coat. Go play hide and seek' (R101). Not only did members adapt to the various aspects of the approach, family members of the respondents also pre-emptively adapted to future measures. One respondent mentioned that he and his girlfriend decided to postpone their marriage, because he did not want 'to pull her in the shit' as he was afraid that the government would also take away her business in case the HAMC is banned by the Supreme Court (R45).

Resisting

In addition to the previous two reactions, the interviews also exemplify the strong motivation among members to fight for the existence of their club. One respondent even argued that the approach has had a 'counterproductive' effect for the government, as it sparked a wide felt willingness to fight back (R28). For instance, a respondent (R34) explained how the often far-reaching measures in fact make him want to 'dig his heels in the sand'. Although HAMC members are usually framed as people who operate outside of the law, the respondents in this study mostly used the law to resist against what they felt to be an unlawful and untrustworthy government.

During the interviews, it became clear that resistance to the measures imposed by the Dutch government comes in different forms. First, we learned how some members worked 'day and night' to acquire the judicial knowledge needed to pinpoint why the measures are, from the perspective of the members, unlawful (R44). One respondent (R42), for instance, explained that he, in his role as secretary, spend most of his time collecting (legal) information about the approach, specifically to appeal to the closing of a clubhouse by a local government. This way of resisting can also be noticed in the way in which the HAMC has fought the verdict of the Lower and Higher Court in the civil ban case. However, during the interviews, respondents mostly spoke about how they fought the local colour ban.

At the time of the interviews, members were confident that they were legally allowed to wear their colours, because they were not (yet) irrevocably banned by the Supreme Court, despite the local ruling. In fact, various members were so confident that they would resist any attempt of the police to confiscate their colours: 'as long as there is no real official ruling in the court case and it is not in black and white [...] then they can't do anything. And of course, they can take it away, but then I'll drive straight to the police station and I'll file an official complaint' (R48). Another respondent similarly stated: 'If the municipality or if the police want to arrest me with my jacket, I refuse to take it off. 'You want to enforce, bring it on, I'll eat you raw'' (R45). One respondent even spent a night in jail, because he refused to turn in his colours to the police when he entered a municipality with a colour ban. The member was well-prepared for this encounter with the police as he carried several court rulings with him showing that the club was not yet banned by the Supreme

Court. During the interview, the member mentioned that he also sent these documents to other charter members, so they could also prepare themselves for future police encounters. Another respondent decided to write down in his own words, point by point, why the club is not irrevocably banned and why members were therefore allowed to wear club-related clothing. The member distributed this one-pager to the members of his charter as a reminder: ‘in making sure my brothers are not caught off guard and maybe make a wrong comment out of emotion’ (R36).⁴ However, not all members were interested in learning about judicial procedures, which is why one member acted as the person to call in case a member was stopped by the police: ‘I usually get a call, even if it’s late at night, from a member. And then I try to get that [police, TvR] officer on the line, and try to explain to him nicely, so and so. We’ve had this so many times’ (R42).

One final example of how members tried to fight the colour ban is how the charter of one respondent (R36) tried to provoke a ‘test case’ to let the judge rule on the (un)lawfulness of the colour ban and ultimately prove their case to the police and municipality. In short, the members of the charter regularly drove around the city for about three weeks, hoping to get stopped by the police. The members discussed beforehand that if a member was stopped by the police, he would try to stop at a pre-arranged location, where three other members *without* colours would wait for him to record the possible confiscation of the jacket: ‘We have a place where we always park the bike near the clubhouse and if the police were to try to stop me at the beginning of [name city, TvR] yes, I would just accelerate up to that place [...] I will take that chance. And let it happen there’ (R36). Although the quoted members eventually were not able to successfully initiate a ‘test case’, in December 2021, the Supreme Court did overrule the local ‘colour ban’ by arguing that the provision constitutes an unlawful restriction on the freedom of expression of Article 7(3) of the Constitution. This ruling came in a case where the police on 22 September 2020 confiscated the colours of a member when he was driving his motorcycle (Supreme Court, 24 December 2021, ECLI:NL:HR:2021:1946).

In the previous two sections, we described two different reactions of members who were about to lose their jobs. A third case is exemplary for the current category. During the interview, the respondent (R29) went to great lengths to explain how he was ‘frustrated’, ‘completely done’, and ‘really pissed off’ when he learned that his employer wanted to fire him because of his membership, and more specifically because of who he interacted with in his private life (i.e., other HAMC members). He first wanted to leave the organization, like the member in the case of paragraph 4.1, but later decided to resist and fight it in court, no matter the consequences: ‘I just think if I’m in my right, I’m in my right. And if it had cost me my job and all my money, hey, bummer, but I’m not going to deny myself and my beliefs [...] I decide for myself who I interact with’ (R29).

Continuing

The smallest category of responses that could be discerned from the interviews can be classified as continuing. Although members did *continue* to organize events, they mostly did so in an *adapted* manner, for instance in someone’s garden instead of in a clubhouse. Still, some members were clear in stating that they continued to wear their ‘patches’, regardless of the consequences. A member explained how it never takes long before the police

⁴ The authors also received a copy of this document.

pulls him over for wearing his colours, but when he was asked if this was a reason for him to leave his jacket home more often, he was clear in his answer: 'when I'm on the bike I put on my jacket. Even in the days when they said it was banned [...] I just never stopped wearing my jacket' (R45). Another member stated in similar words: 'When there is something with the club, I will wear my patch' (R30-2). A third member pointed to a situation where they as a club organized a ride out while wearing colours to visit the graves of their brothers, not long after the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted (R29).

We end this paragraph by noting that *continuing* as a category involves more than behavioural reactions, such as wearing club clothing or visiting club members. One of the overarching goals of the multi-agency approach was to discourage club membership. We therefore asked every respondent at the end of the interview if he ever considered leaving the club, because of all the negative attention and measures taken against them. From the interviews, we learned that this was never the case. Members were clear in arguing that they continue to be a Hells Angel, also when the club is banned by the Supreme Court:

It is demotivating. But no. I won't quit. Because well, these are my friends. For me to quit there really must be a problem from within the club, like within the friendship we have, because someone misbehaves or something, then I might quit the friendship. But I won't end our friendship because of everything the government is currently doing. No. (R25)

Another member added: 'They can ban the Hells Angels, but I won't disappear. I mean, I will just remain the same person. Whether I wear my colours or not, I am just [name respondent, TvR], and my way of life is being a Hells Angel' (R101). These and other examples show that members fully identify as Hells Angel and that membership involves more than attending club-related activities and wearing club clothing. For the majority of the respondents, being a Hells Angel is the most important aspect of their life, sometimes even more so than their own family (R45). One respondent, for example, recalled the situation where a probation officer asked him if he was a member of the Hells Angels, after which the member responded: 'I said no, I *am* a Hells Angel. Yes, that is a big difference. I am who I am, and when I want to be Hells Angel, then I am a Hells Angel. And it can be banned or whatever, but I *am* a Hells Angel, so what can they possibly change about that?' (R34).

Discussion

The growing concerns about the impact of organized crime activities has led European law enforcement agencies to prioritize the fight against these types of criminal behaviour, by prosecuting offenders but increasingly also by taking civil and administrative law measures. This multi-agency approach departs from the rational choice perspective and aims to influence the decision-making process of the offender by changing the situational opportunities of crime (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish, 1994). To date, however, research into the ways in which people subjected to these policies cope with the various measures is lacking. In the current study, we examined the reactions to the Dutch multi-agency approach to OMCGs using a dataset consisting of 24 interviews with current members of the Dutch HAMC. Although clubs, such as the HAMC, are

known to hardly open up to outsiders, we were able to interview members belonging to ten different local divisions fulfilling various roles within the organization.

The results of this study indicate that a variety of different reactions to the OMCG approach exist. Although members feel angry and perceive the measures as unjust, they occasionally choose to conform to it, for instance by leaving colours at home. At the same time, members adapt to the measures as a way to continue club-related activities, albeit in modified manner, as evidenced by how they look for new ways to come together after the closure of clubhouses. Furthermore, it is noteworthy how members over the years have acquired in-depth knowledge of criminal justice procedures and use this knowledge to resist the measures. In this way, HAMC successfully fought the local colour ban adopted by many local governments in the Netherlands. As a final category, we observed that members on some occasions continue with club-related activities despite the measures taken. The fact that this category forms the smallest category, however, suggests that the members' behaviour is indeed in some way influenced by the various measures under the multi-agency approach.

Overall, this study shows that it would be too simple to suggest that the HAMC, as a club, reacts to crime policy in one particular way, for instance by 'going underground'. More specifically, the interviews demonstrate that crime policies can elicit different, sometimes conflicting reactions within a group that may appear to be a uniform and top-down coordinated organization from the outside. Moreover, the four categories of reactions serve as ideal types, meaning that a reaction allocated to one category might also hold characteristics of another category. The reactions are also fluent and dynamic: a member may react in a *conforming* way in one situation, but *adapts* his behaviour on a different occasion. This could be depending on the meaning and impact of a measure for the life of a HAMC member, but it can also be a product of local differences in governance, hence influencing the different reactions on the group and individual level. Previous research based on 23 interviews with mayors and public servants has shown that local administrations indeed differ in how they give shape to the national policy to fight OMCGs (Van Ruitenburg, 2021). Therefore, whether or not club members continue with club activities also depended on how (local) law enforcement agencies and local governments are forcing charters and members to either conform or adapt, or actually provide leeway to continue.

Although situational crime prevention departs from the *rational* choice perspective (Garland, 2001), this research shows that measures can spark *emotions* that steer the reactions to these measures, which further influence the broader consequences of crime policies. Although the HAMC members experience less *opportunities* to partake in club-related activities, the same measures have sparked feelings of anger among members that, in turn, strengthened a sense of belonging to HAMC membership, and subsequently the willingness to fight for the existence of the club, among other things by starting judicial procedures or by finding alternative ways to continue to come together. Results from the interviews also indicate that the Dutch multi-agency approach occasionally involves far-reaching measures that also affect family members, such as the wives and children of the members involved, questioning the moral (and legal) boundaries of crime policies.

The current study is limited by the use of a selective sample of Dutch HAMC members as we were unable to control who of the HAMC members were invited to participate in this study. It might be possible that the group of members who did not want to be interviewed for this study is different from the group of members that was willing to participate, for instance in how they cope and react to the approach. The selectivity of the interviewed sample, hence, suggests that the findings of this study cannot be generalized

to the whole Dutch HAMC population, let alone to other clubs that are labelled as out-law motorcycle gangs. The heterogeneity of the subculture, for instance regarding members' involvement in various types of crime, the culture, and members' reasons for joining OMCGs (Van Deuren, 2023), indicates that future studies could benefit from interviewing members of other OMCGs, as a way to see if the reactions of these members fit the suggested typology of reactions in this paper. The current study conducted the interviews in a period in which the HAMC as an organization was not *irreversibly* banned by civil law; therefore, future research could benefit from interviewing members from other Dutch OMCGs that have been permanently banned. The irreversibly civil ban results in a situation in which members of the banned organization are prohibited from displaying their club colours in public, arranging public gatherings, and congregating in their clubhouses, as engaging in these activities would expose them to individual criminal law consequences. It is therefore likely that this civil law measure resulted in a significant change in the ways in which members react to the Dutch multi-agency approach.

Finally, this study sets the stage for future qualitative evaluation studies of crime policies. Although it is true that no definite conclusions can be made about the effectiveness of the Dutch multi-agency approach to OMCGs, the current study provides contextual insights into how and why crime policies influence individuals subjected to the measures. Qualitative studies have the ability to widen the scope of policy evaluations and open up the discussion to questions that go beyond agent-level output measures and the dichotomous question if an intervention or policy is effective, or not. At the very least, this study has shown that hard-to-reach subcultures in reality might be more willing to participate in scientific research than expected, which opens up a wealth of new data to learn from and to inform criminal policies.

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Data Availability The transcripts of the interviews generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality of the interviews.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate The study was approved by the Ethics Advisory Board (CERCO) of the Faculty of Law (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). All respondents in this study signed an informed consent form.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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