Organized Crime

Organized crime groups have been a menace to society for hundreds of years. Everything from a simple group of Robin Hood-style highwaymen in seventeenth-century England, to the infamous Sicilian Mafia can be considered as organized crime groups. The first recorded incident of Sicilian-influenced organized crime in the United States occurred in October of 1890 when a New Orleans Police Superintendent was executed by a group of Sicilian immigrants. But how does organized crime emerge and flourish in some parts of the world and not others? And how can we even define the term? After all, many crimes, in fact, almost all of them, require a degree of method for their execution, but not all criminals are members of organized crime gangs.

Defining organized crime has proved to be a difficult and controversial task for many governments. How organized crime is defined can influence how laws regarding it are created and how research and prosecutions against organized crime are carried out. Unfortunately, this complicated matter revolving around organized crime has led many governments into giving a very broad or vague definition for it. For example, the United States’ Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016) defines organized crime groups as... self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate, wholly or in part, by illegal means and irrespective of geography that seek to obtain power, ...
However, criminologists such as Mark Galeotti and Howard Abadinsky are able to give much more concrete definitions for organized crime. Galeotti suggests that organized crime is a continuing enterprise, outside of traditional social structures, that contain a hierarchical group of people that attempt to gain profit and power through illegal activities. Abadinsky, while not giving a definition itself, argues that there are eight characteristics inherent in the make-up of criminal networks which include: an absence of political goals; are hierarchical; have limited/exclusive membership; constitutes their own unique subculture; are self-perpetuating; demonstrate a willingness to use violence; are monopolistic; and are governed by their own explicit rules and regulations.

Popular culture often depicts the life of an American mafia boss as a glamorous one, and in poorer communities, membership of a criminal network is often seen as a route to higher social mobility. Yet poverty can only go so far as an explanation for why organised crime groups are able to keep recruiting new members and, indeed, flourish in a given society. Organized crime only develops in areas where and when the government cannot, or will not, exercise their control such as Sicily, Russia, and other areas in Eastern Europe with a weakened government, police force, and military force. Although the United States has a strong government, police force, and military, they are not exempt from lapses of power that allow organized crime groups to flourish. For example, in 1920, the United States' government passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, banning the consumption and manufacturing of alcohol. The prohibition movement had been brewing in the United States since the early nineteenth century. Spearheaded primarily by women, people sought to ban alcohol due to many people’s reliance on the substance, the health concerns associated with overconsumption, and its overarching effects on family life. Also, many of the breweries in the United States were run by German immigrants, something that many Americans loathed as the distrust for Germans was high following World War One. When alcohol was inevitable banned, there was public outrage. As stated before, many people relied on alcohol as a stress-reliever and did not believe that they could live without it. Seeing as alcohol is an addictive substance, people were willing to spend absurd amounts of money in order to obtain it. The ban of alcohol open the doors for small-time criminals to band together and capitalize on this demand and make significant amounts of money. In order to meet the demand for alcohol, criminals started producing their own alcohol and selling it in secret bars known as “speakeasies.” With the vast amount of wealth made, mobsters were able to gain a large amount of power in large cities where the demand for alcohol was higher, such as Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia. People began idolizing these criminal organizations because they provided a good to them that the government could not. This is perfectly highlighted infamous mobster, Al Capone, stating, “All I do is to supply a public demand ... somebody had to throw some liquor on that thirst. Why not me?”

Prohibition was, therefore, the driving force behind the rise of organized crime in the United States during the early twentieth century. A similar scenario occurred in the late twentieth century when the United States began their “War on Drugs,” seeking to ban and eliminate drug usage in the country. Not learning from their mistakes during the alcohol prohibition, the United States’ drug prohibition has horribly backfired. Just like Capone’s mob, Central and South American drug cartels have taken advantage of the high demand for drugs and used it to gain large amounts of power and wealth.
Another major factor in the rise of organized crime in the United States was organizations integrating the use of labor racketeering. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016), labor racketeering is the “domination, manipulation, and control of a labor movement in order to affect related businesses and industries.” After the Prohibition on alcohol ended in 1933, Italian gangs needed a new way to make money. In 1935, the United States’ Government passed the National Labor Relations Act that aimed to protect the rights of workers and reduce harmful private sector labor practices. Through this act came the rise of labor unions that sought to protect the workers associated with them. Unions offered pensions, health funds, and other bonuses that were perfect for La Cosa Nostra to exploit. They were able establish close ties with the labor unions and this allowed them to gain a firm foothold in many industries. Many of La Cosa Nostra’s labor racketeering occurred in large cities that had strong industries and labor unions. They were able to control labor unions in Detroit’s auto industry and New York’s construction industry, among many others. By increasing their grasp over many industries, La Cosa Nostra were able to gain a significant amount of power and wealth for themselves.

Although organized crime groups, such as La Cosa Nostra, appear to be antithesis of normal society, J. Finckenaur argues that criminal networks, in their constitutions, are established in a similar manner to that of mainstream society, in which everyone belongs to some form of social network in their community, such as a church organization, a business firm, or the society of the country they live in. Society itself has its own division of labor, its own hierarchy of authority, and its own continuity; characteristics shared with organized crime groups. He also suggests that criminal organizations have five main characteristics that mirror those of society such as sophistication (skill and knowledge required to plan); structure (division of labor and defined authority roles); stability (the ability to main itself over a period of time); self-identification (identifying as part of the define organization with emphasis of bonding activities/rituals); and authority of reputation (being able to force others to do what the organization wishes without violence). Each of these traits can be found, to some degree, in every facet of society, no matter how minute. For example, the United States as a country consists of all five of the characteristics set forth by Finkenauer. The United States has sophistication (employs those who know how to manage and set plans forth for the government); have their own structure with defined authority roles (The President as the leader and a police force to enforce laws); stability (the United States has managed to maintain itself since 1776); citizens that identify themselves as American; and have laws in place to force their citizens to adhere to the wishes of society itself or be punished.

In terms of structure, one could argue that the American mafia, or La Cosa Nostra, is very comparable to a typical corporate structure in the United States. At the top, they both have an executive officer that makes most of the important decisions and ultimately runs the operation. In La Cosa Nostra, this person is referred to as the “Boss” and in a corporate structure as “the Chief Executive Operator.” Underneath them there is a second-in-command who is often trained to succeed the top boss. Below the second-in-command are the people who are in charge of different departments of the organization (a Caporegime in La Cosa Nostra and a Supervisor in a corporation). And finally, there is the actual working force of the organization. They are the ones who arguably do the most work of the organization, but get the least amount of money from it. In La Cosa Nostra, they are referred to as “Soldiers.”
Does prohibition of illegal substances always work? In 1930s USA, alcohol's prohibition meant otherwise ordinary, respectable people turned to gangs such as those run by Al Capone to supply their wants.

Another aspect shared between organized crime groups and society is the reliance upon codes and laws. It can be argued that laws themselves are what truly differentiate organized crime groups from any other criminal group as laws regulate the actions of the their community and decide the punishments for those who break them. The laws of organized crime groups (the Sicilian Mafia and Japanese Yakuza in particular) are often a closely-guarded secret and are strictly enforced by their respective authority figures. However, in 2007, a police raid on the home of a mafioso named Salvatore Lo Piccolo, garnered information on the laws that govern the Sicilian Mafia. The Mafia’s ‘Ten Commandments’ are as follows:

- No one can present himself directly to another of our friends. There must be a third person to do it;
- Never look at the wives of friends;
- Never be seen with cops;
- Don’t go to pubs and clubs;
- Always be available for Cosa Nostra, even if your wife’s about to give birth;
- Appointments must be respected;
- Wives must be treated with respect;
- When asked for any information by a friend, the answer must be the truth;
- Money cannot be appropriated if it belongs to others or to other families;
- People who can’t be part of Cosa Nostra are anyone with a close relative in the police, with a two-timing relative in the family, anyone who behaves badly and doesn’t hold to moral values.

Although the Mafia’s commandments are rather vague, they still act as the law to which the Mafia is governed. Similar to the laws in society itself, if a member of the Mafia broke one of the commandments, they were punished. However, instead of being served a fine or a prison sentence, those who broke the law of the Mafia were murdered.

Organized crime groups, therefore, constitute their own subculture. Organized crime groups exist within society and their beliefs and values are vastly different from the rest of society. Although they are their own separate subculture, they still interact with the rest of society. In that sense, they are no different than the LGBT or Punk subculture. Even the members of La Cosa Nostra themselves originate from a subculture of Italian immigrants that came to the United States. However, organized crime groups are much more formal than most other subcultures that have members that merely identify as members. There are many criminal subcultures in existence, furthermore, many of whom commit some rather unpleasant deeds (such as child grooming gangs and human traffickers), along with those who we might simply class as thugs, such as football hooligans. Yet someone who commits a simple crime – let us say a petty thief – cannot say that they are a part of the Sicilian Mafia. As this is the case, therefore, organized crime is a subculture within a larger criminal subculture. Although organized crime groups are criminals, they differentiate themselves from the rest of the criminal subculture based on how they operate, their beliefs, their actions, and their exclusivity.

In some ways, La Cosa Nostra is the embodiment of the American Dream. They started out as poor immigrants from Italy, moving to the United States to make a better life themselves. They were able to capitalize on a growing (yet illegal) market and were able to rise to significant social and economic status.

And to this day, La Cosa Nostra and many other organized crime groups continue corrupt many industries and remain a legitimate threat to society.

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Bibliography


Organized crime may be defined as systematically unlawful activity for profit on a city-wide, interstate, and even international scale. The corporate criminal organization is a far cry from the small-scale predations of a Bonnie and Clyde. Criminal organizations keep their illegal operations secret, and members confer by