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Five Areas Which Make the Irish Organized Crime Milieu Distinctive

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Abstract

This article critically assesses five areas that may together make the Irish organized crime milieu distinctive. First, there is minimal research. Second, organized crime groups and illicit enterprises are often characterized as "family-gangs." Third, some violent conflicts are framed as family feuds. Fourth, a broad range of paramilitary groups have influenced Irish organized crime, in a variety of ways. Fifth, many organized crime groups and illicit enterprises are internationally mobile. Three types of mobility are identified: those commuting to other countries for one-off jobs, those migrating for longer periods, and mobile illicit enterprises. Allum's push/pull model of criminal migration is employed to offer some suggestions as to why Irish criminals migrate and the choice of destination. The final section argues that some of the features that make Irish organized crime distinctive are changing or may have already changed. The article highlights key areas of further research needed to clarify the structure of organized crime in Ireland.

Keywords

family, feuding, Ireland, mobility, organized crime, paramilitaries

Introduction

The Irish organized crime milieu can be said to have five distinctive features: (a) there is minimal research, (b) many organized crime groups (OCGs) and illicit enterprises are characterized as "family-gangs," (c) violent conflicts often take the form of family feuds, (d) a broad range of paramilitary groups influence Irish organized crime, and (e)

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many OCGs and illicit enterprises are internationally mobile. While none of these features are unique to Ireland, together they make the Irish organized crime milieu distinctive.[1]

This article reviews the existing literature on organized crime in Ireland and uses theories developed in other jurisdictions to offer insights into the mechanics of organized crime in Ireland and the structural changes that may be occurring. The first section provides context by discussing the definition of organized crime and the scarcity of academic research on the topic. This is followed by a critical review of discussions around family-gangs, including an assessment of Hourigan's (2011) colonialism theory, which is Ireland's first theory of organized crime. The article then reviews the importance of feuding in, and complexity of paramilitary involvement within, the organized crime milieu before discussing the mobility of some Irish criminals. The final section draws from the work of Hobbs (2001) to argue that some of the features that make Irish organized crime distinctive are changing, or may have already changed. The article's core argument is that economic and cultural changes, at the local and global level, are changing that which makes organized crime in Ireland distinctive.

Defining Organized Crime in Ireland

Organized crime means different things to different people. It can be used in a purposively vague manner to include anything from solitary thieves to groups performing quasi-state functions. While this ambiguity makes it an unsuitable scientific category, it does usefully denote a broad field of academic study (von Lampe, 2016; Windle & Silke, 2019).

Organized crime is not defined under Irish law; however, the Criminal Justice Act (2006, paragraph 70) defines a "criminal organisation" as

> A structured group, however organised, that: (a) is composed of 3 or more persons acting in concert, (b) is established over a period of time, (c) has as its main purpose or main activity the commission or facilitation of one or more serious offences in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

"Serious offense" is defined as an offence punishable by imprisonment of 4 or more years. "Structured group" is defined by what it is not: It must not be "randomly formed for the immediate commission of a single offence" and does not require "formally defined roles for its members, continuity of its membership or a developed structure."

The lack of a legal definition of organized crime, and the vagueness of the criminal organization definition, limits the usefulness of official reports for research purposes. One way to limit ambiguity is to follow Varese's (2017) categorization of organized crime into three types:

- Illicit enterprises participate in black markets, such as those selling drugs for profit;

- OCGs seek to monopolize or regulate production and distribution of a given commodity or service. This could include drug wholesalers dictating prices or monopolizing local markets. They need not be big, wealthy, or particularly sophisticated;
- Mafias are OCGs that "attempt to control the supply of protection." They regulate local areas or populations, are usually hierarchical, possess codes of conduct, and have established histories and subcultures (Varese, 2017, p. 48).

While there can be overlaps between, and diversity within, these categories, they are somewhat clearer and less ambiguous than using organized crime as a catchall term. This is because they identify what is "indispensable to the phenomenon" by interrogating the purpose behind the act (Richards, 2014, p. 213).

Distinctive Feature 1: Lack of Research Literature on Organized Crime

Although there is significant political and media interest in organized crime in Ireland, this has not been met with a corresponding amount of academic research. A small number of studies emerged in the late-1990s/early-2000s, primarily focused on paramilitary financing (i.e., Horgan & Taylor, 1999; Silke, 1998, 2000), an issue that received minimal attention during the first decade of the 21st century, with a slight resurgence in the late-2010s (i.e., Hourigan et al., 2018; Jupp & Garrod, 2019; Morrison & Lynch, 2018; Purvis, 2022).

Most contemporary scholarship has focused on illicit enterprise, predominantly markets for drugs at the retail level (i.e., Bowden, 2019; Connolly & Buckley, 2016; Connolly & Donovan, 2014; Windle, 2018a) and markets for people (i.e., Doyle et al., 2019; C. Murphy, 2017; C. Murphy et al., 2020; Ward & Wylie, 2007). There are also individual studies on kidnapping (Synnott et al., 2016) and the criminal exploitation of children (Naughton & Redmond, 2017; Redmond, 2016). Only two studies have focused on OCGs (Hourigan, 2011; Marsh, 2019). There is a somewhat larger number of legal or literature reviews of counter-measures (i.e., Campbell, 2013; Coghlan & Wylie, 2011; Hamilton, 2011; Obokata & Payne, 2016; Obokata et al., 2014). The lack of research focused specifically on the role of women in OCGs and illicit enterprises represents a noteworthy gap in the literature.

Most Irish organized crime research has been published as chapters in academic books or in reports commissioned by state or third-sector organizations with relatively few studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Furthermore, the majority of studies are based on secondary data analysis of open-access documents, with some notable exceptions. The lack of primary data is not unique to Ireland: Globally, most organized crime research relies on media or government documents, or interviews with state officials (Windle & Silke, 2019). More positively, the Irish literature has focused on victims of organized crime and illicit enterprise (i.e., Bowden, 2019; Connolly & Buckley, 2016; Hourigan, 2011; Windle, 2019), an issue largely neglected in the global literature (Windle & Silke, 2019).

The lack of academic literature, and primary data, means that much public knowledge of Irish organized crime comes from media accounts. Many Irish crime reporters are well informed, well intentioned, and conduct dangerous work as a public service. Reports are often based on criminal justice press releases, or underworld informants, so can represent a convenient conduit between the researcher and underworld or state agencies. Media accounts can therefore be useful, especially when triangulated with other sources. The business of selling stories can, however, result in the distortion and misrepresentation of the level, structure, and impact of crime, often by employing exaggerated symbols that are familiar to readers (Windle & Murphy, 2022; Windle & Silke, 2019).

There are several potential causes for this lack of a literature-base. First, criminology is a relatively new discipline in Ireland and, even within criminology, other topics have dominated, especially penology and desistance (Hamilton, 2022; Lynch et al., 2020). Second, researching organized crime takes planning, resources, and time, rendering it a difficult endeavor without funding (Hosford et al., 2022) and funding is scarce in Ireland. Third, An Garda Síochána (the Irish police) recorded offense data are somewhat unreliable (Windle, 2018a) and data that have been used in other countries (i.e., wiretaps, court proceedings) are unavailable for research purposes in Ireland. Fourth, primary data collection can be risky. While serious violence against researchers is rare, globally a small number of researchers have been intimidated, threatened, and even killed. Most of those who have been harmed had, however, focused their enquiries on political actors (Hosford et al., 2022).

Herein lies two further issues that make Ireland a distinctively tricky place to collect primary data. First, it is a small country of less than five million people concentrated into a relatively small number of geographical areas. You could interview 100 gang members in London and never meet a participant: This would be near impossible in Dublin, let alone Cork or Galway. Second, the inherent risks of conducting organized crime research within small countries are compounded by the existence of paramilitaries who may be unconcerned that a researcher implicates them in acts of violence, for a valued cause, but may be offended by association with normal criminality, especially as shining a spotlight on the criminal acts of political actors can present the organization with significant public relations and operational risks.

In summary, conducting research on organized crime is a difficult endeavor in most countries. Hosford and colleagues' (2022, p. 7) review of the global organized crime research literature found that "few scholars stay in the field," partly because of scarcity of funding and data collection challenges (also von Lampe, 2016). These more common barriers are confounded in Ireland by the existence of paramilitary organizations and the small size of the country. Together these factors make Ireland a distinctly difficult environment within which to conduct organized crime research.

Distinctive Feature 2: The Family-Gang Structure

While mafias tend to be hierarchically structured, OCG and illicit enterprise structures take a variety of forms (Varese, 2017; von Lampe, 2016). Studies in many countries

have, however, identified looser social networks as more common than hierarchal organizations (reviews in Desroches, 2007; Windle, 2021). Desroches (2007) has suggested that, for drug traffickers at least, hierarchal organizations are the exception because they are unnecessary for successful enterprise.

There are a variety of criminal structures in Ireland (Hourigan et al., 2018); however, the "family-gang" structure is the one most often identified in academic, media, and policy documents. Hourigan and colleagues (2018) identify this structure as a distinctive feature of the Irish organized crime milieu, and Hourigan (2011) and Windle (2019) suggest that it represents an important explanatory factor for the commencement, continuation, and intensity of gangland feuding.

The existence of family-gangs has found much support in the academic and gray research literature (see Bowden, 2019; Cambridge et al., 2022; Connolly & Donovan, 2014; Marsh, 2019; Moran et al., 2001; L. Murphy et al., 2017; Naughton & Redmond, 2017; Redmond, 2016; Windle, 2019) and within the media. For example, one journalist described a suspected trafficker as having

> . . . travelled through life in a tight and violent group consisting of men he is related to or has known since he was a boy. . . Of the 17 key men in his gang, seven are first cousins . . . Three more of the gang members are related to women married, or de facto married, into the extended family. (Lally, 2019; also Reynolds, 2019)

Official reports, including court records, and media articles often identify particular groups with a family prefix (see Lally, 2019; Windle, 2019). All Irish newspapers published between January 2020 and September 2021 were searched, through the Nexis database, using the search-term 'organized crime': 17.9% (N.60) of 334 relevant articles reported that a family (rather than an individual) was involved in a particular crime or mentioned a particular family, often prefixed by a surname (i.e., Dunne Family) or a vague mention (i.e., "family-based gang," "crime family"). Although many articles focused on two families involved in a high-profile feud, a number of other families were also discussed.

Although Irish research has identified family-gang structures ranging from lower level enterprises (Cambridge et al., 2022; Connolly & Donovan, 2014) to OCGs (Hourigan, 2011), the literature has yet to clarify whether this is the predominant structure in Irish gangland or simply the structure that has received the most attention. Family names can become familiar symbols used by journalists to sell newspapers, which can result in family names being attributed to non-family-based networks.

Furthermore, the exact structure of the family-gang is seldom clarified and there is likely greater diversity within this structural type than is often afforded in the literature. Windle (2019) suggested that the family-gang is an adaption of the wheel network structure whereby an inner-core of family members organize the enterprise, with riskier jobs being subcontracted to other groups and individuals. For example, a former drug dealer reported to Connolly and Donovan (2014) that "he was part of a group of about 25 individuals, or 'players' with a core group of about four people at the top" (p. 68).

Connolly and Donovan (2014) found that a small number of families had traditionally dominated the local heroin markets they surveyed, but had begun competing with other enterprises, while the local distribution of cocaine and cannabis remained "concentrated among a small number of established family networks who have been involved in drug-selling for up to 20 years" (pp. 68/145). Alternatively, Redmond (2016, p. 1), using data gathered from interviews with local Gardaí, found that a local "multigenerational, family-based criminal organisation" was "hierarchical in nature and governed by a family and kinship-based 'core,' with non-family members acting as 'semi-autonomous' agents."

Hourigan (2011, 2015; also Hourigan et al., 2018), drawing upon ethnographic observations of two Limerick housing estates, suggests that the family-gang structure is an outcome of the trauma of colonialism. Hourigan's theory suggests that the cultural and emotional importance of the extended family, as a locus of identity, became essential for those living under British rule. Not only was the family needed for survival in an insurgent environment, but families became important sources of challenging British power and a criminal justice system perceived as fundamentally unjust and biased against the indigenous Catholic population. The historical distrust of official criminal justice institutions remained in some inner-city areas after Ireland achieved independence in 1922. Then, from the 1960s, the centrality of family identity was reinforced in working-class areas most affected by deindustrialization and rising economic inequality. The loss of valued working-class employment affected many individuals' self-respect and many sought refuge in the extended family while trying to bolster their families' honor and prestige by profiting from family-based illicit enterprises and/or developing reputations for violence (Hourigan, 2011).

While the family-gang structure *may* be distinctive of Ireland, it is not unique to the country. The centrality of family to OCGs and illicit enterprises has been identified in many countries (i.e., Berlusconi, 2022; Catino et al., 2022; Malm et al., 2010; Sergi, 2021; Zhang et al., 2007), with Malm and colleagues (2010, p. 58) suggesting that kinship plays a particularly strong role "within enclaves of recent migrants" and networks moving commodities transnationally. Family-gangs have also been identified in East London (Hobbs, 2001; Pitts, 2013), northern England (Harvey & Hornsby, 2016), and Glasgow (McLean, 2019). That family-gangs are common in the colonizer (UK), as well as the colonized (Ireland), throws doubt onto whether the experience of colonialism can be the causal factor. One explanation is that East London and Glasgow were home to many who migrated from colonies that placed a strong emphasis on family, including Irish migrants. Another is that, as much research has shown, exclusion ferments subcultural opposition to the mainstream (see Anderson, 1999) and the family may have become the locus of identity in areas experiencing economic and social exclusion, regardless of nationality. That is, exclusion may have been the principal casual factor for the development of family-gangs, with colonialism adding an additional element in Ireland.[2] The structure of Irish organized crime *may* be grounded in the historical context of colonialism, but colonialism is unlikely *the* cause. Rather, colonialism may have contributed to the precise form the phenomenon takes as a subcultural response to social and economic exclusion. This does not dismiss Hourigan's

theory but rather suggests that a comparative analysis of the influence of colonialism on criminal structures would add much to the academic literature,[3] as would a more in-depth analysis of the mechanics of family-gang structures in Ireland.

Distinctive Feature 3: Feuding

Gangland feuding is a key political and security issue in Ireland, one often identified as an outcome of the family-gang structure (Cambridge et al., 2022; Hourigan, 2011; Hourigan et al., 2018; Redmond, 2016; Windle, 2019). For example, the Gardaí (Irish police) described one prominent gangland feud as "split down along two families" (Hilliard, 2017). By definition, feuding involves, often transgenerational (see Cambridge et al., 2022; Hourigan, 2011), patterns of family conflict. This differentiates feuding from systematic conflicts over illicit markets or territory (Windle, 2019). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a feud as

> A state of bitter and lasting mutual hostility; especially such a state between two families, tribes or individuals, marked by murderous assaults in revenge for some dreadful insult or wrong. (cited in Halsall, 1999, p. 13)

Halsall (1999, p. 13) suggested that when feuds erupt, "each attack or killing places the other side in a position of 'debt,' until it is repaid by retaliatory violence." A number of studies have shown how feuding can be contagious (Hourigan, 2011; Marsh, 2019) and avoiding retaliation can be difficult because it risks harming family honor (Hourigan, 2011; Hourigan et al., 2018). While the social contagion of violence has been observed in other countries (Papachristos et al., 2015), and group processes are often identified as important contributory factors in such violence (see Decker, 1996; Dugato et al., 2020), the Irish literature suggests that family involvement can present a further dynamic. For example, a man recently released from prison reported to Cambridge and colleagues (2022) that family pressure to retaliate in an ongoing feud made desisting from offending, and abstaining from alcohol, difficult. Similarly, a service provider reported to Gavin (2015) that some Irish citizens imprisoned overseas choose to be relocated to other parts of the country upon release to avoid feuds.

Feuding can also represent a useful resource for criminal organizations and actors. As violence within feuds serves as a strategic tool of communication (Halsall, 1999), any retaliatory act can bolster individual and family reputations for violence. This can, in theory if not practice, deter victimization (Marsh, 2019; Windle, 2019), prevent state cooperation, and increase group cohesiveness (Decker, 1996). Indeed, both Hourigan (2011) and Marsh (2019) have shown how feuds have been used by families to cement violent reputations used to govern local communities and/or markets. While the instrumental nature of feuding has been a common theme in journalistic and political accounts of feuds over the last decade (see Cusack, 2013; Lally, 2007; McDonald, 2016), it is difficult to untangle commercial and personal motivations (Marsh, 2019; also Windle, 2018b, 2019). That is, an act of violence connected to feuding may possess any combination of entrepreneurial, cultural, or emotional motives.

Distinctive Feature 4: Paramilitaries

A number of paramilitary groups are operating, and have operated, across the island of Ireland.[4] They have, at different periods, used any combination of five sources to fund their operations: legitimate investments, state sponsorship, donations/extortion, charities, and crime (see Windle, 2018c). While paramilitaries are a distinctive feature of the organized crime milieu, the relationship between crime and politics is messy and complex: Paramilitaries have cooperated with, extorted money from, regulated the activities of, and/or exacted vigilante justice against illicit entrepreneurs and OCGs. Some OCGs have also challenged paramilitary authority, occasionally resulting in violent confrontations (see Horgan & Taylor, 1999; Mooney, 2013; Purvis, 2022; Silke, 1998, 2000). Not all illicit enterprises interact with paramilitaries. The Northern Ireland Organized Crime Task Force reported in 2000 that just under half of the 78 OCGs they identified had no known connection to any paramilitary group (Moran, 2008).

To further complicate matters, some dissident paramilitary groups have been identified as having morphed into primarily criminal groups with little remaining political motivation (Moran, 2008; Morrison, 2013; Organized Crime Task Force [OCTF], 2020) or have exhibited partial transformations (Jupp & Garrod, 2019). Morrison and Lynch (2018) summarize the situation thus:

> A dominant feature of the organised-crime landscape in Ireland is the cross-border cooperation between gangs and terrorism/paramilitary groups in the Republic and Northern Ireland, with smuggling, counterfeiting, and excise fraud being significant issues. (p. 13)

Some individuals have also reportedly used the name of a paramilitary organization for profitmaking activities unsanctioned by their leadership (OCTF, 2016). That is, while the organization remains political, some members exploit the status and position afforded by affiliation for personal gain (Jupp & Garrod, 2019). The complexity of this situation lies in the fact that neither paramilitaries nor criminals are homogeneous populations (Lynch & Joyce, 2018; Windle, 2018c).

Traditionally, most paramilitary funds originated from licit sources, with the type of legitimate investment used often dependent on a group's financial and human capital. As Irish paramilitaries often came from working-class backgrounds, they favored traditional working-class enterprises, notably pubs/drinking clubs and construction or taxi-cab companies. Some of these skirted the boundaries of licit/illicit and were used for other activities, such as extortion, smuggling, and fraud (see Moran, 2008; Purvis, 2022; Silke, 2000).

It can also be difficult to untangle donations and extortion. Donations from, and extortion of, individuals and groups have long been an important means of raising finances and governing local populations (Horgan & Taylor, 1999; Silke, 1998). Both possess important symbolic meaning: Voluntary donations signpost legitimacy within a community (Freeman, 2012) and extortion is an assertion of the group's right to tax and capacity to perform the state function of providing protection (Windle, 2018c).

The boundary between donation and extortion can blur. For example, some paramilitaries extorted licensed premises by coercing them to employ in-house private security firms (Horgan & Taylor, 1999; Moran, 2008), a method traditionally used by OCGs (Harvey & Hornsby, 2016; Windle, 2018c). Although extortion remains prominent in Northern Ireland, notably in smaller businesses and the construction industry (OCTF, 2020), its importance lessened as groups became more involved with the cross-border smuggling of commodities, such as fuel, tobacco, and machinery (Morrison & Lynch, 2018).

Some paramilitaries have entered into alliances with criminals, although these are often ad hoc business arrangements (Dishman, 2001). For example, the Italian police uncovered a money laundering operation, worth €450 million, involving the 'Ndrangheta, Spanish investors and a former member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). The scheme reportedly emerged from an existing PIRA/'Ndrangheta relationship, developed during the 1990s, when 'Ndrangheta members brokered an arms deal (Jupp & Garrod, 2019; Squires & Brady, 2013). Most paramilitary groups, however, developed "in-house" capacity (Dishman, 2001). For example, in the 1970s, the PIRA adapted to declining donations by organizing their members to engage in fraud, extortion, and commodity smuggling. Some loyalist paramilitaries actively engaged in drug trafficking in Northern Ireland with drugs worth an estimated £978,824 seized by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force between 2016 and 2020 (OCTF, 2020). Competition for drug market shares has been identified as sparking conflicts between, and splits within, some loyalist paramilitary groups (Jupp & Garrod, 2019; Moran, 2008), although Purvis (2022) found that many loyalists remained opposed to the illicit drug trade.

This said, paramilitary/criminal relationships are not always compatible. Ideological differences can present barriers to long-term cooperation and pose risks to paramilitaries: Involvement in crime can attract the attention of national and foreign law enforcement agencies, open gaps for infiltration from security services, and damage the group's legitimacy and political capital if the community perceive activities as harmful or immoral (Dishman, 2001; see Purvis, 2022). For example, the PIRA prohibited its members from involvement in drug distribution (Silke, 1998) and some paramilitary groups sought to strengthen political capital by employing vigilantism against drug distributors (see Purvis, 2022; Silke, 1998; Windle & Murphy, 2022).

A final consideration is that there have been "skills transfers" from paramilitaries to criminals, and vice versa. Skills and knowledge can quickly transfer from one group to another because Ireland is a small country where many paramilitaries and criminals meet in a social capacity (Moran, 2008, p. 270).

Much research on paramilitary involvement in organized crime is dated. There have been just four academic papers published on the topic in the last decade (Hourigan et al., 2018; Jupp & Garrod, 2019; Morrison & Lynch, 2018; Purvis, 2022). Paramilitary structures, targets, and motives have changed, and the literature fails to account for the growth in far-right extremism in Ireland (see Europol, 2020). As the far-right are (at present) a predominantly online phenomena, consisting of a disparate network of small cliques and individuals, they will be funded differently to paramilitaries.

Distinctive Feature 5: International Mobility

We know from media and intelligence reports that Irish OCGs and illicit enterprises are active in other countries (see UN Office of Drugs and Crime and Europol, 2021). This movement takes three forms: commuting, migrating, and mobile OCGs. There are reports of Irish actors *commuting* to other countries for one-off jobs (see McLean, 2019) and *migrating* for longer periods, often to coordinate illicit trade from transhipment countries. Indeed, there were an estimated 1,200 Republic of Ireland citizens imprisoned overseas in 2015: 85% were in the United Kingdom with the reminder spread across 30 countries (Gavin, 2015). While only a small percentage of these will have been involved in illicit enterprise, it is indicative of the scale of movement.

Five examples are illustrative.

- Example 1: In 2010, Europol coordinated Operation Shovel, which targeted "a well-known [Irish] family clan" reported to be involved in kidnapping, money laundering, and smuggling various commodities across Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UN Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2016). In April 2022, the United States placed the network on its Office of Foreign Assets Control list and offered a US$5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of core members, who were living in the United Arab Emirates (BBC, 2022).
- Example 2: An Irish citizen, living in the United Kingdom, opened car dealerships in Ireland and the United Kingdom, which were used to launder money generated by drug trafficking (Reynolds, 2019).
- Example 3: An Irish citizen was arrested in Spain for conspiring to import drugs into the United Kingdom. He had an address in the United Kingdom, had been living in Spain, and was arrested after a joint British/Irish/Spanish investigation (Gallagher, 2021).
- Example 4: A number of Irish citizens, as long-term residents of China, have acted as brokers between manufacturers or wholesalers of counterfeit cigarettes and enterprises smuggling cigarettes to Ireland, as both a destination market and transhipment point for the British market (Antonopoulos et al., 2018).
- Example 5: An Irish citizen was found, during a joint Irish/British operation, at a "safe house" in the UK. Believed to have fled the state to evade an investigation into the intimidation of an Irish business group, he had previously been incarcerated in Belgium for machinery theft and received a suspended sentence in Ireland for illegally transporting waste from Ireland to Scotland (Foy, 2021a).

There are also some *mobile OCGs* involved in theft and fraud across multiple countries. One (possibly atypical) example is a family-gang who, partnered with a Hong Kong-based broker (Peachey, 2016), were investigated between 2010 and 2012 in the Europol coordinated Operation Oakleaf. Europol (2019) reported how they operated "companies all over Europe . . . to legitimise and cover their illegal activities," which included the theft of 58 rhino horns from across Europe and smuggled to Asia, the

theft of £57 million worth of Chinese antiquities from two British museums (Peachey, 2016), and distribution of counterfeit goods, tarmac fraud, and/or money laundering in countries across the Americas, Australia, China, Europe, and South Africa (Europol, 2011). More recently, members of the gang were charged in France for smuggling rhino horns and ivory; French authorities had uncovered two workshops used to transform ivory into powder for transportation to Asia (Willsher & Carroll, 2021). In short, the group took the illicit enterprises they had engaged in Ireland (theft and fraud) and "transplanted" (see Varese, 2011) them to other countries.

Why Do Irish Criminals Migrate?

There is a relatively large research literature on why those involved in organized crime migrate across international borders (see Morselli et al., 2011), including studies on OCGs and illicit enterprises from: Albania (Arsovska, 2014), Russia (Varese, 2011), Italy (Allum, 2016; Calderoni et al., 2016; Sergi, 2021), and Vietnam (Silverstone & Savage, 2010). There are, however, no academic studies on the migration of Irish criminals.

Allum (2016) provides a useful framework for assessing why actors migrate and where they migrate to. Her research on the Camorra Mafia found that migrations are driven by push and pull factors. The push factors are quite rational: Actors leave when the risk of violence or arrest increases beyond levels actors find acceptable. The pull factors are more complex and help guide decisions on destination. This often includes the pull of having friends or family in the new location, perceptions of lax legislation or enforcement, and opportunities to fly under law enforcement radars. Importantly, the migrating Mafioso did not transplant their existing enterprises but adapted to new environments: Those who had relied on extortion in Italy became consultants or traffickers in the new country, and tended to eschew violence. This is because they wanted to remain anonymous and often lacked the local knowledge, social capital, and criminal capital, needed to run their businesses as they had at home.

This model may be useful for evaluating Irish criminal mobility. It is possible that Irish criminals are pushed by pressure from law enforcement and violent conflicts: Several drug traffickers are believed to have left Ireland in response to the introduction of stringent criminal forfeiture laws (Hourigan et al., 2018) while actors involved in recent feuds have reportedly relocated to countries—including Dubai, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom—to avoid arrest and/or violence (see Foy, 2021b; Lally, 2019; Reynolds, 2019).

Pull factors likely follow the routine activity of migration, with a combination of entrepreneurial and lifestyle choices. For example, Sands (2007, p. 218) suggests that traffickers were attracted to Spain's location as a "natural gateway" for drugs into Europe; large tourist industry, which provides investment and money laundering opportunities while allowing foreign criminals to blend-in with tourists; and, most importantly, institutional weaknesses, including high levels of corruption and "lack of a proactive and systematic anti-organized crime policy" (Sands, 2007, p. 220).

The choice may also parallel the migratory patterns of the Irish population in general. That is, they may choose a destination because they have a connection to the area, or the area is already part of their routine movements. Migration to Spain is unsurprising when we consider that many Irish people are familiar with Spain as a popular holiday destination and there is a large diaspora community. Similar arguments may be applied to migration to the United Kingdom. That is, sometimes the reasons for choosing a new location can be found in the mundane aspects of our routine movements (see Farrell, 1998).

There is no evidence that groups change once they leave Ireland, but it is likely. An Irish drug wholesaler who moves to Britain or Spain may need to build a network of suppliers and buyers, which takes time. They may not possess the cultural, social, or criminal capital in the new town they enjoyed back home. The reputations they had in Dublin or Cork—for violence or delivering an efficient service—may not have followed them abroad. Building these reputations takes time and is essential for illicit business (see Marsh, 2019; Windle, 2018b).

Migrating is not always easy and can be costly for established enterprises. Not only do changes to business cost money, resources, and time, but many do not want to leave; they like living at home, would miss local comforts, and enjoy their reputations as local "hard-men." The desire to be seen as a gangster drives much organized crime, is often more important than money, and can be difficult to leave behind. Nonetheless, migrating may be the safer bet for those under threat. This theory is plausible but, as with almost all aspects of Irish organized crime, sits in the box marked "needs researching."

Discussion: Will the Structure of Irish Organized Crime Become Less Distinctive?

OCGs and illicit enterprise structures are often founded upon "the environment in which they are working and the tasks to be undertaken" (Natarajan et al., 2015, p. 417). Structures can be affected by fluctuations in global, national, and local markets for illicit goods; the type of commodity or service sold; responses to law enforcement, and employment of new or different technologies (Natarajan et al., 2015; Windle, 2021). Hobbs's (2001) analysis of East London is relevant to understanding the complexity of Irish organized crime structures and why they will likely change. He argued that, as illicit enterprises are reflections of the legitimate labor force, changes to the local economy and local culture affect changes to the structure and activity of local organized crime.

The picture Hobbs (2001, p. 550) paints of East London is, in some respects, reminiscent of parts of Ireland. He showed how East London's working-class areas possessed strong histories, cultures, and identities, and that "family firms" were central to local communities. Family members coordinated the activities of other members of the "firm," who were all fully enmeshed in their local communities. The structure of the firm, and the enmeshment of it within communities, started to change from the 1960s with the closure of the London Docks and other traditional working-class

industry. The privatization of council housing in the 1980s contributed further to this process. Deindustrialization and changes to housing policy caused a mass migration of families from East London, facilitated by the growing mobility of people in response to improvements in transport infrastructures, communications, and education. These separate phenomena collectively contributed to

> The fragmentation of both traditional working class neighbourhoods, and the local labour markets upon which they were dependent, [which] has created arenas that have made it difficult for family-based units to establish the kind of parochial dominance they once enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s. (Hobbs, 2001, p. 550)

The family firm is, however, "far from obsolete" (Hobbs, 2001, p. 551). Rather it adapted to these changes in the local economy and culture, and to changes in the global political economy. As with licit enterprises, firms adopted looser network structures. They became less hierarchical and more "informal collectives of ad hoc groupings" (Hobbs, 2001, p. 552), more *an* element rather than *the* element of a network. In other words, relatives work together to import drugs while also undertaking their own enterprises, as sole traders or in partnership with others, within or outside the family. This situation was not unique to East London. Adamoli and colleagues (1998, p. 24) suggest that OCGs across the world adapted to globalization, and improvements in law enforcement, by changing their structures to suit a more networked world in which they are cogs in wider transnational networks. They use the example of how Cosa Nostra's influence was reduced by its failure to adapt "to the flexibility of the market" and maintenance of "old, rigid and monolithic structures."

Given that trust is a commodity low in criminal networks, and kinship binds networks together, the family will always be central to organized crime (Berlusconi, 2022; Windle, 2018b). East London family firms did not disappear but became brand names which communicated to potential partners and competitors that individual family members can be trusted and feared. Those associated with "the firm" could use the family's mythology and reputation to support independent illicit enterprises (Hobbs, 2001; also Harvey & Hornsby, 2016).

Hobbs (2001) argues that these changes mirror changes in legitimate markets. Capitalism has become even more disorganized, more exploitative and predatory, than it was 20 years ago. For example, more people are now employed on precarious contracts. In Ireland, as in East London, the local shop that had been in the family for generations has closed, replaced by a multinational franchise sportswear outlet employing young people on zero-hour contracts for minimum wage.

Calling an OCG or illicit enterprise a "family-gang" offers little insight into the network's actual structure. It does not, for example, clarify if a matriarch or patriarch exerts complete control in a hierarchical structure, or whether the family represents a brand whereby influential family members exert some authority over, or within, looser networks. Journalist Paul Williams's (2020) description of one family fits the second type. He describes a strong central figure, supported by brothers, and surrounded by nephews mostly uninvolved in family enterprises. Instead, the younger generation

worked together in their own gang, independently and/or as part of a large trafficking network. They used the family name, alongside the contacts and authority of older family members, to facilitate deals and avoid harm. While the media often talk of this family as a "family-gang" it is, as portrayed by Williams, the embodiment of the looser network described by Hobbs.

If illicit markets are distorted reflections of licit markets, then Ireland's current labor environment points to a further loosening of OCG structures, for four main reasons. First, many Irish criminals are mobile. They live and work in foreign countries and form part of transnational networks, and thriving in global markets requires flexibility (Adamoli et al., 1998). Second, the increased use of information technology, and shift toward new psychoactive substances, means that enterprises that once required a physical presence and cohesive group, such as importing drugs or extortion, can be conducted online that requires a chain of one or two people (Windle, 2021). Third, successive Irish governments have embraced neo-liberal policies and practices. The neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, and austerity measures imposed during the Great Recession, undermined some traditional working-class industries, weakened public services, and increased levels of precarious employment (Lynch et al., 2017; O'Hearn, 2003). Consequently, Ireland has a relatively high level of household joblessness and one of Europe's highest levels of economic inequality, although disposable income is closer to the EU average once income tax and social transfers are included (Nolad & Maître, 2021). Consequently, many areas have high concentrations of people suffering unemployment or insecure employment (see Cambridge et al., 2022). Finally, the lack of social and affordable housing in many Irish cities risks fragmenting communities and weakening family bonds (Hearne, 2020), which could weaken Ireland's traditional emphasis on the family.

Conclusion

The argument here is that one of the factors that makes Irish organized crime distinctive—the family-gang structure—may be disappearing, to a point. Hierarchical family structures are too clunky and un-wielding for our networked neoliberal world. As with licit industry, illicit markets need flexible and adaptable networks willing to work with a variety of actors. Looser networks are likely to become the norm, if they have not done so already. The world of organized crime is, much like the world of legitimate business, becoming more homogeneous, less distinctive but also more exploitative and predatory.

The future of feuding is less certain. Modern OCGs often avoid excessive violence because it is bad for business. But violence, whether connected to feuds or over illicit markets, is seldom fully rational. Rather, violence is often learned early as a local subcultural response to economic inequality and social exclusion (see Anderson, 1999; Cambridge et al., 2022). Feuding is concentrated into a relatively small number of areas, and those engaged in feuding often lack the skills to work within the new economy (Marsh, 2019; Windle, 2019). As such, the frequency and intensity of feuds will depend, to a large extent, on whether the country can level the playing field.

This article has highlighted five features that *may* make the Irish organized crime milieu distinctive. While none of these five features are unique to Ireland in and of themselves, when considered together they may make Ireland distinctive. This said, another of this article's core arguments is that there is insufficient research into any of these dynamics. It is possible that further research could uncover that, for example, the family-gang is less common than often believed, or few illicit entrepreneurs ever leave the state. Much further research is needed to clarify the structure of organized crime in Ireland and the changes occurring.

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Notes

1. The Oxford English Dictionary defines distinctive as possessing a "distinguishing mark or quality" while unique means "there is only one." For example, Galeotti (1998, p. 415) called the Russian mafia "a distinctive form of organised crime" while identifying parallels with Italian mafias.
2. McCord (1997) made a similar argument against the frontier culture explanation of violence in America. Frontier theory proposed high levels of violence as an outcome of the individualistic and violent history of the American Wild West. This theory is almost the opposite of colonialism theory: one proposes that violence emanates from individualistic violent times, the other from communal violent times. McCord argued instead that violence is founded within structural inequality.
3. Recent studies have, for example, noted the influence of colonialism on organized crime or gangs in Nigeria (Ellis, 2016), Trinidad (Baird et al., 2022) and the United States (Durán & Campos, 2020).
4. Between the late-1960s and 1998, Northern Ireland suffered a protracted conflict referred to as the "Troubles" in which over 3,600 people died and between 40,000 and 100,000 were injured (Peake & Lynch, 2016). The conflict involved the British military and several loyalist and republican paramilitary organizations. There is evidence of collusion between the military and some loyalist paramilitaries (McGovern, 2015). While much of the conflict was based in Northern Ireland, republican paramilitaries conducted ancillary operations in the Republic of Ireland, including fundraising and training (Morrison, 2013). Paramilitary activity continues, albeit at a lower level than the peak years of the Troubles (Europol, 2021).

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