

Organized crime in the contemporary world

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Organized crime has long been a reality of the criminal landscape in many countries. Under the definition provided in the Organized Crime Control Act (U. S., 1970), it constitutes " the unlawful activities of ... a highly organized, disciplined association..." (Wikipedia, 2006). While membership in these organizations may be demanding, many individuals see great benefits in such affiliation.

Organized crime has existed for centuries, but in the 21st century its functioning has undergone serious transformations. It has become a major threat to the national security because globalization has led to one undesired consequence: crime became global in scope following globalization of trade and capital flows. In a way, transnational criminal organizations have become similar to transnational corporations in their global reach. Although their structures are often based on family ties, it is quite common that these families will include many members living in different states.

The current situation is also characterized by shifts occurring in the structure of an organized group. Traditionally, these groupings were often analogous to a corporation or government organization as they were structured like a pyramid with rulers at the top who passed their influence down the lines of authority.

An example is the renowned Japanese Yakuza, " described as having a kaicho (boss or father having absolute authority in the group), wakato (deputy or captain), and wakai shu or soldiers, the ordinary members - which seem to point at a hierarchy" (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006).

The Italian Mafia in the United States and elsewhere consists of family groups led by the leader of the family – the Don. He delegates part of the authority to the consigliere (personal advisor and economic boss), the underboss (head of the guard), and many other local leaders. Today, the structures become more dynamic and often becomes more horizontal.

The benefits of being a member of the organized crime group include affiliation with a strong organization with a reputation in the criminal world, often an improved economic position and emotional support from bonding with other criminals.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (n. d.) notes that some people joint gangs “ for the emotional, physical or social need to feel part of a community”, “ to feel accepted by others”, and “ to rebel against the “ norm”. The disadvantages of membership can include the need to adhere to a strict code of ethics maintained in the group, the requirement to obey the commands of the leader, and danger of penalties imposed on members that can in many cases be very severe and include death.

Membership in the group is often ethnically-based. Thus, non-Italians are reported to be kept to supportive positions in Mafia gangs, and will hardly ever make it to top posts. A person entering the group will often go through an initiation ritual in which this individual will be required to commit a certain crime or demonstrate loyalty to the group. In any case, recommendation is essential for making it into a crime group.

In my view, organized crime is best explained by learning theories, such as “Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association, developed in 1947” (O'Connor, 2004).

This theory attributes criminal behavior to learned patterns that are best acquired in criminal groups. A person who becomes part of such a group will learn certain ways of behavior from others that become his or her cultural norms. Organized crime groups are often not only professional environments: members socialize between themselves, interact with each other on a daily basis, and spend free time together. Often isolated from the rest of the world, a criminal becomes immersed in such groupings, living by their laws and knowing no others.

This is why organized crime is such a strong and pervasive phenomenon in the contemporary world. Many people and organizations find it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome it. Organized crime provides a framework for many illegal activities, and people flock to such groups for institutional support.

References

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