A Decade in Hell: Assessing the Hype and Reality of Hells Angels’ “Dominance” in Quebec Drug Markets

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A Case Study in the «Rise and Fall» of a Public Threat

- **Question**: How dominant were the Hells Angels in Quebec drug markets?

- **Focus**: Three features of the organization:
  - lethal violence
  - communication network
  - financial structure of drug distribution operations

- **Aim**: To demonstrate that there is more to criminal market structuring than the mere presence of a dominant organization that dictates the will of its leaders.
The Hells Angels in Quebec

- Since the 1980s: A consistent target of law-enforcement agencies
- Since the 1990s: The dominant criminal organization claim
- 1994-2001: A biker ‘war’ with other rival biker and drug trafficking groups (Rock Machine... Alliance...)
  - Estimates of murders range between 120-200 people over this period.
  - Collateral damages from escalating violence (harm/death to ‘civilians’)
- Triggered anti-gang (gangsterism) legislation in Canada (passed in 1997; modified in 2001)
- Public notoriety/aura (québécois de pure-laine)
March 2001: 143 members and associates of the Quebec Hells Angels were arrested in a major crackdown (Operation Springtime).

- the result of a six-year task force that combined the Montreal Police, the Quebec Provincial Police, and the RCMP.

- Task force mirrored the structure of the Hells Angels (six chapters in the province = six regional investigation teams in the province)
  - These teams remain in operation today.

2002: a crackdown was conducted against the Bandidos

2006: a second crackdown was conducted against the remaining Hells Angels chapters.
Questioning Authority

- How were the Hells Angels perceived:
  - A formal organization (as a biker consortium and as a drug distribution consortium)
  - A monopolistic, centralizing force in the drug market
  - Clear and dominant leaders (the Nomads)
  - Leaders (Nomads) served as ‘generals’ during the ‘war’, ordering lower-level members to kill on command

- What has organized crime research taught us:
  - The formal or bureaucratic-like organizational claim is rarely supported in past research.
  - Criminal markets are rarely as organized as we commonly believe
  - Formal leadership is rare and volatile.
  - Criminal markets are much more flexible
1) The Biker ‘War’

- There was a clear escalation in violence.
  - 261 victims (126 murders and 135 attempted murders)

- There were clear signs that a significant biker-related conflict was in place.
  - 55 percent of victims were Hells Angels members or affiliates; 45 percent were with the Alliance.

- There was a strong reaction from police and public authorities.
  - Could this reaction have been handled differently?
Percentage of Gang-Related Account Settlements Per All Account Settlements (Quebec, 1991-2002)
Account Settlements Attributed to Biker Conflict, 1994-2001
Account Settlements by Biker Gang
Biker-Related Arrests, Law-Enforcement Phases, and Collateral Damage
The Biker ‘War’ (cont.)

- Law-enforcement did react, but...
  - The first specialized squad was assembled only after collateral damage from the biker conflict emerged.
  - The conflict was over after Operation Springtime, but attrition had already been observed during the preceding year (there were fewer people left to be killed).
  - The law-enforcement strategy had a dual objective: to stop violence and stop HA dominance of drug markets.
  - Harm reduction and prioritization (remove the smaller actor in the conflict)
2) Communication Networks Surrounding the Hells Angels

- The Intercepted Communication Network
  - Based on electronic and physical surveillance logs

- Final network is comprised of 174 participants
  - 48 participants had a formal status within the Hells Angels or Rockers
    - 12 were Nomads
    - 10 were Nomad Prospects
    - 26 were Rockers

- Degree and Betweenness Centrality

- Question: How central were these ranked members in the network?
Hells Angels’ Communication Network (by Degree Centrality)
Hells Angels’ Communication Network (by Betweenness Centrality)
Hells Angels’ Communication Network

Regarding Key Players in the Network:

- The most connected participants were at the lower-level ranks of the organization.
  - Note that the principal targets of the investigations were the Nomad members.

- The main brokers were not Hells Angels members, but some Nomads were higher on brokerage than other members in the organization.
3) The Hells Angels’ Financial Network

- Based on accounting files kept by the Quebec Hells Angels between May 1999 and December 2000.
  - 68 participants included (pseudonyms used)
  - Transaction network (cocaine and haschisch wholesale)

- Question: Does network positioning matter more than organizational status?
Variables

- **Dependent variable:**

  - **Volume of traffic**
    - Total money exchanged transactions around each participant
      - *It all balances out to 0*...

  - Mean: $3,512,260
  - Range: $1,260 to $43,071,273
Variables (cont.)

- Independent variables:
  - **Organizational status** (10% cut)
    - 41% paid to Hells Angels; 16% received
    - The 43% who did not receive/pay were not Hells Angels members...
      - An indication of membership and not rank
  
  - Network positioning
    - Betweenness centrality (based on transaction network)
Variables (cont.)

- Control variable:
  - **Main drug** (Cocaine or Haschisch)
    - 86% were involved primarily in cocaine market

- Question: Which factors account for increases in a participant’s volume of transactions?
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<tr>
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<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main drug (hash, cocaine)</td>
<td>( b = 0.081 )</td>
<td>( b = 0.052 )</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( p = 0.458 )</td>
<td>( p = 0.668 )</td>
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<td>Betweenness centrality</td>
<td>( b = 0.567 )</td>
<td>( b = 0.582 )</td>
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<td>( p &lt; 0.000 )</td>
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<td>Receives 10%</td>
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<td>Pays 10%</td>
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<td>( b = 0.076 )</td>
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<td>( p = 0.541 )</td>
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<td>( R^2 = 0.582 )</td>
<td>( R^2 = 0.593 )</td>
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The Hells Angels’ Financial Network

- The Hells Angels did not act as an organization in the overall financial structure—it was individually-based, with only members having to pay a cut to the organization.

- Hells Angels members were not the most active participants.

- Betweenness centrality (network positioning) was the significant predictor for transactional activity within this drug distribution context.
General Conclusion

- The police did arrest a considerable portion of the organization’s members and associates (most were convicted and are still incarcerated).
- The Quebec Hells Angels are no longer perceived as the dominant participants in the province’s drug markets.
  - but the organization’s aura still lingers in threat assessments.
- Account settlements in Quebec dropped to their normal rates.
- Even without this ‘dominant organization’, prices for illegal drugs have not fluctuated since the 1990s.
- Police claim that, after the Hells Angels were incarcerated, a new dominant group (street gangs) emerged to fill the void.
- There was no void to be filled...
General Conclusion

- Always prioritize controlling violence over drug market crimes (you could always take care of the drug market crimes after escalation of violence has been resolved).

- There was no dominant criminal organization in Quebec.

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