

Entry mechanisms into the Belgian synthetic drugs market

Abstract

Organised crime groups prefer existing ties, such as family and friendship, to maximise trust. However, they might also win from a certain degree of heterogeneity. External individuals might add value in the form of skills, expertise or money. Accordingly, including suitable co-offenders is an important activity for the organised crime group. This article studies the entry mechanisms of individuals into the synthetic drugs market in Belgium, namely by gaining insight into the factors and mechanisms introducing people into this market. Interviews with 29 inmates detained for their involvement in the production and/or trafficking of synthetic drugs in Belgium revealed that: (1) poly drug supply markets exist in Belgium; (2) financial reasons to enter the market are common; and (3) there are six different entry mechanisms, in which trust is crucial, namely criminal family ties, criminal friends, drug use, earlier time in prison, outlaw motorcycle gang membership, and criminal professional ties.

Keywords synthetic drugs market, Belgium, entry mechanisms, organised crime

Introduction

Organised crime might be complex: illegal activities are often far apart both geographically and temporally (Bovenkerk, 2000; Cornish & Clarke, 2002; Kleemans & Van de Bunt 2008). This complexity asks for cooperation between (groups of) offenders so the illegal activities may be successfully committed (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). This means that including suitable co-offenders to join the group is an important mission for the sustainability of an organised crime group (Tremblay, 1993).

Entry mechanisms into organised crime

Little empirical evidence is found on the phenomenon of criminal groups deliberately and systematically recruiting individuals into their illegal activities (Calderoni et al., 2020). The methods criminal organised groups use to get new members involved differ. Candidate members often play an active role themselves in entering organised crime (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Therefore, researchers prefer the terms ‘organised crime involvement’ or ‘entry mechanisms’ rather than ‘recruitment’ when questioning how individuals become involved in organised crime (Van Koppen, 2021).

Generally, criminology research roughly distinguishes two groups of entry mechanisms into organised crime: (1) offenders who become involved in crime at an early age, so called “evolvers”, and (2) offenders who become involved later on through specific life events, via so called “social snowball effects” (Van Koppen, 2013; 2021).

The first group of offenders, “evolvers”, have an extensive record of offences and the stepping stone for their criminal career goes back to criminal family ties or friends at a young age who eventually become co-offenders (Van Koppen, 2021). Regarding criminal families, literature focuses on intergenerational transmission. Sons, and to a lesser extent daughters, follow in the footsteps of their fathers (Jahanshahi et al., 2023; Spapens & Moors, 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2019). Moreover, research shows that women may participate in criminal groups through their relationship with a boyfriend, husband, father, brother or male friend who is already member of the criminal group (De Seranno & Colman, 2023; Diviák et al., 2020; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Many criminal groups prefer existing social ties, such as family and friendship ties (Guerreiro et al., 2021; Paoli, 2003; Van Koppen, 2021; Von Lampe, 2016). After all, trust is crucial to their illegal activities, which involve significant risks, including, for example major financial risks (Bruinsma & Bernasco 2004; Comunal et al., 2020; Von Lampe & Johansen 2004).

The second group of offenders face the opportunity to engage in or join a criminal group later in life (Van Koppen, 2021). Transfer of knowledge and contacts through social ties may lead to criminal connections and may gradually lead to mutual dependence on resources, for example money, expertise or contacts. As they proceed, they may generate new criminal associations, attract new members from their own social network, which leads to a widening-spread and “snowball effect” (Kleemans & Van de Bunt, 2008). For example, conventional work may provide an entry into criminality. Whereas having a job is

seen as a protective factor in traditional life course criminology (Laub & Sampson, 2003), for offenders of organised crime having a job may cause an increase in crime (Van Koppen et al., 2022). This effect appears to be caused primarily by independent entrepreneurs, such as bookkeepers, lawyers or self-employed workers in the transportation industry (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Another example are leisure activities, such as spending time in local bars, night life and motorcycle clubs, where individuals from different social worlds meet (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Regarding the latter, outlaw motorcycle gangs are highly selective groups where recruitment and admission of new members accure according to own standards and procedures. So called “prospects” undergo a lengthy process of screening, testing and training (Paoli, 2003; Von Lampe, 2016). Motorcycle clubs include a distinctive and recognisable value system and a set of principles and symbols which may not be violated by their members (Rostami & Mondani, 2019). Finally, certain life events later on in life may cause illegal opportunities more or less accidentally, for example significant financial setbacks due to debts or bankruptcy (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). This second group appears to be bigger in organised crime compared to other types of crime (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). Everyday contacts may become bridges to organised crime, which is described as the social opportunity structure (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). The social opportunity structure may be an explanation for offenders’ later entry into organised crime because it is their social network which enables them to match a specific criminal opportunity (Van Koppen et al., 2022). Research shows that criminal careers in organised crime have a later start in comparison to non-organised types of crime and evolve quickly to more serious and harmful types of crime, such as man slaughter and psychical assault (Francis et al, 2013; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008).

Criminal groups might urge for a certain degree of heterogeneity in their organisation by including both family or friends and external members (Van de Bunt & Kleemans, 2007). Both weak ties with for example distant friends or acquaintances, and strong ties with for example close neighbours (Granovetter, 1973) might be useful for the organised crime group. An offender adds value to a group when he or she brings along social ties, expertise or capacity, providing access to profitable criminal opportunities (Morselli, 2009; Black et al., 2005; Comunale et al., 2020).

Entry mechanisms into the synthetic drugs market in Belgium from production to retail

A specific type of organised crime, is drug-related organised crime. The Belgian synthetic drugs¹ market is one of the biggest supply markets worldwide.

Belgium and the Netherlands – and to a lesser extent Poland and the Czech Republic – are considered Europe’s main producers of synthetic drugs (UNODC, 2021). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of Belgian synthetic drugs production sites has been rising sharply (De Ruyver, 2006). Production sites are mainly linked to amphetamine and ecstasy. Since 2018, also a smaller but significant number of methamphetamine production sites are being dismantled on Belgian territory (UNODC, 2021). Mostly large-scale production is found in Belgium, as opposed to kitchen labs, which are more common in, for example, the United States or Czech Republic (UNODC, 2021). Production processes evolved during the years and are known to have a high degree of professionalisation, which leads to increasing production capacities (Boerman et al., 2017; EMCDDA, 2019; Tops et al., 2018; UNODC, 2021). Additionally, Belgium is also known for its international synthetic drug trafficking and knows a widespread synthetic drugs sales market, reaching, among others, Asia, Australia and New Zealand (UNODC, 2021).

Research shows that the Dutch and Belgian drug markets, including the criminal groups involved, are intertwined (Colman et al., 2018; De Ruyver & De Middelmeer, 2017; EMCDDA, 2019). Their activities are mainly concentrated in the border region with the Netherlands, although in recent years an expansion throughout the country has been observed. Consequently, the criminal groups active on the Belgian synthetic drugs market usually consist of Belgian-Dutch partnerships operating across borders, in which Dutch criminals are usually in charge (Spapens et al., 2016). Furthermore, an increased influence of outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs)² within the world of synthetic drugs is noticed in both countries. In

¹ Synthetic drugs are, opposite to plant-based drugs, laboratory-made molecular compounds that do not occur in nature (UNODC, 2021). Examples of synthetic drugs are amphetamines, ketamine or GHB. The three main drugs produced in Belgium are MDMA (XTC), amphetamine and methamphetamine (EMCDDA, 2019). Examples of plant-based drugs tabaco, cannabis or hash.

² OMGs shape their image of being a brotherhood of deviant men, sharing their passion for motorcycles, and rebelling against the prevailing order within society and its rules. OMG members follow a strict set of own rules and agreements. Furthermore, authorities believe OMGs are strongly involved in organized crime (Geurtjens et al., 2018).

Belgium, several OMGs are operating, including the Hells Angels, Blue Angels MC, Outlaws MC, Satudarah MC, No Surrender, and Bandidos MC (Geurtjens et al., 2018). OMGs provide benefits in terms of protection of group members and access to an extensive international network (Boerman et al., 2017, Van Deuren et al., 2022).

Specific knowledge on the entry mechanisms of group members involved in the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs in Belgium – and by extension, in the Netherlands – is however lacking.

Study aim and questions

This article aims to fill a knowledge gap on entry mechanisms in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market, namely by gaining insight into the factors and mechanisms introducing people into the supply side of this market. The supply side of the drug market is generally divided into four levels, namely production (manufacturing of drugs), wholesale (the international import and export), middle level (national supply of larger quantities of drugs) and retail level (local supply of smaller quantities mainly to drug users) (Colman et al., 2018; EMCDDA, 2019).

Consequently, the main research question answered in this article is: *How do organised crime group members enter the Belgian synthetic drugs market?* This question is answered by responding to the following sub-questions: (1) *Who are the people active on the Belgian synthetic drugs market?* (2) *What motives prompt people to enter the market?* And (3) *What factors facilitate involvement in an organised crime group active on the Belgian synthetic drugs market?*

Methods

Data collection procedures: semi-structured interviews with inmates

This study includes 29 semi-structured interviews conducted with people detained for their involvement in the production and/or trafficking of synthetic drugs in Belgium. Respondents were recruited by hand-

ing out information letters and informative flyers through prison staff. Inclusion criteria were the following: (1) (has been) active on the synthetic drugs market (namely XTC/MDMA, amphetamines or methamphetamines), (2) over 18 years old; (3) Dutch or English speaking; and (4) no denial of illegal activities.

Respondents participated voluntarily in an interview. The interviews took place in 7 Flemish prisons between August 2021 and July 2023. Interviews followed a topic list and were audio-recorded. The following topics were covered in the interviews: demographics, information about the drug market and the respondents' role within the synthetic drugs market, information about the group to which respondents belong(ed) (e.g. number of group members and interrelationships, leadership and rules) and entry mechanisms.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study and the small sample size of incarcerated individuals, it is essential to approach the interpretation of the findings in this research with caution. The reliability and validity of the study should be considered with flexibility, particularly concerning the authenticity and credibility of the respondents' experiences as they convey and elucidate them. The experiences of incarcerated individuals may also differ from the experiences of individuals who were not incarcerated or individuals who were not caught by the justice system. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the researcher's subjectivity in interpreting and analysing the interview data. Drawing comprehensive conclusions about the entire synthetic drugs market is not feasible based on the findings of this small-scale exploratory study. Respondents frequently exhibit a protracted history of incarceration, extending at times beyond a decade, and during the course of interviews, they made references to their previous involvement in the synthetic drug market. The temporal intervals between these references can be quite substantial, and it is well-established that drug markets are characterized by significant volatility and dynamism (UNODC, 2021). Consequently, there exists a plausible scenario wherein recent developments within the synthetic drug market in Belgium, unaddressed by our respondents, may not have been comprehensively encompassed within the purview of this study.

Analysis

Interview recordings underwent verbatim transcription, and these transcripts were subsequently imported into the Nvivo software for the purpose of conducting thematic analysis. Our analysis employed a continuum of deductive and inductive coding methodologies to identify themes and patterns, aiming to achieve a deeper comprehension of our dataset.

Initially, a comprehensive literature review was used to compile a predefined list of codes, encompassing the major themes of our study, which include demographics, the drug market, and the initiation and conclusion of criminal careers. This list of predetermined codes served as the foundation for our deductive coding process when analysing the interviews.

Secondly, a ground-up approach was adopted. This involved a re-examination of the interviews, allowing new codes and subcodes to emerge from the data. These codes, which encompassed information on OMGs and inmate socialisation, were subsequently incorporated into our evolving coding framework.

By combining both deductive and inductive coding, our research aimed to both affirm existing concepts regarding entry mechanisms into the Belgian synthetic drugs market and augment these insights with fresh perspectives and ideas concerning pathways into this drug market.

Results

This study sheds a first light on the entry mechanisms of criminal group members into the Belgian synthetic drugs market. During the semi-structured interviews, several factors were mentioned as facilitators for drug market involvement. We highlight below the following factors: (1) criminal family ties; (2) the influence of criminal friends, (3) drug use leading to drug trafficking; (4) influence of time in prison; (5) outlaw motor cycle gangs; and (6) professional working ties. First, we highlight the motivations and explanations given by respondents for entering the synthetic drugs market.

Individuals active on the Belgian synthetic drugs market

In this paragraph, characteristics of our sample (n = 29) are highlighted. This overview provides a small-scale descriptive analysis of individuals active within organised crime groups involved in synthetic drugs production and trafficking in Belgium (see table 1).

Table 1: Demographics of the sample (n = 29)

Mean age	45,4
Range	[27,71]
Gender	
male	24
female	5
Country/region of birth	
Belgium	17
Netherlands	2
North Africa	2
Central Africa	1
East Asia	1
West Asia	1
South Asia	5
Previous convictions	
yes	21
no	3
unknown	5
Drug use	
yes	24
no	5
Involvement in drugs market*	
2CB	2
amphetamines	19
cannabis	14
cocaine	14
GHB	6
heroin	3
ketamine	3
LSD	1
MDMA/XTC	20
methamphetamine	3
Level of supply chain*	
manufacturing	11
wholesale	8
middle level	4
retail level	13

*more than one category per respondent possible

One of the inclusion criteria was being an adult. As such, the youngest respondent was 27 years old, the oldest was 71 years old. The mean age of the sample was 45 years old. The group was mostly male (n

= 24) and most of the respondents were born in Belgium (n = 17), followed by South Asia (n = 5). The majority of respondents had no partner (11 are single, 10 are divorced) and had one or more children (n = 19).

The majority answered positively when asked if they had been in prison before their actual prison stay (n = 21). Most of the respondents have used drugs once in their lifetime, only five respondents out of 29 had never used drugs.

Respondents were selected based on their involvement in the synthetic drug supply market in Belgium: 20 respondents mentioned to be involved in XTC/MDMA and 19 respondents in amphetamines. Most respondents described being involved in retail (i.e. selling small quantities to primarily drug users; n = 13). The second largest group were producers (i.e. manufacturing on industrial scale, namely production of more than 50 grams per production process using professional hardware and/or production of synthetic drugs with the purpose of drug trafficking instead of personal drug use, UNODC, 2021; n = 11).

Respondents active in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market are also often active in other drug supply markets (i.e. polydrug supply markets). Other drug supply markets that were mentioned besides synthetic drugs were cocaine (n = 14) and cannabis (n = 14). Respondents are primarily involved at the retail level for both cannabis and cocaine, however, some respondents are involved at more than one level. For cannabis, 3 respondents indicate to be involved in production, 3 in wholesale, 1 in middle level and 9 in retail. For cocaine, two respondents were also involved in production, 5 in wholesale, 2 in middle level and 8 in retail.

Entry mechanisms into the synthetic drugs market in Belgium

In this paragraph we highlight six entries into the synthetic drugs market mentioned by our respondents. For each entry, we also consider the link to the four levels of the supply chain, namely production, wholesale, middle level and retail level.

Entry mechanism 1: It runs in the family

It appears that especially male figures in the family, such as fathers, brothers, uncles or cousins, may serve as criminal role models. These criminal role models are often individuals who assume the status of “*pater familias*” and exert great influence on other, often younger, family members.

“Our group was led by three brothers. The oldest brother taught it to the others in the group. He knew chemistry so he taught us: that’s how you do that, and that, and that. And he had access to the precursors and chemicals. Afterwards, we produced it all together.” (Interview 28, male, 39 years, active in production)

When focusing on our female respondents, in most cases male relatives or spouses formed led them to enter a criminal group. Female family members may also act as criminal role models. For example, one respondent mentioned that his mother introduced him into the criminal world and also refers to the intergenerational transmission of criminal group membership.

“On my father’s side it is taboo, but on my mother’s side it is not. My mother has also been imprisoned, also because of speed trafficking, 20 kilos was found at our house. I have been in it since I was very, very young. [...] I was introduced to that world by my mother, she knew someone who was a chemist there, I’m still in touch with him.” (Interview 3, male, 32 years, active in production and wholesale)

Working together with family members is considered as a trustworthy cooperation according to our respondents. Family members protect the criminal group and its activities. Family members are, for example, brought in to accomplish a specific task when the criminal group needs trustworthy new members. Or family members are specifically chosen to decrease the risks from law enforcement, e.g. not raising suspicion because of frequent mutual phone calls, messages or visits.

Looking at the levels of the synthetic drug supply chain, we notice that criminal family ties are mostly mentioned by respondents active at the production level (n = 7) and the wholesale level (n = 5). Two respondents at middle level and two respondents at retail level also mentioned this entry pathway to the synthetic drugs market.

Entry mechanism 2: Birds of a feather flock together

Besides family members, criminal friends are a known entry mechanism to organised crime groups. Not only at a young age, but also at a later stage in life, friends may influence individuals and help them enter the criminal world:

“It was through a friend who said: I know a little farmer in West Flanders who makes speed. If you want, my friend said, I will ask the farmer if you can come along one time. My friend said to the farmer: most of what I order from you is for him. And the farmer knew from experience that I paid correctly every time, so after that, I was allowed to meet the farmer.”

(Interview 2, male, 62 years, active in middle and retail level)

Social relationships and new friendships that started in a specific context might have an impact on entering the criminal path. For example, leisure activities (such as being involved in a soccer team) and nightlife are both mentioned as settings where criminal connections might originate.

“I just started playing soccer there and there was another player who actually came up with the proposal. He said: we can make money, a quarter per pill we make and we can make about 30.000 an hour. We have the machine, we have everything. I said: okay, let’s do it!”

(Interview 14, male, 71 years, active in production)

“Because I knew nightclubs very well. I was in clubs from a very young age. From the age of 13 I was already there. I often went to parties where a lot of speed and XTC was used, and that’s how I got to know the older generation. [...] And then you just got to know other dealers, until you can get your stuff very cheap, and you know you’re very close to the source.” (Interview 28, male, 39 years, active in production)

Friends may also influence each other in a more passive way. Two respondents mention they got involved in a crime group because they were helping a friend to pay off his debts to a dealer.

“My roommate was already a driver for that dealer. But he fell ill and got hospitalised and ended in a coma. So I was concerned that he was indebted to that dealer, that this dealer

would come to my house to... So I contacted that dealer myself and asked: does he still have to pay anything? He said: come over, we'll discuss it. And that's how I got in." (Interview 4, female, 38 years, active in wholesale)

Criminal friends as an entry mechanism were mentioned by respondents active at all levels of the supply chain.

Entry mechanism 3: From using drugs to selling it

Using drugs seems often a threshold-lowering stepping stone to selling drugs. From the point of view of users/sellers, it is mainly the financial benefits that make this switch attractive. Some respondents chose to purchase in larger quantities for their group of friends. This social supply of drugs to friends may be, in some cases, the start of a career as dealer.

"By using speed together, you start to hear that there is great demand for it. And then I have a few people, friends of mine, we take speed together at my place and they said: wow, that's good stuff. And then I said: yes, if it interests you, I can always get some for you. That is how it started." (Interview 2, male, 62 years, active in middle and retail level)

Also here, drug use among friends in nightlife is mentioned. Nightclubs may act as criminal gateways to getting to know the right people on the drug market. From using drugs together, they move to buying small amounts of drugs to share among friends while partying, to selling larger amounts to strangers.

"Just through a friend of mine: we went partying and then sniffed speed. First, we tested the drugs, it was good. Then we looked for people in the club, then we started selling in the clubs. And then we took a big profit because speed doesn't cost that much. It was easy to sell. I had been selling since I was 14 years old. That was what I knew and I had the experience of using it myself, which was a big plus!" (Interview 21, male, 27 years, active in retail level)

From the perspective of the criminal group, it appears that the group is always looking for candidates and relies on drug users they know. By selling to the same individuals for years, a bond is created and mutual trust is established. The criminal group benefits from trustworthy new members. In this way,

users are activated by criminal group members to join. However, according to our respondents, co-working with drug users also involves risks. So it is important that the criminal group known him/her for a long time and knows they can count on the new member.

“First, that starts with customers. You start with people that use drugs, then one day you have someone who wants to sell big amounts of drugs, then I’ll give some on credit. I also say: it is better to sell instead of coming here all the time for 20 or 25 grams. Just sell it yourself! I can usually convince them to sell. So long that they work, I just look for workers, honest workers and people that I know, who they are, who their family is...” (Interview 3, male, 32 years, active in production and wholesale)

This third entry into the synthetic drugs market is mentioned by respondents active at all levels of the supply chain. However, a large number of respondents at retail level entered the market through their own drug use (n = 11). For the other levels, the numbers were significantly lower (7 active in manufacturing, 4 in whole sale, and 2 on the middle level).

Entry mechanism 4: Prison as a job market

As described earlier, the majority of respondents has been imprisoned in the past (n = 21), often for non-drug-related offences. During our interviews, this period of incarceration was mentioned by some respondents as an entry mechanism into the synthetic drug supply market and also as the onset of drug use.

“I’m going to be honest: in prison I learned to use drugs. Speed, amphetamine, cocaine, heroin... I learned to use everything in prison.” (Interview 6, female, 63 years, active in middle and retail level)

Some respondents describe prison as “*the place to be*” to get involved with drugs and the supply market. They state that committing minor offences leads to meeting people in prison from whom they learn better and more efficient criminal strategies for the future. These encounters with people active on the synthetic drugs market encourage others to enter the market as well.

“So if you really want to get into it, into the commerce, just get yourself in prison. [...] They arrest you because of a little amount of speed in your pockets. And then, they put you in prison and you get to meet people and they explain to you: you are paying way too much for your drugs, you have to buy it in large quantities! And then after that, they arrest you again. And then again, you meet people in prison and they say: I will tell you how to produce it yourself.” (Interview 8, male, 54 years, active in middle and retail level)

Respondents refer to specific prison conditions. By spending day and night together in this unique society, inmates get to know each other inside out. They build trust and know who they can count on. Trust built up in a prison context influences the decision to cooperate after their time in prison.

“But I got to know him in prison. And so it started step by step. [...] There has to be trust too of course. It’s not like: Jan or Peter came along and we will do something together. No, it doesn’t work like that. You need a little bit of trust. They also see what kind of person you are during the years in prison.” (Interview 1, male, 43 years, active in retail level)

“I was in prison and I helped someone who then wrote me a letter after a few months I was outside and in it was the recipe to make it. [...] He produced himself, that was the reason he was in prison. He had nothing left so I regularly transferred money to him in prison when I was outside from what I earned producing with his recipe.” (Interview 9, male, 54 years, active in production)

Looking at the levels of the supply chain for this entry mechanism, we notice it is mentioned by respondents active at the retail level (n = 4), production (n = 3) and wholesale (n = 2).

Entry mechanism 5: Ride together, stay together

A fifth entry mechanism mentioned by respondents is membership of an OMG. According to our respondents, OMGs are actively involved in the synthetic drugs market. They appear to be primarily involved in the wholesale and middle level of speed, and to a lesser extent in the production of speed. Respondents also cite XTC, and in recent years methamphetamine, as the “liquids” of OMGs. Furthermore, some groups appear to be dedicated to synthetic drug trafficking and others to cocaine trafficking.

“I grew up with those guys from outlaws actually. I came in contact with Hells Angels and Blue Angels, Satudarah, No Surrender,.... There’s not one club that I’ve come in contact with that’s not involved in it. Now they’re kind of switching to crystal meth but that’s not real’ly here, you don’t find that here yet. [...] They buy in large quantities to distribute in their network. There isn’t one motorcycle club where you can’t sniff it, it just goes around on a tray, speed, or whatever you want.” (Interview 28, male, 39 years, active in production)

Synthetic drugs, and more specifically speed, is described as *“the blood through our veins”* by one respondent. Profits from synthetic drugs trafficking are used for group activities, the purchase of luxury goods, as well as trade in arms and weapons or setting up companies to cover illegal activities.

“We can do anything with that money: buy our motors and this and that, eventually we buy garages, and cars and also businesses and houses. It goes deep, you know. But, me, I don’t have all that. It’s the men above me.” (Interview 20, male, 45 years, active in wholesale)

Respondents describe OMGs as highly structured (criminal) groups with their own rules and codes of conduct. Violation of those rules is penalised within the group through exclusion or “bad standing”.

“Because in society they all think: those bikers, they’re all fools. No, we are very structured. I think you’d be surprised where we all are! [...] The last time I heard there were 15.000 of us worldwide. So that’s not that extremely big. Hells Angels are the biggest club worldwide, I think that’s about millions of people worldwide. I do respect that, because that’s the way to do big things! Those guys are really well organised and they are not run by Belgians!” (Interview 20, male, 45 years, active in whole sale)

The interviews explain how joining an OMG follows a structured process. Recruitment of members is done by elected OMG members, so called “*sergeants*”. Recruits or “*prospects*” go through a probationary period to test if they are cut from the same cloth to become a full member of the OMG.

“We are so fucking democratic. So I’ve been elected at some point and then I start my selections. I may know people from going out or from my personal life, or from somewhere, my soccer team for example. And I say: well, that’s an interesting guy, who can keep his mouth shut, or is reasonable in everything. Then you ask: are you interested in joining us? But people never know what they’re getting into. I say that to this day to everyone: please guys, stay away! Because you don’t know what you’re getting into and you’re always fucked. (...) I have tests like... it may sound really gross... Usually I take them with

me, I give them a Coke, I give them 2 XTCs and then I see. The ones who can't handle it, when the XTC starts kicking in and he starts blah blah blah, a waterfall... Sorry, it has been a fun party but you're out. Those men who can control themselves and who still know: I shut up, these men are gold!" (Interview 20, male, 45 years, active in whole sale)

A second way to join OMGs appears to be family ties. When close family members are already members of an OMG, entering an OMG appears to follow a less structured process because the recruit has been known by the group from an early age. Also, the entry procedure is less strict in recent years because of the shrinking number of members among OMGs. This is indicated by one respondent as a thorny issue because it allows unqualified individuals to join the group, which causes problems in the long run.

"My mother was with someone from a motorcycle club, with the president, the head of Belgium. [...] I have those connections for a long time, I know that man very well, that man came to my house, to my family. It is a closed community. [...] But that motorcycle club, that's actually how it started, that's where I saw everything." (Interview 3, male, 32 years, active in production and wholesale)

A critical remark on OMGS was heard from one respondent. This respondent indicated that other organised crime groups are not eager to cooperate with OMGs in the context of synthetic drug trafficking because these groups are too notorious with law enforcement. So, according to this respondent, there are many groups active on the synthetic drugs market that deliberately have no connection to OMGs. Their influence, according to this respondent, should not be overestimated.

"These motorcycle organisations are scrutinised, they are monitored by state security, they are under surveillance 24 hours a day. And other organisations know that too, so they're certainly not going to cooperate with them very quickly. If they know it's a motorcycle club, they often refuse to sit down with those people." (Interview 23, male, 42, active in whole sale)

Membership in an OMG was mentioned primarily by respondents active at manufacturing level (n = 6) and whole sale (n = 5), and to a lesser extent by respondents active at retail level (n = 3) and middle level (n = 2).

Entry mechanism 6: Expanding your professional horizons

The last entry into the synthetic drugs market mentioned by our respondents, is related to professional working ties. This entry mechanism was only mentioned by respondents at the production (n = 1) and wholesale level (n = 2).

For example, one respondent explained how her profession, in this case sex work, helped her building an extensive network, including entrepreneurs in both legal and illegal trafficking in Poland and Italy. This respondent served as a broker by connecting individuals who were operating in the international synthetic drugs market. In other words, her profession gave her the opportunity to get involved in this criminal world and provided her with useful connections.

“My clients told their stories to me and that way I came in contact with people in Poland. You know one person, and he puts you in contact with the other, and the other puts you in contact with the other, and so, in the long run, it all works out. I had a lot of contacts and I could arrange everything. If someone needed something, for example a cook, I could arrange that. Someone needed certain substances, I could arrange that. That actually went very well.” (Interview 16, female, 37 years, active in wholesale)

Another respondent exploited his legal business, skills and connections in the international business world to start importing and exporting drugs internationally.

“I had a big construction company and the first thing I did was hire someone with a criminal record, a labourer, and through his contacts I talked my way up. There is a lot in common with the legal business world. In business, I also used to take too many risks.” (Interview 23, male 42 years, active in whole sale)

Finally, certain professions are in demand by the criminal group. For example, one respondent was approached by group members because he was an electrician and the group needed his knowledge in the synthetic drugs lab.

“It started because I was an electrician. You use clamps, with a screw, and you can put those over a movable cable, then you tighten that screw, then it goes through the insulation, into the copper core and then you can illegally drain electricity. But you need 3 of those, and then you can put a plastic around those clamps, and then you have to fill that with two components, those become hard. And then it can't touch one another. And those things, you can only do that as an independent electrician. Also buying them, you can't just get that in the store.” (Interview 24, male, 43 years, active in production)

Motivations to enter the synthetic drugs market

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their motivations to enter the synthetic drugs market. Explanations appear to be strongly linked to the entry mechanisms used by respondents. For example, according to one respondent, “normalisation” occurs when you are confronted with the drug world early on in life via family or friends and therefore, you are doomed to follow the same path as predecessors or role models.

“That’s normal: other people drink beer, in our family they use drugs. And drug trafficking is also normal. When you grow up like that, it’s also hard to choose another path. And all my family is in it: nieces, nephews...” (Interview 3, male 32 years, active in production and wholesale)

Role models, however, may also encourage individuals to engage in criminal behaviour by showing a way out of financial setbacks:

“My brothers had it much better, they had a life of luxury. I wanted to step in there to have that life too. [...] Drug production brings you so much money, that’s incredible, really. I had, can you imagine, back then, I had 300.000 or 500.000 francs a week, or in the 2000s it was 7.000 to 10.000 euros a week. So why shouldn’t I?” (Interview 13, male, 62 years, active in production)

Motivations of a financial nature were mentioned across all entry mechanisms by respondents. One respondent explains how growing up in poverty made him look up to friends with more wealth and luxury and how he tried to keep up with them:

“Growing up, I only heard my parents saying: we have no money! And so, they push their child on the bad path actually. You know: everybody had sandwiches for lunch, or had beautiful shoes, I didn’t. Because I was born in a poor family, my father said: you are smart. In French he said: Tu as l’intelligence mauvais. I saw a guy selling drugs, and I thought: I’m going to sell drugs too! That guy said to me: do this, do that. I started selling drugs when I

was 11, 12 years old, at school. I sold cannabis by packages of 10 grams, in paper tissues.

And then, I started to make profit!” (Interview 25, male 34 years, active in retail level)

For some respondents, selling drugs initially reimburses one’s own drug use. Later, when the profits increase, they choose to grow further into the drug market and sell larger quantities.

“I got into it quietly by being a user myself and always looking for better and cheaper drugs.

I’ve been in it for 30 years. I started using when I was 13, 14 years old, so I knew my way

around. As you take more and more drugs, you get closer and closer to the production chain.

And after a while, you end up at the source. And in the long run you end up with your nose

in the lab. I was looking for cheaper drugs, all the time. And after a while, you make big

money, and you only want more.” (Interview 24, male, 43 years, active in production)

Two respondents conclude from their experiences in the drug market that *“the problem is not the drugs but it is the money addiction”* (Interview 2, female, 63 years).

“I’m going to be honest: it’s that money addiction too. I have a heavy money addiction. I have already

gained but also spend a lot of money. Even if I have to spend 30 years in prison for that, it’s always worth

it to me again.” (Interview 3, male, 32 years, active in production and wholesale)

Additionally, financial explanations were also mentioned among respondents for whom previous prison sentences prompted entry into the synthetic drugs market. Following a conviction and prison sentence, many respondents were not able to enter the regular labor market because of their criminal record. Additionally, fines or debts are often high, which made respondents move quickly to the profitable drug market. Respondents indicate they received little help in choosing another path.

“But I had to get rid of my fines to live a decent life. I paid all my fines but then I got fines again. Looking

for a job always ended without results. ‘Yes please, come to work for us with your page full of crap!’ That

ain’t gonna happen!” (Interview 15, male, 31 years, active in wholesale)

A final explanation, mentioned mainly by respondents who entered the synthetic drugs market through professional working ties, is seeking challenges and pursuing kicks.

“I wanted to get into that world. I wanted to see that world at the top. There is no doubt that I did it for kicks: getting the impossible done. Because you can’t sign a contract like you place an order for, let’s say, for housing or for a project. You have to get it settled on the basis of words, on the basis of promises, on the basis of agreements. Illegal ways, you name it. So, it did give a thrill to get that settled.” (Interview 23, male, 42 years, active in wholesale)

Discussion

In this article, we examined the factors and mechanisms that contribute to the involvement of individuals in the synthetic drugs market in Belgium. Our research specifically concentrated on the personal characteristics of these individuals, their motivations for opting a criminal path in organised drug crime, and the entry mechanisms that facilitated their entrance into the synthetic drugs market.

Our findings revealed that individuals belonging to organised crime groups engaged in the supply of synthetic drugs in Belgium are predominantly males ($n = 24$). This observation aligns with previous research, where male representation in these groups has been reported to be 92% (Calderoni et al., 2022; Kruisbergen et al., 2019; Van Koppen e.a. 2010). Five female respondents were found to be active at three levels of the supply chain of synthetic drugs, namely wholesale, middle and retail level. Notably, in contrast to the male respondents, none of the interviewed women were involved in the production of synthetic drugs.

Additionally, studies indicate that criminal careers within organised crime tend to start at a later stage in comparison to non-organised crime careers and rapidly progress to serious and harmful criminal activities (Francis et al., 2013; Kruisbergen et al., 2019; Savona et al., 2020). This statement is consistent with our sample, that exhibited a mean age of 45 years, surpassing the mean age of traditional criminal populations (Van Koppen et al., 2010). Furthermore, our analysis demonstrated the interconnectivity of drug markets, as individuals involved in the trafficking of synthetic drugs also tend to be associated with the trafficking of other substances, particularly cannabis and cocaine. This result suggests that a single

market focus in policy and practice is incongruent with the actual state of affairs, thereby potentially impeding the implementation of effective strategies and the disruption of illicit drug markets.

Furthermore, we explored the motivations of individuals' involvement in the synthetic drugs market. Our respondents frequently cited financial incentives as their primary driving force. This is not surprising because the synthetic drugs market, known for its high profitability (Tops et al., 2018), attracts individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Whether originating from impoverished backgrounds or accustomed to a life of luxury, the allure of substantial profits makes the synthetic drugs market enticing (Torres et al., 2021). Subsequently, breaking free from this lavish lifestyle becomes challenging, leading our respondents to prioritise advancement and upward mobility within the drug market. Moreover, the quest for challenges and thrills, along with a sense of "predestination" or normalisation (Coomber et al., 2016), emerged as additional drivers for entry into the synthetic drugs market.

Various factors may influence individuals to pursue a criminal path within organised (drugs) crime (Calderoni et al., 2020; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). A first notable observation is the significant role of trust among group members as a crucial prerequisite for entering the Belgian synthetic drugs market. Numerous respondents reported joining the market through connections with trusted individuals, such as family members, friends, or long-standing professional relationships. Prior literature has highlighted the paramount importance of trust within criminal groups, as it helps minimise the risks of detection and disruption (Bruinsma & Bernasco 2004; Von Lampe & Johansen 2004). Trust seems to play a crucial role at every level of the synthetic drugs supply chain. Nevertheless, based on our small-scale study, it becomes evident that having trustworthy pre-existing connections is particularly desirable at the higher echelons, specifically in production and wholesale level.

Within our surveyed sample, trust also appeared to be deeply rooted in other pre-existing connections. For instance, within the challenging environment of prison, a heightened level of trust may develop among inmates, leading them to engage in criminal activities together post-incarceration. Likewise, loyal customers of organised crime groups may progress to become vendors and members of the group themselves. One can draw upon prior scholarly investigations that have examined individuals who engage in drug consumption and distribution within their social circles, subsequently progressing along

the continuum of criminal involvement by transitioning to drug dealing among acquaintances and fellow drug users (Taylor & Potter, 2013). This mode of entry into drug trafficking was similarly observed within our respondents. It is noteworthy that these retail-level drug dealers continued to uphold values associated with social supply, characterized by principles of friendship and trust within their interactions with their customers.

An additional observation pertains to the prison environment serving as a gateway for criminal activities among several participants in our study. Prisons function as learning and networking places among criminals. Both drug use and trafficking often appear to be learned within prison walls. This phenomenon can be further explored by referring to existing literature on "prisonisation" or "inmate socialisation" among incarcerated individuals (Clemmer, 1958; Stemen, 2017). Based on the experiences of our respondents, these findings hold true in the context of the Belgian synthetic drugs market. However, it should be noted, as indicated earlier, that the chosen sample of incarcerated individuals may have an impact on these results. It is conceivable that an examination of an alternative sample situated beyond the confines of correctional institutions might allocate less scrutiny to the prison's role in shaping criminal careers.

Furthermore, a significant portion of our sample indicated having experimented with drugs at least once in their lives. Some respondents revealed that their drug use originated during their time in prison, while others stated that their drug use eventually led to drug trafficking and other criminal offenses, resulting in their incarceration. Although the interrelationship between drug use and crime was not a primary focus of this study, it is evident that the two are closely connected and often coexist within a group involved in the synthetic drugs market (Brochu et al., 2018).

Finally, OMG involvement seems prominent within the Belgian synthetic drugs market. Our study revealed that a significant number of respondents has connections with an OMG, and in a lot of cases, these OMGs served as the respondents' criminal gateway into the synthetic drugs market. Particularly at the higher echelons of the market, such as the production and wholesale, associations with OMGs often emerged as the primary entry mechanism.

This study provided an initial perspective on the involvement and entry of individuals into the synthetic drugs market in Belgium. It is essential to acknowledge that this study is based on 29 personal narratives shared by the respondents and, therefore, cannot be deemed representative of the entire synthetic drugs market. This qualitative research may encourage further research, potentially employing more quantitative approaches. Future research could, for example, undertake broader quantitative studies to explore the correlations between different levels of the supply chain and various entry mechanisms, as well as the correlations between specific types of (synthetic) drugs and entry mechanisms. The findings presented in this study serve as an initial step towards facilitating such future research endeavours.

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