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A Socially Embedded Drug Market Based on Trust: Analysis of the Synthetic Drug Supply Market in Belgium

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ABSTRACT *Organised crime is often understood as socially embedded, relying on pre-existing social relationships that provide trust and cohesion within criminal networks. This study explores the role of pre-existing social ties within organised crime groups (OCGs) operating in Belgium's synthetic drug supply market. Using a mixed-methods approach combining judicial case file analysis and interviews with incarcerated individuals, the research applies social network analysis (SNA). While most ties were criminal in nature, a notable 16% constituted pre-existing social ties. These relationships fostered trust, cohesion, and operational stability within OCGs, thereby facilitating cooperation and reducing the risk of detection or betrayal. Pre-existing ties also shaped individuals' entry into the drug market, particularly for women, whose involvement often stemmed from trusted male relatives or partners. The findings reveal that OCGs in Belgium's synthetic drug market are deeply embedded in social structures, highlighting the need to address the social embeddedness of organised crime in policy and practice.*

KEYWORDS synthetic drug supply market, Belgium, pre-existing social ties, organised crime group, social network analysis

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research states that organised crime is socially embedded within pre-existing social ties, ensuring more trust than criminal collaboration ties. These pre-existing ties are therefore believed to provide the cohesion that holds organised crime groups (OCGs) together (Von Lampe, 2016). This article focuses on the existence and importance of pre-existing social ties within OCGs active in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market, *i.e.*, amphetamine, MDMA, and methamphetamine (Schoenmakers & Mehlbaum, 2019; Spapens, 2006; Roks et al., 2021; UNODC, 2021, 2024). The large-scale production and (international) trafficking of these synthetic drugs in Belgium are mainly controlled by specialised OCGs (EUDA, 2025; UNODC, 2024). OCGs active in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market operate on all levels of the supply chain for synthetic drugs, *i.e.*, production, wholesale, middle, and retail levels. Their criminal activities have significant implications for public safety, public health, and environmental harm (GI-TOC, 2024).

2 OCGS INVOLVED IN THE BELGIAN SYNTHETIC DRUG SUPPLY MARKET

Little is known about the OCGs involved in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market. Previous research has shown only limited interest in this specific market (Colman et al., 2018; Smet et al., 2013). What is known about OCGs involved in synthetic drug supply derives from international research on organised drug crime in general, or from Dutch studies on the interconnectedness between the Belgian and Dutch drug markets (Vermeulen et al., 2021). Comparatively little attention has been paid to the Belgian actors and OCGs involved in the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs (De Middeler & De Ruyver, 2017; Roks et al., 2021). The existing international literature demonstrates that a wide variety of collaborative forms exist within organised crime, and researchers have not reached a consensus on the structures of OCGs. There is no singular model for OCGs, as collaboration forms are complex and vary across national borders and criminal markets (Baradel & Breuer, 2024; Doosje et al., 2021; Rostami et al., 2018; Xu & Chen, 2005). Consequently, generalising theoretical concepts about OCGs across all forms of organised (drug) crime is inappropriate, given the diversity of structures observed in previous studies.

Studying the Belgian market and its associated groups is particularly relevant given its unique market characteristics. Since the early 21st century, Belgium has been a major producer of synthetic drugs at an industrial scale, distinguishing it from other European drug markets, where production is predominantly conducted in smaller-scale kitchen laboratories (EMCDDA, 2023; UNODC, 2024). Additionally, Belgium's strategic geographical location makes it an attractive hub for drug trafficking. The entire supply chain of synthetic drug production and trafficking occurs on Belgian territory, with its scale and size

expanding year after year (Colman et al., 2018; EMCDDA, 2023; Kruisbergen, 2021; UNODC, 2024).

According to the international literature, members of an OCG specialise in specific tasks, leading to role specialisation and a distribution of labour (Colman et al., 2018; Europol, 2022; Smet et al., 2013; Tops et al., 2018). In most cases, OCGs consist of an upper level, such as leaders; and a lower level, such as service providers, helpers, assistants, or facilitators (Colman et al., 2018). Studies from the Netherlands state that Dutch criminal entrepreneurs usually take up the role of principal in the Dutch-Belgian cooperation within the drug supply markets in both countries (De Middeleer & De Ruyver, 2017; De Ruyver, 2006; Roks et al., 2021; Spapens et al., 2016). These principals finance and organise large-scale production and international drug trafficking (Boerman et al., 2017; Colman et al., 2018; Endedijk, 2017; Europol, 2022; Korps landelijke politiediensten, 2012; Smet et al., 2013). At the same time, they often remain removed from the operational activities, therefore unlikely to be present on production sites, or to be involved in acts of public violence (Colman et al., 2018; Coomber, 2006; Pearson et al., 2001; Smet et al., 2013). They often operate from other countries, such as Spain or the United Kingdom (Blickman, 2005; Smet et al., 2013), relying on brokers who work in the field on their behalf (Desroches, 2007; Smet et al., 2013; Zaitch, 2002), fostering a trend towards globalisation in drug supply markets (Blickman, 2005; EMCDDA & Europol, 2024; Europol, 2022). These Dutch principals often come from the trailer community in the Southern Netherlands, and most of them have been active in the synthetic drug supply market for many years or have passed the torch to relatives of a newer generation (Boerman et al., 2017; Colman et al., 2018; Endedijk, 2017; Korps landelijke politiediensten, 2012; Smet et al., 2013; Tops et al., 2018). A large group is known for their criminal careers in cannabis production and trafficking in the Netherlands (Colman et al., 2018; Smet et al., 2013). Many remain active in other drug markets, such as cannabis or cocaine, and share contacts for precursors, formulas, and tools for drug production, or reuse (international) supply and export lines (Gruppo, 2004; Korps landelijke politiediensten, 2012; Smet et al., 2013). Additionally, a group of new arrivals is entering the top segment of the synthetic drug supply market (Tops et al., 2018). These are younger entrepreneurs from the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, or Morocco, with less experience in synthetic drugs but often experience in the trafficking of other drugs, such as cocaine or hashish. Others previously worked as lab technicians or assistant cooks and gradually rose up the criminal hierarchy (Boerman et al., 2017; Korps landelijke politiediensten, 2012; Tops et al., 2018). There are strong indications that the number of actors active in the synthetic drug supply market is increasing (Boerman et al., 2017; Tops et al., 2018). The largest group of principals, in other words, has long been known and active in the drug scene.

In most cases, according to these studies, Belgians subcontract to these Dutch leaders as performers, helpers, assistants, and service providers (Boerman et al., 2017; Colman et al., 2018; De Ruyver, 2006; Dienst voor het Strafrechtelijk

beleid, 2010; Korps landelijke politiediensten, 2012; Neve & van Ooyen-Houben, 2006; Smet et al., 2013; Spapens & Fijnaut, 2005). However, there are signs that Belgian auxiliaries are moving up within the OCGs and are increasingly occupying managerial positions as well (Colman et al., 2018).

3 STUDYING OCGS FROM A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned, international research on organised crime shows a wide range of criminal cooperation forms, ranging from Relatively traditional collaborations characterised by a strict division of tasks to more fluid and flexible groups consisting of individual criminals (Bright, 2017; Calderoni, 2012; De Middeleer et al., 2018; Kruisbergen et al., 2012, 2019; Morselli, 2001, 2009; Van de Bunt & Kleemans, 2007; Vermeulen et al., 2021). Given this variety of cooperation forms when it comes to OCGs and their organisational structure, an overarching paradigm is appropriate to study the group structure of OCGs. According to some researchers, the approach most suited to contemporary modes of criminal cooperation is to study group structure and cooperation forms as *networks* (Klerks, 2001a; Vermeulen et al., 2021). A network approach transcends existing criminological paradigms because it starts from a common statement, namely that human relationships form the basis of organised crime activities and individuals are interdependent on those around them (Bouchard & Malm, 2016; Mcillwain, 1999; Rostami, 2016; Rostami & Mondani, 2015). Therefore, a network approach has the advantage of being amenable to describing groupings of any kind without predetermine the form of cooperation prior to the study (Bouchard, 2020; Vermeulen et al., 2021).

This approach acknowledges differences between the analytical concepts of networks and organisations. However, it states that they can empirically overlap (Von Lampe, 2016). A network approach on OCGs starts from the social interactions and relations among sets of social entities, such as OCG members (Borgatti et al., 2022; Bouchard & Malm, 2016; Diviák et al., 2020; Doosje et al., 2021; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Approaching organised crime from a network approach further implies that individual behaviour is seen in relation to group behaviour, and that power is not centralised in a single individual or cluster of individuals, but rather spread horizontally over multiple clusters of actors who have reciprocal lines of communication (Bouchard & Malm, 2016; Klerks, 2001b; von Lampe, 2016). However, considering OCGs from a network approach does not imply that power may not be distributed or hierarchical relationships may not exist. The network approach acknowledges both horizontal and hierarchical structures and distinguishes between principals and performers, with the former in most cases determining what and how the latter undertake (Noack & Nelen, 2023; Spapens & van de Mheen, 2022).

A network approach proved to be more than just a convenient conceptual tool. Besides network theory, it also provides specific methods. While embracing the complexity of organised crime and its fluidity, it provides methodological

guidelines to clarify the nature and context of criminal collaboration (Bouchard, 2020). One of the methods to study empirical networks is social network analysis (SNA). OCGs can be examined through SNA using network data and network theory to interpret the data (Bouchard, 2020; von Lampe, 2016). SNA is the mapping and measuring of relationships and flows between the people involved in a network (Klerks, 2001a; Natarajan, 2006; Sparrow, 1991; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Within SNA, actors are referred to as nodes, and their interrelationships as edges (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Previous research by Diviák and colleagues (2020) separates two types of edges among nodes, namely non-criminal pre-existing social ties, and criminal ties (Diviák et al., 2020, 2021; Diviák & Lord, 2024). Criminal ties exist within the realm of the criminal activities, while pre-existing social ties are longstanding social bonds, such as family ties and kinship, affective relationships, friendships, or legitimate business associations (Bichler, 2019; Doosje et al., 2021; Fathurrohman & Bichler, 2021; Mcillwain, 1999). Criminal ties and pre-existing ties can overlap as each person is likely to be part of multiple, potentially overlapping networks (Bichler, 2019; Doosje et al., 2021), which means that between two nodes, multiple edges can exist.

4 GOAL AND QUESTIONS

This article focuses on the OCGs involved in synthetic drug supply in Belgium and aims to understand the type of interrelationships between group members. Understanding the nature and structure of these interrelationships between actors can help to interpret the organisation and structure of the OCGs at the network level. A better understanding of these OCGs might lead to a more targeted approach, both preventive and repressive. Answers are sought to the following two research questions: (a) Are interrelationships within an OCG involved in synthetic drug supply in Belgium all criminal in nature, and if not, what is the proportion of pre-existing social ties within these OCGs? And (b) What added value does it have at the group level to collaborate within an OCG with individuals with whom pre-existing social ties exist?

5 METHODOLOGY

In general, OCGs are challenging to study due to their covert nature (de Bie, 2016; Klerks, 2001a). Therefore, this study employed two complementary data collection strategies: (a) a judicial case file study, and (b) semi-structured interviews with incarcerated individuals. Combined, these methods yielded both primary and secondary data, thereby enabling a quantitative analysis and qualitative contextualisation of OCGs involved in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market.

The first data collection strategy consisted of the examination of judicial case files concerning large-scale synthetic drug production in Flanders between 2015 and 2020. Cases were selected in consultation with drug magistrates using

three criteria: (a) dismantled between 2015 and 2020, (b) located within the magistrate's province, and (c) involving large-scale production of synthetic drugs. In total, 82 cases were identified, of which 74 (90%) were reviewed; the remainder were inaccessible due to ongoing investigations or transfer to the federal level.

Data collection commenced in Antwerp and Limburg—border provinces historically central to synthetic drug production (De Middeleer & De Ruyver, 2017; Smet et al., 2013)—and expanded to East and West Flanders in 2023. Between December 2021 and August 2023, files were accessed in prosecution offices and courts, primarily in paper form. They included police interrogation reports, surveillance records, forensic analyses, financial investigations, and synthesis reports. A structured coding protocol derived from the existing literature guided data extraction. Variables encompassed case characteristics (drug type, supply chain level, conviction outcomes), actor profiles (demographics, criminal histories, group roles), interactions (exchange of goods, communications, relational ties), and resources (financial flows, equipment, chemicals, weapons). All personal identifiers were anonymised.

The final dataset comprised 74 cases, predominantly related to amphetamine ($n = 60$), followed by MDMA ($n = 22$) and methamphetamine ($n = 13$). Several cases involved multiple substances and supply chain levels. While most cases centred on production ($n = 69$), some extended to wholesale ($n = 18$), mid-level ($n = 9$), and retail ($n = 9$) activities.

This research considered an OCG active in synthetic drug supply market as a network (Europol, 2024; Fijnaut et al., 1996; Kleemans et al., 1998; Klerks, 2001b; Morselli, 2009; Van de Bunt & Kleemans, 2007; Weerman & Kleemans, 2002). In other words, this contribution applies a network approach. Within this network perspective, OCGs comprise actors connected through interrelationships and engaged in criminal activities of varying composition (Faust & Tita, 2019; Hutchins & Benham-Hutchins, 2010; Spapens, 2006; Sparrow, 1991; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). SNA was applied to the relational data derived from the case files. These data captured the actors involved and their mutual relationships (Verhoeven, 2009) in binary form, indicating whether a relationship existed (Bright & Delaney, 2013).

In this study, nodes included all individuals observed to be directly involved in at least one aspect of synthetic drug production or trafficking. A relationship between two actors was deemed present when case files evidenced communication, meetings, or exchanges of goods (Bright et al., 2019). This included both direct evidence, such as police photographs; and indirect evidence, such as testimonies describing acquaintanceship. Each identified relationship was entered into an edge list in Excel, where each row represented a connection between two actors (Baika & Campana, 2020; Bichler, 2019; Doosje et al., 2021). This study followed the framework of Diviák and colleagues (2020) to separate two types of edges among nodes, namely non-criminal pre-existing social ties and criminal ties (Diviák et al., 2020, 2021; Diviák & Lord, 2024). Criminal ties included the transfer of material resources, such as goods or money; or the

exchange of intangible resources, such as information or skills; and the behavioural interaction during criminal activities, such as movement between places together, co-arrest, chain of command, supervision based on criminal roles, or formal organisation membership (Baika & Campana, 2020; Bichler, 2019; Bright et al., 2015; Diviák & Lord, 2024; Doosje et al., 2021; Fathurrohman & Bichler, 2021; Mcillwain, 1999; Tenti & Morselli, 2014). Pre-existing ties included long-lasting relationships between nodes, such as family or kinship (which meant actors were tied through a biological or family-based relationship), affective relationships, friendships, or legitimate business associations (Bichler, 2019; Doosje et al., 2021; Fathurrohman & Bichler, 2021; Mcillwain, 1999).

Nodes and edges attributes were also incorporated into the analysis. Nodes attributes included characteristics such as age, sex, nationality, marital status, employment status, criminal history, and criminal role or skills (Bruinsma & Bernasco, 2004; Diviák & Lord, 2024; Framis & Regadera, 2017; Natarajan, 2006; Tenti & Morselli, 2014). These were compiled in a node list in Excel, with each node assigned a unique code to ensure accurate identification (Bichler, 2019). Edges attributes captured the nature of relationships—kinship, co-offending, or otherwise—their directedness, frequency of contact, and modes of interaction (e.g., face-to-face, telephone) (Bichler, 2019; Bright & Delaney, 2013; Bruinsma & Bernasco, 2004; Diviák, 2018; Doosje et al., 2021; Tenti & Morselli, 2014). These were recorded in separate columns within the edge list.

To address the first research question, descriptive quantitative SNA measures were employed, including network visualisation. Visualisations usually facilitate the identification of positions, subgroups, and relationships not easily discernible through statistical measures alone (De Bie, 2016; Rummens & Hardyns, 2020; Tayebi & Glässer, 2016).

The second data collection strategy targeted inmates convicted of offences related to the production or trafficking of synthetic drugs in Flemish prisons. Interviews with incarcerated individuals were considered more feasible than those with active market participants, who would be unlikely to divulge operational details. Following the approval of the Directorate General of Penitentiary Institutions (October 2022), nine prisons were contacted, of which seven consented to participate. Prison staff distributed 737 information flyers to eligible inmates ($n = 934$). Participation was voluntary and anonymised through a sealed-envelope system. In total, 58 inmates indicated their willingness to participate, and 29 were ultimately interviewed. Exclusions were due to refusals, logistical constraints, or failure to meet inclusion criteria.

Interviews were conducted in private rooms within the participating prisons between October 2022 and September 2023. Each session lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and followed a topic list informed by previous research (Chiu et al., 2011; Colman et al., 2018; De Bie, 2016; De Ruyver et al., 2008; Duijn & Klerks, 2014; Klerks, 2001a; Pecht, 2021; Smet et al., 2013; Snaphaan, 2021; Tops et al., 2018b; Van Valkenhoef & Tops, 2021). Core themes included: (a) demographic characteristics, (b) roles and practices within the synthetic drug

supply chain, and (c) group structures and dynamics. Participants were permitted to decline questions or respond in general terms. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and no financial incentives were offered.

The final interview sample ($n = 29$) comprised 24 men and 5 women aged between 27 and 71 years ($M = 45$). Seventeen participants were born in Belgium, while others originated mainly from South Asia and North Africa. Most participants had prior convictions ($n = 21$) and reported previous drug use ($n = 24$). Regarding criminal involvement, 20 participants had engaged in MDMA production or trafficking, 19 in amphetamine production, and 3 in methamphetamine-related activities; many had also participated in other drug markets (e.g., cocaine, cannabis). Their reported positions spanned various segments of the supply chain: production ($n = 13$), wholesale ($n = 14$), and retail ($n = 19$).

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for thematic analysis. Both deductive and inductive coding approaches were applied to identify salient themes and patterns, thereby achieving a nuanced understanding of the dataset. Initially, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken to compile a preliminary coding list (Chiu et al., 2011; Colman et al., 2018; De Bie, 2016; De Ruyver et al., 2008; Duijn & Klerks, 2014; Klerks, 2001; Pecht, 2021; Smet et al., 2013; Snaphaan, 2021; Tops et al., 2018b; Van Valkenhoef & Tops, 2021). These predetermined codes formed the basis for deductive coding. Concurrently, a grounded approach allowed new codes and subcodes to emerge inductively from the data, which were then integrated into the evolving coding framework.

The qualitative data from the interviews were used to support and supplement the data and analysis of the case file study. However, given the nature of the data, it is not possible to combine data sources. For the purpose of SNA, data from the case file study are referred to as whole network data, while data from the interviews are designated as ego network data. This means that interview participants (*egos*) could only describe their local neighbourhoods, namely the set of other direct contacts (*alters*) and the connections among the alters (Bichler, 2019; Rummens & Hardyns, 2020; Soudijn et al., 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2021).

The findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire synthetic drug supply market. Data sources comprised judicial case files and interviews with convicted individuals, reflecting law enforcement priorities and the experiences of prosecuted actors, while excluding the perspectives of undetected participants. Case file insights were shaped by magistrates' selection criteria, investigative practices, legal frameworks, and resource constraints. Biases such as anchoring, halo effects, and incomplete evidence further limited validity. Prison interviews introduced additional limitations: participants' responses were influenced by the carceral context, with some minimising or exaggerating their roles, and lengthy sentences often meant that accounts referred to past rather than current market dynamics. Consequently, network data remained static. Researcher subjectivity also affected data collection and interpretation. Nonetheless, the integration of

qualitative and quantitative analyses strengthened the validity, depth, and comprehensiveness of the study's findings.

6 THE EXISTENCE OF PRE-EXISTING TIES IN THE BELGIAN SYNTHETIC DRUG SUPPLY MARKET

SNA was used to visualise the network based on the whole network data from the case file study (see Figure 1), representing actors or nodes as circles and their interrelationships or edges as lines connecting the nodes. The network counted 1,639 nodes and 4,295 edges.

Figure 1

Visualisation of the Whole Network

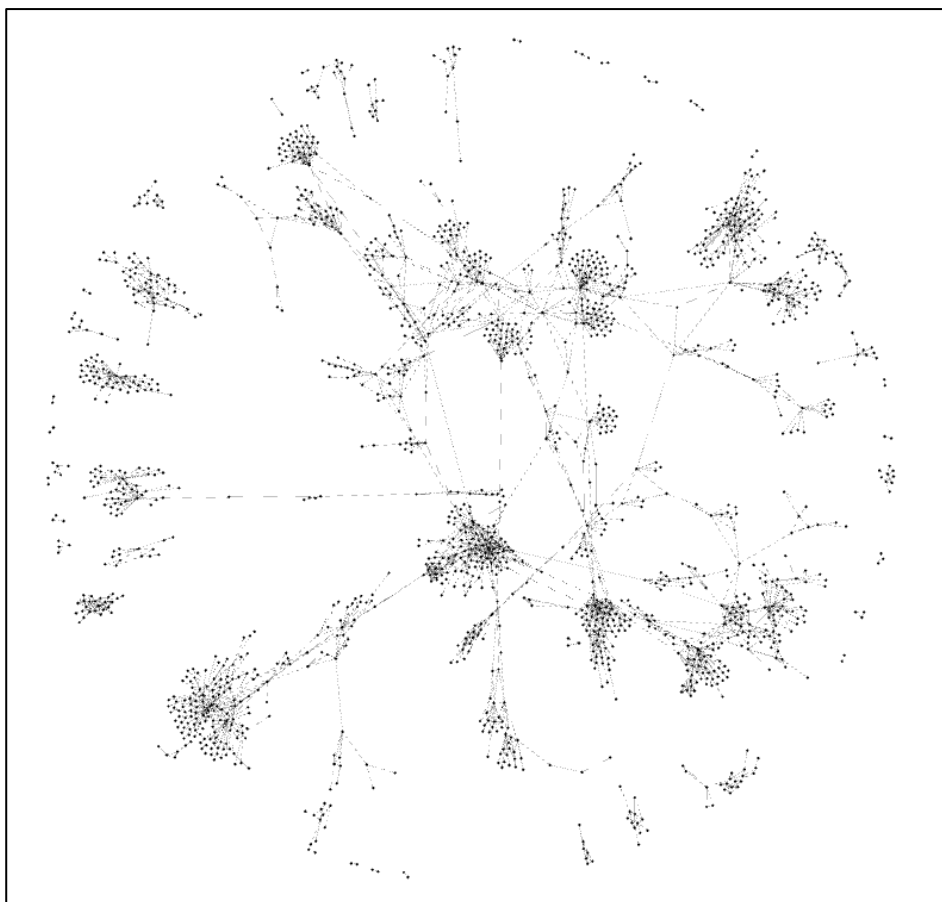


Table 1 provides an overview of the nodes attributes. However, all nodes attributes showed high levels of missing data. The majority of nodes were born between 1960 and 1989 (56.31%) in the Netherlands (21.42%). Other regions of birth were Africa ($n = 17$), America ($n = 20$), Asia ($n = 24$) and Oceania ($n = 2$). Almost 42% of the nodes lived in Belgium, the main provinces of residence being Limburg ($n = 323$), Antwerp ($n = 177$) and East-Flanders ($n = 80$). 19.16% of the nodes lived in the Netherlands, of which the majority lived in Limburg ($n = 126$) and North Brabant ($n = 121$). Other European countries of residence were mainly

Germany ($n = 14$) and France ($n = 7$). Other countries of residence were countries in Asia ($n = 6$) and America ($n = 5$). Almost 80% of the nodes were male. Missing data on marital status was too high (77.3%) to make statements.

Table 1
Overview of Nodes Attributes

Nodes ($n = 1,639$)		
	n	%
year of birth		
1920 – 1959	107	6.53
1960 –1989	923	56.31
after 1990	243	14.83
unknown	366	22.33
country of birth		
Belgium	273	16.66
the Netherlands	351	21.42
other European country	93	5.67
other	63	3.84
unknown	859	52.41
gender		
male	1,311	79.99
female	227	13.85
unknown	101	6.16
country of residence		
Belgium	688	41.98
The Netherlands	314	19.16
other European country	41	2.5
other	15	0.92
unknown	581	35.45
marital status		
married	133	8.11
unmarried	239	14.58
unknown	1,267	77.3

Table 2 provides an overview of the edges attributes in the network. The network contained directed (37.39%), undirected (35.25%) and mixed edges (27.36%). Determining the tool of communication was not easy based on the data from the case file study, as evidenced by large categories others and unknown data (41.35%). Several tools were used to communicate, such as face-to-face conversations and meetings (24.94%), conversations via telephone (25.24%) or electronical messages (7.75%). The category other tools included, for example, two nodes being mentioned in the same criminal file and criminal activity or some form of pre-existing social relationship in which the tool was undefined. Making

statements about the encrypted nature and the language used was difficult given the large number of missing data (22.12% and 72.53%). Besides Dutch (25.88%) other languages (1.58%) included German, English, French, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Turkish and Vietnamese.

The majority of the edges were criminal ties (82.72%). However, approximately 16% of the edges were described as pre-existing social ties. This proportion of pre-existing social relationships in a criminal network is remarkable. A significant part of criminal relationships appeared to be embedded in existing social structures, such as affective (15.97%), friendship (21.92%), familial (52.69%) or professional relationships (9.43%). Familial ties included both kinship and in-law family ties, common examples were parent(-in-law) and child(-in-law), brother and sister, or uncle and cousin.

Table 2
Overview of Edges Attributes

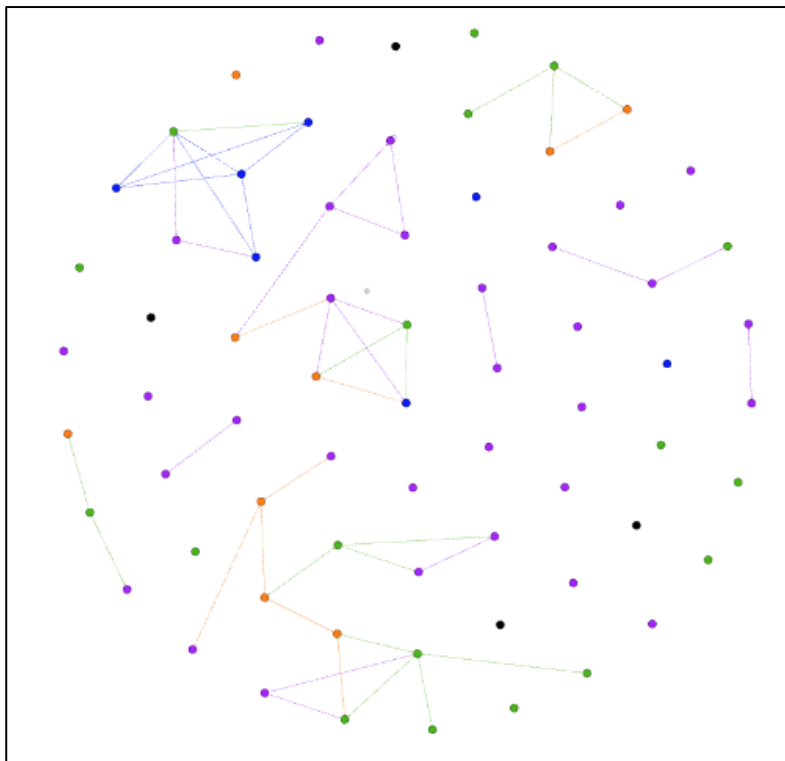
		Edges (n = 4,295)	
		n	%
type			
	directed	1,606	37.39
	undirected	1,514	35.25
	mixed	1,175	27.36
tool			
	conversation face to face	1,071	24.94
	telephone	1,084	25.24
	electronic messages	333	7.75
	letter/paper	31	0.72
	other	1,633	38.02
	unknown	143	3.33
content			
	criminal ties	3,553	82.72
	pre-existing social ties	689	16.04
	affective	110	15.97
	friendship	151	21.92
	familial	363	52.69
	professional	65	9.43
	unknown	53	1.23
encrypted			
	yes	776	18.07
	no	2,569	59.81
	unknown	950	22.12
language*			
	Dutch	1,113	25.88
	other	68	1.58
	unknown	3,119	72.53

*more than one category possible per edge

The existence of pre-existing ties stood out when analysing a specific group of actors, namely those operating as leaders. Figure 2 shows that a large group of leaders manage their criminal activities alone, or, in other words, have no connections to other leaders. However, some collaborating groups of leaders were found using SNA. In total, 43 leaders cooperated in nine clusters of two to 13 leaders. This analysis showed that most collaborations between leaders involved criminal ties (purple) but eleven collaborations between leaders involved pre-existing social ties. Seven of these collaborations among leaders involved family ties (green), namely (step)father and (step)son ($n = 4$) and brothers ($n = 3$), three were described as friendship ties (blue), and one collaboration was described as an affective relationship (orange), namely husband and wife.

Figure 2

Collaborations among actors operating as leaders



7 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST WITHIN OCGS ACTIVE ON THE SYNTHETIC DRUG SUPPLY MARKET

Data from the qualitative interviews on ego networks allowed for a closer examine of the relationships within OCGs active in the synthetic drug supply market. The qualitative analysis of these interrelationships confirmed that criminal operations by OCGs active in synthetic drug supply often involved collaboration with family members, friends, partners, or work relationships. Interview participants referred to the synthetic drug supply market as a “family business”, involving, for example, cooperation among brothers.

Working together with family members and other acquaintances was considered a trustworthy cooperation according to some participants. These collaborations protect the OCG and its activities. Cooperation with family members was described as helpful in decreasing the risks of detection by law enforcement, for example, not to raise suspicion because of frequent mutual phone calls, messages, or visits. Cooperation with trustworthy people within an OCG increased the chance that internal rules were followed by group members, thus the group structure could be maintained. Reliable, known people, such as family members and friends, have already proven their reliability to the interview participants, and were known as “honest workers” or people who “keep their promises”, “pay their debts”, or “share profits fairly”.

When OCGs are dismantled and subjected to interrogations by police or judicial authorities, the OCG expects that these individuals obey one golden rule: *the code of silence*. The ultimate goal is to provide insufficient information to law enforcement so that group members cannot be linked to one another. The result is that one person usually takes all the blame in favour of the survival of the OCG and their continuation of criminal activities. When one person from the OCG was arrested and convicted, participants explained that the OCG continued and sometimes another (new) member took over the criminal role of the arrested group member. Family relationships were mainly cited by participants as confidants to take over the roles of removed group members, as “Participant 1” said: “In the end, it’s a family business. So, if one stops, the cousin takes over. If the cousin stops, the son takes over, the father... It always continues because the business involves millions, billions. It always keeps going”.

Meanwhile, the interviews proved that pre-existing ties played a pivotal role in the entry into the synthetic drug supply market. In particular, increased trust in existing contacts facilitated the path into the synthetic drug supply market for some participants. Family members were mentioned as entry mechanism into the synthetic drug supply market. Participants explained how male family members, such as fathers, brothers, uncles or cousins, served as criminal role models. These criminal role models were often individuals who assumed the status of *pater familias* and exerted great influence on others, often younger members. Besides family members, criminal friends were mentioned by the participants as their entry into the synthetic drug supply market. Not only at a young age, but also at a later stage in life, friends could influence individuals, both directly and indirectly, to enter the world of synthetic drug production or trafficking.

This influence of male family members or friends appeared to be even greater on females as entry mechanism into the synthetic drug supply market. Females were a minority in both the whole network data from the case file study (13.85%), and the ego network data from the qualitative interviews (17.24%). Pre-existing relationships with men who were already active in the synthetic drug supply market exerted a great influence on female participants and provided a first introduction to the synthetic drug supply market. Examples mentioned by the

interview participants were (ex-) spouses or partners, uncles, male friends and colleagues, or male legal clients and colleagues.

8 CONCLUSION

This article sheds light on the pre-existing social ties in OCGs active in the synthetic drug supply market in Belgium. Data were derived from a judicial case file study and qualitative interviews with inmates, and analysed using SNA and thematic analysis.

First, the OCGs were approached at the actor level. This study corroborated previous research on the profiles of actors involved in the Belgian synthetic drug supply market. Actors engaged in synthetic drug production and trafficking in Belgium were predominantly born and living in the Netherlands and Belgium. This finding aligns with research on the interconnectedness and cooperation of actors within the Dutch and Belgian synthetic drug supply market (Boerman et al., 2017; Colman et al., 2018; De Middeleer et al., 2018; De Ruyver, 2006; De Schutter, 2024; Noack & Nelen, 2023; Spapens et al., 2016). Additionally, the synthetic drug supply market was found to be male-dominated, consistent with previous studies (Calderoni et al., 2022; Diviák et al., 2020; Kruisbergen et al., 2019; van Koppen et al., 2010).

Secondly, the interrelationships between actors were studied. Given the nature of the network involved in criminal activities, it was unsurprising that the majority of relationships among actors were described as criminal ties. However, the high proportion of pre-existing social ties within this OCG studied was notable: 16% were described as affective, friendship, familial, or professional relationships. Over half of these pre-existing ties were familial relationships. Moreover, the synthetic drug supply market was described by participants as a *family business*, where working with known individuals increased trust in an otherwise uncertain and hostile environment. Collaborations among family members also became apparent when the relationships of leaders were studied. Leaders prefer to cooperate with family members for the same reason of increased trust.

The qualitative analysis of these relationships showed that pre-existing relationships with trusted individuals were crucial for carrying out criminal activities in the synthetic drug supply market. This study demonstrated the importance of trust within OCGs. Research has described pre-existing ties as the glue that binds OCGs (Von Lampe, 2016) and connections to family, friends, and acquaintances help criminals to identify new opportunities through the resources, networks, or knowledge of their associates (Kleemans, 2014). In particular, these pre-existing social ties based on trust were shown to be vital to the group because they could resolve problems in a criminal environment characterised by distrust, betrayal, and high risks. Trust is an important resource in OCGs because the (financial) stakes are high (Diviák et al., 2020) and building up new (criminal)

social connections that are trustworthy takes up more time and energy (Kleemans, 2014).

The findings indicated that collaborating with trusted individuals reduced the likelihood of non-compliance with internal rules and detection by law enforcement, ensured profits, and minimised conflicts and violence. Earlier research has explained this phenomenon, suggesting that cooperation becomes more manageable when relevant parties possess prior knowledge about each other and have invested time and energy in the relationship. This creates both a “shadow of the past” and a “shadow of the future” (Campana & Varese, 2013; Kleemans, 2014; Raub & Buskens, 2012).

Additionally, reliable and trustworthy relationships proved vital for entering the drug supply market and for attempting to leave it. Pre-existing ties were especially prominent among women and were crucial for their entry into the drug market. Their connections with trusted male group members were often identified as their gateway into the production or trafficking of synthetic drugs. The importance of personal pre-existing ties for women beginning their criminal careers was corroborated by earlier studies (Alarid et al., 2000; Beare, 2010; Benda, 2005; Fleetwood, 2014; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008; Requena et al., 2014; Shaw & Skywalker, 2018). However, this finding can also be viewed from a group perspective, building on prior research. Studies suggest that OCGs derive significant benefits from incorporating personal relationships, particularly in terms of trustworthiness. In this context, women’s pre-existing ties may contribute to reducing risks, ensuring the survival and durability of criminal organisations (Anderson, 2005; Carey & Cisneros Guzmán, 2011; Denton & O’Malley, 1999; UNODC, 2019).

This study highlighted that organised crime was deeply embedded in social relationships. Organised crime in the synthetic drug supply market in Belgium was found to be built on social, trusting relationships, which are inherent to human beings and society. This underscores the necessity of understanding OCGs within their social context rather than perceiving them as an isolated or “underground world”. Organised crime should be understood in terms of its embeddedness in social reality and relationships. Therefore, treating organised crime in policy and practice as something “alien ” or an “underworld ” far removed from the “upper world ” could be inappropriate (van Ruitenburch, 2024).

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