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Abstract | Drawing on interviews with 39 former members of outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs), we identify consequences associated with leaving the club and the effects of membership experienced before and after leaving. This evidence is important in helping to inform efforts to promote and facilitate disengagement from clubs.

While some members experienced adverse consequences from leaving the club, less hostile separations were not uncommon. Poor mental health, the breakdown of relationships with family and friends outside the club, and problems finding employment post-disengagement were common effects described by former members. Therapeutic interventions, access to stable employment, and the availability of peer and family support networks were common themes in the transition away from clubs. But, importantly, experiences of former members varied, highlighting the need for a flexible response.

Effects of outlaw motorcycle gang membership and the support needs of former members

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The effects of outlaw motorcycle gang (OMCG) membership on members beyond involvement in crime are not well understood. While notions of brotherhood and camaraderie often dominate discussions about club culture, the secrecy surrounding club operations may disguise the potential negative consequences of membership from non-members. Similarly, little empirical research has been conducted into how membership impacts disengaged members in life outside of the club. While proactive, intelligence-led enforcement and disruption remains the cornerstone of policing responses to criminal activity by OMCGs, the lack of robust evidence around the support needs of former members impedes efforts to adopt more proactive strategies that can encourage members to disengage from clubs and desist from criminal activity.



Serious & Organised Crime
Research Laboratory

Research into criminal offending by OMCG members has, unsurprisingly, found high rates of offending (Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020; von Lampe & Blokland 2020). Much of this offending occurs between members, chapters and clubs. There are numerous examples of OMCG members being seriously injured or killed because of inter- and intra-club disputes, whether in the United States (Barker 2015), Australia (Monterosso 2018; Veno & Gannon 2009) or Europe (Jahnsen 2018). Autobiographies by former members of some of the larger, more notorious OMCGs have noted the physical and psychological impacts of this violence (Bjorgo 2019).

Beyond that, research into the consequences of OMCG membership is relatively sparse. A small-scale study involving 15 Danish OMCG members found being a member of a club had negative social and financial impacts on those interviewed, and also influenced their feelings of self-worth (Pederson 2014). Some authors have noted the impacts of gang membership in terms of social stigma, and the inability of members to work in certain industries as a consequence of being affiliated with an OMCG (Barker 2015; Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015). While it may be viewed as a badge of honour or inevitable part of membership to some, the incarceration of OMCG members, particularly for more serious offences, is costly for taxpayers (Morgan, Brown & Fuller 2018), while imprisonment can also have negative consequences for individuals sent to prison, including for those serving short sentences (Morgan 2018). This is despite the social or financial support that may be offered by the club to members when incarcerated (Bjorgo 2019; von Lampe & Blockland 2020).

There are real and perceived benefits associated with OMCG membership—brotherhood, camaraderie, prestige or power and, for some members at least, profitability—which encourage individuals to join and stay in clubs (Barker 2015; Dowling et al. 2021). Not all members will be motivated to leave their club; indeed, the probationary period prior to becoming a full member means individuals joining clubs are aware of many of the positive and negative aspects of club life. But it is important to understand how being a part of an OMCG has affected former members who are motivated to leave and the types of supports that might help members transition to life outside the club and stay outside (Pederson 2014, 2015). Alongside research on the reasons for disengagement (eg Tonks & Stephenson 2018; Windisch et al. 2017), this type of evidence has been used to inform strategies to divert individuals away from ideologically-based or violent groups in other contexts. Some of these interventions have been shown to generate significant reductions in group-related crime and violence (Braga, Weisburd & Turchan 2018).

Aim and methods

This study forms part of a larger collaborative project between the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Queensland Police Service (QPS). The broad aim of this research project was to better understand the drivers of recruitment into and disengagement from OMCGs. The aim of this more focused study was twofold: to explore the effects of OMCG membership on members and to identify the support needs of former members transitioning away from clubs.

Sample

This study uses information collected through semi-structured interviews with a sample of former OMCG members in Queensland. The sample was drawn from more than 500 members who at the time of these interviews were identified as either ex-members or members who had disassociated from an OMCG—a formal process introduced by QPS which allows OMCG members to officially declare their effort to disassociate from their club, which is then verified through intelligence gathered by QPS. Detailed information on the interview process is available in Webster and Chiu (2020). Briefly, an experienced member of the QPS Organised Crime Gangs Group with extensive knowledge of OMCG culture was provided with training and support by researchers from the QPS and the Australian Institute of Criminology. A sworn officer was used for safety reasons. Members who had formally disassociated or indicated they were no longer part of an OMCG were contacted via telephone and invited to participate in an interview. Former members were excluded if they had outstanding criminal matters, or if participation in the research would pose a risk to the interviewer or interviewee. Interviews were undertaken both in person and by telephone and, where the interview participant consented, recorded and transcribed. The research was approved by the Institute’s Human Research Ethics Committee and the QPS Research Committee.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics including reasons for leaving the club and life before and after leaving. Interviews were undertaken with 52 former OMCG members. This study analyses the recorded interviews of 39 former members from 13 OMCGs. (The remaining 13 participants did not consent to being recorded.) At interview, participants spanned a range of ages (mean=47.9 years; median=47.5; range=25–66), with membership from the early 1970s to late 2010s. The length of membership varied, but was an average of nearly seven years (mean=6.6; median=5.5; range=0.2–17.0 years).

Analytic strategy

In this study we used a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of former members and how they perceived life before, during and after they left the club. We focused on the lived experiences of the former members who were interviewed, rather than their views about how other members may have been impacted. The semi-structured interview questionnaire included broad questions about the impact of membership on relationships with family and friends, employment, and mental health, among other effects, and how these might have changed (for better or worse) since leaving the club. The immediate consequences of leaving the club were also explored, and participants were asked to describe any steps taken since leaving the club to address the short- and long-term effects of membership. Analysis of the interviews was largely descriptive. We adopted an inductive approach to identifying the most common themes to emerge in the interviews.

Limitations

While interviewing former members provides a unique insight into life in an OMCG and life after leaving, it was apparent that many members left because they had become disaffected with the club (see Dowling et al. 2021), and others did not leave on good terms. It is therefore possible that former members have a different perception of the club than current members. It was necessary to interview former members for two reasons. First, it would be practically impossible to interview current members for the purpose of informing an intervention program. Second, the research is designed to inform the development of a program for former members (or individuals who are motivated to leave), and this program should be informed by the experiences of those most likely to be targeted. A related limitation is that the experiences of former members who agreed to participate in an interview may be different from those who did not. For these reasons we are cautious about generalising beyond the sample of former members interviewed as part of this study.

Results

The effects of OMCG membership were described by former members in different ways and included the consequences of leaving the club, which were often short-lived, and the impact of being a member. Former members described effects that emerged while they were still a member, as they were leaving, or in the period since they had left the club. Irrespective of when these effects began, they impacted members' lives post-disengagement, or acted as a barrier to disengaging, meaning they are all relevant to an intervention program for members leaving or who have left an OMCG.

Consequences of leaving the club

The culture of OMCGs and the emphasis on loyalty means there is an expectation—be it explicit or otherwise—that individuals who join clubs are members for life. The decision to leave an OMCG can therefore come at a significant personal, financial and physical cost. Barker (2015) distinguishes between leaving in good or bad standing—members leave in bad standing when they have been found in violation of one of the club's rules, whereas members can leave in good standing due to illness, injury or 'retiring', having served the club faithfully for many years. The former is typically associated with serious consequences for the departing member. It was evident from the interviews that this neat distinction did not exist in practice. For example, some former members perceived they had left in good standing, only to be later told the chapter had deemed them to be out in bad standing, which inevitably left the former members at risk of violence and extortion.

We identified both direct and indirect consequences of leaving. Some of the direct consequences of leaving or being kicked out include:

- intimidation and threats against the former member and, in rare cases, their associates (outside of the club);
- violence, including being violently assaulted and/or stabbed;
- the loss of assets, particularly club paraphernalia and their motorcycle, but in some cases businesses;
- financial losses, including the payment of large exit fees; and
- disruption of social networks.

Indirect consequences refer mostly to the consequences of action taken to mitigate the risk of direct consequences. This includes having to move away to avoid retribution, and the anxiety that resulted from the fear of retribution, particularly in the immediate aftermath of leaving.

As well as the potential for severe physical violence, some of the direct financial costs were substantial, with former members indicating losses of up to \$250,000. Payment of outstanding club dues or an 'exit fee' of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 was also common, as was the forfeiture of motorcycles. There were occasions where threats were made against former members to extort money or assets that were not acted upon. Similarly, several participants described how the club threatened to take their motorcycle or impose monetary penalties, but they pushed back and held their ground. All of these outcomes depend on the culture of the individual chapter.

Threats of violence directed at former members and their family and friends induced considerable fear, anxiety and shame:

Oh heaps of threats, they hassled a friend of mine, beat him and pulled a gun on him while his daughter was in the car. And that broke my heart, I was so terrified to see her again, looking like a bikie.

I've got a tattoo on... and I woke up one morning, and some anonymous fella had sent me a message saying you need to check this out, and it was a [web]site that was on, like, how to survive on the street, [my details were there]. And I've just been degraded man.

For some, this anxiety associated with leaving was relatively short-lived:

First six months, I was anxious 'cause I was always on alert, but after that I calmed down and improved massively.

Others continue to be affected several years after they left the club:

I've always got four eyes at all times. I cannot sit in a restaurant with my back to anything, I have to sit where I can see everything, I sleep with one eye open, I can't be in my own home without listening for noises, and any bike that goes past I ask if they're coming for me. My wife says I sleep very nervously.

Some former members took evasive action when they left to avoid retribution:

...It took me a while to put in security systems, lights this that. I got a dog that bites anyone. So that's the only real measures that I could take, apart from placing basic weapons around the house, lumps of wood and table legs.

...I was gonna get shot, snipered. I decided at that stage that I was a wanted man...Basically, lived out of my car, moved all over the place.

But acts of violence did occur and, for some members, were quite serious. Some were seriously assaulted in group violence involving weapons:

Definitely. They tried to take my bike. They threatened me to hand over the rego. Then took to me physically with a baseball bat.

I was at work one day, and the guy who was helping me with the...bike called and said some guys have come and taken your bike. And so, I knew what was coming then...and then I got pretty badly bashed...

Fellas had struck me with [weapon], yeah, at the back of the head. I ended up with stitches in the back of my head, yeah.

Relatively few participants described seeking external assistance when attempting to leave the club. Although rare, for at least two members, the situation was exacerbated because they had involved law enforcement (or their former associates believed they had), which presents a significant challenge in helping OMCG members to disengage. Conversely, in one case, a former member described their involvement with law enforcement as offering protection. Others suggested police could offer protection and assistance to those members who were motivated to leave but feared the consequences.

Of course, not all former members shared these negative experiences. Many did not identify any concerns about leaving, nor having experienced any serious consequences. And, while there was a distinction between members who left in good or bad standing, other factors played a role. As one former member who did not experience violence explained:

If you're a younger member, like 12 months, you're fucked. You can't leave. But if you're a life member, you can leave whenever you like...I did everything right. If I'd been a young member, they'd have just taken my bike.

Consequences also varied depending on the process through which members left the gang. Many had a plan in place for how they announced their departure from the club. Often this was done without disclosing it to other members, while some members described speaking directly to their president, or negotiating their departure with the person who had nominated them to be a member, but only in cases where they felt there was a high level of trust. Other former members described simply showing up, handing in the colours and other paraphernalia, and leaving. Others messaged the club to say they were leaving, or simply did not return to the club. There was a general perception that being upfront and honest allowed for a less tumultuous departure, especially when they felt they had a good reason for leaving, but this did not negate the risk of consequences and was still contingent on other factors:

Depends on the terms. Are they a fuck-up, are they going to leave on legit terms? How's your relationship with your president, your vice, your treasurer, your brothers, how's your performance record, all of those factors come into it. You can try and run, but unless you're lucky mate, they'll find you.

I mean if you do the right thing and don't lie or cheat or steal from the club, you can walk away with your head held high. But there are things in place, that if you leave [within a] certain time or haven't done the right thing, or you've used the club's name to stand over people, you could lose your bike, your teeth, a lot of money, there'll be some penalty.

The timing of departure also played a role. Some left while in prison, or in response to a specific event (voluntarily or otherwise). Others left en masse with other members (especially at the time of the now repealed Queensland legislation *Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment Act 2013* being introduced). One member described how he chose to leave in a group for safety but, even then, made sure he met his obligations—handing in club property, paying outstanding club dues etc—and was respectful in how he told his club.

You gotta be smart about it. If I'd done it on my own it would have been more dangerous, but we did it as a group. Depends on the club obviously. But I wouldn't say walk in, rip off your shirt, throw it down and say I'm out. You have to be smart and not embarrass the club.

Finally, the rules with respect to leaving, and the extent to which they are enforced, vary between clubs and even individual chapters. Certain clubs were described as just not letting people out the door without threatening or carrying out acts of violence:

But it depends, some chapters are more vicious, some won't give a fuck and others will. If you went into the club in [location] and left on the Monday, you'd be dead on the Tuesday.

Effects of membership on former members

Relationships with partners, children and friends outside of the club

Brotherhood, loyalty and camaraderie are widely acknowledged as an important aspect of club life (Barker 2015; Dowling et al. 2021). Interview participants described how the club looked after them, offered respect and protection, and were genuinely supportive if 'one of their own' experienced hardship (although this had changed in the eyes of many). They enjoyed meaningful friendships, described fellow club members as 'good blokes' and spoke fondly of club nights, bike rides and family-friendly events. Some met their partner through the club, while others spoke of the club acting as a second family, particularly when they had no close family of their own nearby. This was a part of club life that many former members clearly missed.

Others described how they left the club because the culture had changed and no longer embodied the biker subculture they enjoyed. They may have been critical of some current members, but they spoke positively about their time in the club, their relationships with other members, and the interactions they continued to have with friends who remained members:

...all the guys left in the club were good blokes, I've been around to their places since I left a few times. I'd know them for a long time, we all knew each other's wives, at Christmas we'd get the families together. We were as much family as the blokes and mates too.

However, some former members noted that there was a downside to the strict loyalty to the club and the expectation that the club came first—namely, conflict with partners, poor relationships with their children and the loss of external prosocial peer networks. This was amplified when they felt the brotherhood no longer existed and was a common motivation for leaving the club. (See Dowling et al. 2021 for a more detailed discussion of these changes in club culture.)

For some, it was simply that the pressure to commit so much time to the club became a barrier to spending time with loved ones, placing significant strain on their relationships:

I wasn't able to give my partner or daughter any time. I wasn't there for her during the pregnancy basically. She missed out on the honeymoon period of our relationship, 'cause during that period I was always busy with the club, meeting with national office bearers, organising events settling club disputes.

I lost 10 years of my life with my [child]...I would make promises and [child] would say I'm lying. Made it hard on the kids, resented the club and resented me.

Look, the relationship did suffer, while I was in the club. Towards the end, I was spending six nights a week at the clubhouse. So she had a big thing about that...we were at war with that club...And that took a toll on the relationship.

I couldn't do things with my missus 'cause I had to go on runs, the club made me go to things, told me to tell my missus that I'm in charge. I had to square things with my missus and prioritise the club. And I'd be out riding with the club and couldn't enjoy it 'cause I knew when I got home my missus was gonna give it to me.

I was the worst dad ever, kills me to say it, because the relationship I had with my dad I wanted to be the best dad under the sun, and I wasn't. I mean, my ex-wife rang me and said are you gonna see your [child]? You haven't seen [child] in six months. I just totally lost it.

For others, neglecting their relationships with their partner was made worse because money spent as a member or lost wages had a detrimental impact on relationships:

It does, you're away. And it affects you financially. Every now and then they come up with this big idea, like we gotta go down to Sydney. And you get hassled all the way down. And then, you can't tell your family where you're going, you're just going away on a run. And it puts a strain.

This was compounded by the stigma associated with OMCG membership, which several members described as impacting their relationships with friends outside of the club:

...the group of friends that I grew up with, they didn't want to know me when I joined up with the club.

...mates are terrified of you, you're treated like you're a cancer. People don't want you around 'cause you're an associate, that was hard.

Former members rarely spoke about how their own behaviour in the club impacted those outside (partly because we were unable to ask questions about topics such as drug use and criminal activity due to ethical restrictions), but some participants recognised that their relationships were affected by what took place while they were a member:

With the drug use, the infidelity, I turned into a bit of a monster. The trust goes, you lose family and friends, honest friends, they don't want much to do with you when you're a bikie... It's taken a lot of work to gain trust back. And I still have some trouble with it. I think time will eventually heal all that, but it is a long road.

In transitioning away from OMCGs, former members described how they were able to reconnect with family and friends and form prosocial support networks outside of the club, which acted as an important substitute for the relationships they lost with other members:

I've had good relationships with friends since I left, 'cause they stayed away when I was a member, since I've left they've all started coming back.

Probably strengthened, you know, with my parents. I come from pretty good stock and they love me, and they would never say so, but I could tell they were disappointed when I joined, so my relationship with mum and dad has been better.

I know I've got a lot more social club people who talk to me. When I had colours on, a lot of them wouldn't go anywhere near me. These days a lot of them are my friends, there's no stigma to me being an ex-one percenter, and I have a lot of respect for leaving.

The support of partners and families was also viewed as important in helping to facilitate their transition away from the club:

Well, most people don't have the support network that I had. I've got a partner who can speak up, gets her fights on. It didn't affect my family much really, as I said I had the support to do it from my partner. She sort of thought, well, he wants to do this, he'll be back when he hits the bitumen. And she was there to catch me.

I don't even think I was involved with my family until I was in jail. I have the best mum you can ask for, my sister... I'm blessed with a wonderful family, and our relationships now, for my mum not to have to worry about me going to jail. I'd be in jail for life or dead if it wasn't for my mother.

Psychological effects of being in an outlaw motorcycle gang

Several participants in this study reported experiencing poor mental health, including problems with anxiety, depression and, in rare cases, suicide ideation. While some former members reported pre-existing mental health issues prior to joining, most attributed the onset or escalation of these health issues to the pressures of OMCG membership, and to traumatic events or experiences they were involved in or witnessed. Others described undiagnosed mental health conditions and using alcohol and other substances as a coping strategy. Threatened and actual violence on leaving clubs, and a persistent fear of retribution, undoubtedly exacerbated pre-existing conditions for some members, but were also traumatic enough that they might have triggered the onset of symptoms.

There's the depression I had after we lost our money. I'm reasonably stable in my mental health... In jail there were a couple of gangs, bashing people at random... But I saw a lot of that and that affects you. Being away from your family affects you. A death in the family while in prison affects you.

I was starting to get pretty severely depressed...the stress of the club, and one member in particular, creating drama when there was no drama, I got to the point where I was miserable.

In some cases, poor mental health was the result of a co-occurrence of negative factors—such as serious injury, lack of employment and relationship breakdown—severely impacting former members' quality of life and leading them to attempt suicide:

Severe depression when I left...Combination of everything, PTSD I was diagnosed with from the clinical psych, which I'd had for ages I now realise, but [...] made it worse. I still get bouts of depression, it's around not getting to see with my kids...I got made redundant...attempted suicide...I was pretty close to suicide a few weeks ago.

Another former member, who described his employment prospects as 'grim' due to a serious injury preventing him from working, said:

I'm on meds, it's been tough at times, last year I tried to take my own life. So the system really failed me.

Importantly, there were several examples where former members had benefited from therapeutic interventions addressing their mental health, including psychological and pharmacological treatment. In some cases, this treatment commenced while they were a member, and one participant described this as an important factor in their decision to leave. Others described how treatment after disengagement significantly improved their mental health, with flow-on benefits to their relationships:

Gone through intensive, intensive counselling. I started going through counselling before I left the club, and I said to my counsellor I've got to get out, and he said what are you even doing there? Get out, they're bananas.

Now I see a psych doctor, and I'm prescribed... Yeah, that's changed my life, I see him [regularly]... The best thing I did was go to my GP, tell him the truth...Any type of impulsiveness, aggression is gone. I have more concentration, more focus.

I think my mind sits a lot better, I'm not as worried all the time. If something odd happens, like a light goes on at night outside I'll get a bit jumpy. But I'm much better now. My end goal is much higher. I'm able to save, put money away, buy things I couldn't have in the past...I don't want to punch someone's lights out just to prove myself. I did go and see a psych actually, for 6–12 months.

Access to stable employment and legitimate income

Some former members operated legitimate businesses that were closely linked with the club. Others were employed the entire time they were a member, and continued to work after leaving. A smaller group did not work while they were in the club but had pre-existing skills or qualifications that they were able to use to pick up work after they left. This was another feature that appeared to vary between clubs—some clubs were described as requiring members to be working, while in others almost all the members were unemployed:

I never had problem getting work, being in the club I actually had offers for work, just 'cause you're in a club doesn't mean you can't have a good job. I mean some might need help with jobs, but some normal people need help with jobs as well. It depends on what chapter or club, some just don't want to work, some do.

While there was little evidence that employment in itself motivated former members to leave their club, it certainly appeared to influence their experience of life after leaving. In this sample there was a large group who encountered barriers to finding or retaining employment after they left the club. Two main barriers to employment emerged. The first barrier was the stigma attached to having been a member of the club and the second was a legal barrier—the regulation of employment of OMCG members in certain industries, the need to comply with sentence conditions, and mandatory background checks by employers. Some participants spoke about the legal barriers to employment while they were a member:

I lost my job, I was a [tradesperson] and I lost my job when the VLAD laws [*Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment Act 2013*] came in, no one wanted a bikie on their worksites. I kept getting turned down at job interviews.

I think it was around when the VLAD laws came in. I was applying for jobs and getting knocked back for everything. It affected me, I still haven't found a job, still having difficulties.

Problems with respect to employment were more common in the period after leaving the club, when former members were trying to forge a new life earning a legitimate income:

I've tried to fit back into society, but [a middle-aged] ex-bikie is hard to employ.

In some cases, legal barriers to employment related to sentences being served when they disengaged from the club:

I moved [between several] different houses in a year since I got out because you need a place for parole. Employment for me is a massive one, no one would have me because of the ankle bracelet. People are nasty c*nts, it's always cash in hand.

One participant spoke about the effect of legislation prohibiting employment in certain industries:

I got a job as an [occupation], told my parole officer I was gonna start next week. Then I had another parole meeting next Friday, and was gonna start that night, and this officer said you can't go to work, I'll breach you.

Another more common scenario was the challenge of attempting to find employment when background checks alerted prospective employers to their criminal past, or to their former affiliation with an OMCG. This was compounded by the stigma associated with being a former 'one percenter' (OMCG member):

...I went to one of the employment places, and they done a background check, and they said, we can't get you a job 'cause of your background check, and I said what am I meant to do, and they said I don't know... I would never go back to the club, but it was getting to the point where I was looking at getting into some sort of crime, 'cause I was just on the bones of my arse before getting this job.

That's been where the biggest struggle has been, I've never been on Centrelink until after I left the club, and I'm unemployed now struggling to get a job, really struggling...You don't even get to interview stage.

Yeah, my current boss detests 'one percenters', if he knew I was a 'one percenter' he wouldn't have given me the job.

The findings about employment difficulties are important because access to work was viewed by many as an important catalyst for successful disengagement. Unsurprisingly, given the issues with respect to employment, this was by far the most common support recommended:

I'm a very, very good [occupation]. But I can't pursue that 'cause I have this stigma. I had this six-month period where I made bad decisions, but I've otherwise stayed on the right side of the law, and I've paid for the bad things I've done. That should be taken into consideration.

The biggest thing is, a lot of guys are unemployed, because they're in the club, they're earning money through the club, then they get out, they're unemployed so they join another club. Get a job mate, give them a go. There's guys out there that will give you a go.

The provision of employment post-disengagement may not be, in itself, an incentive for members to leave an OMCG. As one former member indicated when speaking about other, particularly younger members:

...you can make big dollars selling stuff you shouldn't be selling. And that's what it's all about. Why go to work 40 hours for \$1,500, when you can get that in one deal and sit out the rest of the week?

But, for members motivated by other factors to leave, providing access to stable, legitimate employment may help to prevent them returning to the club.

Discussion

In this paper we explored the impacts of OMCG membership on former members, including the consequences associated with leaving the club and the negative outcomes experienced before and after leaving. Several dominant themes emerged which have implications for the design of interventions to support members who disengage, or are motivated to disengage, from OMCGs.

While some members experienced adverse consequences for leaving an OMCG, less hostile separations were not uncommon. Consequences ranged from threats by individual members of former clubs to serious assaults, financial losses and asset forfeiture. Consequences varied according to whether members left in good or bad standing, but also the process through which they left, their motivations for leaving, and the culture of the club or chapter of which they were a member. Importantly, while the decision to leave was often described as being made quickly, members also described waiting to leave, and the anticipated consequences acted as barriers to leaving (Carson & Vecchio 2015). Finding ways to overcome these barriers may be challenging, but could help motivated members to leave OMCGs. This could include providing relocation assistance, tattoo removal or protection to individuals who are likely to face threats of serious violence from their former club.

We observed several related effects of OMCG membership, with evidence that membership negatively impacted family and peer relationships, access to employment post-disengagement and the psychological wellbeing of many of the former members interviewed in this study. The importance of employment in crime desistance is well established (Apel & Horney 2017) and providing access to meaningful, stable employment may be an important mechanism for supporting former members, particularly those who have become disaffected or disillusioned with their former club (Tonks & Stephenson 2018). Notably, three-quarters of former OMCG members participating in a Danish exit program wanted help finding work (Pederson 2015).

The impact of membership on relationships with significant others and parenthood are important motives for disengaging from gangs for some individuals (Pederson 2015; Tonks & Stephenson 2018), while the presence of support networks was identified as a factor in successful disengagement. Findings with respect to the impact of OMCG membership on mental health are also consistent with the wider research into gangs, which has shown membership to increase depression and suicide ideation, anxiety and substance use (Coid et al. 2013; Watkins & Melde 2016).

Importantly, not all former OMCG members disclosed these negative impacts. We are cautious about drawing direct causal links between these negative impacts and OMCG membership, since certain outcomes may be a consequence of the same underlying factors that led individuals to join an OMCG in the first place—for example, seeking support because of a limited or dysfunctional prosocial peer network (Blokland et al. 2019; Decker et al. 2013).

The findings from this research challenge stereotypical portrayals of OMCG members as indestructible ‘bad boys’, an image fostered by OMCG clubs and in media representations (Katz 2011). Indeed, the physical, psychological and social consequences of joining and leaving a club were significant for some of the former members interviewed. These consequences serve as an important counter-narrative to the so-called ‘attractive’ aspects of OMCG subculture (Dowling et al. 2021).

The criminal activity of OMCG members, and the degree to which they are criminal organisations, has dominated research and the focus of responses to OMCGs has been on legislative and enforcement levers. While these remain central to an effective response to OMCGs in Australia, our findings with respect to the impact of OMCGs on former members demonstrate the importance of interventions that respond to diverse support needs of individuals leaving OMCGs. Combining enforcement with support services is an effective method of reducing offending among high-risk individuals and groups (Braga, Weisburd & Turchan 2018). Support measures for former OMCG members could include referral to therapeutic interventions and assistance with accessing stable employment. As the experiences of former members vary, a tailored response is crucial. The timing of this support may also be important given the consequences of leaving the club, especially in the months following disengagement, which may exacerbate the negative effects of OMCG membership.

There are clear precedents for models that can support former OMCG members who have disengaged from clubs. Denmark has led the way in providing an exit program for former members of OMCGs and other gangs that aims to address the impacts of gang membership and to support men seeking to disengage (Bjorgo 2019; Jahnsen 2018). These programs provide housing, employment and education support, drug rehabilitation and other therapeutic interventions, as well as assistance with tattoo removal and some form of protection for individuals who face a real or perceived threat of violence upon leaving (Pederson 2015). The evidence presented in this paper provides the basis for an evidence-informed adaptation of the Danish model to the Australian context.

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