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Abstract | In this study we explore the enablers of illicit drug trafficking using law enforcement intelligence data on a sample of 587 organised crime groups. We measure the prevalence of other forms of criminal activity and their relationship with poly-drug trafficking, which refers to the trafficking of multiple drug types and is associated with increased profitability, versatility and resilience to disruption.

Other forms of criminal activity—including enablers of illicit drug trafficking—were common. Half the groups (52%) were poly-drug traffickers. Groups suspected to have exploited or infiltrated the transport system (air, sea or surface) and those suspected of laundering money via the real estate market or gambling services were more likely to be trafficking multiple drug types. Groups that relied on these enabling activities were more likely to involve professional facilitators.

This research highlights a number of key enablers of organised crime that may be targeted to disrupt illicit drug trafficking.

Enablers of illicit drug trafficking by organised crime groups

Anthony Morgan and Christopher Dowling

Organised crime comprises a diverse range of criminal activities across different illicit markets. A simple distinction can be drawn between primary and secondary activities (von Lampe 2016). Primary activities are those crimes that generate profit, such as the trafficking of illicit drugs and other commodities, trafficking in persons, and fraud. Secondary activities are those that assist with the commission of profit-making crime or which help protect the individuals involved and the profit they generate (Naylor 2003). It is widely acknowledged that these secondary activities, often referred to as the ‘enablers’ of organised crime, are key to the success of organised crime groups.

In its most recent organised crime report, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) identified several enablers of organised criminal activity. These included money laundering, corruption, violence, the use of technology and professional facilitators (ACIC 2017). Similar enablers are identified in the threat assessment reports of the ACIC’s international counterparts, including the National Crime Agency (2020) and Europol (2021a). While the evidence on drug supply networks is substantial (see Bichler, Malm & Cooper 2017), building empirical evidence on the prevalence and relative importance of many of these enablers is often hampered by the clandestine nature of organised criminal activity (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2021).



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Money laundering conceals the criminal origin of illicit funds and enables offenders to spend these profits in the legitimate economy. It ranges from simple activities (eg cash purchases and investments) through to complex schemes involving multiple actors (eg offshore bank accounts and ‘shell’ companies; Levi & Soudijn 2020). Professional facilitators—individuals with specialised skills or expertise such as lawyers, accountants, real estate agents, financial advisers and public officials—can be critical to executing the more complex money laundering schemes, and to expediting or concealing the trafficking of illicit commodities through the corrupt misuse of their positions (Levi 2021). More broadly, individuals with criminal expertise are attractive to criminal groups because of the skills, networks and services they offer, especially where it assists with navigating complex supply chains (Calderoni et al. 2022; Kleemans & de Poot 2008). Encrypted communications technologies, online illicit trading platforms, alternative online banking services and virtual currencies, along with individuals adept at using these technologies, have also made it easier for organised crime actors to conceal their communications and transactions (National Crime Agency 2020). Finally, violence is a mechanism through which some organised crime groups maintain their position or extend their share of illicit markets, enhance their reputation in the criminal milieu, or settle disputes (Europol 2021b).

Strategic approaches to organised crime in Australia now emphasise the importance of targeting the entire ‘business model’ of organised crime groups, including these enablers (ACIC 2017; Department of Home Affairs 2018). An important question—and one with implications for how law enforcement and regulatory entities target their efforts—is how to assess both the prevalence and relative importance of enabling activities. One option is to consider which enabling activities contribute to the harm organised crime groups cause by increasing their profitability, adaptability and resilience to disruption.

Illicit drug trafficking in Australia

Organised crime groups generate substantial profits from the production, distribution and sale of illicit drugs for the Australian market (ACIC 2021; Gong et al. 2012; McFadden et al. 2014). Australian data show a strong correlation between illicit drug supply and enabling offences, such as money laundering and corruption (Hughes, Chalmers & Klimoski 2018), reflecting the key role that these enabling activities play in the illicit drug trade. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which different enabling activities contribute to the profitability of organised crime groups. In this paper we aim to measure the relative importance of different enabling activities by examining the relationship between enabling activities undertaken by criminal groups and more harmful criminal enterprises—namely, the trafficking of multiple drug types.

Organised crime groups that traffic multiple drug types (poly-drug trafficking groups) are important players in the Australian illicit drug market. The approach varies between groups—they may diversify in-house, collaborate with other groups or outsource to another syndicate—though research suggests the division of responsibility by drug type and an overarching management structure are commonplace (Hughes, Bright & Chalmers 2017). Trafficking different illicit drug types offers several advantages, including responsiveness to changes in market demands, maximisation of profit, and resilience to law enforcement interdiction efforts, especially with regard to maintaining adequate supply (Hughes et al. 2016; Rubin et al. 2013). Previous research has shown that up to one-third of commercial importations into Australia involve poly-drug trafficking (Hughes et al. 2016). This figure is similar to estimates from the United Kingdom (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007), the United States (Natarajan, Zanella & Yu 2015) and Canada (Malm & Bichler 2011). Further, poly-drug trafficking groups have been shown to be responsible for disproportionate quantities of drug importations, to have larger amounts of money seized, to operate for longer periods and to be more likely to have concurrent charges for other serious and organised crime offences, such as dealing in the proceeds of crime, firearm offences, fraud and corruption (Hughes, Chalmers & Bright 2020; Hughes et al. 2016). In short, they are responsible for a disproportionate level of harm.

Analysing the association of different enablers with poly-drug trafficking can provide insight into which enablers contribute to greater profitability, adaptability and resilience, and therefore harm, among organised crime groups. Those enablers associated with poly-drug trafficking may be particularly important targets for disruption and regulatory and enforcement activity.

Method

In this study we described the enablers of illicit drug trafficking among a large sample of organised crime groups of national significance identified and assessed by Australian law enforcement. We then examined which enablers were associated with a higher likelihood of poly-drug trafficking among these groups.

Data

The current study examined the characteristics of organised crime groups identified by Australian law enforcement agencies as posing a threat to Australia and which were added to the ACIC's National Criminal Target List (NCTL). The NCTL, which was recently decommissioned, held information on active and nationally significant serious and organised crime groups operating in or affecting Australia. The *Australian Crime Commission Act 2002* (Cth), which governs the operations of the ACIC (formerly the Australian Crime Commission), describes serious and organised crime as an offence that involves two or more offenders, that typically requires substantial planning and organisation and sophisticated methods and techniques, or that is one of several specified offences.

We also analysed data from a linked database, the National Police Reference System. This system holds information designed to assist operational police, including the criminal histories of offenders. Records from the two databases were matched using names and dates of birth (see Morgan & Payne (2021) for a detailed discussion of the matching procedures).

There were 927 organised crime groups in the sample provided by the ACIC; however, viable information was available for 779 of these groups (84.0%). A further 55 groups were excluded because there was only one known member on the NCTL. These are most likely significant facilitators who provide services to multiple serious and organised crime groups, or individuals identified in the course of investigating an organised crime group but whose associates were unknown. This left 724 organised crime groups with two or more members, which aligns with the ACIC's definition of serious and organised crime. The sample for this study is limited to the 587 (81.1%) groups involved in illicit drug trafficking.

Dependent and independent variables

The dependent variable in the multivariable analysis is whether an organised crime group is involved in poly-drug trafficking. We define poly-drug trafficking groups as those identified as importing, exporting, manufacturing or distributing more than one drug type. Each illicit drug and its precursors were coded as a single drug type, as we were interested in whether the groups were involved in different drug markets. Substances included in the 'other drug' category were counted individually for the purpose of coding the outcome variable. Importantly, our focus is on groups that traffic multiple drug types, rather than groups responsible for importing multiple drug types in a single seizure. This is a more expansive definition that allows for more detailed analyses of the characteristics, activity and enablers of groups operating across multiple drug markets. In addition to the type of drug that each group was suspected of trafficking, the role of that group in the supply chain (importation, manufacturing and/or distribution) was also recorded.

Our key independent (or explanatory) variables reflect enablers such as money laundering, corruption, violence, connections to professional facilitators and the criminal expertise of members. Groups were classified based on whether they were involved in violence, extortion and abduction or the criminal use of firearms. We categorised other criminal activities according to the sector that was identified as being targeted and whether the groups targeting these sectors were recorded as being involved in corruption (the exploitation and infiltration of different sectors) or money laundering. We note, however, that there may be some overlap—some sectors or industries may, for example, be infiltrated and exploited by organised crime groups for the purpose of laundering the illicit proceeds of crime. We grouped related sectors together for the purpose of analysis. Groups were also classified based on whether they included professional facilitators among their membership. Alongside the average age of group members, we measured the criminal expertise of each group. To do this, we used the linked apprehension histories for all known members to determine whether groups had members who, before being added to the NCTL, had a recorded history of commercial drug supply or violence and intimidation offences. Finally, we included variables on group size, based on the number of individuals identified as affiliates, and group presence overseas or across Australian jurisdictional boundaries.

Analytic approach

First, we examined the characteristics of organised crime groups involved in illicit drug trafficking, including the types of drugs, the role groups played in the supply chain, other criminal activities and the enablers of their organised criminal activity.

The next stage of the analysis involved estimating a logistic regression model predicting the likelihood of a group being involved in poly-drug trafficking (vs mono-drug trafficking)—our dependent variable. Regression analysis measures the relationship between each independent variable and the outcome variable while controlling for the potential confounding effect of other variables in the model.

Statistically significant variables are those which we can be confident are associated with a change in the likelihood of the outcome being observed. In this case, that outcome is involvement in poly-drug trafficking rather than mono-drug trafficking.

We then re-estimated the model, limiting the sample to only those groups that were under investigation or had been investigated by law enforcement ($n=281$), to account for the possibility that enablers were only identified as a result of the investigation process. This excluded those groups that had not been investigated or were still at the target development stage. To illustrate the relationship between the main explanatory variables of interest and poly-drug trafficking, average predictive margins were estimated using this reduced model and the marginal standardisation method (Muller & MacLehose 2014).

Limitations

There are advantages to using law enforcement intelligence assessments as a source of data, given the clandestine nature of organised crime. Studies that rely on open-source data are likely to miss a significant number of groups because information about those groups is not in the public domain. Useful information may not appear in official data, or even in sentencing remarks, because it relates to the modus operandi of the group and individuals engaging in criminal activity and may not relate specifically to the offences for which members of a group have been charged.

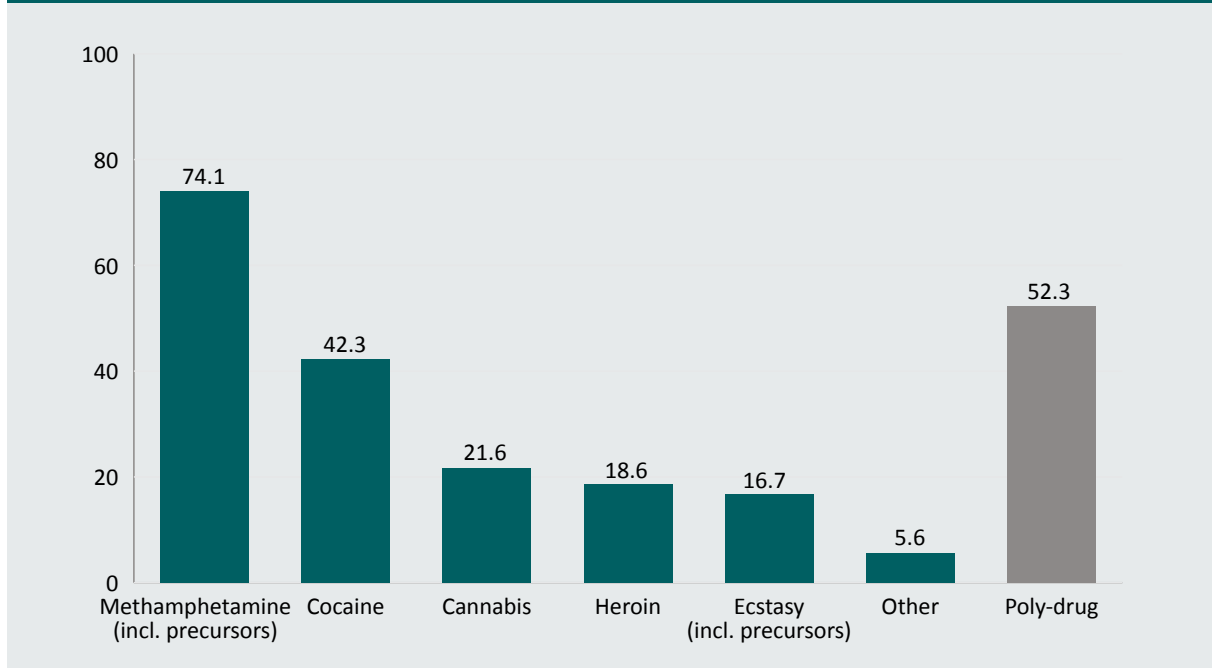
Nevertheless, we note the limitations associated with relying on intelligence data. For one, these data only capture information that is known by law enforcement agencies about individuals and groups suspected of being involved in organised criminal activity. Some groups may have been more closely targeted than others by law enforcement. We are also aware that the use of the NCTL varied between jurisdictions and over time, and has since been replaced as the source of contemporary information about priority organised crime targets.

Results

Characteristics of organised crime groups involved in illicit drug trafficking

Three-quarters of the groups (74.1%) in the sample were involved in the importation, manufacture or distribution of methamphetamine or its chemical precursors (Figure 1). The next most common drug type was cocaine (42.3%), followed by cannabis (21.6%), heroin (18.6%) and ecstasy and its chemical precursors (16.7%). A smaller proportion (5.6%) trafficked other drug types. Overall, 52.3 percent of groups trafficked more than one drug type (ie they were poly-drug trafficking groups).

Figure 1: Illicit drug types trafficked by organised crime groups (n=587) (%)



Source: AIC organised crime group and offender database [computer file]

The extent of organised crime involvement in different stages of the supply chain varied between drug types (Table 1). While it was more common for groups trafficking methamphetamine to import the drug or its precursors (45.5%), a substantial proportion also manufactured methamphetamine, reflecting domestic production (30.1%). Most groups were involved in the distribution stage (74.9%). Conversely, groups trafficking cocaine and heroin—which are necessarily internationally sourced—were much more likely to import the drug (59.3% and 56.9%, respectively). A significant proportion of groups were involved in multiple stages of the supply chain for one drug type, ranging from 23.3 percent of groups involved in cocaine trafficking, to 44.6 percent of groups involved in methamphetamine trafficking.

Overall, 58.3 percent of organised crime groups in the sample imported at least one drug type, 32.2 percent manufactured (or cultivated) an illicit substance, and 76.5 percent distributed a drug. More than half (54.0%) were involved in multiple stages of the drug supply chain (irrespective of the drug type).

Table 1: Illicit drug trafficking by organised crime groups, by drug type and role in supply chain (n=587) (%)

	Importation/ exportation	Manufacture/ cultivation ^a	Distribution	Unknown	More than one stage ^b
Methamphetamine ^c	45.5	30.1	74.9	2.5	44.6
Cocaine	59.3	0.4	60.1	3.2	23.3
Heroin	56.9	0.0	69.7	0.9	27.8
Ecstasy ^c	43.9	21.4	66.3	1.0	25.8
Cannabis	3.9	53.5	74.0	2.4	34.7
Other	42.4	3.0	69.7	12.1	— ^d
All drug types	58.3	32.2	76.5	1.9	54.0 ^e

a: Manufacture refers to the manufacture of methamphetamine and ecstasy. Cultivation refers to cannabis

b: Proportion of groups suspected of involvement in trafficking that drug type

c: Includes precursors

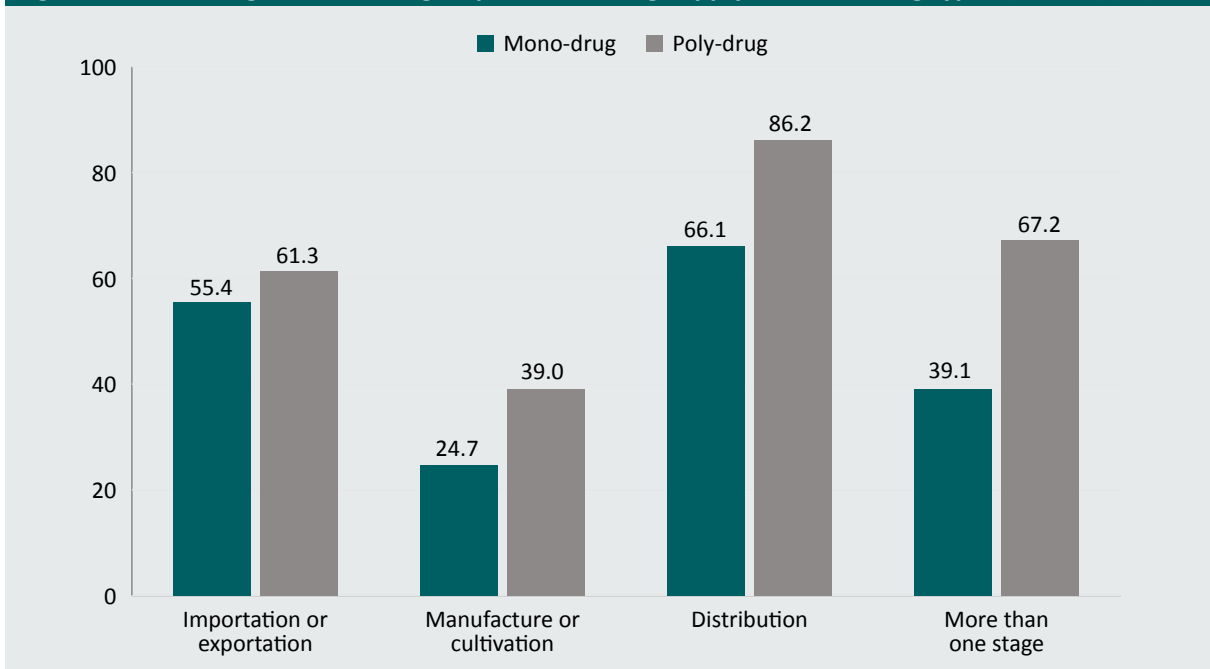
d: Not reported due to small number of individual drug types within the other category

e: Excludes 11 groups for which the supply chain involvement of all drug types was unknown

Source: AIC organised crime group and offender database [computer file]

As shown in Figure 2, poly-drug trafficking groups were significantly more likely than mono-drug traffickers to be involved in drug manufacture (39.0% vs 24.7%, $\chi^2(1)=13.41$, $p<0.001$) and distribution (86.2% vs 66.1%, $\chi^2(1)=32.73$, $p<0.001$) but not drug importation (61.3% vs 55.4%, $\chi^2(1)=2.10$, $p=0.147$). They were also significantly more likely to be involved in multiple stages of the supply chain (67.2% vs 39.1%, $\chi^2(1)=45.61$, $p<0.001$).

Figure 2: Role of organised crime groups in illicit drug supply chain, all drug types (n=576^a) (%)

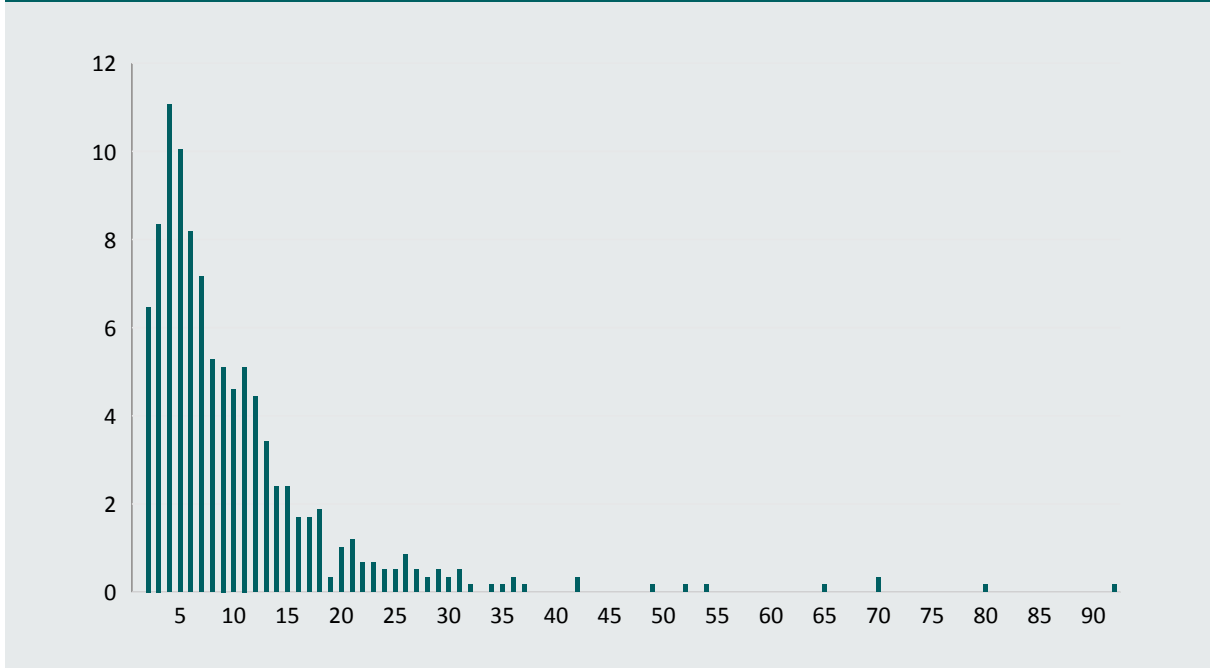


a: Excludes 11 groups for which the supply chain involvement of all drug types was unknown

Source: AIC organised crime group and offender database [computer file]

The size of each organised crime group in the sample is presented in Figure 3. The mean size of each group was 10.1 members (standard deviation=9.7); however, 35.9 percent of groups had five or fewer members, while 66.3 percent had 10 or fewer members.

Figure 3: Number of members in organised crime groups involved in illicit drug trafficking (n=587) (%)



Thirty-one percent of groups had at least one professional facilitator among their membership, while nearly one in five (18.7%) had two or more professional facilitators (Table 2). Overall, 73.1 percent of organised crime groups had a known presence in at least one overseas country, meaning they either originated offshore or have strong offshore links. More than one-third of groups (38.3%) had a presence in two or more overseas countries. It was also common for groups to operate across state and territory borders, with 48.2 percent having a presence in more than one Australian state or territory.

One in 10 groups (10.2%) trafficked illicit commodities other than illicit drugs, while it was less common for groups to be suspected of serious fraud offending (4.8%; importantly, a distinction is drawn between profit-motivated fraud and the fraud-related offending that may underpin money laundering or corruption activity). A significant proportion of groups had a reputation for violence, with 20.6 percent of groups suspected of engaging in violence, abduction or extortion, and six percent suspected of being involved in the criminal use of firearms.

Table 2: Characteristics of organised crime groups involved in illicit drug trafficking (n=587)

	<i>n</i>	%
Group size, composition and reach		
Mean number of members (<i>SD</i>)	10.1 (9.7)	–
Professional facilitators		
None	405	69.0
One	72	12.3
Two or more	110	18.7
International presence		
No international presence	158	26.9
Presence in one overseas country	204	34.8
Presence in two or more overseas countries	225	38.3
Presence in multiple Australian states and territories	283	48.2
Concurrent criminal activities		
Other illicit commodities (besides drugs)	60	10.2
Fraud	28	4.8
Violence, extortion and abduction	121	20.6
Criminal use of firearms	35	6.0
Exploitation and infiltration		
Transport sector	64	10.9
Private or commercial industry	62	10.6
Public sector	26	4.4
Other sector	15	2.6
Money laundering		
Financial sector	125	21.3
Real estate	49	8.4
Gambling	54	9.2
Professional	32	5.5
Other	69	11.8
Criminal expertise		
Prior history of drug supply offending	384	65.4
Prior history of violent offending	394	67.1
Mean age of members (<i>SD</i>)	39.8 (7.6)	

Overall, 21.8 percent of groups were identified as having infiltrated or exploited at least one sector. This was most commonly the transport sector (10.9% of groups), which includes air, sea and surface transport. The majority of these groups had infiltrated or exploited the maritime transport sector (67.2%, or 7.3% of all groups), which is unsurprising given the reliance on shipping for large-scale importations (ACIC 2021). A further 10.6 percent of groups had infiltrated or exploited a private sector or commercial industry. Public sector corruption was less common (4.4%). Half of all groups were involved in money laundering (49.7%). This was most commonly carried out through the financial sector (21.3%). This included a range of methods but most often used the alternative remittance sector (44.8%, or 9.5% of all groups). Around one in 10 groups were suspected of laundering illicit profits through gambling services (9.2%) or through real estate (8.4%). A smaller proportion of groups were identified as operating as professional money laundering syndicates (5.5%).

Finally, the majority of groups had at least one member with a known history of either drug supply offending (65.4%) or violent offending (67.1%), meaning they had previously been subject to legal action by police. This suggests a high degree of relevant criminal expertise. Consistent with prior research into the criminal careers of organised crime groups (Morgan & Payne 2021), the average age of members was 39.8 years, which is much older than the age profile of other offender types.

Multivariable analysis of enabling activities and poly-drug trafficking

Next, we estimated a logistic regression model. In the model including all groups for which data were available ($n=585$), several variables were associated with the likelihood of being a poly-drug trafficking group (Table 3). In terms of group size, composition and reach, groups with more members (adjusted odds ratio (AOR)=1.04), groups with two or more members who were professional facilitators (AOR=1.82) and groups with a presence in more than one Australian state or territory (AOR=1.57) were each more likely to be poly-drug trafficking groups.

Groups with members who had a prior history of commercial drug supply offending (AOR=1.74) and violence and intimidation offending (AOR=1.89) were more likely to be involved in poly-drug trafficking, indicating the importance of criminal expertise. Most importantly, given our focus on enablers, groups which had infiltrated or exploited the transport sector (AOR=2.08), which were laundering funds through real estate (AOR=2.14) or which were laundering funds through gambling services (AOR=1.91) were all more likely to be trafficking multiple drug types. This was also true of groups laundering money through other sectors (AOR=1.83).

Table 3: Logistic regression model predicting likelihood of poly-drug trafficking among illicit drug trafficking groups

	All groups (n=585) ^a		Investigated groups only (n=281) ^b	
	AOR	95% CIs	AOR	95% CIs
Group size, composition and reach				
Number of members	1.04*	1.01 – 1.07	1.03†	1.00 – 1.07
Professional facilitators (vs none)				
One	1.10	0.62 – 1.94	0.84	0.34 – 2.07
Two or more	1.82*	1.09 – 3.02	1.59	0.71 – 3.55
International presence (vs no international presence)				
Presence in one overseas country	1.00	0.62 – 1.63	0.85	0.39 – 1.83
Presence in two or more overseas countries	0.93	0.56 – 1.53	1.07	0.51 – 2.25
Presence in multiple Australian states and territories	1.57*	1.07 – 2.29	1.76†	0.99 – 3.14
Concurrent criminal activities				
Other illicit commodities (besides illicit drugs)	0.93	0.47 – 1.84	1.50	0.47 – 4.78
Fraud	0.66	0.24 – 1.81	0.70	0.06 – 7.74
Violence, extortion and abduction	1.03	0.60 – 1.76	0.65	0.26 – 1.59
Use of firearms	1.39	0.59 – 3.26	1.69	0.53 – 5.44
Exploitation and infiltration				
Transport sector	2.08*	1.07 – 4.07	3.72*	1.18 – 11.73
Private or commercial industry	1.22	0.63 – 2.37	0.95	0.32 – 2.76
Public sector	1.58	0.49 – 5.06	2.40	0.41 – 1.41
Other sector	0.35	0.09 – 1.33	0.11*	0.01 – 0.89
Money laundering				
Financial sector	1.26	0.78 – 2.02	1.79	0.84 – 3.82
Real estate	2.14*	1.02 – 4.50	7.32**	1.85 – 28.91
Gambling	1.91*	1.00 – 3.65	3.01*	1.06 – 8.55
Professional	2.04†	0.92 – 4.54	2.52	0.80 – 7.95
Other	1.83*	1.02 – 3.30	2.08†	0.90 – 4.79
Criminal expertise				
Prior history of drug supply offending	1.74**	1.15 – 2.64	1.67	0.85 – 3.26
Prior history of violent offending	1.89**	1.26 – 2.83	2.37*	1.18 – 4.74
Average member age	0.99	0.96 – 1.01	0.98	0.94 – 1.02
Constant	0.31*	0.10 – 0.94	0.35	0.06 – 1.90

**statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. † $p < 0.10$

a: Likelihood–ratio test $\chi^2(22)=99.97$, $p < 0.001$; Hosmer–Lemeshow $\chi^2(8)=7.19$, $p=0.52$; AUROC=0.732; Nagelkerke $R^2=0.230$

b: Likelihood–ratio test $\chi^2(22)=51.63$, $p < 0.001$; Hosmer–Lemeshow $\chi^2(8)=11.14$, $p=0.19$; AUROC=0.770; Nagelkerke $R^2=0.286$

Note: Two groups missing due to incomplete data

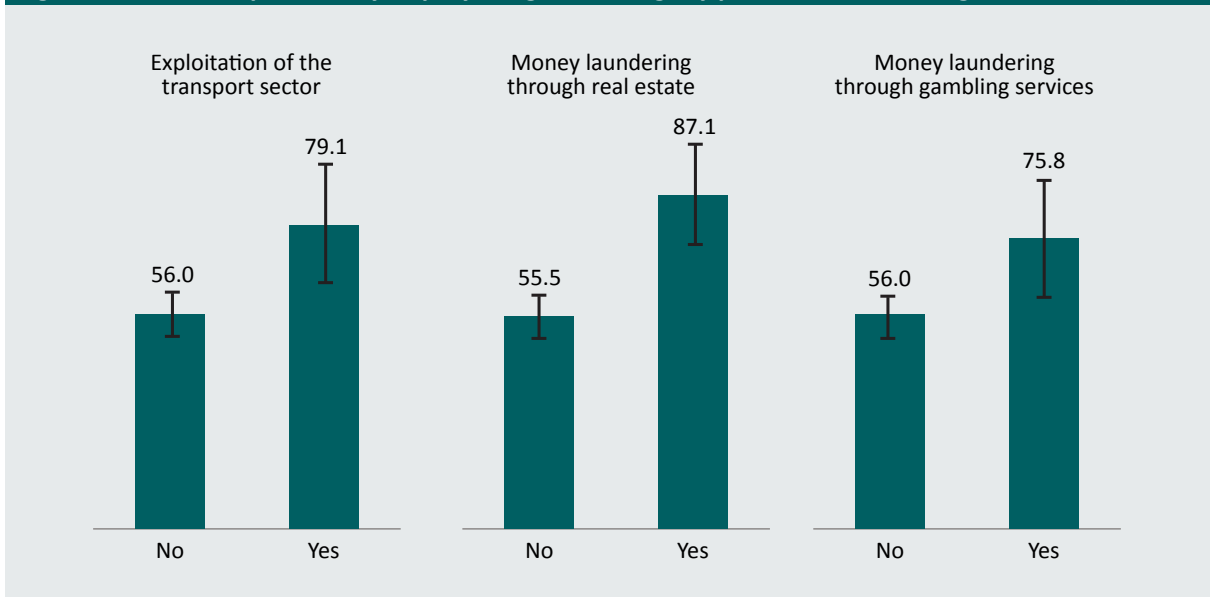
Source: AIC organised crime group and offender database [computer file]

Poly-drug trafficking groups on the NCTL were much more likely to have been investigated by law enforcement ($\chi^2(1)=6.8, p<0.01$). It is possible that the features that distinguish these groups from others were identified during the course of an investigation. Indeed, it is even possible that groups were only found to be trafficking multiple drugs through the course of an investigation. We therefore estimated a second logistic regression model that limited the sample to those groups that either were under investigation or had been recently investigated by law enforcement ($n=281$).

In this reduced model, groups which had infiltrated or exploited the transport sector (AOR=3.72), were laundering funds through real estate (AOR=7.32) or were laundering funds through gambling services (AOR=3.01) were more likely to be involved in poly-drug trafficking. This means we can be confident that these results represent real differences between poly- and mono-drug trafficking groups and are not an artefact of a different likelihood of being investigated by police.

Finally, we used the results of our regression model to estimate the predicted probability of an organised crime group being involved in poly-drug trafficking when these enabler activities are present and when they are not. The probability that an organised crime group is involved in poly-drug trafficking (rather than mono-drug trafficking) was 79 percent for groups exploiting the transport sector, 87 percent for groups laundering money through real estate, and 76 percent for groups laundering money through gambling services (Figure 4). These represent increases of 23, 32 and 20 percentage points in the estimated probabilities, respectively.

Figure 4: Predicted probability of poly-drug trafficking, by presence of enabling activities (%)



Source: AIC organised crime group and offender database [computer file]

These are all sectors that rely on some level of insider expertise. We therefore examined whether professional facilitators were more likely to be a member of the networks that relied on these enablers. We note that the role of professional facilitators in these networks—including the sector in which they were employed—was not specified. Nevertheless, in both the full and reduced samples, groups were significantly more likely to include professional facilitators if they were infiltrating or exploiting the transport sector (full sample (FS): 42.0% vs 29.6%, $\chi^2(1)=4.2$, $p<0.05$; reduced sample (RS): 48.4% vs 28.8%, $\chi^2(1)=5.0$, $p<0.05$) or laundering money through gambling services (FS: 46.3% vs 29.5%, $\chi^2(1)=6.5$, $p<0.05$; RS: 50.0% vs 29.0%, $\chi^2(1)=4.9$, $p<0.05$). Professional facilitators were also more likely to be a member of networks involved in laundering through real estate, but the result was only statistically significant in the full sample (FS: 55.1% vs 28.8%, $\chi^2(1)=14.5$, $p<0.001$; RS: 42.9% vs 29.6%, $\chi^2(1)=2.1$, $p=0.15$).

Discussion

This research has examined the enablers of illicit drug trafficking by organised crime groups targeting Australia. From this study it is possible to make some general observations about groups involved in the illicit drug trade in the Australian context and how these findings compare to the international evidence.

Nearly three-quarters of illicit drug trafficking groups in this study had a presence in at least one overseas country, reflecting the transnational nature of the drug trade into Australia. The majority of groups had 10 or fewer members, which is consistent with the general view of contemporary organised crime groups as being mostly small, flexible groups which can exploit opportunities for profit and adapt to disruption or market changes (Bichler, Malm & Cooper 2017; Desroches 2007). The high proportion of groups with members who have relevant drug trafficking histories points to the importance of skills, knowledge and expertise—a key factor in recruitment into organised crime groups internationally (Calderoni et al. 2022). The diversity of concurrent criminal activity present among the groups generally—including one in 10 groups that had diversified into other illicit commodities—also points to the range of skills and expertise that must be present within illicit networks. Most groups had at least one member with a prior history of violent crime, while one in five groups had a reputation for violence, extortion and abduction, showing that—while the exact context and motives of this violence are unknown—some groups are willing to use violence in their pursuit of illicit profits (Europol 2021b).

Half the groups included in this study were suspected of money laundering activity. Professional money laundering was relatively rare, suggesting that most laundering was likely being done by opportunistic launderers or groups who launder money themselves (Malm & Bichler 2013), although this might reflect the focus of investigations (Soudijn 2014). Groups involved in money laundering were most likely to target the financial sector, particularly the alternative remittance sector, which continues to be vulnerable despite strict regulatory controls (Unger & den Hertog 2012). Around one in three groups included one or more professional facilitators within their membership, reflecting the significant but not universal role these individuals play in the illicit drug trade (Levi 2021). Of course, there may be other important enabling activities occurring which were not reflected in our data. For example, while many of these enabling activities are technology-facilitated, the specific role of technology was not captured in the NCTL. We know from UK data that use of encrypted communications by organised crime groups is now universal (National Crime Agency 2020). Further research into the role that technology plays, particularly among contemporary organised crime groups, is needed.

We focused on poly-drug trafficking because it can provide insight into the enabling activities that contribute to the harm caused by organised crime groups by increasing their profitability, adaptability and resilience to disruption (Hughes et al. 2016; Rubin et al. 2013). Our study builds on previous Australian research into poly-drug trafficking groups (Hughes et al. 2016; Hughes, Bright & Chalmers 2017; Hughes, Chalmers & Bright 2020). Fifty-two percent of drug trafficking groups were suspected of poly-drug trafficking, which is higher than previous estimates based on commercial seizures alone (Hughes et al. 2016). This may be due to our focus beyond the importation stage, which was a limitation of prior research; indeed, poly-drug trafficking groups were more likely to be involved in the manufacture and distribution stages of the supply chain, and multiple stages of the supply chain, than mono-drug trafficking groups.

Several enabling activities were associated with poly-drug trafficking. The first was the infiltration and exploitation of the transport sector, which can assist organised crime groups to move illicit commodities, which must be concealed from authorities while in transit (Basu 2013). The most common transport sector exploited by drug trafficking groups in this study was the maritime transport sector. This is consistent with research by Sergi (2020), who identified the important role that ports play in the illicit drug trade. Indeed, sea imports account for the largest proportion of Australian drug seizures (ACIC 2021). Poly-drug trafficking groups move larger quantities of illicit drugs (Hughes et al. 2016) and therefore have more to gain from infiltrating and exploiting the transport sector. While there may be financial costs, corrupting transport reduces the risk and non-monetary costs associated with trafficking (Basu 2014; Giommoni, Aziani & Berlusconi 2017). Unsurprisingly, groups that had infiltrated or exploited the transport sector were more likely to have professional facilitators within their membership. These have been a focus in recent years, with the introduction of additional safeguards such as more rigorous vetting of aviation and maritime employees.

Money laundering via the real estate market or via gambling services were both associated with poly-drug trafficking. Given the links between poly-drug trafficking and profitability, it makes sense that poly-drug trafficking groups would be more likely than mono-drug trafficking groups to target sectors with known vulnerabilities. While complex and sophisticated money laundering schemes are certainly used by drug trafficking groups to conceal the illegal origins of their revenue, the most common techniques are comparatively simple and include purchasing large assets and disguising revenue through the operation of legitimate businesses (Bichler, Malm & Cooper 2017). The vulnerability of the real estate market to money laundering has been well established, both here and overseas. The real estate market is characterised by high-value, non-transparent transactions, and large increases in value do legitimately occur, making it an attractive investment (Kruisbergen, Kleemans & Kouwenberg 2015; Unger & Ferwerda 2011). For this reason, recent inquiries have sought to address the vulnerability of real estate and the role of professional facilitators, which again featured prominently here (Cullen 2022; Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee 2022).

While gambling services, unlike the real estate sector, are a reporting entity under Australia's regulatory regime, they have nevertheless continued to attract considerable concern. Recent inquiries have drawn attention to the scale of money laundering activity associated with gambling services, particularly casinos (Bell 2022). That poly-drug syndicates are more likely than mono-drug trafficking groups to launder funds through gambling services reflects the attractiveness of the sector to groups which generate significant amounts of profit.

This study is an important step in advancing our knowledge of the role of enablers in Australian organised crime. By focusing on the enablers of organised crime groups, rather than the groups themselves, it is possible to identify regulatory or preventative measures that may reduce illicit drug trafficking. This may overcome the limitations of an over-reliance on efforts to reduce drug availability and related harm through arrest and seizures (Eggins et al. 2020). Further research is needed that can demonstrate whether restricting opportunities for corruption or laundering through high-risk sectors, primarily through regulatory measures, can have a measurable impact on organised crime offending and related harm. Evidence is growing of the benefit of certain methods outside of criminal prosecution, such as proceeds of crime action, in reducing subsequent criminal activity (McFadden et al. 2014). However, measures need to be directed further upstream (see Dowling & Morgan 2022 for an example), particularly to target the enablers of organised crime and reduce the profitability, adaptability and resilience of criminal groups.

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