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FROM LEARNING TO CHOOSING: A STUDY OF CRIMINAL-CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN ORGANIZED CRIME

DE APRENDER A ELEGIR: UN ESTUDIO DEL DESARROLLO DE LA CARRERA CRIMINAL EN EL CRIMEN ORGANIZADO
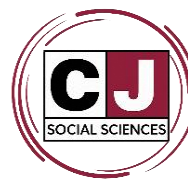
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Abstract

The study explores the developments of criminal careers of individuals engaged in organized crime in Sri Lanka, where the lens of the research is the application of Differential Association Theory and Rational Choice. Criminal networks continue to develop internationally and locally. This study implements a mixed-methods approach, inclusive of semi-structured interviews with 30 incarcerated offenders and questionnaires with rehabilitation officers. The results of the study established evidence of peer association, initial context of family background and level of deviance as the main influences to initiate participating in an organized crime network and supporting DAT. As offenders build a body of experience and status in the organized crime network, they begin to behave more strategically, consistent with RCT and rationale-based decisions involving risk assessment, opportunities available, and anticipated outcomes. The research also discovers structural barriers low education, unemployment, and social marginalization as long triggers and reinforcing antecedents of sustained crime involvement. Developing a criminal career from social learning to rational choice, this study advances theoretical understandings and offers insights for practice. It also advocates for prevention and rehabilitation interventions appropriate to the offender's position on the criminal career continuum, especially places like Sri Lanka, where socio-political circumstances intersect with organized crime.

Keywords

organized crime, criminal careers, rational choice theory, differential association theory

1. INTRODUCTION

O rganized crime is a persistent and evolving threat in both local and transnational contexts. Organized crime organizations respond to local and transnational recruitment and operational opportunities in different geographical, political, and cultural situations, and they adapt their activities by recruiting new members, introducing new illegal behaviors, and adjusting their operational activities in response to enforcement pressures. It is notable that, despite the advanced literature that seeks to examine the structures and operations of organized crime, there has been less scholarly focus on the ways that individuals enter, stay in, and exit organized crime (Kleemans & van Koppen, 2020). These discussions around the cases of offenders' life history timelines sometimes referred to as "criminal careers" are vital in shaping the prevention and restoration of offenders to non-offending states.

There are some discussions of criminal career development indicating that things are not simply a product of an individual's static personality or random role and opportunity. It is understood as a dynamic approach that includes a longitudinal development with social learning, situational constraints, and rational decision making (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Blokland, 2005).

This article examines how people engaged in organized crime transition from learning to choosing: how some aspects of involvement at early stages are determined by social networks and learned behaviors, while involvement at later stages is determined by more calculated, deliberative decisions. Those pathways are examined through the integrated frameworks of Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947) and Rational Choice Theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986).

In Differential Association Theory (DAT) it is important to understand that criminal behavior is learned as a result of interactions with others in intimate personal groups. The original premise of DAT was that through interactions with criminal peers people learn the techniques for committing crime, as well as the motivations and justifications (Sutherland, 1947). Since DAT was introduced, several empirical studies have examined the appropriateness of the theory for several forms of crime (e.g. juvenile delinquency [Warr, 2002]; cybercrime [Holt et al. 2010]; and white-collar crime [Benson & Simpson, 2009]). In organized crime specifically, loyalty and trust, as well as shared ideologies, are a necessary part of the recruitment and retention processes (Calderoni et al., 2022; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). These early forms of differential associations help form a deviant "value system" that allows them to legitimize their engagement in criminal conduct and to enhance their engagement with criminal networks.

At the same time, Differential Association Theory, by itself, does not explain how offenders make deliberate choices about crimes, roles, or the timing of actors. In these contexts, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides complementary knowledge. RCT, according to Cornish and Clarke (1986), is summarised as the crime is the product of a choice made by

an actor weighing the perceived benefits of offending against the potential costs of punishment or failure. RCT acknowledges decisions are only boundedly rational and influenced by an individual's own knowledge, emotions, and the constraints of the situation (Cornish & Clarke, 2014; Paternoster, 1989). In crimes of an organised nature where risks are high, and rewards are generally substantial, offenders exhibit sophisticated decision-making strategies that optimise individual actors' profits while minimising the risk of detection (Leclerc & Wortley, 2013). Studies have shown that when people engage in trafficking, extortion, or financial crime, they calculate expected utility around factors such as police presence, market conditions, and connections with political influences (Sahin et al., 2020; Bright & Delaney, 2013). There is an emerging body of research to indicate that the two theories are not mutually exclusive and further develop at different points of the criminal career (Bouchard & Morselli, 2014).

Early engagement with crime is likely to play a social role, such as through peer influence, familial connection, or community expectations. As individuals gain experience and status in organized networks, their role transitions from apprentice to strategist. At this point, risk, opportunity, and cost begin to supersede status rational calculations about behavior (van Koppen et al., 2010). For example, a young gang sniper. At one point, they will become a decision-maker deciding which methods and forms of criminal activity to use - since they will have now developed methods of risk calculations and ways to navigate the market using crime patterns and law enforcement patterns (Campana & Varese, 2021) quantifiable ways.

Sri Lanka presents a very interesting context to study this kind of social development. The organized crime landscape is considerably derided by, a civil conflict, political patronage and economic inequality (Gunaratna & Woodall, 2015). Criminal organizations in Sri Lanka are embedded in the very local communities that they operate in, and regularly intersect with a number of political, religious, or business elites (UNODC, 2023; Global Initiative, 2023). Youth demographic members often become members of the local network through family relations or local proximity connection. While the member may be part of a social criminal career, the youth member is often mentored by senior criminals and is socialized into a deviant subculture. As their experience and knowledge increases acquire important forms of specialized calculus and decision-making, they navigate and respond to increasingly complex risk environments as regards in transnational contexts, often involving narcotics, human trafficking and contract killings (Silva, 2017).

This research paper addresses important gaps in criminology literature by providing a longitudinal study of the criminal careers of organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka. The methods used draw on and combine qualitative and quantitative studies in the field of criminology. We wish to demonstrate how the processes of learning – through social interaction – and choosing – through rational deliberation, are interrelated processes and develop through time. In part, our empirical study builds on the work of Kleemans and de Poot (2008) concerning opportunities for crime embedded in social networks, and Pratt et al.

(2006) on the continued importance of risk in the decision-making process, even for seasoned offenders.

The research is framed by three questions:
  I.   How do initial social associations and learning experiences inform organized crime involvement?
  II. How does a cost–benefit analysis develop over time and with experience and criminal capital?
  III. What life events or turning points cause offenders to switch from socializing to rationalizing to make decisions (and vice versa)?

By analyzing the movement from socially learned motivations to deliberately chosen actions, this research provides a more layered and nuanced conceptualization of criminal development. It has practical implications for law enforcement and rehabilitation by demonstrating that at various points in criminal development, practitioners require (and we presume should use) different types of interventions (social dislocation in pre- and early emergent phases and risk manipulation in latter stages (Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2010)). Ultimately, this work contributes to the burgeoning criminological literature that advocates for the development of integrated, contextual, and politically relevant accounts of organized crime careers in the Global South.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To explore the human and criminal career development of organized crime generally will require a comprehensive theoretical framework. Criminologists have long debated if crime is learned behavior within social groups, or products of rational choice. This section will discuss in depth two important theoretical frameworks Differential Association Theory and Rational Choice Theory and examine the extent to which they can be combined to enhance our understanding of criminal career development in organized crime. This section will also examine the emerging literature surrounding social learning, strategic choice, cultural context and other environmental factors that contribute to the offender decisions of organized crime.

2.1. Differential Association Theory and Social Learning

Differential Association Theory (DAT), introduced by Edwin Sutherland, is the classic explanation of how criminal behavior is learned. Sutherland's (1947) position was that criminal behavior is not passed from one individual to another but, instead, learned from communication within a single individual group of friends or family. The central tenet of DAT is that friendships and membership in a group predict criminal behavior, such as delinquency or organized crime. Individuals learn to commit crimes by associating with individuals who

already carry out crimes, on a group level. It is the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of this participation that ultimately leads individuals to learn criminal norms.

There is also considerable empirical support for the basic principles of DAT, especially in the area of gang opening and social learning from peers, onward to organized crime. For example, Warr (2002) showed that peer influence is an important predictor of adolescent delinquency. Akers (1998) is an extension of DAT to a broader model of social learning, while including reinforcement, imitation, and differential reinforcement. Similarly, in organized crime, social processes have been shown to be important for recruitment, training, and socialization of new members. Specifically, with the Dutch offenders, Kleemans and de Poot (2008) found that many of the Dutch offenders became involved with organized crime through a family or neighborhood connection and learned illegal methods for illegal trades, with some direction from the perpetrators.

Likewise, Calderoni et al. (2022), in a systematic literature review of risk factors associated with recruitment into organized crime, reiterated a strong argument concerning the significance of intimate social networks and trusting relationships. In their study, Calderoni et al. revealed the kinship ties, proximity, and shared cultural identity, aided the internalization of criminal values and the acquisition of deviant techniques. Further, Calderoni et al. observed that these relationships extended beyond early adolescence and, in fact, were often consolidated into adulthood forming strong emotional attachments and group loyalty, which can often increase resistance mechanisms to law enforcement intervention.

In the South Asian context, specifically in regard to Sri Lankan case studies, Silva (2017) highlighted that most of the youthful male participants recruited into organized drug networks were initially introduced into dealing by family members or peers within the urban slum context. When dealing with individuals with whom there were already trusting relationships existent, youths often felt protected and seen as legitimate partners in the criminal endeavor. Therefore, young, novice offenders were able to access criminal resource and mentorship based on their early connections. Early identified relationships set the stage for ongoing criminal careers.

2.2. Rational Choice Theory and Strategic Decision-Making

In contrast to socially oriented explanations, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) views crime as the outcome of purposeful decision-making. Cornish and Clarke (1986) assert that criminality occurs when individuals calculate the costs and benefits of their choices although RCT acknowledges the existence of constraints such as lack of information or emotional cues, it maintains that offenders evaluate the reward expected from the crime, the risk of punishment, and the effort required to commit the crime.

Recent literature has applied RCT to organized crime. Evidence suggests many offenders consciously construct their choices and think strategically, particularly concerning criminal activities with significant risk and reward. Leclerc and Wortley (2013) explain that organized crime offenders evaluate their choices according to police visibility, surveillance technologies, and timing. Their research on sexual and financial offenders demonstrates that knowledge of the physical environment (including past experiences) and anticipation of the risks associated with perceived capabilities contribute significantly to the type and amount of crime that is committed.

Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) developed the "thoughtfully reflective decision maker" and further speculation argues that an individual with superior decision-making will contemplate future consequences, as opposed to engage in impulsive offending. These findings are especially important to organized crime because these individuals need to consider long futures when planning long-term activities, formulate a division of labor, and rationally manage illicit enterprises. Additionally, Liu et al. (2022) used neuropsychological instruments to demonstrate that organized offenders have an elevated reward profile and are less risk adverse then non-offenders with criminal status. These behaviours compliment the contention that rational decision-making, despite being bounded by biases and incomplete information, still drives criminal displacement, particularly when they are employed in a rational way during mid- and late-career stages.

One longitudinal study conducted by Van Koppen et al. (2010) found that while Dutch organized criminals typically start in networks of typical socializing, when they progressed to social influence or leadership positions, their deception and habitual risk taking requires decision-making and ability to manage risk taking. Their study displayed a development progression from socialized engaging in networks to evaluating and making rational choices as leaders.

2.3. Integrating Differential Association and Rational Choice Theories

The debate regarding social learning and rational decision-making has typically been expressed dichotomously. Yet, new scholarship indicates that these mechanisms are not mutually-exclusive, but are instead complementary and sequential (Bouchard & Morselli, 2014; McCarthy, 2002). Specifically, one way in which this may manifest, is that individuals may learn criminal behaviors, and justifications entirely through association and come to rationalize and refine their actions once they have experience and "criminal capital."

In examining street gangs and organized crime, Campana and Varese (2021) found that, social learning processes serve as an entry point into deviance, but once inside, survival and success within networks of criminals is less a function of affective ties and more a function of processing risk and perceived benefits. Once individuals began calculating benefits and risks, they had fully forged a professional identity as a criminal through a separation of crime from

normality, facing the crucial shift from affective or normative ties to instrumental or calculative ties (Bouchard, 2013).

Kleemans and van Koppen (2020) presented a criminal career approach which addressed the traverses of development in organized crime - a point that the early social learning decidedly transitions to strategic action. Their conclusions are consistent with this notion, that Rational Choice Theory becomes increasingly predictive in the later phases of the process while Differential Association Theory maintains its explanatory power during phases of initial criminalization.

In Sri Lanka, organized crime is made more difficult due to state-criminal collusion, ethnic group ties, and poor law enforcement (Gunaratna & Woodall, 2015). These contextual factors shape the social construction of risk and opportunity, which modifies both learning and decision-making. As Silva (2017) demonstrated, people in criminal networks with links to political actors often feel safe and unlikely to be prosecuted, which changes their risk assessments and bolsters their engagement with criminality.

2.4. Gaps in Knowledge and Future Directions for Empirical Investigation

Given the increasing literature on integrating DAT and RCT, there is not much empirical data using these models in the South Asian context with most studies being cross-sectional which restricts our understanding of the changes between social learning and rational decision-making. A longitudinal format would provide invaluable data on including the transitions between peer influences and rational thought regarding engagement, as well as the conditions which determine this transition.

This study fills an obvious gap in Dartmouth's literature with a longitudinal mixed methods study that focuses on the criminal career development of organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka. It adds to the growing body of research examining not only why people commit crimes, but also how they develop into persistent and ultimately strategic decision-makers within organized criminal environments.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated within a stage-contingent theoretical model that integrates Differential Association Theory (DAT) and Rational Choice Theory (RCT) in the broader criminal-career framework (Blokland, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 2003) (Table 1). The theoretical model assumes that social learning processes dominate early-career entry into organized crime, whereas cost-benefit calculations become increasingly explicit at mid- and late-career decision points, even if both mechanisms are mutually reinforcing across all stages.

Table 1 – Theoretical Framework

Stage	Dominant Mechanism	Core Constructs	Key References
Entry / Apprenticeship	Social learning (DAT)	Peer intensity, family ties, and criminal definitions	Sutherland (1947); Kleemans & de Poot (2008)
Consolidation / Professionalization	Hybrid (DAT + RCT)	Criminal capital, opportunity recognition, bounded rationality	Bouchard & Morselli (2014); Campana & Varese (2021)
Leadership / Brokerage	Strategic decision-making (RCT)	Risk–reward calculus, network brokerage, opportunity structuring	Cornish & Clarke (1986, 2014); van Koppen et al. (2010)
Turning-points / Desistance	Shifting mix	Mentor loss, sanction certainty, and prosocial ties	Paternoster & Pogarsky (2009); Kerstholt et al. (2024)

Source: Author

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1. Differential Association Theory (DAT)

DAT argues that crime is learned through interaction with close personal associates who provide criminal definitions favorable to obedience to the law (Sutherland, 1947). In an organized crime context, ties with high density and intensity transmit technical know-how (e.g., drug-cutting methods) and the moral vocabulary of justification (Warr, 2002). Empirical network research finds that kinship and neighbors are the most common recruiting conduits into Italian mafias (Calderoni et al., 2022), Dutch trafficking organizations (Kleemans & de Poot, 2008) and Sri Lankan drug syndicates (Silva, 2017).
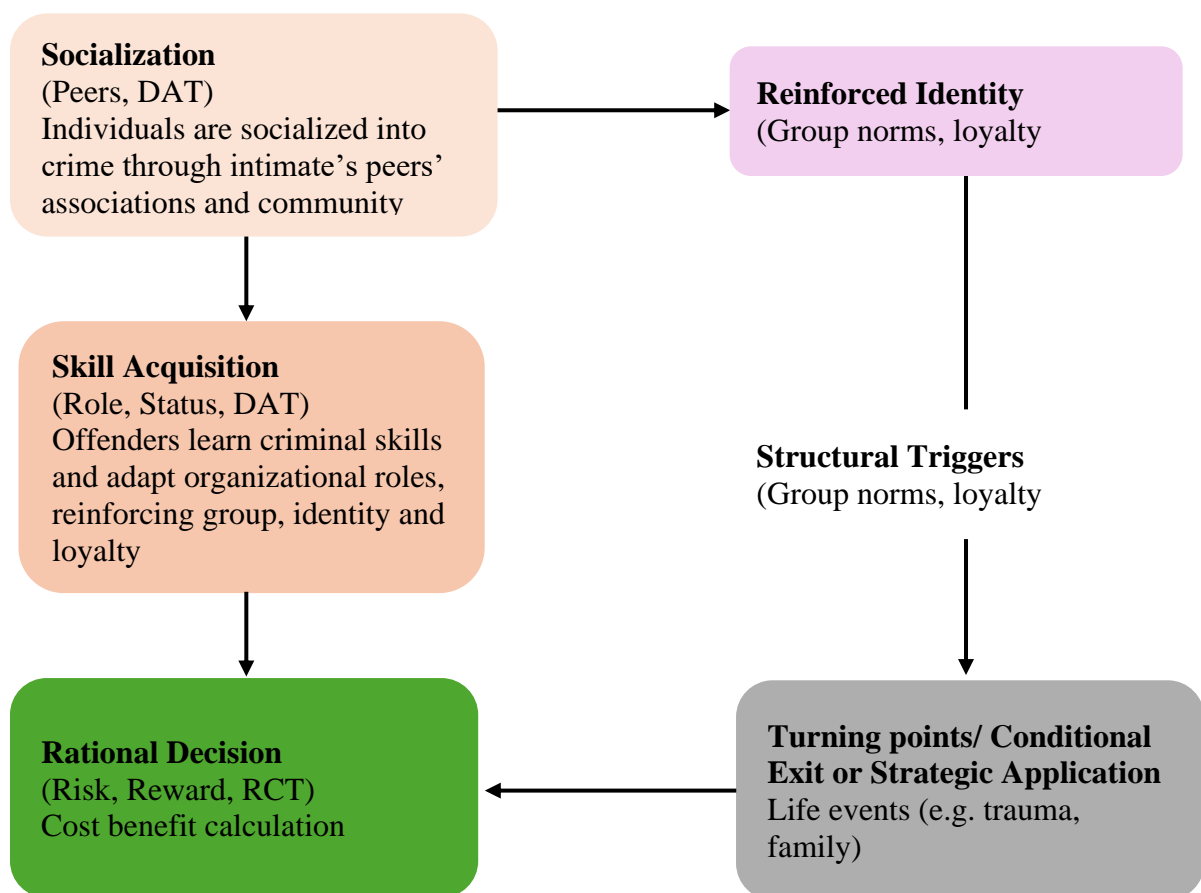
4.2. Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

RCT frames offending as purposeful, driven by expected utility (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Organized crime actors undertake weighing payoff, effort, and sanction probability when attempting to plan smuggling runs, contract killings, or money laundering (Leclerc & Wortley, 2013). Neuro-cognitive evidence suggests that chronic offenders have heightened sensitivity to rewards and lower levels of risk aversion (Liu et al., 2022) consistent with bounded-rationality assumptions of RCT.

4.3. Criminal-Career Paradigm

Life-course studies support the idea that participation in crime is developmental, including onset, maintenance, escalation, specialization and desistance (Blokland, 2005). Integrated DAT-RCT models are able to conceptualize that social influence is strong at onset, but the utilitarian reasoning behind criminally acts increases as actors amass 'criminal capital' (Kleemans & van Koppen, 2020) and move toward managerial or executive level roles (Campana & Varese, 2021).

Figure 1 - Conceptual framework

Socialization (Peers, DAT) Individuals are socialized into crime through intimate's peers' associations and community

Reinforced Identity (Group norms, loyalty

Skill Acquisition (Role, Status, DAT) Offenders learn criminal skills and adapt organizational roles, reinforcing group, identity and loyalty

Structural Triggers (Group norms, loyalty

Rational Decision (Risk, Reward, RCT) Cost benefit calculation

Turning points/ Conditional Exit or Strategic Application Life events (e.g. trauma, family)

Source: Author

5. METHODOLOGY

Applying a mixed-methods research design, the current study examines the developmental pathways of organized crime offenders following both Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and Differential Association Theory (DAT). The mixed-methods research design combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide an understanding of the learning processes, the strategic choices, and the critical moments in the criminal careers of organized crime participants. The nature of triangulating the two methods creates internal validity and provides a better contextual understand of the situational social and psychological factors that are present in organized crime (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

5.1. Research Setting and Population

The research was undertaken at Welikada Prison, one of the largest high-security correctional institutions in Sri Lanka. Welikada Prison has a sizable population of those imprisoned for organized criminal offenses in which the felons are involved in many illegal activities in conjunction with others such as drug trafficking incidents; extortion and seriously violent crimes including contract murders, and smuggling. Potential participants were prisoners with definable links to organized criminal subject matter and included confirmed connections within organized crime groups or arrangements based on a review of prison records and rehabilitation officers' categorization.

5.2. Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Participants were selected according to mentioned above conditions applying purposive sampling to recruit individuals with first-hand knowledge about organized crime. This method is appropriate for researching hidden or difficult-to-access populations, such as incarcerated organized crime offenders because random sampling is not feasible (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The analysis involved 30 incarcerated offenders at Welikada Prison, who were identified through prison records and rehabilitation officers to have verifiable experiences in organized crime or involvement in organized crime networks. Additionally, five rehabilitation officers were interviewed to contribute their professional insights and to triangulate the offenders' stories with institutional observations.

The decision to recruit 30 offenders was grounded in practical and methodological issues. Access to offenders within high-security facilities is limited and ethical considerations impact the recruitment process. While the sample size is smaller than studies aimed at statistical generalization, it is appropriate with qualitative criminological studies interested in capturing a variety of offenders' life histories (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Kleemans & de Poot, 2008). The inclusion of rehabilitation officers provides additional participant data which broadens the

analytic strategy with an understanding of institutional perspectives of patterns of risk, treatment, and recidivism.

While it is recognized that this sample cannot be used to make statistical generalizations to all organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka, the interviews themselves were in-depth and the triangulated data sources help to theoretically generalize as well as deepen the superficial understanding of criminal career trajectories. The results should therefore be interpreted as suggestive of modalities within this population rather than as indicative of all organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka, which highlights the need for future studies to expand their designs to be larger or multi-sited to reach further generalizability.

5.3. Data Collection Methods

5.3.1. Qualitative Data: Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data were primarily collected via semi-structured interviews with the 30 offenders. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility, permitting the researcher go deeper into individuals' narratives, perceptions, and social interactions (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The interview guide contained open-ended questions on:

- Criminal norms and early exposure, influenced by peers (influenced by DAT)
- Decision-making processes, including cost-benefit analysis (influenced by RCT)
- Significant turning points and transitions in careers
- The experience of desisting from criminality, where applicable

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was decided to proceed with an inductive coding process in which themes would emerge directly from the data while also being informed by core concepts from RCT and DAT. Coding categories included "peer influence," "rational justifiers," "turning points," and "criminal capital.

5.3.2 Quantitative Data: Questionnaires Used with Rehabilitation Officers

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires given to five rehabilitation officers. As a method of data collection, the questionnaire materials included the following:

- The frequency and severity of involvement in organized crime among inmates
- Indicators of recidivism
- Institutional misconduct and compliance or non-compliance
- Risk and needs assessments

Most items were on a Likert scale (e.g., 1–5) or categorical. These instruments provide additional, triangulated data on offenders' behavioral consistency and conceptual basis.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1. Demographic and Background Analysis of Offenders

This section aims to provide a profile of the thirty offenders using significant socio-demographic variables that relate to entry into organized crime. The data was collected via interviews and verified through institutional records when available.

Table 2 - Age Distribution of the Sample

Age Group	Number of Offenders (n = 30)	Percentage (%)
18–25 years	5	16.7%
26–35 years	14	46.7%
36–45 years	7	23.3%
46+ years	4	13.3%

Source: Author's Field Study, 2025

As indicated in Table 2, nearly half of the offenders were 26 - 35 years old (46.7%), highlighting that early adulthood represents the most active period of organized crime participation. This finding is consistent with Farrington (2003), which indicated that criminal activity peaks during young adulthood. The group of offenders 45 years and older (13.3%), indicates a smaller cohort of long-term participants who may be preparing to transition into positional or planning roles, which also aligns with Rational Choice Theory, as individuals in the later stages of their career may have a more purposeful decision-making process.

Table 3 - Educational Background

Education Level	Number of Offenders	Percentage (%)
No formal education	3	10%
Up to Grade 5	6	20%
Grade 6–O/L (Ordinary Level)	14	46.7%
A/L completed	5	16.7%
Diploma or Higher	2	6.6%

Source: Author's Field Study, 2025

About 77% of offenders had only achieved O/L or lesser (Table 3), indicating a substantial educational disadvantage. Low levels of education limit legitimate employment opportunities which may push individuals into organized crime as a rational alternative for

survival, consistent with Strain Theory and Rational Choice Theory (Agnew, 1992; Cornish & Clarke, 1986).

Table 4 - Employment Before join organized crimes

Employment Category	Number of Offenders	Percentage (%)
Daily wage laborers (e.g., masons, porters)	8	26.7%
Small business owners/self-employed	4	13.3%
Drivers (private and goods transport)	3	10.0%
Unemployed before being involved in OC	7	20.3%
Skilled technical workers (e.g., electricians)	2	6.7%
Clerical/administrative work	1	3.3%
Armed Forces or Police Services	5	20.0%

Source: Author's Field Study, 2025

Table 4 shows that a significant proportion of offenders were working as daily wage laborers (26.7%), which is indicative of a weak economy as a push factor into organized crime. Additionally, 16.7% of offenders had previously served in the army or police, providing them with tactical skills and inside knowledge. This subset reflects the operational aspect of Rational Choice Theory: that individuals are rational actors utilizing their specific training to maximize their illegal opportunity; but, still entered through social connections consistent with Differential Association Theory.

According to the study, the armed forces and police services have recruited members to organized crime because of several psychosocial and structural risk factors.

- Identity loss post-service: Finding civilian life difficult, some veterans were vulnerable to the economic pull of criminal networks
- Economic shortages: A lack of income through pension or savings led some veterans to engage in criminal activity
- Moral dissonance: Crimes were rationalized as "missions" or "orders" in interviews
- Peer normalization: There were members from the same military unit who were already members of a criminal network, which was regarded as an act of survival or loyalty

6.2. Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted by coding semi-structured interview transcripts from a total of 30 convicted organized crime offenders. Coding followed the six-phase protocol

established by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was derived through both inductive and deductive methods. The quantitative profiles and qualitative narratives were triangulated to confirm primary themes that correspond to criminal career formation and development.

6.2.1. Early Socialization and Family Background

Many of the offenders described their family contexts as either absent of supervision or immersed in criminality (deviance). This was especially true for offenders who faced neglect, poverty, or a family legacy of criminality.

> My father went in and out of jail. I thought it was normal. Everybody had respect for him in the neighborhood.
>
> *— Respondent 4*

Twelve out of 30 offenders (40%) reported being exposed to criminal behaviors in their home environment during adolescence. This theme corresponds with Differential Association Theory, whereby criminal behaviors are learned through interaction with primary groups. The family, as a socializing agent, occurs at an establishing age and is one of the earliest means of normalization of criminal behavior.

6.2.2. Economic Pressures and Survival Motives

Economic and sometimes physical pressure was the number one motive for most of these offenders to engage in organized crime. Data showed that 13 offenders (43.3%) were either unemployed or employed in low-paying, daily wage work.

> It was just anything I could scrounge up as a regular income. I have two kids, and I had zero help. That's how I got approached with an offer.
>
> *— Respondent 17*

These economic pressures were indicative of General Strain Theory, where a person does not achieve societal approved goals (e.g., job stability, family stability), and as a result strikes legitimacy as a means to achieve. Because of the structural pressures, organized crime became a rational response.

6.2.3. Role of the Military and Police Services

A very telling theme was the transformation from disciplined service to deviant enterprise. Six offenders (20%) had some military or police service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Police).

> I was taught to obey orders. When say a senior from my unit ask for assistance, I didn't hesitate. I was taught loyalty.
>
> *— Respondent 12, Ex-Army*

These individuals described their difficulty reintegrating after military or police service, pointing to unemployment, the vague transition away from service and promotion of themselves by former colleagues. Their transition into deviance demonstrated a deviant transformation of loyalty to a level of organization and tactical knowledge that was recomposed for engagement in crime.

This suggests that after training in highly structured registry into the military or police forces, when separated from that structure those individuals would be highly vulnerable to the opportunistic co-option practices of criminal networks. It also provides a further justification for a possible convergence of Rational Choice Theory and Differential Association Theory as their decisions were being made rationally but could often been seen as being socialized away via familiar social relationships associated with military or police service.

6.2.4. Peer Pressure and Gang Membership

The majority of participants cited peer influence (e.g., neighbors, friends, or ex-colleagues) as the reason for their criminal involvement. Interview data also revealed that 22 offenders (73.3%) reported having close friends that were already involved in organized crime before they themselves became involved.

> Everyone I then hung out with was doing it (smuggling, dealing, whatever). You either get in the game or go broke.
>
> *— Respondent 7*

Peer association not only normalized crime, but also was a conduit for engaging with organized networks. This supports the idea behind Differential Association Theory, where people learn crime norms more often than law-abiding (prosocial) norms.

6.2.5. Crime opportunity and the rational way of knowing.

Some offenders described rational consideration in deciding to engage in crime rather than work in legitimate employment. In many cases offenders who had technical or military skills had made rational choices to utilize that skill set in high-reward, illicit activity.

> I knew how to move weapons without being detected. That skill set got me into the gang.
>
> — *Respondent 21*

This phenomenon is consistent with Rational Choice Theory, whereby perceived benefit (e.g., income, respect, protection) outweighed the perceived risk (e.g., arrest, imprisonment). Interestingly, men who identified as having higher education qualifications (O/L or A/L) attributes described their decision making as more often incorporating cost-benefit thinking.

6.2.6. Structural Marginalization and Systemic Failure

While offenders articulated their disenchantment with formal institutions and highlighted low expectations of opportunities, discrimination, and corruption, they suggested that these elements even after they attempted to abide by the law.

> I wanted to follow the law and get a job. Nobody helped me. One cop said I would always be a thug.
>
> — *Respondent 9*

This systemic failure contributed to a sense of alienation, and further to their acceptance of criminal involvement in their worldview. This theme is reflective of a larger structural critique—one which situates poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities as barriers that have continued to engage offenders in further crime.

6.2.7. Desistance as a Distant Concept

When asked about their future, the majority of offenders did not articulate tangible plans for desisting from crime. The respondents voiced this schema of 13 of them utilizing imprisonment as a "pause," rather than a turning point.

> Once I am out, I have no choice. Who is going to hire me with my record?
>
> — *Respondent 19*

What this consistently suggests is that offenders demonstrated little internal motivation for desistance and affirmed a cyclical criminal identity sustained by social structural barriers and expectations. The remaining four, that expressed intent to change were all students operating in rehabilitative or spiritual programs in prison.

7. DISCUSSION

This research investigated the developmental pathways of organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka utilizing an integrated differential association theory (DAT) and rational choice theory (RCT) framework. Results indicated that the entry, persistence, and escalation in a career of organized crime was influenced by the interaction of early socialization, and later on rational decision-making. The analysis resulted in four overarching themes.

Offenders often described early exposure to criminal norms in the family or community social settings. Forty percent of participants described their parents or relatives being involved in criminal activity directly, which normalized deviant values from an early age. This strongly supports DAT's fundamental notion that intimate social associations provide definitions favorable to violation of the law (Sutherland, 1947). In Sri Lanka, family involvement in crime, not only exposed offenders to the techniques of crime, but legitimized that deviance was a valid and suitable lifestyle, which positioned youngsters into social networks where crime was accessible and normalized.

Most of the participants (73%) indicated that peer networks were critical for maintaining continued involvement. Peer groups gave offenders access to criminal organizations, protection, and group identity, thereby strengthening the original motives derived from the family. More importantly, when offenders got older, associations with peers was not simply about being part of a peer group, but about survival and economic rationality. This peer association was often (if not always) preceded by learned association (DAT), but quickly turned to a more conscious calculation of opportunities versus risks (RCT). Peer associations shaped offender routes into organized crime higher up in the hierarchy.

Additionally, economic vulnerability was a significant driver of the offending choices. More than 40% of the offenders were unemployed or doing some type of precarious daily wage work before being involved with organized crime. This context plays nicely within Strain Theory, but also demonstrates offenders were rationally weighing their criminal engagement strategies as opposed to being strictly motivated by the strains they encountered within their legitimate opportunity structures. The offenders consistently weighed the relative benefits of illegal income against the limited opportunities of the legal economy. This is a clear example of the bounded rationality that Cornish and Clarke (1986) wrote about. The counterpoint to this rational calculus was evident among offenders with higher levels of education or technical skills when they related crime to a choice around their economic choices.

One significant subgroup (16.7%) of offenders were either former military or police officers. Their entry into organized crime was often a mixture of rational choice and social influence. Their knowledge of logistics, discipline, and gun handling led to a rational assessment of how to maximize their gains using organized crime. However, their recruitment into organized crime usually was through personal connections to former colleagues, which speaks to the elements of Differential Association Theory. This subgroup

illustrates that career criminals often use both theories at the same time: they rationally exercise specialized skills while embracing social pressures to participate in networks of trust and loyalty.

The narratives also illustrated structural constraints, such as limited education, poverty, discrimination, and lack of reintegration. Offenders often viewed incarceration as a "time out" but did not see it as a turning point in life, supporting the idea of cyclical criminality. While some respondents in treatment programs goaled to avoid crime, most stated they would resume organized crime following release from incarceration. These findings demonstrate how structural marginalization supports deviant associations (Differential Association Theory) while presenting limited rational alternatives to crime (Rational Choice Theory).

Table 5 - Integration of RCT and DAT

Theme	Rational Choice Theory (RCT)	Differential Association Theory (DAT)
Military/Police Service Transition	Strategic skill utilization	Peer-linked recruitment within services
Economic Strain	Cost-benefit analysis of criminal income	—
Peer/Gang Influence	—	Learning techniques, definitions, group validation
Family and Early Socialization	—	Transmission of pro-criminal norms
Opportunity and Decision-Making	Rational selection of criminal paths	—
Desistance Perception	Rational entrapment through sunk costs	Continued exposure to deviant associations

Source: Author's Field Study, 2025.

Table 5 represents the intersection of RCT and DAT through the different themes. For example, while the economic strain acted to limit legitimate opportunities and to encourage rational cost-benefit analysis of alternatives, peer and family associations tended to be the primary source for learning and reinforcing deviant norms. The military/police participant demonstrates an intersection where a rational use of technical skills was pursued, especially through strongly peer-linked recruitment associations. This further supports the argument that criminal pathways develop through both social learning and rational decision-making situations.

While this study focuses on Sri Lanka, its findings have broader comparative implications. The shift from social learning to rational choice is not limited to Sri Lanka, but

reflects trajectories in other South Asian and global contexts as well. In fact, research on organized crime in India and Pakistan has shown that relationships with kin, neighbors, and state protection are similarly important to offender recruitment in South Asia (Campana & Varese, 2021; UNODC, 2023). In addition, the presence of ex-military or police involvement in organized crime has also been documented in both Latin America and Eastern Europe, indicating that organized crime applies specialized training and access to state resources consistent with the emergence of criminal networks in Sri Lanka (Bouchard & Morselli, 2014).

In summary, the results support the idea that DAT and RCT are not separate models, but rather intertwined processes at different stages of the criminal career. Early stages of involvement are shaped mainly through social learning from family and peers (DAT). As offenders gain experience, accumulate "criminal capital," and rise in networks, decision-making becomes more rational, reflecting cognitive processes about risk, rewards, and opportunity (RCT). The Sri Lanka example illustrates this sequenced yet overlapping relationship: offenders move from form of "learning" to forms of "choosing," but the two processes are always interconnected throughout their careers.

7.1. Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides meaningful insights into understanding the development of criminal careers in organized crime in Sri Lanka, several limitations should be noted.

Sample size and representativeness: The sample comprised of 30 incarcerated offenders and 5 rehabilitation officers from one correctional center (Welikada Prison). Although purposive sampling provided access to individuals with direct and relevant experiences, the representativeness of the sample to the population of organized crime in Sri Lanka is necessarily limited. Generalizations should not be made statistically, rather the findings will be considered as theoretical insights and indicative patterns.

Institutional context: The entire study was conducted in one prison. This may have influenced offenders' responses, as the narratives were likely guided (at least partially) by the prison environment, surveillance-based mechanisms, and the mechanisms of institutional rehabilitation programs. A study that examined multiple sites of data collection from different prisons or community settings would be more beneficial in understanding organized crime disembodied from the correctional institution.

Self-reporting: Much of the data provided by offenders was collected through a self-reported interview. While there were triangulated responses to the rehabilitation officers' questionnaire and prison records, self-reported data can be subject to recall bias, selective reporting or embellishment of experiences.

Generalizability across contexts: The socio-political context of Sri Lanka, particularly with respect to military and police actors and organized crime, is distinct. This provides significant

comparative value, but it does not support direct transfers of findings to other national contexts

Despite this limitation, the study contributes to criminological theory as it demonstrates the convergences between Differential Association Theory and Rational Choice Theory as criminal careers develop. Future work might utilize a larger multi-site or longitudinal sample to enhance the generalizability and comparability of the findings.

8. CONCLUSION

This research examined how individuals became involved in organized crime in Sri Lanka from social learning to rational choice. An analysis of data collected from a purposively selected sample of 30 incarcerated offenders, along with triangulated data from five rehabilitation officers, demonstrated that Differential Association Theory (DAT) and Rational Choice Theory (RCT) offer valuable, and complementary, explanations for how criminal careers develop.

The data suggested that the initial point of socialization through families or peers factored significantly into criminal involvement, as anticipated based on DAT, which highlights the importance of the intimate association of trusted individuals and the transmission of criminal values. Over time, however, the offenders engaged in more rational choice actions by weighing the costs and benefits involved for their role, risks, and opportunities over time, as proposed by RCT. Some participants, particularly those with military or police backgrounds, demonstrated some degree of both theories, as they learned to use their specialized training strategically, yet still involved themselves through social bonds with trusted associates.

The data found several consistent risk factors influencing sustained participation in organized crime: low levels of education, being economically vulnerable, having criminal family backgrounds, and barriers to reintegration into legitimate lifestyles. These conditions manipulated and reinforced deviant associations while removing rational alternatives, facilitating ongoing organized crime participation. Importantly, it was found that many participants did not perceive their imprisonment as an opportunity for transcending to a legitimate lifestyle, but instead, it functioned as a marking point within an organized crime career.

These results are generalizable beyond the Sri Lankan context, indicating similar family influence, peer recruitment, and strategy development mechanisms were also studied in organized crime in South Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. In demonstrating how DAT and RCT overlap at various stages of the criminal career, this research contributes to criminological theory in a comparative way and affirms the global relevance of integrated models of offender development.

From a policy perspective, this study suggests an evidence-based, stage-specific approach to interventions. For instance, early prevention efforts should target vulnerable

family and peer networks, while rehabilitation and reintegration approaches should reflect rational movement away from criminality as it is essential that credible alternative options be provided to current criminality and/ or criminal behavior. Social learning and rational choice dual influences should be recognized when developing practical responses to issues around organized crime in Sri Lanka and other contexts.

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