

## **Maturity Levels for Outlaw Groups: The Case of Hells Angels MC**

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### **Abstract**

The maturity of outlaw biker groups varies among gangs as well as among countries where a gang is present. In this article, a four stage model for maturity is introduced to help define the threat represented by outlaw groups. Maturity models such as the one for Hells Angels introduced in this article can serve several important purposes. First, general insights into evolution over time can be generated and communicated to decision-makers in society. Second, a contingent approach to law enforcement implies that the police and other government agencies can apply appropriate measures depending on the maturity level of a specific outlaw motorcycle gang. Thus, law enforcement can distinguish approaches for fighting non-mature gangs versus mature gangs. Third, the evolution of gangs over time provides insights into the mechanisms that make gangs more and more dangerous and threatening to society.

**Keywords:** Maturity, Outlaw, Groups, Hells, Angels

### **Introduction**

McIntosh (2009) argues that from relatively humble beginnings, outlaw motorcycle gangs, such as the Hells Angels, Outlaws, Bandidos, Pagans, Sons of Silence, Mongols, Coffin Cheaters, Black Pistons and others have evolved into sophisticated organized crime syndicates responsible for a large portion of the global illicit drug and weapons trades. This evolution into sophisticated organizations can be studied in terms of maturity levels over time. By application of stages of growth models with distinct characteristics of each maturity level, findings may suggest that different outlaw groups can be classified into different maturity levels.

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according to its maturity level, appropriate strategies to fight it can be identified. Third, the evolution of gangs over time provides insights into the mechanisms that make gangs more and more dangerous and threatening to society.

### **Outlaw Biker Groups**

One percent (1 %) biker clubs engage in non-conformist behavior, including anti-social and criminal behavior (Barker, 2005). Outlaw biker groups are organized in units that are registered as legal entities. Nevertheless, most of them are criminal matrix organizations where the motorcycle clubs themselves are legal, while activities of club members are often illegal. This combination of legal and illegal can be labeled matrix organizations, where the horizontal axis is legal (the club), while the vertical axis is illegal (the projects).

Lavigne (1996: 1) described criminal bikers in this way:

The darkness of crime lies not in its villainy or horror, but in the souls of those who choose to live their lives in the abyss. A man who toils from youth to old age to violate the line that divides civilization from wilderness, who proclaims he is not of society, but an outsider sworn to break its laws and rules, yet who readily seeks refuge in its lenient legal system, embraces its judicial paternalism and gains substance from its moral weakness; whose very existence as an outlaw is defined by society's being, is but a shadow of the real world, bereft of freedom and doomed to tag along in society's wake.

Outlaw biker groups as criminal organizations can be compared to legal organizations such as manufacturing companies and auditing firms. In a criminal organization, management is exercised by clear and explicit rules laid out for its members (Morselli, 2009). In a legal organization, management is exercised by clear and explicit goals for business performance. Table 1 illustrates some of the differences between criminal and legal organizations. In terms of recruitment, a criminal organization engages in selective recruitment of new members (Thomas, 2008), while a legal organization turns to the labor market to identify candidates.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Criminal Biker Organization</b>	<b>Legal Business Organization</b>
<i>Management</i>	Rules how to conduct illegal business	Goals for business performance
<i>Organization</i>	Network, matrix and support groups	Hierarchy and subsidiaries
<i>Recruitment</i>	Successful crime and similar lifestyle	Labor market based on education and

<i>Leadership</i>	Control of member activities and lifestyle	experience Control of work outcome and performance
<i>Relationships</i>	Tight brotherhood based on common values	Loose ties based on cooperation at work
<i>Finance</i>	Cash and accounts in unstable secrecy states	Budgets and accounts in stable states
<i>Marketing</i>	Bribes, threats and adventures	Advertisements, corruption and power games

*Table 1: Comparison of criminal and legal organizations*

### **Hells Angels MC**

Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) was founded in 1948 in San Bernardino in California. Today, the outlaw group has close 3.000 members in close to 250 chapters around the world in nearly 60 countries. Like many network organizations, a large number of individuals are associated with the club in various capacities – often wearing the sign 81 as letter numbers for HA. HAMC maintains a strong core leadership. Each chapter has a charter and a clearly defined division of labor between the international organization and themselves (Thomas, 2008). With a history spanning more than half a century, the HAMC has emerged into a vast organization, with chapters spanning across five continents (Morselli, 2009).

Morselli (2009) studied criminal market activities of the HAMC in Canada. He found that the HAMC organization is a hierarchical structure with clear and explicit rules laid out for its members. Their criminal market activities are characterized by flexibility rather than the rigid confines of a formal organization.

Some gangs have legally registered their names and insignia in order to protect their reputation. For instance, the HAMC has registered its trademarks. HAMC has successfully sued Disney Pictures to change a movie script, and legally forced an author who used the HAMC winged death head on the cover of his book. HAMC only had to legally threaten Marvel Comics in order to prevent them from using the name Hell's Angel for one of their comic characters (Fleischhaker, 2011).

When HAMC are suing companies worldwide for trademark infringements in order to protect their reputation and economic

interest, it tells us how society lets a deviant and outlaw group assimilate into a larger system. Trademark protection is an example of the cultural politics of the outlaws, i.e. the ways in which social and economic exclusion and inclusion are negotiated in socio-cultural practice. Trademark protection also tells about ways in which the proliferating internal boundaries of society, often grounded in relations of inequality, are crossed and challenged by those deemed expelled, with the mechanisms used by agents of the dominant system to control them.

Thomas (2008: 15) argues that HAMC has “mastered the art of turning crucible experiences into leadership gold”. He characterizes HAMC as a large, durable, complex, multiunit, multinational entity that has grown rapidly. The organization has closed its own borders and engages in selective recruitment of new members, and it rarely admits converts into the top leadership ranks. The most visible crucible is the motorcycle run – an event remarkable in its functional similarity to that of a tour of duty.

Thomas (2008) suggests that HAMC is best known for two things: its violent past – including murders, drug wars and gang fights – and its longevity. As an organization, it seems like a paradox that a group that purports not to follow society’s rules or any other rules maintains a strict code of conduct.

### **Models for Maturity Levels**

Maturity literally means ripeness. It describes the transition from an initial to a more advanced state, possibly through a number of intermediate states (Boughzala and Vreede, 2015). The evolutionary improvement can be defined in terms of discrete maturity levels. The fundamental underlying assumption of maturity models is that a higher level of maturity will result in better performance. Maturity models reflect the degree to which an organization has success.

A stage model is a theoretical approach to a phenomenon where stages are (1) sequential in nature, (2) occur as a hierarchical progression that is not easily reversed, and (3) involve a broad range of organizational activities and structures. Benchmark variables such as membership, affiliates, and behavior are used to indicate characteristics in each stage of growth. A one-dimensional continuum is established for each benchmark variable (Ditlev-Simonsen and Gottschalk, 2011).

The concept of maturity models and stages of growth has been applied to a variety of organizational phenomena to determine maturity levels. Maturity models identify sequential, hierarchical and cumulative levels for development over time. The first topic is to decide on the

number of stages. Stage models have a limited number of stages, which are conceptualized and defined in significantly different forms from one to another. The second topic is to identify the dominant problems for each stage, indicating that for each of them there is a pattern of primary concerns. The third topic is to identify workable benchmark variables. Benchmark variables indicate the theoretical characteristics in each stage of growth. The fourth and final topic is concerned with paths of evolution. Stage models indicate that growth proceeds from the initial to the final stage, via intermediary ones (Solli-Sæther and Gottschalk, 2015).

All stages of growth models share a common underlying logic. Organizations undergo transformations in their design characteristics over time, which enable them to face new tasks or problems that growth elicits. Problems, tasks or environments may differ from model to model, but they all suggest that stages emerge in a well-defined sequence, so that the solution of one set of problems or challenges leads to the emergence of a new set of problems or challenges, that the organization must address. Each stage comes with its own difficulties that the organization has to resolve, and each resolution leads yet to another problem in need of a resolution. This key principle of the growth model may be illustrated by referring to the problems common to legal organizations, where they will survive or collapse depending on their ability to develop and mature over time. Solving the developmental task of one stage leads to the next problem demanding solution.

A stage model considers degrees of criminal cooperation based on the fundamental principle of social organizing. It indicates maturity levels for criminal cooperation based on patterns of criminal organizing and elements of social organizations.

Criminal organizations may develop through four stages over time as illustrated in Figure 1. In the beginning, the gang is randomly selecting targets for crime and carries out their activities without plan or coordination. At the highest level of a value-based organization, gang members share core values that determine how and why they do what they do, based on competence and a strategy.

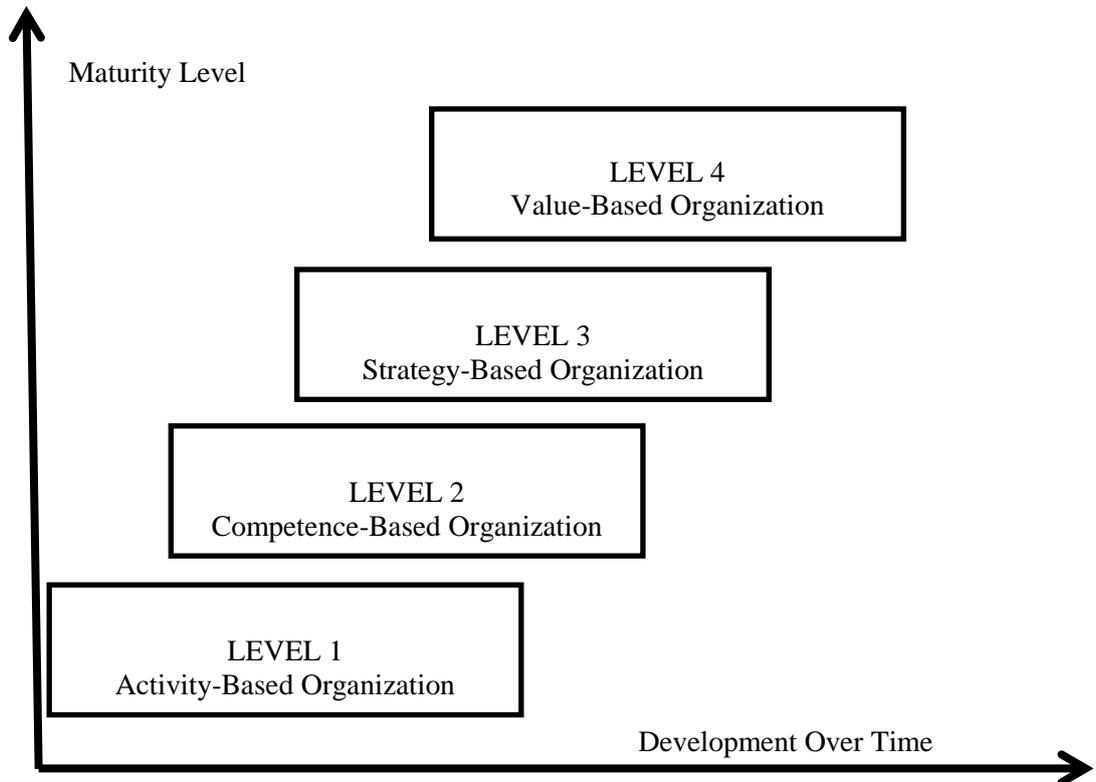


Figure 1 Maturity levels for criminal organizations

Criminal organizations at four levels as illustrated in Figure 1 can be characterized by management, structure, relations, actors, leadership, and corruption as listed in Table 2. Management develops from rules via knowledge and goals to a culture where rules are implicitly guiding behavior. Members develop from amateurs and generalists to specialists and experts in fields such as trade, finance, intelligence, and marketing.

	<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<b>LEVEL 2</b>	<b>LEVEL 3</b>	<b>LEVEL 4</b>
	<b>ACTIVITY-BASED ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>COMPETENCE-BASED ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY-BASED ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>VALUE-BASED ORGANIZATION</b>
MANAGEMENT	Rules	Knowledge	Goals	Culture
STRUCTURE	Gang	Network	Hierarchy	Matrix
RELATIONSHIPS	Friendship	Resources	Commitments	Community
ACTORS	Amateurs	Generalists	Specialists	Experts
LEADERSHIP	Dramatic	Organizational	Ambitious	Charismatic
CORRUPTION	Random	Selective	Goal-Oriented	Continuous

Table 2 Characteristics of the development model for criminal organizations

### Model for Hells Angels

Criteria to determine maturity for HAMC include exploitation of law, businesses that cut across legal and illegal markets, trademark protection, reputation, prosperity, followers and law enforcement avoidance.

We define a maturity model for HAMC in terms of four stages. The first stage is characterized by establishing territories both geographically and in terms of illegal markets. Threats and power are applied to succeed in establishing the club in competition with rivalry gangs. The final stage is characterized by entering into legal arrangements by running legal businesses and keeping professional relations with banks, attorneys and government representatives, while at the same time keeping secrecy around their club activities. The maturity model is illustrated in Figure 2.

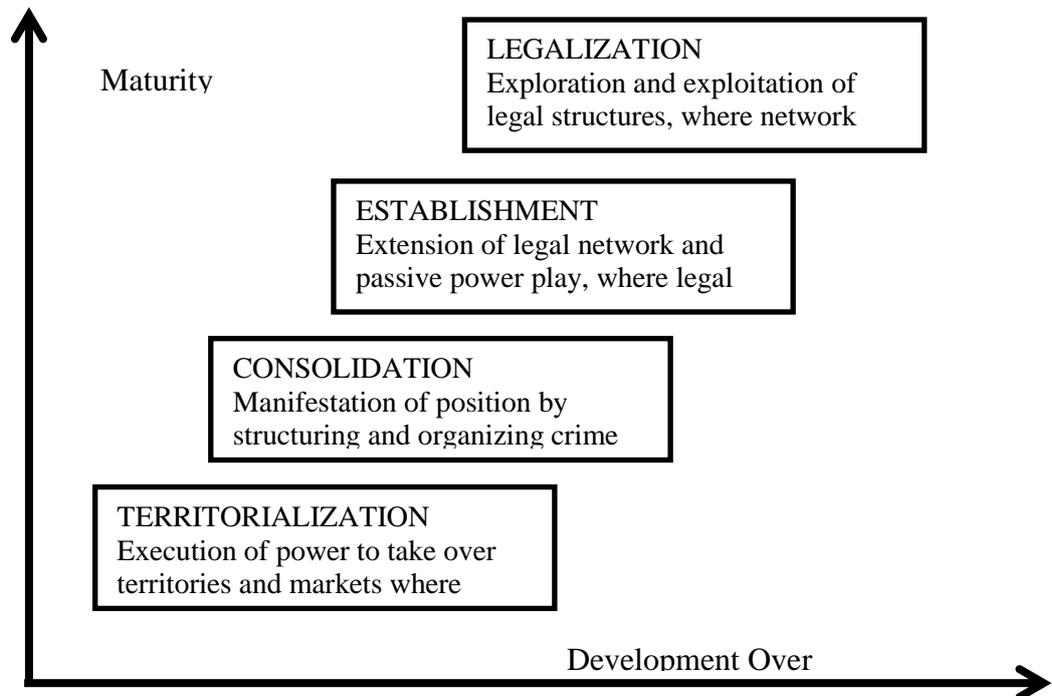


Figure 2 Maturity model for Hells Angels MC

Characteristics of each maturity level in Figure 2 can be identified in terms of structure, activities and reputation as illustrated in Table 3. The first stage of territorialization is characterized by a loose structure where members initiate crime with some coordination among them, by violent and risky activities, and by a reputation of dangerous criminals. The final stage of legalization is characterized by a legal base organization in the club that sets up project organizations separate from the club that carry out criminal activities. This is a matrix organization,

where the vertical chapters are legal, while the horizontal projects are illegal. Criminal activities are hidden in legal activities, and the club is seeking a positive and respectful reputation based on social activities.

	STRUCTURE	ACTIVITIES	REPUTATION
TERRITORIALIZATION	Individual violent member initiatives with some coordination among them	Violent behavior, risk taking and random crime	Dangerous criminals seeking negative publicity
CONSOLIDATION	Coordinated individual profit-oriented activities	Trade in drugs, manipulation, threats and fraud among rivals and suppliers	Negative attention and respect in the underworld
ESTABLISHMENT	Management by outsourcing of criminal activities	Threats of violence, management and arbitration among criminals	Attention avoidance and power base construction in criminal markets
LEGALIZATION	Base organization sets up and monitors criminal projects	Mixture of legal and illegal activities and businesses, money laundering	Seeking positive attention by means of social activities

*Table 3 Characteristics of maturity levels for Hells Angels MC*

As an example, Hells Angels MC Norway is seeking positive attention by means of social activities. Their spokesman is a hero in Norway because of a number of media exposures where he participates in adventures and helps disabled children. When he is to comment on members being convicted of crime, he says that they were unlucky and stupid, and that their actions have nothing to do with the club. Wood and Alleyne (2010) found that gangs achieve positive attention by providing financial aid (albeit from drug trade profits) to disadvantaged communities, by providing law and order services, by providing security

escorts for recreational programs, and by assisting impoverished households by supplying groceries, free transportation and manpower.

## Discussion

Outlaw groups are seen by the greater society as culturally and legally deviant. They also see themselves in this manner and self-proclaim themselves as outsiders. Maturity models illustrate how their criminal activities may become integrated into society over time. Integration into society is often accomplished in surprising ways, be it through fashion in terms of clothing, motorcycles and behaviors, be it through commodification of subcultural trends, paradoxical exploitation of law, or through businesses that cut across legal and illegal markets. Criminal bikers try to seem integrated, but this is a front. However, harsh laws against organized motorcycle gangs, for example in Australia, have seen such organizations becoming less integrated, rather than more, despite their efforts to appear to be just a bunch of guys who like to ride motorcycles.

Hells Angels is an outlaw group operating as a transnational crime organization. HAMC represents a challenge and a threat to societies all over the world. Although there is a large worldwide presence of outlaw motorcycle gangs, they are faced with varying degree of public skepticism, legal regulations, and law enforcement across the globe. In Australia in 2014, for example, the High Court rejected a challenge by bikers to a law aimed at preventing biker gang members from associating with each other. The law was introduced in 2012 following a wave of gun violence involving criminal biker gangs and other organized crime groups (Berkovic, 2014).

Biker gangs such as the HAMC operate on a transnational basis in their legal, as well as, illegal activities. Barker (2011) suggests that many American-based motorcycle clubs have evolved into biker gangs involved in organized crime nationally and internationally. Depending on social and political perceptions of these gangs by community stakeholders, laws and regulations to combat them vary among countries (Gottschalk and Markovic, 2016). While some countries have made it illegal to be a member, other countries are struggling to define boundaries for club activities as well as defining who are affiliated to clubs.

Countries vary on their responses to criminal activities. This also includes how outlaw motorcycle gangs are treated as well. When members of a criminal biker gang commit a crime, and the criminal is detected, then they are prosecuted in almost all jurisdictions in the world. Exceptions include places where bikers are associated with the elite in society. There is initially no difference between him and any other citizen of that country. One issue of interest is whether and to what extent individual criminals are perceived and treated differently because they are

members of a 1 percent outlaw biker club. It is important to assess the treatment of members of criminal biker gangs by the stakeholders. In the case of criminal activity, stakeholders include members of the government, law enforcement agencies, courts, and the community.

In this article, the concept of maturity levels in stages of growth models is introduced as a theorizing procedure. The purpose of such models is to enable a contingent approach to law enforcement and policing, where the response to HAMC and other gangs depends on the level of maturity of the criminal organization.

### **The Case of Norway**

The dominant 1 percent biker gang in Norway is Hells Angels (Gottschalk, 2013). While there are only one hundred members, their supporters count several hundred in terms of 81-members that are individuals in the roles of prospects or hangarounds. In a country with not more than six million inhabitants, the presence of HAMC is notable both in the media and in the court rooms. Seventy out of a hundred members have been convicted and sent to prison in the last few decades. Some are convicted individually, while others are convicted as an organized crime group, which implies that they get a more severe and thus longer sentence. The penalties for organized crime are not linked to membership in HAMC, but to the fact that prosecutors can present evidence suggesting that the same individuals have cooperated in criminal activities previously and thereby representing a criminal group.

Amongst Norwegian police officials there are varying opinions about the seriousness of HAMC versus other kinds of law enforcement challenges. After the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and the local 2012 attack by a single terrorist in Norway, terrorism has become the top priority for Norwegian police. The national police investigation service (Kripos) considers criminal biker gangs as the most serious threat. However, several police districts disagree, as they found ethnic foreign groups to be more of a challenge. Thus, there is within the Norwegian police service – with 13,000 employees among which 9,000 officers – disagreements in terms of priorities. Also, there is disagreement in terms of law enforcement strategy. Kripos is concentrating on the organized crime aspect, which implies weapons, drugs, trafficked individuals, and other victims of criminal gang activities. The national authority for investigation and prosecution of economic crime (Økokrim) is only interested in the proceeds of crime. They want to follow the money trail. But since Kripos is the national authority handling criminal biker gangs, Økokrim does not get involved and the money trail is neglected.

Police practice towards members varies among police districts as well. While the chief of police in the southern part of Norway always puts visiting bikers back on the plane, ferry, or train, the chief of police in the

capital Oslo lets them all in and asks them to behave. By that, it is meant that they can do as they like as long as they do not to make trouble in public places in terms of public disorder. Otherwise, they can do what they like in their own clubhouse and in a rented hotel nearby.

The attitude toward HAMC in Norway can be described in terms of special episodes and events. For example, when bikers from the club wanted to join a motorcycle parade in the city of Tromsø, the chief of police in that city refused to support the parade and withdrew from organizing traffic during the parade. Another episode is related to colors, where some municipalities have asked local bars and restaurants to deny access to biker club members who are wearing their uniforms. Some establishments agree to this rule, but the overall enforcement of this rule varies. Examples exist where club members wearing colors have been let in through the back door.

Yet another example of an episode is a dialogue between the Oslo police and the Hells Angels in June 2011 (Jensen and Stubberud, 2012: 267):

It is almost one o'clock in a warm street in the city center on a Thursday morning. A car stops right outside a restaurant where three members of Hells Angels (HA) stand smoking. In the car there are two persons from Oslo Police District. When they approach the three persons from HA they all shake hands. After this formal greeting, they all enter the restaurant and the meeting begins. On the agenda is the planning of Euro Officer Meeting and the club's 15th anniversary in September. The HA members feel greatly responsible for accomplishing a successful event. Many foreign members will participate. Good planning and cooperation with the police are important aspect in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts. They provide information on the number of guests, on party locations, hotels, transportation, sightseeing and other details on the event. They answer the police' questions on other details of the event. The atmosphere is good and jokes are made about all the sights the older foreign members would like to see together with their wives during their stay in Oslo. The next issue is the police demands and restrictions for the event. The members are told that the police expect all HA guests to bring their ID documents, that photos are taken, that they accept the colors ban in restaurants and nightclubs, and that they follow police directions. It is agreed that the chief operation officer of the police will stop by the clubhouse to look at the location of checkpoints and parking. No crime is accepted. If crime is revealed, there will be reactions. The members accept this. They have already informed their foreign guests on the existing rules in Oslo. After clarifying a few more details the discussion continues on the threat situation for the

reestablishment of Mongols in the capital. After having stated their concern in connection with this establishment, a new meeting is convened after the summer holidays. They exchange new contact phone numbers and the meeting ends with firm handshakes.

Eirik Jensen, one of the authors of this report, was in charge of special operations in the Oslo police district at that time. Later, Jensen faced bribery charges from the internal police complaints commission, and he was expected to stand trial in the fall of 2016.

After a bomb exploded in the city of Drammen outside of Oslo in Norway in 1997, police investigations concluded that the bomb was placed outside the Bandidos clubhouse by members of HAMC Norway. Several HAMC members were convicted to jail sentences. Furthermore, Gjensidige Insurance Company, which had insured the destroyed buildings, paid close to US\$100m to the owners of the buildings. After several court sentences against HAMC members, Gjensidige sought repayment from those members. The members did not pay, but Gjensidige found out that they owned shares in a clubhouse outside the city of Hamar. Gjensidige got a majority pledge in the clubhouse based on debts of these members (Gottschalk, 2013). Still, in 2016, however, Gjensidige has this pledge without taking any actions to retrieve the money.

The perception of criminal bikers is dependent on their reputation. Lately, many criminal biker clubs in Norway have emphasized their social responsibility to improve own image. They arrange Christmas parties for children, wine tasting for adults, and other social initiatives that help improve their image. Rather than being frightened, criminal bikers would like citizens to pay them respect.

Some municipalities supported by Kripos have tried to get rid of criminal biker clubs. They have made it difficult for clubs to change or move locations for their club houses and has withdrawn various buildings and alcohol permits. Other municipalities have been successful in preventing biker clubs to settle in their towns, for example by regulating real estate so that nobody is allowed to live in the building.

HAMC Norway was established in 1992, and the club's approach was territorialization. The club moved into consolidation ten years later, and it can now be found at maturity level 3 characterized by establishment. The club is currently struggling to reach level 4 characterized by legalization. They have developed ties to important attorneys in Norway, so that municipalities and law enforcement agencies are careful in their approach to the club. They have a spokesman named the Super, who successfully creates an image of a milieu of movie stars, which is a reputational goal according to one of their club songs.

Other outlaw motorcycle groups in Norway have not reached level 4 or level 3. They are struggling at levels 1 and 2. Examples include Bandidos, Outlaws and Black Pistons. When Mongols entered Norway some years ago, they were extremely violent to establish themselves at

level 1. HAMC is the most successful group in terms of maturity, with some fallbacks over the years, from which they quickly recovered.

### **Conclusion**

This article has set out a model of maturity levels for outlaw motorcycle gangs, and relates it to Hells Angels in Norway. It argues that the model should be used to determine strategies for dealing with outlaw motorcycle gangs at the various stages of their maturity, and that policing organizations in different countries should adopt the model as a way of aligning strategies globally.

If law enforcement agencies internationally align themselves at a contingent approach to policing, then they will be more successful in combating transnational crime organizations such as criminal biker gangs across the globe. The described stage model can help national and international organizations identify where different countries in the world should be at their approaches to fighting criminal biker gangs.

The contingent approach by law enforcement and society at large should be based on maturity levels. At the territorialization stage, individuals should be detected and prosecuted so that they stay out of business as long as possible. At the consolidation stage, drug trade and other illegal activities should be made less profitable by tracing money and work hard on asset recovery. At the establishment stage, the organization as such should be combatted by denying property ownership and access to restaurants and other public places. At the legalization stage, businesses run by HAMC members – such as tattoo shops – should be regularly visited by tax inspectors and anti-trust authorities.

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