

# Trends in Organized Crime

## Who are the enforcers? The motives and methods of muscle for hire in West Scotland and the West Midlands. --Manuscript Draft--

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Who are the enforcers?

The motives and methods of muscle for hire in West Scotland and the West Midlands

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## Abstract

Enforcement, ranging from threats to intimidation to assault to homicide, has long been an established practice within criminal networks. However, comparatively little academic research exists about the nature and role of enforcers within and beyond the context of contract killings. Drawing on qualitative interviews with criminal enforcers from two contrasting sites within the UK—the West Scotland and the West Midlands—the current study examines the articulated, identifiable pathways into criminal enforcement. Also it examines the nuanced nature of enforcement and the roles those men commonly adopt within the context of organised crime, as well as the relationship between these men’s activity, the wider context of organised crime, and presence of social and cultural capital within it. This article provides insights into how one becomes an enforcer; how contact is made between all parties involved; the degree of planning involved; and costing arrangements, with important implications for research and practice.

*Keywords: Bourdieu; debt collecting; enforcement; hitman; organised crime; violence*

## Introduction

What exactly does it mean to be a criminal ‘enforcer’? To what extent and in what ways does this intertwine with violence and the adoption of the role of ‘hitmen’? Both terms conjure up images of glamour and professionalism in the underworld. However, very little is known about the lived experience of muscle for hire. Accordingly, this paper seeks to add to and extend the somewhat limited existing scholarship on enforcers, and the nuanced nature of their roles. It combines unique qualitative data sets gathered in two geographical locations in the UK – West Scotland and the West Midlands, focused on in-depth semi-structured interviews with people involved in enforcement activities. Through comparative analysis of their extended narratives, we zero-in on their motivations for and roles within enforcement contexts in different geographical locations. In so doing, we seek to add to the emerging literature on UK organised crime (e.g. Antonopoulos 2016; Hall et al. 2017; Campana & Varese 2018; Rahman 2019) and the nuanced roles associated with underworld enforcement, arguing as we do that – contrary to popular mythology – there is a spectrum of enforcement roles in the criminal underworld.

In the first section, we outline the insights from the extant literature on organised crime, begin to interrogate the somewhat limited existing scholarship on criminal enforcement, and argue that the concepts extend beyond the rather narrow and dark role of ‘hitmen’. Secondly, we outline the research methods used to gather data in both of our geographical settings. Thirdly, we present the findings from the data under thematic themes. Fourth and finally, drawing on insights from Bourdieu (1985, 1986, 1990) as well as the wider extant literature on criminal enforcement, we draw together a summary of our main insights and make recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

## Organised Crime and Criminal Enforcement

Organised crime (OC) is a somewhat nebulous concept that is hotly debated by criminologists (Kelly & Caputo 2005; von Lampe 2016; Bjørge 2017). Traditionally, organised crime groups (OCGs) were viewed as fiercely competitive and hierarchical, but contemporary evidence suggests more loosely affiliated networks of criminals who coalesce around certain criminal opportunities, often lacking a rigid hierarchy (Finckenauer 2005). There is emerging consensus that OC tends to be a productive activity, involving the provision of illicit goods and services (Varese 2010; Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou 2018; McLean et al. 2018). Under this umbrella falls a wide variety of goods and services, such as drugs, child criminal exploitation, human trafficking, fraud and forgery, money laundering, the infiltration of business operations, and the corruption of public officials and the political process (Finckenauer 2005; Gottschalk and Markovic 2015; Bjørge 2017).

Another aspect of OC is the regulation of illicit production, services and exchange, such as controlling the supply of 'protection' against extortion, theft, property rights and the settlement of various disputes (Varese 2010; Wang 2013). The view of Mafias as 'enforcers', for example, was proposed by Schelling (1984) and developed further by Gambetta (1996), who argued that violence was a necessary resource for the 'protection' of illicit markets. Mafiosi must be able to resort to violence, Gambetta (1996, p.40) argued, because 'the ability to inflict punishment is crucial to the role of guarantor'.

According to Finckenauer (2005, p.66) 'the ability to use, and the reputation for use of, violence or the threat of violence to facilitate criminal activities' is indeed a central feature of illicit networks. While criminals do cooperate, including within the context of local and global opportunity structures (Hobbs 2013), many illegal transactions occur without recourse to violence (Vargas 2014). Illicit markets, by definition, cannot be regulated by contracts and courts (Reuter 2009). Instead, transactions typically are trust-based, enforced by 'strategic



1 violence' (Wright 2006) that is calculated to secure the growth and survival of the criminal  
2 enterprise. Strategic violence takes many forms (Reuter 2009): *internal* to discipline a  
3 difficult workforce and discourage informants; *external* to manage market competition or  
4 contraction; and *transactional* to resolve disagreements about the terms of a deal. OCGs may  
5 outsource such violence, insulating themselves from the consequences of its use (Kelly &  
6 Caputo 2005). Payment for a killing, for example, provides a 'useful remove between the  
7 person who benefits and the killer or killers themselves' (MacIntyre et al. 2014 p.326).  
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### 19 **Hitmen and the Extreme End of Enforcement**

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21 In the most extreme cases of enforcement, targeted homicides are extended to  
22 eliminate an 'obstacle' or underworld 'rival' (Rahman 2019; Wilson & Rahman 2015).  
23 Criminal 'hits' have been defined as 'the targeting of specific individuals for murder'  
24 whereby a third party is contracted for political, economic or personal gain (Shaw &  
25 Skywalker, 2016: p.382). A hitman is a criminal undertaker (Hall 2012), a person 'who  
26 accepts an order to kill another human being from someone who is not publicly  
27 acknowledged as a legitimate authority regarding "just killing" for financial or material gain'  
28 (Brolan et al. 2016: p.221). Such a distinction separates hitmen from soldiers and state  
29 executioners (MacIntyre et al. 2014: p.326).  
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43 Prior work has classified hitmen as 'amateurs', 'semi-professionals' and  
44 'professionals' based on specific patterns and characteristics (Schlesinger 2001). MacIntyre  
45 et al. (2014: p.334-347) similarly distinguish between 'novice' hitmen who are trainees or  
46 beginners in the crime, and older 'dilettante' hitmen, who may not necessarily come from an  
47 offending background but may simply accept a contract as a means of resolving a personal  
48 (often financial) crisis and engage in the killing with little enthusiasm and minimal skill.  
49 These contrast further with 'journeymen', who tend to be experienced and reliable, but not  
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necessarily exceptional, and ‘masters’, who comes closest to Schlesinger’s (2001) ‘professional’ category. ‘Masters’ often come from military or paramilitary backgrounds and tend to exist in the shadows—these ‘ghosts’ often evade justice owing to their transient lifestyle, travelling into communities to kill and leaving immediately afterward (see also Wilson & Rahman 2015).

Research suggests that conventionally violent occupations such as the military can be fertile recruiting grounds for hitmen (MacIntyre et al. 2014; Van de Blunt et al., 2014). In attempting to consider what ultimately might drive someone to become a hitman, however, Wilson and Rahman (2015: p.263) argue that motivations are mostly economic. They argue some hitmen neutralise their intended victims as ‘targets’, reframe their actions as ‘just money’ and ultimately view their job as ‘shoot to kill’ — thus, separating their ‘morally-responsible selves’ as a means of being able to kill, while also de-personalising their intended victims.

## **A Continuum of Enforcement**

Professional hitmen obviously represent the apex of criminal enforcement. They are the most widely researched of criminal enforcers and best known publicly owing to (at times exaggerated) media portrayals of hitmen acting on behalf of mafias and global criminal networks to conduct ‘hits’ in ‘smoky rooms, bars and casinos frequented by gangsters’ (MacIntyre et al. 2014, p.326). However, criminal enforcement is woven into the fabric of any provision of illicit goods and services. Some OCGs employ enforcers whose task is to ‘employ violence to maintain or advance a criminal enterprise’ (Rahman 2019, p.75), whereas others subcontract less lethal activities, such as threats or intimidation or monitoring of victims’ whereabouts (Schloenhardt 1999; Aronowitz, 2001). Accordingly, enforcement

could be said to exist on a continuum, with simple debt collecting and other forms of less lethal coercive activity on one end and dark interactions like contract killing on the other.

The wider literature on organised crime acknowledges that enforcement roles may be more nuanced than the hitman classification (Rahman 2019), and that while the act of enforcement will invariably represent an intention to uphold a powerful foothold in the underworld, it may not always involve extreme violence. It is for this reason that the current study takes a broader view of enforcement, defining criminal enforcers as any member or an associate of a criminal organisation who engages in an extra-legal approach to governance which leads to resolving any unsettled dispute that goes against organisational or mutually agreed rules and deals. This is necessary owing to the diversification of OC (Hobbs 2013) and the articulation and evolution of groups like street gangs into OC (Densley 2014; McLean 2018).

Conceptually, an enforcer can be viewed as someone who takes ‘special liberties’, which according to Hall and Winlow (2015) means that a person takes a position of entitlement, which warrants harmful behaviour for expressive and instrumental desires. Enforcers exist on a spectrum of roles that may contradict extant research and mythology that focuses almost exclusively on ‘hitmen’. In our own study, we attempt to move beyond the existing simplistic accounts that conflate underworld enforcement with hitmen to recognise and explore further the distinction between contract killing and the wider roles associated with criminal enforcement.

### **The Current Study**

Although there has been some limited criminological literature that has focused on the profiles and motivations of hitmen (e.g., MacIntyre et al. 2014; Rahman 2019; Schlesinger 2001; Wilson & Rahman 2015), to date there has been comparatively little academic research

1 into the people who work in other aspects of underworld enforcement; that is, the nature and  
2 role of criminal enforcers within and beyond the context of contract killings. This is  
3  
4 understandable in part because these men often tend to occupy a secret, covert world  
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6 (MacIntyre et al. 2014; Shaw & Skywalker, 2016), but the authors have unique access to this  
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8 world.  
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11 Our empirical research focused on two comparative sites within the UK: the West of  
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13 Scotland and West Midlands. While each region has some notable differences in terms of  
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15 demographics and population characteristics, both share a number of similarities pertinent to  
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17 the current study. Both cities have long histories of OC (Chinn 2014; Davies 2013) and have  
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19 produced some of Britain's most notorious underworld figures, including Robert Dawes,  
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21 Jamie Daniel and Eddie Lyons. Both sites are major 'hubs' for illicit drugs (McLean et al.  
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23 2020). They also suffer from deeply embedded 'postcode' violence and gangland feuds that  
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25 have spilled out into the public domain—the West Midlands is widely associated with gun  
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27 crime, and the West of Scotland with knife crime. As with any research, the sites were also  
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29 chosen owing to researcher networks—the first and second author have unique access into  
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31 the underworlds of both areas. All of which make for excellent comparative analysis.  
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39 Through adopting a small-scale but in-depth qualitative approach, we focused on the  
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41 following research questions: (1) What are the articulated, identifiable pathways into criminal  
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43 enforcement for a small sample of men in these two geographical locations? (2) What roles  
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45 do these men commonly adopt within the context of organised crime? (3) What is the  
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47 relationship between these men's activity, the wider context of organised crime and presence  
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49 of social and cultural capital within it?  
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## 56 **Method**

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1 The participants in this research have been given pseudonyms to uphold ethical  
2 precepts. Before commencing interviews, they were advised to not talk about any ongoing  
3 criminal activities that they were aware of, nor talk about any crimes that only they knew  
4 about. Also, they were counselled not to reveal personal information of any cases that they  
5 wanted to shed light on as a reference point for a question or a prompt that they were  
6 voluntarily responding to. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the first and second  
7 authors' universities.  
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### 19 *West Scotland*

20 Data from the West Scotland site are derived from a qualitative study of gangs and  
21 OC conducted in two shifts from 2012–2019 and encompassing interviews with a combined  
22 purposive and snowball sample of 65 (ex)offenders (53 men, 12 women) aged between 16  
23 and 55, who had engaged in behaviour defined as serious and OC (Scottish Government  
24 2015). The current study draws on a limited account of these interviews. While a significant  
25 number of participants in the study had engaged in some form of enforcement – via threats,  
26 assaults, and occasionally serious attacks – to varying degrees, it was rare for any participants  
27 to perceive their role as an active ‘enforcer’ first and foremost and, for example, a drug dealer  
28 second. Only a handful of individuals saw their main role as an enforcer (often for specific  
29 groups or partnerships) or ‘muscle for hire’ more generally. It is this small minority within  
30 the sample group that the current study draws upon, in particular the participants Wi, Ge and  
31 Joe.  
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51 At the time of interview Wi was in his 20s, but reflected upon his experiences to  
52 discuss how he moved from being a core member of a street gang to eventually working as an  
53 enforcer for a number of groups/individuals involved in serious and OC. The relationship he  
54 shared with several older individuals involved in pre-existing criminal networks contributed  
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1 significantly to this transition. Ge is Wi's best friend, and both have known each other since  
2 childhood. Like Wi, Ge was involved in street gangs and regularly engaged in violence.  
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4 Unlike Wi, Ge is from a middle-class background. It is his ties to Wi that arguably played the  
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6 greatest role in bringing him into enforcement practices. Joe on the other hand was an elder  
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8 individual who was one of two main enforcers involved with a well-known OCG. Joe was  
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10 brought into such activities due to his local reputation as an ample fighter, displaying bravado  
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12 and having a general lack of fear. After a dispute over pay, along with other growing minor  
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14 incidents, the OCG turned against Joe and sought to carry-out several attempted 'hits' against  
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16 him. Joe in turn retaliated. The dispute remains unsettled to this day. Other participants  
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18 include recently turned practitioner Matt, who drew upon his military experience and military  
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20 connections to act as a freelance agent procuring weaponry and (anti)surveillance devices  
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22 either for sale or hire, to help facilitate enforcement practices.  
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29 Interviewees were initially accessed via gatekeepers at several charitable outreach  
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31 organisations, including those working with (ex)offenders seeking to desist from crime. Most  
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33 of the sample were interviewed once, although a few were interviewed numerous times.  
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35 Interviews were mostly conducted face-to-face in a neutral public space, although some were  
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37 conducted via encrypted mobile messaging applications such as WhatsApp Messenger and  
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39 Viber. A small number of interviews were also conducted in groups. Interviews typically  
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41 lasted an hour or less. Thematic analysis took place thereafter.  
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### 48 ***The Midlands***

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51 Historically, the Midlands, especially the West Midlands is renowned for its criminal  
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53 groups. The internationally renowned TV series *Peaky Blinders* depicts the exploits of a  
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55 crime family during the aftermath of World War I (Chinn 2014). The findings from the  
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57 Midlands site derive from three in-depth semi-structured interviews that were conducted  
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1 between the months of June and August 2019. The three men that were researched have  
2 previously been involved in extra-legal governance, namely within OC settings. John, who  
3 had previously been interviewed for academic research on OC (BLIND), is a freelance  
4 private investigator, who is ex-military and is also an ex-police officer that worked during the  
5 peak of the Irish troubles. As will be discussed later, John admits that his experiences as law  
6 enforcement and private investigator have served him well in his involvement within criminal  
7 enforcement. Aaron was recently released from prison after serving time for multiple drug  
8 related offences. He has previously worked as a doorman for several prominent nightclubs in  
9 Birmingham, West Midlands, and has extensive knowledge and links to the city's  
10 underworld. So too, through his work as a doorman, he has previously been involved in debt  
11 collecting for local businessmen and those who are submerged in the criminal landscape.  
12 Similarly, to Aaron, Theo has recently served prison time for drug related offences. Before  
13 his incarceration, Theo was involved in debt collecting on a regular basis.

14 Here it is important to note that all three men have not worked together, yet they have  
15 several commonalities that are worthy of consideration. As will be revealed in the findings,  
16 they have all been involved in enforcement, namely in the context of debt collecting. Thus,  
17 they have first-hand experiences of operating as paid enforcers, who have 'planned' and  
18 'executed' activities that have descriptions of underworld enforcement. In addition, all three  
19 men offer narratives on how they have previously operated on behalf of businessmen as well  
20 members of criminal groups.

## 21 Findings and Discussion

22 Findings are presented thematically. The three themes speak to specific aspects of  
23 enforcement. These are 'becoming an enforcer', 'the economics of enforcement', 'planning  
24 and execution'. The accounts presented demonstrate the 'blurred boundaries' of enforcement,

1 which von Lampe (2008) considers to be a small degree of separation between legal and  
2 illegal economies.  
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## 7 **Becoming an Enforcer**

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9 Like most serious crimes, OC does not operate within a social vacuum (Hobbs 2013;  
10 Deuchar 2018; Rahman 2019). Indeed, it is a social phenomenon that has many interfaces  
11 when contrasted with the legitimate societal sphere. The nexus between licit and illicit  
12 worlds are not dissimilar or aimed at avoiding one another. Rather, OC has a routine of  
13 intermingling with its social environment. Van de Bunt et al. (2014: p.322) argue that ‘social  
14 embeddedness means that existing relations and structures are not only the breeding ground  
15 for criminal activities, but also determine the form these activities can take’. The notion of  
16 social embeddedness can be applied to occupation, gender relations and ethnic minorities. As  
17 this paper reveals, enforcement, for some of the men in this study, is considered as an  
18 occupation. However, before discussing how legitimate occupations can serve as fertile  
19 grounds for enforcement activities, this section will first consider what it takes to become an  
20 enforcer, as well as how social embeddedness and its underpinning variables facilitate this.  
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39 The concept of social embeddedness derives from the field of economics. Polanyi’s  
40 (1944) work on England’s social and political upheavals during the rise of the market  
41 economy argues how economic activity cannot be considered without taking into  
42 consideration the social and cultural framework within which this behaviour is situated. Four  
43 decades later, Bourdieu (1985) developed similar thoughts by suggesting that explanations  
44 for economic behaviour are not only sought in “physical capital”, but also in “social capital”.  
45 In recent times, Bourdieu’s work has been influential when studying offenders. Burgeoning  
46 criminological research in Western Europe has used social capital as a framework of  
47 exploring offenders in group settings (see, for instance, Deuchar 2009; Fraser, 2015), with  
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1 some advancing Bourdieu's initial work on capital so as to be able to produce  
2 groundbreaking perspectives of street level crime (Sandberg & Pedersen 2011; Harding  
3 2014). Social capital is defined as 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue  
4 to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less  
5 institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu and  
6 Wacquant 1992, p.119).

7 While social capital may be viewed as a simple network of social connections,  
8 Bourdieu used it to explain the harsh realities of social inequality. In short, social capital  
9 resonates with the saying: 'It's not what you know, it's who you know'. However, this view  
10 is not exclusive to the legitimate world, as the relational side of embeddedness is paramount  
11 when collaborating in illicit operations. When asked whether social capital is needed to be a  
12 successful enforcer, John stated:

13 100% social. But it's social in the criminal world. You need to have that name.  
14 Everybody needs to know that you're the person who collects the debts. Often, you  
15 gain that criminal reputation and respect from the work that you've put in, the prison  
16 time that you've done, and those that you are affiliated to. Everyone in the East  
17 Midlands knows who collects and who has the name.

18 Aaron also believed that social capital is essential when operating as an enforcer, but  
19 also considered the importance of cultural capital:

20 I'd say a combination of all. Because if you're just a Joe Bloggs coming up to me  
21 and you're saying "yo, you owe some money". And I've never heard of you or  
22 you ain't got nothing about ya in terms of you being able to look after yourself or  
23 being associated to a certain group or name, then I'm just going to tell you to fuck  
24 off. However, if I know that you're affiliated to a group or I know; "fuck me,  
25 he'll be a handful if I don't pay the money", then it's a whole different thing.

26 Both men consider the significance of street social capital (Ilan 2013), which acts as an  
27 extension of street culture. In doing so, they narratively establish that having a 'name' is  
28 crucial for reputation and position when undertaking enforcement duties. This echoes the

1 ethnographic work of Anderson (1999), who alluded that street culture is often contingent  
2 upon informal 'respect' based hierarchies that are the epitome of violent potential and illicit  
3 entrepreneurialism. Interestingly, both men use the term 'affiliated', which denotes that  
4 enforcers are often part of a wide network of criminal operators. For John, being incarcerated  
5 can contribute towards developing criminal affiliations, which supports Rahman's (2019,  
6 p.124) claim that the 'institutionalised' form of street capital 'is much needed for one to be  
7 legitimated in the eyes of those who are embedded in the underworld'.  
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10 While respect is imperative for cultivating a reputable identity as well as an entrée in  
11 underworld settings, the relational and occupational aspects of social embeddedness is worthy  
12 of consideration. Two Scottish enforcers, 'Wi' and 'Ge', discussed this concept when  
13 reflecting on how they fell into this line of work:  
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16 Wi: I don't think I had a precious way in which I fell into it.

17 Ge: Nah, wouldn't say so

18 Wi: I had always had backing from dodgy guys. It was well known, [so I] had always  
19 been a bit brazen about the scheme... fact actually the first time I got paid was wee  
20 [Jason]. Gave me £5.

21 Ge: (laughing) and a bottle of Bucky

22 Wi: (laughs) mind his slasher cap [also]

23 Ge: Aye, after words.

24 Interviewer: What was that for?

25 Wi: £5, a bottle of B, and a cap to batter fuck right out of [young gang member]. I  
26 didn't like him either but.

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28 At the age of 14, Wi had been a core member of a local youth gang. As such, another  
29 member paid him a small fee to sort an ongoing dispute. Coincidentally, this individual would  
30 also later pay Wi again to carry out a more serious offence on the individual's brother-in-law,  
31 still unknown to his partner. As Wi's reputation grew, so did the opportunities afforded him:  
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34 ... aye, we just hung out in [southside area]. My mates' mate, [mate A] said some  
35 guy fucked his auld man over ... [I suggested that we go] to [the guy's] house. My  
36 mate chapped his door, the maw came out so I fuckin' gubbed (punched) her right in  
37 the mooth. The da[d] came charging and scooped Ge here (pointing to Ge while  
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1 laughing). Everybody was scrapping outside the boy's house (laughs)... [afterwards]  
2 I glanced a missed call ... [returning the call a voice] answer (Mate A's dad) said  
3 "cheers", stick up for him ... Asked us round ... [after several meetings] we were in  
4 [mate A's] drinking [and his dad] asked to speak to me... said "you want a wee job eh  
5 lad?". Always called me lad. Course, I'm fucking steaming, said aye, "what's it  
6 doing" ... [he asked me] to do some guy in round on [street name] ... gave me the  
7 address on a bit of paper, said tell "no cunt lad. Destroy that" (Wi motions tapping  
8 paper) ... [I] steak[ed] the place out a bit. Knowing his routine, that, you know... [one  
9 night he] was coming [down lane C], back from [pub name], only two ways back to  
10 his .... I had been waiting in the bushes. They (the bushes) run up the side of the wall  
11 (demonstrating with hands) ... no chance [would] get clocked. The street light shines  
12 across the building so its pitch dark. [the victim always] used the side door whenever  
13 going back from work. I assumed he would do the same ... I came up behind him  
14 before he put key in the door, just torn the knife along his face like that (gesturing  
15 horizontal motion). He was fuckin' wrecked, didn't scream, nothing ... So, I plugged  
16 him in the back and bailed ... [I received] £750. Was paid about a month, 5 weeks  
17 later.  
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23 As Wi states, while he had a criminal reputation locally and had already received a  
24  
25 payment at the tender age of 14 for conducting an assault, how he received his first 'proper'  
26  
27 payment for a 'hit' was quite different. Then, six months later, Mate A's dad again  
28  
29 approached Wi and asked him to go for 'a drive':  
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35 Was just cruzin. I didn't think nothing other than he was wanting to talk shit ... he  
36 smacks the breaks, shouts "that's the cunts", pulls the car on the other side of the road  
37 and hands me a massive KD (abbreviated for kitchen devil) ... [I] ran up behind the  
38 guy [and] grabbed his jacket collar ... stabbed him rapid as fuck all over the body ...  
39 mainly the back ... must have been about 20 times ... don't know how many stabs  
40 went through the jacket, no' that sure ... fucking bailed .... I didn't even ask for  
41 anything. Crazy man, I knew nothing. Out driving next thing fucking GBH on some  
42 dude I've never clocked before ... [Mate A's dad] did that (motions with his hand),  
43 put about £340, no £45 (£345) up my sleeve.  
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49 Like legitimate activities, illicit activities are hard to separate from social relations  
50  
51 between participants and the institutional environment in which interactions take place.  
52  
53 Regularly the term "partners in crime" is used to describe relationships that are bound by  
54  
55 established social ties. Therefore, crime is habitually embedded in existing friendship,  
56  
57 familial and occupational relationships. So too, criminal enterprises are often epitomised by  
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1 strong internal relationships based on trust. As there is no protection from opportunistic  
2 behaviour, offenders prefer working with or for individuals that they have established ties  
3 with. John's involvement in enforcement started after he was approached by a "school mate"  
4 who worked for an OC group. It was his school friend who introduced him to the criminal  
5 group:  
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14 Because of my law enforcement and private investigator backgrounds, they knew  
15 that I had methods and techniques of tracking people down and finding out in-depth  
16 information about people. I'm not justifying what I've done, but at that time I  
17 needed the money and therefore I'd be the person that certain individuals would  
18 rely on when it came to offering strong intel on someone who owed money and  
19 what not. But then I got greedy. The money was coming in nicely and I got myself  
20 involved more and more to the extent whereby I'd go on knocks and be on the front  
21 line. So from being offered a grand or two to provide accurate information on a  
22 person, my role became more expensive and more hands-on.  
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27  
28 While it was relational embeddedness that facilitated John to get involved in  
29 underworld activities, it was his occupational embeddedness that supported him to occupy a  
30 niche position within enforcement. Most OC activities that are sophisticated or continuous  
31 require reliable information. Often, criminals achieve this by using corrupt law enforcement  
32 agents, as their occupation serves as a source for intelligence. According to Van de Bunt et  
33 al. (2014: p.327-328), in some circumstances 'the link between organised crime and  
34 occupations is easily explained: certain occupations provide their practitioners with ideal  
35 opportunities to engage in organised crime'.  
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47 The work of Benson et al. (2009) offers a threefold explanation of how certain  
48 occupations provide opportunity to commit crimes. They first consider *nodes*; how social  
49 contacts established through the course of a career can contribute towards criminality.  
50  
51 Alongside occupational networks, they consider *paths*; how individuals follow established  
52 procedures, and how they find certain people to achieve the right goals. Finally, they  
53 consider *edges*; that is how individuals find grey areas that present opportunities to commit  
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1 crimes. This often occurs when activities are insufficiently supervised. In John's case, it can  
2 be said that his opportunity to be involved in enforcement stemmed from being connected by  
3 an established social contact, who realised that his prior occupations in law enforcement were  
4 valuable, so as to be able to "achieve the right goals". However, Aaron's opportunity to  
5 become an enforcer was a combination of node and edges:  
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14 I first got involved when I was working on a few nightclub doors. This one  
15 doorman approached me and knew that I could handle myself. He also knew that I  
16 worked at the gym so he asked whether I'd be interested in making some additional  
17 money through debt collecting. It was as simple as that. He reassured me that there  
18 was minimal risk attached to jobs and I went for it. Basically, for a while, I was an  
19 enforcer in the morning and a doorman at night.  
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24 The above passage reveals how certain legitimate occupations like nightclub  
25 security encompass individuals who are involved in extra-legal governance, particularly  
26 in relation to the provision of a service – debt collecting – which has previously been  
27 criticised for being unregulated even in a legitimate context (Verkaik 2000). Put simply,  
28 occupations in some cases can serve as a breeding ground for criminal activities. Crimes  
29 like enforcement will take on the shape of a social environment, and those who become  
30 enforcers are often the product of an expanding network through social ties.  
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### 43 **The Economics of Enforcement**

44  
45 The understanding of money being the keystone asset for offenders extends beyond OC  
46 studies. Gary Becker's (1968) work on the economic approach of crime and punishment  
47 examined how offenders calculate; the practicalities of earning legal income, the income  
48 offered because of such opportunities, the income received based on illicit methods, the  
49 probability of being apprehended because of illegal acts and the probable punishment should  
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1 the offender be caught. A swathe of economic studies of crime has emerged since Becker's  
2 seminal work.  
3

4 Most academic work that considers offenders who operate in criminal enterprises for  
5 monetary gain emphasize the rationality of perpetrators as well as their ability to maximize  
6 their operations subject to constraints (Reuter 1983; Fiorentini & Peltzman 1997; Allum &  
7 Glimour 2012; Densley 2013; Hobbs 2013; Abadinsky 2016). However, Bakkali's (2019)  
8 pioneering research on road life in London, UK, argues how economic capital on road can be  
9 entrenched in the form of *cultural capital* (an individual's embodied, linguistic, objectified  
10 and institutionalised state) and *social capital* (the networks that individuals are connected to)  
11 (Bourdieu, 1986). Likewise, a person's social and cultural capitals can be institutionalised in  
12 the form of economic capital. John emphasised how "debt collecting works by  
13 name". When asked how contact would be made for a debt collecting service, he alludes to  
14 the significance of social and cultural capital:  
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31 For instance, if an individual who lives in the West Midlands is owed money by  
32 someone in the North East; regardless of criminal or business reasons, one of the  
33 first things that would happen is a dialogue between a big name in the West  
34 Midlands and someone that he knows in the North East. Sometimes a conversation  
35 between individuals can settle a lot of things. The bigger the name, the less  
36 violence is employed. So, the chances of that debt being collected is relatively high  
37 because mutual agreements can be made. If you're a household name in the  
38 criminal underworld, that alone gets half of the job done.  
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45 John's perspective of enforcement on a regional level illustrates the dialectical relationship  
46 between social and cultural capitals in the underworld and its significance for economic gain  
47 for the lender as well as the enforcer. Like most underworld activities, debt collecting is a  
48 rarified niche in the labour market, which is seemingly contingent upon social ties. While  
49 Bourdieu (1986: p.247) defines social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential  
50 resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of institutionalised  
51 relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition', he fails to consider how it should be  
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1 measured. Seemingly, for John, social capital in extra-legal duties hinges on “a household  
2 name in the criminal underworld”. Although he does not offer insight on how a name is  
3  
4 amassed within the illicit realm, he reinforces a recurring theme in this study thus far, which  
5  
6 is that reputation is crucial in the criminal landscape.  
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10 In addition, John stresses the importance of a “dialogue” taking place and alludes to  
11  
12 how a “conversation” between operatives can mitigate victimisation and the procuring of  
13  
14 outstanding finances. Evidently this reinforces Bourdieu’s (1990) understanding of linguistic  
15  
16 cultural capital, which argues that the mastery of language, speech and its relations, that is a  
17  
18 person’s means of communication and self-presentation, is acquired from the national  
19  
20 culture. In this case, the culture that the dialogue is acquired from may involve prior  
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22 successful interactions with nefarious individuals as well as engagement in illicit goods or  
23  
24 services.  
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28  
29 At a house party in Glasgow, for example, a discussion ensued in which Wi would  
30  
31 disclose his activities vaguely to a reputable OC group. One of the group’s members later  
32  
33 contacted Wi and asked if he would be willing to “do a few things” in return for payment.  
34  
35 The pay fluctuated depending on the job, but Wi would agree or disagree to the terms if he  
36  
37 needed the money, if he was not busy, and if the job would not take too long. On some  
38  
39 occasions, he did not even ask for money because the gang gave him “cheap” and  
40  
41 occasionally “free” drugs. Wi felt he was part of the group and that he “owed” them, but with  
42  
43 hindsight he knows he was really being exploited:  
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51 Wi: To be honest mate, they just use people. Like vulnerable wee guys wi’  
52 [reputations] from the scheme. End up thinking “aye they are cool” cause they are  
53 giving you [drugs], aye, whatever .... They do back you up [also though if] I was to  
54 get in trouble. Makes it hard, know, if you’re being used or not really .... They would  
55 fling me under a bus if it came to it [however]. That’s why they get wee guys to do  
56 shite for them. Shit falls on them if they get caught.  
57

58 Ge: That’s in the contract but mate. You get paid.

59 Wi: Aye, mate, aye mate.  
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2 For Aaron and John in England, by contrast, enforcement is very much a monetary-  
3  
4 driven service, which is rewarding. As Aaron states:  
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8 In debt collecting sometimes you find that the lender will tell you to get back his  
9 money and from that, you get a percentage. I've been involved in situations  
10 whereby individuals have had to pay back the money with interest. In them cases  
11 I've been told by the lender to take a percentage from the money that he's owed and  
12 whatever else he's charged on top. But these kinds of things you agree before you  
13 go and do the job and you first assess how big the job is.  
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19 John's stance on costing is much firmer. Seemingly, his cost is contingent upon the  
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21 value of the debt as opposed to the severity of recovering the outstanding money:  
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26 For me, it depended on the size of the debt. If it was a debt below £20,000 it'd be  
27 20% of whatever I'm told to recover as opposed to what I end up recovering. If it's  
28 a big job, then I would ask for a flat fee for £10,000. Especially if it's a flat fee and  
29 work out of town, a collection that's six figures. I'd ask nothing less than ten grand.  
30  
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32  
33 While both men differ on how they justify the economics of their work, they both echo that  
34  
35 costing is agreed prior to commencing any extra-legal work. Interestingly, their perceptions of  
36  
37 costing differ from Becker's (1968) viewpoint of how offenders calculate the economics of  
38  
39 their crime. Both men do not factor the probability of being apprehended in their costing, nor  
40  
41 do they decide the monetary value of their work in relation to the punishment that they would  
42  
43 receive if convicted. This should not be mistaken for imprudent behaviour, as the next section  
44  
45 reveals that the men are indeed rational and sophisticated in their planning and execution of  
46  
47 extra-legal work.  
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## 51 52 53 54 **Planning and Execution** 55

56  
57 Based on the above, social ties are crucial, as offenders operate in volatile  
58  
59 environments, primarily because of their illegal activities. Before this section exemplifies the  
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1 similarities between legal and illegal activities, especially within OC settings, it should be  
2 stressed that illegality does make a difference when it comes to how an activity takes place.  
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4 By default, illegality insinuates that contracts are not enforceable. This denotes that illegal  
5 actions must be clandestine, as people can be arrested and their assets can be seized at any  
6  
7 given point. The concept of OC is nebulous, yet it is globally accepted that the phenomenon  
8  
9 is financially lucrative. There is little by way of guidelines and mechanisms that govern  
10  
11 transactions in the underworld. For instance, entering a contract and paying off debts add to  
12  
13 the everlasting list of unregulated actions in the illicit world, hence cooperation in the world  
14  
15 of organised criminality can be problematic. Thus, cooperation is paramount.  
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22 Aaron, who has previously worked as a debt collector on a freelance basis for several  
23  
24 underworld figures, reflects on the rational nature of debt collecting, a process which in  
25  
26 popular culture is synonymous to violent practice, but one that he considers to be complex:  
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30 You see, something like debt collecting is not about inflicting violence. A lot of it  
31 is about approach. Sometimes it's about how you talk and how you can go about  
32 handling an intense situation. Often I've observed a lot of doormen that are  
33 employed as debt collectors. I've even worked with a few. They're usually  
34 involved because they've got the gift of the gab. They can talk their way through  
35 situations but at the same time they're usually big and therefore intimidating.  
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40 Interestingly, Aaron's experiences of debt collecting involve working alongside  
41  
42 nightclub doormen. His sentiments echo the work of Hobbs et al. (2005), whose  
43  
44 ethnographic research revealed how licit and illicit opportunities are often presented to private  
45  
46 security, which usually come in the daunting form of "bouncers". Although Aaron makes it  
47  
48 clear that violence for him is not a defining function when it comes to enforcing debt  
49  
50 collection, he does consider intimidation to be a crucial characteristic. His perspective  
51  
52 supports Schloenhardt's (1999) research findings of how actors in trafficking organisations  
53  
54 use threats and intimidation as enforcement tools, so as to be able to continue the flow of  
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illegal enterprises. When Aaron was prompted to expand on his thoughts about employing violence when debt collecting, he stated:

... you have to approach these things with a bit of sense. If you're out to collect money, you need to have a feel of the person that you're going to deal with. Remember, they can just end up going to the police. What you're doing isn't legal, because after all what you're doing is intimidating them and you are kind of putting the feelers out. It depends on the situation. Debt collecting is different to say beating someone up.

Based on the above, Aaron is prudent of the illegalities of debt collecting via enforcement. Similarly, to him, Theo is wary of employing violence, especially when dealing with debtors that are not from criminal backgrounds:

I've been part of situations where it's been a 'criminal figure' so to speak, that dealt with a legitimate company who owed him money. So, in that case I didn't go in with tools (weapons). It's because I was dealing with normal 9 to 5 people, who would happily call the police. So, you're better off reasoning with them and having a conversation. But I suppose if you're dealing with those that are involved in OC so to speak, then there would be no police involvement and therefore you'd send a message in a different way, and maybe that could be through the use of weapons. It's about knowing who you're dealing with, but most importantly it's about how you're able to get that money back.

Seemingly, Theo's approach towards the use of violence is contingent upon the operating position of the debtor. Indeed, enforcement, in relation to debt collecting is not a process that is exclusive to underworld operatives. His approach of "reasoning" with legitimate figures implies logic as well as rationality, which is much needed when retrieving owed money.

However, his perspective on employing violence differs with those from OC settings. While there is no primary evidence to support this statement, it seems that Theo's viewpoint of no police involvement observes the notion of omerta, which means that those from criminal fraternities are required to maintain a code of silence about any illegal activities that they

1 carry out or ones that are carried out against them. Research that considers omerta reveals  
2 how organised criminals are not in a position to ask for law enforcement protection, nor are  
3 they able to initiate civil action when they have been exploited (Reuter 1983; Gambetta 1996;  
4 Paoli 2002; Zaitch 2005). In addition, Theo's involvement in enforcement has required him  
5 to collect money from a legitimate company on behalf of a criminal. This is a prime example  
6 of "blurred boundaries", which is an ongoing discussion in studies of OC that considers how  
7 interactions between licit and illicit worlds are often fluid. When prompted as to why  
8 business owners would require the help of those part of criminal organisations, Theo stated:  
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22 You'll find that legit businesses have ties with individuals that are in the underworld  
23 when it comes to assets like property, cars and other things. Also, businessmen  
24 work with other businessmen and sometimes they need enforcers to settle an issue  
25 in order to avoid court fees, legal fees and other issues that will cause hassle or  
26 economic strain. So therefore, you'd go to a man and say "I got an issue, can you  
27 deal with it?"  
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31 The above excerpt resonates with Aaron's experiences as an enforcer on one occasion:  
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36 One case that I was involved in was because this guy started up a coffee shop in  
37 town and he took out some credit. Legit business of course but the guy owed  
38 £15,000. In this case, I think things were done legally, as there was paperwork  
39 and signatures involved, but the lender didn't want to take it to court and end up  
40 with the hassle of paying legal fees. So, I had to go down and speak to this guy  
41 respectfully and ask him where are we at with the repayments etc.  
42  
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46 Both Aaron and Theo mention the instrumental value of enforcement. In the Western  
47 world, financial disputes are often settled through legal channels, which therefore involves  
48 judicial processes that are costly. The instrumental value in enforcement is that individuals  
49 like Aaron and Theo help one achieve a particular end. In doing so, they become arbiters of  
50 an alternative form of criminal justice. Both men's experiences depict the commodification  
51 of enforcement, an illegal activity which they consider to be a service that they offer for  
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1 profitability. Aaron stated that he viewed his time as an enforcer as ‘employment, because at  
2 the end of the day it’s all about being paid’. Similarly, Theo viewed his role as enforcer as a  
3  
4 ‘job’ that involved ‘getting paid’. By rationalising enforcement as a method of occupation, as  
5  
6 opposed to a criminal act, both men have employed rationality and sophistication, so as to be  
7  
8 able to continuously offer a service that is a rarefied niche in the criminal market. John, who  
9  
10 has worked alongside professional enforcers demonstrates rationality and sophistication when  
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12 planning and executing an act of enforcement:  
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16 I’ve collected in many cities between Glasgow, Scotland and London, England. I  
17 used to work for a guy who lived in southern Spain, and he would often get me  
18 involved in jobs. But there was a pattern when it came to debt collecting. The  
19 knock itself is probably 20-30 minutes max. But the preparation for it is weeks. If  
20 done correctly, you’d have to establish who’s the debtor? What are they capable of?  
21 Can the debt be collected? How much can be collected? Who is the debtor linked  
22 to? Can we come to a compromise? Are we wasting our time here? What other  
23 information do we have? What school do their kids go to? Can we get easy access  
24 to his wife or girlfriend?  
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30 As mentioned, John’s involvement in enforcement is unconventional. Evidently,  
31  
32 John takes an intelligence approach when operating alongside professional enforcers.  
33  
34 The above excerpt not only demonstrates rationality and sophistication, but it also  
35  
36 unearths the underpinning acts that are crucial for the successful planning and execution  
37  
38 of a debt collection. Given John’s expertise, one may think his method is an exception,  
39  
40 however, Aaron also stated that “a vetting process of the debtor is important”, while  
41  
42 Theo put forward how enforcement “is all about knowing who you’re dealing with”.  
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50 Some of the stories from Scotland highlight why vetting is so important. Wi was  
51  
52 once hired by an Edinburgh-based crime group to assault one of its own group  
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54 members. Wi took the job, even though it was outside of his comfort zone, and recruited  
55  
56 his friend Ge to help him with it:  
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1 Wi: Fuck that am fucking going places, fucking don't know place. Meeting fucking  
 2 guys, I don't fucking know.  
 3 Ge: I said to him [once he told me], "am fucking going mate".  
 4 Wi: Aye, did... was fucking dodgy mate, aye. We are out in a scrap yard. Well no'  
 5 really. Like an industrial estate, [partly demolished]. Middle of nowhere. These guys  
 6 come up in a [car type] ... I thought they would have Edinburgh accent, but they were  
 7 [Glaswegians].  
 8 Ge: Nah mate, I think I've seen the tall yin. I am sure he is from Dundee.... [they]  
 9 gave us an address, said have it done by the night... went to [house A] .... Fucking  
 10 didn't even know where it was.  
 11 Wi (laughing) walked it using sat nav.  
 12 Ge: I chapped the door. About ten times before he answered.  
 13 Wi: Well [he] didn't answer, but was speaking through the door. The glass panel you  
 14 see. Mumbling shit.  
 15 Ge: Wouldn't answer, [so Wi] fucking pans the window wi' a boulder from the boy's  
 16 front yard (laughs).  
 17 Wi: Fucking guy's holding on for life. Like jamming his body against the door.  
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23 After several attempts to enter the property in an effort to assault the individual in  
 24  
 25 question, the would-be victim managed to fend off his assailants. Wi and Ge were forced to  
 26  
 27 leave because the commotion was attracting too much attention and this failure pretty much  
 28  
 29 sounded the death knell for his enforcement career.  
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32 Also in Scotland, Joe survived a hit because, like the group who hired Wi and Ge, his  
 33  
 34 enemies had hired the wrong man for the job:  
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40 Open[ed] front door and this guy's just pure standing there ... didn't know what he  
 41 was doing. Was fumbling about, going through his jacket, twitching.... [eventually]  
 42 this big blade falls on the floor... I took the axe off the wall and chased him '... he ran  
 43 into [rival group member's] car. I knew it was them straight away. Paying a junkie to  
 44 do me in.'  
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49 In this case, the hitman was a drug addict ("junkie") who had been manipulated into  
 50  
 51 the deed. Wi also talked about this practice:  
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56 Mostly [youths that are] used, [or] fucking junkies... you do get like high level  
 57 guys... they usually have like [paramilitary experience]... they would only be used  
 58 for like high shit to get to guys that no one else can get to ... yeah, I've been given a  
 59 gun before and told "do this"... I didn't do anything but ... not the same as using  
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1 professional know. Anyone can shoot a gun [but] hard to aim them. You wouldn't  
2 think it but hitting targets isn't easy.  
3

4 While Wi discussed earlier that he regularly used weapons, such as knives, to carry  
5 out enforcement, the use of firearms indicated a new level, which he was unwilling to  
6 progress to, largely due to inexperience. Former soldier Matt, an ex-offender recently turned  
7 practitioner, discussed his prior involvement in criminal networks and how military and  
8 professional experience may often play an important role in the higher echelons of  
9 enforcement.  
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22 [Anyone] could get a gun if they really pure tried. Would likely be of poor quality...  
23 [or] more likely lack the proper ammunition [however]. Most [firearms used aren't]  
24 like gun guns ... [they are typically] replicas, air rifles, modified pieces with  
25 reactivated firing pins ... antiques ... Bullets are usually cut to fit. Need the  
26 knowhow to get guns with the proper ammunition .... [ammo] is overlooked by the  
27 run of the mill guy. When I [left the army] I had connections ... [I was] approached  
28 from time to time ... [asked] what could I get my hands on. Punters can be flipped off  
29 wi' a pirate (antique revolver with modified ammunition). They just want to look  
30 flash [to say] "I have a gun, back up". I knew [when someone was a] serious geezer  
31 ... [I usually] knew ... or knew of ... the boys that [approached me] on behalf [of the  
32 OCG].  
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38 Matt notes the importance access to firearms, and their proper discharge, plays in the  
39 social structuring of criminal networks. Once Matt left the army, he was approached by local  
40 criminals whom he had shared childhood experiences with. They would enquire as to whether  
41 Matt could use established military connections to obtain firearms for them in exchange for  
42 an agreed fee. Over time, Matt would gain a reputation as someone with connections. With  
43 this reputation Matt would occasionally be approached by criminal groups involved in the  
44 higher echelons of OC. Interaction would usually be facilitated, not by key members of the  
45 OCG themselves, but rather other, usually known, individuals who like Matt had prior  
46 (para)military experience. These individuals could draw upon existing knowledge and  
47 experience to discuss which specific weaponry was required for the intended event. This level  
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1 of detail, insight and professional experience often separates low-mid level enforcers, such as  
2 Wi, from more serious offenders. This can be as simple as knowing how to actually load and  
3 discharge a firearm, as Matt states:  
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10 See wi' handguns you can stand there, me here, pure unloading clips on each other  
11 [and] hit everything in the room but each other.  
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14 Mistakes such as these can result in 'civies' (civilians) getting caught in the cross fire  
15 or collateral damage in the form of partners, friends and family members being unduly  
16 assaulted.  
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22 Irrespective of rationalising enforcement as employment, Aaron, John, and Theo are  
23 mindful that the act itself is criminal and punishable by imprisonment. With this in mind, the  
24 men are cautious of enforcement, with Aaron stressing that debt collecting must be  
25 approached "with a bit of sense". Similarly, Theo highlights the importance of "reasoning",  
26 while John provides a detailed example of executing an act of enforcement:  
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36 Debt collecting and being an enforcer is a shady business. Long gone are the days  
37 whereby you could trust people that you'd work with. Now it's all about greed.  
38 Now with technology on everyone, every day, you don't know who's monitoring  
39 or recording your nefarious and criminally driven conversations. One example I  
40 can give involved myself and a well-known figure in the East Midlands. We were  
41 on a job which involved a lot of money that needed to be collected. Me and this  
42 guy turned up to the debtor's house and I did all the talking. I said to the man:  
43 "Hello, I'm here on behalf of the individual who you owe money to. I don't know  
44 much about what's gone on between you and the lender but what I can say is that  
45 you should pay the man his money back because it's the moral and right thing to  
46 do. I really don't want to be disturbing family time with you and I apologise if I've  
47 done so, but let's just settle this as gentlemen". Now while I've said all this, the  
48 man next to me is holding a sign which reads out as: "We know you're recording  
49 us. Don't make a scene or else we'll make it difficult for you to breathe". Do you  
50 see what I mean? If this guy now goes to the police and makes a statement saying  
51 that I threatened him, I'll counter by making the police listen to what I had to say  
52 because I would have recorded that whole conversation on my Dictaphone.  
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## Concluding Discussion

The focus of our research has been to address the relative paucity of scholarly insights into the pathways into criminal enforcement, the nuanced roles undertaken by enforcers that often exist on a continuum, and the relationship between these men's activity, the wider context of OC and presence of social and cultural capital within it (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986, 1990). As such, in this paper we have drawn upon a comparative micro-analysis of the narratives of three men in West Scotland and three men in West Midlands, respectively, as a means of providing an initial, exploratory understanding of these issues from the perspective of those hard-to-reach individuals who are immersed in extra-legal undertakings. By presenting their voices, we have sought to present real-world insights into the often misunderstood and not well-captured lives of active enforcers. In so doing, we have been able to provide personal viewpoints, examples and anecdotes from those men who have been successful and less successful in their endeavours. This, we believe, speaks well to the structure of the illicit business of enforcement in different geographical, cultural and historical locations.

In our initial literature review, we drew upon previous scholarly insights to distinguish between the wider, macro- presence of enforcement and the more micro- focus on contract killings. We identified the evidence that suggests the way in which organised criminals often outsource threats, intimidation and violence as a means of insulating themselves from the negative consequences of this activity and that – *at times* – this outsourcing process may include the need for contract killing (Schloenhardt 1999; MacIntyre et al. 2014; Wilson & Rahman 2015; Brolan et al. 2016). We also focused on the blurring of boundaries between occupational roles and criminal enforcement and the (albeit limited) evidence in the literature on OC that suggests a spectrum of enforcement roles and activities that contradict popular mythology and indicate that many criminal transactions may run



1 relatively smoothly, without retort to violence. In relation to the more extreme end of  
2 enforcement roles, we also critiqued the previous typologies that suggest the nuanced nature  
3 of ‘hitmen’ characteristics, which may often include the presence of ‘dilettantes’ and  
4 ‘journeymen’ as well as more professional ‘masters’ (Schlesinger 2001; MacIntyre et al.  
5 2014).

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12 As we have alluded to, the Midlands areas of England have historically been  
13 renowned for the presence of criminal groups (Rahman 2019), and the men we interviewed  
14 there clearly had many years of licit and illicit occupational roles behind them. Contrastingly,  
15 although some high profile underworld figures and families have been notoriously associated  
16 with the criminal history of Glasgow (Scotland’s largest city), in a more general sense the  
17 West of Scotland has traditionally been more renowned for its territorial street gang culture  
18 (Deuchar, 2009; Davies, 2013), albeit that recent evidence has suggested emerging links  
19 between this and the wider work of OC groups (McLean 2019). The traditionally different  
20 historical, cultural and geographical contexts that surrounded the men we interviewed  
21 perhaps in some ways gave rise to the subtly differing insights and perspectives that arose in  
22 our data.

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29 While men like John, Aaron and Theo traditionally worked on the basis of clearly  
30 defined and carefully negotiated financial fees that preceded enforcement activity, those in  
31 the West of Scotland were at times less proactive and due to their younger age and reduced  
32 prior experience, they could feel exploited by those who recruited them (see also Deuchar  
33 2018; Mclean et al. 2019). Although a level of rationality was usually present across both of  
34 our sites, and enforcement acts were always predicated on the presence of both social and  
35 cultural capital, the latter appeared more deeply embedded within the perspectives of the men  
36 in the West Midlands due to their deeply relational and also occupational embeddedness  
37 (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986, 1990). In West Scotland, the younger men at times appeared to fall

1 into the categories of ‘amateurs’, ‘dilettantes’ and ‘journeymen’ (MacIntyre et al., 2014);  
2 while their roles were clearly wider than those associated with professional ‘hitmen’  
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4 (involving violence that stopped short of killing), they were also prone to a lack of careful  
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6 planning and the making of mistakes. Those in the West Midlands evidently also engaged in  
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8 more nuanced roles beyond the use of contract killing or even violence, including the need  
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10 for rational approaches to debt collection and acting as arbiters of alternative justice with  
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12 those involved in both legitimate and illegitimate businesses. However, their more advanced  
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14 levels of advantageous occupational experience, social embeddedness and related ability to  
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16 draw upon appropriate nodes, paths and edges (Benson et al., 2009) illustrated the importance  
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18 of advanced cultural and institutional street capital in successfully entering, advancing and  
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20 navigating the terrain associated with OC as recognised professional enforcers.  
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26 Our research suggests that nuanced enforcement roles may be deeply woven into the  
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28 fabric of organised criminality within some parts of the UK, yet it is a criminal activity that is  
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30 overlooked in policy and national debates (HM Government, 2018). While we must be  
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32 cautious about overgeneralizing the insights from our qualitative research, the findings could  
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34 help to inform the future work of UK law enforcement in tackling the issue of OC and the  
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36 work of enforcers within this context.  
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41 For example, in the *West Midlands Police and Crime Plan 2016-2020*, the West  
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43 Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (2016, p.13) makes the link between OC and  
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45 ‘urban street gangs’ and focuses on the need for ‘detecting, disrupting and bringing  
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47 perpetrators to justice’ (p.14). Our research, albeit small-scale in nature, suggests that those  
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49 who define themselves as enforcers may not always be directly associated with urban street  
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51 gangs but may have occupational roles that enhance their ability to become recruited by  
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53 organised criminals and rely on strong reputational profiling to ensure repeat business and  
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55 financial gain. Across our sample, we found the significance of reputation, especially those  
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1 that engaged in extra-legal encounters that had descriptions of complex interactions. John's  
2 time as an enforcer epitomises how reputation and a tactful approach to violence as opposed  
3 to its application can be sufficient to coerce a wrongdoer. Indeed, theorists have long  
4 recognised the importance of the connection between power and reputation. As Thomas  
5 Hobbes once claimed, 'The reputation of power *is* power: because it draweth with it the  
6 adherence of those that need protection' (Hobbes 1651 in Oakeshott 1947: p.56). The  
7 Commissioner also makes reference to the need for reducing gun and knife crime and for  
8 increasing the volume of 'weapon surrender bins' in relevant boroughs and communities  
9 (p.14). However, our insights illustrate the way in which killing, and even wider, non-lethal  
10 violence, is only one element of an enforcer's role and that planning and execution may  
11 equally involve logic, rationality, careful use of verbal communication and intelligence-led  
12 approaches arising from prior occupational knowledge.

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14 In Scotland, Police Scotland (2016) has identified that its service faces 'significant  
15 demand' in respect of investigations into OC, and in its national strategy for reducing the  
16 harm caused by it, the Scottish Government (2015) presents a four-pronged approach: *divert*  
17 people from OC; *deter* OC groups; *detect* and prosecute people involved in OC; and *disrupt*  
18 OC groups. The data outlined in this paper suggest that discussion, debate and strategic  
19 decision-making around OC enforcement should be further guided by insights into the  
20 potential exploitation of young men, the nuanced nature of the enforcement roles they may  
21 take on, and the risks they can become subjected to due to their relative inexperience in  
22 undertaking these roles.

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24 At the same time, we believe that further research is needed into the extent to and  
25 ways in which men of all ages and from differing social and occupational background may  
26 become attracted to, recruited for and gain traction through, enforcement roles within  
27 differing geographical areas of the UK. In particular, we suggest that future research needs to

focus on exploring and examining the potential links between occupational backgrounds in  
areas such as the military and involvement in lethal and non-lethal enforcement roles.

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**Dear Reviewer and Editor-in-Chief,**

***RE: TIOC-D-19-00046: Who are the enforcers? The motives and methods of muscle for hire in West Scotland and the West Midlands***

**We thank you for recognizing ‘significant merit’ in our work and the opportunity to revise and resubmit our article for considered publication in *Trends in Organized Crime*. Based on the feedback provided, we have expended considerable time and effort in making a number of substantive changes to the manuscript. The following is a detailed statement of how we have addressed all the reviewer’s excellent comments (responses in bold).**

### **Reviewer’s comments**

I think that at first there needs to be a better conceptual consideration about enforcing agreements in criminal marketplaces and in situation where agents often co-operate, but where trust may be limited. There is little discussion around the social norms, and how these might govern and sustained by agents. In many ways we regard criminal marketplaces as inherently violent, often they are not. How does enforcement fit within this?

**We agree that the original manuscript took for granted the need for enforcement in criminal settings. We have rewritten the literature review to provide greater context and explore the nuances of criminal marketplaces. We further explore this in the findings.**

Quickly (indeed in the abstract) enforcers seem to be conflated into Hitmen? Are they? Here is the core problem for me, we really never have the parameters around what is being described 'enforcement' or muscle for hire' properly established? Quickly the article simply conflates enforcement with muscle for hire, and then with paid contract homicide. I think you need a more focused engagement with the extended literature on organised crime and a better connection with the dark, violent aspect that constitutes some of it. But that some might be a minority activity at the very bottom of the social strata where legal redress is not available. I think this needs to be better established at the outset and throughout. This is there at page 4, but the counterpoint, that most criminal transactions run relatively smoothly without resort to violence also needs to be acknowledged and the whole terminology of 'enforcement' unpacked a bit more in an academic manner. We never really establish what the authors mean by enforcement (or muscle for hire) and we have no real definition or parameters set around what is being described beyond taken for granted stereotypes. If we are talking about people outsourcing their capacity for physical violence and intimidation, we need a better introduction and framing of that setting up some better parameters than the ill defined ones here. In this respect I can see how violence can be core, and instrumental violence again runs a continuum, and yet I do not think lethal violence is that central, and really think much of the hitmen connection a bit overdone. Is there not a huge difference between say a small act of debt collecting and a paid contract murder. How can we justify placing those together. Instrumental use of criminal violence for example is there in a robbery or in taking pay to burn out a building. Is this enforcement?

**This is an important observation. We have completely rewritten the front end of the paper (the abstract, introduction, and literature review) to disentangle “hitmen” from other enforcers and to present a continuum of enforcement. We offer a clear definition for the concept of enforcement and, in so doing, better set up the contribution of the current study.**

The article abstract mentions men. The interview Scotland sample featured men and women?

**In the revised methodology, we have clarified that this study is based on an all-male subsample of a broader ethnographic study of organized criminals that included women. Our focus here is only people who identified principally as “enforcers” as opposed to drug dealers etc.**

I Was left wondering why were these research sites selected? We are not told in the methods. Traditionally the West coast line was perhaps a first manifestation of county lines, is this a reason for the selected sites. Why the comparative dimension?

**We have added a full paragraph on how and why the sites were chosen and why a comparative analysis is appropriate.**

I found the methods section a bit odd. I have the feeling this is material gathered for another purpose now being re-interpreted. This is fine, but in all, and digging down we are talking about some six or seven people who appear in the article. This would seem a small sample to be making broader claims about enforcement practices. The methodology feel a bit opaque, and simple description of ethical approval is no substitute for a more detailed discussion of participant involvement and understanding of the research process. Given the nature of the topic, what were participants understandings of agreement and consent? How long were they known for? How can you place stock in what you are told? With interventions like that of Steven Lubet in *Interrogating Ethnography* who precisely with this sort of ethnography suggests a field that relies heavily on anonymous sources, often as reported by a single investigator whose underlying data remain unseen and alleges too many ethnographic assertions that were dubious, exaggerated, tendentious, or just plain wrong, ethnographers should be giving a better account of their methods than appears here. That would need amending in my view before any publication. It may be possible to look to how others have done this, but I found a few lines on this under the heading Methods to be wholly insufficient.

**We acknowledge that the methodology needed more detail and have made changes to this effect. However, some of these criticisms, namely how the veracity of our (sample’s) claims can be trusted, could be levelled at literally any qualitative study, especially of hard to reach, hidden populations. Owing to space constraints, we cannot answer all of them in text. What we can say here is – and as mentioned in the manuscript – all participants went through informed consent and voluntarily answered all questions and prompts. In addition, to avoid unethical practice, participants were counselled to reveal their personal information or talk about any ongoing criminal activities that they are directly or indirectly related to. Given that the manuscript is for a journal article, word count is restricted and therefore we believe that all relevant details have been addressed in relation to the mechanics of the primary research.**

Moving on from this, there is a debate to be had about the very truth claims being made of such a small sample of interviewees. For example, many of those presented here talk of their rep, but really, do debt collectors, a six foot guy or two with a face full of scars built like a brick wall really need a criminal name or reputation to effectively settle scores and collect money from someone? Is there an element here of posturing? Interestingly this is partially answered in the section on the economics of enforcement, which I think needs to be acknowledged earlier and before the empirical argument is made (much more relevant to me than the hitman arguments). On the point that reputation is key in the criminal underworld that seems to be a central strand of the argument here, is that really still the case. That jars a little with say Criminal identities and consumer culture: crime, exclusion and the new culture of narcissism or articles linked by hall, Winlow and Ancrum (take for example little Legs lament on the decline of the established underworld hierarchy where anyone with a big blade or a gun can settle scores) or indeed, Hobbs later work in lush life that sees the global as quite transformative (and certainly democratising) a feature that seems to appear in page 27 in Theo's quote for example. Finally, this also links to the observations on the continuum and line that seemingly may exist between legal debt collecting and debt collecting and score settling its illicit forms (a line I feel much more central than say hitmen) which comes in later in the argument and perhaps needs to be a central thrust, I feel there is far more value in this. Specific debt collection companies legal and regulated into a darker manifestation involving the likes of Shaun Smith. Perhaps here the problem is the lack of clarity on what enforcement is that the authors demonstrate. If I hire a hard man to batter a rival, is that enforcement? Is muscle hired to run with the Cannabis being imported 'enforcement'? Where does door work or bouncing fit? Is that enforcement? The piece makes mention of the relative paucity of scholarly insights into criminal enforcement, but by the conclusion we really still have not established what criminal enforcement is. The empirical material presented here is fascinating, but without connection to a strong theoretical and underpinning context framing argument it all feels underdeveloped. When the researchers thus claim 'while we must be cautious of overgeneralising the insights of our qualitative research' it feels a little like they are closing the door after the horse has bolted. What it needs is a better framing of the entirety of the argument around what enforcement is, with the empirical material marshalled in that direction. If that was here I might feel differently, but as it stands, and with the lack of focus on methods and ethics, I think it needs substantial restructuring.

**We take issue with some of these criticisms because (a) they seem to be grounded in the very same myths that the current study aims to challenge ('do debt collectors, a six foot guy or two with a face full of scars built like a brick wall really need a criminal name or reputation to effectively settle scores and collect money from someone?'—actually, yes) and (b) they seem to imply that the very findings of the study, as derived from rigorous empirical research and analysis, are really not the findings because they don't fit the reviewer's paradigm or subjective view of organized crime. The reality is that 'reputation', emerged from both primary datasets as an important theme. This said, some of the comments have merit and we have completely restructured and rewritten the front end of the paper to better define what enforcement is and why what we discuss in the current study meets the definition and how this advances the literature. The new manuscript draws**

**on 10 new sources (including the work of Hobbs, Winlow and others cited above) to help with this endeavor and now includes many new paragraphs of explanatory material.**

I felt the whole piece lacked coherence, organisation, structure and clarity. I hope these comments help developing what I thought was a very interesting empirical piece, which I think the article has great potential to be good, but think it requires a very substantial level of refocusing and reframing.

**We have reorganized, restructured, and clarified. Our sincere thanks again to the anonymous reviewer for their comments, which have greatly improved this paper. We hope you share this opinion, and very much look forward to your decision shortly.**

**Sincerely,  
The Authors**