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Jay S. Albanese

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# Risk Assessment in Organized Crime

## Developing a Market and Product-Based Model to Determine Threat Levels

Jay S. Albanese

*Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond*

The risk posed by organized crime is a central concern of governments around the world. The infiltration and control of legal and illegal markets and products is a major concern in nearly every country. New agencies and initiatives are under way in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Belgium, and elsewhere, with the specific purpose to better predict and detect organized crime activity. This article proposes a model to assess the risk of organized crime. It employs a different unit of analysis from most current models, focusing on illicit markets rather than groups, and it offers a practical alternative for determining the presence of organized crime in areas that may or may not have a history of organized crime involvement.

**Keywords:** *organized crime; risk assessment; prediction; illicit markets; threat assessment; criminal markets*

### Definition of Organized Crime

It is important to be clear about what we mean by *organized crime*. Too often, discussions of organized crime lack focus because it is not clear what precisely is being talked about. Definitions of organized crime have been offered by a wide variety of authors and researchers over the years, and an analysis of those definitions is presented in Table 1. It can be seen from Table 1 that authors have identified 11 different characteristics of organized crime in their definitions. When these are broken down, however, it is seen that 5 characteristics are most typical: organized continuing hierarchy, rational profit through crime, use of force or threat, corruption of public officials for immunity, and public demand for services. There seems to be less consensus about whether organized crime holds a monopoly over particular markets, has restricted membership, is nonideological, specializes in certain activities, has a code of secrecy, or engages in extensive planning of its activities.

A definition based on the consensus of these authors (see Table 1) would read, "Organized crime is a continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption

**Table 1**  
**Definitions of Organized Crime in the Literature**

Characteristic	Number of Authors
Organized hierarchy continuing	16
Rational profit through crime	13
Use of force or threat	12
Corruption of public officials to maintain immunity	11
Public demand for services	7
Monopoly over particular market	6
Restricted membership	4
Nonideological	4
Specialization	3
Code of secrecy	3

Source: Albanese (2007).

of public officials” (Albanese, 2007, p. 4). The precise size of the enterprise or group is not important to the definition; two persons are the minimum required to engage in a criminal conspiracy, so any group of two or larger suffices.

Organized crime can be described either by the activities it engages in or by the groups involved. Continuing criminal conspiracies that constitute organized crime require insiders and outsiders to connect suppliers with customers and also to protect the enterprise from law enforcement. Therefore, organized crime groups need to obtain the product (e.g., drugs, stolen property) and make it easily available to customers (e.g., movement from source to destination) while obtaining some “insurance” when members are caught or convicted (e.g., the need for corruption of public officials to protect the enterprise from disruption). All successful organized crime groups require these elements to survive and make a profit.

## The Risk of Organized Crime

Determining the risk of organized crime requires specific local assessments rather than global judgments. To say that organized crime is a problem in the United States, for example, is too broad a statement to be useful because it overlooks the huge variations within the country (i.e., some locations have no organized crime problem, whereas other locations within the country have serious organized crime problems). Global assessments of organized crime abound: “Transnational organized crime continues to grow in the absence of a comprehensive, integrated global counter strategy. . . . There are more slaves in the world now than at the highest point of the African slave trade” (World Federation of United Nations Associations, 2007). More than \$1 trillion is paid each year in political bribes (World Bank Institute, 2007). Global

assessments like these are useful in drawing attention to the problem, but they are not useful in assessing the risk or threat in a particular location. To accomplish this, more precise information at the local level is required.

Most risk or threat assessments in organized crime have focused on groups. These assessments are often carried by law enforcement agencies to determine which groups are at highest risk or pose the greatest threat. The methods used to determine risk involve identifying the universe of known crime groups in the country and then ranking them by their attributes and potential seriousness. Sample attributes used in these assessments include violence, corruption, infiltration, sophistication, discipline, insulation, stability, and group cohesiveness (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006; Serious Organized Crime Agency, 2007).

In a similar way, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Organized Crime Section at FBI Headquarters is divided into three units, which are focused on Italian American organized crime, Eurasian/Middle Eastern Organized Crime, and Asian and African criminal enterprises (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). This illustrates a primary focus on crime groups as a focal point for attention to organized crime. Table 2 is excerpted from a Canadian threat assessment. It illustrates that threat assessment is carried out by law enforcement agencies to target individuals and groups determined to pose the highest risk. This selection of "groups" as the criterion to be predicted is based on the premise that law enforcement agencies place apprehension of criminals as the central part of their mission. Experience shows, however, that apprehension of organized crime figures usually does not eliminate the group—which recruits new members or promotes existing members after a successful prosecution (Organized Contraband Smuggling, 2000; President's Commission on Organized Crime, 1987). The expectation that prosecution of individuals involved in organized crime groups will affect the operation of the group and also affect the illegal market for the illicit products in question is problematic. Successful prosecutions of organized crime figures affect groups for only a short period because the customer demand for the illegal products or services is not diminished by a prosecution, so existing or new groups continue to exploit these illicit markets.

### **High-Risk Activities Versus High-Risk Groups**

A focus on organized crime activities rather than groups is useful for purposes of assessment and analysis to produce an objective basis for investigative priorities and targets. Three categories of organized crime can be identified: provision of illicit services, provision of illicit goods, and infiltration of legitimate business (Albanese, 2007). Provision of illicit services involves money, sex, and gambling outside legitimate avenues (i.e., loan-sharking, prostitution and pornography, and illegal gambling). Provision of illicit goods includes drug trafficking or the buying, selling, or distribution

**Table 2**  
**Findings From 2006 Canada/U.S. Organized Crime Threat Assessment**

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Asian organized crime groups are distinguished by a high level of criminal entrepreneurship. They use both personal relationships and specific business and technological skills to maximize profit.
Asian organized crime is active throughout Canada and the United States, from major metropolitan areas and their suburbs to isolated rural communities.
During the past decade, preexisting underground economies of the former Soviet Union and its satellite states have transformed into fully realized transnational organized crime syndicates.
Increasingly, Russian organized crime is characterized by fluid, cellular-type structures. Senior members/associates of Russian criminal groups appear to recognize and accept the hegemony of a single criminal authority who plays an important role in dispute resolution, decision making, and the administration of criminal funds.
Italian organized crime/La Cosa Nostra is the most mature form of organized crime in both Canada and the United States. Its ability to form alliances with and co-opt other organized crime groups gives it global influence.
In both Canada and the United States, Italian organized crime/La Cosa Nostra is distinguished by its strict, vertically integrated, hierarchical structure. The resulting discipline and efficiency permit these groups to focus resources and maximize profit.
African criminal enterprises are engaged in a variety of low- to mid-level criminal activities that include a number of financial fraud schemes.
Albanian criminal groups are engaged in a range of cross-border criminal activity, including drug smuggling and money laundering.

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Source: Royal Canadian Mounted Police. "Strategic Priority: Organized Crime 2006 Canada/US Organized Crime Threat Assessment" [http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/organizedcrime/octa\\_e.htm](http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/organizedcrime/octa_e.htm) Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2007. Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2008.

of stolen property. Infiltration of legitimate business involves coercive use of legal businesses to exploit them for profit or use them for money laundering.

This three-part typology of organized crime can be subdivided further into specific offenses of concern to law enforcement agencies and the general public. Summarized in Table 3, it can be seen that the provision of illicit services entails the offenses of commercialized sex (prostitution or pornography), illegal gambling, human trafficking, and subcontracting to others (to provide services such as illicit dumping of waste, trafficking in human organs or protected animal species, or murder for hire). The provision of illicit goods includes the offenses of drug trafficking, property theft (e.g., automobiles, clothing, art), and counterfeiting (e.g., identity documents, software, DVDs, CDs, weapons). The infiltration of business involves extortion of business owners, racketeering (ongoing criminal enterprises which "front" for illegal activity), money laundering, and fraud (e.g., investment fraud, Internet phishing, and smuggling of goods).

Table 3 suggests that much of organized crime can be grouped into 1 of 10 different categories of offenses. Of course, manifestations of these criminal behaviors can change over time, but the underlying conduct is remarkably stable. Consider Table 4, which compares "traditional" with "modern" forms of organized crime

**Table 3**  
**Specific Offenses That Constitute Organized Crime**

Provision of Illicit Services	Provision of Illicit Goods	Infiltration of Business
Commercialized sex activity	Drug trafficking	Extortion and racketeering
Illegal gambling	Stolen property	Money laundering
Human trafficking	Counterfeiting (identity documents, software, DVDs, CDs, weapons)	Fraud (investment fraud, phishing, smuggling)
Subcontracted services: dumping, trafficking in protected species, human organs, murder for hire		

**Table 4**  
**Shifts in Organized Crime Activity Over Time**

Original Activity	Modern Version
Local numbers and lottery gambling	Internet gambling at international sites
Heroin, cocaine trafficking	Synthetic drugs (less vulnerable to supply problems)
Street prostitution	Internet prostitution and trafficking in human beings
Extortion of local businesses for protection	Extortion of corporations, kidnappings
Loan-sharking	Money laundering, precious stones, commodities
Fencing stolen property	Theft of intellectual property

activity. It can be seen that the modern forms are simply newer versions of older kinds of criminal conduct that have changed due to opportunity, technology, and likelihood of apprehension. Therefore, the number of underlying organized crime activities does not appear to change significantly over time, although the specific manifestations of those crimes shift to account for broader social changes.

When we think of risk assessment, the fundamental question to be answered is "risk of what?" Tables 3 and 4 illustrate that we can identify in specific terms the particular organized crime risks we wish to target. This is a departure from most risk prediction and assessment efforts to date, which focus on crime groups rather than the products or markets that constitute the focus of organized crime activity.

There has not been much effort to explain organized crime's choices of particular criminal activities. Why is drug trafficking chosen over cigarette trafficking, or human trafficking engaged in versus trafficking in endangered species? One approach to this question focuses on routine activities or situational crime prevention. This perspective concentrates on criminal settings (environments conducive to organized crime activity) rather than on the motivations of individuals or groups of people. Because much organized crime activity depends on transactions in public and semipublic places (e.g., selling drugs, stolen property), better surveillance and control of these settings would reduce the opportunity for small-time organized crimes, which would affect

larger organized crime operations, according to this view (Felson, 2006). The routine activities approach has not been systematically applied to organized crime, however, so it is not clear whether a focus on criminal settings, and the exclusion of individual motivation, would effectively prevent large-scale organized crime activity.

## **Risk Assessment in Criminal Justice Settings**

Risk assessment is not easy, because criminal conduct remains a relatively rare event. The less common an event, the harder it is to forecast or predict effectively. Therefore, it is easier to predict automobile accidents than it is to predict incidents of organized crime. In the biological sciences, where many well-known diseases are in fact rare, it is difficult to predict diseases such as prostate cancer or breast cancer in an individual patient. However, it is possible to determine broader risk levels among groups by scrutinizing common factors among known victims of the disease and comparing them with nonvictims. It is this basic strategy of science that helped to identify factors such as cigarette smoking, obesity, and lack of exercise to increase risk for a number of serious diseases. Indeed, it has been found that in general, people themselves are not at high risk; it is their activities that place them at high risk (Kravitz, 2007; Ortega, Ruiz, & Sjostrom, 2007).

In criminology, the approach should be similar. We cannot predict very well who will become a criminal or which precise offense or victim will be chosen in a given case. However, a close examination of known cases of offenders, crimes, and victims can be compared with nonoffenders, crime-free activities, and nonvictims to assess their comparative risk levels. Therefore, the purpose of risk assessment and prediction in criminal justice is the same as it is in natural science: to determine comparative risk levels of different activities so that resources can be focused on those activities that pose the highest risk. A great deal of useful research has been produced that shows the utility of risk levels to determine intensity of probation supervision, the factors important in determining parole release guidelines, and sentencing guidelines in criminal justice (Davies & Dedel, 2006; Kleiman, Ostrom, & Cheesman, 2007; Langton, 2006; Sims & Jones, 1997).

Research in criminal justice risk assessment has been consistent in that very few variables account for most of the risk; the addition of more factors does not add to predictive efficiency. Although our ability to predict the behavior of individuals is poor, our ability to distinguish risk levels among and within groups is much better (Farrington & Tarling, 1985; Gottfredson & Tonry, 1988). Here, we wish to assess comparative risk levels of criminal activities and illicit markets. The assumption is that if we properly assess and rank these illicit markets and activities, our targeting of these activities will lead us, in turn, to the high-risk people (organized crime groups) involved in them. Another way to illustrate this is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Risk Assessment Focus on Activities Versus Individuals**

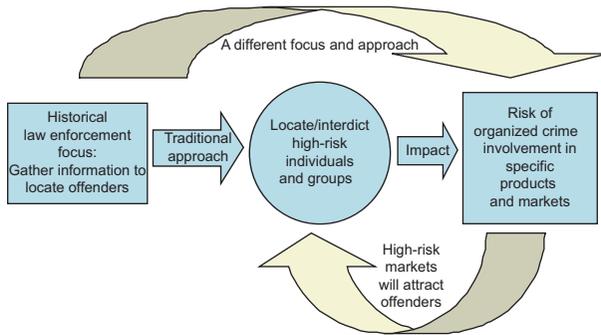
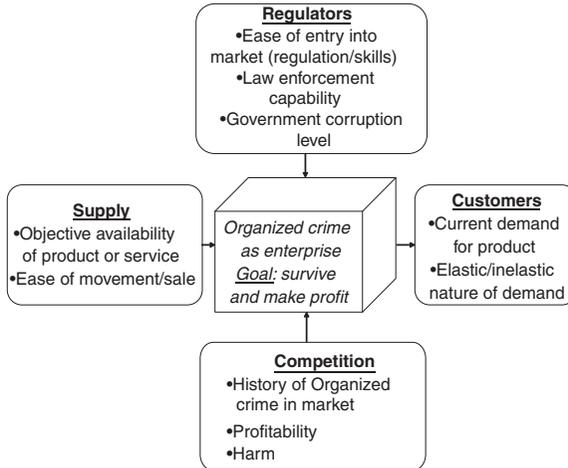


Figure 1 compares traditional approaches to organized crime risk assessment with a different approach. Historically, the focus of risk assessment has been to gather information on offenders to locate and interdict high-risk individuals and groups involved in organized crime. The long-term goal for the prosecution of these individuals is to have an impact on the illicit activities involved. The alternative approach, proposed here (following the large, curved arrows in Figure 1), looks to assessment of high risk in specific products and markets, knowing that these markets will attract the offenders that law enforcement seeks. The difference in the two approaches is that the traditional approach focuses on high-risk offenders (with impacts on illicit markets and activities a secondary concern), whereas the alternative approach focuses on identification of high-risk products and markets (knowing that targeting these will have a more substantial impact and also yield the offenders involved). Put another way, if you correctly identify the high-risk products and markets, you will know where to look for the offenders. This is an important distinction because even markets with no prior history of organized crime can be identified through this process, providing information for investigators beyond what might be obtained from targeting assessments to those individuals and groups with known ties to organized crime.

### Modeling the Illicit Markets

Changing the criterion of risk assessment from identifying high-risk individuals and groups to high-risk illicit markets requires an understanding of important market variables. Prior work on illicit markets and organized crime makes it clear that supply, demand, regulators, and competition are crucial variables to measure to determine markets at risk (Albanese, 2001; Edwards & Gill, 2002; Reuter, 1985;

**Figure 2**  
**A Model of Organized Crime Operation in Illicit Markets**



Smith, 1980; Vander Beken, 2004; Wilkins & Casswell, 2003). Figure 2 illustrates how these risk factors might interact to increase the risk of organized crime involvement for a particular product or market.

Figure 2 illustrates that organized crime groups operate enterprises with the goals of survival and making a profit, while controlling the pressures they face from suppliers (sources), customers (demand), regulators (law, police), and competitors (other legal and illegal businesses and products). In each category, it can be seen that specific indicators (variables) can be developed to measure the comparative nature of supply (availability, ease of movement), demand (the level of demand and whether it is elastic or inelastic), competition from other groups and products (profitability, history of organized crime in that market, and impact of harms produced), and regulators (ease of entry into the illicit market or product—existing regulations and any special skills needed, the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement in that jurisdiction, and government corruption levels). If indicators for each of these variables are developed (and applied to different illicit products), it is possible to assess the comparative risk of organized crime involvement for different types of products and illicit markets (a listing of specific product markets is shown in Table 3).

There is a need to measure these variables for each product periodically to assess changes in risk over time. It is likely that the true value of such a risk assessment effort will be to assess changes in the comparative risk of organized crime involvement in different products and markets over time. A one-time effort to assess risk would be limited in its utility because it cannot assess the direction of the risk (is it

on its way up or down?), and periodic assessments are needed to assess the impact of efforts and initiatives against organized crime.

Summarized in another way, Figure 2 offers a 10-factor model for risk assessment. The types of variables include supply indicators ([a] objective availability of product or service, [b] ease of movement/sale), regulation indicators ([c] ease of entry into market by its regulation and the skills needed, [d] law enforcement capability and competence, [e] level of local government corruption), competition indicators ([f] history of organized crime in the market, [g] profitability, [h] harm), demand indicators ([i] current customer demand for product, [j] nature of the demand—whether elastic or inelastic). Using multiple indicators or measures for each of the variables (and for each product) would yield a reliable, comparative assessment of risk.

The indicators in the risk assessment model can be combined into an index for ease of use in practice. The index would be based on the perceptions and experiences of those who might have knowledge of illicit products. Much in the same way that the Transparency International (2005) corruption surveys rely heavily on perceptions of business activities, analogous surveys at the local level could be conducted to determine the circumstances surrounding the supply, demand, regulation, and competition for various illicit products in specific jurisdictions. For example, local citizen, business, police, and perhaps offender surveys could be used to help measure perceptions of supply, demand, regulation, and competition for particular illicit products. An analysis of known, closed cases could be added to this information to look for evidence of the 10 indicators (noted above) in actual criminal cases. Police training and performance can be comparatively assessed to determine its capability and competence. Similarly, an assessment of local or national legislation and regulations can be carried out to determine the extent to which they advance organized crime activity by unwittingly enlarging or shifting illegal markets for various products or services. Preliminary work on the impact of legislation on organized crime has begun in the European Union (Morgan & Clarke, 2006; Savona, 2006; Vander Beken & Balcaen, 2006).

## The Future of Risk Assessment in Organized Crime

The preceding discussion illustrates that it is possible to develop a model and composite measures for each of the 10 indicators noted above to produce an index of risk of organized crime involvement in different illegal products and markets. The potential utility of such a risk assessment index for screening, and targeting of law enforcement and prevention efforts, should not be underestimated. A 10-factor risk model does not oversimplify the situation. Consider the UN Gender-Related Development Index, which is an indicator of the standard of living in a country, measuring inequalities between men and women in health, life expectancy, and income. The Gender-Related Development Index is composed of only three indicators (Somers, 2007). In a similar way, the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index uses only six

survey sources for most nations included (Beets, 2005; Transparency International, 2007). Therefore, a risk assessment model does not need to contain a large number of variables to be useful in practice in distinguishing risk levels.

Unlike most contemporary efforts to assess risk of organized crime, the model proposed here focuses on assessment of products/markets at highest risk (rather than on offenders or groups). Correct identification of these product markets will lead police to the organized crime groups they are looking for. Targeting only the crime groups themselves fails to anticipate future changes in organized crime involvement in new and different products and locations.

To enhance the utility of the risk assessment approach proposed here, several important aspects cannot be ignored. First, specific locations must be the basis for analysis due to variations in supply, demand, regulation, and competition among localities and regions. Second, different products/activities will have different risks, so separate risk assessments must be carried out for each product/activity—to produce a comparative risk (threat) for each activity in a given location (Table 3 provides a list of these organized crimes/activities). Third, risk assessment in organized crime must be connected to allocation of resources so that government resources can be targeted systematically at those criminal activities found to be the highest risk. Fourth, there must be periodic application of risk assessment to different products and locations to help assess the impact of intervention efforts over time. Systematic risk assessment in organized crime holds great promise as a practical screening device and investigative tool to target illicit markets, activities, and government resources in responding to the threats identified.

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**Jay S. Albanese** is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. He served as chief of the International Center at the National Institute of Justice. Dr. Albanese is the author/editor of 10 books on organized crime, ethics, transnational crime, and criminal justice. He is a past president of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.