

#65 (MARTIN BOUCHARD)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime and policing researchers.

Martin Bouchard is an expert in social network analysis and using gang network information to understand how best to strategically tackle organized crime groups. In this episode, he provides a primer on understanding social network analysis and why it's useful.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is Reducing Crime. I'm your host, Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome. In this episode, we are talking social network analysis of gangs and organized crime groups. Just as the summer started, I was lucky enough to be invited by Jacob Lindegaard-Benson to open the European Crime Analysis Conference in Denmark. Not only was it a lovely chance to revisit the beautiful city of Copenhagen, but it also provided the opportunity to chat with Martin Bouchard.

Martin is a professor of criminology at Simon Fraser University, where he leads the Crime and Illicit Networks Lab. He's published extensively in the area of social organization of illicit markets, as well as the role of social networks in a variety of criminal enterprises. This includes understanding gang violence and the effect of gang affiliation on individuals getting into and out of criminal lifestyles.

He received his PhD in 2006 from the Université de Montréal, or if you can't understand my awful French accent, the University of Montreal, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Maryland. Yeah, that one's a bit easier. He has worked with numerous government and law enforcement agencies in Canada and on Canadian organized crime groups, and in 2019 he received the Western Society of Criminology's Fellows Award for individuals who have made important contributions to the field of criminology.

In our chat, you'll discover about centralized and decentralized organized crime networks, what dyads and brokers are, and how police can use their understanding of networks to best target and disrupt gang and organized crime activity. He also touches briefly on the similarities with police corruption networks. That's what you'll learn. I learned that apparently my networking skills mean I have a bright future as a broker in an organized crime group. Yeah, read into that what you will. So, while other conference goers earnestly attended some really good sessions, it's a great

conference and I strongly recommend it, Martin and I sat down at the hotel bar, which as you'll hear worked out quite nicely indeed.

You did a TED Talk, didn't you?

Martin Bouchard:

I did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've never done one and I've looked at these thinking, "Okay, they're really quite impressive."

Martin Bouchard:

It's impressive in the preparation that goes into it, and I didn't know any of it, but it was an eight months process, and you have a TED Talk community of other speakers that you meet once a week. You have coaches that listen to you every little bit of your talk, so you go three, four minutes at a time and they critique it. So I learned a lot about communication and the importance of every sentence and pauses and how to make it sound a little bit more interesting to a wider audience. It was a fascinating process.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I never knew there was that much effort went into a TED Talk.

Martin Bouchard:

Me neither. Yeah, I thought it was just, yeah, on a whim. "You're here-"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'll write a bit of a script, might practice a couple of times, and just go for it.

Martin Bouchard:

I'm in town, I'm in Vancouver, I'm in LA, I'll do the LA TED Talk. Right? So no, there was a lot that went into it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Has it helped in terms of lecturing and teaching and presenting? Do you learn some skills in that way?

Martin Bouchard:

Everything, and I'm also less shy about pausing, about taking my time, about finding the proper analogy. I don't rush into my speeches as much I find. I probably make the same mistakes I always make. We have our own little ways of speaking, but I did pick up an interest in making sure that I'm clear, and so I embrace sometimes the analogy, I embrace some explanations. I don't fear the example. I don't fear taking my time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Interesting, right. Yeah. For college professors, one of the things that I think we're often bad at is communicating. It's not something that we are ever really taught well.

Martin Bouchard:

No, we're not taught well and we do it every day, and yet, we don't get that much better because it's also something that you need to be trained on. It's not because you do it that you do it well. You just redo the same thing over and over, typically. So, some of us start on a strong level, I guess, of communication, but not all of us do that and we're certainly not trained, as you said.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is depressing when you go and see a talk by one of the great big names in the field and you think, "I'm really looking forward to this," and you love their written work, and then you discover what an absolute disaster they are at just presenting. It's like, "Oh, shit. I was really looking--"

Martin Bouchard:

I'd rather read them. I'd rather read them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't burst the bubble.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes, absolutely. It happens all the time, of course.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's something our field has got to really figure out at some point, because here we are at what's largely really a policing conference, communicating with the policing audience is very different than communicating with an academic audience.

Martin Bouchard:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The message has to be different. The message has to be pitched different, and as academics, I think we have to overcome a degree of reticence on their part to necessarily pay attention to what we have.

Martin Bouchard:

Absolutely. Yeah. They're not a captive audience in a classroom, for example. And in terms of academic conferences, you can go into topics in all kinds of ways that are allowed just because it's other academics and we don't need to be that useful all the time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or ever.

Martin Bouchard:

Or ever. But an audience who are here, you'd rather communicate very clearly and in ways that they can take home with them as well. And I don't know that I do this well, to be clear.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We really do. I saw you give a great presentation yesterday.

Martin Bouchard:

But I know that I pay attention differently now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's interesting. Was academia always your thing? You grew up in Montreal, didn't you?

Martin Bouchard:

I grew up in a small town in Quebec and then moved to Quebec City for my teenage years, then Montreal for university. So I feel like I've lived everywhere.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[inaudible 00:06:09] in Montreal.

Martin Bouchard:

Montreal, exactly. And so I identified to Montreal because that's where I spent my adult years before going to Vancouver. But I've been all over Quebec, in a very French part of Quebec as well. I only really spoke English in Vancouver on a daily basis, or even before during my postdoc, but I did a French PhD at Université de Montréal, so all in French, except the papers in the middle, but you had to have an introduction in French, a conclusion in French, and a dissertation defense in French as well, because it's a French university.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How was that transition to then pretty much a full-on English-speaking world?

Martin Bouchard:

It was exciting in many ways because everything was new. I was also the French guy. I'm still the French guy everywhere in Vancouver, even after 16 years there, but I was just excited at that time to move away. I loved Montreal. I probably wanted to stay in Montreal, if I'm honest. When I was there, certainly-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is a great city.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, it was a strong pull, and I didn't think that the move away was going to be permanent the way it has been.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Are you seriously missing the winters there though? Because they're brutal. They are brutal.

Martin Bouchard:

I'm not missing it, and I can still enjoy hockey. I don't have to go through, and in Montreal, especially the parking, parking your car in the middle of snowstorms, that's sort of the worst of it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good stuff. Yeah. I mean your area really now is social network analysis across the board. Has it always been that? When did you get into that?

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, that's a good question. I feel like I almost want to say yes because it's been so long and it's always been intertwined with my research, but if I'm looking back at my PhD, there was no social network analysis. It was analysis of police databases in terms of drug markets. So how many people are selling drugs? I've been involved designing methods to estimate the size of illegal populations, and the goal was always to find a denominator. So how many people there are so we can understand how much law enforcement pressure they receive.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Fundamentally, it's a hidden figure. Nobody in a drug transaction wants to report this to the police. So it does remain this ultimate challenge to some degree, doesn't it?

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. So I was driven by solving that puzzle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And did you?

Martin Bouchard:

In some ways. You have statistical models that you're trying to approximate the size of the population, but you never know if you're right. But it was a very network-y topic because behind the scenes, we were studying criminal organizations. That's what we were trying to do. So how much are criminal organizations involved in drug markets? What are their risks of being arrested compared to independent dealers? So there was already that attempt at trying to figure out how to count and to work with police data in order to make a difference between organized crime and not. And from there, I had a mentor, Carlo Morselli-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Passed away recently

Martin Bouchard:

Who passed away recently-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very young too. It's very sad.

Martin Bouchard:

The most sad event because he was so loved by so many people. So when he was in Montreal, he was probably the most prolific supervisor. So many graduate students worked with him and under him, and so it was a shock, especially at his age and how active he was otherwise, and a great, great, great mentor. He really allowed so many people to express themselves in research.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you guys at Université de Montréal were really in the pioneering forefront to developing what has now become social network analysis. Because it really wasn't a thing before then.

Martin Bouchard:

It was not. It was not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It almost appeared out of nowhere, if you know what I mean.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, exactly. Like 9/11, right? These sorts of events.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's an analogy.

Martin Bouchard:

There's an analogy, and I'm saying this for a reason too, but events like 9/11 and having someone like Valdis Krebs who published a paper on the network of hijackers a few months after the event, because social network analysis has been around for 50 years before it's been around in criminology, it's just never made its way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So were the tools around at that point?

Martin Bouchard:

The tools were around, it was just not in criminology. We were just late to the party.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Okay. So which other fields beat us there?

Martin Bouchard:

I want to say business management was big. Looking at boards of business owners, directors, and how they are intertwined to understand innovation in business, for example. It was always in anthropology, sociology, that's where it was born.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I started paying attention when people like yourself, and there were some other early adapters, people like Gisela Bichler, Aili Malm, Andrew Papachristos started publishing all this stuff and it appeared on the criminology field, seemed almost out of the blue, but then here you were doing this really fascinating work, plus all the tools were available as well. It seemed perfectly timed that-

Martin Bouchard:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you had the explosion in police recorded data to help feed into all of this. It all seemed to coalesce really nicely.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, it's the perfect storm. And because the tools were already there, there were no obstacles there. In the 1990s-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

[background noise] Somebody in the bar is eventually going to start wanting to test bells or something like that. We're going to have a foghorn test in a moment.

Martin Bouchard:

It's making me thirsty, certainly. I wonder if we can get served a beverage.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Actually, that's not a bad idea. Do you want a beer?

Martin Bouchard:

We could ask.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Please excuse the small interlude at the moment in the recording here while Martin and I availed ourselves of the services of the bar.

Anyway, cheers.

Martin Bouchard:

Cheers.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I think it's Danish, but it's Danish IPA, that's actually bearable.

Martin Bouchard:

It is pretty good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Let's go back to where we were.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Interrupted by having a beer. Tell me about the gang side. What has social network analysis allowed us to learn about how gangs operate and be successful?

Martin Bouchard:

What I found early on is sometimes with organized crime and gangs, the whole thing is a conspiracy, and a conspiracy is a social network.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know there are batshit crazy conspiracy theorists who will love the fact that you said that. It really is.

Martin Bouchard:

It's true. It's a different context, of course, but because it's a conspiracy, it doesn't have anything that holds itself, there's no glue other than the social relations and the conspiracy. They're talking, they're planning. So it's fascinating that all of this is happening as a social network, and so we need the simple method to analyze this. That's the only way, in a sense. That's not the only way, but that's a very important way to understand it. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is that we study gangs and organized crime sometimes as a sort of box that's very flexible and rigid and it has 10 members, this gang. This other one has 15 and 20, but everybody who works on gangs knows that it changes all the time. It's very fluid, it's flexible, and here's a method, social network analysis that allows you to bring on that flexibility and provide an answer that can change over time.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's often a misconception that people have that organized crime groups or gangs are rigidly hierarchical organizations with membership numbers and cards and all that kind of stuff. But a lot of the gangs that I've helped the police in Philadelphia study, it's kind of groups of corner boys who knew each other from school and people kind of

drift in and out. And whoever's the kind of top dog is whoever managed to get hold of some drugs that they can sell that week and then next week he's got nothing, it's somebody else that's got something. It is incredibly fluid.

Martin Bouchard:

Fluid and organic, as you mentioned, especially when it starts. Of course, even the organizations that have some kind of hierarchy, it does not function necessarily as a hierarchy. A paper presented at this conference where there was no prediction by rank of who was connected with whom or who was friends with whom, it's literally another mechanism that's at play. So this method allows you to get into this and to be able to describe a little bit closer to how they actually function, which is basically through social relationships and who you like and who you know, who's close to you. You have a gang of 20 people, you don't work with these 20 people, you work with four, five, six, and this matters because you're in that cluster of the larger gang on the East Side or the West Side, but you don't necessarily work or know the West Side of the group. So now you can describe this.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the things I have noticed though, you tend to have this whole language around social network analysis that I think a lot of people sometimes are not familiar with, use terms like dyads and brokerage and things like that. What do these kind of things mean?

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, well, a dyad is the basic element of a social network.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's not drinking then?

Martin Bouchard:

It's not drinking. No, it could have been. It should be.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's the basis of most of my social networks.

Martin Bouchard:

It's the foundation of everything here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to academia.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. It's really the unit of analysis, and that's the difference. For some people, for academics who work with data sets and standard data sets, each line is one respondent in a survey, for example.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But not in SNA.

Martin Bouchard:

But in SNA, the unit of analysis will be two people. If there's a line that you see visually in a network, this line is made of two nodes, two people that are connected. So any line in a dataset for social network analysis will be two people. That's what starts everything. And that's the basic of what a social network is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Can you qualify that depending on whether it's family or tribal or if we just meet socially, or can you change the nature of what that relationship is? Does that help you understand organized groups?

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. And when you study gangs and organized crime, you realize it's fascinating and complex because that's not all they do. They do all kinds of things together. They socialize with many of them, but they don't socialize with all of them. So social network analysis just allows you to classify that, so that if you want to study the social relationships and the friendships within a criminal organizations, you can. You can filter out the criminal relationships. And if you want to study just the co-offending, you can as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And what is brokerage? You talked about that yesterday.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah. We use these terms outside of social network analysis, and when we hire a mortgage broker, for example, it's just someone who's there to facilitate a transaction between two parties. And so that's the idea here, but in social network analysis and organized crime, we will use the broker to describe someone who's in between two gang members or two gangs or two factions and serve as the bridge between. So that broker will be in contact with at least some members on the left side and also in contact with members on the right side. But he's the root, he's the conduit between these two factions or these two people.

And when you are that person in between, while you get a lot of power from this, you are the one basically receiving the information, receiving the money, receiving the drugs, and getting it to the other side. From network theory and everything that we know about networks, these positions come with power of information, power to act, doing something on one side that the other side would not learn about for example. You can use it for good or for bad reasons if you wanted, but you have some control. So as you have larger and larger networks, you have more and more of these brokers or you're the pathway between more and more people. And if you're the unique, the only one, the only pathway between these two people, well, you get a lot of points in social network analysis.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So if my career goes south, it's always possible on any given day, and I decide to join an organized crime group, if I'm more social, if I more interact with people, so that's going to be of material benefit to me?

Martin Bouchard:

Absolutely. The social butterflies that are accepted. So social butterflies, not the annoying ones, but the ones that people want to meet, the people who have social capital, it's not just how many people you know, but it's also an ability, an ability to manage your social relations. That's what social capital is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's not necessarily how many connections you have on LinkedIn because those are largely with people you've never met and have no idea, but is it some degree the quality of those connections?

Martin Bouchard:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What they can bring to the criminal business?

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah. And if you would get something out of it, means that they want to work with you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you have to bring some capacity.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You have to be able to do something.

Martin Bouchard:

To do something, to be agreeable enough almost and trustworthy that they want to collaborate with you. And it's not a given. It's not because you're there in the gang or the group that people will want to work with you-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So you may know people, it's not that I can connect you with a bunch of other academics, but I could connect you with people who've got skill sets in the organized crime world, like money laundering and those kinds of skills.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. They need to bring something to the table. And they put themselves in these positions also by virtue of having these quality contacts in the construction industry, for example, because they have these capacity, for example, to win a construction bid for the criminal organization in order to get some money laundering going. So there's all kinds of ways in which this social capital manifests itself. What we found, what my colleagues found in all kinds of research, whether avoiding arrest, making money, having a long career, the people who are better at managing their social relations are almost always getting ahead.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You say a career in organized crime, but I kind of feel like academia's a career in organized crime, because I'm certainly obtaining wages by deception. It's not like I'm earning them.

Martin Bouchard:

Well, you use everything you can,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You also said the other day that, it was interesting, you did a comparison between the centrality of biker gangs, wasn't it?

Martin Bouchard:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There were some that were very, sparse isn't the right word, but I think decentralized. They seem to have little groups all over the place with a few people who did the connections connected groups with one another, and another one that was just a core group in the middle who connected to everything. Did I interpret that right?

Martin Bouchard:

Yes. No, you did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a rarity, but I'll take it.

Martin Bouchard:

It was individuals, but there was a chapter, right? So it was all different chapters of the biker organization connected through sometimes very important individuals who were the brokers. They were sometimes the only representative of their chapter in the dataset that was making the connection to the rest of the organization. So that brings a lot of power. So everyone on their right side, for example, needs to go through them in order to get anywhere.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they're like this narrow bridge that everything has to filter through, if one group has drugs and they want the other group to sell on the street or something like that-

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, and it creates a lot of power to these bridges that especially when they're unique. So all throughout the organization, you have some people that have these roles, often you can say, well, they may not even know that they are this bridge. We're calculating these network metrics sometimes and we know more about their power than they may know themselves. But I do believe that most of the time there's a reason why they are in this position and that they're able to exploit it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean I'm trying to figure out how to use this from a policing perspective. Do you go for gangs that are more centralized? Are they easier to disrupt? Or do you go for more decentralized or less centralized gangs?

Martin Bouchard:

Well, you can go for any of these based on your priorities. If one of them was involved in violence and your organization had had a public safety component, of course you would have to go for the most violent one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Martin Bouchard:

But the fact that they are decentralized or centralized will affect how many resources you would need to put into this operation in order for it to succeed to get real disruption.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I got the sense that you were saying that a decentralized group is easier to disrupt or interdict into.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes and no.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay.

Martin Bouchard:

So a decentralized group will be easier to have an impact on with a random target, if you will, because any target in a decentralized network will be a decent target. In a centralized network, what that means is that there is one player, there is one gang member that is bringing all of the attention, all of the connections-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They consolidate all the power.

Martin Bouchard:

Consolidate all of it. So if you can pinpoint to that individual or that gang, bingo, you have it. You can disrupt this network very easily. But most of the police operations, if they operate a little bit more blindly, will have more success having some disruption in a decentralized context because any one of their random targets will be decent.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. You can't destroy the whole organization, the whole conspiracy, but you can take out some bridges.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You want to look for the bridges?

Martin Bouchard:

I think that that's the most powerful way to disrupt. My colleagues and I, we looked at all kinds of metrics in which you can look at cohesion and reach. Like, is this network losing its ability to function in terms of people going from one person to another? Ultimately, it comes down to, between a centrality to that brokerage, looking at these bridges, because the analogy of the network being a roadmap, the fact that the spatial language is in there, it's not random. That's the way it was built early on.

So it's a route, it's a roadmap basically, and you can navigate through it. So if you cannot have these bridges, you cannot cross to the other side. You cannot go south, basically you're stuck where you are. And so when that happens to criminal networks, the distribution of these drugs is affected. In theory, this is the way to go in order to slow down criminal activity, not necessarily to stop it, but to slow it down.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Bizarrely, the analogy works exactly, because years ago I was an officer in the Reserve army in the UK and I was an engineer officer, and one of the things that we trained on was how to blow up bridges, the idea to stop a Russian advance across Europe. And bridges, of course, are this wonderful opportunity, you take out a bridge, you're not stopping the advance, but you're really slowing it because you're forcing the opposition to take a longer, more torturous

route to go 20, 30 miles upstream or downstream to find another bridge. But that becomes less valuable if all you have is bridges everywhere.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. And that's a perfect analogy. Yeah, that's great.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there a way to use these models to then actually measure if you're actually having an impact? Because so much of what we're interested in doing with evidence-based policing is sort of saying, "Okay, if we do this, we hope to get this result." Can we actually measure the impact? Can we measure disruption in terms of how the network changes after some kind of interdiction operation?

Martin Bouchard:

Yes, we can. And that's the goal. That's what everybody should be thinking right now. And the fact that it's a data set that is set in time and space so that you have an operation that you can date. So you can look at the before and the after, just like any project where you have data on violence before and after and intervention. So it's the same thing with networks, but the metrics that you follow will be a little bit different. What matters is how much can they reach each other or not is truly important, especially with drug trafficking as they change countries, how difficult is it to bring these drugs in after we've lost our contact in Colombia?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you had one bridge that enabled you to bring drugs from one country to another, if you lose that bridge, how long does it take to reestablish a new trusted network?

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because you're not just using arrest data, are you? And who gets arrested with somebody else? I mean you've got a whole range of other data sets, right?

Martin Bouchard:

You can bring in any dataset that you can match with the people who are in the network, so there are characteristics or attributes. Once we know who's part of that network, you can triangulate with other data sets and try to bring in more information on these people from other sources, if you have them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Telephone conversations?

Martin Bouchard:

Telephone conversations would be one way to map a network of phone calls, for example. And it's a fascinating way of doing it because you have direction. Sometimes you look at these phone calls and in social network analysis, we pay attention to who calls whom, and because if you think about this in terms of a roadmap that you're trying to navigate, then it can only go from the caller to the person being called, it doesn't go the other way around necessarily. So the route is only going one way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So would you be looking more for people who make more outgoing calls?

Martin Bouchard:

It depends, because the receiver could be the person starting the whole thing, right? So when you make the phone call, this is when the drugs can be distributed, this is the green light, but it does bring to light that the person receiving the phone calls will get different metrics. It will look very different depending on what you look at in the network, so their in degree, so their popularity receiving a lot of phone calls will be higher, but their out degree, so their capacity to generate network contacts will be less. And then it's a matter of interpretation. Sometimes it means more power to the in degree, to the person receiving, and sometimes it's more power to the person starting the process. And that's why you always need that context. You need that intelligence. You need people in the field to tell you a little bit of what's going on here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. So that's important. So the analysis, not enough on its own. You also need criminal intelligence. I've said this a few times, crime analysis tells you what's going on, criminal intelligence will tell you why.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. And so this work can't be done on its own, it really has to be supplemented with insider knowledge?

Martin Bouchard:

Insider knowledge, and you can bring it in the network and/or in the interpretation of the network. And it's key because you can have police data sets with an algorithm and just run it through and have network metrics and interpret this because you'll find central people, but these people may be central for a reason that's completely unrelated to something that's relevant to the law enforcement agency or even to the organization itself. So you have to be able to work through what's really going on with someone who knows what's going on. But I will say that the blind analysis of networks, without knowing anything about it, has a role. I love to go and come in not knowing anything about the network, doing my analysis, trying to interpret and make projections, but then confront these interpretations with the real meaning.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're saying it's helpful to have people who can help interpret the crime analysis, it isn't the end of the analysis, it's the start of really thinking about this.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. I mean if you don't have a person telling you about the substance of these relationships, you really have only metrics and you cannot go that far with only metrics. It happens often because you have sometimes consultants or academics coming in with no knowledge of the scene, the drug markets, the gangs that are operating. You need that prime analyst, that police officer, investigators who bring you that knowledge of the field-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Context.

Martin Bouchard:

That context. You need both. You need both. And sometimes we can come in at different times. So I like to do a blind analysis without knowing anything because I'm not biased by any preconceived notion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. You're not coming into it with a predetermined plan for how the analysis is going to go, you're just going to get the network unfold organically.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. Exactly. Little Johnny is the leader, and if I know this, then I'll pay more attention to little Johnny as opposed to pay attention to the network as a whole and the data and then having this discussion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's actually helpful not to know who, say the gang leader is, or who's perceived to be the gang leader. You just come in, let's see if the model establishes that.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. I feel there's a role for this as well, but we cannot do without that knowledge in the end.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And increasingly I worry about that, as we have more and more open data, which is a good thing, but we also get more and more people coming into the field with no experience of the field and from other disciplines, like computer science or whatever, who've never sat in the back of a police car or never spoken to a police officer, trying to come up with some deep insights from this and crashing and burning a bunch of the times I think.

Martin Bouchard:

It happens. I work with computer scientists. I love the skillset. It's something that we probably need in the field-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, for sure.

Martin Bouchard:

But with us trying to crash into a different field, we need some help.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You gave a presentation that said, and this is something I found really counterintuitive, so I've done some work in Central America, in many parts of Central America. You rise to be the head honcho in the gang by having a reputation for being the most violent. And yet, what you were finding in biker gangs in Canada was the reverse of that, that being engaged on the violence side of it wasn't exactly career enhancing.

Martin Bouchard:

It was not. And you're right to bring this into the South American context, because it may be very different in different parts of the world, but when you talk about a biker organization, that's really a business organization at this point, like many of them own car dealerships and grocery stores. So the business-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Beyond just drug dealing then?

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. No, I mean but the business aspect is so important. And what happens is that, because we have a range of people in this organization, we have prospects, hang arounds, we have younger bikers as well. What we found is that those who have this prior history of violence do not tend to be promoted as fast. And sometimes they're basically boxed in, they're stuck in that role.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're stereotyped as the muscle.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. They're the muscle. That's what they do. And sometimes there's a reason why they do this, because they're good at it, or sometimes they just don't have the other skill. Like we were talking about social capital earlier, that's what the organization ultimately is looking for in terms of its promotion and those who will get full patch memberships a little bit quicker. It's fascinating work that I've done with Alicia Gern, a graduate student who studied promotion in the Hell's Angels using survival models.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got all these different characters going on. You mentioned a couple of them, prospects, hangers on. What's the difference between those within the gang?

Martin Bouchard:

Well, it starts with being a hang around. If you have any status within the Hell's Angels organization, you're going to be a hang around. Before that, you'll be an associate, you'll be around the gang. Maybe they know you, but at one point even the hang around is a status. It means you do work with them in some capacity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So they trust you. They'll bring you in a job or two and-

Martin Bouchard:

You'll be invited to parties. You'll be doing maybe menial jobs for them, especially at this stage.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And we can start to see this in the data?

Martin Bouchard:

You can start to see this in the data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In social network data in terms of what? Phone calls? Or-

Martin Bouchard:

In terms of them being seen with the organization in the data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you might have surveillance records.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. Surveillance records, but the data that we used in this case is police events. So we have people being pulled over for a traffic stop. Each time they are ID-ed because their motorcycle is parked in the wrong place, they'll be in the dataset. So we have all kinds of information like this, but we tend not to use the biker events because it just masks everything. Because everyone at these parties or these big events, they're all connected to each other. There's no network variations in these events. So I tend to keep them out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Interesting. So there's some data that you don't actually want because it's just more noise than value.

Martin Bouchard:

It's more noise because-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

More noise than signal.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. It's the same when there's no variation in a model. Well, it's not a variable, it's a constant.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If violence doesn't work, what are the skill sets that, I'm going to join a biker organization-

Martin Bouchard:

It seems like it, but I feel it's a good sign to think-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This future career, I'm now planning it instead, it's not my fallback anymore.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, no, but it's a good sign to be thinking that way. And I don't know which speaker in this policing conference mentioned this, I think it was Alex Murray-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

From West Mercia Police, Deputy Chief Constable.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. Let's plug it in. Episode number 64.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, like 30 something or other. Yeah, he's from way back. He was a podcast guest. Yeah.

[EDITOR SIDE NOTE: Alex Murray is episode 31 of the Reducing Crime podcast]

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. But there was this quote about thinking like criminals, basically going inside their minds. So I think it's a good sign that you're thinking that way because it allows you to have the empathy sometimes to make the right calls and understand their decision-making, not from your perspective as an academic, but from theirs. What makes sense in their world?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So I don't need to be the most violent, it's the connections that will help me promote within the organized crime group?

Martin Bouchard:

Well, if they want to break into academia, these Hell's Angels well, they got the perfect candidate if you come in because you'll be the ultimate broker between all of us in academia and in policing and their organization. But you can imagine, when they connect with the business associate who's connected to construction industry, for example, the kind of value that they bring.

So these guys are promoted a little bit quicker. There's a lot of patch over with a biker organization. So when someone comes in another city, another province in Canada, they bring a lot of contacts that are of value to the organization. They tend to get through the ranks a little bit faster as well.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you're able to spot this through the data analysis that you've doing?

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly, yeah. Just following the trajectories of 154 of them for 12 years of data. Some of them were already full pat, so we can't study their promotion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're already in.

Martin Bouchard:

They're already in.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In and done.

Martin Bouchard:

But we had about 65 people that had a promotion, sometimes two. They went from hang around to prospect, from prospect to full patch, so we could see their whole trajectory. And in almost all cases, it was who they knew and how many that matter, and not violence.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Interesting. I mean it's really fascinating. How have police used this?

Martin Bouchard:

In all kinds of ways, in thinking about disruption. The law enforcement agencies I've worked with in British Columbia, what they learned is that when you apply a network approach, you find a lot of what you already know matches the analysis. So of course, the gang leader is going to be maybe all over the data.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But that's not a bad thing.

Martin Bouchard:

That's not a bad thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It reduces uncertainty.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It gives you more confidence in what you know.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. It's like our control variables in any regression models. It's what we know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, now we've lost everybody, but yeah. You said the R word.

Martin Bouchard:

The R word. But the controls are so important because that's what we know about something, but there's always surprises in the dataset, and that's where it comes in useful because law enforcement agencies who use it who work with me don't want to forget the important people. And they know, they know they'll have their biases and they'll overlook people. It's like sometimes they smile and they laugh, like, "No way. There's no way that little Johnny should be on our radar." And yes, little Johnny brings something to the table. Little Johnny shows up in every event that the leaders show up. As low level as he is, he's plugged in with everyone at the top.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what makes that really interesting is that, not so much for the interdiction, but it sounds like little Johnny, being so well connected, is a wonderful target to turn to become a confidential informant.

Martin Bouchard:

Absolutely. You got it right. So some of the work that we do as well is in identifying suitable-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Candidates.

Martin Bouchard:

... candidates to be informants.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's really important because we've got to go away from this model that arrest and prosecution is the only way forward. And sowing disruption within an organized crime group, anything that interrupts actually the harm that they commit on the community in different ways. I think disruption is one of the areas that is really underdeveloped within policing these days.

Martin Bouchard:

And it's some of the only ways to find out anything about these organizations is to have informants, to have someone inside. It could be a wire, but it could also be an informant.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a lot of this, you're talking about people having social capital. You've also talked about human capital as being distinct from social capital. What do you mean by that?

Martin Bouchard:

Well, human capital is basically our skillset, like what we bring to the table in terms of education, what we know to do, basically our skills.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, so that's just inherent in me.

Martin Bouchard:

Well, the human capital element is me, but the social capital is through someone else. It is through my social relationships that I can get something else. When we were talking about the ability to use your social networks, I don't have all the skills, but someone that I know has these skills or these resources, so can I reach out to them in order to get access to this? So that's social capital. Every time you need someone else for a skillset or resource, it's going to be social capital, but human capital is within you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So I might have a skillset in being able to set up encrypted networks for telephones and things like that. So you came to me for this.

Martin Bouchard:

For the skillset.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But my social capital will be, I can connect you with people who can do that, who can do money laundering, who can run financial systems, set up bank accounts.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So I may have no skills except for who I basically drink and party with.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And is that more useful? Please tell me it is, please.

Martin Bouchard:

It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's the only skillset I have.

Martin Bouchard:

Yeah, I think it is more useful, and the person coming to you for your skillset is using their social capital in that instance. But I find that it's a skillset that's completely overlooked. Your capacity to identify the proper people to help you accomplish something-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To be a connector.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. To be the connector is something.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some of this work is also looking at corruption within policing networks. Depressingly it's going to be finding the similar things, isn't it?

Martin Bouchard:

It's so similar, and we sort of knew-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

All the critical criminologists at this point are all nodding away.

Martin Bouchard:

Yes. I mean, and it's the work of Mary Willette, Sadaf Hashimi, Jason Gravel, Andrew Papachristos, all of this is just fascinating. But some of the parallels that they find in these networks, it's truly fascinating because it's the same sort of size of the crime. It's the same clustering within the police misconduct networks as we see the clustering in gangs, for example.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's not necessarily a bad apple, you just get a bag of apples with the whole barrel.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. And the social contagion phenomenon is happening in the same way. If you're exposed to police corruption, you're more likely yourself to be involved in the future. So we're not surprised because that's based on social theories that have been around for decades. But at the same time, to find it so clearly represented in police corruption network data, that's the fascinating part that people don't expect.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If people want to learn more about this, where's a good starting place?

Martin Bouchard:

Gisela Bichler published a really good book focused on criminal networks. It's called Understanding Criminal Networks. Carlo Morselli published in 2009 a book called Inside Criminal Networks. Sometimes it's available for free through Springer, but otherwise there's all kinds of training. I try to give training myself as much as I can.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I appreciate you spending some time with me. We should finish up this beer and then go and rope a couple of other people into it and expand our social network.

Martin Bouchard:

Exactly. That's what we're doing. It's the snowball.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Cheers. Thanks.

Martin Bouchard:

Thank you. Thank you, Jerry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 65 of Reducing Crime recorded in Copenhagen in May, 2023. If you teach, you can DM me for transcripts and spreadsheets of multiple choice questions for every episode. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime or @Jerry_Ratcliffe, but if you subscribe, they'll be delivered straight to your preferred device.

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