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History of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

Abstract: Chapter 2 provides an important discussion of the history of the OMCGs and their development as local, national and international organizations. However, where other authors have discussed the rise of the outlaw motorcycle clubs and gangs, what is often missing from this is an examination of the social context at the time, and how this may have impacted individual behaviour and decisions. In this way, it is possible to also consider the implication of labelling these groups as deviant and outlaw, and how that grew from meaning non-conforming, into (organized) criminal groups. This helps to set the scene for each of the chapters to come, considering the social, the political, the policing and the membership of these groups.

When the motorcycle was first introduced to the general public at the turn of the 20th century it was sold as being a reliable, fun and inexpensive form of transport which offered a sense of adventure (Austin, Gagne & Orend, 2010), an image which has remained popular throughout its history. The motorcycle provided a sense of individuality, reflective of the image of the lone cowboy forever chasing the sun (Carrington, 1999) and, throughout the years, brought with it an implied comradery of these riders who later formed the associations, groups and organizations found around the United States (US) and, later still, across the world.

However, poor road surfaces, an uncomfortable riding position and exposure to the elements also made it a risky adventure, which often excluded larger families and friends who did not ride. At the same time Henry Ford was building, and beginning to offer, a fast and reliable ‘motorized carriage’, which proved far more popular with families and businesses. The Model-T has been considered as the vehicle that changed the world, providing relatively cheap, comfortable and reliable family transportation (Merrill, Sharp & Usborne, 2008).

It is possible then that this combination of exposure, rise of a cheap form of ‘motorized carriage’ and the risk associated with the motorcycle may also have added to the stereotypical image of the motorcycle rider, characterized by Carrington (1999) as a lone rider, hardened by the open road, drifting through life akin to the outlaws of the American wild west of the 18th and 19th centuries and later popularized in American cinema and media. Yet this image is appropriate for only a small – but significant – number of riders. In this chapter we consider a number of important factors which have combined to inform our understanding of the outlaw motorcycle clubs. We examine the historical position of the outlaw clubs and how they have risen from single, isolated groups of individuals to national and international organizations with affiliations and associations throughout the world, and provide an explanation of why social and economic conditions may play an important role in membership in criminal and/or deviant motorcycle clubs. We offer this because it is important to contextualize the subject matter before considering further the implications of behaviour and how best to understand it and ultimately police it.

A short history of the motorcycle and motorcycle clubs

Although much of the history of the motorcycle and its association with outlaw clubs has been covered in other academic and biographic