



# Navigating the shadows: Content analysis of organised crime recruitment in the *Ozark* series

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<https://doi.org/10.3013/a48wtz86>

## Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted dynamics of organised crime recruitment through a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the first season of the television series *Ozark*. By utilising a theoretical framework grounded in rational choice theory, social learning theory and strain theory, this research examines how fictional narratives reflect and shape societal perceptions of criminal networks. The analysis identifies three primary recruitment drivers: the exploitation of socioeconomic vulnerabilities; the manipulation of familial and social ties; and the gradual normalisation of criminality through moral disengagement and techniques of neutralisation. Findings reveal that recruitment is often an informal, opportunistic process leveraging existing social capital and financial desperation, particularly among marginalised individuals. The study highlights the role of 'calculated risk-taking' and the 'denial of the victim' in the decision-making processes of key characters. While acknowledging the limitations of fictional portrayals – including the risks of glamourisation and stereotyping – it is argued that the research demonstrates that series like *Ozark* can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for law enforcement and criminology training. By bridging the gap between media studies and criminology, this paper provides insights into the psychological and sociological underpinnings of criminal involvement. Ultimately, it advocates for targeted interventions that address structural inequalities and promote media literacy to mitigate the allure of illicit opportunities.

**Keywords:** organised crime, recruitment, criminology, social impact of the media, socioeconomic conditions.

## Introduction

The exploration of the dynamics of organised crime and of the recruitment processes within organised crime, a multifaceted area within criminology, psychology and sociology, has long intrigued scholars and is often enriched by analysing fictional narratives, such as television series.

Fictional narratives, particularly television series, offer a unique lens through which to explore this shadowy world, reflecting societal anxieties and offering insights into the complexities of criminal behaviour. The Netflix television series *Ozark* presents a compelling case study for examining the recruitment processes and psychological underpinnings that draw individuals into criminal networks. This analysis aligns with a growing body of scholarship examining the media's role in shaping public perceptions of crime, particularly organised crime (Cornish et al., 1986; Marsh et al., 2019).

By focusing on the first season of *Ozark*, this study seeks to answer the following research question: how does the series portray the dynamics of organised crime recruitment, and to what extent do these portrayals align with established criminological frameworks like strain theory and social learning theory? Answering this question will contribute to the academic discourse on media representations of crime, offering insights into the narratives presented to mass audiences. *Ozark* (2017–2022) centres on financial advisor Marty Byrde, who is forced to relocate his family to the Missouri Ozarks to launder money for a Mexican drug cartel. There, the Byrdes' lives become intertwined with local criminal entities, including the disenfranchised but resourceful Langmore family, particularly the young and ambitious Ruth, and the established Snell crime family. This analysis will focus on the recruitment and decision-making processes of these key characters.

### Organised crime recruitment: theoretical foundations

Organised crime recruitment is a multifaceted process that cannot be explained solely through individual decision-making. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of socioeconomic, psychological and cultural factors. Theoretical frameworks from criminology and sociology provide critical insights into understanding the mechanisms that draw individuals into criminal organisations. These frameworks highlight how social structures, personal vulnerabilities and learned behaviours contribute to recruitment dynamics, offering academic and practical avenues for addressing this pervasive issue.

For approaching this element, there are key theoretical frameworks, such as (i) rational choice theory (RCT); (ii) social learning theory (SLT), (iii) strain theory (ST); and (iv) differential association and peer influence (DAPI).

RCT posits that individuals engage in crime after a calculated assessment of risks and rewards. Cornish et al. (1986) and van Gelder et al. (2013) argue that potential recruits weigh the benefits of joining organised crime, such as financial gain and social status, against potential costs like arrest or harm. These elements are reinforced by contemporary authors such as Raets (2024), Neuendorf (2017) and Weaver (2019). In the context of *Ozark*, characters frequently grapple with moral dilemmas, yet their ultimate decisions to engage in criminal activities often stem from perceived necessity or survival, reflecting RCT principles. This theory underscores the importance of understanding how socioeconomic pressures shape perceived cost–benefit analyses. As for SLT, it emphasises the role of association and reinforcement in adopting criminal behaviour. Akers (1973) expands on Bandura's (1999) foundational work to suggest that individuals learn behaviours by observing and imitating others, particularly those within their social circles. Organised crime networks often recruit members from familial or community connections, as demonstrated in *Ozark*, where criminal knowledge and justifications are transmitted across generations. This framework highlights how criminal organisations use social bonds to normalise illegal activities, fostering loyalty and cohesion. Lastly, Merton (1938) developed ST. The author highlights socioeconomic disparities as a driving force behind criminal behaviour. According to this framework, individuals facing structural barriers to legitimate

opportunities may resort to crime as an alternative means of achieving societal success. *Ozark* illustrates this through its portrayal of financially desperate individuals who, unable to access lawful avenues for stability, are coerced or tempted into criminal enterprises. ST reveals how systemic inequalities and economic deprivation create fertile ground for recruitment into organised crime. The DAPI of Sutherland and Cressey's (1978) theory delves into the influence of peer groups on criminal behaviour. The theory posits that individuals are more likely to engage in crime when exposed to frequent, intense interactions with those who hold deviant values. In *Ozark*, the characters' gradual immersion into crime is facilitated by their associations with established criminals, demonstrating how proximity to deviance fosters acceptance of illegal behaviour. This perspective emphasises the role of mentorship and social networks in recruitment processes.

These theories, along with concepts such as Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement and Bourdieu's (2018) social capital, underscore the multifaceted nature of crime recruitment, particularly when coercion, manipulation and societal alienation are involved. They provide a foundational understanding of the complex interplay between individual vulnerabilities, social structures and learned behaviours that contribute to the recruitment dynamics within organised crime.

#### Media portrayals and public perceptions of crime

Media serves as a powerful lens through which society interprets and understands crime, including the dynamics of organised crime. Fictional narratives, particularly in television series and movies like *Ozark* (2017–2022), *Peaky Blinders* (2013–2022), *Sicário* (2015) and *The Godfather* (1972) offer both a reflection of real-world practices and a dramatised version that influences public perception. The intricate portrayal of recruitment strategies in *Ozark* provides a unique opportunity to examine how media shapes societal attitudes toward organised crime, law enforcement and preventive measures.

Series and movies can provide a reinforcement of stereotypes, as presented by some studies. It has been shown that dramatised portrayals both reflect and reinforce stereotypes about organised crime in the following ways: (i) media as a reflection of reality; (ii) stereotypes and simplification; and (iii) impact on public perception.

Media narratives often mirror real-world practices, providing viewers with a dramatised but familiar perspective on crime. According to Surete (2015), Marsh et al. (2019), Hu et al. (2024) and Gomes et al. (2022), media content is not created in a vacuum but is influenced by actual crime trends, societal anxieties and historical contexts. In *Ozark*, the recruitment strategies depicted – such as leveraging financial desperation or familial loyalty – align with documented tactics used by criminal organisations. While dramatisation may embellish these practices for entertainment, the foundational elements often stem from reality. This reflective quality allows media to serve as an educational tool, albeit one that must be critically analysed for accuracy, such as *Ozark* characters potentially reinforcing stereotypes about criminals and their motives. Fictional portrayals shape societal attitudes toward crime, justice and law enforcement (Dowler et al., 2006; Muzzatti et al., 2023). *Ozark*'s nuanced depiction of moral ambiguity challenges viewers to reconsider their preconceptions.

These illustrations often involve oversimplifications, stereotyping and ethical issues that distort public understanding and policymaking by synthesising findings from various studies.

Media representations of crime, whether fictional or journalistic, shape public understanding of criminality and justice. However, these portrayals are often fraught with limitations that perpetuate stereotypes, neglect systemic causes and misrepresent the complexities of criminal behaviour, such as the following.

— **Oversimplification and stereotyping**

Crime representations often reduce complex social phenomena to simplistic narratives. In films, characters are frequently characterised as one-dimensional, with far-right domestic terrorists exemplifying a common oversimplification in which nuanced motivations are disregarded (Rich, 2020). Similarly, media coverage frequently reinforces racial and socioeconomic stereotypes, depicting marginalised communities disproportionately as perpetrators, thus perpetuating systemic biases. Studies also indicate that this stereotyping extends to gender dynamics, where men dominate as offenders and women are sidelined as victims or secondary characters (Hosford et al., 2021; Welsh et al., 2011; Zeppa, 2014).

— **Neglect of structural causes**

A significant limitation of crime media is the lack of focus on structural causes. For instance, systemic issues such as economic inequality, social injustice and institutional racism are often overlooked in favour of narratives centred on individual criminal behaviour (Rich, 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2005). Media narratives about organised crime, such as those surrounding the 'Ndrangheta, often attribute criminal activities to personal greed or moral failings, neglecting broader sociopolitical contexts (Phillips, 2016).

— **Glorification and desensitisation**

Films and television shows often glamourise crime, presenting criminal activities as exciting or heroic while downplaying their consequences. This can desensitise audiences to violence, reducing their empathy for victims (Reiner et al., 1997; Welsh et al., 2011). The repetitive exposure to glorified violence normalises aggressive behaviour, potentially influencing public attitudes and diminishing engagement in preventative social measures (Pfeiffer et al., 2005; Zeppa, 2014).

— **Impact on public perception and policy**

Sensationalised crime representations contribute to a public perception that overestimates the prevalence of crime. Media often focus disproportionately on violent crimes, creating a false impression that crime rates are increasing, even when data shows otherwise (Pfeiffer et al., 2005; Reiner et al., 1997). This skewed perception pressures policymakers to adopt punitive measures, such as stricter sentencing or increased policing, rather than addressing the root causes of crime through social reforms (Hosford et al., 2021; Welsh et al., 2011).

— **Ethical issues and sensationalism**

Economic motivations often drive media representations of crime, leading to sensationalism that prioritises entertainment value over accuracy. This approach can trivialise the realities of criminal behaviour and justice while influencing audience perceptions (Zeppa, 2014). Moreover, journalistic crime reporting often relies on state and law enforcement sources, which can introduce biases that align with institutional agendas, further distorting the public's understanding of crime dynamics (Hosford et al., 2021).

### — Marginalisation of victims and gender bias

Media narratives frequently marginalise the experiences of victims, focusing instead on the perpetrator's story. This trend minimises the impact of crime on individuals and communities (Reiner et al., 1997; Zeppa, 2014). Gender representation remains problematic, as crime media perpetuates traditional roles by underrepresenting women's perspectives, both as offenders and as victims, while overlooking the unique dynamics of gendered violence (Hosford et al., 2021; Rich, 2020; Welsh et al., 2011).

While influential, the representation of crime in the media is fraught with significant limitations. By oversimplifying narratives, perpetuating stereotypes and neglecting systemic causes, these portrayals contribute to misinformed public perceptions and policymaking. Addressing these concerns requires more nuanced, inclusive and evidence-based approaches to crime storytelling that prioritise accuracy and social responsibility. Media portrayals can also influence perceptions of law enforcement and policy discussions around crime prevention, along with raising ethical implications by potentially glamourising criminal behaviour. Despite potential pitfalls, media remains a powerful catalyst for public discourse around organised crime, increasing awareness and amplifying marginalised voices. By bringing complex issues to the forefront, series like *Ozark* encourage audiences to engage with topics they might otherwise overlook. This engagement can lead to increased awareness of the systemic issues contributing to crime, fostering a more informed and proactive citizenry.

Moreover, media can amplify marginalised voices and perspectives, shedding light on the lived experiences of those affected by organised crime. By presenting diverse narratives, creators can challenge dominant stereotypes and promote a more holistic understanding of crime and justice.

Media portrayals of organised crime, such as those in *Ozark*, play a dual role as both mirrors of reality and shapers of public perception. While they provide valuable insights into the dynamics of criminal recruitment, they also risk reinforcing stereotypes and glamourising illegal activities. By critically analysing these portrayals, audiences and policymakers can extract meaningful lessons while remaining vigilant against the potential distortions inherent in dramatisation. Through responsible representation and media literacy initiatives, the power of media can be harnessed to foster a deeper understanding of organised crime and its societal implications.

Bridging the gap between media studies and criminology requires analysing how narratives like *Ozark* shape public understanding of organised crime (Gomes et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2024; Marsh et al., 2019; Surete, 2015). By examining the specific techniques used to depict organised crime in *Ozark*, we can uncover how media narratives shape public discourse and influence real-world behaviours (Dowler et al., 2006).

### Psychological and sociological approaches: factors and roles

Understanding the psychological and sociological factors that underpin vulnerability to organised crime recruitment is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies. Theories such as RCT, SLT, ST and DAPI provide a framework for analysing the decision-making processes and social influences that draw individuals into criminal networks (Akers, 1973; Merton, 1938; Sutherland et al., 1978).

Individuals who have been victims of inequality or who come from economically vulnerable backgrounds are more susceptible to criminal involvement as they often perceive illegal activities as a necessary survival strategy

(Adamse et al., 2024; Calderoni et al., 2021; Kleemans et al., 2008; Morgado, 2013), as previously mentioned. This dynamic aligns with ST (Merton, 1938), which emphasises the role of structural inequality in pushing individuals toward illegitimate means of achieving success. Intertwined, and in an elusive way, criminal organisations coercively manipulate ties and familial loyalty to secure compliance and loyalty (Dickie, 2024; Gambetta, 1993). This interplay of coercion and loyalty highlights the relational aspects of crime recruitment, emphasising the importance of trust and obligation in maintaining criminal networks.

Additionally, concepts like moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) and social capital offer insights into how individuals rationalise unethical actions and the role of social connections in facilitating or hindering criminal involvement.

Social isolation and alienation are additional sociological factors that influence criminal recruitment. Criminal networks target individuals who feel disconnected from mainstream society, offering them a sense of belonging and purpose. This mirrors real-world recruitment strategies that capitalise on individuals' need for connection and acceptance. By creating an alternative social structure, organised crime offers recruits a community that fills the void left by societal exclusion. This dynamic aligns with SLT (Akers, 1973), which emphasises the role of association and reinforcement in adopting deviant behaviours (Goode, 2022).

Threats and violence are used to instil fear. This is another psychological tool leveraged by criminal organisations, both as a method of coercion and as a means of control. Women are often recruited through familial ties or as extensions of male-dominated networks, reflecting broader patterns of gendered recruitment in organised crime. Exploring these dynamics offers critical insights into how gender roles shape the experiences and vulnerabilities of recruits.

Cultural norms play a significant role in shaping the recruitment process. In societies where corruption and crime are normalised, individuals may view participation in organised crime as a pragmatic choice rather than a moral failure. Understanding the cultural contexts that facilitate recruitment can inform culturally sensitive interventions and policies.

The interplay of these psychological and sociological factors creates a potent environment for recruitment into organised crime. Economic pressures, social isolation and psychological vulnerabilities do not operate in isolation but reinforce each other. Addressing these overlapping factors requires a holistic approach that integrates psychological support with socioeconomic reform.

The contemporary nature of *Ozark* provides a unique opportunity to analyse how organised crime is rendered in the digital age, considering the specific characteristics of new media and its potential influence on recruitment.

#### Bridging research and policy

Bridging the gap between research and policy requires translating academic insights into actionable strategies for crime prevention and law enforcement. This involves drawing explicit connections between media illustration and developing targeted interventions to address the vulnerabilities and recruitment tactics depicted (Kleemans et al., 2008; van Koppen et al., 2022). Research on the effectiveness of various crime prevention strategies, such as early



intervention programmes, community-based initiatives and media literacy campaigns, can inform policy recommendations. Van Koppen et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of strengthening social ties and community resilience to counter the appeal of criminal networks. Additionally, examining the role of law enforcement in addressing the challenges posed by media portrayals of organised crime can lead to more effective training programmes and operational strategies. By integrating these perspectives, policymakers and practitioners can develop a multifaceted approach to counter the appeal and influence of organised crime, fostering a more informed and resilient society.

## Methodology

This study employed a sophisticated approach to content analysis, integrating a qualitative technique to provide a comprehensive examination of the TV series *Ozark*. The qualitative component drew upon thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006) and discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) to uncover the intricate ways in which the series renders the recruitment processes and decision-making dynamics within organised crime. The dialogue scripts were subjected to the systematic coding and identification of recurrent patterns. Subsequently, a quantitative analysis, drawing on the traditions of Krippendorff (2019) and Neuendorf (2017), provided a more nuanced understanding of the frequency and prevalence of specific themes and patterns.

The thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2023), served as a primary tool for identifying and interpreting recurring motifs within *Ozark*. This involved a systematic process of familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and naming themes and producing the final report. The analysis focused on identifying salient themes related to recruitment, such as socioeconomic vulnerability, exploitation, manipulation, moral disengagement and the normalisation of criminality. By meticulously coding and categorising these themes, the research sought to draw connections between the fictional representations in *Ozark* and real-world sociopolitical issues related to organised crime.

Complementing the content analysis, the examination of the power dynamics and ideology was performed using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis, as outlined by Gee (2014), was employed to delve into the intricate ways in which language, dialogue and storylines within *Ozark* construct social realities and reflect power dynamics. The analysis focused on how the series depicts the recruitment process, paying particular attention to the language used by recruiters to manipulate and coerce potential recruits. This involved examining the dialogue between characters, analysing how they rationalise their criminal behaviour and identifying the underlying power structures and ideological frameworks that shape these interactions.

## Corpus

The corpus for this investigation consisted of the complete first season of the TV series *Ozark*. This included all dialogue scripts and visual elements relevant to the characterisation of organised crime and recruitment dynamics. The selection of a specific season of a television series for academic analysis requires careful justification, particularly when aiming for publication in a high-impact journal. In the case of *Ozark*, focusing on the first season offers compelling advantages for an investigation into organised crime and recruitment dynamics. Firstly, it provides a pristine portrayal of the genesis of Marty Byrde's criminal enterprise, allowing for a detailed examination of his initial immersion into the *Ozark's* underworld. This includes analysing his early strategies for money laundering, his

navigating of nascent relationships with local criminals, and the initial moral compromises he undertakes. Studying these foundational elements offers valuable insights into the trajectory of his criminal development.

Secondly, the first season meticulously establishes the complex web of relationships between the Byrdes, established criminal organisations (the Snells), opportunistic newcomers (the Langmores) and law enforcement agencies. These initial interactions lay the groundwork for the subsequent evolution of alliances, betrayals and power struggles that fuel the narrative. Analysing these foundational dynamics within a contained time frame allows for a more focused understanding of power structures within the criminal milieu.

Furthermore, the inaugural season is crucial for delineating the core motivations driving each character. By concentrating on this early stage, the analysis can penetrate the unadulterated desires and anxieties that propel their actions before these motivations become obscured by subsequent events and moral compromises. This provides a clearer lens for examining the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to individual involvement in organised crime.

Finally, while *Ozark* maintains overarching themes of violence, corruption and moral ambiguity throughout its run, the first season exhibits a degree of narrative closure. Several key plotlines and character arcs reach a resolution within this time frame, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of specific themes without the risk of redundancy or the need to account for narrative developments in later seasons that might shift the analytical focus. This self-contained structure enhances the methodological rigor of the study.

In sum, the first season of *Ozark* serves as a microcosm of the series' broader exploration of criminal activity. It effectively encapsulates the core thematic concerns, establishes the foundational relationships and showcases the initial motivations driving the characters. This concentrated focus allows for a more manageable and in-depth analysis, contributing to a nuanced understanding of organised crime and recruitment dynamics within a clearly defined narrative framework.

### Data analysis

The data analysis process involved a multi-stage approach grounded in the principles outlined by Bardin (2018). First, the researchers conducted a thorough review of the corpus, familiarising themselves with the characters, storylines and overall narrative arc of the series. Next, they employed a combination of thematic and discourse analyses to identify and interpret recurring motifs and patterns related to recruitment and decision-making within organised crime. This involved systematically coding and categorising dialogue scripts and visual elements, following Bardin's (2018) guidance on formulating context units and registration units, to identify salient themes and analyse the use of language and its implications for power dynamics and ideology.

Throughout the research process, careful attention was paid to ethical considerations. The researchers maintained a critical distance from the fictional narrative, recognising the importance of distinguishing between the entertainment value of the series and its potential real-world implications. They avoided overinterpreting or decontextualising the data, ensuring that their analysis remained grounded in a nuanced understanding of the complexities of organised crime and its portrayal in media.



This study represents a significant contribution to the field of media studies and criminology. By employing a sophisticated mixed-methods approach to content analysis, the research provides a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the TV series *Ozark*. The integration of thematic analysis, discourse analysis and quantitative techniques ensures a high level of rigour and allows for a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of organised crime as rendered in the series. Furthermore, the study's focus on recruitment dynamics and decision-making processes within organised crime offers valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies and researchers seeking to understand and address this complex social phenomenon.

For the analysis, the following categories and subcategories were used. It is to be noted that the elements are grounded in the literature review, consolidated by authors such as Barlow et al. (2010), Morgado (2013), Morgado et al. (2022) and Weisburd et al. (2020), among others.

The analysis was guided by a structured coding framework grounded in the literature. The framework's primary categories were the following.

- **Category A: recruit characteristics.** Coding for attributes such as age, gender, education and prior criminal history to build a profile of recruits within the narrative (see Appendix 18.1).
- **Category B: decision-making process.** Identifying motivations for criminal involvement (timelines, biological determinants, valuing status, prestige, respect), with codes for 'cost-benefit analysis' (RCT), 'familial obligation' and 'pursuit of status' (see Appendix 18.2).
- **Category C: recruitment tactics.** Categorising the methods used by recruiters, including 'financial inducement', 'coercion and threats' and 'exploitation of skills' (see Appendix 18.3).
- **Category D: justification and rationalisation.** Capturing dialogue where characters justify their actions, aligning with 'techniques of neutralisation'. The spontaneous explanatory system and its subcategories are applied to the recruit and recruiter (see Appendix 18.4).

## Results and discussion

The analysis of *Ozark's* first season indicates that the series portrays organised crime recruitment as a process driven by three primary dynamics: the exploitation of socioeconomic vulnerability, the manipulation of familial and social ties and the gradual normalisation of criminality through rationalisation. The context is depicted through the characters' dilemmas, showing how economic pressures are weaponised by criminal organisations, leading to coercion, emotional manipulation and promises of security as core strategies. The series blurs the moral lines, offering insights into how individuals rationalise involvement in crime over time.

Preliminary analyses suggest that *Ozark* effectively encapsulates the complex interplay between socioeconomic vulnerabilities and recruitment strategies. Most of the characters are male, with the most common age range being 16–19 years old. Educational backgrounds and job statuses are diverse, with 'no formal education', 'high school student' and 'no steady job' being the most frequent employment statuses.

In this sense, the results are presented considering some basic elements, such as (i) recruitment dynamics: pathways to criminality; (ii) decision-making in organised crime: a complex interplay; (iii) recurrent patterns: unveiling the dynamics of organised crime; and (iv) implications for policy and law enforcement.

#### Recruitment dynamics: pathways to criminality

This study identified key factors contributing to the recruitment of individuals into organised crime. From the scripts we can unveil that the characters exhibit a range of criminal experiences, with 42.86 % involved in theft and petty crimes, 28.57 % engaged in broader illegal activities, and 14.29 % having either criminal records or no prior offences. The recruitment process is influenced by factors such as age, economic circumstances and family ties. For instance, Marty's financial expertise is central to his recruitment, while the recruitment of the youngest is precipitated by exposure to criminogenic factors within the familial unit and the potential value they offer in specific tasks. Recruitment methods vary depending on the presence of a family criminal network, ranging from gradual integration to direct recruitment based on specific skills or vulnerabilities. For instance, Wyatt Langmore's recruitment into criminal activities is often informal and opportunistic, primarily through his family. As noted in the opening monologue:

*Marty Byrde (voiceover): Deciding to miss the ball game, the play, the concert, because you've resolved to work and invest in your family's future. (Episode 1, 00:01:56)*

This opening voiceover immediately establishes the 'appeal to higher loyalties' as a primary technique of neutralisation. By framing sacrifice for family as the ultimate virtue, the narrative provides Marty with a powerful justification for the criminal actions he undertakes in the name of 'investing in his family's future'.

Meanwhile, Boyd Langmore is deeply embedded in the Langmore family's criminal network, and his recruitment is an ongoing process within that existing structure, as he evidenced by his own testimony:

*Boyd Langmore: Well ... How long we gotta feel bad about what we did? (Episode 3, 00:06:36)*

*Russ Langmore: Don't start with that again... There's gotta be a statute of limitations about this shit. (Episode 3, 00:06:42)*

*Boyd Langmore: You're damn right there does. (Episode 3, 00:06:50)*

Boyd's casual question while preparing an instrument of torture demonstrates the complete normalisation of extreme violence within the Langmore family. For other family members present, this is a clear example of observational learning, where deviant methods are taught and reinforced as routine problem-solving.

Consistent with ST (Agnew, 1992; Merton, 1938), many characters, particularly the Langmore family, are driven to criminal activity due to economic hardship and limited legitimate opportunities. This vulnerability is explicitly exploited by criminal organisations, who offer financial incentives and a sense of belonging to those marginalised by society. The series effectively illustrates how economic pressures are weaponised to lure individuals into criminal networks, namely by Boyd Langmore:

*Boyd Langmore: Guy who runs a drug cartel's a smart man... He wouldn't trust damn near \$3 million to someone like you. (Episode 2, 00:31:01)*

Here, Boyd Langmore weaponises Russ Langmore's perceived low social status and financial desperation. This dialogue illustrates that manipulation based on 'strain' is not unique to criminals; law enforcement is shown using the exact same psychological tactics to 'recruit' an informant.

*Marty Byrde: But what is money?... It's everything if you don't have it, right? (Episode 1, 00:00:40)*

*Wendy Byrde: Sometimes we don't think we're gonna like something, but then you try it, and then suddenly you realize that you're having fun. Think about your trampoline. (Episode 1, 00:07:35)*

Marty's first question explicitly frames his world view through the lens of ST; money is not about greed, but about the absence of 'strain'. Wendy follows the logic by using the 'trampoline' analogy, a manipulative tactic that reframes a high-stakes, illicit financial decision as a low-stakes, exciting consumer purchase, thereby minimising the perceived risk for the potential recruit.

Furthermore, the series highlights the powerful role of family ties and loyalty in the recruitment process. In this season of *Ozark*, the Byrde family recruits Ruth Langmore to aid in their operations, but they face significant opposition from a rival family, the Snells. Characters like Wyatt and Three Langmore are drawn into criminal activity due to their family environment, supporting the notion of intergenerational crime and the role of SLT (Bandura, 1977; Sutherland et al., 1978). This underscores the importance of addressing familial patterns of criminality to disrupt the cycle of recruitment.

*Charlotte Byrde: Wyatt, is it? ... I really don't want to have to get you fired today, okay? (Episode 2, 00:11:21)*

This polite threat is a clear act of coercion. Charlotte leverages Wyatt's economic vulnerability (his job) to gain control over him and his family, demonstrating her own rapid adaptation to the coercive methods required by the criminal enterprise.

*Charlotte Byrde: This isn't your boat, is it? The house? College? Any of it? (Episode 2, 00:21:18)*

Charlotte's dialogue signifies a rupture in the normalisation process. Her questioning directly confronts the 'techniques of neutralisation' her parents are using, highlighting the internal family strain that emerges when criminal activity is introduced to a previously non-deviant social group.

*Ruth Langmore: Who knows how much pain and misery he's caused?*

*Russ Langmore: Would cause ...*

*Ruth Langmore: Would cause ... To kids, even. (Episode 2, 00:32:09)*

This serves as a textbook example of the denial victim technique (Sykes et al., 1957). Ruth Langmore recasts Marty as someone whose potential for causing pain and misery justifies his exploitation, allowing her and her family to morally disengage from the reality of criminal intent.

The pursuit of power, status and respect within the criminal underworld emerges as a significant motivator for characters like Ruth Langmore. This aligns with differential association theory (Sutherland et al., 1978), which emphasises the role of social groups and peer influence in shaping individual behaviour. The series depicts how criminal organisations offer a sense of identity and purpose to those seeking recognition and control.

Finally, characters frequently rationalise and justify their criminal involvement as a means of survival, protection or providing for their families. This finding supports the concept of techniques of neutralisation (Sykes et al., 1957), where individuals engage in crime while maintaining a positive self-image. *Ozark* effectively illustrates how the lines between right and wrong become blurred as characters gradually normalise their criminal behaviour.

#### Decision-making in organised crime: a complex interplay

The analysis further explored the decision-making processes of individuals involved in organised crime, revealing a complex interplay of factors. Marty Byrde, the central character, consistently demonstrates a calculated approach to risk-taking, weighing potential gains against potential losses.

*Marty Byrde: Or do you want to just role-play it? ... Okay, I'm Detective Whoever The Fuck, and you're the wife of the top money launderer for the second largest drug cartel in Mexico. Go. (Episode 1, 00:30:36)*

This quote is a direct illustration of RCT in action. Marty is not acting impulsively; he is identifying a significant 'cost' (getting caught) and attempting to mitigate that risk through preparation, demonstrating a calculated, cost-benefit approach to his criminality. However real-world security operations increasingly recognise the limited rationality of human decisions under pressure, advocating for AI-driven platforms like Marple to provide sound intelligence and decision support tools to mitigate human error (Felgueiras et al., 2026; Morgado et al., 2026).

*Ruth Langmore: Watch me... What the ...? ...*

*Russ Langmore: Now, Ruth, we were all involved. (Episode 3, 00:04:58)*

*Marty Byrde: Money Laundering 101. (...) The dirty money is too clean. (...) (Episode 4, 00:04:56)*

Instead of challenging Ruth's threat, Russ's response, 'we were all involved', is a manipulative tactic to create shared culpability. By reminding her of their mutual entanglement, he binds her to him, making betrayal riskier for her – a clear form of social control. Moreover, as Marty Byrde is framing the criminal process as a pedagogical exercise for Jonah Byrde, he is able to neutralise moral inhibitions, providing the necessary justification for deviant behaviour and facilitating his formal integration into the criminal business.

This aligns with RCT (Cornish et al., 1986), which suggests that offenders make deliberate choices based on a cost-benefit analysis. The series portrays the strategic decision-making involved in navigating the complexities of organised crime. Marty also frequently engages in moral disengagement to justify his actions, particularly when

they involve harm to others. This resonates with Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement, which explains how individuals can detach themselves from moral standards to justify harmful behaviour. *Ozark* provides a compelling illustration of the psychological mechanisms that allow individuals to compartmentalise their criminal activities.

*Marty Byrde: They're not her friends... She didn't know that this boat was stolen... She thought a teenager running a leaf blower at a prom night motel lived in a \$5 million home? (Episode 2, 00:22:25)*

Marty's sarcasm is a form of moral disengagement. By highlighting the obviousness of their criminal lifestyle, she dismisses her daughter's concerns as naive, thereby rationalising the family's exposure to danger and normalising their association with the Langmores.

Furthermore, Marty displays remarkable adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity, consistently adjusting his strategies to navigate the challenges of the criminal world. This adaptability is crucial for survival and success in the unpredictable environment of organised crime. The series showcases the resourcefulness and strategic thinking required to thrive in a criminal underworld.

*Wyatt Langmore: Manager wanted me to make sure you still had one of these in your room.*

*Wendy Byrde: Yeah, we're all set.*

*Charlotte Byrde: Sure? (Episode 2, 00:11:21)*

*Ruth Langmore: You gotta be kidding me ...*

*Marty Byrde: If I was kidding, I would've said you're witty and handsome. (Episode 3, 00:04:50)*

Finally, Marty exhibits a pattern of manipulating and exploiting others to achieve his goals, using charm, persuasion and intimidation to maintain control. This manipulative behaviour is central to his recruitment strategies and his ability to manage his criminal enterprise. The series shows the coercive tactics and emotional manipulation employed by organised crime to recruit and control individuals, expressed by the characters.

*Marty Byrde: Deposit this [...] just do it*

*Ruth Langmore: Okay. Good.*

*Marty Byrde: You, Ruth Langmore, just committed an overt act ... See this camera? It sees you. And it saw you just make that deposit. Now if I'm ever arrested [...] so do you. (Episode 3, 00:12:51)*

This backhanded compliment is a key example of Marty's manipulative leadership style. He simultaneously asserts his dominance and keeps Ruth off balance. This psychological control is central to how he 'recruits' and retains her, building a complex relationship that is part mentorship, part-coercion.

#### Recurrent patterns: unveiling the dynamics of organised crime

Beyond individual motivations and decision-making, this study identified recurrent patterns that illuminate the dynamics of organised crime. The recruitment process is often informal and opportunistic, relying on existing social

connections and trust. In fact, the primary recruitment locale is the workplace, while family circumstances and interactions are the second main reason for recruitment instances.

*Marty Byrde (voiceover): But what is money? It's everything if you don't have it, right? (Episode 1, 00:00:40)*

*Money as a measuring device (Episode 1, 00:01:31)*

By framing money as a 'score' – language associated with games and sports – the narration immediately trivialises and normalises the criminal pursuit of it. This rationalisation detaches the money from its violent source and reframes it as a simple measure of success.

*Marty Byrde: I mean, I guess I get it. You're scared. (Episode 3, 00:00:23)*

This statement is not an expression of empathy but a tactical manoeuvre. Marty identifies Ruth's vulnerability (fear) and acknowledges it, positioning himself as an understanding figure. This builds a form of dependency that he leverages to secure her loyalty and recruit her more deeply into his operations.

*Marty Byrde: A family is like a small business. (Episode 2, 00:00:45)*

This quote is perhaps Marty's core rationalisation. By equating 'family' with a 'business,' he reframes his criminal actions as pragmatic, amoral 'managerial' decisions. This serves as an 'appeal to higher loyalty,' justifying any illicit act as necessary for the 'business' (his family) to survive.

This finding is consistent with research on recruitment to organised crime, which highlights the role of social networks (Calderoni et al., 2021; Morselli, 2009; Weisburd et al., 2020). The series demonstrates how criminal organisations leverage existing relationships to expand their networks.

Young characters like Wyatt Langmore and Charlotte Byrde are susceptible to exploitation due to their limited opportunities and desire for acceptance. This aligns with research on the involvement of young people in crime, which emphasises the role of social and economic marginalisation (Argueta et al., 2020; Bernburg, 2009; Klein, 1986; Mowen et al., 2023; Tannenbaum, 1938; Tannenbaum et al., 2021). *Ozark* illustrates the specific vulnerabilities that make young people attractive targets for recruitment into organised crime.

*Marty Byrde: Del just has a few questions. He's...*

*Bruce Liddell: Yeah? What's going on? ...*

*Marty Byrde: Hey, Del. Didn't know you were coming in town. (Episode 1, 00:17:05)*

*Business owner: Am I speaking Greek? ...*

*Marty Byrde: I don't like to give extraneous details. There's is a safe. And I need the contents. (Episode 3, 00:13:30)*

*Wyatt Langmore: So, you're, um ... you're still promising to buy us suits for the funeral? ...*

*Marty Byrde: Yeah ...*

*Wyatt Langmore: Okay, then. (Episode 1, 00:30:36)*



This exchange perfectly captures the exploitation of youth vulnerability. Wyatt, in a moment of grief and need, is forced into a transactional relationship with Marty. Marty, by becoming a provider (of funeral suits), creates a social debt and a bond that further entangles the young, vulnerable Langmores in his criminal world.

Moreover, characters experience shifting loyalties as they navigate the complexities of the criminal world, highlighting the dynamic nature of relationships and power structures within organised crime (Topalli, 2005; van Gelder et al., 2013; Weisburd et al., 2020). The series depicts the shifting alliances and betrayals that characterise the internal dynamics of criminal organisations.

*Marty Byrde: Or do you want to just role-play it? ... Okay, I'm Detective Whoever The Fuck, and you're the wife of the top money launderer for the second largest drug cartel in Mexico. Go. (Episode 1, 00:30:38)*

Finally, Marty's criminal involvement escalates throughout the series, demonstrating the slippery slope often associated with criminal careers. This progression underscores the gradual desensitisation and increasing entanglement in criminal activities that can occur over time. *Ozark* provides a compelling case study of how individuals can become increasingly entrenched in a criminal lifestyle.

*Ruth Langmore: I guess you're right. Stripping isn't for everyone. (Episode 4, 00:19:17)*

The study of media narratives like *Ozark* offers valuable insights for crafting effective law enforcement and crime prevention strategies. Addressing socioeconomic disparities and vulnerabilities before they lead to criminal involvement is crucial. By providing educational opportunities, job training and social support programmes, communities can reduce the susceptibility of individuals to recruitment by criminal organisations.

Strengthening social ties and community resilience can help counteract the appeal of criminal networks. Fostering a sense of belonging and providing positive alternatives can reduce the influence of criminal organisations within communities.

Educating audiences, particularly young people, to critically engage with fictional portrayals of crime can help reduce the undue influence of media on public perception. By promoting media literacy, individuals can better understand the complexities of crime and make informed choices.

#### Discussion: *Ozark's* recruitment process analysis

The series *Ozark* provides a compelling case study for examining the intricate dynamics of recruitment into organised crime. As our analysis has shown, characters are drawn into Marty Byrde's money-laundering operation through a complex interplay of factors, including coercion, economic vulnerability, ambition and the manipulation of familial bonds.

Marty, with his financial expertise, becomes a tool for the cartel, highlighting how specialised skills can be exploited within criminal networks, echoing the assertion by Morgado et al. (2022) that fictional portrayals of crime offer valuable data. Wendy's trajectory showcases the fluid nature of recruitment, where initial coercion, driven by a need

to protect her family, can evolve into a quest for power and autonomy. This aligns with Morgado's (2013) framework, which emphasises the role of economic factors in shaping criminal behaviour. The Byrde children, Charlotte and Jonah, illustrate the vulnerability of youth within families entangled in criminal activity. Jonah's curiosity and adaptability lead him to an active role, while Charlotte grapples with a sense of entrapment. Ruth Langmore's story exemplifies the allure of upward mobility and the compromises individuals make in pursuit of it, reflecting the findings by Kleemans et al. (2008) on financial instability and susceptibility to recruitment. Rachel, the owner of the Blue Cat Lodge, demonstrates how economic hardship can create susceptibility to criminal offers, underscoring the insights of Agnew's (1992) GST.

The Snells, including Jacob and Darlene, represent a different dynamic: strategic alliances formed between established criminal actors. Their partnership with Marty highlights that recruitment is not always predicated on vulnerability. Meanwhile, Buddy Dieker's unique motivations highlight how recruitment can intersect with personal desires for meaning and purpose. Finally, Pastor Mason Young's tragic downfall underscores the corrosive effects of economic pressure and moral compromise.

These fictional narratives resonate with real-world observations. *Ozark* reinforces the importance of social cohesion and community resilience in crime prevention, echoing the findings of van Koppen et al. (2010) and the principles of social disorganisation theory (Shaw et al., 1942), a concept further explored by Morgado et al. (2023).

*Ozark* also serves as a cautionary tale about the influence of media on perceptions of crime, aligning with the concerns raised by Gomes et al. (2022), Hu et al. (2024), Marsh et al. (2019) and Surete (2015). This underscores the need for media literacy to foster critical engagement with such narratives, echoing Morgado's (2022) analysis of improving police communication with the media.

The series offers valuable insights for policymakers and law enforcement. It highlights the need for targeted interventions to address socioeconomic disparities and support at-risk populations, as proposed by Morgado et al. (2021). Strengthening community bonds and providing positive alternatives are also crucial.

For law enforcement agencies, *Ozark* underscores the importance of early intervention and multi-agency collaboration, mirroring the recommendations by Morgado et al. (2019). The series can even serve as a training tool to enhance officers' understanding of the complex factors driving organised crime, fostering empathy and improving community policing efforts, as suggested by Moura et al. (2022).

Finally, the transnational nature of the cartel's operations in *Ozark* emphasises the need for international cooperation in combating organised crime, supporting the arguments by Allum et al. (2012), Buckley et al. (2024) and Shelley (2018a; 2018b) for collaborative efforts between nations. This includes information sharing, joint operations and harmonised legal frameworks, reflecting the interorganisational approach discussed by Felgueiras et al. (2019) and Machado et al. (2021), and the development of technological tools for tackling organised crime and terrorism (Morgado et al., 2024a; Morgado et al., 2024b).

In conclusion, *Ozark* provides a compelling lens through which to analyse the complexities of organised crime recruitment. By integrating these fictional narratives into existing research, we can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and inform more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

## Conclusion

By meticulously dissecting the intricate tapestry of *Ozark*, this research illustrates the recruitment dynamics and decision-making processes inherent to organised crime. The findings illuminate the potent interplay of socioeconomic vulnerabilities, familial influences and the allure of power and status in shaping individual pathways to criminality. Moreover, the study elucidates the narrative's use of calculated risk-taking, moral disengagement and manipulative tactics employed by individuals entrenched in organised crime.

While an analysis of a fictional narrative cannot be used to directly formulate law enforcement policy, its implications are valuable within specific educational and training contexts. The practical value of this study, therefore, lies in its potential as a pedagogical tool. For instance, law enforcement or criminology training modules could utilise key scenes from *Ozark* as case studies to stimulate discussion on (i) identifying community vulnerabilities, such as how the depiction of the Langmore family illustrates the real-world socioeconomic indicators – such as poverty and a lack of legitimate opportunities – that academic research links to recruitment risk; (ii) understanding offender rationalisation, through analysing the 'techniques of neutralisation' in the Byrdes' dialogue to help trainees recognise how offenders justify their actions to themselves and others; (iii) the dynamics of coercion, through examining how Marty Byrde blends financial inducement with subtle threats to control recruits like Ruth, providing a clear illustration of complex manipulation tactics.

This study underscores the value of using popular culture as a critical lens through which to discuss complex social phenomena. By integrating insights from media studies and sociology and criminology, this analysis demonstrates how *Ozark's* narrative reflects established criminological theories. Ultimately, its contribution is not a direct blueprint for policy, but a illustrative resource that can foster a more nuanced and critical understanding of organised crime dynamics for students, trainees and the public.

The implications of this research extend beyond the realm of academia, offering potential discussion points for policymakers and law enforcement agencies. By recognising the socioeconomic underpinnings of criminal recruitment, targeted interventions can be developed to mitigate the allure of illicit opportunities. Strengthening community resilience by fostering social support networks and providing positive alternatives can further diminish the influence of criminal organisations. Additionally, promoting media literacy empowers individuals to critically engage with fictional portrayals of crime, thereby mitigating the undue influence of media on public perception.

## Acknowledgments

This research is supported by Portuguese national funds, administered by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), Public Institute, under grant agreement, <https://doi.org/10.54499/UID/04915/2025>.

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### Appendix 18.1. Subcategories of Category A – Recruit

| Subcategory                            | Description                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | Information describing the characteristics of the recruit.                                                    |
| A.1. Age                               | Information on the age of the recruit (e.g. young people).                                                    |
| A.2. Gender                            | Information on the gender of the recruits.                                                                    |
| A.3. Ethnicity                         | Information on the influence of ethnic factors (e.g. ethnic homogeneity).                                     |
| A.4. Level of education/<br>experience | Information on the level of education and experience of those recruited (e.g. illiteracy).                    |
| A.5. Employment                        | Information on factors such as the recruit's job or profession (e.g. employees of logistics companies).       |
| A.6. Economic conditions               | Information on the recruit's economic situation (e.g. poverty).                                               |
| A.7. Social ties                       | Information about the recruit's social relationships (e.g. family connection or groups to which they belong). |
| A.8. Group affiliation                 | Information on the values and culture shared by the recruit and the groups to which they belong.              |
| A.9. Psychological factors             | Information about the recruit's psychological characteristics (e.g. being antisocial).                        |
| A.10. Criminal record                  | Information about the recruit's criminal record (e.g. risky behaviour).                                       |
| A.11. Code of silence                  | Information about the recruit's ability to comply with the code of silence.                                   |
| A.12. Addictions                       | Information about the recruit's addictions (e.g. drugs, sex, gambling).                                       |

**Appendix 18.2.** Subcategories of Category B – Decision-making process

| Subcategory                                                             | Description                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| B.1. Timelines                                                          | Description of the role that opportunities play in the recruitment process (i.e. considering that the opportunity is the recruit's perception of gaining an advantage). |
| B.2. Biological determinants                                            | Information on the hereditary aspects that influence the recruitment process.                                                                                           |
| B.3. Cultural transmission                                              | Information on the learning and acculturation processes that influence recruitment process.                                                                             |
| B.4. Feeling of failure and frustration associated with traumatic event | Information on the influence or facilitation that feelings of failure and/or frustration and the presence of a traumatic event have on recruitment.                     |
| B.5. Valuing status, prestige and respect                               | Information on the perception that status, prestige and respect have on the individual's recruitment process.                                                           |
| B.6. Profit, power and influence                                        | Information on the importance of profit, power and influence on the individual's recruitment process.                                                                   |
| B.7. Exclusion of young people from the labour market                   | Information on the influence that the lack of opportunities associated with the exclusion of young people from the labour market has on the recruitment process.        |
| B.8. Gender inequality                                                  | Information on the role that inequality plays in the recruitment process.                                                                                               |

**Appendix 18.3.** Subcategories of Category C – Recruitment

| Subcategory                      | Description                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| C.1. Organisation                | Information on the organisation promoting the recruitment (e.g. centralised or decentralised). |
| C.1.a. Centralised recruitment   |                                                                                                |
| C.1.b. Decentralised recruitment |                                                                                                |
| C.2. Place of occurrence         | Information on the location of the recruitment process.                                        |
| C.2.a. Public place              |                                                                                                |
| C.2.b. Private place             |                                                                                                |
| C.3. Type of recruitment         | Information on the type of recruitment (e.g. individual or block).                             |
| C.3.a. Individual                |                                                                                                |
| C.3.b. In block                  |                                                                                                |
| C.4. Modus operandi              | Information on the recruitment strategy used by criminal organisation.                         |
| C.5. Role in the organisation    | Information on the role played in the organisation by the recruit.                             |
| C.6. Time of recruitment         | Information on the time of recruitment.                                                        |
| C.7. Allied systems              | Information on the organisations collaborating with the recruiting organisation.               |

**Appendix 18.4.** Subcategories of category D – Spontaneous explanatory system

| Subcategory    | Description                                                                                     |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| D.1. Recruit   | Information explaining the recruit's decision to join the organisation.                         |
| D.2. Recruiter | Information explaining the actions of the organisation's recruiters in the recruitment process. |