

Primer



Aggravating and Mitigating Role Adjustments



Prepared by the
Office of the General Counsel

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I. INTRODUCTION

This primer provides a general overview of §§3B1.1 (Aggravating Role) and 3B1.2 (Mitigating Role), which set forth offense level adjustments based on a defendant's role in the offense. Although the primer identifies some of the key cases and concepts related to these guidelines, it is not a comprehensive compilation of authority nor intended to be a substitute for independent research and analysis of primary sources.

II. AGGRAVATING ROLE: §3B1.1

Section 3B1.1 provides for 2-, 3-, and 4-level increases to the offense level if the defendant had an aggravating role in the offense, as follows:

- (a) If the defendant was an organizer or leader of a criminal activity that involved five or more participants or was otherwise extensive, increase by 4 levels.
- (b) If the defendant was a manager or supervisor (but not an organizer or leader) and the criminal activity involved five or more participants or was otherwise extensive, increase by 3 levels.
- (c) If the defendant was an organizer, leader, manager, or supervisor in any criminal activity other than described in (a) or (b), increase by 2 levels.¹

Applying these adjustments turns, first, on the size and scope of the criminal activity (“five or more participants or was otherwise extensive”), and, second, on the defendant's particular role in that activity (defendant was an “organizer or leader” or a “manager or supervisor”).² In addition, if the defendant exercised management responsibility over property, assets, or activities in the criminal activity, instead of over one or more other participants, an upward departure may be warranted.³

¹ U.S. SENT'G COMM'N, GUIDELINES MANUAL §3B1.1 (Nov. 2023) [hereinafter USSG].

² *Id.*; see USSG §3B1.1, comment. (backg'd.).

³ See USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.2). Although the commentary indicates that a *departure* may be warranted in such circumstances, the Fifth Circuit has held that an adjustment under §3B1.1 is warranted where the defendant exercised management only over the property, assets, or activities of a criminal organization. See *United States v. Aderinoye*, 33 F.4th 751, 756 (5th Cir. 2022) (“Our precedent does not limit the enhancement to defendants who controlled other participants in the scheme; it is enough that the defendant managed the criminal enterprise's property, assets, or activities.”); *United States v. Ochoa-Gomez*, 777 F.3d 278, 282–83 (5th Cir. 2015) (per curiam) (citing *United States v. Delgado*, 672 F.3d 320, 345 (5th Cir. 2012) (en banc)); *But see Ochoa-Gomez*, 777 F.3d at 284–86 (Prado, J., concurring) (“Given that our precedent appears to conflict with the plain language of Application Note 2, *sub silentio* overruled [prior caselaw], and places this circuit at odds with several other circuits, the issue merits *en banc* review.”); *United States v. Warren*, 986 F.3d 557, 569 & n.44 (5th Cir. 2021) (“Though we believe [prior] cases incorrectly applied the Guidelines, we are bound by them under our court's rule of orderliness.” (footnote omitted)).

The government bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the defendant should receive an aggravating role adjustment.⁴ Upon finding that the government has met its burden of proof, the district court must apply the appropriate adjustment.⁵ Because the determination of a defendant's role in an offense is a factual question, appellate courts review it for clear error.⁶ "[A]bsent a mistake of law, battles over a defendant's status . . . will almost always be won or lost in the district court."⁷

A. SIZE AND SCOPE OF THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

To apply a 3- or 4-level adjustment pursuant to §3B1.1(a) or (b), the criminal activity must have involved "five or more participants" or have been "otherwise extensive."⁸ In the absence of such criminal activity, the defendant only may be subject to a 2-level increase pursuant to §3B1.1(c). Accordingly, in applying §3B1.1, the sentencing court must first determine the size and scope of the criminal activity.

⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. García-Sierra*, 994 F.3d 17, 37 (1st Cir. 2021) ("To properly impose the upward adjustment, the sentencing court must be satisfied that a preponderance of the evidence supports the government's claim" and the government bears the burden); *United States v. Lora-Andres*, 844 F.3d 781, 785 (8th Cir. 2016) (same)); *United States v. Mack*, 808 F.3d 1074, 1085 (6th Cir. 2015) (same); see also *United States v. Rodriguez*, 851 F.3d 931, 948 (9th Cir. 2017) (district court not required to submit to jury the issue of whether a defendant convicted of drug crimes was an organizer or leader before imposing an enhancement, where such adjustment did not affect the statutory maximum or mandatory minimum of defendant's sentence).

⁵ See, e.g., *United States v. Christian*, 804 F.3d 819, 822 (6th Cir. 2015) ("Once a sentencing court makes a factual finding as to the applicability of a particular adjustment provision, the court has no discretion, but must increase the offense level by the amount called for in the applicable provision." (quoting *United States v. Feinman*, 930 F.2d 495, 500 (6th Cir. 1991))); *United States v. Burgos*, 324 F.3d 88, 92 (2d Cir. 2003) ("Once this management or supervision is found, the adjustment is mandatory." (citing *United States v. Jimenez*, 68 F.3d 49, 51–52 (2nd Cir. 1995))).

⁶ *United States v. Gomez*, 905 F.3d 347, 351 (5th Cir. 2018) ("We review this factual determination [that the defendant was an organizer or leader] for clear error."); see also *United States v. Crabtree*, 878 F.3d 1274, 1290 (11th Cir. 2018) ("We review a district court's determination that a defendant is subject to a Section 3B1.1 role enhancement as an organizer or leader for clear error." (quoting *United States v. Martinez*, 584 F.3d 1022, 1025 (11th Cir. 2009))); *United States v. Wolf*, 860 F.3d 175, 196 (4th Cir. 2017) ("We review a district court's findings of fact related to the application of the Sentencing Guidelines for clear error, whether the findings involve the amount of loss[,] the number of victims[,] an aggravated role in the offense[,] or use of sophisticated means." (citations omitted)); *United States v. Collins*, 877 F.3d 362, 363 (7th Cir. 2017) ("We generally review a district court's determinations on the guidelines for aggravating and mitigating roles for clear error, . . . [unless the] court acted on the basis of a misunderstanding of the legal standard[.]" (citations omitted)); *Christian*, 804 F.3d at 822 ("We review a district court's factual findings for clear error, and defer to its legal conclusion that a defendant had a managerial role in criminal activity."). But see *United States v. Gasca-Ruiz*, 852 F.3d 1167, 1170 (9th Cir. 2017) (en banc) (emphasizing that district court's application of the guidelines to the facts is reviewed for abuse of discretion, although factual findings are reviewed for clear error).

⁷ *United States v. Arias-Mercedes*, 901 F.3d 1, 5 (1st Cir. 2018) (alterations in original) (citation omitted).

⁸ USSG §3B1.1(a)–(b).

1. “Five or More Participants”

Application Note 1 to §3B1.1 defines a “participant” as “a person who is criminally responsible for the commission of the offense, but need not have been convicted.”⁹ The defendant is counted as a participant under §3B1.1.¹⁰

The guideline specifically provides that undercover law enforcement officers are not participants because they are not criminally responsible for committing the offense.¹¹ Unlike undercover officers, however, an informant may be considered a “participant” for any period during which he or she was a member of the conspiracy, before working with the government.¹²

Courts “uniformly count as participants” those “who were (i) aware of the criminal objective, and (ii) knowingly offered their assistance.”¹³ Consistent with this principle, persons who are not co-conspirators can be “participants” if they aid the defendant with knowledge of the criminal activity. Accordingly, the definition of a “participant” is broader

⁹ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.1); *see also* United States v. Burris, 22 F.4th 781, 787 (8th Cir. 2022) (district court did not err in finding an acquitted co-defendant was a participant); United States v. Ford, 987 F.3d 1210, 1214 (8th Cir. 2021) (district court’s finding that defendant’s organization included more than five participants was supported by the record); United States v. Guzman, 926 F.3d 991, 1003 (8th Cir. 2019) (“[A]n individual need not be guilty of the precise offense of conviction—or even charged—to be found ‘criminally responsible’ under §3B1.1.” (citations omitted)); United States v. Fluker, 698 F.3d 988, 1002 (7th Cir. 2012) (“We have explained that this means a participant ‘could have been charged,’ even if only as an accessory; but ‘mere knowledge of a conspiracy’ is insufficient to establish that a person was ‘criminally responsible.’ ” (citation and emphasis omitted)).

¹⁰ *See* United States v. Walter-Eze, 869 F.3d 891, 914 (9th Cir. 2017) (defendant “may be included among the participants in the criminal activity for purposes of section 3B1.1(a)” (citations omitted)); United States v. Paccione, 202 F.3d 622, 625 (2d Cir. 2000) (per curiam) (holding, consistent with the “apparent consensus among our sister circuits,” that “a defendant may be included when determining whether there were five or more participants in the criminal activity in question”).

¹¹ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.1).

¹² *See* United States v. House, 872 F.3d 748, 752 (6th Cir. 2017) (“Although an informant cannot be held criminally responsible for his investigative work on behalf of the government[,] he can be held responsible for his involvement in the criminal activity before the informant started cooperating with the government[.]” (citations and emphasis omitted)); United States v. Lora-Andres, 844 F.3d 781, 786 n.3 (8th Cir. 2016) (informants counted as “participants” because they “were extensive participants . . . long before they began working with law enforcement”).

¹³ United States v. Anthony, 280 F.3d 694, 698 (6th Cir. 2002); *see also* United States v. Acevedo-López, 873 F.3d 330, 336–38 (1st Cir. 2017) (“To be considered a participant, it is only necessary that an individual gives knowing aid in some aspect of the criminal activity;” individual properly considered a participant when he “was promised a job, given money, and enjoyed outings paid for with money provided by [defendant] as part of the criminal activity” (citations omitted)); United States v. Starks, 815 F.3d 438, 441 (8th Cir. 2016) (“[I]ndividuals may be participants even if they do not benefit from commission of the offense.”); United States v. Vega, 826 F.3d 514, 539 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (per curiam) (“[A] party who gives *knowing aid in some part* of the criminal enterprise is a ‘criminally responsible party.’ ” (quoting United States v. Bapack, 129 F.3d 1320, 1325 (D.C. Cir. 1997))); United States v. Smith, 719 F.3d 1120, 1126 (9th Cir. 2013) (“Any person who knowingly abets the defendant’s conduct qualifies as a ‘participant.’ ”).

than the scope of conspiratorial liability. For example, in *United States v. Bennett*, the Eighth Circuit counted as a “participant” a person that was deceased at the time of the defendant’s appeal, because that person participated in the criminal activity.¹⁴ Additionally, some courts have concluded that a person who has received a grant of immunity is still properly counted as a “participant.”¹⁵

Conversely, an unwitting person is not a “participant,” even if the person assisted the criminal enterprise, because he or she ordinarily bears no criminal responsibility.¹⁶ For example, in *United States v. Anthony*, the Sixth Circuit held that the defendant’s attorney was not the necessary “fifth participant” in a scheme to make materially false statements to federal investigators, despite writing the key letter that conveyed his client’s false statements to authorities, because he apparently did not know the statements were false.¹⁷ Likewise, a person’s mere knowledge that criminal activity is afoot does not ordinarily make that person a “participant,” absent willful participation in the offense.¹⁸

In the drug conspiracy context, courts have held that end users of controlled substances, absent more, are not “participants.”¹⁹ Individuals who are more than mere end-user purchasers, such as a buyer who purchases drugs for further distribution or those who assist the transportation of drugs, are “participants” under §3B1.1.²⁰ Courts also have

¹⁴ 765 F.3d 887, 898 (8th Cir. 2014) (“[The co-defendant] participated in the scheme, and his subsequent death simply does not alter that fact. Nor does [his] death affect whether [the defendant’s] fraudulent scheme was ‘otherwise extensive’ when perpetrated . . .”).

¹⁵ See *United States v. Tavares*, 705 F.3d 4, 30 (1st Cir. 2013) (“In light of our sister circuit’s reasoning and the clear language of the [g]uideline, we also hold that a ‘participant’ can be an immunized witness against the defendant.” (citing *United States v. Anderson*, 580 F.3d 639, 650 n.16 (7th Cir. 2009); *United States v. Jackson*, 95 F.3d 500, 511 (7th Cir. 1996))).

¹⁶ See *United States v. Harvey*, 532 F.3d 326, 338 (4th Cir. 2008) (“‘Participants’ are persons involved in the criminal activity who are criminally responsible, not innocent bystanders used in the furtherance of the illegal activity.”).

¹⁷ 280 F.3d 694, 698–99 (6th Cir. 2002); see also *United States v. Vega*, 826 F.3d 514, 539 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (per curiam) (“An individual is ‘criminally responsible’ under §3B1.1 only if ‘he commit[s] all of the elements of a statutory crime with the requisite mens rea.’” (quoting *United States v. McCoy*, 242 F.3d 399, 410 (D.C. Cir. 2001))).

¹⁸ See *United States v. Zuno*, 731 F.3d 718, 723 (7th Cir. 2013) (“[M]ere knowledge of a conspiracy’ is insufficient to establish that a person was ‘criminally responsible.’” (quoting *United States v. Fluker*, 698 F.3d 988, 1002 (7th Cir. 2012))).

¹⁹ See *United States v. Egge*, 223 F.3d 1128, 1133–34 (9th Cir. 2000) (“Where the customers are solely end users of controlled substances, they do not qualify as participants . . . absent an intent to distribute or dispense the substance. In order to qualify as a participant, a customer must do more than simply purchase small quantities of a drug for his personal use.”); see also *United States v. Barrie*, 267 F.3d 220, 224 (3d Cir. 2001) (“Customers of drug dealers ordinarily cannot be counted as participants in a drug distribution conspiracy.”).

²⁰ See *United States v. Sykes*, 854 F.3d 457, 460 (8th Cir. 2017) (“An ongoing supplier relationship . . . is sufficient to support a finding that the supplier was a participant under §3B1.1.”); *United States v. Mack*, 808 F.3d 1074, 1085 (6th Cir. 2015) (affirming finding that individuals were participants in the conspiracy because they went “beyond just simply purchasing drugs” and instead sought to “protect [the defendant] as

held that persons who receive stolen property, but without knowledge that it was stolen or without any participation in the theft, are not “participants” supporting application of the aggravating role adjustment.²¹

When determining whether there are “five or more participants” in the criminal activity, the court may consider all participants—not only those who were subordinate to or supervised by the defendant. Indeed, courts have held that a defendant does not need to even know of all other participants.²²

2. “Otherwise Extensive”

Even if the criminal activity did not involve at least five participants, the defendant nonetheless may be subject to an adjustment pursuant to §3B1.1(a) and (b) if the criminal activity was “otherwise extensive.” This inquiry encompasses more than the number of “participants”; rather, “all persons involved during the course of the entire offense are to be considered.”²³

Circuits are split in how they evaluate whether activity was “otherwise extensive.” Several circuits follow a test first articulated by the Second Circuit in *United States v. Carrozzella*,²⁴ which requires that at least five persons were involved in the offense.²⁵ In making this determination, the sentencing court must consider “(i) the number of knowing participants; (ii) the number of unknowing participants whose activities were organized or

he operated his organization”); *cf.* *United States v. Minter*, 80 F.4th 753, 759 (6th Cir. 2023) (“[m]ost of our sister circuits have also held that an arm’s length seller-buyer relationship cannot lead to a managerial enhancement under §3B1.1,” which requires a finding of “at least some level of managerial control”).

²¹ See *United States v. Hussein*, 664 F.3d 155, 162 (7th Cir. 2011) (“[S]imply accepting fraud proceeds, stolen goods, or other contraband does not make recipients participants in the underlying scheme that produced the ill-gotten benefits when they are simply customers and not part of the operation.”).

²² See *United States v. Kirk Tang Yuk*, 885 F.3d 57, 83 (2d Cir. 2018) (“[T]he Guidelines require only that the conspiracy *actually involve* five or more participants, not that the organizer be aware of all participants.”); *United States v. Haywood*, 777 F.3d 430, 434 (7th Cir. 2015) (“[A] defendant can be an organizer or leader without knowing every participant.”).

²³ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.3); see also *United States v. Kent*, 821 F.3d 362, 370 n.8 (2d Cir. 2016) (citing Application Note 3 to reject as “unavailing” the defendant’s suggestion that there were fewer than four knowing participants “because they were not all working at the same time”); *United States v. Tuma*, 738 F.3d 681, 694 (5th Cir. 2013) (“[I]n deciding whether a scheme was otherwise extensive, the district court *must* take into account all persons involved during the course of the entire offense.” (quoting *United States v. Ho*, 311 F.3d 589, 611 (5th Cir. 2002))).

²⁴ 105 F.3d 796 (2d Cir. 1997), *abrogated in part on other grounds by* *United States v. Kennedy*, 233 F.3d 157, 160–61 (2d Cir. 2000).

²⁵ *Id.*; see also *Kent*, 821 F.3d at 369 (“As we also explained in *Carrozzella*, even though §3B1.1 adjustments are based primarily on the number of people involved . . . factors other than head counting ‘may be properly considered in the “otherwise extensive” determination.’ In doing so, however, a district court must ensure that it does not engage in impermissible double counting of offense level adjustments” (citations omitted)).

led by the defendant with specific criminal intent; [and] (iii) the extent to which the services of the unknowing participants were peculiar and necessary to the criminal scheme.”²⁶ The second and third factors, the court explained, “separate out” the “service providers who facilitate a particular defendant’s criminal activities but are not the functional equivalent of knowing participants” and the “[i]awful services that are not peculiarly tailored and necessary to a particular crime but are fungible with others generally available to the public,” respectively.²⁷

At least three other circuits, the Third, Sixth, and District of Columbia Circuits, have adopted the *Carrozzella* test.²⁸ Although the Fifth Circuit has not adopted the *Carrozzella* test verbatim, it has held that in determining if the offense is “otherwise extensive,” sentencing courts must “examine [the] number of persons involved in the activity, not the nature of the criminal organization.”²⁹

Other circuits consider the “totality of the circumstances,” looking to all the circumstances of the criminal activity, “including . . . the width, breadth, scope, complexity, and duration of the scheme.”³⁰ The number of persons involved, while not required to be five or more, is also relevant: “[i]n most instances, the greater the number of people involved in the criminal activity, the more extensive the activity is likely to be.”³¹ The First, Seventh,

²⁶ *Carrozzella*, 105 F.3d at 803–04.

²⁷ *Id.* at 804.

²⁸ See *United States v. Thung Van Huynh*, 884 F.3d 160, 171 (3d Cir. 2018) (describing a “three-step approach” to determining extensiveness: (1) “a sentencing court must distinguish the scheme’s ‘participants,’ as defined by the commentary to §3B1.1, from non-participants who were nevertheless involved”; (2) “the court must determine whether the defendant used each non-participant’s services ‘with specific criminal intent’”; and (3) “the court must determine the extent to which those services were ‘peculiar and necessary to the criminal scheme’” (quoting *United States v. Helbling*, 209 F.3d 226, 247–48 (3d Cir. 2000))); see also *United States v. Myers*, 854 F.3d 341, 358 (6th Cir. 2017) (“To determine whether a scheme is ‘extensive,’ we consider ‘whether the combination of knowing and countable non-participants is the functional equivalent of an activity carried out by five criminally responsible participants.’” (citation omitted)); *United States v. Wilson*, 240 F.3d 39, 47 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (adopting *Carrozzella* approach).

²⁹ *United States v. Ho*, 311 F.3d 589, 610 (5th Cir. 2002); see also *United States v. Tuma*, 738 F.3d 681, 694 (5th Cir. 2013) (“The district court properly focused on the number of people involved in the scheme . . .”).

³⁰ *United States v. Laboy*, 351 F.3d 578, 586 (1st Cir. 2003) (quoting *United States v. Dietz*, 950 F.2d 50, 53 (1st Cir. 1991)); see also *United States v. Harmelech*, 927 F.3d 990, 997–98 (7th Cir. 2019) (“A fraudulent scheme is ‘otherwise extensive’ if the defendant ‘made a substantial portion of his income’ from the fraud scheme, the scheme ‘continued in operation’ for an extended period, or the scheme ‘used many people,’ including unknowing individuals ‘to make profit off the scheme.’” (quoting *United States v. Sheikh*, 367 F.3d 683, 688–89 (7th Cir. 2004))).

³¹ *Dietz*, 950 F.2d at 53.

Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Circuits employ this approach.³² In unpublished opinions, the Fourth³³ and Eleventh Circuit have indicated that they also may look to the totality of the circumstances or a multi-factor analysis.³⁴

3. “Any Criminal Activity Other than Described in (a) or (b)”

To apply the 2-level adjustment in §3B1.1(c), the court must conclude that the defendant was involved in a “criminal activity,” and either that the activity did not involve “five or more participants” or that it was not “otherwise extensive.”³⁵ Subsection (c) is thus broader than the remainder of §3B1.1. Because §3B1.1(c) requires that the defendant act as an organizer, leader, manager, or supervisor of another participant, however, the court necessarily must find that the “criminal activity” involved at least two participants—the defendant and another person—before applying the 2-level adjustment.³⁶

The court may not apply §3B1.1(c) if it finds that the defendant held an aggravating role in a criminal activity that involved at least five participants or was “otherwise extensive.”³⁷ The mandatory language of §3B1.1 requires the sentencing court in such circumstances to apply either subsection (a) or (b), depending on whether the defendant acted as an “organizer or leader” or “manager or supervisor.”³⁸

³² United States v. Belfrey, 928 F.3d 746, 751–52 (8th Cir. 2019); United States v. Figueroa, 682 F.3d 694, 696 (7th Cir. 2012) (collecting cases); *Laboy*, 351 F.3d at 586; United States v. Yarnell, 129 F.3d 1127, 1139 (10th Cir. 1997); United States v. Rose, 20 F.3d 367, 374 (9th Cir. 1994) (“Whether criminal activity is ‘otherwise extensive’ depends on such factors as (i) the number of knowing participants and unwitting outsiders; (ii) the number of victims; and (iii) the amount of money fraudulently obtained or laundered[.]” (citations omitted)).

³³ United States v. Okomba, No. 20-4077, 20-4079, 2022 WL 1261997, at *9 (4th Cir. Apr. 28, 2022) (circuit considers all persons involved and “the totality of the circumstances, including not only the number of participants but also the width, breadth, scope, complexity, and duration of the scheme” (quoting United States v. Beverly, 284 F. App’x 36, 41–42 (4th Cir. 2008))).

³⁴ United States v. Zada, 706 F. App’x 500, 510–11 (11th Cir. 2017) (per curiam) (“While we have not expressly addressed the circuit split, [United States v. Holland, 22 F.3d 1040 (11th Cir. 1994)] suggests that this circuit uses a broader, totality-of-the-circumstances-based approach.”); *see also Holland*, 22 F.3d at 1046 (while the circuit does not employ a “precise definition for the ‘otherwise extensive’ standard,” a number of factors are relevant to the determination of extensiveness).

³⁵ USSG §3B1.1(c).

³⁶ *See* USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.2); United States v. Naranjo-Rosario, 871 F.3d 86, 98 (1st Cir. 2017) (court must find the “criminal activity involved at least two, but fewer than five, complicit individuals (the defendant included)” to apply §3B1.1(c) (quoting United States v. Al-Rikabi, 606 F.3d 11, 14 (1st Cir. 2010))); United States v. Tanner, 837 F.3d 596, 603 (6th Cir. 2016) (“The primary question . . . is whether the defendant exerted control over at least one individual within a criminal organization.”).

³⁷ USSG §3B1.1(a)–(b).

³⁸ *See* United States v. Raia, 993 F.3d 185, 191 (3d Cir. 2021) (plain error to apply §3B1.1(c) “despite the uncontested fact that the voter bribery scheme involved five or more participants”: “A trial court’s only options in cases involving a criminal activity with five or more participants are . . . a four-level enhancement under §3B1.1(a), a three-level enhancement under §3B1.1(b), or no enhancement at all” (quoting United States v. Kirkeby, 11 F.3d 777, 778–79 (8th Cir. 1993))); United States v. Ross, 210 F.3d

B. ROLE IN THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Application of §3B1.1 requires the court to determine whether the defendant was an organizer, leader, manager, or supervisor in the criminal activity.³⁹ “The determination of a defendant’s role in the offense is to be made on the basis of all conduct within the scope of §1B1.3 (Relevant Conduct)”⁴⁰ Thus, the court’s consideration is not limited to the defendant’s participation in the counts of conviction, but includes all relevant conduct attributable to the defendant under §1B1.3.⁴¹ The guidelines do not expressly define the terms related to the defendant’s role in the criminal activity, however, the Commentary to §3B1.1 provides guidance, and there is an expansive body of case law interpreting and applying them. For instance, the First Circuit has expressed that, in deciding whether a defendant is a supervisor, it is insufficient “to show that ‘the defendant merely controlled, organized or managed criminal *activities*; rather, he must instead control, organize, or manage criminal *actors*,’ ” and evidence of such “may be wholly circumstantial.”⁴²

Courts have observed that “the line between being an ‘organizer or leader,’ on the one hand, and a ‘manager or supervisor,’ on the other, is not always clear.”⁴³ Nonetheless, the difference between organizers and leaders, and managers and supervisors, turns on the defendant’s degree of responsibility in the criminal activity.⁴⁴ For that reason, “those who

916, 925 (8th Cir. 2000) (“In order to impose a two-level enhancement for role in the offense under § 3B1.1(c), the court must first determine that neither § 3B1.1(a) nor § 3B1.1(b) apply.”).

³⁹ USSG §3B1.1(b).

⁴⁰ USSG Ch.3, Pt.B, intro. comment.

⁴¹ The determination of the size and scope of the criminal activity also should be made on the basis of all the conduct within the scope of §1B1.3, and not solely on the specific acts and participants in the offense of conviction. For example, the First Circuit affirmed the district court’s conclusion that the criminal activity involved more than five persons. *United States v. Lucena-Rivera*, 750 F.3d 43, 50–51 (1st Cir. 2014) (“[The defendant] does not dispute that more than five individuals were involved in his drug-trafficking operation, but contends that there was no basis to conclude that those individuals were also involved in the money-laundering offense of conviction [T]he definition of relevant conduct [includes] ‘all acts and omissions . . . by the defendant . . . that occurred during the commission of the offense of conviction, *in preparation for that offense*, or in the course of attempting to avoid detection or responsibility for that offense’ ” (emphasis added) (quoting USSG §1B1.3(a)(1)(A))).

⁴² *United States v. Fígaro-Benjamín*, 100 F.4th 294, 306–07 (1st Cir. 2024) (quoting *United States v. McKinney*, 5 F.4th 104, 109 (1st Cir. 2021)) (§3B1.1 enhancement was appropriate when defendant in a drug smuggling conspiracy, among other evidence, served as captain of a boat transporting drugs and gave instructions to others).

⁴³ *United States v. Williams*, 605 F.3d 556, 571 (8th Cir. 2010) (quoting *United States v. Delpit*, 94 F.3d 1134, 1155 (8th Cir. 1996) (alteration omitted)).

⁴⁴ See USSG §3B1.1, comment. (backg’d.) (“This section provides a range of adjustments to increase the offense level based upon . . . the degree to which the defendant was responsible for committing the offense. This adjustment is included primarily because of concerns about *relative* responsibility.” (emphasis added)); see also *United States v. Anderson*, 988 F.3d 420, 427–48 (7th Cir. 2021) (“The purpose of the enhancement is to divide participants according to their ‘relative culpability . . . in the criminal enterprise.’ ” (citation omitted)).

are more culpable ought to receive the harsher organizer/leader enhancement, while those with lesser culpability and responsibility receive the lesser enhancement imposed on managers/supervisors And those with the least relative culpability receive no enhancement at all.”⁴⁵ Conduct within the scope of §3B1.1 overlaps its classifications, so that organizers and leaders also qualify as managers and supervisors.⁴⁶

Additionally, more than one person may qualify as an organizer or leader of a criminal activity.⁴⁷ To qualify for an adjustment, the defendant need only have organized or led one other participant in the conspiracy.⁴⁸ Titles given to members in the criminal

Some circuits have differentiated further between organizer and leader. For example, the Ninth Circuit clarified that “with respect to the distinction between an organizer and a leader under §3B1.1(c) . . . the level of control required to be an organizer is only ‘the ability and influence necessary to coordinate the activities of others to achieve the desired result.’” *United States v. Vinge*, 85 F.4th 1285, 1287 (9th Cir. 2023) (quoting *United States v. Doe*, 778 F.3d 814, 824 (9th Cir. 2015)); *see generally* *United States v. Hunsaker*, 65 F.4th 1223, 1229 (10th Cir. 2023) (“[W]hile control over subordinates is *required* to find that a defendant played a management, supervision, or leadership role in a criminal activity, we conclude that a sentence enhancement under §3B1.1(c) for a defendant who acts as an organizer does not require the presence of underlings in the endeavor.” (quoting *United States v. Valdez-Arieta*, 127 F.3d 1267, 1272 (10th Cir. 1997))).

⁴⁵ *United States v. Weaver*, 716 F.3d 439, 442 (7th Cir. 2013) (citations omitted); *see also* *United States v. Lovies*, 16 F.4th 493, 506 (7th Cir. 2021) (“Where there is a dispute about whether the role enhancement applies . . . the court should make a ‘commonsense judgment about the defendant’s relative culpability given his status in the criminal hierarchy.’” (citation omitted)); *United States v. Payne*, 881 F.3d 229, 232 (1st Cir. 2018) (“[T]o say [the defendant] was only [a supervisor] is to imply that someone else was the leader to whom the supervisor reported.”).

⁴⁶ *See* *United States v. Quigley*, 373 F.3d 133, 139 (D.C. Cir. 2004) (“We read subsection (b) to sweep in lower level managerial and supervisory conduct, and subsection (a) to encompass higher level managerial and supervisory conduct We are confident that all organizers or leaders of a conspiracy qualify as managers or supervisors under §3B1.1(b).”).

⁴⁷ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.4) (“There can, of course, be more than one person who qualifies as a leader or organizer of a criminal association or conspiracy.”). Nearly every circuit has applied this section as written. *See* *United States v. Rivera*, 51 F.4th 47, 52 (1st Cir. 2022); *United States v. Maes*, 961 F.3d 366, 378 (5th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Sexton*, 894 F.3d 787, 796 (6th Cir. 2018); *United States v. Jones*, 792 F.3d 831, 836 (7th Cir. 2015); *United States v. Louper-Morris*, 672 F.3d 539, 565 (8th Cir. 2012); *United States v. Rivera*, 527 F.3d 891, 910 (9th Cir. 2008); *United States v. Gehrmann*, 966 F.3d 1074, 1085 (10th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Vallejo*, 297 F.3d 1154, 1169 (11th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Bras*, 483 F.3d 103, 113–14 (D.C. Cir. 2007); *see also* *United States v. Cameron*, 573 F.3d 179, 185 (4th Cir. 2009) (noting “it is true that more than one person may qualify as an organizer or leader of a criminal operation” but holding the defendant in that case did not).

⁴⁸ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.2); *see also* *United States v. Si Lu Tian*, 339 F.3d 143, 156 (2d Cir. 2003) (“[T]he Sentencing Guidelines only require that the defendant be an organizer or leader of one or more of those participants for the section 3B1.1(a) enhancement to be appropriate.”). The same requirement applies for a “manager” or “supervisor.” USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.2); *see also* *United States v. Whitworth*, 107 F.4th 817, 823–24 (8th Cir. 2024) (district court did not err in finding that the defendant “supervised or managed” one other person); *United States v. Lewis*, 976 F.3d 787, 798 (8th Cir. 2020) (“A ‘defendant may be subject to the enhancement even if he managed or supervised only one participant, limited to a single transaction.’” (quoting *United States v. Guzman*, 946 F.3d 1004, 1008 (8th Cir. 2020))); *United States v. Savage*, 885 F.3d 212, 229 (4th Cir. 2018) (“[T]he enhancement is justified if the defendant managed or supervised the activities of at least one other person in a scheme that involved five or more

activity, such as “kingpin” or “boss,” “are not controlling” in distinguishing leaders and organizers from managers and supervisors.⁴⁹ Instead, Application Note 4 provides a non-exhaustive list of factors for courts to consider, including:

the exercise of decision making authority, the nature of participation in the commission of the offense, the recruitment of accomplices, the claimed right to a larger share of the fruits of the crime, the degree of participation in planning or organizing the offense, the nature and scope of the illegal activity, and the degree of control and authority exercised over others.⁵⁰

If the district court’s factual findings demonstrate some combination of these factors, the courts of appeal tend not to disturb the application of §3B1.1(a).⁵¹ The guidelines do not require that each of the factors has to be present in any one case, and no single factor is dispositive in determining whether §3B1.1(a) applies.⁵² Nonetheless, where the district court’s factual findings are insufficient, it may err by applying an enhancement pursuant to §3B1.1(a).⁵³

participants.” (quoting *United States v. Bartley*, 230 F.3d 667, 673 (4th Cir. 2000)); *United States v. Ranjel*, 872 F.3d 815, 820 (7th Cir. 2017) (“The enhancement applies if the defendant managed or supervised ‘one or more other participants’ in criminal activity that *involved* five or more people.”); *United States v. Craig*, 808 F.3d 1249, 1259 (10th Cir. 2015) (“The [g]uideline requires only a conclusion that [the defendant] supervised at least one such participant; it does not require the court to identify specific examples.” (citations omitted)).

⁴⁹ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.4).

⁵⁰ *Id.*; see also Amendment 6 of the amendments submitted by the Commission to Congress on April 30, 2024, 89 FR 36853 (May 3, 2024) (promulgated technical amendment changing “decision making” to “decision-making”). Absent congressional action to the contrary, the amendment will become effective November 1, 2024. The Third Circuit held that because “the terms ‘organizer’ and ‘leader’ are not genuinely ambiguous . . . th[is] multi-factor test in the commentary is not controlling.” *United States v. Adair*, 38 F.4th 341, 354 (3d Cir. 2022) (citation omitted)).

⁵¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Jones*, 56 F.4th 455, 496–97 (7th Cir. 2022); *United States v. Gomez*, 905 F.3d 347, 351–52 (5th Cir. 2018); see also *United States v. Wells*, 55 F.4th 1086, 1092–93 (6th Cir. 2022) (adjustment properly applied to defendant who was incarcerated for most of the conspiracy where there was evidence that defendant had decision making authority over co-conspirators, recruited other participants, had a financial incentive, and participated in planning), *cert. denied*, 143 S. Ct. 1790 (2023).

⁵² See *United States v. Payne*, 881 F.3d 229, 232 (1st Cir. 2018) (“[T]here need not be evidence of every factor” (quoting *United States v. Talladino*, 38 F.3d 1255, 1260 (1st Cir. 1994))); *United States v. Dixon*, 901 F.3d 1322, 1348 (11th Cir. 2018) (“[T]here is no requirement that all of the considerations have to be present[.]” (quoting *United States v. Martinez*, 584 F.3d 1022, 1026 (11th Cir. 2009))); *United States v. Olejiya*, 754 F.3d 986, 990 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (“No single factor is dispositive.”); *United States v. Robertson*, 662 F.3d 871, 877 (7th Cir. 2011) (“[N]o single §3B1.1 factor is essential in determining whether the adjustment applies, and a court need not assign equal weight to each factor.”).

⁵³ See, e.g., *United States v. Burnley*, 988 F.3d 184, 189–90 (4th Cir. 2021) (remanding because “the district court made no [individualized] assessment and its rationale was indeterminable because it did not apply the [Application Note 4] factors”); *United States v. Hammerschmidt*, 881 F.3d 633, 637–38 (8th Cir. 2018) (remanding for resentencing because the district court “did not determine whether [the defendant] managed or supervised another participant”); *United States v. Bonilla-Guizar*, 729 F.3d 1179, 1186–87 (9th Cir. 2013) (“[T]he district court may apply the §3B1.1 management enhancement only if it finds, based on evidence in the record, that [the defendant] managed at least one other participant in the crime.”).

To qualify as an organizer or leader, the defendant must have exercised a significant degree of control and decision-making authority over the criminal activity.⁵⁴ For example, in *United States v. Bolden*, the Eighth Circuit affirmed the district court’s conclusion that the defendant was an organizer or leader of a drug conspiracy, where the evidence showed that the defendant “recruited members of the conspiracy[,] . . . directed those members to distribute drugs . . . supplied drugs for distribution[,] [] retained a large portion of profit for himself . . . [and] played a role in setting up [drug] transactions.”⁵⁵

By contrast, to be a manager or supervisor, the defendant need only “have exercised some degree of control over others involved in the commission of the offense or he must have been responsible for organizing others for the purpose of carrying out the crime.”⁵⁶

But see *United States v. Shengyang Zhou*, 717 F.3d 1139, 1150 (10th Cir. 2013) (affirming application of adjustment because, although district court did not “identify[] which of the ‘organizer or leader’ factors supported its finding, . . . the court’s findings were specific enough to provide a clear picture” (citation omitted)).

⁵⁴ See *United States v. Hernández*, 964 F.3d 95, 102 (1st Cir. 2020) (“To qualify as an ‘organizer,’ ‘the defendant must have exercised some degree of control over others involved in the commission of the offense or he must have been responsible for organizing others for the purpose of carrying out the crime.’” (citations omitted)); *United States v. Esteras*, 102 F.4th 98, 110–11 (2d Cir. 2024) (district court erred in applying a §3B1.1(a) enhancement because defendant did not qualify as “organizer or leader” where evidence showed he “was effectively an independent middleman . . . [who] possessed no ‘decision making authority’” (quoting USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.4))); *United States v. McGee*, 985 F.3d 559, 562 (7th Cir. 2021) (“Typically, this means that ‘the defendant “had some real and direct influence” on other participants in the criminal activity.’” (citation omitted)); *United States v. Thung Van Huynh*, 884 F.3d 160, 171 (3d Cir. 2018) (the district court did not clearly err in applying §3B1.1(a) adjustment when the defendant “exercised a significant ‘degree of control over others in the commission of the offense’” (citations omitted)); *United States v. Sunmola*, 887 F.3d 830, 839 (7th Cir. 2018) (same result where “[t]he record indicate[d] a high level of control and authority” by defendant). *But see* *United States v. Gehrman*, 966 F.3d 1074, 1084 (10th Cir. 2020) (“[N]o [hierarchical] control is necessary to qualify as an organizer.”).

⁵⁵ 596 F.3d 976, 984 (8th Cir. 2010); *see also* *United States v. Espinoza*, 885 F.3d 516, 526 (8th Cir. 2018) (affirming the application of §3B1.1(a) because the defendant “would personally confront [sellers] when they fell behind on their drug debt, evidencing management of the conspiracy’s financial operations,” and “[a] text-message exchange in which a . . . customer asked an associate to find out what [the defendant] would charge for a particular quantity of methamphetamine purchases was evidence of his price-setting authority”); *United States v. Crabtree*, 878 F.3d 1274, 1290–91 (11th Cir. 2018) (affirming the application of 4-level organizer adjustment when the defendant “was in a pivotal position of management authority that enabled the fraud to succeed,” regardless of the fact that he did not closely manage all operations); *see also* *United States v. Borders*, 829 F.3d 558, 570 (8th Cir. 2016) (the district court did not err in applying §3B1.1(a) where the defendant led “scouting parties” to find vehicles to steal, directed others to remove VIN numbers, stole merchandise, and arranged for the stolen materials to be transported, stored, and purchased).

⁵⁶ *United States v. Chin*, 965 F.3d 41, 55 (1st Cir. 2020) (citation omitted); *see also* *United States v. Johnson*, 64 F.4th 1348, 1352 (D.C. Cir. 2023) (“A manager or supervisor must ‘exercise some control over others.’” (citation omitted)); *United States v. Lozano*, 921 F.3d 942, 948 (10th Cir. 2019) (“The term ‘supervisor’ is satisfied upon a showing that the defendant exercised any degree of direction or control over someone subordinate to him.” (alterations omitted) (quoting *United States v. Backas*, 901 F.2d 1528, 1530 (10th Cir. 1990)); *United States v. Wolf*, 860 F.3d 175, 198 (4th Cir. 2017) (“[T]his court has consulted the dictionary definition of ‘manager’ to derive its meaning under . . . §3B1.1(b): ‘[A] person whose work or profession is the management of a specified thing (as a business, an institution, or a particular phase or activity within a business or institution).’” (quoting *United States v. Slade*, 631 F.3d

Because the guidelines do not expressly define “manager or supervisor,” the Seventh Circuit has explained that its “primary goal is to make a commonsense judgment about the defendant’s relative culpability given his status in the criminal hierarchy.”⁵⁷ Additionally, in *United States v. Reyes-Ramirez*, the Eighth Circuit affirmed the district court’s application of the 3-level adjustment in a drug conspiracy case on grounds that the defendant acted as a supervisor or manager by, among other things, being the “key link” between the source and the distributors.⁵⁸

The Commentary to §3B1.1 notes that, with respect to smaller criminal activities that involve fewer than five participants or are not otherwise extensive, “the distinction between organization and leadership, and that of management or supervision, is of less significance than in larger enterprises that tend to have clearly delineated divisions of

185, 190 (4th Cir. 2011)); *United States v. Mannings*, 850 F.3d 404, 409 (8th Cir. 2017) (per curiam) (“We have ‘defined the terms “manager” and “supervisor” quite liberally,’ “The key factors in determining management or supervisory authority are control over participants and organization of the criminal activity.’” (citations omitted)); *United States v. Henry*, 813 F.3d 681, 682–83 (7th Cir. 2016) (concluding that “[i]f you recruit a person, tell him what his job is, specify his wage, and equip him with tools of his trade (the gun in this case), you’re his manager” and that as such “an employee doesn’t cease to be an employee merely because he’s on a long leash”); *United States v. Rodriguez*, 741 F.3d 908, 912 (8th Cir. 2014) (upholding enhancement where the defendant “directed his coconspirator to transport drugs and drug proceeds,” and concluding that “[t]he fact that [the defendant] reported to others in the conspiracy does not negate his role in managing and supervising the activities of a coconspirator”); *United States v. Hertular*, 562 F.3d 433, 448 (2d Cir. 2009) (“A defendant is properly considered as a manager or supervisor . . . if he ‘exercised some degree of control over others involved in the commission of the offense or played a significant role in the decision to recruit or to supervise lower-level participants.’” (citation omitted)). *But see* *United States v. House*, 883 F.3d 720, 725 (7th Cir. 2018) (stating that “control is simply one measure,” and affirming use of §3B1.1(b) enhancement when defendant “devis[ed] the plan, us[ed] his business as the front, provid[ed] the necessary vehicle information, coordinat[ed] with his co-conspirators and the borrowers, and receiv[ed] and distribut[ed] the funds”).

⁵⁷ *United States v. Craft*, 99 F.4th 407, 414 (7th Cir. 2024) (internal quotations omitted) (quoting *United States v. House*, 888 F.3d 720, 724 (7th Cir. 2018)).

⁵⁸ 916 F.3d 1146, 1147–48 (8th Cir. 2019) (quoting *United States v. Pierce*, 907 F.2d 56, 57 (8th Cir. 1990)); *see also* *Wolf*, 860 F.3d at 198 (defendant played managerial role in mortgage fraud scheme because of involvement in “drawing up compensation agreements and deciding on a property’s gross price, selecting floor plans, . . . recruiting new participants in the conspiracy, and controlling which documents would and would not be submitted to the lender”); *United States v. Hawkins*, 866 F.3d 344, 348 (5th Cir. 2017) (affirming application of §3B1.1 when defendant “directed and recruited a number of subordinates, who executed drug deals, picked up payments, acted as enforcers, and transported drugs belonging to her and her co-conspirators”); *United States v. Ranjel*, 872 F.3d 815, 820 (7th Cir. 2017) (enhancement appropriate when “evidence established that [the defendant] directed one coconspirator to hold drugs, another coconspirator to sell drugs, and a third coconspirator to deliver cocaine to various retailers, collect payment, and deliver the money to him”). *But see* *Johnson*, 64 F.4th at 1352–53 (reversing enhancement where there was insufficient evidence that the defendant controlled other co-defendants and participants); *United States v. Collins*, 877 F.3d 362, 367–68 (7th Cir. 2017) (“[M]erely directing an interested buyer to a dealer is not sufficient for a §3B1.1 adjustment.”; “[A] criminal who operates on his own, not as part of any organization, need not receive the enhancement because of an isolated incident like [a] request to [another person] to cover for him on one sale One doctor may cover one patient for another, or one lawyer may cover one case for another, without turning one into a supervisor of the other.”).

responsibility.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, §3B1.1(c) is inclusive and calls for the same 2-level adjustment regardless of the specific aggravating role held by the defendant.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the Ninth Circuit has declined to apply the 2-level adjustment unless there is an additional showing that the defendant had “control over others.”⁶¹

III. MITIGATING ROLE: §3B1.2

Section 3B1.2 provides for 2-, 3-, and 4-level decreases to the offense level if the defendant had a mitigating role in the offense, as follows:

- (a) If the defendant was a minimal participant in any criminal activity, decrease by 4 levels.
- (b) If the defendant was a minor participant in any criminal activity, decrease by 2 levels.

In cases falling between (a) and (b), decrease by 3 levels.⁶²

“The determination whether to apply subsection (a) or subsection (b), or an intermediate adjustment, is based on the totality of the circumstances and involves a determination that is heavily dependent upon the facts of the particular case.”⁶³

⁵⁹ USSG §3B1.1, comment. (backg’d.).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., *United States v. Grushko*, 50 F.4th 1, 16–17 (11th Cir. 2022) (evidence supports 2-level enhancement for both defendants who exerted control and influence over a third participant), *certs. denied*, 143 S. Ct. 2594 (2023), 143 S. Ct. 2680 (2023); *United States v. Atkins*, 881 F.3d 621, 628 (8th Cir. 2018) (affirming use of §3B1.1(c) adjustment in wire fraud case because defendant “decided how and when the fraudulent tickets were created, what loads would be duplicated and received, and how much remuneration he would receive”); *United States v. Agyekum*, 846 F.3d 744, 752–53 (4th Cir. 2017) (affirming use of §3B1.1(c) adjustment when defendant directed the activities of pharmacy involved in Oxycodone distribution, “handled all the money” involved, controlled bank accounts, and directed the pharmacist, although she “technically filled the prescriptions”).

⁶¹ See *United States v. Harris*, 999 F.3d 1233, 1236–37 (9th Cir. 2021) (“Our precedent is clear that, without ‘control over others,’ a suggestion is not leadership, facilitation is not leadership, and playing an important role is not leadership” (quoting *United States v. Avila*, 95 F.3d 887, 892 (9th Cir. 1996))); see also *United States v. Kabir*, 51 F.4th 820, 826–28 (9th Cir. 2022) (affirming application of enhancement and distinguishing between cases in which defendant only facilitated from those in which the defendant organized), *cert. denied*, 143 S. Ct. 838 (2023); *United States v. Pimentel-Lopez*, 859 F.3d 1134, 1143–44 (9th Cir. 2017) (“[E]ven a defendant with an important role in an offense cannot receive an enhancement unless there is also a showing that the defendant had control over others.” (quoting *United States v. Whitney*, 673 F.3d 965, 975 (9th Cir. 2012))).

⁶² USSG §3B1.2.

⁶³ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(C)); see also *United States v. Walker*, 89 F.4th 173, 187 (1st Cir. 2023) (“An evaluation of these factors does not require extensive analysis, . . . but it does require both a judgment about the defendant’s own conduct and a comparison to the other participants.” (citations omitted)).

The defendant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that he or she is entitled to a mitigating role adjustment.⁶⁴ As with aggravating role adjustments, the fact-specific nature of mitigating role determinations results in a deferential appellate standard of review. Therefore, “[o]vercoming an adverse minor role decision is a difficult burden for a defendant to meet on appeal, for the district court’s determination is . . . ‘invariably fact-specific and, thus, appellate review of such a determination is respectful.’ ”⁶⁵

A. “SUBSTANTIALLY LESS CULPABLE THAN THE AVERAGE PARTICIPANT IN THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY”

Application Note 3(A) explains that §3B1.2 operates to provide “a range of adjustments for a defendant who plays a part in committing the offense that makes him substantially less culpable than the average participant *in the criminal activity*.”⁶⁶ Thus, the relative culpability of the defendant is measured only in comparison to those persons who actually participated in the criminal activity, rather than against other individuals who commit similar crimes.⁶⁷ Courts have concluded that a defendant must “prove that he was *less culpable than his cohorts*” and “[m]erely not being more culpable than his cohorts falls short of meeting the standard.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Wynn*, 108 F.4th 73, 80 (2d Cir. 2024) (“Because a mitigating role adjustment under §3B1.2 has the effect of reducing the defendant’s otherwise-applicable Guidelines range, it is the defendant who bears the burden of establishing his entitlement to that reduction by a preponderance of the evidence.”); *United States v. Sanchez*, 989 F.3d 523, 544–45 (7th Cir. 2021); *United States v. Nkome*, 987 F.3d 1262, 1269 (10th Cir. 2021); *United States v. Presendieu*, 880 F.3d 1228, 1249 (11th Cir. 2018); *United States v. Mathis*, 738 F.3d 719, 741 (6th Cir. 2013).

⁶⁵ *United States v. Cortez-Vergara*, 873 F.3d 390, 393 (1st Cir. 2017) (citation omitted); see also *United States v. Womack*, 55 F.4th 219, 244 (3d Cir. 2022) (“[District court] rulings are left largely undisturbed by the courts of appeal.” (quoting *United States v. Isaza-Zapata*, 148 F.3d 236, 238 (3d Cir. 1998))); *Nkome*, 987 F.3d at 1277 (on challenge to mitigating role adjustment, finding “under the clear-error standard, ‘battles over a defendant’s status and over the scope of the criminal enterprise will almost always be won or lost in the district court’ ” (citations omitted)); *United States v. Sharkey*, 895 F.3d 1077, 1081 (8th Cir. 2018) (per curiam) (“Whether a defendant played a minor role is a question of fact, reviewed for clear error.” (citations omitted)).

⁶⁶ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(A)) (emphasis added).

⁶⁷ See *id.*; see also *United States v. Arias-Mercedes*, 901 F.3d 1, 6 (1st Cir. 2018) (no “need to compare a defendant’s conduct with the conduct of hypothetical participants in similar offenses”).

⁶⁸ *United States v. De la Cruz-Gutiérrez*, 881 F.3d 221, 226 (1st Cir. 2018); see also *United States v. Nkome*, 987 F.3d 1262, 1277 (10th Cir. 2021) (“[A] defendant is not entitled to a reduction under [§]3B1.2 simply because he is the least culpable among several participants in a jointly undertaken criminal enterprise.” (quoting *United States v. Lockhart*, 37 F.3d 1451, 1455 (10th Cir. 1994))); *United States v. Brown*, 929 F.3d 1030, 1041 (8th Cir. 2019) (“[W]hile relative culpability of conspirators is relevant to the minor participant determination, our cases make it clear that merely showing the defendant was less culpable than other participants is not enough to entitle the defendant to the adjustment if the defendant was deeply involved in the offense.” (quoting *United States v. Bradley*, 643 F.3d 1121, 1129 (8th Cir. 2011))); *United States v. Gomez-Valle*, 828 F.3d 324, 330–31 (5th Cir. 2016) (no “affirmative right to a §3B1.2 reduction to every actor *but* the criminal mastermind.”).

The term “participant” as used in §3B1.2 has the same meaning as “participant” for purposes of §3B1.1.⁶⁹ Thus, a defendant may receive a mitigating role adjustment only if the criminal activity involved at least one other “participant.” As the Commentary to §3B1.2 states: “an adjustment under this guideline may not apply to a defendant who is the only defendant convicted of an offense unless that offense involved other participants in addition to the defendant”⁷⁰ As with aggravating role adjustments, it is not necessary that the other participants actually be convicted for their role in the criminal activity for §3B1.2 to apply.⁷¹

Application Note 3(B) to §3B1.2 provides that a defendant ordinarily should not receive a mitigating role adjustment if he or she benefitted from a reduced offense level by virtue of having been convicted of an offense that was “significantly less serious than warranted by his actual criminal conduct.”⁷² Courts also have declined to grant an adjustment in cases in which the defendant’s base offense level “does not reflect the conduct of the larger conspiracy,” regardless of the offense of conviction.⁷³

⁶⁹ See USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.1); see also USSG §3B1.1, comment. (n.1) (“A ‘participant’ is a person who is criminally responsible for the commission of the offense, but need not have been convicted.”).

⁷⁰ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.2).

⁷¹ See *supra* note 9 and accompanying text; *United States v. Groenendal*, 557 F.3d 419, 426–27 (6th Cir. 2009) (“[Section] 3B1.2 does not require that the other ‘participants’ be charged with the crime . . . [It] can apply . . . even when only one participant is charged in the offense.” (citations omitted)); see also *United States v. Diaz*, 884 F.3d 911, 917 (9th Cir. 2018) (noting that a defendant is not required to “identify other participants by name; doing so is only one way a defendant can establish the existence of other participants in a criminal scheme” and observing that “[i]dentifying the locations of other individuals and the roles they actually served may be sufficient for the defendant to meet his burden”). The fact that the defendant himself merely aided or abetted the criminal activity does not automatically entitle him to a mitigating role adjustment under §3B1.2. See *United States v. Miller*, 283 F.3d 907, 913 (8th Cir. 2002) (conviction for aiding and abetting murder not entitled to role reduction where §2X2.1 “provide[s] that aiders and abettors receive the same offense level as if convicted as a principal”); *United States v. Teeter*, 257 F.3d 14, 30 (1st Cir. 2001) (defendant convicted of aiding and abetting “must prove her entitlement” to adjustment for minimal or minor role).

⁷² USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(B)).

⁷³ *United States v. Roberts*, 223 F.3d 377, 381 (6th Cir. 2000) (“Although this note applies by its terms only to a defendant who has been convicted of a lesser offense, it stands for the principle that when a defendant’s base offense level does not reflect the conduct of the larger conspiracy, he should not receive a mitigating role adjustment simply because he was a minor participant in that broader criminal scheme.”); see also *United States v. Kiekow*, 872 F.3d 236, 248 (5th Cir. 2017) (affirming the district court’s denial of a minimal role reduction based on circuit precedent holding that “when a sentence is based on activity in which a defendant was actually involved, §3B1.2 does not require a reduction in the base offense level even though the defendant’s activity in a larger conspiracy may have been minor or minimal.” (quoting *United States v. Marmolejo*, 106 F.3d 1213, 1217 (5th Cir. 1997))); *United States v. Durham*, 836 F.3d 903, 912 n.8 (8th Cir. 2016) (minor role adjustment inapplicable when the court had decreased defendant’s base offense level “below what it would have been if she had been held accountable for the actual amount of drugs involved in the conspiracy during the relevant time”).

B. MINIMAL AND MINOR PARTICIPANTS

Upon determining that the defendant was “substantially less culpable than the average participant in the criminal activity,” Application Notes 4 and 5 explain how to distinguish between “minimal” and “minor” participants.

Application Note 4 provides that §3B1.2(a)’s 4-level reduction for minimal participants “is intended to cover defendants who are plainly among the least culpable of those involved in the conduct of a group.”⁷⁴ The application note further provides that “the defendant’s lack of knowledge or understanding of the scope and structure of the enterprise and of the activities of others is indicative of a role as minimal participant.”⁷⁵

Application Note 5 provides that §3B1.2(b)’s 2-level reduction for minor participants applies to defendants who are “less culpable than most other participants in the criminal activity, but whose role could not be described as minimal.”⁷⁶

C. FACT-BASED DETERMINATION

Whether the defendant was a minimal or minor participant, or occupied a role falling between minimal and minor, is “heavily dependent upon the facts of the particular case.”⁷⁷ Application Note 3(C) to §3B1.2 provides a non-exhaustive list of factors for the court to consider in determining whether to apply a mitigating role adjustment and, if so, the amount of the adjustment:

(i) the degree to which the defendant understood the scope and structure of the criminal activity; (ii) the degree to which the defendant participated in planning or organizing the criminal activity; (iii) the degree to which the defendant exercised decision-making authority or influenced the exercise of decision-making authority; (iv) the nature and extent of the defendant’s participation in the commission of the criminal activity, including the acts the defendant performed and the responsibility and discretion the defendant had in performing those acts; [and] (v) the degree to which the defendant stood to benefit from the criminal activity.⁷⁸

The application note also emphasizes that the mere fact that a defendant performed an “essential or indispensable role in the criminal activity” is not conclusive in determining

⁷⁴ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.4).

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.5). *See generally* United States v. Broussard, 882 F.3d 104, 111 (5th Cir. 2018) (“A ‘minimal participant’ is someone who lacks knowledge or understanding about the scope or structure of the enterprise; a ‘minor participant’ is someone who is less culpable than most participants but more culpable than a minimal participant.” (citations omitted)).

⁷⁷ USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(C)).

⁷⁸ *Id.*

whether to apply a mitigating role adjustment and that such defendant, if otherwise eligible, may receive a mitigating role adjustment.⁷⁹

Case law interpreting §3B1.2 and its commentary provides further guidance for determining whether to apply a mitigating role adjustment. The First Circuit concluded that for purposes of applying the 4-level “minimal” participant adjustment, the defendant must have been only a “peripheral figure” in the criminal activity.⁸⁰ The Fifth Circuit has gone further, concluding that a defendant must demonstrate that he or she played only a peripheral role to receive *any* mitigating role adjustment, even the 2-level minor participant reduction.⁸¹ The Second Circuit weighs the factors in Application Note 3 to §3B1.2 to determine if a defendant is “substantially less culpable” than the average participant in the scheme, though “a reduction ‘will not be available simply because the defendant played a lesser role than his co-conspirators.’ ”⁸² The Ninth Circuit has held that district courts must consider the factors enumerated in the guideline and “compare the defendant’s involvement to that of all likely participants in the criminal scheme for whom there is sufficient evidence of their existence and participation.”⁸³ The Eleventh Circuit has instructed courts to consider “ ‘the defendant’s role in the relevant conduct for which she

⁷⁹ *Id.* Application Note 3(C) further provides, as an example, that “a defendant who does not have a proprietary interest in the criminal activity and who is simply being paid to perform certain tasks should be considered” for a mitigating role adjustment. *Id.*

⁸⁰ *United States v. Espinal-Almeida*, 699 F.3d 588, 619 (1st Cir. 2012) (defendant “must be a plainly peripheral player”).

⁸¹ *See United States v. Perez-Solis*, 709 F.3d 453, 471 (5th Cir. 2013) (“[N]o reduction is available under §3B1.2 unless the participant was ‘peripheral to the advancement of the criminal activity.’ ” (citations omitted)); *see also United States v. Castro*, 843 F.3d 608, 613–14 (5th Cir. 2016) (“[I]t is improper for a court to award a [§3B1.2] adjustment simply because the defendant does less than the other participants[;] . . . the defendant must do enough less so that [s]he at best was peripheral to the advancement of the illicit activity.” (citations omitted)). The Fifth Circuit also has held that district courts may not treat a “defendant’s ‘integral role’ ” as a “*per se* bar to mitigating-role adjustment” and “need not weigh each §3B1.2 factor on the record.” *United States v. Bello-Sanchez*, 872 F.3d 260, 264–66 (5th Cir. 2017) (citations omitted).

⁸² *United States v. Solis*, 18 F.4th 395, 402 (2d Cir. 2021) (quoting *United States v. Carpenter*, 252 F.3d 230, 235 (2d Cir. 2001)); *see also United States v. Wynn*, 108 F.4th 73, 82, 84–85 (2d Cir. 2024) (weighing each factor set forth in Application Note 3(C) to §3B1.2 to consider whether the defendant was “substantially less culpable than the average participant” in the offense).

⁸³ *United States v. Diaz*, 884 F.3d 911, 916 (9th Cir. 2018); *see also United States v. Klensch*, 87 F.4th 1159, 1164 (9th Cir. 2023) (outlining three-step process for determining if a defendant is substantially less culpable than the average participant: identify all participating individuals, “calculate a rough average level of culpability for these individuals, taking into consideration the five factors in comment 3(C),” and “compare the defendant’s culpability to that average” (citation omitted)); *United States v. Rodriguez*, 44 F.4th 1229, 1234 (9th Cir. 2022) (“We recently clarified that the mitigating-role commentary’s reference to the ‘average participant’ refers to ‘the mathematical average,’ and that to calculate that average ‘*all* likely participants in the criminal scheme’ must be included.” (citation omitted)); *see also United States v. Campuzano-Benitez*, 910 F.3d 982, 989 (7th Cir. 2018) (“The court should weigh these [§3B1.2] factors to determine if the defendant seeking the reduction is ‘substantially less culpable than the average participant in the criminal activity’ ” but courts need not spell out their analyses of each factor on the record. (quoting USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(A))).

has been held accountable at sentencing’, and . . . ‘her role as compared to that of other participants in her relevant conduct,’ ”⁸⁴ as well as the “totality of circumstances” and the factors laid out in Amendment 794.⁸⁵

D. DRUG COURIERS AND MULES

There is a substantial body of case law concerning the application of §3B1.2 to defendants who were couriers and mules in drug trafficking organizations. Courts uniformly have rejected the argument that a defendant is automatically entitled to a mitigating role adjustment based solely on their status as a courier or mule.⁸⁶ However, couriers and mules “may receive” an adjustment under §3B1.2, even if they are held accountable for only the quantity of drugs they personally transported under relevant conduct principles.⁸⁷

Ultimately, because the role of a courier or mule may vary from organization to organization, a defendant’s culpability and entitlement to a §3B1.2 reduction depends on the facts of the specific case at hand.⁸⁸ Courts tend to deny reductions for couriers and

⁸⁴ United States v. Presendieu, 880 F.3d 1228, 1249 (11th Cir. 2018) (quoting United States v. De Varon, 175 F.3d 930, 940 (11th Cir. 1999) (en banc)); see also United States v. Wright, 862 F.3d 1265, 1278 (11th Cir. 2017) (district court must “determine that the defendant was less culpable than *most other participants* in her relevant conduct” (citations omitted)).

⁸⁵ See *Presendieu*, 880 F.3d at 1250; United States v. Cruickshank, 837 F.3d 1182, 1194–95 (11th Cir. 2016) (remanding when sentencing court based denial solely on drug quantity at issue).

⁸⁶ See, e.g., United States v. Ruiz, 999 F.3d 742, 750 (1st Cir. 2021) (“[T]o the extent that [the defendant] implies drug couriers should automatically receive a mitigating role reduction, we have previously rejected this argument and do so again here.”); United States v. Sanchez, 989 F.3d 523, 544 (7th Cir. 2021) (a defendant’s “role as a courier does not automatically entitle him to a minor role reduction”); United States v. Nkome, 987 F.3d 1262, 1277 (10th Cir. 2021) (“[W]e have ‘consistently’ held that courier or mule status does not invariably qualify a defendant for a mitigating-role adjustment.” (citation omitted)); United States v. Bello-Sanchez, 872 F.3d 260, 264 (5th Cir. 2017) (“[T]he mere fact that [the defendant] was but a courier is not dispositive.”); United States v. Rowe, 878 F.3d 623, 630 (8th Cir. 2017) (“[T]he Eighth Circuit has never found someone’s role as a courier in and of itself sufficient to warrant a mitigating role reduction.” (alteration in original) (citations omitted)); *De Varon*, 175 F.3d at 943 (“We do not create a presumption that drug couriers are never minor or minimal participants, any more than that they are always minor or minimal.”).

⁸⁷ See USSG §3B1.2, comment. (n.3(A)) (“[A] defendant who is convicted of a drug trafficking offense, whose participation in that offense was limited to transporting or storing drugs and who is accountable under §1B1.3 only for the quantity of drugs the defendant personally transported or stored may receive an adjustment under this guideline.”).

⁸⁸ See United States v. Saenz, 623 F.3d 461, 467 (7th Cir. 2010) (“[C]ouriers can play integral roles in drug conspiracies. True, but all drug couriers are not alike. Some are sophisticated professionals who exercise significant discretion, others are paid a small amount of money to do a discrete task.”); see also United States v. Klensch, 87 F.4th at 1164 (reversing a “district court’s singular and cursory explanation for not granting a minor-role reduction” that seemingly relied “on courier conduct as dispositive”); United States v. Cartagena, 856 F.3d 1193, 1197 (8th Cir. 2017) (affirming district court’s denial of adjustment to a courier responsible for 3,989 grams of heroin who was “active, necessary and well-compensated” (quoting United States v. Adamson, 608 F.3d 1049, 1054 (8th Cir. 2010))); United States v. Monzo, 852 F.3d 1343, 1346 (11th Cir. 2017) (listing relevant facts in assessing couriers: “the

mules upon finding that the defendant was more than a “mere” courier or mule because, for example, the defendant transported a significant quantity of drugs,⁸⁹ acted as a courier or mule on multiple occasions,⁹⁰ had a relationship with the organization’s leadership,⁹¹ or was well-compensated for transporting the drugs.⁹²

‘amount of drugs, fair market value of drugs, amount of money to be paid to the courier, equity interest in the drugs, role in planning the criminal scheme, and role in the distribution’ ” (quoting *De Varon*, 175 F.3d at 945); *United States v. Torres-Hernandez*, 843 F.3d 203, 210 (5th Cir. 2016) (“The commentary to § 3B1.2 . . . does not require, as a matter of law, that an adjustment must be made for transporters such as [the defendant]. The commentary [to §3B1.2] and Amendment 794 instead confirm that there are many factors that a sentencing court should consider, and how those factors are weighed remains within the sentencing court’s discretion.”); *United States v. Orlando*, 819 F.3d 1016, 1025 (7th Cir. 2016) (enhancement appropriate when defendant’s “role was not akin to that of some faceless drug courier [because he] had personal connections to organized crime figures, and he leveraged those connections to recruit [others]”); *United States v. Meléndez-Rivera*, 782 F.3d 26, 28–29 (1st Cir. 2015) (noting generally that determination of role is “invariably fact-specific” and therefore “battles over a defendant’s role in the offense ‘will almost always be won or lost in the district court’ ” (citation omitted)).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Pérez*, 819 F.3d 541, 546 (1st Cir. 2016) (“When two persons undertake to transport by themselves a large quantity of drugs in a long and hazardous voyage at sea, it is not clear error for a sentencing court to . . . refuse to grant any mitigating role adjustment.”); *United States v. Sandoval-Velazco*, 736 F.3d 1104, 1109 (7th Cir. 2013) (a court cannot deny the reduction solely on drug quantity, but the quantity can “give effect to a defendant’s role in connection with those drugs”); *United States v. Rodriguez-Castro*, 641 F.3d 1189, 1193 (9th Cir. 2011) (affirming denial of reduction where the offense involved 33.46 kilograms of cocaine, which “was a substantial amount”). *But see* *United States v. Cruickshank*, 837 F.3d 1182, 1194–95 (11th Cir. 2016) (remanding for resentencing because court improperly suggested that quantity of cocaine transported on vessel was “so large that no participant in the scheme could ever have been eligible” for such reduction).

⁹⁰ See *United States v. Cantrell*, 433 F.3d 1269, 1283 (9th Cir. 2006) (affirming denial of reduction, in part, because the defendant “went on several drug pick-ups, each of which involved a minimum of a pound of methamphetamine”); *Ponce v. United States*, 311 F.3d 911, 913–14 (8th Cir. 2002) (affirming denial of reduction where the defendant, in addition to instructing others, transported “4.5 kilograms of methamphetamine, along with various quantities of cocaine and heroin, on at least six separate occasions”).

⁹¹ See *Nkome*, 987 F.3d at 1282 (affirming the district court’s denial of a mitigating-role adjustment based in part on the fact that the defendant had a child with a higher-up member of the conspiracy, supporting “an inference that she would have shared a reasonable measure of his knowledge of the conspiracy’s scope and structure”); *United States v. Garcia*, 580 F.3d 528, 539 (7th Cir. 2009) (affirming the district court’s denial of a minimal-participant reduction, and observing that the defendant “was fortunate to receive any role reduction at all,” when she was close to the drug conspiracy’s leadership and transported drugs and money on multiple occasions); *United States v. Mendoza*, 457 F.3d 726, 730 (7th Cir. 2006) (“One of the factors that sentencing judges should examine while assessing a defendant’s role in a criminal enterprise is the defendant’s relationship with the enterprise’s principal members.”).

⁹² See *United States v. Diaz*, 884 F.3d 911, 918 (9th Cir. 2018) (remanding sentence of drug courier because the district court “ignored” the fact that the defendant’s “compensation was relatively modest and fixed” and because of the absence of “evidence that [he] had a proprietary interest in the outcome of the operation or otherwise stood to benefit more than minimally”); *United States v. Gómez-Encarnación*, 885 F.3d 52, 57 (1st Cir. 2018) (“[T]he sum of the money given to [a codefendant] and found at [the defendant’s] residence[] is enough to suggest that [the defendant] was well-trusted by the conspirators with responsibility not easily granted to a minor player”); *Cartagena*, 856 F.3d at 1197 (affirming denial of adjustment where the defendant-courier was “active, necessary, and well-compensated”).