

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN LATIN AMERICA

ABSTRACT

Criminal governance—when organized criminal groups regulate the behavior of local residents—has become one of the most consequential challenges confronting contemporary Latin American societies. In the areas where criminal groups operate, they often regulate economic, social, and political life, establishing parallel institutions, resolving disputes, extracting revenue, and offering security and services. Once primarily associated with fragile states, criminal governance has spread across a wide range of contexts, including relatively strong and democratic states in Latin America. This policy document synthesizes three decades of interdisciplinary research on the topic, drawing on 169 academic studies published since 1990 and original fieldwork conducted by the authors across several Latin American countries. It explains how criminal groups govern; presents competing theories about when and why they take on governance functions; and assesses the social, political, and economic consequences of these local regimes. It then reviews evidence on key policy responses—including militarized enforcement, community-based interventions, and negotiation—highlighting their strengths, limitations, and unintended effects. The document concludes with recommendations for designing more effective policies to confront criminal governance and mitigate its harms. It also outlines avenues for future research and data collection.

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Criminal Governance in Latin America¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the expansion of organized crime has emerged as one of the major challenges to Latin American societies.² A particularly striking expression of this expansion is the rise of criminal governance—the informal arrangements through which criminal organizations regulate aspects of the economic, social, and political life in the communities where they operate.³ This form of governance entails the creation of parallel institutions that can provide security, resolve disputes, extract revenue through extortion, regulate social and economic activities, and even shape electoral outcomes and public policies. It may also involve the provision of goods and services.⁴

The situation in the region is dire. From the favelas of Rio de Janeiro to neighborhoods in Medellín and municipalities across Mexico, Ecuador, and Venezuela, and even in the most unlikely places like the outskirts of Montevideo, criminal organizations frequently act as *de facto* rulers of territories and populations. Across these diverse contexts, they violently impose rules of conduct and provide essential services that the state is unwilling or unable to provide. Recent estimates suggest that between 70 and 100 million people in Latin America live under some form of criminal governance.⁵ Such an astonishing number underscores the significance that criminal governance has attained and its vast repercussions on dimensions including democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and socioeconomic development in the region.

While this phenomenon was once primarily associated with weak states unable to extend authority throughout their territories,⁶ it is increasingly evident that stronger and more democratic states such as Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay are not immune.⁷ Moreover, these schemes have flourished beyond Latin America, affecting countries with robust welfare systems and traditionally strong institutions—including Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—

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² Albarracín and Barnes 2020; Davis 2018.

³ As we note in Section 2, some definitions of criminal governance include the regulation of behavior of members of criminal organizations (see Lessing 2021). This document focuses exclusively on criminal governance over civilian, non-member populations.

⁴ Arias 2017; Barnes 2025; Lessing 2021; Mantilla and Feldmann 2021. We use the terms ‘governance’ and ‘rule’ interchangeably throughout the text.

⁵ Uribe et al. 2025.

⁶ Koonings 2001; Koonings and Kruijt 2004.

⁷ Blume 2021; Feldmann and Luna 2022; Fynn 2025.

though to a much lesser extent.⁸ These developments highlight a broader global trend in which criminal organizations are reshaping the nature and scope of organized violence.⁹

Against this backdrop, this policy document synthesizes the expanding literature on criminal governance, summarizing what we know about its origins, patterns, and consequences as well as the strengths and limitations of different policy responses. Our analysis draws primarily on English-language academic publications from the past three decades, complemented by fieldwork conducted by the authors across several Latin American countries. The relevant Spanish- and Portuguese-language scholarship is not systematically covered. We discuss well-documented cases such as Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, and Venezuela but also bring attention to less studied contexts including Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Our review and analysis are based on 169 studies published since 1990, documenting a research field that has expanded dramatically in recent years, peaking in 2022. The literature is mostly qualitative and highly interdisciplinary, with political scientists leading the field alongside criminologists, sociologists, and anthropologists who rely primarily on case studies. Most of this research draws on interviews, ethnographic work, and secondary sources. More recent contributions from economists and political scientists have brought quantitative data and statistical and quasi-experimental methods to the field, complementing the predominantly qualitative literature.¹⁰

The remainder of this document is organized as follows. Section 2 defines criminal governance and maps the main domains of rule exercised by criminal groups. We also discuss questions regarding measurement and data. Section 3 examines the conditions under which these actors become rulers and explains why their modes of governance vary across contexts. Subsequently, in Section 4 we turn to the far-reaching consequences of these schemes on local politics, economies, and social and cultural life. Section 5 reviews evidence on the impact of policy interventions that seek to combat organized crime and criminal violence. While a few policies have been specifically designed to limit or dismantle criminal governance, we examine three common approaches—militarization (including decapitation operations and crackdowns), community-based interventions, and negotiations with criminal groups—and assess what the existing evidence suggests about their impact on criminal governance. Drawing on studies that evaluate these policies’ effects, we identify important lessons about their potential impact on criminal governance regimes. We conclude by identifying key policy implications and outlining priority areas for future research.

II. WHAT IS CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE AND HOW DOES IT VARY?

This section briefly introduces criminal governance as a concept. After discussing existing conceptualizations and establishing their similarities and differences, this section describes what

⁸ See, for example, Jensen and Rodgers 2025; Campana et al. 2025.

⁹ Davies et al. 2024.

¹⁰ We searched Google Scholar for works published from 1990 onward using the English-language keywords ‘criminal governance’, ‘illegal governance’, and ‘extralegal governance’, as well as cognate terms including ‘criminal violence’, ‘criminal groups’, and ‘criminal organizations.’ From this initial search, we manually identified and selected a total of 242 works that referenced the concept of criminal governance. After a first reading of each scholarly work, we excluded studies that focused exclusively on countries outside Latin America and the Caribbean, examined non-criminal armed groups (such as militias, paramilitaries, and rebel groups), or did not address criminal governance as defined by rulemaking or service provision. We retained 169 works and coded them along several dimensions, including their definitions of criminal governance, research methods, geographic focus, and findings.

criminal governance looks like in practice. We outline the ways in which criminal groups regulate social, economic, and political life by imposing rules of conduct, resolving disputes, collecting payments, and providing goods and services. We also elaborate on how these governing practices influence different actors, including communities, representatives of civil society, state agents, and politicians.

II.I Criminal Governance: Definitions

While key aspects of the phenomenon of criminal governance were documented and analyzed in previous studies of democratization, state weakness, and crime in Latin America,¹¹ the first conceptualization was introduced in work on Brazil in the mid-2000s.¹² Describing conditions in Rio de Janeiro, this work posited that in some areas social order and illegal economies were regulated through the enforcement of both formal and informal institutions by criminal entities.¹³ These institutions either replaced, complemented, or competed with state authority, and often involved the distribution of justice, security, and access to services.

More recently, several studies in political science have further conceptualized criminal governance. While there is still no consensus on a definition of criminal governance and significant conceptual challenges remain, the most adopted definition understands criminal governance as “the imposition of rules or restrictions on behavior by a criminal organization.”¹⁴ While this definition encompasses regulation of criminal group members, rival groups, and civilians, this policy document focuses exclusively on governance of civilian populations. Drawing on criminological studies on smuggling and surveillance,¹⁵ a recent formulation emphasizes the ways states use their power to define what ultimately constitutes a criminal endeavor and refers to areas ruled by criminal groups as ‘criminalized governance’.¹⁶

Other works introduce additional concepts that situate criminal governance within broader social and political phenomena. Collectively, they highlight the critical role of state actors in enabling and shaping these governance regimes. Seminal work on Mexico conceptualizes organized crime as emerging in a gray zone where state agents (armed forces, police, prosecutors, prison directors) exist alongside criminal organizations operating not within parallel orders but within “an ecosystem of coercion, corruption, and criminality where the interactions between state agents and private economic groups give rise to organized crime.”¹⁷ In this view, the rules and restrictions of behavior characteristic of criminal governance are set not only by criminal organizations but also by a broader system of interactions in which state agents are critical. Other studies further argue that such *ecosystems* regulate not only social order but also markets through formal and informal institutions.¹⁸

Together, these works underline the extent to which criminals use their influence on bureaucrats, politicians, and social networks to co-produce local order, emphasizing that criminal governance is

¹¹ Leeds 1996; Méndez et al. 1999; Venkatesh 1997.

¹² Arias 2006.

¹³ Arias 2009.

¹⁴ Lessing 2021.

¹⁵ Andreas 2000.

¹⁶ Barnes 2025.

¹⁷ Trejo and Ley 2020, 37, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Mantilla and Feldmann 2021.

always enmeshed in broader political dynamics.¹⁹ Drawing on these insights, a recent study introduced the term *criminal politics*, defined as the “interrelated activity of politicians, organized crime actors, and state agents in pursuing their respective agendas and goals.”²⁰ This conceptualization highlights that though criminal groups regulate various domains of social life in criminal governance schemes, such orders do not exist in a vacuum and are always related to broader political patterns. The nature and attributes of the state—including its infrastructural capability,²¹ legitimacy,²² and political and administrative nature—may promote and/or constrain the activities of criminal entities and therefore influence criminal governance schemes.²³

II.II. How Criminals Govern

Having defined the concept, we now turn to what criminal governance entails on the ground. Although studies document many practices, most reference four broad categories: rules of conduct, dispute resolution, taxation, and provision of goods and services.

Armed groups often impose **rules of conduct** on the communities they control. Most groups impose rules to protect their security, such as curfews and checkpoints, rules on talking to police, rivals, or reporters, and restrictions on mobility. They also maintain order by banning theft, robbery, and other forms of crime. In the economic domain, they regulate markets through a range of measures, including price and quality controls; ‘taxes’, extortion, and protection fees (discussed in greater detail below); rules governing where and when goods and services are sold; debt enforcement and contract regulation; labor and hiring norms; and control over supply chains, routes, and access to markets or resources. A wide range of political activities are regulated or influenced, for example, by requiring permissions for meetings and protests, vetoing political candidates who can campaign in the area, pressuring or forcing people to vote for certain candidates or abstain from voting, and meddling with the work of civic organizations and even local governments. Criminal groups also tend to directly or indirectly provide basic public goods. In the social domain, criminal groups regulate or ban a wide range of behaviors, including loitering, parties, alcohol, and drug use, and impose dress codes and norms on domestic conflicts, gendered conduct, and school or church attendance. These rules are enforced in various ways, including punishments ranging from forced labor to eviction and death.²⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, some criminal groups even restricted mobility to slow contagion, demonstrating an ability to adapt to external shocks.²⁵

A second component of criminal governance is **dispute resolution**. Groups often arbitrate interpersonal disputes, either under pressure from residents in their areas of control²⁶ or because it helps them consolidate their power.²⁷ Research on Brazil, for example, shows the powerful Primeiro Comando da

¹⁹ Arias 2006.

²⁰ Feldmann and Luna 2023, 2.

²¹ Mann 1986; Soifer and vom Hau 2008.

²² Holsti 1996.

²³ Albarracín et al. 2025.

²⁴ For an overview of sources detailing these and other practices in criminal governance regimes, see Feldmann and Luna (2022); Magaloni et al. (2020); Mantilla and Feldmann 2021); Lessing (2021).

²⁵ Davis 2022; De Bruin and Weintraub 2023.

²⁶ Arias and Rodrigues 2006; Lessing 2021.

²⁷ Arjona and Saab 2025.

Capital (PCC) operating rudimentary systems of parallel justice, including trials, debt collection, enforcement, and sentencing.²⁸ Similar practices have been documented among the Sinaloa Cartel and the Knights Templar in Mexico,²⁹ among others. These mechanisms are efficient in speed and compliance but lack due process, leaving individuals vulnerable to abuse.³⁰

Taxation, extortion, or the provision of protection in exchange for payment is a third common practice—arguably one of the most consequential of all. Traditionally analyzed as a ‘protection racket’,³¹ regularized extortion is now understood as a structured governance mechanism, shaping compliance through coercion, reputation, and repeated interaction.³² Mafia studies have illustrated how groups institutionalize protection markets, embedding them in territorial control, dispute resolution, and the regulation of commerce.³³ Recent research expands this perspective, treating extortion as part of broader governance strategies, combining taxation, punishment, and order-making where states are fragile or complicit.³⁴ Evidence suggests that extortion is becoming increasingly common in Latin America,³⁵ flourishing in fragile states such as Ecuador, Haiti, and Peru. Extortion has also surfaced in authoritarian settings, including El Salvador and Venezuela, where repression pushes groups toward more discreet violence. Several studies further illustrate the phenomenon’s reach: The Gulf Clan’s extortion of migrants in the Darién region of Colombia paradoxically facilitated population movement across borders,³⁶ while the Colombian armed group National Liberation Army (ELN) and Venezuelan groups like Tren de Aragua tax and regulate movement through illegal crossing points (so-called ‘*trochas*’) in diverse ways.³⁷ Extortion also targets microbusinesses and services through fees (also known as *cobro de piso* or *vacuna*), creating an onerous system of double taxation and undermining access to basic utilities such as water and electricity, which can become unaffordable for many community members.³⁸

Finally, beyond security provision in extortion schemes, criminal groups often offer **goods and services** to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of the communities they govern.³⁹ In Rio de Janeiro, criminal groups often offer dwellers badly needed goods, such as food and medicine, and during festivities like Christmas, toys and goodies to children. They also frequently organize concerts and parties, events that communities highly deprived of leisure and recreation value.⁴⁰ Criminal groups are also known to offer residents access to electricity, sell water, and even provide cable TV services, as documented in recent work on Medellín and Rio de Janeiro.⁴¹ In Mexico, studies show that drug cartels and gangs provide material assistance—such as food, cash, health care, and housing—as part of strategies for criminal

²⁸ Feltran 2020; Ferreira 2022; Lessing and Willis 2019.

²⁹ Flanigan 2014; Pereda and Décary-Hetu 2024.

³⁰ Barnes 2025.

³¹ Schelling 1967; Tilly 1985.

³² It is important to note that collecting payments in the absence of regulation of conduct or service provision does not entail governance (Lessing 2021). Hence, in this policy document, we only focus on extortion that is part of a criminal governance regime.

³³ Gambetta 1996; Varese 2017, 201.

³⁴ Lessing 2021; Skarbek 2024.

³⁵ Bergman 2018a; Insight Crime 2025; Maloney et al. 2025.

³⁶ Álvarez Velasco et al. 2024.

³⁷ Álvarez Velasco and Jiménez Bayón 2023; García Pinzón and Mantilla 2020; Idler 2019.

³⁸ Bergman 2018b; Fernández 2022; Moncada 2021.

³⁹ Arias and Goldstein 2010; Smith and Varese 2001.

⁴⁰ Barnes 2025.

⁴¹ Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Barnes 2025; Doyle 2021.

governance and territorial control.⁴² Service provision often complements coercion and responds to residents' needs, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴³ In contrast, evidence from the Southern Cone is more fragmented. Evidence from Argentina highlights limited forms of service and good provision, including informal loans and job access, primarily within illegal markets.⁴⁴

As the examples in this section illustrate, the available evidence suggests wide variation in the practices criminal groups adopt across time and place. It is also important to emphasize that the forms and intensity of violence vary across localities where criminal groups exercise governance. We return to this issue when discussing studies on how policies affect criminal governance and violence (Section 5).

II.III Measuring Criminal Governance

Scholars have documented and analyzed criminal governance for decades through detailed qualitative research. Ethnographic studies in Rio de Janeiro,⁴⁵ Jamaica,⁴⁶ and elsewhere have provided rich accounts of how criminal groups rule populations, describing the specific practices, daily dynamics, and lived experiences under criminal rule. This work established the empirical foundation for understanding criminal governance and identified the key dimensions along which these arrangements vary.

More recently, researchers have sought to systematize this qualitative evidence to enable comparison across cases. This work systematically analyzes interviews, ethnographic observations, and documentary sources to identify when and how illicit actors establish authority, provide services, and impose rules. These studies show how ethnographic depth can be converted into systematic evidence, capturing the everyday mechanisms of criminal control while maintaining comparability across contexts.⁴⁷

When scholars have attempted to measure criminal governance quantitatively across multiple cases, they have often relied on proxies. A recent study introduces fiscal analysis as a novel tool to study criminal governance, tracing the influence of criminal actors over municipal budgets.⁴⁸ Other contributions draw on event data, such as forced displacement as an indicator of territorial control,⁴⁹ and a combination of homicide and confrontation data with qualitative evidence to create hybrid measures of criminal governance intensity.⁵⁰ Violence against local prominent leaders has also been used as a proxy of criminal governance at the municipality level.⁵¹ Yet, as scholars note, relying solely on territorial control data as a proxy can be misleading, as the authority of criminal groups is rarely absolute. Groups may regulate entry, movement, and surveillance in their territories but often tolerate state schools, clinics, and services such as energy and telecommunications. Ultimately, their authority depends on a tacit acceptance or forbearance of state and political actors, making criminal governance

⁴² Flanigan 2014; Osorio and Brewer-Osorio 2025.

⁴³ Felbab-Brown 2020.

⁴⁴ Dewey 2020.

⁴⁵ Arias 2006, 2017; Barnes 2025.

⁴⁶ Jaffe 2013.

⁴⁷ Antillano et al. 2020; Chiodelli and Gentili 2021.

⁴⁸ Angulo Amaya 2024.

⁴⁹ Cantor 2014, Marston 2020.

⁵⁰ Díaz and Alves 2022.

⁵¹ Ibarra et al. 2025.

possible in places where the state is not absent.⁵² Likewise, using violence as a proxy for criminal governance can be problematic because similar criminal governance regimes may exhibit different levels and types of violence.

A few studies have attempted to measure criminal governance directly through survey data. In one of the few large-scale efforts to measure prevalence across countries, using two questions from Latinobarómetro surveys, a study estimates that between 70 and 100 million people in Latin America live under some form of criminal governance.⁵³ While this represents a landmark contribution, the authors acknowledge significant measurement challenges. More recently, surveys conducted in eight Latin American countries asked a set of questions to measure the prevalence of various governance practices by criminal groups. Preliminary findings suggest that, on average, 24 percent of respondents report the *presence* of armed groups in their neighborhood. Respondents who reported such presence were then asked whether these groups engage in the following practices: resolving conflicts among neighbors; forbidding or reducing robberies and other property crimes; imposing curfews or restrictions of movement; forbidding or regulating violence among neighbors; imposing norms of behavior in public; and providing medicines, food, or other goods to those in need. Across these practices, reported prevalence ranged from 14 percent to 25 percent among respondents who identified an armed group in their neighborhood. In addition, on average, 52 percent of those reporting the presence of an armed group said that the group demands payments or contributions from people or businesses.⁵⁴

Two recent studies collected detailed original data to systematically measure the scope of criminal governance across localities, documenting various governance practices. One administered a survey to 7,000 residents and businesses in Medellín, documenting various governance practices by criminal organizations across neighborhoods.⁵⁵ The other study gathered data on non-state armed governance by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and criminal groups in 75 rural and urban localities across Colombia through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.⁵⁶

Innovative work has also expanded the measurement toolkit beyond conventional approaches. One study examines how criminal organizations capture civic groups, operationalizing governance through patterns of participation and institutional entanglement.⁵⁷ Another uses network analysis to map illicit urban ecologies, quantifying how actors, spaces, and rules interact to structure governance.⁵⁸ A third turns to discourse and narrative, tracing how legitimacy is produced through language and the control of imaginaries (complex, shared mental concepts).⁵⁹ Together, these approaches extend measurement to symbolic and relational dimensions, offering new ways to make criminal governance observable.

Each methodological approach has distinct strengths and limitations. Qualitative research provides rich evidence of how people experience criminal governance in daily life, capturing mechanisms and processes that are often inaccessible to quantitative data. Ethnographic work reveals the texture of life under criminal rule—the specific ways groups enforce order, the negotiations between residents and

⁵² Albarracín et al. 2025.

⁵³ Uribe et al. 2025.

⁵⁴ World Bank and Harvard University 2025.

⁵⁵ Blattman et al. 2024.

⁵⁶ Arjona and Saab 2025.

⁵⁷ Molenaar 2017.

⁵⁸ Müller 2024.

⁵⁹ Poppi 2023.

armed actors, and the subtle forms of resistance or accommodation that shape governance dynamics. Such detailed evidence allows for identifying and tracing causal processes. However, qualitative studies are difficult to scale and rarely allow for systematic comparison across contexts.

Quantitative data, by contrast, can reveal broader patterns, compare the prevalence and forms of governance across cases, and test hypotheses about causes and consequences. Yet quantitative measurement faces significant obstacles. Records of criminal governance are scarce, and most proxies have serious limitations. Even though surveys offer more direct measurements, operationalizing key concepts and capturing variation in what groups govern—and how they govern—require complex projects of data collection. In addition, there are important validity issues:⁶⁰ We do not yet know how willing respondents are to answer truthfully about the presence and activities of criminal groups or whether such willingness varies systematically across contexts. If respondents are less likely to report criminal governance where groups are stronger or more embedded in local life, surveys will underestimate governance precisely where it is most entrenched. Similarly, if fear reduces truthful reporting where groups are more violent or coercive, surveys may miss the most oppressive regimes. Finally, there is no consensus on how best to operationalize variation in criminal governance—whether it is best captured as a binary variable (present/absent), an ordinal measure of intensity, or a categorical typology capturing distinct forms.⁶¹ As we discuss in Section 6, for policy purposes it is important to identify not only where criminals govern but also *how*, as life under criminal governance can be radically different across cases.

These methodological challenges underscore that advancing our understanding of criminal governance requires both qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are not substitutes but complements—each offer something the other cannot. Qualitative data help researchers design and validate quantitative measures, ensuring they capture what we think they capture. Qualitative work also reveals what quantitative studies miss and identifies new domains or aspects of governance that should be measured. Conversely, quantitative data can reveal puzzles and patterns that warrant deeper qualitative investigation. Whether through individual mixed-methods studies or complementary research by different scholars, the field benefits when both types of evidence inform our understanding. For policymakers seeking to diagnose the extent and nature of criminal governance in their contexts, both types of evidence are essential. We return to these issues in our policy recommendations.

Taken together, the literature reflects a field still grappling with profound methodological challenges but also expanding toward more systematic, innovative, and comparative tools. From ethnographic coding to fiscal analysis, event data, network metrics, and discourse analysis, scholars are gradually building a more plural and rigorous repertoire for measuring criminal politics.

III. WHY DO CRIMINALS GOVERN POPULATIONS?

The growing literature on criminal governance has advanced numerous reasons why criminal groups may benefit from governing civilian populations. Several studies have also described the conditions under which criminal groups are more likely to thrive, with some explicitly focusing on groups that govern

⁶⁰ Uribe et al. 2025.

⁶¹ Durán-Martínez 2024a.

civilian populations in their territories. An even smaller portion has sought to understand why criminal groups may vary in their willingness to rule civilians, in their success, or in their decisions regarding *how* to govern. This section summarizes the main arguments advanced in the extant literature and identifies important gaps in this research. We start by examining the motivations for criminal governance; we then turn to the conditions that enable it; and, finally, we focus on what drives variation in forms of governance. Where relevant, we note which hypotheses about criminal governance also find support in research on rebel and militia governance, as scholars have identified important parallels between how criminal organizations and other non-state armed groups exercise territorial control over civilian populations. These findings show that some arguments are further supported by evidence on other types of non-state armed groups.⁶²

III.I Benefits of Governing Civilians

Several studies have investigated why criminal groups seek to govern residents of areas where they operate, arguing that these organizations do so because governance brings several advantages. Perhaps the most well-known reason is a direct economic benefit: These actors charge for some of their regulations and services. Classic research on the mafia shows criminals selling contract enforcement and protection to the underworld as a revenue source. These actors also extract payments from residents and small businesses in exchange for security from their own members.⁶³ Often, such protection rackets are an important part of their revenue.⁶⁴ It can also provide these organizations with cash flow, as has been documented in Medellín.⁶⁵ Extortion is an important source of revenue for at least some organizations. In El Salvador, for example, it is believed to be the primary source of income for the gangs.⁶⁶

This regular collection of payments may also yield additional indirect benefits. It may help the organization build a reputation of strength and power, which can not only send important signals to potential rival criminal groups but also facilitate the obedience of local residents.⁶⁷ Moreover, taxation by criminal organizations may function as a ‘technology of governance’,⁶⁸ helping establish and maintain control over populations, as scholars of rebel governance have argued.⁶⁹

Forms of governance that go beyond the direct collection of payments, like the regulation of conduct or the provision of goods and services, can also benefit criminal organizations. To start, preserving order in a territory is good for business. Keeping delinquency and unruly behavior at bay makes it easier for

⁶² While rebel and militia groups fighting in civil wars differ from criminal groups in important ways, the literatures on rebel and criminal governance increasingly reveal similar patterns in how non-state armed actors establish and maintain control over territories and populations (Arias et al. 2025; Kalyvas 2015). Although a detailed comparison of these phenomena is beyond the scope of this policy document, we reference relevant findings from rebel and militia governance research when they support the arguments about criminal governance discussed in this section.

⁶³ Gambetta 1996; Smith and Varese 2001.

⁶⁴ Some political parties in Latin America have participated in arrangements with criminal organizations that allow the latter to establish protection rackets, making extortion an engrained practice such as the PRI in Mexico (Kenny and Serrano 2012; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009). In Paraguay, similar dynamics have been linked to the Colorado Party (Feldmann and Luna 2023).

⁶⁵ Blattman et al. 2024; Rettberg and Miller 2023.

⁶⁶ Brown et al. 2025.

⁶⁷ Smith and Varese 2001.

⁶⁸ Mampilly and Thakur 2025.

⁶⁹ Mampilly 2015; Mampilly and Thakur 2025; Revkin 2017.

customers to buy illicit goods because they are less likely to buy in an unsafe environment. In addition, if locals call the police due to an incident, police presence can also scare buyers.⁷⁰ High levels of crime and disorder also put pressure on police and politicians to intervene.⁷¹ By preserving order, criminal groups help keep police presence low, reducing the likelihood of crackdowns, raids, product seizures, and arrests. This also makes interactions with authorities more predictable.⁷² Finally, when criminals regularly tax the production or income of residents, they earn more when local economic activity expands. This gives them incentives to create stability and predictable rules and to reduce transaction costs to encourage economic activity and thereby maximize their own revenue.⁷³

Criminal governance practices can also foster beliefs, emotions, and norms that facilitate civilian cooperation with the ruling criminal group.⁷⁴ The provision of services like education, health, or entertainment can directly cultivate support for these organizations.⁷⁵ Dispute adjudication, which often plays a critical role how an aspiring ruler consolidates power,⁷⁶ can also engender cooperation.⁷⁷ Some types of rules on conduct also trigger support from locals, such as the punishment of theft and rape.⁷⁸ Although directly observing and measuring positive beliefs, emotions, or social norms related to criminal organizations is evidently difficult, different types of evidence suggest that when these groups govern, people living where they operate often view them positively.⁷⁹ This includes observations by ethnographers,⁸⁰ statements in interviews,⁸¹ public demonstrations following the arrest or extradition of group leaders,⁸² and even massive attendance and mourning at rituals when group members die.⁸³

This civilian cooperation, in turn, generates numerous benefits for criminal groups. It can lead to lower levels of reporting to the police, which reduces the likelihood of arrests and drug seizures.⁸⁴ It can make it harder for rival criminal groups to enter and take root in the territory.⁸⁵ Governing criminal actors can often mobilize civilians politically, including to attend protests, support political candidates, or oppose policies and interventions.⁸⁶ This can be a crucial benefit—so much so that, as one author notes,⁸⁷ criminal groups may govern to gain electoral advantages that secure their operations and reward

⁷⁰ Arias 2006; Blattman et al. 2024; Lessing 2021.

⁷¹ Durán-Martínez 2018; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009.

⁷² Arias 2017; Blattman et al. 2024; Durán-Martínez 2018; Feltran 2020; Lessing 2021; Lessing and Willis 2019; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Willis 2015.

⁷³ Blattman et al. 2024; Olson 1993; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Uribe et al. 2025.

⁷⁴ Arias 2006; Arias and Barnes 2017; Arjona and Boucoyannis 2022; Barnes 2017; Blattman et al. 2024. The literature on rebel governance also discusses several mechanisms by which governing populations increase civilian cooperation with the rebel organization (for example, Arjona 2016; Loyle et al. 2023; Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2021).

⁷⁵ Arias and Barnes 2017; Blattman et al. 2024.

⁷⁶ Arjona 2016; Arjona and Boucoyannis 2022; Boucoyannis 2021.

⁷⁷ Arias 2006; Arjona 2016; Arjona and Saab 2025; Lessing and Willis 2019; Willis 2015.

⁷⁸ Davis 2010; Lessing 2021; Taussig 2005.

⁷⁹ The positive attitudes and beliefs toward armed groups that govern have been extensively documented in the rebel governance literature. See, for example, Arjona (2017); Barter (2012); Revkin and Ahram (2020).

⁸⁰ Barnes 2025.

⁸¹ Arias 2017.

⁸² Jaffe 2013.

⁸³ Vásquez 2024.

⁸⁴ Arias 2006; Barnes 2017; Blattman et al. 2024; Trejo and Ley 2020.

⁸⁵ Arias 2006; Arias and Barnes 2017; Gambetta 1996; Lessing 2021; Moncada 2016.

⁸⁶ Albarracín 2018; Arias 2006; Arias and Barnes 2017; Feldmann and Luna 2023; Jaffe 2013; Moncada 2016; Trejo and Ley 2021.

⁸⁷ Cruz 2023.

political allies. Ruling local populations can also facilitate governance of members of the criminal group itself.⁸⁸

Beyond material motivations, some groups regulate behavior for ideological or identity-based reasons. For example, Colombia's Gulf Clan enforces dress codes, while certain ELN fronts demand commitment to progressive causes.⁸⁹ The Templar Knights in Mexico are also known for adopting governance practices that reflect a cult-like, moralizing ideology.⁹⁰ Similarly, ideology has been described as an important factor influencing whether or not, and how, rebel groups govern local populations.⁹¹

III.II In What Contexts Does Criminal Governance Emerge?

The literature on criminal governance provides rich descriptions of the settings where criminals govern populations. These studies typically identify common features of places where criminal governance is observed—such as state weakness, poverty, or the presence of illicit markets—but they focus primarily on characterizing these contexts rather than explaining variation across comparable cases. Drawing on research on both organized crime broadly and criminal governance, this section synthesizes what we know about the contexts that create favorable conditions for criminal governance to develop. The following section then addresses a related but distinct question: Once a criminal group operates in a territory, what determines whether it establishes governance arrangements?

A common explanation of criminal governance is based on a demand and supply argument: Populations that need security, contract enforcement, dispute adjudication, and other services are willing to pay in exchange for the provision of these services.⁹² In most cases, such demand for new governance is high in places where the state is absent or governs poorly. This is true of both urban areas—where most research focuses—like some *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro and some *comunas* in Medellín,⁹³ and rural territories that have valuable natural resources or are strategically important for illicit economies because of their location,⁹⁴ for example, border zones between Mexico and the United States or Colombia and Venezuela.⁹⁵ Whether due to the state's inability to govern well or its unwillingness to do so, this literature suggests that the spaces where criminal groups become rulers are areas where the state fails to fulfill its role as the main provider of security and basic services.

⁸⁸ See Barnes 2017; Lessing 2021; Lessing and Willis 2019. The benefits of civilian cooperation for rebel groups constitute one of the most well-established findings in the civil war literature. These include the many ways that civilians can help rebels maintain territorial control (see Kalyvas 2006). Similar dynamics operate in contexts where criminal groups or ideological groups enmeshed in criminality seek to control territory Felbab-Brown 2017; Feldmann 2024; Kaplan and Nussio 2018 Zubillaga, Hanson, and Sánchez 2022.

⁸⁹ Aponte 2021; Badillo-Sarmiento and Trejos-Rosero 2023; Mantilla and Feldmann 2024.

⁹⁰ Flanigan 2014; Lomnitz 2019.

⁹¹ See Stewart 2021.

⁹² See, for example, Blattman et al. (2024) for a discussion of this argument.

⁹³ See, for example, Arias (2006); Arias and Barnes (2017); Blattman et al. (2024); Brown et al. (2025); Magaloni et al. (2020). While criminal governance has been traditionally believed to be mostly a phenomenon occurring in marginalized neighborhoods of large cities, using survey data on 18 Latin American countries Uribe et. al (2025) find it to be prevalent in cities of all sizes.

⁹⁴ Blume 2021; Ley et al. 2019.

⁹⁵ García Pinzón and Mantilla 2020; Idler 2019.

At the same time, several scholars have emphasized that criminal groups do not simply thrive where the state is absent or weak but also where it allows for various forms of cooperation between state actors and criminal organizations.⁹⁶ In Brazil, for example, studies have documented that police officers divert weapons to gangs;⁹⁷ in Medellín, police officers have charged gangs for allowing them to operate;⁹⁸ and numerous studies have documented links between politicians and criminal organizations to win local elections in cities in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Jamaica.⁹⁹ These forms of ‘crime-state relations’¹⁰⁰ emerge due to numerous factors, including weak institutions, struggling economies, the corruption of law enforcement agencies, forms of urban planning that lead to the segregation of space, and transitional processes from authoritarianism to democracy with poor security sector reform.¹⁰¹ The literature suggests that state complicity is a critical factor in explaining the sustainability and growth of organized crime in general and criminal governance in particular.¹⁰²

It is important to note that, in many cases, criminal groups do not have full monopoly over the use of violence or governance. Instead, stable arrangements—often called duopolies of violence¹⁰³—emerge where both the state and criminal organizations complement each other. In these arrangements, criminal groups maintain order and regulate daily life while state actors tolerate (or enable) criminal activity.¹⁰⁴ Often, criminal and state actors informally reach understandings over the extent of their own ‘jurisdictions’, that is, which populations and activities are governed by which actor and set of rules.¹⁰⁵ In these contexts, violence tends to remain at low levels, police actions are selective, and the interests of both state and criminal actors are served.¹⁰⁶

Beyond the initial conditions that enable criminal governance to emerge, several factors contribute to its persistence. Brokers, civic associations, and prison-street links often help sustain the arrangements between state actors and criminal groups by mediating their relationships and deriving some benefits for local communities. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, civic associations facilitate deals between politicians who want to campaign in certain favelas and the gangs that operate in them, often in exchange for public goods for their communities.¹⁰⁷ Intimidation and corruption of prison authorities and guards help consolidate criminal entities’ position as the de facto authorities, as illustrated by the case of the PCC in São Paulo.¹⁰⁸ This dynamic arises against the backdrop of states forfeiting their role and delegating local order to criminal groups in difficult-to-govern areas, allowing criminal organizations to pay for the provision of public goods.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁶ Durán-Martínez 2018; Feldmann and Luna 2022, 2023; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Jaramillo 2004; Mantilla and Feldmann 2021; Trejo and Ley 2020.

⁹⁷ Dreyfus et al. 2008.

⁹⁸ Arias 2017.

⁹⁹ See Barnes (2017) for an overview of various types of collaborative relationships between criminal groups and the state.

¹⁰⁰ See Barnes (2017).

¹⁰¹ Davis 2020; Feldmann and Luna 2023; Mantilla and Feldmann 2021; Trejo and Ley 2020.

¹⁰² Trejo and Ley 2020, Pansters 2018.

¹⁰³ Skaperdas 2001.

¹⁰⁴ Barnes 2017; Blattman et al. 2024; Lessing 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Willis 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Arias 2006; Blattman et al. 2024; Lessing 2021; Magaloni et al. 2020; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Uribe et al. 2025; Willis 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Arias 2009; Arias and Barnes 2017; Lessing and Willis 2019; Willis 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Dudley and Taylor 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Lessing 2024.

III.III Understanding Variation in Criminal Governance

The literature has identified numerous reasons why criminal groups may benefit from governing civilian populations and the contextual factors that tend to characterize places where criminal governance regimes exist. However, a surprisingly small number of studies have focused on understanding why criminal governance varies once groups are present. Studies have focused on variation along several key dimensions. The most investigated is the level and type of violence used against civilian populations, ranging from highly coercive regimes that rely heavily on intimidation and punishment to more cooperative arrangements that minimize violence.¹¹⁰ Researchers also examine variation in the scope of governance—whether criminal groups regulate narrow aspects of daily life or exercise comprehensive control over economic, social, and political activities.¹¹¹ Others focus on the extent to which criminal groups provide benefits.¹¹² Another important dimension is the degree of legitimacy or popular support that criminal groups enjoy, which affects both their governing capacity and their relationship with local populations.¹¹³ Additionally, scholars analyze differences in what criminal groups choose to govern, distinguishing between those that focus primarily on regulating illegal markets versus those that extend their authority to broader social order and public goods provision.¹¹⁴ In addition, significant attention has been paid to variation in the relationships between criminal groups and state actors, ranging from direct confrontation to various forms of collusion and cooperation.¹¹⁵

Taken together, these studies have offered several strands of arguments to explain why groups govern and why they do so in different ways. One set of explanations focuses on contextual factors. One of the most important is the relation between the criminal organization and state actors. While different studies focus on slightly different aspects of this relationship, they converge on the idea that state behavior sets the incentives for what criminals choose to govern, how visibly they rule, and how violent or ‘service-oriented’ their order becomes. For example, several studies have argued that in Rio de Janeiro, militias—whose members include former and even current members of state security forces—and gangs display distinct governance patterns in terms of their intervention in economic activities, strategies to cultivate local support, approach to civic associations, and levels and forms of violence they use.¹¹⁶

Other arguments focus on competition by rival organizations, which is widely believed to increase the odds of higher levels of violence. However, some studies find that the impact of intergroup competition on criminal governance is mediated by other factors. For example, when a group has brokered networks with the state and the local community, rivalries are managed through negotiated coexistence and mediated enforcement; where networks are fragmented or predatory, competition tends toward coercion-heavy disorder.¹¹⁷ Likewise, when groups depend on resident cooperation, they increase benefit provision to win information and compliance, whereas low dependence on locals pushes the organization toward coercion and extractive practices.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Barnes 2025; Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹¹¹ Arjona and Saab 2025; Blattman et al. 2024.

¹¹² Arias and Rodrigues 2006; Barnes 2025.

¹¹³ Lessing 2021.

¹¹⁴ Arias 2017; Lessing 2021.

¹¹⁵ Arias and Barnes 2017; Flom 2022; Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹¹⁶ Arias and Barnes 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹¹⁷ Arias 2017.

¹¹⁸ Barnes 2025.

Other contextual factors that have been found to influence criminal governance are the strength of local associations,¹¹⁹ which allow residents to negotiate with state actors and armed groups, monitor behavior, and channel demands to constrain abuse; the structure of local illicit markets, which pushes governance toward negotiated, lower-visibility order in stable/monopolized markets but toward coercive, turf-defensive rule when markets are fragmented or contested;¹²⁰ and the racial and ethnic composition of the organization, which may influence its ability to expand into territories inhabited by members of different ethnic groups.¹²¹

Other arguments focus on the structure and quality of networks connecting criminals, state actors, and civic intermediaries. In communities with embedded, brokered networks that are thick, reciprocal, and monitored through community institutions, criminal governance is more stable and predictable and less violent; where such networks are fragmented or predatory, criminal governance is narrower, extractive, volatile, and based on coercion.¹²²

A few studies argue that the local populations criminal groups seek to govern have agency, and their responses can influence whether and how a criminal group governs them. The quality of local (state or non-state) governance¹²³ and the existence of intercommunity coordination¹²⁴ have been found to influence the likelihood that local communities can launch and sustain resistance to criminal rulers, thereby limiting criminal power. There are also various forms of community resistance to extortion, from isolated defiance to vigilantism and alliances with state actors, some of which can influence the behavior of criminal organizations.¹²⁵ Even in places where organized resistance cannot undermine criminal rule, the behavior of the community can influence *how* these regimes function and how they affect residents. In the Chapare region in Bolivia, for example, peasant communities regulate the way criminal groups involved in the drug business may operate, including their interaction with residents and the use of violence.¹²⁶ In Guerrero, Mexico, after arresting members of organized crime, indigenous communities try them in open hearings and place them in reintegration programs through reeducation and community service guided by community elders.¹²⁷

Another strand of arguments focuses on the attributes of criminal organizations. Groups' leadership styles, internal rules, and capacities tilt governance toward different mixes of coercion and benefit provision, conditioning both how communities experience rule and how policies aimed at undermining it will fare.¹²⁸ We refer to the implications of these arguments for policy later in the document.

Finally, recent work documents a positive association between state presence and criminal governance. There are several potential explanations for this finding.¹²⁹ Only two have empirical support so far. First, a study of criminal groups in Medellín (*combos*) finds that neighborhoods that were closer to state security posts developed more intensive criminal rule: Criminal organizations increased rule

¹¹⁹ Arias 2017.

¹²⁰ Arias 2017.

¹²¹ Lessing 2021.

¹²² Arias 2009; Arias and Barnes 2017.

¹²³ Arjona 2016; Arjona and Saab 2025; Ley et al. 2019.

¹²⁴ Ley et al. 2019.

¹²⁵ Moncada 2021.

¹²⁶ Grisaffi 2025.

¹²⁷ Ley et al. 2019.

¹²⁸ Barnes 2022, 2025; Lessing 2021.

¹²⁹ Uribe et al. 2025.

making and dispute resolution to dampen visible disorder, deter police predation, and safeguard drug profits. This implies that, where illicit rents are high and criminal rule already exists, state and criminal governance can be strategic complements rather than substitutes. Another study of over 70 communities in Colombia investigates the common claim that non-state rule flourishes where the state is weak, especially in terms of security, service provision, and infrastructure. First, the study finds that high-quality governance—effective and perceived as fair—hinders the emergence of non-state rule, regardless of whether it is provided by the state or by other local authorities (including civic leaders and traditional ethnic institutions); second, it finds that dispute adjudication plays a critical role; and third, it reports that the expansion of state capacity can *facilitate* armed group governance by disrupting existing local adjudication without providing a viable alternative.¹³⁰

IV. THE CONSEQUENCES OF CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The consequences of the rise and expansion of criminal governance are manifold. Research is only beginning to scratch the surface in understanding how such regimes affect people, politics, economics, culture, and society at large. Most scholars agree that criminal governance undermines citizens' fundamental rights and increases their vulnerabilities,¹³¹ even when criminal groups provide order or services that residents may value. As we will show, a growing literature on the effects of criminal governance on democracy—and on the rights it affords citizens—documents a range of troubling consequences. Beyond this, however, we have little empirical evidence on the overall effect of criminal governance on the economy and society.

IV.I Criminal Governance and Its Influence on Politics

The first impact of criminal governance concerns the body politic. Criminal governance represents a sharp deviation from conventional politics. Armed actors—whether operating independently or in collusion with state officials—rule not to promote the common good but to secure and boost their economic interests.¹³² Most research has examined the impact of organized crime broadly—campaign financing, corruption, violence against officials—rather than the distinctive political effects of criminal governance per se. This gap partly reflects the difficulty of analytically separating criminal governance from criminal politics more generally.¹³³ Yet understanding how territorial control and governance functions shape political dynamics is crucial, as groups that govern populations wield different forms of leverage than those that merely operate criminal enterprises.

When criminal groups establish governance regimes, they can influence politics in two ways. Like any powerful criminal organization, they can corrupt officials, rig elections, and intimidate or even kill opponents.¹³⁴ These systematic attacks on police, prosecutors, judges, politicians, journalists, and educators undermine the very foundations of democracy. But groups that govern populations also leverage their local power and authority to mobilize political support and influence political activities in

¹³⁰ Arjona and Saab 2025.

¹³¹ Sampaio 2024; Trejo and Ley 2018.

¹³² Arias 2017; Corrales and Freeman 2024.

¹³³ Feldmann and Luna 2023.

¹³⁴ Albarracín 2018, 2025; Córdoba 2019; Trejo and Ley 2020.

favorable ways. In Brazil, drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) support favorable candidates in local elections.¹³⁵ A similar pattern can be found in Mexico, where powerful cartels influence electoral campaigns and pressure elected officials to implement friendly policies.¹³⁶ In Colombia and Venezuela, on the other hand, the ELN exerts a similar influence in areas where it has a significant presence.¹³⁷ This combination of coercion capacity, power, and influence enables deeper forms of political capture than criminal organizations without governance functions typically achieve.

The impact of criminal governance affects several dimensions of democracy. Procedurally—that is, the structures, processes, and institutions that make up the democratic system—it weakens elections, courts, and other accountability mechanisms.¹³⁸ Substantively—the rights and outcomes democracy provides in practice—it distorts representation, curtails rights, and shifts the balance of power between citizens and rulers.¹³⁹ As criminal groups accrue wealth and influence, they move from economic to political capture—financing loyal candidates, ensuring impunity, and silencing or eliminating opponents.¹⁴⁰ Numerous studies offer detailed evidence of these dynamics in Latin America. In Mexico, criminal support for political campaigns has skewed democratic competition.¹⁴¹ In Brazil, organized crime’s influence on elections is well documented (see Box 1).

Box 1. How Criminal Groups Affect Democracy in Brazil

Criminal syndicates have developed significant clout over the years in Brazilian politics, especially at the municipal level. Their influence is particularly intense within underserved communities across urban peripheries in major metropolitan areas characterized by limited state presence and personalized political competition. Research on criminal governance shows the existence of political-criminal entanglements predicated on corrupt schemes that undermine democratic governance.¹⁴² To the extent that criminal syndicates regulate everyday life for residents, they gain leverage over local politicians seeking votes, campaign financing, or policy implementation. These groups use their power in diverse ways, creating distinct arrangements, ranging from tacit non-aggression pacts with politicians or state actors to more explicit forms of collaboration, where politicians rely on criminal actors to mobilize voters, threaten rivals, and run political campaigns. Rather than institutional breakdown, these schemes constitute a reconfiguration of governance that undermines democracy, where formal political authority coexists with and depends on criminal power. In Rio de Janeiro, the Comando Vermelho (CV) and so-called *militias* (groups composed of active or former members of security forces and police) have become political actors in parts of the city, using coercion and clientelism to control territory while inserting themselves directly into local electoral politics and municipal institutions by running candidates, supporting campaigns, and pressuring for friendly security policies that guarantee their influence and shield them from accountability.¹⁴³ In São Paulo, the PCC, which has attained a dominant position, displays a less conspicuous, direct but equally consequential role,

¹³⁵ Trudeau 2024.

¹³⁶ Corrales and Freeman 2024; Trejo and Ley 2021.

¹³⁷ Mantilla and Feldmann 2024.

¹³⁸ Corrales and Freeman 2024.

¹³⁹ Luna 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Lessing 2021; Trejo and Ley 2020.

¹⁴¹ Blume 2017; Trejo and Ley 2021.

¹⁴² Albarracín 2018.

¹⁴³ Arias 2017; Barnes 2025.

influencing local governance through its capacity to tamper with elections and negotiate with authorities across São Paulo and beyond.¹⁴⁴ In short, the intrusion of criminal actors in politics signals the emergence of a new political order that negatively affects critical dimensions of democracy including participation, representation, and accountability.¹⁴⁵

Beyond financing, violence remains a central tool of political interference. Violence against politicians is a tool to create or preserve criminal governance regimes.¹⁴⁶ More than 30 candidates were murdered during Mexico's 2024 elections.¹⁴⁷ Brazil has also experienced targeted killings of politicians in cities, rural areas, and the Amazon, totaling almost 900 killings and homicide attempts between 1985 and 2024.¹⁴⁸ Ecuador has also recently seen a sharp escalation in attacks on political figures, including the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio while campaigning in Quito in 2023.¹⁴⁹

In contexts where criminal organizations control territory, they often rely on *both* violence and economic power to shape local politics in beneficial ways. They often influence elections through a mix of clientelism funded by illicit revenues and violent coercion.¹⁵⁰ Electoral interference of this nature has been documented in Mexico,¹⁵¹ Colombia,¹⁵² Brazil,¹⁵³ and Ecuador.¹⁵⁴ Colombian scholars in the 1980s aptly coined the term *clientelismo armado* ('armed clientelism') to describe these dynamics.¹⁵⁵ Criminal groups also suppress media freedom, silencing journalists who expose their political ties. Such pressures not only distort campaigns and candidate selection but also undermine freedom of expression—a cornerstone of democratic citizenship.¹⁵⁶

The substantive effects of criminal capture of the state are equally corrosive: It undermines political competition and often leaves independent and anticrime platform candidates at a considerable disadvantage with little chance of success.¹⁵⁷ Elected politicians backed by criminal networks tend to serve criminal interests rather than their constituents.¹⁵⁸ Accountability breaks down as officials are coerced or co-opted, and policy outcomes—especially in security and justice—are shaped by criminal preferences.¹⁵⁹ When criminal actors provide justice, security, or material assistance—effectively functioning as social policymakers—these benefits come with strings attached, requiring silence or loyalty from recipients and ultimately serving to entrench coercion and dependency.¹⁶⁰

¹⁴⁴ Feltran 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Albarracín 2018.

¹⁴⁶ Feldmann and Luna 2025; Luna and Feldmann 2025; Osorio 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Pardo 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Albarracín 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Clapp 2024; Mantilla et al. 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Cruz 2023.

¹⁵¹ Pereda and Décary-Hetu 2024; Trejo and Ley 2020.

¹⁵² Badillo-Sarmiento et al. 2025; Blattman et al. 2024; Hochmüller 2022; Mantilla and Feldmann 2024; Naef 2023.

¹⁵³ Feltran 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Mantilla et al. 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Peñate 1999.

¹⁵⁶ Trejo and Skigin 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Trejo and Ley 2020; Trudeau 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Duncan 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Arias 2017; Corrales and Freeman 2024; Luna 2024.

¹⁶⁰ Arias 2006, 2017; Doyle 2021; Lessing 2022; Mantilla and Feldmann 2021.

The extent of political capture varies by context. In fragmented systems, capture remains local; in cases of large, nationally organized groups—as in Colombia or present-day Mexico—it extends to the regional and national levels.¹⁶¹ While some arrangements produce temporary stability, such as the PCC’s ‘pacification’ of São Paulo,¹⁶² the long-term effects remain corrosive. Moreover, dismantling entrenched criminal regimes often unleashes major political and economic disruption.¹⁶³

Ultimately, criminal governance undermines the rule of law: Through violence, extortion, and intimidation, criminal groups systematically violate civil, political, and social rights.¹⁶⁴ The state’s failure to curb impunity sustains these abuses.¹⁶⁵ In extreme cases, violence obstructs basic services, as in Haiti, where schools and hospitals have been forced to close.¹⁶⁶

Public disillusionment under such conditions often translates into support for authoritarian ‘iron-fist’ measures as societies demand decisive action to curb the actions of criminal groups.¹⁶⁷

While popular, these strategies erode due process, disproportionately harm marginalized communities, and strengthen security forces at democracy’s expense.¹⁶⁸ Mass detentions in El Salvador under President Bukele illustrate how the demand for security can normalize authoritarian practices.¹⁶⁹ Similar patterns of democratic backsliding have emerged across the region.¹⁷⁰

IV.II Criminal Governance and Its Influence on the Economy

Compared to politics, the economic effects of criminal governance are far less studied, though emerging research highlights important trends. Criminal organizations distort markets through extortion, control of supply chains, and illegal taxation, all of which deter investment and entrepreneurship.¹⁷¹ These practices function as regressive taxes, hitting small businesses and women entrepreneurs hardest, while also driving up consumer prices.¹⁷² In addition, criminal governance often blurs the line between formal and informal economies and has the potential to compromise legal businesses.¹⁷³

Extortion and protection rackets affect consumers by imposing burdensome, informal taxes on residents.¹⁷⁴ The dynamics of extortion vary, thereby affecting local populations differently. Competition among rival groups raises extortion prices, further deepening their negative impact on communities but securing stable revenue for criminal organizations.¹⁷⁵ In some contexts, efforts to crack down on

¹⁶¹ Albarracín et al. 2023; Duncan 2015.

¹⁶² Feltran 2020.

¹⁶³ Kenny and Serrano 2012.

¹⁶⁴ Anaya Muñoz and Frey 2018; Badillo-Sarmiento and Trejos-Rosero 2025; Feldmann 2024; Lessing 2015; Atuesta and Ponce 2017.

¹⁶⁵ Méndez et al. 1999.

¹⁶⁶ Felbab-Brown 2017; Sampaio 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Cruz 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Bell-Martin and Marston 2023; Lessing 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Guzmán et al. 2025.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson 2025; Samaniego-Bailón and Zambrano-García 2022.

¹⁷¹ Arias 2006; Doyle 2021; Lessing 2021.

¹⁷² Bell-Martin and Marston 2023; Sampó et al. 2023.

¹⁷³ Feldmann and Luna 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Fontes 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Magaloni et al. 2020; Moncada 2021.

extortion have backfired, as in Buenaventura, Colombia, where antiextortion drives increased costs of basic services as groups start charging higher prices for services to make up for their losses.¹⁷⁶ In parts of Mexico, dominant groups have even replaced extortion schemes after attaining direct control of legal markets, inflating prices for basic goods.¹⁷⁷ Similar conditions arise in underserved communities in large metropolitan areas in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.¹⁷⁸ Recent studies show that criminal governance schemes are affecting economic activities in rural communities in Central America.¹⁷⁹

While predatory practices dominate, criminal governance may at times foster temporary economic stability as criminal actors reduce uncertainty and transaction costs when they preserve order and regulate licit and illicit markets, transforming places previously characterized by unpredictable violence.¹⁸⁰ An ethnographic study of La Salada market in Buenos Aires, for example, illustrates how such arrangements allow commerce to thrive in environments of insecurity and distrust. The PCC in São Paulo is another example: The group's consolidation coincided with reduced violence and greater commercial activity.¹⁸¹

At the national scale, illicit economies constitute a major share of gross domestic product (GDP). Drawing on International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, a study estimates that illegal economies account for 11.8 percent of global GDP, 17.8 percent in Central America and the Caribbean, and 20 percent in South America.¹⁸² In Colombia, the drug trade alone made up 7 percent of GDP in the 1980s, 3–4 percent in the 1990s¹⁸³ and about 3 percent between 2015 and 2018.¹⁸⁴ These illicit economies often operate under criminal governance structures that provide the order and regulation necessary for sustained economic activity. Building on debates in political economy,¹⁸⁵ recent work posits that pervasive “criminal politics” leads to “botched development.”¹⁸⁶ In such contexts, legal and illegal economies intertwine, fueling corruption, violence, institutional decay, and environmental harm.¹⁸⁷ While stability may appear in the short term, the long-term outcome is entrenched underdevelopment and inequality.

Overall, the literature points to a fundamentally negative economic impact of criminal governance despite any short-term stabilizing effects. While criminal actors may temporarily reduce transaction costs and enable commerce in specific contexts, these arrangements impose substantial long-term costs: They divert resources from productive activities, discourage formal investment, promote economic informality, and entrench inequality. The literature, however, faces significant empirical limitations. Systematic cross-national comparisons remain scarce, and firm-level analyses are virtually absent due to data constraints.

¹⁷⁶ Fernández 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Author interview with Mexican business owner, from Guerrero. Chicago, September 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Bergman 2018a; Moncada 2021.

¹⁷⁹ Blume 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Dewey 2016.

¹⁸¹ Feltran 2020.

¹⁸² EY 2025.

¹⁸³ Thoumi 2016.

¹⁸⁴ Montenegro et al. 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Acemoglu et al. 2005; Mazzuca and Munck 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Feldmann and Luna 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Dewey and Thomas 2022.

IV.III Criminal Governance and Its Influence on Society and Culture

Criminal governance also transforms the social and cultural fabric of communities. By imposing rules, extracting resources, and settling disputes, criminal groups function as everyday authorities. Ethnographic work in Brazil,¹⁸⁸ Mexico,¹⁸⁹ and Colombia¹⁹⁰ shows how cartels, militias, and prison gangs regulate behavior, enforce curfews, and even run informal courts. These practices are often co-produced with politicians, bureaucrats, and community leaders.¹⁹¹

While such arrangements sometimes reduce petty crime, they often generate selective violence against rivals, civic leaders, women, and marginalized groups.¹⁹² Communities shift their trust away from public institutions and toward criminal brokers, who provide benefits like funeral aid or dispute resolution in exchange for loyalty.¹⁹³ Control is maintained through credible violence, surveillance networks, and the capture of local associations.¹⁹⁴

Though these systems may reduce transaction costs in informal markets, they entrench corruption and structural informality.¹⁹⁵ Public services—schools, health clinics, transportation—often operate only with criminal approval, restricting access to education and health care.¹⁹⁶ Studies suggest such conditions inhibit social mobility, weaken collective action, and contribute to forced migration.¹⁹⁷

Culturally, *narco culture* illustrates the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of criminal governance. Emerging initially in Mexico and Colombia, narco culture has spread throughout Latin America.¹⁹⁸ It encompasses music (for example, narcocorridos and urban genres), fashion, architecture, and media. The celebration and glamorization of drug trafficking reveal and are informed by social frustration with entrenched inequalities, the state's limited capacity to provide jobs and security, and the lack of pathways for upward mobility.¹⁹⁹ The figure of *la Buchona* underscores the gendered nature of narco culture. Once a derogatory label, it now refers to women—especially in northern Mexico—who embody a hyper-feminized style tied to drug trafficking. With surgically enhanced bodies, designer clothing, and conspicuous luxury, the *Buchona* reflects both the allure and contradictions of narco culture²⁰⁰ and illustrates how criminal governance reshapes not just institutional relationships but intimate social identities and gender norms.

Summing up, the literature underlines that criminal governance exerts deeply negative effects across politics, the economy, and society. Politically, it undermines democratic institutions by corrupting officials, skewing elections, silencing journalists, and entrenching coercive clientelism, thereby advancing criminal rather than public interests. Economically, it distorts markets through extortion, illegal taxation, and capture of supply chains, imposing regressive burdens on small businesses while

¹⁸⁸ Biondi 2016.

¹⁸⁹ Herrera 2021.

¹⁹⁰ Badillo-Sarmiento and Trejos-Rosero 2023; Duncan 2022.

¹⁹¹ Arias 2006; García Pinzón and Mantilla 2020; Idler 2019; Mantilla and Feldmann 2024.

¹⁹² Blattman et al. 2021.

¹⁹³ Auyero 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Barnes 2025; Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009.

¹⁹⁶ Arias 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Blattman et al. 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Rojas Sotelo 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Aravena and Guzmán 2023; Astorga 2000.

²⁰⁰ Valenzuela Arce 2024.

intertwining legal and illegal economies in ways that generate short-term stability but long-term underdevelopment and inequality. Socially and culturally, it reshapes community life by regulating behavior, delivering selective benefits, and fostering dependence on criminal brokers, while reinforcing violence, exclusion, and often the exaltation of a criminal lifestyle (*narco* culture). Although these arrangements may at times reduce violence or transaction costs, the broader scholarly consensus highlights their enduring harm, weakening rule of law, perpetuating inequality, and fueling democratic backsliding, with significant gaps remaining in empirical evidence on their full economic and societal impact.

V. INTERVENTIONS TO UNDERMINE CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

While the prevalence and importance of criminal governance are increasingly recognized, policies are usually designed to decrease criminal violence, reduce youth participation in criminal groups, or undermine illicit markets rather than tackling criminal governance *per se*. A few interventions have explicitly aimed to disrupt the territorial control of criminal groups. This section briefly summarizes insights from studies on the effects of three common types of policies in Latin America—law enforcement approaches, community-based interventions, and truces or negotiations with armed groups—which typically target local areas where criminal groups are powerful. While evaluations seldom focus on criminal governance as an outcome, we consider what the available evidence suggests about these policies’ implications for criminal governance.

Most cases do not fall neatly into a single category since policies often blend elements across approaches. We therefore classify cases according to their predominant component. The case of El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele—often portrayed as a hybrid that combines hardline law enforcement with a more limited community-based component and (at least earlier) negotiations with criminal groups—is discussed at the end.

V.I Law Enforcement Approaches

Most policies to counter organized crime in Latin America have relied on a law enforcement approach. Often, such policies involve militarization, understood as cases where “government agencies tasked with providing public safety adopt the weapons, organizational structure, and training typical of the armed forces.”²⁰¹ In practice, this has included many crackdowns (short-term, high-intensity surges in enforcement directed at a specific place or group),²⁰² and so-called decapitation operations (that is, removal of criminal leaders via arrest, killing, or extradition in to disrupt their organizations²⁰³). Some form of militarization has been adopted at some point in several countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021, 521.

²⁰² Sherman 1990.

²⁰³ Lindo and Padilla-Romo 2018.

²⁰⁴ Calderón et al. 2015; Flores-Macías 2018; Phillips 2015.

While the impact of militarization policies on criminal governance has been rarely assessed directly,²⁰⁵ several studies have evaluated their impact on violence. These findings offer insights on the potential impact on criminal governance as well. A large literature—mostly focused on Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico—finds that these operations increase various forms of violence and often displace it to new locations,²⁰⁶ fragment criminal organizations, intensify competition, and fail to reduce crime as well as perceptions of safety.²⁰⁷ Several mechanisms have been invoked to explain these findings: the disruption of internal command-and-control dynamics of the criminal organization; the unraveling of collusive arrangements with officials or rival organizations; the weakening of security governance by criminal groups in certain territories, which facilitate predatory behaviors by other criminal actors; the incentives these policies provide for criminal organizations to increase their firepower; the neglect of skills needed to protect civil liberties and human rights in training of military members, which often leads them to become perpetrators of extrajudicial killings and kidnapping; and changes in payoffs across criminal activities, for example, by making extortion more appealing.²⁰⁸ Militarization can also weaken state capacity not only by decreasing its ability to provide public safety but also by reducing its fiscal capacity, as the deterioration of public safety undermines citizens' willingness to pay taxes.²⁰⁹ Despite these effects, studies of public opinion find that people in countries plagued by criminal violence tend to support militarization policies and implementation can increase support for the state²¹⁰—though such support depends on the human costs involved.²¹¹

These findings—and the theorized mechanisms—have ambiguous implications for criminal governance. On one hand, disruption of a group's internal structure or its relationship with other actors may temporarily reduce its capacity to provide order, adjudicate disputes, and take on other governance roles, all conditions that decrease these groups' appeal in the eyes of communities. On the other hand, groups often adapt as new leaders emerge, new bargains with state actors are formed, and winners consolidate territorial control. The most likely outcome is that criminal governance, even when temporarily disrupted, persists—either under the same organization or a successor. Moreover, if decapitation displaces violence because armed groups seek to expand or relocate in new places, criminal governance may emerge in new territories. The weakening of state capacity²¹² that accompanies militarization may further facilitate the consolidation of criminal governance regimes.

²⁰⁵ Policies that combine militarization with other components are discussed below. Some have been evaluated for their effects on territorial control and criminal governance.

²⁰⁶ Not all forms of violence are affected in the same way. For example, leadership removals in Mexico are associated with higher levels of extortion but not of kidnappings, perhaps because these types of crime involve different opportunity structures: extortion is less risky and requires less effort than kidnapping (Estévez-Soto and Esteban 2025).

²⁰⁷ Atuesta and Ponce 2017; Blair and Weintraub 2023; Calderón et al. 2015; Castillo and Kronick 2020; Contreras Velasco 2025; Dell 2015; Durán-Martínez 2018; Espinosa and Rubin 2015; Estévez-Soto and Esteban 2025; Lessing 2017; Lindo and Padilla-Romo 2018; Magaloni et al. 2020; Osorio 2015; Trejo and Ley 2020. Some studies find that violence increases both in places where removal of leaders takes place and in neighboring municipalities (for example, Calderón et al. 2015; Osorio 2015). However, one study in Mexico finds that while decapitation increased violence where it took place as well as in municipalities where criminal groups operated, it reduced violence in nearby municipalities (Lindo and Padilla-Romo 2018). It is important to note that *mano dura* policies have enjoyed broad public support in El Salvador. However, in this case, they pair militarization with mass incarceration and an ongoing state of exception—features that are not typically part of militarization policies elsewhere.

²⁰⁸ Estévez-Soto and Esteban 2025; Flores-Macías 2018.

²⁰⁹ Flores-Macías 2018.

²¹⁰ Blair et al. 2025; Córdova and Tiscornia 2025; Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021.

²¹¹ Masullo and Morisi 2024.

²¹² Flores-Macías 2018.

V.II Community-Based Interventions

Another set of policies that have been implemented across Latin America work with residents, local groups, and municipal services to reduce recruitment, violence, extortion, and illegal activities in places where criminal groups have high levels of power and influence. At times, these policies have involved partnership with the private sector (Medellín and Monterrey) and investment in public spaces and services (Monterrey, Chihuahua City, and Medellín).²¹³ These policies usually involve a ‘package’ of interventions that seek to simultaneously address different factors that facilitate the activities and embeddedness of gangs, such as security, state provision of services, economic opportunities for local residents, and coordination between state agencies and civil society organizations.²¹⁴ These policies are often referred to as ‘community-based’ interventions. Many of them also include a law enforcement component.

While these policies are usually not explicitly designed to undermine criminal governance, they do seek to reduce the influence of criminal groups and, in some cases, their territorial control. There are several examples across countries, with mixed results. Between 2010 and 2014, as part of the United States’ Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded interventions in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, where neighborhoods were randomly selected to receive the intervention. The intervention consisted of different components in each setting, where municipal teams partnered with police, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and residents to diagnose local risks and implement a combination of youth outreach/mentoring and job training, community policing/problem solving, environmental design fixes (lighting, cleanups, graffiti removal), and observatories to track progress. An evaluation conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), based on a baseline survey as well as midpoint and posttreatment surveys, found that treated neighborhoods showed significant reductions in extortion, murders, illegal drug sales, and robberies. Perceived insecurity also declined. Survey respondents also reported less neighborhood disorder due to gangs and higher satisfaction with, and trust of, the police.²¹⁵

Another intervention that relied on various components is Medellín’s *Metrocable*. In 2004, the city built a cable-propelled transit system and various infrastructure projects, increased police patrols, and established a family police station, among others. An evaluation found that the project decreased homicides substantially.²¹⁶ In Bogotá, street segments were randomly assigned to receive more police patrol time, better city service provision (for example, street lighting and cleanup), or both. An impact evaluation found no evidence of overall crime reduction. However, improving service provision did lead to a moderate reduction of crime in the street segments that received better services. Unfortunately, the study also found evidence of *increased* crime in nearby streets.²¹⁷

While these studies do not focus on the effects on criminal governance, the challenges they identify are likely to also undermine these interventions’ potential effect on criminal governance: sustainability over

²¹³ Díaz Montemayor 2019; Moncada 2016.

²¹⁴ Moncada 2016; Frühling 2007; Ungar and Arias 2012.

²¹⁵ Berk-Seligson et al. 2014. It is important to note, however, that this impact evaluation was later criticized in a report that, based on a different approach to analyzing the data, found that it could not rule out that the intervention had either positive or negative effects (Rosnick et al. 2016). This reanalysis was, in turn, questioned by LAPOP (Main and Jung 2016).

²¹⁶ Cerda et al. 2012.

²¹⁷ Blattman et al. 2021.

time and police abuse. The mechanisms by which this type of program could undermine criminal governance require sustaining service provision and state-civil society coordination over time. In addition, police or military abuse create distrust in the state and can undermine any progress made by other program components. These lessons are further clarified in the community-based policy that has received most attention in Latin America—one that also had a strong policing component: Rio de Janeiro’s Police Pacification Units (Box 2).

Box 2. Lessons from Rio de Janeiro’s Pacifying Police Units (UPPs)

Rio de Janeiro’s *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* (UPPs) were launched by the Rio de Janeiro State Public Security Secretariat in 2008, in the lead-up to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. The program sought to recover territorial control of favelas from criminal groups; reduce armed confrontations and the open display of heavy weapons; integrate these areas into the formal city through coordinated public services and infrastructure; and expand residents’ access to services and rights.²¹⁸ UPP deployments typically began with an occupation by an elite police unit (BOPE) (and, at times, the army), followed by the permanent deployment of young officers who received two weeks of human rights training²¹⁹ and patrolled the communities providing proactive, community-oriented policing.²²⁰ In parallel, government agencies and city partners would map the needs of residents and deliver services such as lighting, sanitation, schools, health posts, and youth programming, although there was wide variation in how the UPPs operated across the favelas where they were implemented.²²¹ The program expanded rapidly (eventually covering more than 160 favelas and deploying thousands of officers) but implementation varied substantially across units and commanders. Some UPPs developed more community-facing practices (for example, continuous patrols, meetings with residents, and local conflict mediation), while others relied on more discretionary, uneven, or coercive policing.

Most research on the UPPs emphasizes that residents’ reactions were mixed. Studies commonly report early improvements in everyday security and mobility in some places, alongside persistent concerns about police abuse, arbitrary or discretionary enforcement, fragile and inconsistent participation mechanisms, and uneven delivery of promised social services.²²² Over time, several accounts note that sustaining the intervention proved difficult: resources and state coordination often weakened, armed actors adapted, and state authority ceded terrain again in some areas.²²³

Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo’s study of the UPPs finds that the impact of this program depended heavily on the preexisting criminal order in the favela.²²⁴ Their results

²¹⁸ Arias and Barnes 2017; Barnes 2022; Magaloni et al. 2020; Oosterbaan and Van Wijk 2015; World Bank 2012.

²¹⁹ WOLA 2016.

²²⁰ Frühling 2007.

²²¹ Magaloni et al. 2020.

²²² Grijó Vilarouca and Ribeiro 2019; World Bank 2012.

²²³ Werling 2014; WOLA 2016.

²²⁴ Magaloni et al. 2020.

underscore both the promise and the risks of community-based interventions. On average, the UPPs reduced fatal police shootings by about 45 percent. Yet the program produced sharply heterogeneous effects: It improved local security where criminal groups were unable to maintain order or were predatory but increased lethal violence and common crime where criminal groups had previously maintained order through more cooperative (or ‘benign’) relationships with residents.

These shifts in local security help explain why the UPPs gained legitimacy in some places but not others. In the authors’ survey, far more residents wanted the UPP to stay in Batán (75 percent) and Cidade de Deus (56 percent) than in Providência (37 percent) and Rocinha (27 percent). Across settings, police victimization (home invasions, physical assault, or a friend/family member killed by police) strongly reduced acceptance of the UPP, reinforcing the broader point that state authority depends not only on coercive capacity but also on residents’ willingness to recognize the police as legitimate.

The only study that, to our knowledge, has explicitly examined the effects of state policy on criminal governance investigates how a shift in the location of policing, dispute resolution, and family services in Medellín in the 1980s created plausibly random variation in residents’ proximity to these state services.²²⁵ The study finds that three decades later, criminal groups were more likely to provide governance in areas closer to both state-provided services and profitable drug markets. One interpretation is that in settings where the state is present but cannot fully eliminate criminal organizations, such groups have stronger incentives to cultivate local loyalty and regulate behavior to protect illicit rents from state interference.²²⁶ If this interpretation is correct, the results have important implications for policies aiming to reduce criminal governance: first, both crackdowns and improvements of public services and security could *increase* incentives for criminal groups to govern populations in an effort to foster legitimacy in places where they obtain high rents; second, gang rule could be weakened by reducing criminal groups’ rents; and third, reducing criminal rents could, however, not only eliminate criminal groups’ incentives to govern locals but also make them more likely to adopt violent and coercive approaches toward local populations.²²⁷ These are sobering lessons. Yet it is important to stress that these lessons are based on a single study of the impacts of increased state services in one city in the 1980s, for which data on criminal governance are only available in 2019.

In summary, rigorous evidence on the impact of policy interventions on criminal governance remains extremely scarce. Most of what we know comes from extrapolating the potential implications of studies focused on violence, crime, or security outcomes. The available evidence suggests that militarization approaches consistently fail to durably undermine criminal governance: They tend to disrupt the internal hierarchy of criminal groups, fragment them, and displace violence, but criminal governance often persists under new leadership or in new territories. Community-based interventions appear more promising, particularly when they can sustain service provision and avoid police abuse, but their effectiveness is highly contingent on local conditions such as the type of criminal governance regime in place and the presence of illicit rents. Paradoxically, one study suggests that the presence of state

²²⁵ Blattman et al. 2024.

²²⁶ Blattman et al. 2024, 32.

²²⁷ Blattman et al. 2024, 33.

services and illicit rents may create incentives for criminal groups to govern *more* to win local loyalty, complicating efforts to dismantle their authority.

V.III Truces and Negotiations with Criminal Groups

Negotiating with criminal groups is more common than often assumed.²²⁸ Beyond well-known recent cases like El Salvador's state-sponsored national gang truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18 in 2012–2014,²²⁹ Latin American states have directly negotiated with criminal groups or facilitated negotiations among them in cases as diverse as Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, and Jamaica.²³⁰ Scholars and journalists have also documented alleged clandestine negotiations between the city government of Medellín and the criminal boss 'Don Berna' in the early 2000s²³¹ and between President Bukele's administration and Salvadoran gangs in 2019–2021,²³² although these continue to be contested.

The primary goal of negotiations and truces is usually the reduction of violence, and evidence suggests that these pacts do reduce homicides in the short term.²³³ However, this reduction may come with significant tradeoffs. Evidence from Medellín shows that while homicides fell under a pact, disappearances and other harms rose and violence was deliberately hidden.²³⁴ Moreover, this type of negotiation is unlikely to break gang power. For example, after the 2012 truce in El Salvador, gangs continued to exercise territorial control.²³⁵

Evidence from studies of negotiations in El Salvador and Medellín suggests that durable violence reductions require criminal groups to be cohesive, hierarchical, and capable of maintaining territorial control to enforce compliance.²³⁶ They also require a coherent state that coordinates vertically across levels of government and horizontally across the police, judiciary, and executive to support and uphold the agreement.²³⁷ Yet, when the state administers incentives and groups are cohesive, violence may continue but be less visible, and criminal actors may grow stronger.²³⁸ This is why negotiations must include other targets beyond homicide reduction, such as extortion, disappearances, sexual violence, and recruitment.²³⁹ States must also build institutions that outlive the agreement and allow for monitoring, receiving complaints from residents, and providing services; these institutions must be connected to city- and national-level policy so they can persist when political leaders change.²⁴⁰ Finally, making negotiations transparent and embedding community participation through independent monitoring and complaint mechanisms is critical. These measures enhance legitimacy and can

²²⁸ Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Durán-Martínez 2024b.

²²⁹ Katz et al. 2016.

²³⁰ Freeman and Felbab-Brown 2021.

²³¹ Durán-Martínez 2018; Moncada 2021.

²³² El Faro 2023.

²³³ For example, Katz et al. (2016).

²³⁴ Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016.

²³⁵ Van der Borgh 2019.

²³⁶ Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²³⁷ Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²³⁸ Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²³⁹ Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²⁴⁰ Durán-Martínez 2024b. See also Freeman and Felbab-Brown (2021).

mitigate risks of state-criminal collusion and the concealment of non-lethal violence, while increasing the likelihood that agreements persist as new political leaders take office.²⁴¹

The implications of these findings and arguments for criminal governance are clear: While negotiations may temporarily reduce violence (or, at least, visible violence), they may also strengthen criminal organizations by facilitating impunity for non-lethal violent activities, including using their power to influence the social, political, and economic life of local populations and sustaining illicit, collusive agreements with state actors and politicians.²⁴² Moreover, negotiations can unintentionally legitimize criminal groups,²⁴³ which can, in turn, facilitate criminal governance.

Despite growing scholarly attention to negotiations with criminal groups, significant gaps remain, and they affect our ability to draw lessons for policies to address criminal governance. First, we lack systematic research on specific institutional arrangements and policies that can transform negotiations from violence-management tools into genuine reductions in criminal power. Recent research identifies the need for monitoring institutions and service provision,²⁴⁴ but empirical evidence on which institutional designs work, under what conditions, and how to ensure their persistence remains thin. Second, we know little about the long-term consequences of failed negotiations—do they erode state legitimacy, facilitate the consolidation of criminal governance regimes, or create opportunities for criminal expansion? Finally, international actors (UN agencies, NGOs, foreign governments) have played roles in some negotiation processes, yet their influence on outcomes remains understudied. These gaps are particularly important given that negotiations, when poorly designed, risk strengthening rather than weakening criminal governance.

V.IV Hybrid Interventions

In some cases, governments combine two or more approaches to undermine criminal groups that control territory, some of which also govern local populations. For example, as we noted before, the UPPs in Rio de Janeiro were a community-based approach but also relied heavily on policing. In this section, we focus on one of the cases that has drawn most attention in the past two decades and combines all three types of intervention: El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele (Box 3).

Box 3. Militarization, Massive Incarceration, Limited Community-Based Policies, and Negotiation with Gangs in El Salvador

Nayib Bukele was elected President of El Salvador in 2019. By then, the country had been grappling with severe gang violence since the post-war period—especially from the late 1990s through the 2000s, when deportations of gang members from the United States helped entrench violent rival gangs (notably MS-13 and Barrio 18) in the country.²⁴⁵ Soon after taking office, Bukele launched the *Plan de Control Territorial* (PCT), which was

²⁴¹ Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²⁴² Durán-Martínez 2024a, 2024b.

²⁴³ Durán-Martínez 2024b.

²⁴⁴ Durán-Martínez 2024a. See also Freeman and Felbab-Brown (2021).

²⁴⁵ Cruz 2010, 2011; Sviatschi 2022.

coupled with a nationwide *régimen de excepción* (state of exception) in 2022 that expanded security force powers and significantly weakened judicial due process guarantees. The PCT was presented as a multiphase, security-led strategy to regain territorial control and suppress gangs, combining large-scale deployments of security forces, mass arrests, harsher incarceration conditions, and, at a later stage, a social component that sought “to promote education, culture, art, sports and health among vulnerable young people to prevent gang recruitment and eventually reduce popular collaboration with maras.”²⁴⁶

Official data suggest that homicide rates in El Salvador had already been declining since 2016 but fell steeply after Bukele took office in 2019.²⁴⁷ In addition, the population has reported significantly lower levels of crime and perception of insecurity.²⁴⁸ Several reports indicate that gangs’ territorial presence and community control have diminished sharply, and some analysts suggest that the gangs have been severely weakened, if not effectively dismantled.²⁴⁹ Although criminal governance is seldom discussed, this suggests that gangs’ capacity for governing populations has likewise been substantially reduced. The government attributes this to the PCT and the state of exception. A recent impact evaluation using different sources of homicide data found that both the PCT and the state of exception led to a sharp reduction in the homicide rate, which, according to the study, can be explained by both deterrence and incapacitation (that is, the physical removal of gang members).²⁵⁰

However, according to multiple journalistic investigations, the initial drop in killings was facilitated by clandestine negotiations between the administration and gang leaders, which reportedly involved prison privileges and impunity arrangements for gang members in exchange for the latter’s political support for Bukele and their reduction of violence. Consistent with reports of a negotiation between the administration and the gangs, the United States Treasury Department sanctioned two Salvadoran officials accused of negotiating with these groups.²⁵¹ The pact reportedly unraveled, followed by a dramatic shift toward mass detention under the state of exception.²⁵²

The success of Bukele’s approach has also been questioned as several nongovernmental²⁵³ and multilateral²⁵⁴ organizations have raised the alarms due to massive violations of fundamental human rights, including arbitrary detention, systematic violations of due process, and abusive prison conditions.²⁵⁵ El Salvador’s prison population has surged to roughly 108,000 detainees—about 1.7 percent of the

²⁴⁶ Paradelo-López and Antón 2025, 8.

²⁴⁷ Congressional Research Service 2025; Reuters 2024a.

²⁴⁸ Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública 2023.

²⁴⁹ See, for example, Valencia (2025).

²⁵⁰ Paradelo-López and Antón 2025.

²⁵¹ CNN 2021.

²⁵² El Faro 2023. See also El Faro (2025) and Reuters (2021).

²⁵³ Amnesty International 2023; Human Rights Watch 2024.

²⁵⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2024; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023.

²⁵⁵ Amnesty International 2023; Human Rights Watch and Cristosal 2022; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2024.

population—often described as the highest incarceration rate globally.²⁵⁶ Reports also raise concerns about a concurrent rise in reported disappearances during the crackdown.²⁵⁷ In addition, the magnitude of the reduction in homicides has also been questioned, as various analysts have criticized the validity of official homicide data.²⁵⁸

While the model adopted in El Salvador has drawn significant attention in the region due to its success in reducing violence and weakening the gangs, it is important to note the lessons that can be learned from this case are not clear. This is a predominantly coercive model—militarized enforcement and incarceration under a prolonged state of exception—paired with a more limited and difficult-to-assess community component and shadowed (at least earlier) by negotiations with gangs. It thus remains difficult to identify what independent role each of these components has played. Moreover, the sustainability and replicability of El Salvador's model is questionable given its reliance on mass incarceration, human rights violations, and undemocratic measures.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section advances public policy recommendations based on the research on criminal governance reviewed in the previous sections. We first outline a set of guiding principles and then turn to specific recommendations of interventions that operate primarily at the local level. We then discuss key tasks for measuring criminal governance and avenues for future research that are essential to refine policy recommendations.

Although our recommendations focus primarily on local interventions, it is important to note that addressing structural conditions that underpin criminal governance schemes is also crucial. Reforms that reduce impunity, corruption, and political capture are essential because these conditions often enable criminal governance in the first place. Such reforms include strengthening rule-of-law institutions to increase the likelihood that enforcement is lawful and trusted; protecting freedom of expression and ensuring the safety of journalists to expose state-criminal collusion as well as state capture by criminal organizations; expanding financial investigations and anti-money laundering capacity to disrupt illicit revenues; and strengthening regional cooperation against transnational supply chains. Finally, protecting electoral integrity through early warning protocols, candidate protection, secure reporting channels, and rapid prosecution of threats is critical to prevent intimidation and sustain democratic competition.

²⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch 2025; World Population Report 2025.

²⁵⁷ Reuters 2024b.

²⁵⁸ Giles 2024.

VI.I Guiding Principles

Setting priorities: where to intervene and for what goal

Defining priorities to address criminal governance is inherently difficult because policymakers face a difficult tradeoff between harm and feasibility. On one hand, communities living under consolidated criminal governance often experience severe violations of their fundamental rights, including coercion, restrictions, surveillance, and, in some cases, high levels of violence. These are also the settings where criminal governance most clearly strengthens criminal organizations by generating cooperation, information sharing, revenue, and political leverage. Yet entrenched regimes are also the most difficult to disrupt. They tend to be embedded in local institutions and markets, and state interventions can trigger violent backlash or simply create a governance vacuum that another group fills. On the other hand, prevention—stopping criminal governance before it consolidates—may be more feasible because criminal organizations have not yet fully entrenched themselves as problem solvers and arbiters in the community. But prevention poses a different challenge: the number of ‘at-risk’ communities is large, and states rarely have resources to sustain intensive packages everywhere.

Setting priorities therefore requires explicit choices about *which outcome* is considered most important (for example, reducing coercive control, preventing criminal governance consolidation, lowering violence, restoring specific state governance functions), *over what time horizon*, and *with what level of risk and required capacity*. One way to operationalize these tradeoffs is to use a triage framework that ranks places by three criteria:

1. **Severity of harm to residents in consolidated criminal governance regimes:** Prioritize locations where criminal rule produces the most serious rights violations (for example, systematic extortion, forced displacement, disappearances, forced recruitment, restrictions on movement, or high levels of violence).
2. **Potential of consolidation of criminal governance:** Prioritize areas where criminal governance is likely to expand or generate broader impacts, such as in strategic locations like ports, transport corridors, border crossings, and large informal markets as well as in neighborhoods or localities contiguous to territories already under criminal influence. Also prioritize interventions against criminal syndicates that are either debilitated or in an early phase of development, as they pose lesser challenges than powerful, consolidated groups.
3. **Feasibility:** Prioritize places where a sustained state presence is realistic. This includes assessing local state capacity and, crucially, whether local institutions are complicit, coerced, or captured, and, if so, whether policies to cut the crime-politics nexus can be implemented. This is critical because interventions in places with strong levels of state capture require integrity reforms (that is, those seeking to reduce corruption and increase ethical, transparent, and accountable governance) as well as protective measures before services can be provided or community policing can succeed.

Considering these three criteria can help guide policymakers in deciding which cases to prioritize. Critical to this exercise is having a system for early detection of incipient criminal governance—when criminal groups begin by solving disputes, offering ‘protection’, regulating markets, or mediating access to services. Identifying these early-stage functions provides a critical opportunity for the state to fill the

same gaps *before* criminal authority becomes normalized and harder to dislodge. We discuss measurement later in this section.

Prevention and disruption require different strategies

Preventing the consolidation of criminal governance primarily involves closing the gaps that criminal and other armed actors exploit—improving local economic opportunities, strengthening everyday rule-of-law institutions, and integrating marginalized communities into formal political and economic life before criminal groups become the default problem solvers. Disrupting established criminal governance, by contrast, requires both weakening entrenched organizations and replacing the governance functions they perform. This includes restoring credible protection, accessible dispute resolution, and reliable service provision, and doing so in ways that residents experience as responsive and reliable. In many communities, people evaluate state authority relative to the order they previously relied on—however coercive or unfair it may have been—so transitions that are slow, ineffective or inconsistent, or perceived as abusive can undermine state legitimacy and make criminal rule more likely to return. This is why priority setting and sequencing matter: Disruption without permanent replacement, as shown in the UPP case in Rio, can create governance vacuums, while prevention hinges on early detection and sustained improvements in the quality of local governance.

Acknowledge tradeoffs and avoid assessing success with single metrics

Policies aimed at criminal governance almost always operate under tradeoffs, and making the latter explicit is itself a form of risk mitigation. The most common trap is to treat **violence reduction**—especially homicides—as the primary measure of success. Violence reduction is obviously a critical outcome, but criminal governance can persist, deepen, or even expand even when the most visible signs of violence abate. Criminal groups can lower visible violence by tightening internal discipline, centralizing coercion, outsourcing violence, or shifting toward less visible forms of control (extortion, surveillance, forced displacement, disappearances, threats, and selective punishment). For this reason, strategies that reduce homicides can still leave communities under coercive rule and can sometimes strengthen criminal authority if they increase predictability, stability, or rents.

A second tradeoff concerns **short-term stabilization versus long-term high-quality governance**. Some interventions can reduce immediate harm but rely on exceptional measures like temporary deployments, short-term service surges, or ad hoc arrangements with armed actors. These approaches can buy time but can also create fragile equilibria that unravel when funding declines, political leadership changes, or criminal groups adapt. Policy design should therefore ask during the planning phase: *Is this intervention meant to stabilize in the short run, to replace governance functions over time, or to dismantle the organizational capacity that sustains criminal rule?* Different objectives imply different timelines, partners, and accountability structures.

A third tradeoff arises between **aggressive disruption of criminal groups and the risk of creating governance vacuums**. Arrests, territorial incursions, and market crackdowns can weaken specific actors, which may in turn disrupt criminal governance. However, they do not automatically restore legitimate state (or non-state) governance and may create governance gaps that rival armed groups or splinter factions quickly exploit. This is why interventions should be judged not only by what they ‘take

away’ from criminal groups but also by what the state and communities can credibly ‘put in its place’ and sustain.

Fourth, **drug policies focused on decreasing supply can facilitate criminal governance** by raising illicit rents and increasing incentives for groups to govern populations to protect revenues²⁵⁹ or expand to new territories to regulate illicit markets. Consider how supply-side interventions might affect governance dynamics.

Finally, there is a tradeoff between **asserting state force and preserving legitimacy**. Abusive, discretionary, or corrupt enforcement can undermine trust in the state, eroding the kind of local cooperation needed for any policy aimed at weakening criminal governance. Across contexts, coercive components need guardrails (clear rules, oversight, complaint mechanisms, and protections for complainants) not as add-ons but as essential design features.

An important implication of these tradeoffs is that policymakers should define success using a small *bundle* of outcomes, not a single metric like homicide reduction. For example, success could be measured in terms of criminal coercive control (extortion, threats, rules of behavior, and restrictions); civilian access to dispute resolution and basic services; violence (lethal and non-lethal); legitimacy/trust in state (or legitimate, non-state) institutions; and confidence in local democratic processes (for example, willingness to participate in meetings and vote without intimidation, believe that elections are fair, and so on)

Diagnose the local governance regime before choosing policy components and sequencing

A consistent lesson is that criminal governance is not the same across cases. It varies in what functions criminal groups perform, how intensively they do so, and how residents experience it. Because of this heterogeneity, the same policy tool can produce different effects across areas where these groups operate—even within the same city—and even backfire if it disrupts an existing order without replacing the functions that made everyday life predictable for local residents.²⁶⁰ This is why policy design and implementation should rely on a clear diagnostic of the situation.

While the evidence does not yet support mapping from criminal governance types to specific policy packages, the literature supports starting from a practical diagnostic that is simple and can guide the design of an intervention. Such a diagnostic should cover the following:

1. Identify who governs and how:

- Determine which state agencies (police, judiciary, social services, and infrastructure units) maintain a physical presence and what functions they actually perform. Evaluate whether agencies trust or compete with one another, and whether they coordinate their activities.
- Assess the type of governance arrangements in place, identifying the actors that perform various governance functions (including state, criminal, and civic society actors), such as

²⁵⁹ Blattman et al. 2024.

²⁶⁰ Blattman et al. 2021; Magaloni et al. 2020.

security/order, rules of behavior, dispute resolution, taxation/extortion and revenue extraction, provision or control of services, and regulation of markets (legal, informal, and illicit).

2. **What sustains residents' compliance and cooperation:** Determine whether fear, material benefits, efficacy in dispute resolution and maintenance of public order, identity ties, and/or selective protection drive residents' cooperation with criminal groups. Also, identify which populations are most affected (shopkeepers, migrants, youth, women, particular blocks). Identifying which governance functions are central to cooperation with the criminal governance regime is crucial to prioritize areas for intervention.
3. **Community organization, collective action, internal divisions:** Assess how organized and cohesive the community is; whether there are internal divisions; and identify leaders who are respected by large portions of the population. Assess how key civil society groups and individual leaders have responded to criminal governance, including by resisting, negotiating with, participating in, or helping the criminal group.
4. **Organizational features of the armed actor(s):** Assess armed groups' level of cohesion/fragmentation,²⁶¹ leadership structure, ability to discipline members,²⁶² links to prisons and external networks,²⁶³ and level of sophistication (resources at their disposal, capacity to carry out complex military and financial operations). These features shape whether agreements can be enforced internally, whether splintering is likely after crackdowns, and whether violence will increase or spread to new locations.
5. **Type of illicit and licit markets:** Identify the main criminal activity in the area (drug trade, extortion, illegal mining, and/or human smuggling) and analyze how groups operate within it. Determine whether the armed group also profits from licit markets.
6. **State-criminal relationships:** Assess the extent to which criminal actors have compromised state agencies and characterize the relationships—whether they involve contestation, toleration, collusion, or state capture.²⁶⁴ Critically, examine how criminal governance intersects with the broader political system: Do criminal groups operate in relative isolation, or are they integrated into political networks that extend beyond the local level?²⁶⁵ These relationships influence whether interventions are feasible: In captured settings, expanding resources and programs can be diverted, and enforcement can be selectively applied.

This diagnosis should drive policy design in terms of both components and sequencing. For example:

- Where extortion is the backbone of governance, priorities should include victim protection, trusted reporting channels, financial investigation capacity, and credible prosecution, paired with short-run protection measures to prevent retaliation.

²⁶¹ Durán-Martínez 2018.

²⁶² Feldmann 2024.

²⁶³ Lessing and Wills 2019.

²⁶⁴ Barnes 2017; Lessing 2021.

²⁶⁵ Albarracín et al. 2025; Feldmann and Luna 2023.

- Where dispute resolution is central, interventions must expand state mechanisms or support community-based alternatives that enjoy broad local legitimacy for mediation and rapid adjudication (often outside formal courts);²⁶⁶ otherwise, criminal arbitration will quickly return.
- Where governance relies on market regulation (informal transport, street commerce, land occupation), policies that formalize markets and reduce arbitrary barriers can weaken criminal control—but only if accompanied by enforcement against coercion and corruption.

It is important to note, however, that we do not have evidence on which sequencing is optimal. Policymakers should therefore consider trying interventions in different orders and rigorously evaluating the outcome. It is also important to stress that interventions that only disrupt criminal activity rarely undermine criminal governance. Even when a group is weakened, governance vacuums in marginalized areas and illicit economies are often filled by rival organizations or splinter factions. For this reason, disruption strategies are most likely to be durable when they are paired with credible, sustained improvements in everyday governance—protection, dispute resolution, service access, and market regulation—so that residents do not have to rely on criminal actors to meet basic needs.

Finally, because assessing the situation of localities that are under high control of a criminal organization is difficult, this diagnosis should combine administrative and service data, qualitative monitoring, and community organizations' information *if it is possible to obtain such information without exposing such organizations or their members to retaliation*. We discuss some of the challenges to collect evidence on criminal governance at the end of this section.

VI.II Interventions to Reduce Criminal Governance

While few interventions have been rigorously evaluated for their impact on criminal governance, the recommendations below build on research identifying critical factors that shape these regimes.

Disrupt the political-criminal nexus

Identify the entry points criminal groups exploit to infiltrate the state via corruption.²⁶⁷ Design anticorruption integrity measures that anticipate violent backlash by criminal actors.²⁶⁸

Protect state officers and public servants (police, judges, prosecutors, prison guards, elected officials) and their families from bribery, intimidation, and violence. Implement geographical rotation, develop measures to relocate state employees from sensitive neighborhoods, and design and implement witness protection programs.

Break protection rackets by strengthening municipal/subnational anticorruption controls with means such as asset declarations, audits, and rotation and vetting of leaders of law enforcement agencies. Prioritize enforcement against the most violent actors as well as public servants that protect criminal organizations.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Arjona and Saab 2025.

²⁶⁷ Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Trejo and Ley 2020.

²⁶⁸ Feldmann and Luna 2023.

²⁶⁹ Lessing 2015; Trejo and Ley 2020.

Safeguard elections and local political competition where intimidation and municipal capture by criminal groups poses risks, for example, by establishing protocols to protect candidates, prosecuting threats quickly, and creating secure channels to report threats and violent events.

Plan a realistic transition and replace criminal governance functions

Disrupting criminal governance is rarely a matter of removing an armed group and ‘restoring the state’ overnight. In many communities, criminal organizations are part of the social fabric and have become problem solvers and regulators because state institutions are absent, inaccessible, corrupt, or slow, or inadequate given the reality local residents live in. A realistic strategy therefore requires a gradual transition that weakens and delegitimizes criminal organizations while replacing the specific governance functions that used to sustain residents’ compliance and cooperation with criminal groups.

A gradual transition should include the following:

- **Map existing authority structures:** Identify who residents turn to for protection, dispute resolution, market regulation, and access to services—including state agencies, civic leaders (for example, religious figures), community organizations, and criminal actors. Mapping these authority structures clarifies which functions are most central to the local equilibrium and where the state must credibly ‘show up’ first.
- **Understand local institutions, practices, and networks:** Document the formal and informal rules that structure daily life (how disputes are resolved, who enforces order, how markets operate) and map the networks connecting key actors—including links between criminal groups, political brokers, and service providers. This helps anticipate resistance, capture, and opportunities for reform coalitions.
- **Work with legitimate non-state actors:** Collaborate with unarmed community actors that residents recognize as legitimate sources of authority to co-produce order and monitor delivery.²⁷⁰ Alternatives to state authority should not automatically be treated as competitors to dismantle; ²⁷¹ strengthening the state’s legitimacy is more feasible as a medium-term goal achieved by building on trusted local structures while gradually shifting expectations toward lawful institutions.
- **Sequence interventions strategically:** Prioritize which governance interventions to implement first. Most approaches prioritize security, followed by services in education, health, and infrastructure. Recent evidence suggests that dispute adjudication may be foundational, potentially enabling other governance areas to function more effectively.²⁷² However, more research is needed. To the extent that developing optimal sequencing is critical, policymakers should consider trying interventions in different orders and rigorously evaluating the outcome.
- **Create accountable interinstitutional coordination:** Establish a clearly mandated executive coordinating entity that aligns policing, justice, and social service provision so that progress does not depend on a single ‘hero’ unit or administration and can survive leadership turnover.

²⁷⁰ Arias 2009; Durán-Martínez 2024a.

²⁷¹ Arjona and Saab 2025.

²⁷² Arjona and Saab 2025.

Improve governance quality across key domains

It is important to prioritize domains where criminal groups have filled gaps and are critical for members of the community. We summarize below recommendations for doing so in different policy areas:

- **Security:** State agents must work closely and diligently with community members to assess their needs, receive complaints, and build trust. Establish channels for ongoing communication and community participation in policy design.²⁷³ Victimization of community members—which happens all too often during state incursions into areas controlled by criminal organizations—brings additional harm to already affected communities, undermines trust-building efforts, and delegitimizes the state.²⁷⁴
- **Justice and dispute resolution:** Working with local actors, design interventions that provide fast, accessible mechanisms for mediation and dispute resolution. Options include mobile courts and training local leaders who already mediate conflicts. Latin America has extensive experience with alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that can inform these efforts.
- **Market regulation:** Based on diagnosis of which markets criminals control and how, design interventions with community members to regulate and formalize contested areas of economic activity. This includes transport, retail security, vending, construction materials, access to internet/cable services, and water connections.²⁷⁵
- **Service provision:** Include a detailed plan to provide services in areas where criminal groups currently act as providers. Given limitations in human capital and resources, prioritize based on both community input about major problems and an assessment of what criminal groups currently offer. Recognize that some practices of criminal groups address real needs and are valued by communities—dispute resolution, protection from petty crime and theft, enforcement of order, and provision of goods during crises. Understanding which governance functions communities find valuable is essential for designing state services that can effectively replace criminal authority rather than being rejected or ignored.

Protect and empower victims and communities to resist criminal rule

- **Build trusted channels between communities and the state:** Establish accessible mechanisms through which residents can report crimes, request services, and provide input for policy design. This is especially critical in communities where prior state interventions have caused harm or where law enforcement has been complicit with criminal actors.²⁷⁶ Building trust requires consistent state presence, responsiveness to community needs, and accountability for abuses.
- **Develop secure reporting systems and rapid protection:** Create confidential reporting mechanisms with credible protection for victims of extortion and other forms of criminal violence.²⁷⁷ Evidence shows that communities sometimes confront criminal taxation through

²⁷³ Magaloni et al. 2020.

²⁷⁴ Flores-Macías 2018; Magaloni et al. 2020.

²⁷⁵ Fernández 2022; Moncada 2021.

²⁷⁶ Magaloni et al. 2020.

²⁷⁷ Moncada 2021.

collective action, but such resistance requires state backing to be sustainable.²⁷⁸ Rapid response to reports—both to address the immediate threat and demonstrate state commitment—is essential to encourage continued cooperation.

- **Support collective organization:** Support local business associations, neighborhood organizations, and community groups as they can collectively resist or limit criminal control and governance.²⁷⁹ Provide resources and legal support for such organizations without co-opting or undermining their autonomy.
- **Strengthen community policing mechanisms:** Invest in community-oriented policing approaches that involve residents in security provision while maintaining clear accountability structures.²⁸⁰ These mechanisms may help break state-criminal networks that sustain criminal governance regimes by creating transparency and direct community oversight of police activities. Ensure these programs receive sustained support and are not dismantled with changes in political leadership.

Ensure policy continuity across administrations

One of the most common problems documented in evaluations of community-based interventions is their short duration and lack of sustainability.²⁸¹ Programs must become institutionalized ‘state policies’ that cannot be easily undone by future administrations. This requires embedding interventions within permanent institutional structures, securing multiyear funding commitments, and establishing monitoring mechanisms that persist across political transitions.²⁸² Without such continuity, even successful interventions risk collapse when political leadership changes, allowing criminal governance to reemerge.

Use negotiations strategically—as governance tools, not just violence fixes

If pursued, negotiations must seek to reduce criminal power, not just manage violence. Expand targets beyond homicides to include extortion, disappearances, and recruitment. Ensure transparency, participation of vetted community representatives that are not co-opted by the criminal organization, and coordination across state institutions. Build monitoring bodies and service mechanisms that outlast political transitions.²⁸³

Anticipate and contain displacement and diffusion

Policies targeting violence or criminal groups—whether through militarization, decapitation, or community interventions—frequently displace criminal activity and governance to new locations.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁸ Moncada 2021.

²⁷⁹ Arias 2017; Arjona 2016; Ley et al. 2019; Moncada 2021.

²⁸⁰ Arias and Ungar 2009; Frühling 2007.

²⁸¹ Werling 2014; WOLA 2016.

²⁸² Durán-Martínez 2024a; Freeman and Felbab-Brown 2021.

²⁸³ Durán-Martínez 2024a; Freeman and Felbab-Brown 2021.

²⁸⁴ Dell 2015; Lessing 2017; Osorio 2015.

- **Gather intelligence for early detection:** Establish early warning systems to identify when criminal groups attempt to expand their presence and governance structures into new territories. Early detection enables rapid response before governance regimes become entrenched.
- **Coordinate regional responses:** Work with neighboring municipalities and authorities to prevent groups from simply relocating their presence and operations across borders. Fragmented, municipality-by-municipality approaches create enforcement and governance gaps that criminal organizations can exploit.

Avoid policies that fragment groups without improving governance

When used, militarization and decapitation operations must be coupled with immediate efforts to improve governance quality in affected areas.²⁸⁵ Militarization tends to lead to abuse of state security personnel and to antagonize local residents. Leadership removal often produces succession struggles that destabilize territories without reducing criminal control.

VI.III Research and Data

Measure criminal governance in more places—and do it better

Because criminal governance is often hidden and underreported, governments and research partners should invest in measurement and evaluation that can guide resource allocation and detect unintended consequences.

Collecting data on criminal governance is difficult: These phenomena are not usually ‘visible’ outcomes that can be traced in official data (like homicides). Moreover, creating a sufficiently nuanced depiction of criminal governance regime requires more than asking a couple of simple questions: Since criminal groups can intervene in many aspects of life and in various ways, it is not straightforward to determine what data collection should focus on.

In addition, there are important methodological, logistical, and ethical issues that should be considered. We do not yet know which survey questions best and most efficiently capture sufficient data to typify a criminal governance regime. To some extent, this depends on theoretical priors about which domains are most important to map based on both ethical concerns about how people live under such regimes and priors about what aspects of criminal governance are more consequential for other important outcomes (such as criminal group strength) and policy design. In addition, collecting data on this topic can put researchers, participants, or both at risk.

Despite these challenges, collecting data on criminal governance can and should be done, and it should be a priority in most countries in the region. State agencies and academics could collaborate to develop strategies to measure this phenomenon:

- Researchers have for years conducted in-depth fieldwork in places where criminal groups govern, which is how we know many details about how groups across various countries rule

²⁸⁵ Calderón et al. 2015; Phillips 2015.

certain communities. There are ways to conduct this type of fieldwork while minimizing risks. Supporting this type of in-depth fieldwork is essential for the policy community to identify the emergence of new cases of criminal governance as well as new patterns.

- A few studies have also suggested that it is possible to collect data on a large number of cases. Devising ways to scale up these approaches is important in contexts where they can be conducted in ways that minimize risk.
- Validating whether at least some aspects of criminal governance can be measured in ways that produce comparable data using questions included in large-scale surveys is essential. Here, again, the collaboration of state agencies and academics is important. Validating surveys in a random sample of cases where the same aspects of criminal governance are documented with in-depth fieldwork could provide policymakers with validated tools. Ideally, such collaborations could lead to developing survey questions that can be deployed (perhaps with some adjustments) across regions within countries as well as across Latin American countries. Critically, these measures should not just aim to assess the prevalence of criminal governance as a binary (yes/no) but they should aim to provide sufficient information to assess the scope of criminal groups' intervention in critical areas of community life. While these proxies cannot capture the many aspects and nuances of criminal governance regimes, they can provide a sufficiently granular picture to assess the roles that the criminal organization plays in the community.
- Given the importance of criminal governance, official surveys—especially in countries where it is widespread or emerging—should include questions that measure its presence and, when possible, key attributes (for example, domains of governance).
- Researchers could explore new sources that may capture some aspects of criminal governance. For example, some practices of criminal governance are reported by local media. Also, criminal groups themselves sometimes publicize their presence and governance online.²⁸⁶ It is worth systematically assessing whether these sources can offer an unbiased—while certainly incomplete—proxy of at least the presence of criminal governance.
- Investigating whether certain existing data can serve as proxies of criminal governance is also worth pursuing. For example, one study relies on violence against prominent leaders as a proxy for attempts to either build or preserve criminal governance regimes.²⁸⁷ Systematically assessing whether this and other data are adequate proxies of criminal governance is an important task.

Policymakers, multilateral organizations, and granting agencies should prioritize research that validates quantitative data, identifies biases and their correlates, and improves collection techniques. Triangulating with qualitative work is essential in this process, as it offers deeper and more detailed descriptions of criminal governance regimes. Identifying contextual factors that determine tradeoffs between data collection approaches is also crucial, as different cases pose different challenges. Research should foster greater connection between qualitative and quantitative studies, avoiding the tendency to work in silos. At the same time, the research community should aim for at least some

²⁸⁶ Johnson 2025.

²⁸⁷ Ibarra-Olivo et al. 2025.

comparative data to facilitate knowledge accumulation on the origins, dynamics, and consequences of criminal governance, and the implications of alternative policies.

Address critical research gaps

- **Expand geographic scope:** Current understanding is largely based on well-known cases where criminal governance is visible and entrenched like Rio, Medellín, and São Paulo. Expand research to contexts where criminal governance is growing but less visible or in early stages, such as the Southern Cone.²⁸⁸ The Caribbean, which is deeply affected by criminal governance, also needs more attention (Jamaica is an exception).²⁸⁹
- **Understand variation across contexts:** The origins, dynamics, and consequences of criminal governance likely vary across rural versus urban settings, types of illicit markets, criminal group organizational structures, and features of local communities. These factors influence how criminal groups, community actors, politicians, and state agencies respond and should inform policy design. Much more research is needed on variation in criminal governance regimes across contexts.
- **Connect micro-dynamics to broader systems:** While most research rightly focuses on micro-level variation—which can differ across units as small as street blocks—it is essential to investigate links between these local dynamics and subnational regional and national factors.²⁹⁰ Research on criminal politics suggests that understanding criminal governance and intervention impacts requires examining how local regimes relate to broader political, social, and economic patterns.
- **Examine nonmaterial motivations:** While criminal groups are typically considered to lack ideological motivations, research shows their behavior is sometimes influenced by values, identities, or ideological commitments.²⁹¹ Understanding whether and how these attributes influence criminal governance and their implications for policymaking is crucial.

²⁸⁸ Fynn 2025; Feldmann and Luna 2022, 2023.

²⁸⁹ For example Arias 2017; Jaffe 2013.

²⁹⁰ Albarracín et al. 2025; Feldmann and Luna 2023; Trejo and Ley 2020.

²⁹¹ Badillo et al. 2025; Lomnitz 2019; Mantilla and Feldmann 2024.

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