ORGANIZED AGAINST CRIME

01
POLICY DOCUMENT

January 2026

THE GROWING THREAT OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ABSTRACT

This policy paper examines the scale and nature of organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), highlighting its uniquely violent character. We propose a novel metric—excess lethal violence—that underscores how the region stands out globally in terms of criminal violence. Organized crime in LAC significantly undermines growth, productivity, and social mobility, reinforcing poverty and inequality traps. We argue that while eradicating organized crime is unlikely—just as developed countries coexist with entrenched mafia structures—countries already dealing with entrenched organized crime, as well as those where criminal networks have yet to fully embed themselves, still have a window of opportunity to contain their most harmful effects. The paper outlines four critical policy priorities for the region: (a) prison reform to address their criminogenic nature; (b) improved training and coordination within and across police and law enforcement agencies; (c) reinforced judicial effectiveness, reducing impunity and defining strategic priorities; and (d) international coordination and collaboration. We emphasize the value of emerging research efforts that combine fine-grained data with deep contextual knowledge of LAC's local dynamics to inform more effective and actionable policy solutions.

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The Growing Threat of Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean[1]

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I. THE SCOPE OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Killings ordered from within prisons, intimidated government officials, threatened candidates and hijacked elections, retaliatory murders, violent crackdowns, confiscated drug shipments, corrupt authorities, extorted businesses, large fractions of the territory under criminal rule. These are some of the news headlines that the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) receive every day.[2]

These dire events occur not only in countries where criminal organizations are entrenched due to a long history of production and trafficking of illegal drugs—like Colombia, Brazil, or Mexico—but also, increasingly so, across most of the region: Each year, the violent presence of organized criminal groups becomes apparent in a new country.[3] For instance, the killing of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in Ecuador (in August 2023—just a month before the election) confirmed that powerful organized criminal groups were present in one of the region's least violent countries until the start of the current decade. There, the homicide rate has grown sixfold between 2020 and 2023. Countries with historically low crime levels, like Costa Rica and LAC's Southern Cone, have also recently experienced surges of violence that seem to reveal the grip of criminal organizations.[4]

This policy paper argues that organized crime is one of LAC's most pressing problems and must be brought to the center of the conversation about development. The toll from organized crime, in its multiple expressions, cannot be overlooked when discussing economic and productivity growth, poverty and inequality reduction, and the health of democracy in LAC. Organized crime is not only the source of violence and human rights abuses, but it can also compromise legitimate economies and capture governments. We argue that the extent of its damage depends on how LAC can manage its

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[1] This policy paper was produced as part of the Crime and Violence knowledge initiative of the World Bank Latin America and the Caribbean Chief Economist office (LCRCE). A version of this paper was published as Chapter 2 of the Spring 2025 Latin America and the Caribbean Economic Review (LACER), World Bank. Erwin De Nys, Yara Esquivel, Ailsa Hart, and Paula Rossiasco of the World Bank, and Thomas Favennec (Laboratorio de Soluciones Colaborativas de Políticas Públicas, LABCO) provided valuable inputs. Maria Micaela Sviastchi, Santiago Tobón, and Miguel La Rota reviewed some sections. We are grateful for the detailed feedback from William Maloney, Ana Arjona, and Santiago Levy at various stages, as well as the excellent comments on previous versions of this document from participants in workshops held at the Institute of Latin Studies (ILAS) at Columbia University (March 2025) and Lima (May 2025). We are indebted to Laura Tenjo for her research assistance.
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[2] Abi-Habib et al. 2024; Freeman 2024; Rodríguez Mega 2024; The Economist 2024c.
[3] Abi-Habib 2024; Nicas et al. 2025.
[4] LAC citizens are not unaware of these dynamics. While in 2005 only three LAC countries were in the top 20 nations with the largest share of Google queries about 'organized crime' and related words, in 2024, the region accounted for 13 countries in that ranking.

associated costs, with the understanding that governments have limited capacity—and sometimes limited willingness—and that entirely eradicating organized crime seems rather impossible, as evidenced by the presence of contained forms of the same phenomena in some of the world's most developed nations.

What is 'organized crime'?

Because of its illegal nature and the complexity of its causes and manifestations, there is no single and bounded definition of 'organized crime'. Each academic discipline emphasizes different elements of the phenomenon, and this heterogeneity is also present in the legal definitions offered by law enforcement agencies and international treaties. But several common defining elements emerge from our academic and legal literature review. Among them, and considering the specific experience of LAC, we underscore the following fundamental characteristics of organized crime:

Territorial control. In LAC, organized criminal groups control territories that range from a few blocks in urban contexts to large rural areas, where they monopolize illicit (and sometimes licit) markets through coercion and violence. Importantly, a criminal group's territorial control does not necessarily imply the absence of the state or its security forces. It does, however, preclude the presence of rival criminal groups.

The Global Initiative against Organized Crime (GI-TOC) ranks 17 LAC countries among the top 50 featuring "mafia-style" groups, characterized, among other things, by the control they exercise over the territory in which they operate.[5] Territorial control enables economies of scope. Once a criminal organization settles into an area, it can engage in a range of activities to expand its economic profit and social control. The latter is at the core of the groups' criminal governance (see the second fundamental characteristic).

In many cases, achieving territorial control involves high initial levels of lethal violence. This type of violence is most often related to disputes between groups over territories or markets, so once control is consolidated, it tends to decrease. The violence that remains is targeted to punish deviations from agreements or send signals to potential competitors.[6] Such symbolic signaling is also used to enforce codes of conduct within the group's ranks.

Criminal governance. In territories under their control, criminal organizations dictate the rules of the game. They provide services to the community, sometimes substituting for but often complementing the state—particularly regarding the provision of security and justice—and limiting citizens' mobility and

[5] For example, in Honduras, organized crime groups control La Mosquitia, which is a key transit point along Central America's cocaine corridor between South America and the US (Sweigart and Rauls 2021). In Colombia, ex-FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces) dissidents are issuing and regulating ID cards, requiring special licenses for truck drivers, and fining or expelling those who do not comply. Guerrillas are also detaining people—including adolescents and women—investigating them, charging fines, or pressuring them into forced labor for a few days. The Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and ex-FARC factions have expanded territorial presence from 117 municipalities in 2022 to 172 municipalities in 2023 (Jaramillo 2024). In Peru, the Shining Path controls a narrow drug-trafficking corridor across Junín, Ayacucho, and Huancavelica, by providing protection and escort services for drug shipments, and using violent attacks and propaganda to remain entrenched despite state operations (Insight Crime 2024).

[6] For example, in Colombia, the ceasefire and disarmament of the rebel group FARC under the 2016 peace agreement, combined with a lack of state presence in former FARC territories, resulted in organized crime groups once again fighting for dominance. This led to systematic killings of local leaders in disputed areas, lasting until today (Prem et al. 2021).

freedom.[7] While organized crime can be a competitor of the state in many places and in the provision of many services, criminal governance can also coexist with the state in a mutually convenient equilibrium. This implies that organized crime is sometimes tolerated by weak states. For example, it is not unusual for the police to "delegate" control of certain illegal activities to criminal groups or allow them to dominate specific territories.[8]

Extortion. Collecting "taxes" from businesses or landlords is a widespread practice of organized crime groups in the territories under their control. Extortion is often disguised as a sale of protection services, local justice, or even social assistance. It is, however, protection against the threat of violence that the groups themselves can exercise against those who do not pay for their services. Extortion falls on top of the taxes established by governments, so many businesses that pay formal taxes are exposed to double taxation (to the detriment of their ability to compete and invest) or decide not to pay formal taxes and operate in the shadow. Extortion affects smaller businesses more than larger ones.[9]

State capture. Criminal activity is made possible by the ability of criminal groups to control state actors at the national and subnational levels through a perverse combination of coercion and bribes (*plata o plomo*), outright infiltration of state institutions, and/or control over electoral processes through campaign financing or, most worrisome for democracy and the rule of law, the elimination of candidates by murder or pressure to drop out.[10] In several high-profile cases, criminals have held prominent government positions.[11]

These characteristics are closely intertwined and enable one another in varying degrees, depending on the nature of the organized criminal group and the context in which it operates. Territorial control facilitates criminal governance, and the latter helps consolidate territorial control, so the two are

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[7] For example, in Puerto Leguizamo, a small port town on river Putumayo, on the triple border of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, the group known as *Comandos de la Frontera* (Colombia), an ally of Comando Vermelho (Brazil) and Ecuadorian groups in the cocaine trade, dictates the hours during which civilians may transit the river and who they may carry on their boats, prohibits the consumption of alcohol, and punishes deviations with sanctions that range from shoveling dirt to torture and murder. Under this group's governance, there are no more drug addicts in Puerto Leguizamo and no more speedboat thefts (Vélez 2025).

[8] This is the case in some neighborhoods in Medellín (Colombia), where locals are known to be instructed by the police to resort to the criminal group (the 'combo') in control of their neighborhood in case of theft (Blattman et al. 2024d). Another example is Lara (Venezuela), where the group known as the *Colectivos* controls public transportation, water pipes, and gas stations operating under government-subsidized prices. They charge public buses a fee to enter social housing projects to pick up passengers, decide which streets and houses have water, and charge drivers for allowing them to skip long queues at these gas stations (Venezuela Investigative Unit 2023).

[9] A paradigmatic case is El Salvador, where MS-13 and Barrio 18 were involved in extortion and protection racketeering throughout the country. Approximately 79 percent of businesses, including high-end restaurants and shopping malls, paid extortion fees. The process often began with a local youth connecting the business owner to a criminal leader, who called from prison to discuss '*la renta*' —a protection fee. The total cost of extortion in El Salvador, including lost income from household security expenses and people deterred from working, was estimated at 16 percent of GDP in 2014 (see The Economist 2016). In Ecuador, between 2022 and 2023, extortion cases increased by more than 65 percent and have nearly quadrupled since 2021. Businesses are being forced to pay extortion fees in areas controlled by *Choneros*, *Lobos*, and *Tiguerones*, three major drug-trafficking groups (Austin 2023). Examples in the press include the throwing of a grenade at a school in Guayaquil in 2024 following a US$10,000 demand for extortion, and the bombing of a small pharmacy in Pascuales after the owner refused to pay a US$5,000 protection fee (Austin 2023; El Universo 2021).

[10] There has been a long chain of murders of candidates running for office, ranging from the assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in 2023, just days before the election, to those of the 10 candidates running for local office in Chiapas and Michoacan during the 2024 elections in Mexico.

[11] Notable cases include Mexican ex-federal security secretary Genaro Garcia Luna, who was convicted in US federal court on drug trafficking charges in 2023, or Pablo Escobar, the infamous head of the Medellin Cartel in the 1990s, who held a seat in the Colombian Congress between 1982 and 1983.

intertwined in a feedback loop. Moreover, the capacity to extort citizens and businesses depends on these groups' degree of control, governance structure, and collusion with the state.

Notice also that our approach to characterizing the nature of organized crime focuses on actions and behaviors, not on the structure and internal organization of groups (for example, their size, command configuration, and military capacity). Not all criminal groups provide services, regulate citizens' behavior, or control elections in the territories under their control.[12] They also vary in sophistication based on the level of diversification of their activities, the profitability of their businesses, and the degree to which they are interconnected with national and transnational criminal networks.[13]

But to be sure, organized crime is not a problem exclusive to LAC. Local criminal organizations are part of an enormous transnational network of groups that are involved in all sorts of illegal activities, including drug trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, firearms trafficking, illegal gambling, extortion, illegal mining, and cybercrime, among others. These groups interact with one another at different levels and in various capacities and permeate legal business and legitimate activities, which leads to the question of whether organized crime is a bigger problem in LAC than elsewhere.

How prevalent is organized crime in LAC?

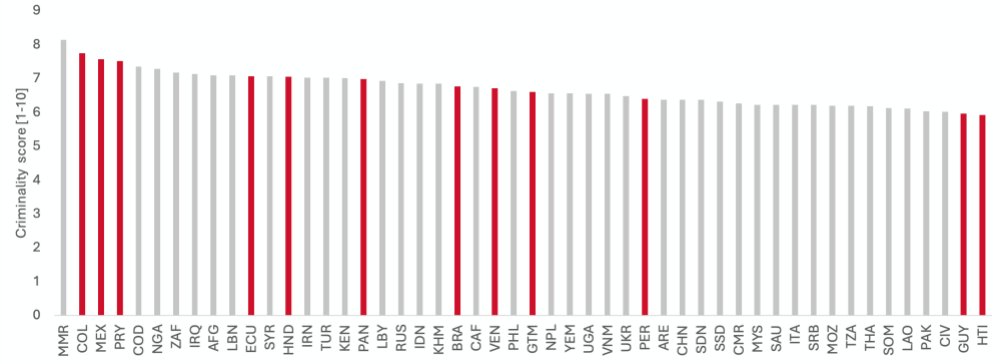
There is virtually no hard data on the incidence of organized crime that is comparable across countries. GI-TOC has recently produced an Organized Crime Index, based on quantitative data and qualitative assessments that attempts, even if imperfectly, to offer internationally comparative measures. The index is a composite of two scores, one on criminality and the other on resilience. The first score assesses "the scale, scope, and impact" of 15 criminal markets and "evaluates the structure and influence" of five types of criminal actors. The second score measures countries' preparedness to face organized crime.

In 2023, 12 LAC countries (Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama, Brazil, Venezuela, Guatemala, Peru, Guyana, and Haiti) ranked among the world's top 50 by the criminality score, alongside countries such as Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Africa, the Russian Federation, and Italy (Figure 1). Admittedly, the list is reassuring in that the criminality score does not just pick noise. Importantly, not all countries are equally affected by organized crime, which implies that places where the phenomenon is recent and its manifestations still mild may have a head start in enacting policies to offset the geographic and sectoral expansion that characterizes the dynamics of organized crime.

[12] Magaloni et al. 2020.

[13] For example, compared to gangs in Medellín (Colombia) or Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Salvadoran 'maras' were less organized, less lucrative, less in control of local violence, and less connected with international networks of organized crime (Blattman 2024).

Figure 1. Twelve LAC countries are among the top 50 (among 193) for organized crime
Criminality Score, top 50 countries in the sample, 2023



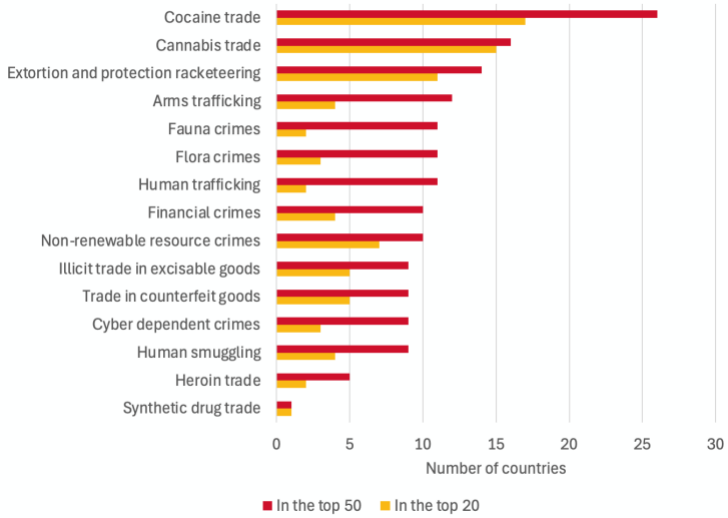
Source: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.
Note: LAC countries are highlighted in red. The Criminality Score in the Global Organized Crime Index measures the extent and impact of organized crime in a country on a 0–10 scale, with higher scores indicating more criminal activity. The figure uses International Organization for Standardization (ISO) country codes.

Considering the components of the criminality score independently offers insights into the various manifestations of organized crime and its more prevalent dimensions in LAC. Indeed, the different component rankings reveal country-specific specialization patterns along the vertical production chain of the criminal business. That is, not all countries that rank among the top for their involvement in, say, the cocaine trade (including the production, distribution, and sales stages), also rank high for financial crimes. However, it is worrying that LAC has a dominant presence in far too many criminal markets, including the cocaine trade (with 17 LAC countries among the top 20), the cannabis trade (15 of 20), extortion and protection racketeering (11), arms trafficking (4), and financial crimes (4) (see Figure 2). Mexico appears in the most categories (13) among the top 20 countries across the 15 criminal markets in the GI-TOC index, followed by Brazil and Colombia, each with 8. The countries of the Caribbean with the highest criminality scores (Guyana and Haiti) rank among the world's top 20 for cocaine trade and for extortion and protection racketeering.

Little is known about where, when, and how these activities come about; how these groups are structured and interconnected; the extent to which they specialize or diversify into multiple markets; or how the vast sums of money involved in these activities flow across legal and illegal activities and stain politics. Much of this remains invisible. We observe violence and, to some extent, corruption, at least the portion that gets detected. This is rather insufficient and implies that what we know about how organized crime works comes from a handful of case studies explored by journalists, field researchers, and investigative units in state agencies. We urgently need to understand the hidden web of organized crime in LAC to control its most costly manifestations and unleash the region's development potential.

Figure 2. LAC presence is significant in many criminal markets

Number of LAC countries among the top 50 and the top 20 by criminal market, 2023



Source: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.
Note: Multiple countries can have the same score and be tied with others within the top 20 or 50. As a result, the top group may include more than 20 or 50 countries.

Why is organized crime so widespread in LAC?

The answer to this question is exploratory. While there is no consensus on the drivers of the escalation of organized crime in the region, several factors may contribute collectively to explaining the phenomenon's scope.

During the second half of the 2010s, the global cocaine market exploded.[14] Several factors contributed to that. First, the production of coca leaves, the primary precursor of cocaine, surged in Colombia—the world's leading supplier—since the mid-2010s. This was caused by the 2014 announcement (during peace negotiations between the government and the FARC guerrilla) of future material benefits to coca farmers and to a lesser extent by the 2015 suspension of aerial spraying of coca fields.[15] Excess coca leaves translated into an upspring of cocaine manufacturing, which was facilitated by the 2016 devaluation of the Venezuelan currency, which intensified the smuggling of gasoline (key input in the transformation of coca leaves into cocaine) across the porose border between the two.[16] Cocaine manufacturing increased almost sixfold between 2013 and 2023, and excess cocaine production came with improved purity, which is associated with demand increases.[17] Second, the concentration of cocaine production in the southwest of Colombia may help explain why Ecuador became a global cocaine exporter—as measured by cocaine seizures—and why violence skyrocketed in the last few years, especially in large port cities such as Guayaquil and after the killing of the leader of the 'Los Choneros' gang in December 2020, which triggered a fragmentation of the local criminal structure

[14] See also, IOM 2021; The Economist 2023; UNODC 2024.
[15] Prem et al. 2023.
[16] Beeder 2023.
[17] UNODC 2024.

associated with drug trafficking.[18] Third, higher cocaine profits in LAC resulted in new entrants into the business. For example, Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) moved from prison micro-traffic in Brazil to wholesale cocaine shipments to Europe, owing to its connection to the Italian mafia organization 'Ndrangheta.[19]

The surge of the cocaine trade was complemented by concomitant shocks, some of which were specific to the region and thus help explain its condition as a crime outlier. These include (a) rising commodity prices that triggered an expansion of illegal mining across many LAC countries;[20] (b) increasing global migration to the US that created rents from migrants' smuggling across different parts of LAC (notably the Darien jungle or the US-Mexico border);[21] (c) new opportunities for criminal organizations to gain legitimacy and power, as well as to reorganize and innovate during the COVID-19 pandemic, which came along with sudden drops in income, making recruitment for crime easier;[22] (d) innovation in digital technologies, which broadened the portfolio of criminal businesses and contributed to the expansion of cybercrime;[23] and (e) the expanded production and availability of arms from the US, which facilitated the growth of organized crime into new areas and markets.[24] In 2023, 68 percent of homicides in Latin America involved firearms, and for the Caribbean, the share was 78 percent—the highest globally.[25] The supply of arms associated with the vicinity of the US is somewhat unique to LAC. National efforts to reduce organized crime require addressing the availability of firearms from the US, the primary source of weapons for LAC (Box 1). To this end, innovative strategies such as extraditing drug lords to the US in exchange for reducing the supply of arms may prove helpful.

Box 1. Firearms trafficking fuels organized crime in LAC[a]

Illegal weapons are pervasive in LAC. About 253,000 firearms are trafficked into the region every year.[b] The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives reports that roughly 68 percent of guns at Mexican crime scenes are US manufactured. In Central America, 55 percent of traced firearms come from the US. The figure in the Bahamas can reach as high as 99 percent.[c]

The US is, in fact, the world's leading producer and trader of firearms. Between 2000 and 2020, its firearm production rose by 187 percent, 10 times the country's population growth rate.[d] In 2022, the number of licensed firearm dealers in the country exceeded the sum of all the outlets of McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, and Wendy's.[e] Many such sellers operate near the US-Mexico border, with a large share of the firearms and assault weapons they sell ending up in the arsenal of Mexican cartels.[f] Indeed, in some border states, it is perfectly legal to sell large-caliber firearms that in Mexico are for exclusive military use, requiring only the buyer's driving license to check the buyer's age.[g]

[18] Daniele et al. n.d.
[19] International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024.
[20] Idrobo et al. 2014.
[21] For instance, Venezuelan criminal organization Tren de Aragua evolved, in response to border closures during the pandemic, from charging smugglers fees to establishing its own comprehensive smuggling operation, including owning transport companies and hostels, thereby profiting significantly from migrant exploitation throughout the continent (Financial Times 2024 and The Economist 2023).
[22] Sviatschi et al. 2025.
[23] Chatterjee 2005; Grabosky 2007; Di Nicola 2022.
[24] Aguirre and Muggah 2020; Solmirano, C. 2023.
[25] Calculations based on data from UNODC. For some countries, the latest available data point is 2021 or 2022.

While LAC already faced crime before the relaxation of gun policies in the US in 2004 and 2005, the flow of firearms from the north significantly contributed to worsening violent crime since 2007, especially in Mexico and Central America, where cartels and gangs fight among themselves and against the state.[h]

Moreover, easy access to firearms enabled these groups to enter other businesses and challenge state authority, also facilitating the expansion of criminal networks into large armies capable of dominating entire cities or regions and undertaking new ventures such as human trafficking, extortion, and protection rackets. Such a significant geographic and sectoral expansion would have been impossible without firearms.

Note:
a. This box is based on Pérez Ricart 2024.
b. McDougal et al. 2013.
c. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives 2022a.
d. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives 2022b.
e. Everytown Research and Policy 2023.
f. Weigend Vargas et al. 2023.
g. Pérez Ricart et al. 2021; Pérez Esparza and Weigend 2015.
h. Dube et al. 2013; Escalante Gonzalbo 2011; Merino et al. 2013; Weigend Vargas et al. 2023; Zepeda Gil and Pérez Ricart 2022.

Together with these shocks, the record-breaking drug production and trafficking experienced by the region in the 2010s resulted in a new landscape of criminal actors in LAC, shaped by the consolidation of international criminal enterprises, in which multiple criminal networks interact globally to manage complex supply chains of increasingly diversified criminal activities.[26] In 2023, 11 LAC countries ranked among the top 50 by their foreign criminal actors' presence in the GI-TOC criminality score. Powerful organizations such as 'Ndrangheta and the Albanian mafia are present in several countries of the region.[27] Mexican cartels now operate in parts of Colombia and Ecuador.[28] Some government crackdowns contributed to this factor, beheading established organizations and fragmenting them into several new groups, which has increased competition for the control of territory and illegal markets.[29] Needless to say, all these dynamics came about with high levels of violence.[30]

Last but not least, the involvement of state and political actors in the operation of organized crime in the region is, undoubtedly, a crucial factor behind the growth and strength of criminal groups.[31] It is also key to gauging the impact of this phenomenon on democracy, governance, and state capacity.

Organized crime is extremely violent in LAC

The use of violence is indeed the key transversal element to the activities of organized criminal groups in LAC almost everywhere. Whether indiscriminate or selective, violence originates from conflicts

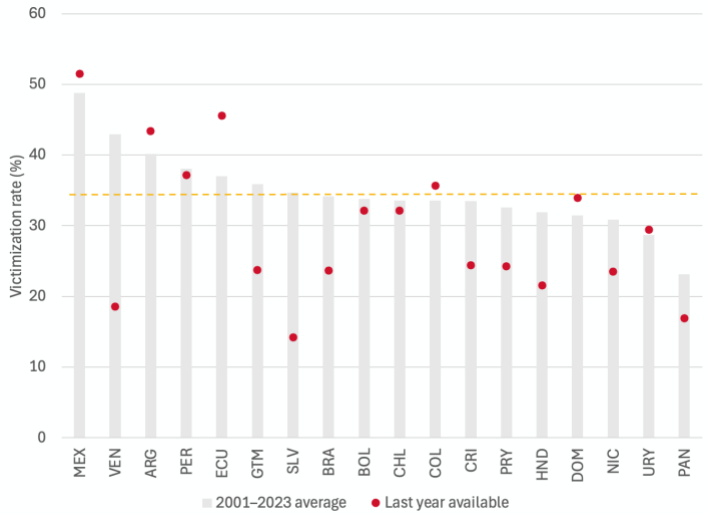
[26] McDermott 2020.
[27] GI-TOC, n.d.; Saiz 2024.
[28] IISS 2024; Millán et al. 2026.
[29] Calderón et al. 2015; Dell 2015; Guerrero 2011.
[30] UNODC 2023a.
[31] Betti 2024; Flom 2019.

between criminal organizations and state forces, conflicts between rival organizations over dispute markets or territory, conflicts within organizations over dispute leadership positions during power transitions, or the selective punishment of rule breakers.

LAC's record as the world's most violent region can be seen, for instance, in victimization surveys. One-third of LAC respondents to the World Values Survey (WVS) state that they or a family member were the victims of a crime in the past year, a figure three times higher than the world average. Sadly, this gap has remained essentially unchanged for over a decade.

Because only a subset of countries enters each survey wave, the WVS does not allow for contemporaneous comparisons of victimization rates across LAC. Fortunately, Latinobarómetro includes a similar victimization question that accommodates such a comparison.[32] Figure 3 suggests that victimization is relatively evenly distributed across the region, with Mexico and Panama at the two extremes.

Figure 3. Victimization is relatively evenly distributed across LAC
Victimization rates, LAC countries, 2001–2023 average and last year available



Source: Authors' calculations based on Latinobarometro.
Note: The dotted line is the simple average of all LAC countries. The last year available is 2023, except for Nicaragua, for which it is 2020. The figure uses ISO country codes.

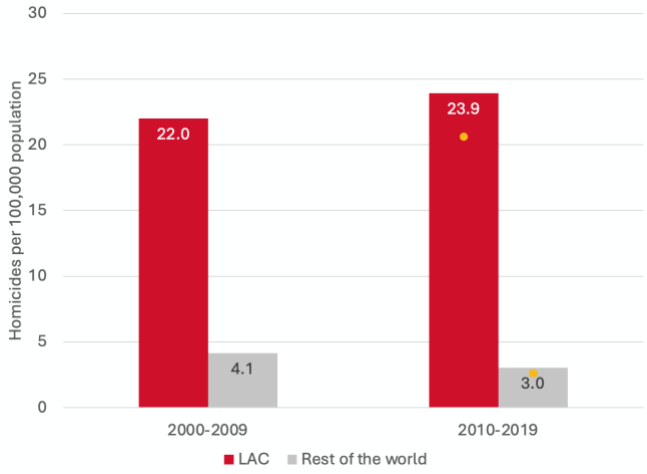
However, this homogeneity can hardly account for the considerable variation in the incidence of organized crime across LAC countries, as revealed by a range of GI-TOC index-based country rankings. This can be explained by the fact that survey-based victimization captures both lethal and non-lethal violent crimes as well as property crimes, and thus constitutes informative measures of general patterns of crime. But, as discussed, organized crime in LAC seems to be more reliant on lethal violence.

[32] Latinobarometro asks respondents if they or a relative have been assaulted, attacked, or a victim of a crime in the last 12 months.

This is consistent with the widely cited figure that, while accounting for approximately 9 percent of the global population, LAC suffers one-third of the homicides. Moreover, the homicide rate gap between LAC and the rest of the world increased from 5.4 to 1.0 in the first decade of this century to 8.0 to 1.0 in the second (Figure 4). Every subregion of LAC suffers from high levels of violence. The homicide rates of South America, Central America, and the Caribbean all far exceed those observed elsewhere in the world. Importantly, violence in LAC is neither explained by the region's development stage nor by its high inequality. LAC's homicide rates are unusually high relative to countries with similar per capita income levels or economic inequality.[33]

Figure 4. LAC is the world's most violent region

Homicides per 100,000 population. LAC and the rest of the world, 2000–2009, 2010–2019, and the last year available



Source: Authors' calculations based on UNODC.
Note: Orange dots show the average of the last year available between 2020 and 2023. Regional aggregates are calculated as simple averages across countries. To avoid comparing different sets of countries, we interpolate missing data for up to five consecutive years. Countries with more than five consecutive missing observations are excluded. For this reason, Bolivia, Peru, and Haiti are excluded from the LAC averages.

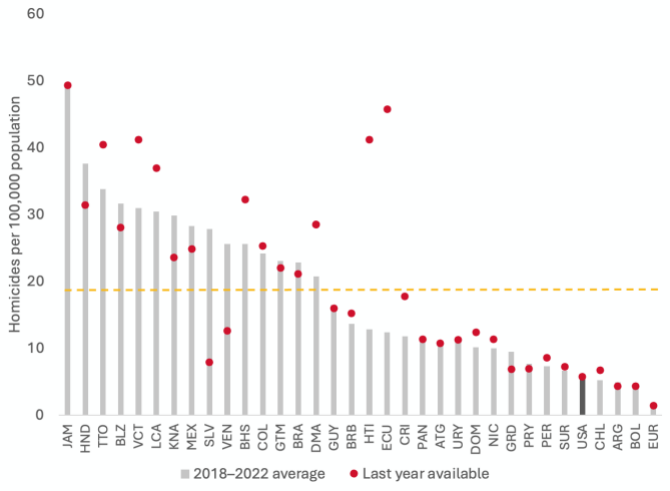
The region's aggregate homicide rate does hide substantial variation across countries. Averaged over 2018–2022, annual homicides per 100,000 people vary from 49 in Jamaica and 38 in Honduras at the top, to 5 in Argentina and 4 in Bolivia at the bottom (Figure 5). During that period, only four LAC countries featured homicide rates lower than that of the US. The last available country-year figure of the homicide rate (red dot in Figure 5) shows significant improvement in some countries in recent years, notably El Salvador and Venezuela, while the problem in others has worsened considerably, with Ecuador and Haiti being the most paradigmatic cases.

Unlike the rest of the world, variations in murder rates in LAC are highly correlated with the presence of organized crime, as measured by the GI-TOC Organized Crime Index (Figure 6). While most non-LAC countries ranking among the top 50 by their criminality score have homicide rates under 10 per 100,000

[33] Formally, if one regresses the homicide rate against GDP per capita and inequality in a panel of countries with continent fixed effects, the coefficient for LAC results significantly high.

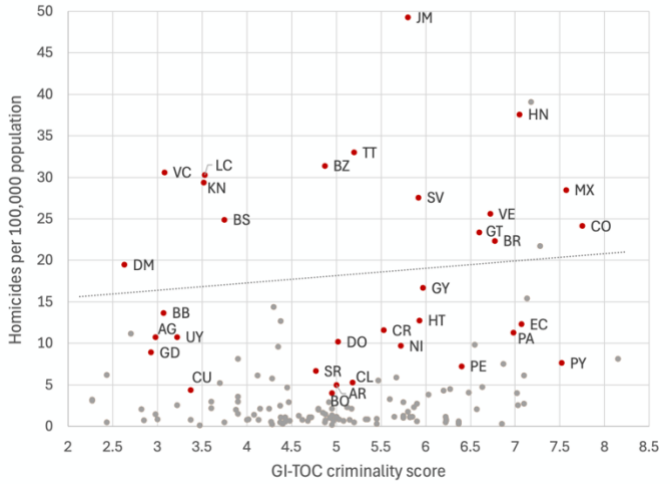
people,[34] most LAC countries in the same group have homicide rates exceeding 10 per 100,000 people, and several countries have homicide rates exceeding 20 per 100,000 people, or even much higher.

Figure 5. There is large variation in homicide rates across LAC countries
Average homicide rate, LAC and comparators, 2018–2022, and last year available



Source: Authors' calculations based on UNODC.
Note: The dotted orange line is the LAC 2018–2022 simple average. Red dots show the last available figure for each country. The figure uses ISO country codes.

Figure 6. LAC countries have higher homicide rates than countries with similar organized criminality score levels
Homicides per 100,000 population, 2018–2022, and Criminality Score, 2023, LAC and comparators



Source: Authors' calculations using homicide rates from UNODC and criminality scores from GI-TOC.
Note: LAC countries are highlighted in red. The Criminality Score in the Global Organized Crime Index measures the extent and impact of organized crime in a country on a 0–10 scale, with higher scores indicating more criminal activity. The figure uses ISO country codes. The dotted line represents the linear trend fitted to the LAC countries' data.

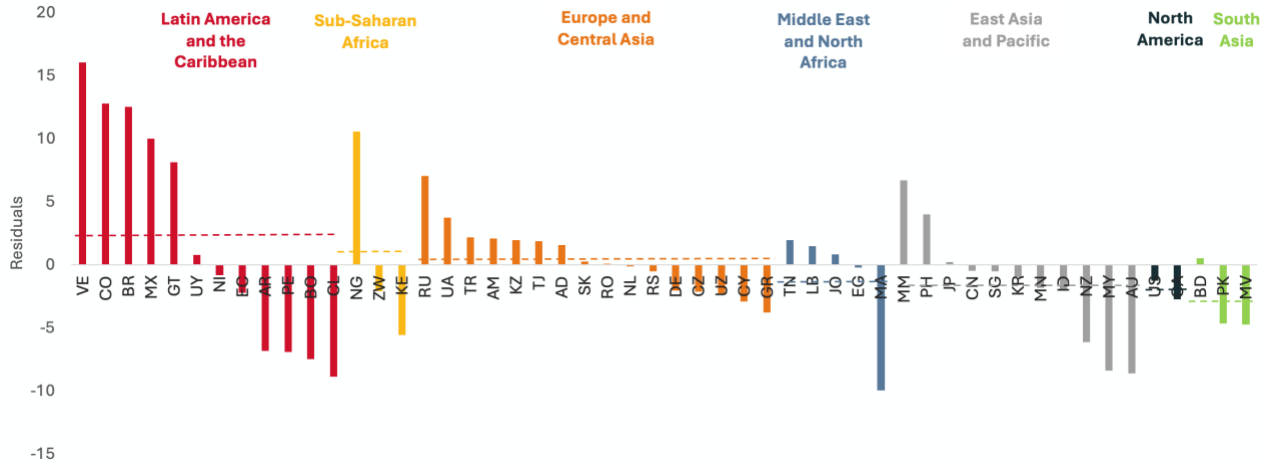
[34] The exceptions are Nigeria, South Africa, and South Sudan.

To be sure, murders are neither the only violent manifestation of organized crime nor are they solely caused by organized criminal dynamics. Still, these figures do suggest that organized crime is more lethal in LAC than in most other places. This is in line with findings from journalistic investigations, judicial cases, and academic research, which have documented the relationship between organized crime and violence in LAC, albeit not systematically and only for some countries. Still, the subset of countries where lethal violence has only recently risen remain largely understudied.[35]

To explore the hypothesis that violence in the region tends to be more lethal than elsewhere, we compute the "excess" homicide rate given what would be predicted by the reported level of general victimization. That is, a country's excess lethal violence for a given victimization level.[36] Figure 7 plots our proposed measure for all the countries available in the WVS sample. By far, LAC has the highest average levels of excess lethal violence (horizontal lines), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe and Central Asia. Within LAC, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, and Guatemala are the countries with the most excess lethal violence. In contrast, countries like Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina report lower homicide rates relative to their general levels of crime. This excess lethal violence measure is highly correlated with the GI-TOC criminality score (0.63) in LAC. The correlation is lower globally (0.34), suggesting that there is something particular about organized crime and violence in LAC.

Figure 7. LAC is the region with the highest lethal criminal violence

Residuals of regression of the homicide rate against victimization rate (averaged 2017–2022)



Source: Authors' calculations based on UNODC and WVS.
Note: The figure uses the ISO country codes.

[35] Dammert 2025; Dudley 2014; UNODC 2023c.

[36] Specifically, for all countries in the WVS sample, we regress the homicide rate on the average victimization recorded for the same period by the WVS. This regression's residuals can be interpreted as the fraction of homicides that cannot be explained by general crime (as captured by survey crime victimization rates). Positive values of the residuals indicate that victimization rates predict lower homicide rates than those observed, that is, that violence is more lethal. The results are very similar if, instead of the regression residuals, the ratio of homicides to victimization rates is computed. The correlation of the country-level rankings between the two measures is 0.79. This exploratory measure has obviously many limitations. For instance, its quality depends on the availability of reliable victimization surveys. Instead, the homicide rate is usually the most reliable—and internationally comparable—statistic of violence due to its low level of underreporting.

Why do we care?

Organized crime and violence obstruct the path to development. LAC has long been hobbled by mediocre economic growth, low productivity, and high levels of poverty and inequality. Organized crime and the high lethal violence it brings along contribute to trapping the region in this dismal equilibrium. There are several channels through which organized crime trumps development.

Reducing and distorting private investment. Uncertainty about property rights resulting from criminal violence and extortion reduces and distorts investment—both local and foreign—making it insufficient and suboptimal.[37] Criminal taxes/extortion, alongside security and insurance expenses, increase business operation costs, reducing competitiveness and investments.[38] In some countries, legal businesses suffer from forgone profits, as segments of the territory are entirely out of reach due to the presence of criminal organizations. Extortion and protection racketeering may also hinder compliance with formal taxes, particularly for smaller businesses with limited capacity to absorb these costs.

Diverting public resources toward unproductive uses. A significant portion of national and local government budgets must be allocated to unproductive security and defense expenses aimed at combating crime and violence. Counting only national government expenditures, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated the fiscal cost associated with expenses on public security for seven LAC countries between 2018 and 2022 at 1.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).[39] This is both inefficient and socially wasteful. If crime and violence were sufficiently controlled, these resources could be devoted to productive or socially beneficial investments such as infrastructure, education, or health.

Destroying human and natural capital. Criminal governance and violence affect human capital formation and productivity, both through direct victimization and by altering schooling choices and opportunities.[40] Also, drug trafficking, illegal mining, and environmental crimes are responsible for the depletion of natural capital through deforestation and water contamination, with potentially incommensurable costs for future generations (see Box 2).

Deepening inequalities. Organized crime and criminal violence disproportionally affect segments of the population already at a disadvantage—those living in the poorest urban neighborhoods, rural areas with limited state presence and strong illicit economies, and border communities.[41] While wealthier people can be the target of extortion and kidnapping, they have more resources to protect themselves.[42] People living in poverty, the less educated, and ethnic and gender minorities are more likely victims of homicide and non-lethal crimes that affect their health—physical and mental— and their capacity to accumulate human capital.[43] When violence occurs in contexts of high inequality, it contributes to exacerbating and perpetuating it.[44]

[37] Pshisva and Suarez 2010; Bernal et al. 2024.
[38] Detotto and Otranto 2010.
[39] Bisca et al. 2024.
[40] Justino 2016; Prem et al. 2023.
[41] Arjona and Kalyvas 2012; GMH 2013; Gómez et al. 2010; Yashar 2018.
[42] Di Tella et al. 2010.
[43] Doran 2017; Schargrodsky and Freira 2023; Soares 2006.
[44] For a review, see Arjona (2021).

Box 2. Environmental crimes in the Brazilian Amazon[a]

The Amazon rainforest is facing an escalating crisis of environmental crimes, including illegal deforestation, mining, wildlife trafficking, land grabbing, and biopiracy. These activities threaten the rainforest's biodiversity and the survival of communities that depend on it. Between the beginning of August 2023 and the end of September 2024, the Brazilian Federal Highway Police (Polícia Rodoviária Federal, PRF), recorded an 88 percent increase in environmental crimes in the Amazon, compared to the previous 14 months.[b] The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Amazon Institute points out that forest degradation in the nine Brazilian Amazon states is at its highest level in the last 15 years. Studies by the Institute for Amazon Environmental Research and the World Bank also emphasize the urgent need for effective interventions against deforestation in the Amazon basin.

Illegal mining contaminates water sources and soil with toxic heavy metals, posing severe health risks to human and aquatic life. Land grabbing and illegal resource exploitation fuel conflicts between traditional communities, illegal settlers, and powerful logging and mining interests. The expansion of sophisticated criminal organizations into the region, notably Comando Vermelho and PCC, adds a new and concerning dimension.[c] These groups take advantage of the region's vast and sparsely monitored territory and its weak law enforcement to smuggle illegal products and help finance their operations through environmental crimes. The intricate connection between drug trafficking and environmental crimes is increasingly apparent in Brazil, with criminal organizations using established traffic routes and infrastructure to smuggle illegally acquired natural resources.[d]

Note:
a. This box is based on text contributed by Erwin De Nys, Practice Manager of the World Bank's Climate Finance Mobilization Unit.
b. Rodrigues 2024.
c. O Globo 2024.
d. Amazon Watch et al. 2023.

Weakening democracy and the quality of government. Organized crime erodes social capital, hinders the provision of public goods, and threatens democratic institutions.[45] Under criminal governance, citizens often forgo their agency and right to political participation.[46] In the areas under their control, criminal groups challenge the state's rule of law, interfere with electoral processes, and reduce political competition.[47] This process often leads to state capture and widespread corruption.[48]

All these channels add up to significant costs, many of which are hard to quantify. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) estimates direct human capital losses and public and private security

[45] Arjona 2021; UNDP 2013.
[46] In some contexts, criminal groups establish an order that may facilitate certain forms of civic engagement—such as community meetings, dispute resolution, or collective action—transforming the nature of political participation rather than eliminating it.
[47] Albarracín 2018; Arjona et al. 2023; Blanco and Ruiz 2013; Carreras 2013; Ceobanu et al. 2011; Gallego 2018; Krause 2014; Malone 2010; Pérez 2003; Ponce 2019; Visconti 2020.
[48] Arias and Barnes 2017; Arjona 2016; Arjona et al. 2015; Lessing 2021; Mampilly 2012.

expenses in LAC in 2022 at 3.4 percent of GDP.[49] These are the most recent estimates available of the direct costs of crime. In 2010, the World Bank reported a higher figure of 7.7 percent of GDP for Central America, considering material and health costs in addition to security expenses.[50]

II. CRITICAL POLICY AREAS TO REDUCE THE BURDEN OF ORGANIZED CRIME

The fact that organized crime results in more lethal violence in LAC than in other places may be explained in part by persistent disputes across organizations for territorial and market control, but it also indicates a failure of the state to respond to the challenges posed by organized crime. Entirely eradicating organized crime is unlikely. But improved state action can help manage it by addressing its more harmful manifestations. This has been the case in other places, where organized crime is present, but it does not coexist with lethal violence, and its impact on economic development is constrained.

In particular, LAC stands out for its poor performance in the three key pillars of security policy: prisons, police forces, and justice systems. The discussion that follows argues that the region has serious problems in all three dimensions and highlights urgent policy interventions that governments must undertake to improve their law enforcement capacity to fight the scourge of organized crime.

LAC prisons must be transformed to fulfill their objectives[51]

Prisons should contribute to reducing crime through incapacitation, deterrence, and resocialization.[52] Incapacitation refers to removing offenders from society so they cannot commit crimes while imprisoned. Deterrence involves discouraging potential criminal behavior through the threat of imprisonment. Resocialization aims to improve offenders' outcomes after they have been released from prison. LAC prison systems fail on all three fronts.

The most pressing concern is that in many places, organized criminal groups have taken control of prisons and manage outside crime from within.[53] Criminals behind bars are no longer prevented from committing new crimes, and imprisonment is no longer a threat that deters criminals. Instead, it has become a step in a gang criminal's career. Prisons in LAC are not only a 'safe place' for gang leaders but also a field for the recruitment and training of new gang members. In Brazil, PCC and Comando Vermelho emerged in prisons as a strategy for inmates to defend themselves from prison violence. Tren de Aragua also originated behind bars in Venezuela.[54] The largest and deadliest Salvadoran '*maras*'—Barrio 18 and MS-13—were, in turn, created in prisons in Los Angeles. All these gangs eventually became transnational criminal organizations.[55] Other infamous gangs do not originate inside prisons,

[49] Perez-Vincent et al. 2024.
[50] World Bank (2010) based on Acevedo (2008).
[51] The discussion in this section refers to both prisons and jails under the label 'prisons' because the distinctions between these terms made in the US is neither as clearcut in LAC nor as comparable across countries in the region. The discussion also refers interchangeably to 'prison system' and 'penitentiary system'.
[52] Becker 1968; Bhuller et al. 2020; Drago et al. 2009; Kuziemko 2013.
[53] Schargrodsky and Tobón 2025.
[54] Sampó and Troncoso 2024.
[55] Biondi 2016; Lessing 2010; Lessing and Willis 2019.

but their imprisoned leaders preserve and command outside operations and negotiate and regulate operations with imprisoned leaders from competing criminal groups.[56]

Authorities in LAC must regain control of prisons by interrupting cellular and other forms of communication, subjecting gang leaders to stricter controls in high-security facilities and improving the allocation of prisoners to prevent the exposure of minor criminals to members of criminal groups. Of course, these interventions are challenging because prison crackdowns can instigate both internal and external violence. For example, in Rosario (Argentina), the hardening of prison security conditions in March 2024 triggered a series of random assassinations in the streets that were ordered by imprisoned gang leaders to protest the operation. However, the authorities persisted with the tightening, and the homicide rate eventually fell back (see Box 3).

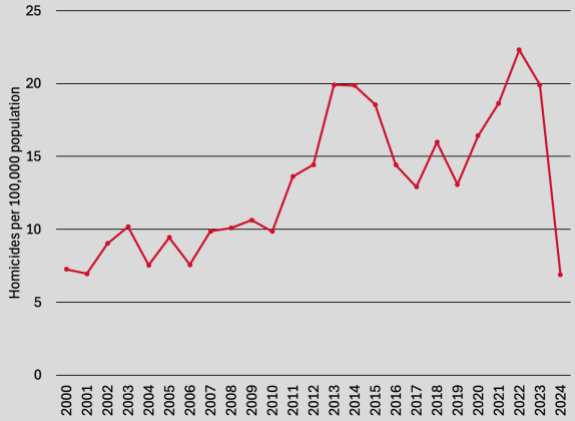
Box 3. The Rosario prison intervention in 2024[a]

Since 2013, violent crime has increased significantly in the city of Rosario, Argentina. This phenomenon is almost entirely related to drug trafficking, with most murders associated with territorial disputes between Rosario's largest gang—Los Monos—and rival organizations. Despite the incarceration of most of Los Monos' leaders, the murder rate kept increasing, reaching 22 per 100,000 inhabitants by 2023 (five times Argentina's rate). Corruption within the prison system allowed imprisoned gang leaders to carry on their illicit activities outside. For example, in 2022, Los Monos carried out a drive-by shooting at the house of a federal judge who had ordered the prison transfer of one of the criminal leaders.

In early 2024, the federal and provincial authorities launched Operativo Bandera, which included a severe tightening of the prison conditions of gang leaders, enforcing the prohibition on the use of cellphones, implementing sudden searches, reallocating prisoners, grouping members of each gang in separate wings, and controlling visits. Gangs responded by starting a series of random assassinations of civilians in the streets. However, the government persisted with the tighter imprisonment conditions for gang leaders and responded with the deployment of 1,400 additional federal security officers in the city in coordination with provincial police. Operativo Bandera had almost immediate success, lowering Rosario's murder rate by 65 percent between 2023 and 2024 (Figure B3.1).

[56] Blattman et al. 2024a, 2024b; Kalsi 2018; Sviatschi 2022.

Figure B3.1 Homicides declined sharply after the Rosario prison intervention
Homicides per 100,000 people, Rosario (Argentina), 2000–2024



Source: *Sistema Nacional de Información Criminal* for 2000–2023 data; *Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad de Santa Fe* for 2024 data.

Note:
a. This box is based on Schargrodsky and Tobón (2025).

LAC prison systems also stand out for large numbers of unsentenced prisoners, harsh conditions, and overcrowding (Figure 8). Out of 24 LAC countries with available data, 6 have more than twice their capacity, and only 3 operate under capacity. On average, almost half of those in prison are unsentenced.

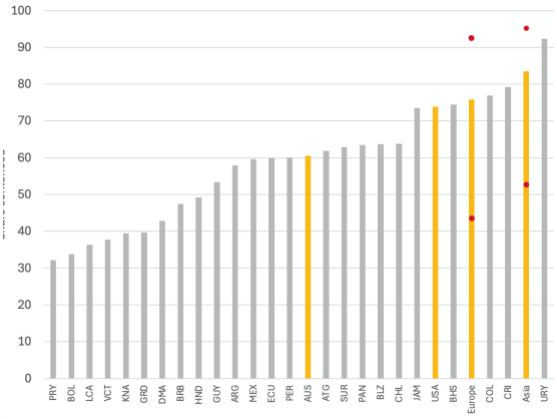
Thus, a second priority is improving prison conditions. By providing inmates with better infrastructure and services, lower occupancy levels, and higher guard-to-inmate ratios, some regions of Colombia saw a 36 percent reduction in recidivism rates.[57] Similar results have been observed in the US.[58] Improving prison conditions also involves implementing resocialization programs for inmates.[59]

To reduce overcrowding, it is also critical to consider alternatives to incarceration. These alternatives could be particularly valuable in sparing young and low-level offenders from a deleterious prison experience under the influence of criminal organizations.[60] Electronic monitoring has proven to be a cost-effective alternative to prison in Argentina, reducing recidivism rates by approximately 50 percent.[61] Reducing pre-trial detention and the length of sentences are also approaches that may reduce recidivism.[62] Restorative justice and behavioral therapies have also demonstrated promising results.[63] Most of these are low-cost alternatives and thus potentially cost-effective relative to standard incarceration.

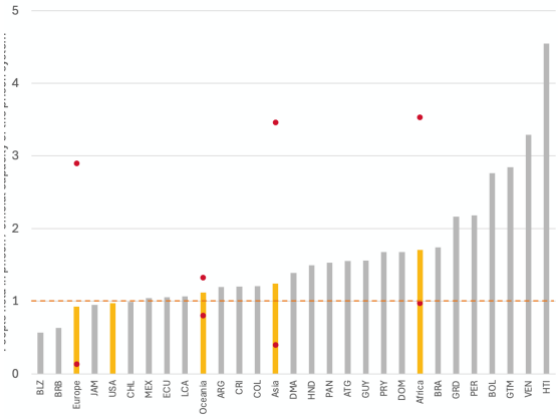
[57] Tobón 2022.
[58] Chen and Shapiro 2007.
[59] Alsan et al. 2024; Davis et al. 2025.
[60] Agan et al. 2023a; Agan et al. 2023b; Aizer and Doyle 2015; Bhuller et al. 2020; Eren and Mocan 2021; Kleinberg et al. 2018; Kuziemko and Levitt 2004.
[61] Di Tella and Schargrodsky 2013. These findings were replicated in the US and Australia (Grenet et al. 2024; Williams and Weatherburn 2022).
[62] Donohue and Wolfers 2006; Estelle and Phillips 2018; Polinsky and Riskind 2019; Rose 2021; Rose and Shem-Tov 2021.
[63] Shem-Tov et al. 2024.

Figure 8. LAC prisons are overcrowded, and many prisoners are unsentenced

Share of people in prison who are sentenced, 2021 or 2022



Ratio of people held in prison to official prison capacity, 2021 or 2022



Source: UNODC.

Note: LAC countries are shown in grey. Bars for world regions (in yellow) show the median country in the region, and red dots indicate the minimum and maximum values within each region. The 'share sentenced' is calculated as the number of reported sentenced prisoners divided by the total prison population. Data for prison capacity in the United States are from 2019, and for Haiti, they are from 2015.

Finally, the world has been observing the Salvadoran government's 'mano dura' (firm hand) strategy put in place in 2021 to incapacitate MS-13, Barrio 18, and other criminal groups through mass incarceration.[64] More than 73,000 young men were arrested, resulting in a large drop in the homicide rate (from 18 to 2.4 per 100,000 people between 2021 and 2023), with the regaining of state territorial control translating into strong citizen support.[65] The strategy, however, has been questioned for disregarding the separation of powers in government and due process.[66] In other LAC countries, even short-term results from mano dura approaches have proven to be context specific. Some have strengthened criminal organizations' prison control and extended their influence across borders by forcing their fragmentation and relocation.[67]

Working police forces could make a big difference, but shaping them is difficult

Police forces reduce crime through deterrence and incapacitation. As in the case of prisons, most police forces in LAC fail to fulfill these objectives. While most LAC countries are within the European

[64] The crackdown was possible under a state of emergency declaration that suspended constitutional rights to fight these groups (Human Rights Watch 2024). Originally set to last 30 days, the state of emergency has been extended 34 times so far (The Economist 2023a).

[65] For arrest data, see Human Rights Watch (2024). A large previous reduction in lethal violence, from 105 to 20 homicides per 100,000 people between 2015 and 2020, had resulted from an agreement with MS-13 and Barrio 18 to decrease violence in exchange for improved prison conditions and early release. Although the truce succeeded in containing lethal violence, it increased extortion (Blattman 2024; Dudley 2020; Insight Crime 2024; Meléndez-Sánchez and Winter 2024; Papadovassilakis 2023). Despite a constitutional ban on immediate re-election, President Nayib Bukele was reelected on February 4, 2024, winning by a large margin. The government's approval ratings range between 80 percent and 90 percent, the highest in Latin America. Surveys show that individuals in other LAC countries may view President Bukele even more favorably than Salvadoreans (The Economist 2023a, 2024a).

[66] Amnesty International 2022; Cristosal Human Rights 2023; The Economist 2023a; Human Rights Watch 2024.

[67] Akee et al. 2014; Blattman 2024; Davenport 2007; Golcalves et al., n.d.; Lessing 2013; Meléndez-Sánchez and Winter 2024.

range in police size per hundred people, the region displays a wide variation in police force sizes across countries.[68] However, there is no ideal police-to-people ratio and no reason police personnel should be spread homogeneously across the territory.

Instead, how police personnel are deployed across a country's or a city's geography can play a critical role. Here is an instance where better data and better processing tools, including artificial intelligence and data analytics, could improve patrolling strategies and the efficient real-time allocation of resources.[69] Geographical strategies include specific interventions aiming to recover state territorial control, like Brazil's Pacifying Police Units (*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*, UPPs), which sought to reclaim control of *favelas* dominated by criminal groups, and El Salvador's *Plan de Control Territorial*, which regained state authority over areas once controlled by gangs.[70]

Resource allocation between patrolling and investigative activities is another dimension that matters for police effectiveness in the fight against organized crime. There is often a bias in favor of patrolling because visible police deployment responds to citizens' demands for police presence. However, patrolling helps combat common crime but is not enough to address organized crime, which requires stronger police investigative capacities.

Police forces in LAC are also usually undertrained to address the challenges they face, particularly those posed by organized crime. Better training in best policing practices for both patrolling and investigative work can make a difference. In addition, there is a need for more institutional support, including better working conditions, wellness practices, and compensation. These are necessary to prevent corruption, reduce personnel rotation, address mental health distress (common in the occupation), and foster loyalty to the state among the police.[71]

Another issue when considering police effectiveness in LAC is the need for coordination with other state agencies and, sometimes, other security forces. Police forces must coordinate and collaborate with other state agencies to be effective. Mexico City is a good example of a multi-pillar strategy to fight crime that rests strongly on intelligence-based policing and inter-institutional coordination under a centralized command (Box 4). Coordination is also essential when local and national forces overlap. Moreover, in response to the growing presence of national and transnational criminal organizations, better coordination (through centralized command or other mechanisms) of police interventions within and across the LAC countries and with countries outside the region is necessary.

[68] Police forces in LAC range in size from 173 per 100,000 people in Honduras to 887 in Uruguay.
[69] Mastrobuoni 2020.
[70] Monteiro and Weintraub 2025.
[71] Dube et al. 2023; Holz et al. 2023; Owens et al. 2018.

Box 4. Mexico City's high-impact crime reduction strategy[a]

Mexico City's homicide rate peaked at 30 per 100,000 people in 2018 after four years of increase. A new crime reduction strategy was implemented in 2019 to reduce high-impact crimes and improve the public's perception of security.[b] The strategy is still being implemented and consists of six key pillars:

1. Intelligence-based policing—the Secretariat of Citizen Security (SSC) police force was given new investigative powers, enhancing its operations with intelligence-driven, targeted actions.
2. Inter-institutional coordination under the centralized command of the Chief of Government to promote continuous collaboration between the Prosecutor's Office, the SSC, and local boroughs, through periodic meetings.
3. Strategic allocation of police to high-crime areas for more rapid and effective response.
4. Use of advanced technological tools to optimize surveillance and incident response.
5. Prioritizing the professionalization and welfare of police personnel, resulting in a cumulative salary increase of 45 percent between 2018 and 2022, and certification of nearly 90 percent of the police personnel
6. Social prevention programs to tackle underlying causes.
The strategy resulted in a 49 percent decrease in high-impact crimes between July 2019 and July 2024, with daily averages dropping from 131 to 57 crimes. The perception of insecurity also fell by 41 percentage points between early 2018 and mid-2024. Homicides have been dropping each year since the effort began.[c]

Note:
a. This box is based on text contributed by Thomas Favennec from LABCO.
b. Gobierno de la Ciudad de México 2024a; Secretaría de Seguridad Ciudadana de la Ciudad de México 2024a.
c. Gobierno de la Ciudad de México 2024b; Secretaría de Gobierno de la Ciudad de México 2024b.

Countries in the region vary in their degree of decentralization of police forces. For instance, while Colombia has only one (national) police force distributed across the territory, Argentina has federal and provincial police forces. Police (de)centralization presents significant trade-offs. Local police forces may have the advantage of better local knowledge. But if organized crime groups respond to police interventions in one area by moving their activities to another, decentralized and isolated police responses are likely insufficient. On the other hand, coordination and competition among security forces may prevent their capture by criminal organizations. However, more important than the degree of institutional decentralization is the capacity of police forces to coordinate internally across units and with other state actors.[72]

Police effectiveness also depends on trust from the community. According to the WVS (2017–2022), levels of citizen trust in the police in LAC are the lowest globally. On average, 67 percent of respondents in LAC countries report having little or no trust in the police, compared to 36 percent in non-LAC countries. Distrust affects crime reporting and cooperation. Tackling the use of force, abuse, and biased enforcement (for example, the targeting of minorities) to which police forces are prone can contribute

[72] Durán-Martínez (2015) argues, more broadly, that the cohesion of the state security apparatus is key.

to restoring trust.[73] Preventive interventions focusing on at-risk officers seem cost-effective in reducing these behaviors.[74] Another approach shown to reduce bias is increasing diversity within police departments by recruiting underrepresented groups.[75] Increased institutional support, as previously discussed, can also help.

Effective monitoring and accountability measures are crucial for improving police-community relations.[76] For instance, body-worn cameras have the potential to influence policing outcomes, notably reducing fatal and nonfatal police use of force and civilian complaints against the police. From a financial standpoint, these cameras could pay for themselves by lowering investigation costs and payouts or settlements.[77] Militarized policing is often associated with abuse and is therefore undesirable in most cases.[78] Community-oriented policing efforts have emerged as an alternative approach to militarized policing. However, they have yielded mixed results, and their effectiveness is strongly context specific (Box 5).

Box 5. Rio de Janeiro's community-oriented policing strategy[a]

In 2008, in Rio de Janeiro, the state launched UPPs to reclaim territory from criminal groups. The initiative aimed to move away from the 'militarized' policing of *favelas*, the low-income urban areas housing about 20 percent of Rio's population and controlled by gangs. Young officers trained in human rights and community-oriented policing were enlisted to foster better relations with favela residents and reduce armed confrontations. Implementation varied by leadership style, including offering soccer and karate classes for kids, conflict resolution, and community meetings to discuss security. More than 10,000 UPP police officers were deployed in about 160 *favelas*.

UPPs reduced fatal police shootings by 45 percent compared to previous militarized policing. However, their impact varied with the military capacity of local criminal groups and the prevailing form of local governance. Where criminal groups had strong military power and offered civilian benefits in exchange for support, UPP interventions turned communities into war zones. Where gangs had lower military capacity and harsher governance, UPPs improved local security conditions. Where gangs shared resources from illicit markets with state associates while providing local security and assistance to civilians, UPP crackdowns disrupted this order. Where gangs exploited communities through illicit associations with state agents, engaging in harmful activities like human trafficking and kidnapping under law enforcement protection, by breaking these illicit pacts, UPPs improved local security and human rights. Where rival groups engaged in constant conflict over territorial control, UPPs were crucial in resolving violent situations, often acting as key actors to bring order.

A takeaway from this experience is that the state's ability to regain territorial control also depends on police behavior. Effective territorial control shifts when communities view police as legitimate and not as criminal themselves. However, if criminal groups maintain order better than the police and residents fear law enforcement more than criminal bosses, citizens may prefer criminal organizations.

[73] Braga et al. 2019.
[74] Abril et al. 2024; Parker et al. 2024; Stoddard et al. 2024.
[75] Ba et al. 2021; Cox et al. 2024; Donohue and Levitt 2001; Harvey and Mattia 2024; Miller and Segal 2019.
[76] Rivera and Ba 2023.
[77] Ariel et al.2015; Assaraf et al. 2024; Barbosa et al. 2021; Braga et al. 2017; Braga, MacDonald et al. 2022, 2023; Fagundes et al.2023; Lum et al. 2019; Mancha et al., n.d.; Munyo and Rossi 2020; Williams et al. 2021.
[78] Magaloni and Rodriguez 2020.

Note:
a. This box is based on Magaloni et al. (2020).

Justice systems: the weakest link

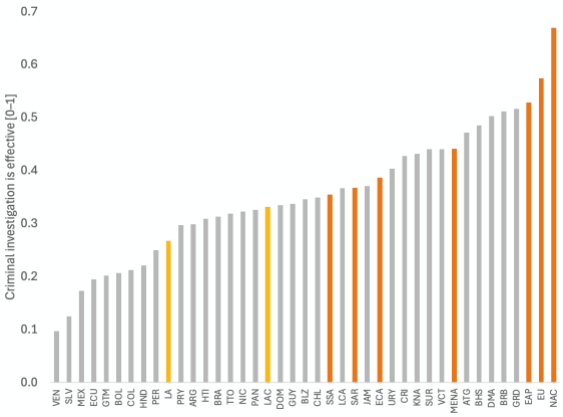
A large proportion of crimes in LAC are neither investigated nor prosecuted. Judicial systems in the region lack the capacity to properly investigate and process most offenses, including very serious ones. In some cases, justice systems in the region can be captured by offenders.[79]

The available indicators of the effectiveness of criminal investigation and adjudication—from the World Justice Project—suggest that, except for Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, Latin American countries rank among the lowest relative to countries in other world regions (Figure 9). The first indicator assesses the quality of criminal justice based on the perception and experience of whether perpetrators of crime are effectively apprehended and correctly charged. It also measures whether the police, investigators, and prosecutors have adequate resources, are free of corruption, and perform their duties competently. The second indicator measures whether perpetrators of crime are effectively prosecuted and punished, and whether criminal judges and other judicial officers are competent and produce speedy decisions. It provides a closer assessment of impunity, confirming that this is a significant problem in the region.

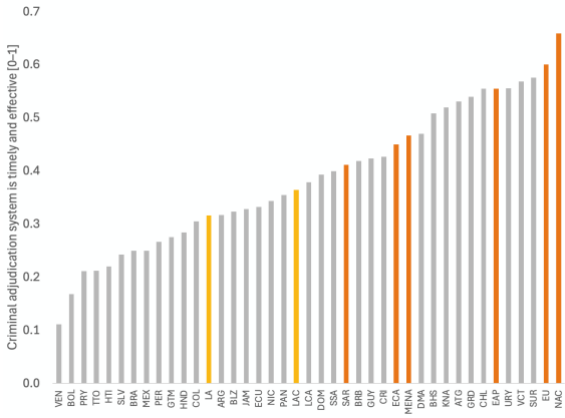
Figure 9. Most Latin American countries rank poorly on the effectiveness of their criminal justice systems

Criminal Justice Indicators, 2023

a. Criminal investigation system is effective [0–1]



b. Criminal adjudication system is timely and effective [0–1]



Source: World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2023.
Note: The indexes are based on data from general population polls and qualified respondents' questionnaires, completed by criminal law experts. Scores range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating a more effective system. LAC countries are shown in grey. EAP = East Asia and Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia; EU = European Union; LA = Latin America; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; NAC = North America; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa.

[79] This discussion refers to justice systems as all public authorities that (a) manage and solve disputes between citizens, private organizations, and state agencies—including formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms; and (b) investigate, prosecute, and convict criminal offenses. This broad characterization includes different types of public authorities, such as formal judicial systems, criminal investigation agencies, and prosecution services, as well as informal dispute resolution mechanisms such as conciliation, mediation, and other restorative instruments.

High levels of impunity for serious crimes are confirmed by most measures of criminal justice performance in those LAC countries experiencing more crime and violence. For example, according to UNODC data, clearance rates for homicide in parts of Europe and Asia commonly range around 80–85 percent, whereas in the Americas overall, they are nearer 50 percent, and in some LAC countries, reported clearance rates fall below 10 percent. In this context, the ineffectiveness of the justice system, combined with fragile public institutions and weak, non-strategic security forces, contributes to a vicious cycle that interconnects and intensifies broad social, economic, and political disadvantages; powerful criminal organizations; and expanded illicit markets.

The region's weak judicial systems imply that countries lack the capacity to detect, investigate, and dismantle complex criminal organizations with multiple actors and layers or, at the very least, to punish the criminals and activities that generate the worst welfare externalities for the region's citizens.

A major source of weak judicial capacity is the absence of performance indicators that create the right incentives across the law enforcement and criminal justice chain. In cases involving organized crime, for example, emphasizing short-term operational metrics—such as the number of arrests or prosecutions, often targeting low-level operatives—can undermine broader strategic goals. These actions may even obstruct investigations aimed at dismantling higher levels of criminal command. Similarly, indiscriminate repressive measures can unintentionally fuel violence and jeopardize civilian safety.[80]

To foster strategic rather than merely operational effectiveness, performance indicators must reflect the long-term impact of law enforcement and prosecutorial actions. Current measures that reward volume—arrests, seizures, or the neutralization of visible leaders—should be replaced with metrics aligned with priority criminal phenomena and strategic objectives. In some cases, fewer but more targeted arrests and prosecutions could yield greater overall impact.

Because changing evaluation systems may face resistance from officials accustomed to being judged by immediate results, new indicators must be both practical in Latin American institutional contexts and capable of balancing daily performance assessment with the pursuit of long-term outcomes.[81]

To improve criminal justice capacity, specifically in fighting organized crime, authorities must turn to prioritization, which entails focusing available resources on investigating and eliminating those crimes that are more harmful to society. Examples of such crimes include homicidal violence, child prostitution, and extortion.[82]

Judicial authorities are also central to efforts to develop alternatives to incarceration. Reforming eligibility conditions for focused law enforcement and imprisonment in national- and subnational-level penal codes requires the involvement of judicial authorities, as well as broader discussions on drug policy. Progressing in the conversation about the regulation of drug markets can alleviate LAC prison overcrowding and free resources to target the central structures of criminal organizations more efficiently.[83]

[80] Abt 2019; Blattman 2023; Draca et al. 2023; Kennedy 2011; Lessing 2017.
[81] Laboratorio de Justicia y Política Criminal 2025.
[82] Abt 2019; Blattman (2023); Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018; Kennedy 2011; Lessing 2017.
[83] UNODC 2024; Uprimny, Chaparro, and Cruz 2017.

Finally, as discussed, in some of the territories under their control, criminal organizations help people resolve disputes, replacing state institutions and taking on the role of imparting justice.[84] Therefore, well-functioning justice institutions are among the first forms of state presence governments must bring to territories where state services have been absent.[85]

Supporting innovative conciliation and arbitration systems and other restorative and reparation mechanisms can be a first step toward regaining the state monopoly over justice provision in places where non-state actors have control. In the long term, they can work simultaneously with formal justice institutions, managing minor disputes and preventing them from reaching the courts. They can complement and operate in alignment with conventional judicial institutions.

Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are not new in LAC but have been deployed in limited contexts (Box 6). The region's experience with these mechanisms can inform strategies for bringing state presence to the provision of justice in territories lost to criminal groups' control.

Box 6. Mobile service units may be a way to bring the state where it is absent

Most developing countries cannot provide essential services throughout their entire territory. One innovative approach tested in several contexts is providing services through mobile vehicles. Mobile clinics, for instance, have been widely deployed to reach people who cannot access quality health services.[a] In the context of the fight against organized crime, mobile justice services can be a first move to regain control over territories under criminal governance.

Mobile courts are increasingly used worldwide to extend justice services to remote and underserved areas.[b] Rigorous evaluations of these itinerant programs are scarce. In rural Liberia, an NGO provided mediation and advocacy services through community paralegals trained in formal law. To reach remote communities, the program deployed 'mobile paralegals' on motorbikes to 160 villages across 5 of Liberia's 15 counties. Legal aid led to an increase in clients reporting fair case outcomes, satisfaction, and better relationships following case resolution.[c]

The Mobile Unit for Attention and Orientation to Victims (MUAOV), launched in 2012 in Colombia, is another program that has been evaluated. This program was designed to address the needs of victims of armed conflict in remote and marginalized areas. The mobile units provided personalized consultations, specialized legal advice, training on rights and transitional justice mechanisms, and information about national and local programs for victims. Between 2012 and 2020, the MUAOV served more than 125,000 people, addressing issues such as human rights violations, administrative requests for compensation, and comprehensive reparations.[d] It facilitated the administrative processes related to reparations, increased the rate at which victims received compensation, and improved victims' perceptions of justice and security.[e]

Note:
a. Vidrine et al. 2012; WHO 2006.

[84] Feldmann and Mantilla (2021).
[85] Arjona and Saab 2024.

b. Harper 2011; Open Society Foundations 2013; UNDP 2014; World Bank 2006, 2008.
c. Sandefur and Siddiqi 2013.
d. Colombia, Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho de Colombia 2020.
e. Vargas et al., n.d.

International coordination and collaboration are critical in the fight against organized crime

LAC states are responsible for building strategic policy response capacity to manage organized crime, but they are unlikely to succeed independently because the problem of organized crime transcends national borders and requires global solutions. Thus, achieving effectiveness in the fight against organized crime requires strong international coordination and collaboration efforts. A critical dimension is that organized criminal activity relocates. When a government confronts criminal networks, these organizations can move to another country or region, as well as across activities. These negative externalities require coordinated actions to address them.

Improving cross-country platforms for exchanging information is critical—across customs and tax authorities, financial intelligence units, and criminal investigation units. The currently limited information exchanges enable criminals to move from one country to another, carrying their criminal business across borders.

Facilitating the exchange of criminal evidence between jurisdictions is also crucial. It requires stepping up another level of collaboration to standardize crime definitions, probatory evidence, and protocols for investigation in penal codes across countries, as in the European Union. The standardization effort required is even more significant in countries with federal governments and multiple penal codes. The disruption of illegal financial flows and the successful implementation of anti-money laundering (AML) measures also depend on coordination among public and private agents, within and across countries. Collecting periodic and comparable information to measure organized crime and violence in its multiple expressions is also a step toward a more significant coordinated international effort. This effort can also signal that it is a policy priority, enabling progress to be benchmarked and readily communicated to citizens.

Finally, beyond the scope of collaboration across the pillars of security policy, to succeed in the fight against organized crime, international coordination and collaboration are also needed to address two structural factors specific to the region, which, as discussed, are leading causes of the problem's growth. First, putting a halt to the illicit trafficking of firearms—mostly from the US (see Box 1)—that fuel violence in LAC critically depends on international acknowledgment of the problem and collaboration to solve it. Second, the region cannot abstain from the global conversation about drug policy. The failed war on drugs, especially concerning cocaine (and now fentanyl), has allowed organized crime to control drug markets, leading to higher rents and territorial dominance. Effective regulation can reduce these illegal rents, as seen in various contexts, including New York, Portugal, and Uruguay. To reduce crime in LAC, the global discussion on legalization and regulation must progress.

III. FIGHTING ORGANIZED CRIME REQUIRES A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW IT OPERATES

Rethinking prisons, restructuring the police, prioritizing judicial action, promoting institutional coordination, raising the costs of criminal business, and thwarting the demand for criminal services cannot be achieved without a better comprehension of the nature, complexity, dynamics, and multiple expressions of organized crime. The lack of reliable information on organized crime and the challenges of systematically and comparably measuring it across countries are immense. This means that policy making and program development to combat violence and organized crime often proceed blind, contributing to institutional weakness.

One of the biggest challenges is that organized crime has both visible elements—such as lethal violence—and hidden aspects that are much harder to quantify. This explains why authorities often respond reactively, particularly when high-profile incidents occur. However, areas where organized crime has the most influence frequently remain under the radar, and quietly controlled activities are rarely scrutinized. This allows criminal organizations to grow undetected until they reach a level where control becomes challenging.

While homicides are relatively well-documented, other crimes typically go underreported, with the degree of underreporting varying by type of crime, socioeconomic status, education, gender, and ethnicity.[86] The main alternative sources of information are victimization surveys. However, these are not usually representative at a granular level and are not systematically collected.

Thus, part of the problem is the absence of systematic official surveys. While countries in LAC regularly gather information on labor markets and inflation, they neither systematically collect standardized surveys on criminal activity nor include survey modules in official household and business surveys.[87] This is despite security being one of the top concerns of the population in most opinion poll studies in the region. It follows that surveys capturing criminal activity in representative ways at the neighborhood level—necessary to inform the targeting of policies and programs—in areas facing critical levels of organized crime and violence are even rarer.[88]

The use of administrative data to inform state action and policy design is also not systematic or widespread. The most helpful effort to comprehend the workings of organized crime and inform prevention or security policies appears in scholarly research but is almost always isolated. Most of the time, these efforts are carried out by academic researchers who invest years of work in limited geographies before they start scratching the surface of the organized crime iceberg. We know from the experiences of long-term research focused on Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Medellín (Colombia), and El

[86] Soares 2004.

[87] There are few exceptions. Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru systematically include victimization questions in their household surveys. Brazil, Chile, and Colombia have had a one-time module in the household survey, while Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic have occasionally added a module. However, the number and scope of victimization questions in household surveys vary significantly across countries. El Salvador and Mexico conduct annual victimization surveys. Other countries have only collected victimization surveys occasionally.

[88] Medellín (Colombia) has an annual official survey representative at the neighborhood level and Sao Paulo (Brazil) has one representative for nine city zones. Bogota (Colombia) has an annual survey representative at the locality level collected by the city's Chamber of Commerce.

Salvador that there is much to gain from research specialization and research partnering with state agencies and city governments.

Box 7 presents a detailed description of the city's criminal governance as uncovered by the Medellín Impact Lab, a collaborative endeavor that adopted a multifaceted approach, gathering and analyzing administrative data; conducting city-wide surveys representative at the neighborhood level; carrying out extensive qualitative interviews over the years; and, importantly, working side-by-side with the city government as much as possible. This innovative and comprehensive approach to studying organized crime offers valuable lessons for policy makers. It is a good example of research that informs more effective public policies and demonstrates the importance of long-term, complementary efforts in tackling such complex social issues.

Box 7. Understanding and countering organized crime in Medellín[a]

The city of Medellín (Colombia) is home to an extensive network of organized crime, featuring about 400 street gangs known as *combos*, which collectively employ around 12,000 individuals. These gangs are deeply embedded in the city's socioeconomic fabric, controlling approximately two-thirds of its neighborhoods. Gang members' income varies significantly by rank, with foot soldiers earning around US$10,000 (purchasing power parity) per year, which places them near the city's workers' median income. At the top, leaders within the gangs and the larger mafia-like structures known as *Razones* earn salaries that place them well within Colombia's top 1 percent of income earners. *Combos* often provide protection and order in their neighborhoods to reduce police presence and foster loyalty among residents while protecting their lucrative drug trafficking operations.

The hierarchical structure of these gangs is meticulously organized. *Combos*, which consist of 15 to 50 members, engage primarily in retail drug sales and extortion. Their operations extend to coercive services such as loan sharking and debt collection. *Razones* oversee dozens of *combos*. They not only supply wholesale drugs and other resources to their affiliated *combos* but also coordinate their activities to ensure order and maximize profits by splitting geographical markets, enforcing collusion on drug prices, and facilitating peaceful negotiations to avoid costly conflict when required. *Razones* also communicate among themselves to coordinate activities at their level and maintain peace. Agreements at this level reflect a sophisticated business organizational structure. As a result of these arrangements, violence in Medellín has fallen sharply compared to 15 years ago, when markets were under dispute. The remaining homicidal violence is targeted and meant as a punishment for breaches in the prevailing agreements.

The Medellín Impact Lab, a joint endeavor by Universidad EAFIT in Medellín, the University of Chicago, and Innovations for Poverty Action, has been instrumental in uncovering the intricate details of this criminal governance. Administrative data played a crucial role in this research. Working with the city government, the team secured access to various datasets, including arrest records, geolocated crime reports, social security data, and school performance records. This comprehensive administrative data allowed for real-time mapping of crime hotspots and predictive analyses, essential for understanding the dynamics of organized crime in the city and informing the design of targeted security and prevention policies and programs.

Additionally, the research team has accompanied the city government in conducting annual large-scale victimization surveys representative of all the city's low- and medium-income neighborhoods. They have also directly implemented three large-scale surveys covering approximately 8,000 residents and businesses across Medellín in 2019, 2023, and 2024. These surveys have been designed to capture underreported phenomena such as extortion and gang governance. They have shown, for example, that most extortion goes unreported—only about 15 official reports per week compared to the estimated 150,000 households and businesses paying extortion fees—highlighting the need for better diagnostic tools and more effective interventions.

Collection of qualitative data has been equally crucial. Over several years, the research team conducted hundreds of interviews with residents, business owners, community leaders, police officials, and gang members. This qualitative approach provided deep insights into the gangs' organizational structures, income sources, and governance strategies. It underscores the importance of understanding organized crime groups' economic and political organizations to design policies that can disrupt their operations, minimizing potential unintended consequences.

Partnerships have been vital for this research, including its experimental stage. Collaborations with local government, police, and NGOs have facilitated designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions to reduce crime. One such intervention, a program named 'Operación Convivencia', intensified the presence of city outreach workers to tackle order and counter gang governance in neighborhoods where gangs were entrenched and state legitimacy was low.

The Medellín Impact Lab also initiated a pilot project called *Parceritos* focused on gang recruitment of minors, which aims to provide alternative opportunities and support systems for at-risk youth and reduce the allure of gang involvement. The pilot's results have led the city to commit funds to implement the intervention and measure the program's impact on youth recruitment and overall crime rates in the medium and long term.

Note:
a. Based on Blattman et al. (2022, 2024a, n.d.).

Another research team has conducted extensive and long-term research on the impact of gangs and public policy in El Salvador. Their studies have provided invaluable insights into gang recruitment strategies, the socioeconomic consequences of gang territorial control, and the effectiveness of various public policy interventions. This research has shed light on the complex dynamics of gang control and its far-reaching effects on communities, informing state action and policy design to combat crime and support community development. Box 8 elaborates on the lessons from this experience.

Box 8. Specialized research on gangs in El Salvador

Until 2022, organized crime in El Salvador, predominantly driven by gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, represented a complex challenge characterized by territorial control; violence; and illicit activities, including extortion and drug trafficking. In 2015, it was reported that over 50 percent of municipalities in El Salvador had gang presence.

The work of Micaela Sviatschi (Princeton University), Carlos Schmidt-Padilla (University of California, Berkeley), and co-authors reveals the role that rigorous and long-term research can play in informing state action and policy design at the country or city level. For example, they studied the impact of gangs on children in El Salvador. Criminal organizations employed varied strategies to recruit vulnerable children, including direct coercion and offering increased social status and acceptance. Children exposed to gang leaders during their formative years were more likely to become affiliated with these gangs as adults.[a] Moreover, prisons in El Salvador often served as breeding grounds for further criminal development and network-building among inmates. For example, inmates exposed to gang leaders were more likely to engage in gang-related activities upon release.[b]

The territorial control exerted by gangs significantly hindered development by imposing restrictions on residents' mobility and access to opportunities. In gang-controlled neighborhoods, individuals experienced lower material well-being, reduced income, and limited educational opportunities compared to those living just 50 m outside gang territory. This restricted mobility also affected labor market options, as individuals in controlled areas found commuting to work in non-gang areas challenging. This research also highlights that criminals affect firms' behavior and political reforms in municipalities that experience gang violence.[c]

Research on public policies addressing these issues has yielded promising results. The Safe Schools (*Escuelas Seguras*) program, implemented in 2015, involved the preventive use of police patrolling to reduce gang recruitment around educational centers. This initiative led to fewer school dropouts and reduced recruitment and arrests of vulnerable cohorts. As a result, there was a decline in extortion and homicides five years after the gang operations were disrupted.[d]

The study of truces between gangs shows both positive and negative outcomes. While they can reduce violence in the short term, truces often strengthen criminal groups, leading to increased criminal activities and territorial control.[e]

Government crackdowns on gangs, like the one in 2022, have been successful in reclaiming neighborhoods and restoring residents' freedom of movement. Yet, these crackdowns can have unintended consequences, such as increased stigma and discrimination against residents of former gang territories in the job market.[f] While such measures address immediate safety concerns, their long-term success may depend on context and careful consideration of the potential to undermine institutional legitimacy.

Note:
a. Sviatschi 2022.
b. Golcalves et al., n.d.
c. Melnikov et al. 2020.
d. Castro et al., n.d.
e. Brown et al. 2024.
f. Melnikov et al., n.d.

As suggested by the ongoing experiences in Medellín and El Salvador, deep knowledge of the context and original quantitative and qualitative evidence are key to a more comprehensive understanding of organized crime in specific territories.

The need for better information on the operations of organized crime is not exclusive to its territorial dimension. Another example of the need for improved information and coordination among public and private agents is the handling of Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs), through which financial institutions report transactions potentially associated with money laundering and other financial crimes to state authorities. Still, their use to explore patterns and inform prosecution processes is very limited in LAC (Box 9). Strengthening units charged with detecting money laundering through banks and financial institutions is thus a critical priority. However, this is probably not enough. The rise of cryptocurrencies poses an additional challenge, as some financial transactions occur through parallel channels that avoid the formal financial system. Thus, a range of government agencies must strengthen their understanding of these parallel channels and devise coordinated measures to minimize their illegitimate use.

Box 9. Follow the money: dismantling criminal organizations requires disrupting the financial flows and networks that sustain these groups[a]

AML measures are designed to prevent and detect the concealment of criminal profits. These measures can play a crucial role in the fight against organized crime in LAC by targeting the financial infrastructure that supports criminal activities. Conceptually, AML measures contribute to the following:

- Disrupting financial networks and recovering assets: By identifying, freezing, and recovering assets linked to criminal organizations, AML measures can disrupt the financial flows and networks that sustain these groups and take the profitability out of such crimes.
- Enhancing transparency: Implementing stricter regulations on financial transactions, such as requiring reporting on the source of funds and the ultimate owners of companies, can increase transparency and make it harder for criminals to launder money.
- Targeting corruption and other financial crimes: By introducing AML controls, such as filing suspicious financial transactions, countries can reduce the opportunities for criminals and organized crime groups to profit from crimes such as corruption and tax evasion.
- Supporting the integrity and growth of financial markets: By increasing AML controls, countries promote productivity and investor confidence in local markets, thereby promoting growth.
- Fostering domestic and international cooperation: To effectively implement AML controls, countries must facilitate regular information sharing between relevant domestic authorities, such as supervisors, financial intelligence units, law enforcement, and foreign counterparts.

The primary challenge lies in implementation. Although targeting criminal finances is an effective policy strategy, it requires significant domestic coordination and innovation, as the information and powers needed to tackle illicit financial flows are held by different agencies, and criminals are constantly adapting their methods to move and conceal funds. As a result, only one in five countries effectively investigates, prosecutes, and convicts money laundering

offenses at a high or substantial level.[b] Advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain can help detect suspicious activities and trace illicit funds more effectively. However, the most crucial missing input is well-trained personnel capable of designing and implementing strategies to track and investigate patterns of suspicious financial activity.

Note:
a. Based on text contributed by Yara Esquivel and Ailsa Hart from the World Bank's Financial Integrity and Stability team.
b. Financial Action Task Force. 2022.

Harmonizing administrative records of crime and violence, producing subnational information by including victimization modules in household and business surveys, engaging in data collection at the local level, and detecting illegal financial flows are essential preconditions for nuanced—and more policy-relevant—analyses. Producing better information is an urgent priority in the fight against organized crime in the region.

IV. COMBATING ORGANIZED CRIME AND VIOLENCE IS A FIRST-ORDER DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY

LAC is beleaguered by organized criminal groups that evolved from drug trafficking organizations into transnational corporations that control trafficking, smuggling, and migration routes and scores of illegal and legal activities. This paper has discussed how organized crime hinders the region's development. These groups violently dispute the territories that are valuable for their businesses, establish parallel governance structures that constrain the freedom of individuals, selectively kill those who break their imposed social order, finance political campaigns, shape voters' turnout, and eliminate opponent politicians. Urgent policy action and full political support are necessary from governments across the region to contain their expansion and social damage.

Organized crime breeds in the absence of opportunities

Organized crime finds a breeding ground in the lack of opportunities and political participation of the region's most vulnerable people. This implies that, in addition to the urgent actions already discussed regarding the fundamental pillars of security policy (prisons, police forces, and the justice system), fighting organized crime also requires addressing a range of factors that multiply criminal activity.

Conceptually, these factors can be divided into those that can help reduce criminal organizations' labor supply and access to capital (thus increasing their operating costs) and those that curtail the demand for the types of goods and services they provide (thus decreasing their income).

Regarding labor supply, the lack of opportunities—especially for young men, who are the primary victims and main perpetrators of criminal violence—facilitates recruitment into criminal organizations. The research agendas from Medellín and El Salvador discussed above unambiguously support this insight. In many cases, recruits are not forced into crime, but criminal groups offer significantly better income opportunities than those available in legal markets. They also offer career prospects and

elements of 'emotional mobility' (respect, appreciation, and recognition)—aspects that the precarious non-criminal jobs the region offers to most of its youth often fail to provide.[89]

Moreover, many of these men have been brought up in violent contexts, whether in their communities or households. A study from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) shows that 64 percent of children under 15 years in LAC have experienced violent discipline at home in the form of severe physical punishment or emotional aggression.[90] Only 10 LAC countries have legislation prohibiting these practices.[91] Constant exposure to violence increases the likelihood of young people internalizing aggression as a survival and empowerment mechanism, making gang affiliation seem like a form of protection and empowerment.[92] The influence of friends and acquaintances is also a determining factor. Research on youth motivations for joining groups suggests that those who join for instrumental reasons, such as economic benefits or protection, are more likely to engage in criminal activities. Peer pressure plays a crucial role, as social dynamics within gangs reinforce participation in criminal activities.[93]

The lack of education and economic opportunities interacts with, and is exacerbated by, the region's political inequality. Large segments of the population in LAC have no voice or agency. Political inequality is a source of de facto disenchantment that increases the demand for alternative forms of governance, feeding into the appeal that the types of services criminal organizations provide.

Policies that contribute to improving the functioning of LAC's precarious labor markets and generating better job opportunities—including education and skill training systems and improved regulatory frameworks that level the playing field for business—are fundamental. By increasing the opportunity costs of engaging in criminal activities, these policies reduce the labor supply for organized crime. Simultaneously, policies to prevent recruitment targeted at high-risk youth must be prioritized because they can help break criminal organizations' access to vulnerable populations. Actions can include targeted educational interventions, community-based prevention and protection, and resocialization of former criminals. There are also interventions that can help change the norms that underlie the social acceptability of different forms of violence. Mentorship and emotional support programs, where young people can find role models outside the criminal context, have also proven effective. Prevention policies and programs are a crucial component of a practical approach to security policy.

Working-age men and women need better alternatives to crime in the form of quality jobs that offer prospects for improvement over their life cycle. The reforms required to provide productive jobs are still pending, and the region has paid a high price for this, not only by providing an abundant supply of labor for criminal activities but also in terms of foregone growth, prosperity, and overall development. While these reforms are complex, they are essential to public security. Better prisons, police, and justice systems are indispensable but so are better opportunities.

Prevention and social programs cannot substitute for security policies, but they are a necessary complement. Similarly, even a good security policy without improvements in social conditions and long-

[89] Amaya and Martínez d'Aubuisson 2021; Blattman et al., n.d.; Bouchard and Spindler 2010.
[90] UNICEF 2018a.
[91] UNICEF 2018b.
[92] Hoeve et al. 2009; López Stewart et al. 2000; Rojas-Flores et al. 2013.
[93] Lachman et al. 2013; US, District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department 2011.

term prevention measures will be insufficient. A combination of security and prevention interventions will likely yield the best results.

Fighting organized crime requires functioning states and prioritization

The discussion above suggests that there are policies that could deal simultaneously with supply and demand mechanisms. In many parts of the region, insufficient opportunities and political agency exist alongside non-functioning states. Far from containing cartels, gangs, and illicit networks, many state structures in LAC have inadvertently fueled their expansion. The paradox is stark: governments consistently fail to deliver decisive action in a region where public safety ranks among citizens' most significant concerns. This failure is not simply a question of limited resources, thin budgets, and lack of trained personnel. LAC's lack of state capacity coexists with its inability to solve institutional rigidities and political bottlenecks, and sometimes with its actual unwillingness to address structural problems. In turn, these structural failures interact with pervasive state capture by vested interests (including the very criminal organizations that it should be fighting) and with short-term electoral incentives.

Many national, provincial, and local states in LAC are thus impaired by a blend of incapacity, institutional gridlock, credible threats and extortion of public officers, and political capture that makes them look in directions other than the necessary policy actions. Weak institutions and underfunded bureaucracies lack the tools to respond swiftly to urgent security threats. When the engine of government does move, it often stalls in layers of red tape or institutional veto points that delay decisions until crises spin out of control. Even when institutions could act, political elites frequently choose not to, either out of short-term electoral calculation or because parts of the state itself are captured by the very interests they are meant to regulate. In this way, organized crime thrives not only in the absence of the state but also in its dysfunction: A state that is present, yet enfeebled, becomes a silent partner in its own undoing. This is partly why, in LAC, there is space for organized crime groups to offer services, including protection and conflict resolution, two dimensions at the core of a functioning state.

State failure is evident in several dimensions, such as the lack of state monopoly over justice and security services, the unequal state presence throughout the territory, the inability to provide essential services to all, excessive regulation coupled with poor enforcement, and frequent resort to militarized solutions, which can backfire in controlling organized criminal violence and in terms of citizens' trust.

The above discussion does not imply that a working state is a precondition for fighting organized crime. That would entail delaying urgent policy action on organized crime per se, and strengthening government institutions should guide state action in LAC, regardless of the prevalence of organized crime. Instead, governments should put the fight against organized crime at the forefront of the policy agenda. To that end, they must identify the behaviors and outcomes that cannot be tolerated and draw red lines to guide context-specific, prioritized state action.

There are no acceptable crimes, but given the complexity and multiplicity of forms that organized criminal activity can take—as well as the limited capacity of the state to confront them—policymakers must prioritize and start by identifying the kind of crimes that have the most adverse impacts and focus all state efforts, in a coordinated way, to counteract them. This type of focus can generate new challenges. For example, it may clash with penal codes and lawyers' views of the rule of law.

Additionally, implementing a cross-cutting strategy involving independent institutional actors with diverse objectives that send the same signal to the criminal markets presents a challenge. But given the breadth of the problem, the region cannot aspire to attack the entire phenomenon of organized crime holistically. Neither the US nor Europe has completely eradicated organized criminal activity. Instead, they have learned how to manage the problem by controlling the most harmful activities and behaviors for society.[94] Note that policy, if carefully designed, can change the relative profitability of the different criminal activities and shift organized criminal groups away from those that are more harmful to society to those that represent more tolerable or more manageable harm. LAC can build strategic capacity to manage organized crime.

[94] In Italy, organized crime is deeply entrenched and among the most powerful in the world, with groups like the 'Ndrangheta exerting strong territorial control and dominating Europe-wide illicit markets such as drug trafficking. However, despite their pervasive influence, Italian mafia groups have reduced the use of overt violence in response to policy signaling. Their strategy relies on economic and political infiltration rather than violent confrontation, which explains why Italy faces high levels of organized criminal activity but very low levels of visible violent crime.

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