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What do we know about organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean?

Trends, definitions and risks for
democracy

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Introduction

Latin America grapples with a multifaceted criminal landscape that extends beyond organized crime. A critical aspect of this analysis pertains to the region's alarmingly high homicide rates, which stand out starkly, considering that Latin America comprises merely 9 per cent of the global population, yet accounts for nearly one-third of global homicides (UNODC, 2023b). Moreover, according to the latest UNODC report on homicides (2023b), approximately 40 per cent of these homicides are attributable to the activities of criminal organizations and gangs.

Given the inherent challenges in quantifying violence, homicides and national homicide rates often serve as the primary metrics for assessing the extent of this phenomenon. This is particularly relevant as homicides represent one of the most reliable indicators of societal violence, given their relatively lower underreporting rates and the heightened focus on criminal investigations in official records (Dammert, Croci & Frey, 2024). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that threats, assaults, kidnappings and robberies also serve as indicators of violence (Cruz, 1999), with threats frequently associated with the operations of criminal organizations. Indeed, threats often serve as a precursor to one of the most lucrative enterprises of contemporary criminal organizations: extortion.

Organized crime is intricately intertwined with the contextual realities in which it operates. Various factors, such as social conditions, technological advancements, political dynamics and levels of human development, exert a direct influence on the genesis, manifestation and evolution of criminal activities (Rivera & Sansó-Rubert, 2023). Within Latin America, which is characterized by weak state institutions, pervasive poverty, stark inequality, widespread corruption and entrenched impunity, a conducive environment serves as fertile ground for the proliferation of organized crime. Additionally, informality and, especially, labour informality, have significant impacts on the growth of illegal markets and the consolidation of criminal organizations (Herrera et al., 2023).

Criminal organizations exhibit a rational orientation, driven by profit-seeking motives, meticulously planning their operations while prioritizing the protection of their members to evade law enforcement scrutiny and fend off challenges from rival criminal entities. Demonstrating a high degree of adaptability, these organizations diversify their illicit ventures in accordance with market demands, employing both positive incentives and coercive measures, including violence, to legitimize their operations within communities and ensure the smooth functioning of their enterprises. Moreover, they exploit corruption to facilitate their activities, exerting influence over key public and private officials by bribing or killing them (*"plata o plomo"*), thereby ensuring the success of their illicit operations (Dammert y Sarmiento, 2019). Notably, impunity plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the wealth of criminals and the safety of complicit officials, without which the perpetuation of the criminal enterprise would be untenable.

This document has been prepared for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to advance the conceptualization of one of the problems affecting all of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), as well as to identify possible courses of action by their governments. The content has greatly benefited from the invaluable contributions of prominent experts from various parts of the region, who have provided key insights in describing specific phenomena and national contexts. We extend our sincere gratitude to each of them for their contributions.

Partial versions of the document were also discussed in Mexico, Panama and New York with UNDP experts and officials, whose feedback helped refine perspectives and emphasize key points related

to the connection between the prevalence of multiple illegal markets, democratic consolidation, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Although all contributions have significantly strengthened the document, we acknowledge that what follows represents a specific perspective. It inevitably leaves out many other examples from the region and potential emphases that could be valuable in the ongoing debate on the need to strengthen democratic processes across the region.

The document is organized into five sections. The first provides a review of the conceptualization of organized crime, highlighting the complexities of the concept and the various normative and academic interpretations present in the region. To address violence and illegal markets effectively, it is essential to gain a more detailed understanding of these phenomena and identify key elements related to their interaction with other processes that contribute to strengthening governance.

The second section examines the main illegal markets in the region. While not exhaustive, it focuses on those markets that are the most prevalent and developed and are significantly linked to various forms of violence, particularly homicides.

The third section acknowledges the multiplicity of actors involved in criminal activities, with diverse structures impacting their exercise of violence as well as their capacity to influence politics and control territories. The analysis focuses on the primary actors, although it is recognized that more and more criminal cells or structures are emerging, often loosely connected to transnational groups.

The fourth section presents an analysis of selected national and subnational cases that reflect specific complexities. The aim is to illustrate both the differences and the widespread presence of illegal markets, their historical roots and socioeconomic connections, as well as their links to increasingly weakened state institutions.

Finally, the fifth section provides a set of recommendations (not exhaustive) aimed at enhancing the understanding of these issues and addressing them in a serious, robust and sustained manner over time. The urgency of these matters is evident, as is the need for high-level political will to tackle them effectively.

1. How can we conceptualize organized crime in LAC?

Organized crime is understood as a particular way to commit crimes, characterized by a certain degree of planning and the joint and coordinated participation of some people, rather than a crime itself. The crimes committed involve different kinds of illicit businesses, commonly referred to as manifestations of organized crime (Sampó, 2017). Among them, the most profitable in the region are drug trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling and crimes against the environment (including illegal logging, illegal mining and illegal fishing). The nature of these crimes is mainly transnational, since the chain of value involves not only the production, capture or exploitation that takes place in a particular area, but also the movement of the illicit good, its distribution in many transshipment points, as well as the final destination of the product.

Drug trafficking, particularly cocaine smuggling, together with illegal gold mining, are the most profitable and important manifestations of organized crime in Latin America. Cocaine production and trafficking has been increasing without restrictions since 2013 (UNODC, 2023b). Nearly all coca crop cultivation is concentrated in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. Even when some small plantations have been found in countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Ecuador, the impact of those hectares on worldwide production is very limited. Brazil is both the world's second-leading consumer (the first is the United States) and the main transshipment point, particularly for cocaine exported to Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Nevertheless, the high levels of cocaine being moved in the region have forced the use of non-traditional ports of departure as well as of counterintuitive routes (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023). They have also pushed consumption rates in faraway markets such as in Asia and Oceania. When focusing on North America, particularly Mexico, it is important to highlight the role of fentanyl production and the health crises associated with it in the United States and Canada. Furthermore, the Caribbean serves as a major transit route for drug trafficking from South America to Europe and North America, highlighting the multidimensional and complex nature of drug trafficking (Dawkins-Cavazos, 2024).

The phenomenon of illicit **gold mining** warrants particular scrutiny, especially given its prevalence in the Amazonian basin and its profound implications for environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. The process of establishing an illicit gold mining operation typically begins with deforestation, clearing vast swathes of land to access gold deposits (Schaeffer & Folly, 2021). Next, antiquated extraction methods are employed to extract the gold, often involving the use of mercury, which leads to soil and water pollution, posing significant health risks to nearby communities in both the short and long term. Furthermore, this activity generates greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to air pollution. Additionally, in countries such as Mexico and Ecuador, women from rural and indigenous communities bear a disproportionate burden from the presence of criminal organizations operating within forest ecosystems (Ngum & Barooah, 2023).

Human smuggling has persisted in the region for an extended duration. Individuals from diverse countries, including those outside the immediate region, often initiate their journeys there, with the United States frequently identified as their primary destination. However, following the notable migration surge from Venezuela since 2017, a corridor toward the South has emerged. This corridor notably exploited a multiplicity of small, medium and large criminal structures. Individuals fleeing economic, security and humanitarian crises have opted to cross borders illicitly, thereby subjecting

themselves to potential victimization by human traffickers. While the distinction between human smuggling and human trafficking may appear nuanced to analysts, the former entails an agreement between migrants and the criminal entities facilitating their journey. However, the perilous and precarious nature of the endeavour frequently results in alterations to the agreed terms in route. Consequently, individuals, particularly women and minors, often find themselves in unfamiliar territories devoid of documentation and indebted to criminals. They then become susceptible to various forms of exploitation, with sexual and labour exploitation representing the predominant manifestations of human trafficking (Anguita Olmedo, 2007).

Widespread unemployment rates, poverty, illiteracy and political instability, along with the unique geographical location and other factors, also make the Caribbean an attractive target for human traffickers (Dawkins-Cavazos, 2024). This area has been classified as a transit route, source or destination for child and women victims of human trafficking. Traffickers exploit the vulnerable population in their communities, luring them with promises of a better future, only to subject them to illegal activities such as prostitution and child labour. In fact, the heavy reliance on tourism and the growing number of resorts in the region have also fuelled sex tourism, which in turn drives both legal and illegal sex work markets (John, 2020).

Although many other manifestations of transnational organized crime exist within the region, a significant portion of the illicit enterprise appears concentrated within the areas mentioned above. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that trafficking in small arms and light weapons perpetuates violence, providing criminal organizations with firepower. Moreover, the smuggling of counterfeit goods (such as cigarettes, sportswear and footwear), while socially normalized, fuels substantial illicit commerce and may inadvertently sustain criminal structures. Addressing these issues necessitates societal re-education regarding the interconnections between such crimes and the perpetuation of violence.

This document provides a detailed description of the main illegal markets present in the LAC region and their economic, political and social consequences. One of the distinctive elements of illegal markets and the development of their criminal activities is the increasing use of violence to consolidate their presence, which can even escalate to levels of territorial control. Multiple experts have analysed this so-called criminal governance and emphasize its ability to both replace and coexist with the state apparatus.

Criminal governance¹

In recent years, criminal governance has drawn a significant amount of global attention that often focuses – incorrectly – on criminals forming alternative states. Avoiding these misunderstandings can help us to better understand crime and how to respond to it in much of the Global South.

Criminal governance is defined as the management of social political and economic interactions within varied communities and territories (Trejo & Ley, 2018). It is the creation and development of an alternative social, political and economic order, different from the one provided by the state, but not necessarily competing with it (Sampó, 2021). On the contrary, in many cases, criminals acting in certain territories count on the consent of key actors who belong to the political elite. This new

¹ This section was prepared in collaboration with Professor Desmond Arias, The City University of New York.

order is often consolidated with the involvement of state actors, specially at the municipal level. As a result, the population benefits from the agreements that criminals and political actors can reach, politicians take advantage of the new order created by criminals, and criminals use that order to protect and enhance their illicit activities. Much of the writing on criminal governance focuses on the management of civilian populations by groups of organized offenders (Arias, 2017; Lessing, 2021; Herrera & Martinez, 2022; and Skarbek, 2024).

In this context, it is also important to understand what criminal governance is not. It is not the formation of a parallel state that seeks to supplant or usurp formal state authority (McColl, 1969). Unlike rebel governance, at least in some narrow conceptualizations, criminal governance does not seek to demonstrate how criminals could govern a country in an effort to overthrow a government. Indeed, criminals seek to live within and profit from illegal activities.

Most critically, criminal governance exists in the context of state power. Criminal groups collaborate with a range of state actors, including politicians, bureaucrats and security officials, to advance shared projects. These projects include various types of corruption, including contracts rackets, land theft and bribery, to allow the propagation of different illicit markets, including narcotics. Often these choices are simply corrupt acts by low-level officials, but at times more explicit political projects are at play, as higher state and elected officials work with criminals to advance their broader political agendas.

Not all criminal governance is the same. Variance emerges from the organizational nature of criminal groups and their relationship to the state (Arias, 2017). The more organized the criminal group, the greater the scope of governance. A tightly organized criminal group can govern more aspects of social, political and economic life than a more loosely organized illicit conglomeration. This is not to say that criminal governance does not occur with multiple organizations overlapping in particular spaces but, rather, that the nature of that governance differs and may be more diffuse (Idler, 2019). Criminal governance is also shaped by the relationship with the state (Arias, 2017; Trejo & Ley, 2018; Lessing, 2021). If connections are low level and clandestine, the tenor of their relationship with the state may be contentious. In this case, government agents may manage some elements of local life, while criminal groups may manage others. Alternatively, criminals and the state may have closer and open relations. In this case, criminals work directly with criminals or state officials directing governance, depending on their relative power.

Among those who most misinterpret the meaning of the concept, criminal governance has attracted attention because it appears to reveal the power of criminals to oppose the state. Criminal governance, however, more properly explains how criminal organizations can shape political, social and economic life for their benefit in the context of state power. Most critically, criminal governance enables these organizations to manage violence where they operate to avoid attracting the attention of forces within the state opposed to their activities. These activities build legitimacy among the population, reducing the chances that other criminal groups could take territory or that those populations would work with state actors to remove criminals. In addition, it indirectly helps political actors who may cooperate with criminal structures as they can benefit from the influence they may have in certain territories. Due to the legitimacy that criminal actors may have gained in these territories, they may possess the power to mobilize inhabitants and influence the voting behaviour of those living under their control. Consequently, they can be exploited not only by criminal elements but also by the political elite.

This document has benefited from the collaboration and ongoing support of multiple experts, to whom we extend our gratitude. We express particular appreciation and thanks to those who participated by submitting reviews on special topics: Desmond Arias (Criminal Governance); Camila Nunes Dias (O Primeiro Comando da Capital); Paula Tobo, Andrés Cajiao, and Andrés Preciado (Clan del Golfo); Josué González (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación); Cecilia Farfán- Méndez (Sinaloa Cartel); Valeska Troncoso (Tren de Aragua); Jonathan D. Rosen (The Maras); Christopher Hernández (Haiti); Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera (Mexico); Gonzalo Croci (Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica); and Marco Iazzetta (Rosario, Argentina). Manuela Gil Valles supported the editing and research.

Organized crime as a risk for human development

Illegal markets and organized crime may sometimes appear distant or removed from daily life in Latin America, but its pervasive influence permeates most economic transactions there. The prevalence of a substantial informal economy further facilitates the operations of criminal actors within those societies. However, it is imperative to underscore how the presence and activities of criminal organizations pose significant challenges to human development.

Early in the 21st century, at the 2003 Barbados Conference, the Organization of American States embraced the concept of multidimensional security, expanding beyond traditional threats to encompass those emanating from violent non-state actors, as well as socio-economic and environmental factors capable of impacting the well-being of the region's citizens. As articulated in the 2003 Declaration, organized crime, corruption, social exclusion and extreme poverty constitute factors that can undermine the stability of democratic regimes and jeopardize peace within the region. Strengthening state institutions and empowering civil society to foster resilience emerge as indispensable measures to weaken the influence of criminal organizations.

Regrettably, support for democracy in the region has waned, coinciding with a dearth of responses to the demands articulated by civil society. This erosion of legitimacy may explain the emergence of criminal governance systems, in which criminal organizations provide essential goods and services - notably security and justice - often concentrating their presence in areas inhabited by vulnerable populations, including women, youth and individuals with low incomes (Sampó, 2021).

Furthermore, the influence wielded by criminal organizations through the establishment of these criminal governance systems extends beyond the confines of their territories and serves as a bargaining chip when negotiating with political elites. As posited by Ferreira and Richmond (2021), a hybrid regime may emerge, wherein non-state violent actors collaborate with select state actors, further blurring the lines between legitimate governance and criminal influence.

The existence of weak states intensifies the lack of institutional presence and effective solutions in areas where they are most needed. In these circumstances, criminal structures often step in to fill the void, offering vulnerable populations an improved quality of life by reducing exposure to common crimes and providing access to basic necessities. They may also offer a seemingly more efficient system of security and justice than the state. However, residents of these environments commonly face pervasive violence, coercion and forced recruitment. Compliance with the norms established by criminal groups becomes essential for survival, with the implicit threat of severe consequences, including death, for those who dissent.

Corruption further enables the seamless operation of criminal activities, while impunity ensures that those adhering to agreements with key private and public officials are protected from incarceration. Illegal markets divert resources from productive uses, creating parallel and informal economies that are difficult to regulate and tax. This situation exacerbates inequality and poverty, particularly in areas with already precarious conditions. The presence of illegal markets and criminal organizations also contributes to the breakdown of social cohesion, fostering an environment of fear and violence. Youth involvement in these criminal organizations undermines education and development, leading to increased school dropout rates. Additionally, environmental destruction, rising addiction rates and mental health issues have significant public health consequences.

How can vulnerable populations consider long-term human development when their daily existence is characterized by mere survival? Such aspirations remain out of reach without a strong state presence and mechanisms to resist coercion by criminal entities. Furthermore, international cooperation is essential, not only for the exchange of knowledge but also for coordinated efforts to weaken and, ultimately, dismantle transnational criminal organizations. Collaborative actions, akin to a network, are crucial in targeting the primary motivation of these entities: profit.

2. Illegal markets in Latin America

This section outlines the most significant illegal markets in LAC, highlighting their trends, scale and geographic distribution. It explores the shift from traditional lucrative activities, such as drug trafficking, to extractive industries. Additionally, the actors involved in these markets and their evolving trajectories are identified and will be further analysed in the subsequent section. While this study focusses on LAC, it is crucial to recognize that organized crime is not confined to the Global South. Conversely, the Global North plays an important role as a consumer of many illicit goods smuggled by criminal organizations from LAC. For example, Europe and the United States are significantly impacted by organized crime, as evidenced by cocaine and gold trafficking. However, respect for the rule of law and lower levels of impunity make illicit markets and criminal organizations less visible in these regions.

The 2022 Global Organized Crime Index (GI-TOC) indicates that the Americas have emerged as a hub for global illicit markets, with its regions consistently ranking among the top three globally for 11 of the 15 markets. Furthermore, most of the original 10 criminal markets have expanded since the last iteration of the Index in 2021. This context underscores the urgency of modifying the ways in which criminal markets are analysed and addressed. To confront and prevent the presence and growth of illegal markets and criminal activities requires shifting from a linear, single-actor analytical perspective to a systemic approach that accounts for flexible actors. Traditionally, illegal markets have been analysed from the product's origin to the money laundering generated by these activities. This analysis often assumes that these processes are driven by centralised, hierarchical organizations with strong ties and presence in various territories, maintained through loyalty or the constant threat of violence.

However, new systemic perspectives that acknowledge the multiple components of illegal market development are needed. These perspectives should consider diverse methods and stages of money laundering, multiple products, routes and commercialization mechanisms. Similarly, criminal organizations have undergone substantial transformations. Specific illegal markets have become concentrated in some countries within the region, where market scale, state fragility or geographic location bolster criminal structures with significant territorial, regional and, even, global presence. In most countries, illegal markets develop through connections with numerous smaller, flexible criminal structures linked to various illegal products. These structures maintain territorial control and form adaptable connections with other national and international entities. In this evolving landscape, understanding and regulating illegal markets is particularly complex. While the growing body of knowledge on organized crime in most LAC countries contributes to a clearer characterization of the problem, it remains inadequate and potentially contradictory.

Drug trafficking

According to the latest World Drug Report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024), the supply and demand for cocaine are at their highest levels in history. In 2022, an estimated 2,700 tons of pure cocaine were produced, representing a 20 per cent increase from the previous year. As a result, South America has experienced a surge in cocaine availability, leading to a sharp decline in retail market prices and a rise in violence in many transit countries, as seen in Ecuador in early 2023.

It is noteworthy that drug trafficking, particularly cocaine trafficking, has been extensively studied. Nevertheless, both cocaine production and consumption continue to grow globally (UNODC, 2023a, 2024). New markets have emerged in regions such as Asia and the Middle East, with criminal organizations utilizing unconventional routes and non-traditional ports of departure (Sampó & Troncoso, 2022). Coca cultivation remains concentrated almost exclusively in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, although recent discoveries of plantations in some Central American countries and southern Mexico suggest efforts by criminal organizations to expand production and leverage technology to increase output. While these new cultivations have not yet significantly contributed to cocaine production, they indicate a determination to expand. Cocaine trafficking remains one of the largest illegal markets in the region, with major criminal organizations such as Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Cartel del Golfo, Cartel de Sinaloa and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (Jalisco New Generation Cartel, CJNG) primarily focused on drug smuggling (especially marijuana and cocaine), while increasingly diversifying their activities.

The Bahamas, with its strategic location along drug trafficking routes between South America and the United States, has experienced criminal governance linked to narcotics smuggling operations (Fabre et al., 2023). Criminal groups in the region control specific islands or maritime routes, often engaging in corrupt practices with local officials to ensure safe passage for drugs. For example, local fishermen and small-scale boat operators are often co-opted by larger criminal networks to transport illicit goods in exchange for payment, creating a network of individuals and communities dependent on and influenced by these criminal actors (UNODC, 2023c).

The marijuana market remains vital at the regional level. Despite efforts by many countries to legalize consumption and certain levels of domestic production, including state-controlled production and commercialization as seen in Uruguay, the illicit market remains significant and prolific. Paraguay's role as a main producer of marijuana in the region is notable; it supplies demand in countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Chile. Additionally, Colombia has gained attention for its production of "creepy" marijuana, which has higher THC levels, is more profitable than traditional marijuana, and is reaching various regional markets.

The fentanyl crisis in the United States and Canada has raised concerns in LAC due to the drug's lethal potency in small doses. Mexico has emerged as a significant producer of fentanyl, and connections between its cartels (Sinaloa and CJNG) and counterparts in Central and South America suggest a potential southward spread. Also, it is essential to recognize that China and India are the primary global producers of fentanyl, and both maintain close commercial ties with the region. Consequently, criminal organizations from these countries may have an interest in exporting fentanyl to LAC in addition to Mexico's role in supplying North America.

The medical use of fentanyl and its potential for diversion further complicate the situation. Recent incidents in South America highlight the issue, such as the deaths of 24 people and the intoxication of over 80 in Buenos Aires, Argentina due to cocaine mixed with carfentanil (a fentanyl derivative). Additionally, there have been reports of medical fentanyl being diverted to the illicit market in Brazil, Argentina and Colombia (United States State Department, 2024). While the problem may not be related to the quantity and quality of doses, the high level of addiction it causes remains a concern.

Heroin production in the region appears to be concentrated in Central and North America, with only small seizures and low prevalence reported in countries such as Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. According to a report by the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) on drug supply in the Americas, only Guatemala, Mexico and the United States consider heroin or poppy cultivation a significant concern (CICAD, 2022).

As an illegal market, drug smuggling is the subject of greatest focus and priority in terms of international public policy and implementation. However, law enforcement has made minimal progress in this area. The “war on drugs” has dominated the attention of Latin American countries, with policies against organized crime often conflated with policies against drug trafficking. Yet, as discussed earlier, cocaine and marijuana trafficking have continued to grow, with both supply and demand strengthening.

Public policy efforts to control cocaine have mainly focused on producing countries such as Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. However, transit and consumer countries have also developed strategies to combat cocaine trafficking. Despite these efforts, drug trafficking remains more significant today than a decade ago, especially as production and global demand have surged.

Extractive industries: illegal mining and illegal logging

Extractive industries, particularly illegal gold mining, represent one of the most significant illicit markets for organized crime and have a substantial negative impact on the environment (Gonzaga, 2023; Webb, 2024; AmazonAid, 2024; Rodriguez, et al., 2017; Uhm, 2023). Illegal logging is also widespread throughout the Amazon region and other areas, such as the Sierra Tarahumara in Mexico.

Illegal mining contributes to a substantial portion of the informal economy in several Latin American countries. It is often driven by the demand for precious metals, such as gold, silver and other minerals. This activity provides livelihoods for many marginalized communities where formal employment opportunities are scarce. (UNODC, 2023c; Barba, 2020; Sánchez, 2024). However, while it generates short-term income for local miners, it usually bypasses state regulations, resulting in significant tax evasion and loss of revenue that could otherwise be invested in public services and infrastructure development (Prevenir Amazonía, 2021; Congo et al., 2024).

The environmental consequences of illegal mining in Latin America are profound and far-reaching. These practices, often carried out without proper regulations or oversight, lead to extensive deforestation, soil degradation and water pollution due to the use of toxic substances such as mercury and cyanide (Lozada et al., 2020; Idrobo et al., 2014; Clerici et al., 2024). The Amazon rainforest has been severely affected, with large swaths of land cleared for mining operations, contributing to the acceleration of climate change and loss of biodiversity (Igarape, 2021). These operations frequently disrupt local communities and indigenous territories, leading to social conflicts and displacement (Brazil Government, 2024). The influx of miners and associated activities can also lead to social problems such as increased crime, human trafficking and public health crises, including the spread of diseases (El Peruano, 2024; Miranda, 2016).

Illegal mining has become a significant source of revenue for criminal groups actors across Latin America that often control or heavily influence illegal mining sites, using profits to finance their activities, purchase arms and strengthen their power bases. In regions such as Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, illegal mining is directly linked to the financing of drug cartels, guerrilla groups and paramilitary organizations (De Echave, 2016). These activities present a severe challenge to governance and the rule of law in Latin America. The activities associated with illegal mining are often facilitated by corruption, involving local authorities, law enforcement agencies and, even, government officials (Mongabay, 2019). Bribery, extortion and collusion allow illegal mining operations to thrive despite efforts to regulate the sector (Rivera & Bravo 2023).

Criminal organizations also engage in illegal logging to sell timber, transport other illicit goods concealed within the cargo, or prepare the land for further exploitation, such as mining, cattle breeding, or cultivating profitable species. The lack of coordinated agreements between countries often allows criminal organizations to operate in a legal gray area. For example, while the commercialization of a specific tree may be illegal in Peru, it might be legal just across the porous border in Colombia. Consequently, illegal logging can occur on one side of the border, and the wood can be “laundered” through forged documents on the other. This process often requires the complicity of public officials to obtain the necessary paperwork to sell the wood as if it were legally extracted. In Peru, between 2005 and 2020, 614 public officials across 13 regions were involved in authorizing plans containing false information (Mongabay, 2021). A similar situation occurs in Bolivia, where non-existent species are declared to justify the volume of wood moved from prohibited areas. In Honduras, despite the “Zero Deforestation for 2029” plan, false documents and fake stamps were discovered in a significant seizure in July 2024 (Mongabay, 2018; Proceso Digital, 2024).

Illegal logging serves both as a business and a means for other criminal activities in countries as diverse as Chile, Colombia, Perú, México, Costa Rica and Panamá (Shuldiner, 2022; WWF, 2021; Ipenza, 2019; Observatorio de Bienes Comunes de Costa Rica, 2024; FAO, n.d.). It has severe environmental impacts, contributing to climate change and environmental degradation. Indigenous communities are particularly affected, as most illegal activities occur on their ancestral lands. Indeed, “Indigenous communities face a disproportionate level of attacks – nearly 40% – despite comprising only 5% of the world’s population.” (UNHCR, 2009; Global Witness, 2022).² Special mention must be made of environmental activists who have lost their lives denouncing illegal activities and fighting the exploitation of biodiverse lands, especially in the Amazon Basin and Colombia, which recorded the highest number of killings in 2022. Latin America is the region with the most environmental defenders threatened and killed in 2022, accounting for 88 per cent of the total. Over a decade, more than half of these attacks occurred in Brazil, Colombia and the Philippines, while in 2021, over three-quarters took place in Latin America (Global Witness, 2022).

While illegal gold mining is a prominent example, other non-renewable resources, such as wildlife trafficking (Reuter & O’Regan, 2017; Bergós et al., 2024), flora trafficking (Mesías & Vázquez, 2022; Devine et al., 2021), and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, are also of concern. IUU fishing has unique challenges, with state actors and companies illegally fishing in non-permitted areas (Park et al., 2023), resulting in substantial economic losses. Argentina is the third most-affected country in the world, with nearly \$3.5 billion in losses, followed by Peru and Chile, with losses of \$500 million and \$300 million, respectively. (Perfil Córdoba, 2023).

Human smuggling and human trafficking

Beyond drug trafficking, other illicit businesses generate more revenue and resources than cocaine or fentanyl trafficking. Human smuggling, driven by the complex economic and social situations in many countries in the region, is one of the most profitable illegal businesses in LAC (Alvarado et al., 2022; Correa-Cabrera, G., & Schaefer, 2022). This market has facilitated the expansion of various criminal organizations, such as Tren de Aragua, from Venezuela to southern countries such as Colombia, Peru and Chile (see the next section for further details).

² Global Witness (2022). Rising to the challenge of a world in crisis. Dismantling the power of polluters, defending the power of people. Annual report. www.globalwitness.org/en/about-us/annual-report-2022-rising-challenge-world-crisis

For decades, human smuggling in the region has been associated primarily with the Mexican-United States border, often representing the final destination of a longer journey that may have begun in Central America or even outside the region (Unidad Investigativa de Venezuela, 2023; Palacios, 2023). Recently, with criminal organizations such as the Cartel del Golfo gaining control over the Darien Gap, a challenging terrain located on the border between Colombia and Panama, new routes and flows have emerged. Individuals from various South American countries, as well as those from overseas, now cross the Darien Gap with the assistance of smugglers (*coyotes*) to reach Mexico and the United States.

In response to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela over the past five to six years, a significant trend has developed: Venezuelans are increasingly migrating to southern countries, such as Colombia, Peru and Chile. Factors including porous borders, cultural proximity and seemingly welcoming environments have led migrants to seek alternatives to traditional destinations such as the United States or Spain. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), “The majority of migrants and refugees from Venezuela remain within the region, totalling 6.59 million as of June 2024. Among the largest host countries are Colombia (2.9 million) and Peru (1.5 million).”³

It is essential to differentiate between human smuggling and human trafficking. However, the vulnerable and fragile circumstances faced by migrants often leave them at the mercy of those they have paid for assistance. Changes to the terms of agreements between migrants and the *coyotes* or criminal organizations they have contracted are common. Even after escaping poverty and violence, migrants—particularly women and girls—often encounter even more dangerous and complex situations (Anguita & Sampó, 2021; Badillo, Bravo & Mercado, 2023). Human trafficking can involve sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and, even, organ harvesting. Depending on migrants’ location, appearance and condition, criminal organizations may exploit those individuals for various purposes.

According to the GI-TOC (GI-TOC, 2023), human trafficking is the second-largest illegal market after financial crimes and may be the most lucrative business for criminal organizations, as a person can be sold multiple times by the same criminal organization. Unlike a gram of gold or cocaine, which can only be sold once, a trafficked individual can be exploited repeatedly, especially in cases of sexual exploitation. After a period of sexual exploitation, victims may be forced into labour exploitation, generating further profits for traffickers. Ultimately, when victims are no longer considered useful, they may be sold for organ harvesting if their organs retain any value (Gonzalez, Garijo & Sanchez, 2020).

It is challenging to accurately estimate the total revenue generated from human trafficking by criminal organizations. According to the latest report on trafficking in persons by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB, 2022), over 40 million people are victims of forced labour or forced marriage in LAC, and one million children are victims of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation accounts for 50 per cent of these victims, while 38 per cent are subjected to forced labour.

The Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative⁴ reports that, in the Americas, the most common methods of controlling adults and children in human trafficking include psychological abuse, movement restrictions, threats and physical abuse. Additionally, one-third of victims have very low educational levels, having attended only elementary school.

3 IOM (2024). About the regional Venezuela Situation. respuestavenezolanos.iom.int/en/about-regional-venezuela-situation

4 Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC). www.ctdatacollaborative.org

However, the lack of comprehensive data presents a significant challenge to effectively addressing human trafficking. For example, the latest report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022) is based on only 800 judicial processes from 85 countries that took place between 2012 and 2020. The report includes information about 450,000 victims and 300,000 perpetrators, yet this data appears insufficient given the vast scale of this illicit market.

Extortion

Extortion has emerged as a pervasive crime affecting almost all LAC countries (Dammert, 2021; Moncada, 2021). Although the degree of threat and severity of extortion vary, this crime has spread widely throughout the region (Vargas et al., 2024; Cavgias et al., 2023). Various criminal structures, ranging from small to large organizations, rely on extortion as a primary means of financing and use it to strengthen their territorial control. For example, the Tren de Aragua in Venezuela uses extortion to sustain the lifestyles of its leaders. When operating in other countries, they often target fellow nationals, extorting them and sending the proceeds back to Venezuela (Vázquez & Félix, 2022).

Other criminal organizations, such as the Central American Maras, have developed highly complex extortion schemes. In their case, small and medium-sized businesses, companies and, even, ordinary citizens are required to pay for the ability to move, work or access security. Various actors, including young girls and women, may be involved in the extortion process, often approaching victims to establish contact with those offering the “protection” necessary for conducting business or living safely (Amaya & Martínez, 2021).

Criminal organizations such as the Brazilian PCC employ extortion to collect money from inmates in the prisons they control. This money is used to support the families of other inmates or former prisoners who have been released and need assistance to restart their lives. It is important to note that extortion is not limited to well-known criminal organizations; it can also be perpetrated by independent criminal entrepreneurs or “copycats.” These individuals often use similar tactics and invoke the names of notorious criminal organizations to instil fear and extract money from their victims. Extortion can be carried out in person or through cyber-dependent methods, such as using smartphones.

The extortive capacity of numerous criminal organizations is, in many instances, out of control (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2023). In various cities across Latin America, media reports confirm the existence of extortion schemes targeting businesses, merchants, schools, hospitals and citizens at large. In some cases, residents are compelled to pay merely for living in their homes, moving through their neighbourhoods, or protecting their children.

Fuel and oil theft

Since the COVID-19 crisis, oil and fuel theft has emerged as a profitable activity for certain gangs and criminal organizations. In border areas such as those shared by Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, this crime has grown significantly. Similar incidents have been reported in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay), including the theft of fuel from the state – owned company

Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) in Argentina (Carabajal & Di Nicola, 2020), demonstrating the crime's spread across different regions. According to official sources, profits from such thefts in Argentina could reach up to \$5 million annually. Criminal organizations extract oil by tapping into a YPF pipeline, processing it in clandestine refineries, and selling the fuel to unbranded gas stations and agricultural producers.

A comparable situation exists in Mexico, where oil is stolen through clandestine pipelines that divert fuel for illegal sale, primarily at gas stations in Mexico City (Peschard, Salazar & Olea, 2021; Montero, 2017). Additionally, "hot taps" are used to quickly extract hydrocarbons. Corruption within the state-owned oil company, Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), has facilitated this illegal activity. According to official data, fuel theft in Mexico represents an estimated \$1 billion in losses annually (Llovera, n.d.). Corrupt officials play a key role in these operations, with major Mexican drug trafficking organizations, such as the Zetas, Cartel del Golfo and CJNG, involved in the theft and commercialization of the fuel (Montero, 2017).

Colombia faces a similar challenge. In 2020, Ecopetrol, the Colombian state-owned oil company, reported a 46 per cent increase in oil theft, with over 900 illegal taps detected. The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) was implicated in many of these thefts. Fuel theft in Colombia was estimated at approximately \$40 million in 2020, with much of the stolen fuel used to support the drug trafficking industry. Furthermore, clandestine refineries cause significant environmental damage, polluting both soil and water (Reuters, 2022).

Other illegal markets

While this paper analyses what the authors consider to be the most significant illegal markets in LAC, it is important to recognize that criminal organizations engage in various activities that complement the markets mentioned above. Contraband is one of the oldest and most normalized criminal markets in the region. Many Latin Americans are accustomed to purchasing smuggled and counterfeit goods – such as cigarettes, sportswear, shoes, toys and, even, fuel – due to their lower price and acceptable quality. Additionally, there is often little awareness of how these activities undermine the rule of law. However, governments lose substantial tax revenue as a result, reducing their capacity to combat criminal organizations and prevent the entry of smuggled and counterfeit goods into their territories (Carrión & Gottsbacher, 2021; Picazo, 2018). Many people are unaware of how these activities weaken state structures and strengthen criminal organizations (Stefoni, et al., 2021). Even when this connection is not immediately evident, criminal organizations involved in smuggling cigarettes and other goods contribute to violence, undermine citizen security and weaken the state (Muñoz, 2020). Tax evasion through the sale of smuggled cigarettes is a significant business; for instance, in Panama, losses reached \$165 million in 2020, according to the non-governmental organization Crime Stoppers (Hernández, 2024). In Latin America, contraband involves approximately 210,000 million illegal products, including textiles, medicines, beverages, food, cigarettes, makeup and toys, according to the Latin American Alliance Against Contraband (La República, 2022).

Arms trafficking is a crucial business for criminal organizations as it supports their operational structures. Not only does this trade generate profits, but it also enables these groups to arm themselves to confront state forces and exert control in the communities where they operate. The region is awash with firearms, many of which originate from the United States or are diverted from surplus stocks at regional gun factories, often with the complicity of corrupt officials (Statista, 2024). Recently, cases have surfaced showing a route for small arms and light weapons that are shipped

disassembled from Europe, destined for redistribution in various South American countries (Diálogo Américas, 2024). Additionally, some countries serve as transit points for firearms that are eventually distributed to criminal organizations. It is also important to note the high number of uncontrolled firearms in Central and North American countries, which criminal organizations can easily acquire (INTERPOL, 2021).

Cybercrime is a growing concern in the region. Although precise data on the scale of this illicit activity is lacking, it is evident that cyber-dependent crimes are expanding, affecting both civil society and large enterprises, such as banks (GI-TOC, 2024). Moreover, crimes traditionally committed in the physical world, such as extortion, human trafficking and, even, kidnapping, are increasingly being carried out in the digital realm.

Money laundering and financial crimes represent critical revenue streams for criminal organizations. These groups require mechanisms to “clean” illicit funds to integrate them into the legal economy and gain access to legitimate assets, such as real estate. While tracking and prosecuting these financial flows is challenging for most states, following the money trail remains one of the most effective ways to disrupt criminal networks. However, money laundering is a pervasive problem in Latin America, driven by the region’s economic characteristics, levels of corruption, institutional weaknesses and role in global illicit markets (Zapata et al., 2016). The laundering of illicit funds not only fuels organized crime, it also undermines economic stability, public trust and governance structures throughout the region (Moncada, 2021).

Several challenges complicate the establishment of strong regulatory and oversight frameworks to combat money laundering in the LAC region. They include the lack of robust legislation, weak enforcement capabilities, and limited resources for financial intelligence units, which collectively hinder the effective detection and prevention of money laundering activities. Even where anti- money laundering laws are in place, their implementation is often inconsistent, and penalties may not be sufficient to deter illegal activities. The Caribbean faces particular challenges, as the problem is exacerbated by its strategic geographic location, economic dependence on tourism and international trade, and the institutional fragility of certain countries in the region (Ellis, 2018; Morris et al., 2018; Clarke, 2022).

The following section provides brief overviews of the main actors in the region’s criminal world. The aim is not to offer an exhaustive review but rather to focus on the most well-known and established criminal structures, which can serve as examples for analysing potentially lesser- known yet equally sophisticated situations in other national contexts. In each case, the collaboration of distinguished local experts has been sought to characterize these structures with depth and accuracy.

3. The actors

In the LAC context, various types of criminal organizations may be categorized by their scope (local, national, regional or transnational) and distinguishing characteristics (such as hierarchical structure, membership size, managerial capacity within specific criminal markets, and degree of societal recognition). This framework leads to a typology of criminal entities in the region, which include mafias, cartels, transnational criminal organizations, gangs, mega-gangs and familial clans.

According to Sergi (2023), mafia groups constitute a distinct subtype of organized crime, characterized by their provision of protection services through extortion and racketeering, often exerting control over illicit economic activities within specific geographic areas. These groups frequently maintain connections with political and influential power structures, enabling them to interfere with democratic institutions and public administration. Their operations often extend beyond national borders, as they engage in transnational activities, with human trafficking a prominent illicit enterprise.

Cartels have historically been synonymous with drug trafficking, a legacy attributed to organizations such as the Medellín and Cali cartels, which were pivotal in coca cultivation, cocaine production, and the complex distribution networks extending to retail markets. Initially, these cartels maintained complete control over the entire cocaine production and distribution chain. However, contemporary cartels have evolved, relinquishing direct control over specific facets of the trade, instead employing intermediaries in various locations to streamline operations and reduce costs. These modern cartels assert territorial dominance and, in some instances, establish systems of criminal governance within specific regions. Importantly, their activities have diversified beyond drug trafficking to include illicit mining, clandestine lodging, human trafficking and human smuggling. Notable examples of these new cartels include the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel.

Beyond cartels, Latin America is home to a range of regional criminal structures that may be considered significant or intermediate transnational criminal entities, depending on factors such as membership size, business scope and organizational structure. Unlike cartels, these organizations tend to operate more horizontally, functioning as networks rather than cohesive entities. Their ability to diversify their illicit activities, manage both local and transnational illegal markets, adapt to changing circumstances, and establish systems of criminal governance justifies their classification within this category (Fondevilla & Villalta, 2024).

In Jamaica, criminal governance is evident in the “garrison communities” of Kingston, where local gang leaders, known as “dons,” exert significant influence over everyday life. These dons often control access to resources, including housing, food and jobs, and enforce their own rules through violence and intimidation (Ahmed, 2019). For instance, in areas like Tivoli Gardens or August Town, the don might dictate who can enter or leave the community, resolve disputes and, even, provide social services. These criminal leaders often have political connections, allowing them to influence or control local elections and decision-making processes (Haughton, 2024). Also, in Haiti, particularly in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, gangs have taken over large parts of the city, where they operate as de facto local governments (Organized Crime Index, 2023). Groups like the “G9 an Fanmi” (G9 Family and Allies) have established themselves as dominant forces, controlling access to basic services, distributing aid, and imposing taxes or extortion fees on residents and businesses (InSight Crime, 2023). The weak presence of the state, exacerbated by political instability and economic challenges,

has allowed these gangs to flourish and fill the void left by the government, creating a parallel system of governance that relies heavily on coercion and violence (Niño & González, 2022).

Additionally, data from countries such as Haiti (Marc-Donald, 2024), Jamaica (Campbell & Harriot, 2024), Ecuador (Brotherton & Gude, 2022), Costa Rica (Saborío & Astorga, 2022), Peru (Benites, 2024), Guatemala (Fontes, 2018), and Argentina (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023) reveal the presence of numerous smaller gangs, groups or criminal organizations. Despite their size, these groups maintain territorial control and possess a significant capacity for violence due to their access to weapons and frequent confrontations over consolidation of territory.

O Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)⁵

The PCC is a Brazilian criminal organization uniquely characterized by its deep connection to the prison system. Prisons not only served as the birthplace of the PCC but also provided the environment in which it grew, took root and developed a highly efficient self-reproducing system. This growth was driven by the state's policies of mass incarceration and the precarious, inhumane and violent conditions within the prison system.

The PCC's distinctiveness lies in its ability to transform the prison environment into a criminal ecosystem that leverages the state's own mechanisms to sustain and expand its influence across social, political and criminal domains. It has extended its reach geographically and across various illicit markets, legal economic activities, governance spaces and political networks. By exploiting the state's focus on mass incarceration – the Brazilian government's primary response to crime and violence – the PCC has emerged as a significant political challenge. Over its 30 years of existence, it has demonstrated resilience and maintained a strong trajectory of expansion, numerically, geographically, economically, socially and politically.

Although the PCC was initially established in a prison in 1993, its significant consolidation began in 2016. From 2010 onwards, the PCC entered a phase characterized by substantial economic, social and political growth, yet also faced challenges that threatened the conditions essential for its continued existence and influence in the criminal world. It is difficult for the PCC to assert dominance in the border region between Brazil and Paraguay, as these heavily trafficked territories are occupied by a diverse array of actors. Achieving a level of control similar to what the PCC has established in São Paulo is unlikely due to structural factors, including the lack of a sense of community belonging.

Although the PCC initially maintained cooperative and peaceful relations with the criminal gang the Comando Vermelho (CV), the situation has since changed. Brazil's criminal landscape is now polarized between these two major groups, with a range of smaller criminal organizations aligning themselves with one of them. This dynamic has reshaped the contours of power within the prison system and across the impoverished neighbourhoods of many cities, particularly in the north and northeast regions of Brazil, where there is a tense balance of power, sometimes involving numerous local or regional groups.

⁵ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Camila Nunes Dias, researcher at the Center for the Study of Violence (NEV) of the University of Sao Paulo.

Since 2017, the PCC has solidified its presence in the global cocaine market, using routes that pass through São Paulo, with a significant volume of product shipped through the Port of Santos. Through individual business initiatives by its members or close collaborators, the PCC has effectively established its own network, forming connections with criminal groups in Eastern Europe, Italy, various African countries and other regions, allowing it to operate at a high level within this multi-billion-dollar global market.

At the national and local levels, particularly in São Paulo, the effects of this expansion are evident in three key areas:

- **Criminal diversification:** The PCC has diversified its crime portfolio beyond traditional drug trafficking and robbery, engaging in markets involving environmental crimes (such as illegal occupation and construction in urban preservation areas and illegal gold mining in the Amazon), fuel refining and adulteration, cigarette and pesticide smuggling, and other illicit activities.
- **Participation in the legal economy:** The PCC has increased its presence in segments of the legal economy, including vehicle sales, fuel stations, transportation services, cleaning services, construction, real estate and, even, health and education.
- **Political influence:** The PCC's political influence, once confined to specific local and territorial areas, has expanded into state, local and regional bodies. This influence is exerted through clientelist relationships, electoral manipulation, campaign financing, political lobbying, participation in public tenders, and influence over strategic policy sectors, such as urban planning.

In 2019, the historical leadership of the PCC was transferred to the federal penitentiary system, where efficient isolation measures were in place to control communication and the flow of information. To prevent further reconfigurations, the power axis shifted to individuals outside of prison, facilitating the organization's intense economic and territorial expansion within Brazil and abroad. However, this shift created internal tensions within the PCC, as it has disrupted the balance between its street-based economic activities and its prison-based ideological foundation of belonging, loyalty and identity, which give the PCC its distinct character. In the current context, the PCC faces the paradox that its own economic growth may generate friction within the very structures that form its social and ideological base. This tension could challenge its capacity to renew, expand and strengthen itself, which has historically depended on leveraging the state's repressive mechanisms against marginalized and peripheral populations affected by incarceration policies and police violence.

Clan del Golfo⁶

The Clan del Golfo⁷, recently self-proclaimed as the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia – EGC), is one of the most significant forces shaping the security

⁶ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Paula Tobo, Andrés Cajiao and Andrés Preciado. Fundación Ideas para la Paz, Colombia.

⁷ The Colombian state gave the name “Clan del Golfo” to this armed group in 2016. This group has never used that name to identify itself. Since 2008, it has presented itself as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, a name it retained until the end of 2023 when it decided to become an “army.”

landscape in Colombia, alongside dissidents from the demobilized Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the ELN. The Clan is the largest organized crime structure in Colombia, wielding substantial territorial influence and the capacity to exert control over territories and local populations. Since 2016, the Colombian state has classified this organization as an organized armed group due to its hierarchical command structure and its ability to maintain control over parts of the territory, enabling it to conduct sustained and coordinated military operations. The group's membership is considered significant, with estimates ranging from around 5,000 members, according to the Ministry of Defence, to as many as 13,000, based on the group's own claims.

The Clan emerged from the paramilitary demobilization process and was formed by former leaders and members of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) (Álvarez et al., 2017). Due to their origins, they are often labelled as heirs of paramilitarism, paramilitaries or neo-paramilitaries. However, the Clan represents a broader phenomenon of organized crime transformation, which should be understood as a distinct manifestation of violence (Badillo & Trejos, 2023).

Following the demobilization of the AUC, the Clan lost its counterinsurgency focus. It formed alliances with former and dissident FARC and ELN factions in different areas of the country (ICG, 2024). Their relationship with the state and military forces also changed. While allegations of coexistence with state forces persist in certain regions, such as Chocó, the Clan consistently engages in attacks against public forces (including ambushes and harassment) (Badillo & Trejos, 2023), distinguishing it from traditional paramilitary organizations.

Although some of its primary commanders were originally part of the AUC, the Clan has developed extensive criminal experience by incorporating members from various negotiation and demobilization processes, as well as by adopting diverse criminal practices. The group's capacity to integrate former members of different armed groups, alongside establishing agreements with multiple armed and criminal groups, demonstrates that its primary interest is not political or ideological but economic. This pragmatism has made it a highly adaptable organization, capable of internal reorganization and restructuring, allowing it to withstand state actions effectively.

Both in its operational mode and internal composition, the Clan exemplifies criminal hybridity in Colombia. Its pragmatism has enabled territorial expansion through alliances or pacts with other armed groups, the creation of franchises, the subcontracting of local criminal structures, and the outsourcing of services. By 2023, the Colombian Ombudsman's Office identified the Clan as the group with the most significant municipal presence, exerting some level of influence over 392 municipalities (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2024), primarily in the northern part of the country.

However, its influence is not uniform. In regions such as Urabá, southern Córdoba and Chocó, the Clan has established territorial and community control, enabling significant influence over local governance. In these zones, it can impose rules of conduct, restrictions and mobility control, impose business hours, and impose forced taxation (extortion) on local economies. It also has influence over local politics and the ability to corrupt the security forces and the judicial branch. In other areas, its presence is maintained through local criminal groups operating under the Clan's name, particularly in strategic corridors or economically vital areas. In some locations, its influence is confined to urban centres. The group's capacity to influence is largely facilitated by informants or "*puntos*," unarmed civilians who report on local activities.

Since 2022, there have been signs of changes in the Clan's franchise system, aiming for greater integration and control over subcontracted structures. This has fuelled territorial disputes in the north, including in areas such as Barranquilla and Santa Marta. Additionally, since early 2024, the Clan has shown an interest in expanding its control over much of northern Colombia, including efforts to connect Urabá with the Venezuelan border. This expansion has led to the breakdown of previous pacts with the ELN and other armed groups.

From 2020 to 2024, the Clan del Golfo demonstrated a rapid and effective capacity to expand and gain control over contested territories. In areas where it has engaged in conflict, such as Chocó, Bajo Cauca, northern and northeastern Antioquia, and southern Bolívar, it has managed to establish itself or maintain military favourability. These movements have positioned the Clan as the predominant actor in northern Colombia and nearly half of its Pacific coast.

Several factors contribute to the Clan's ability to evolve to this point; one of the most important is the diversification of its funding sources. The Clan is likely one of the illegal armed actors with the greatest influence over drug trafficking networks, from which it derives most of its income. In recent years, it has expanded its control over other illicit economies, including illegal gold mining, migrant smuggling (Cajiao et al., 2022), and extortion.

The Clan has also been one of the armed actors most interested in the Total Peace policy.⁸ While the government has shown limited interest in negotiating with this group, the current context has led to significant changes in the Clan's operational strategy, aimed at gaining political recognition. While the integration of former FARC members had already prompted a shift in the group's relationships and behaviour, the Total Peace initiative has accelerated a process of "politicization." In its pursuit of political recognition, the Clan has adopted tactics similar to those of guerrilla groups, such as building support and a social base by co-opting or creating civil and community organizations. It has also developed a political discourse that highlights its advocacy for historically marginalized communities, which is publicized through frequent public statements. In the absence of negotiations or an effective security strategy, the Clan will likely continue to strengthen militarily, expand territorially and seek a potential negotiation with the government.

Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación⁹

The CJNG is currently the greatest criminal threat in Mexico and poses one of the most significant challenges at the continental and global levels. Since its emergence as an independent organization just over a decade ago, this cartel has been involved in the production, transit and distribution of methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. More recently, fentanyl has emerged as its primary product. Fentanyl has revolutionized the drug market due to its high profitability. In Asia, a kilogram of fentanyl with high purity levels costs between \$3,000 and \$5,000. When mixed with other substances or drugs to increase its volume, this kilogram can sell for between \$1.2 and \$1.9 million.

⁸ Total Peace is the peace policy of the government of President Gustavo Petro. It seeks to open simultaneous spaces for political or legal negotiation with criminal and violent groups throughout the country, with view to disarming or dismantling them. Currently, eight negotiation tracks are underway.

⁹ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Josué González. Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Beyond drug trafficking, the cartel profits from other illicit activities such as arms trafficking, fuel theft, highway robbery, human trafficking, human smuggling and environmental crimes. The CJNG is reported to have more than 18,800 members, associates, facilitators and brokers affiliated with it in Mexico, the United States, and countries worldwide. It also engages in money laundering, primarily through specialized cells, with Los Cuinis—a group led by the González Valencia brothers—particularly prominent. Since 2015, the United States Department of the Treasury has issued alerts and imposed sanctions, including asset freezes, against them. Its assets are laundered through travel agencies, shopping centres, advertising companies, residential developments, real estate ventures, gas stations and restaurants, among other businesses.

In 2014, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration identified the Jalisco Cartel as a priority criminal organization, describing it as having a business model based on a system of “franchises” that adopt the group’s name in mutually beneficial relationships. As of 2024, the cartel operates under a central leadership structure. Its leaders manage a network of specialized cells and sub-networks involved in various criminal activities, with extensive territorial reach and mobility.

In Mexico, the CJNG is present in nearly all states, with the greatest influence in Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima and Michoacán. As part of its strategy for growth and territorial expansion, it forms alliances with declining national organizations (such as the Tijuana Cartel) and local groups (such as the Unión Tepito Cartel in Mexico City).

The CJNG expands its territorial presence at the expense of other organizations that once held greater influence, including the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. In North America, the United States and Canada represent the largest markets for fentanyl and methamphetamine. In Central America, there is evidence of the CJNG’s presence through illicit products and operators in Guatemala, El Salvador and Panama, with anecdotal evidence also suggesting activities in South American countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. Globally, two main routes have been identified for the transit of drugs through Africa to Europe. In Asia, China, India and Hong Kong are key locations where the Jalisco Cartel sources chemical precursors and machinery for fentanyl production.

The policy response to the CJNG has varied over the last decade. Toward the end of Enrique Peña Nieto’s presidency (2016–2018), confronting the Jalisco Cartel and capturing its main leaders became a priority, although the desired outcomes were not achieved. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2019–2024) implemented the “hugs, not bullets” policy was implemented, resulting in a lack of a clear strategy or tangible results in combating criminal groups.

It is also critical to examine the growing political influence of the Jalisco Cartel. In June 2024, during the largest elections in Mexico’s history, the cartel reportedly used money, extortion, violence and murder to exert influence before, during and after the electoral process, potentially establishing ties with or exerting control over various municipal officials (Hernández, 2024). In the coming years, the CJNG, along with the Sinaloa Cartel, is expected to dominate the criminal landscape in Mexico and maintain its influence across the continent. Even the neutralization of its leaders is unlikely to significantly diminish the organization’s operational capabilities.

Sinaloa Cartel¹⁰

The Sinaloa Cartel is arguably one of the most well-known criminal groups globally. Its fame has been amplified by figures such as Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and Sandra Ávila Beltrán, known as “the Queen of the Pacific,” and sensational criminal proceedings covered by international media. However, the focus on these individuals in popular culture often blurs the line between myth and reality. Nonetheless, the Sinaloa Cartel remains one of the most resilient criminal organizations, particularly in the face of law enforcement actions targeting its leadership.

The organization has been conducting transnational criminal operations for five decades. This resilience is partly due to the long-term incentives embedded within its structure and its ability to maintain a relatively low profile. While numerous accounts of its alleged operations exist, the most reliable sources of information, despite certain limitations, are often court documents, which require substantiated evidence to support the allegations presented.

The Sinaloa Cartel is renowned for its involvement in illicit drug production, trafficking and money laundering. In April 2009, the United States government designated the Sinaloa Cartel under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, aimed at denying significant foreign narcotics traffickers, their associated businesses, and their operatives with access to the United States financial system and prohibiting all trade and transactions between these traffickers and United States entities. Although based in Mexico, particularly in the Pacific Northwest state of Sinaloa, this designation highlights the organization’s critical role in international narcotics trafficking (The White House, 2009).

The cartel supplies most of the illicit drugs in response to demand in the United States and demonstrates adaptability to changes in demand. For example, with the rising demand for synthetic opioids, the group has shifted its focus to the production and distribution of illicit fentanyl, moving away from heroin (Noria Research, 2021). While this transition has affected opium poppy farmers in Mexico to varying degrees, it has not diminished revenue-generating activities related to drug trafficking, such as storage, transportation and distribution.

Although the Sinaloa Cartel’s structure is not fixed and may change depending on its business needs, it can generally be considered a hierarchical organization designed to optimize information processing, knowledge acquisition and individual monitoring (Garicano & Van Zandt, 2012). This does not imply that the cartel is a monolithic structure with a single leader who centralizes all knowledge and decision-making power. Rather, its defining characteristic is the degree to which it disseminates information about the agents involved in its operations. The cartel achieves this by continuously generating information and fostering trust through repeated interactions, which incentivize long-term participation, often reinforced by family ties (Farfán- Méndez, 2016).

The Sinaloa Cartel has also taken advantage of the “paradox of invisibility,” employing women to commit crimes, as law enforcement and the media often do not suspect them due to prevailing stereotypes about organized crime and masculinity (Farfán-Méndez, 2020). Court documents show that the cartel has employed women in managerial roles, decision-making positions, and money laundering operations and has exploited women from low-income backgrounds as drug mules.

10 This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, University of California San Diego.

The Sinaloa Cartel employs risk-averse money laundering practices. If discovered by law enforcement, its human and financial assets are not immediately lost to arrest, death or seizure.

These methods allow the organization to learn when it has raised suspicion before confronting law enforcement directly. If its activities attract attention, the cartel has time to devise alternative strategies to secure both funds and personnel involved in these operations. Risk-averse methods may also involve using brokers who launder money for the group without being considered formal members.

The group possesses significant firepower, often acquired legally in the United States. Notably, the Sinaloa Cartel largely refrains from using this firepower against the general population, not as an altruistic decision but as a business strategy to maintain community loyalty toward the group rather than state actors. As a result, the group uses violence selectively, particularly in its home state (Farfán-Méndez, 2019). According to the most recent victimization survey in Mexico, while 39.9 per cent of Mexicans consider their neighbourhoods dangerous, only 20.7 per cent of Sinaloa residents feel the same about their communities (INEGI, 2023). Furthermore, 53 per cent of Sinaloa's residents view criminal groups as better providers of protection than local authorities, compared to 41 per cent of Mexicans who share that sentiment.¹¹

Tren de Aragua¹²

Tren de Aragua, which originated in Venezuela's Tocarón prison between 2012 and 2013, has evolved from a local criminal gang into a criminal structure with transnational reach. This organization has expanded its influence beyond Venezuela, establishing operations in other Latin American countries such as Colombia, Chile and Peru. While its presence is less visible in Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador, it remains strategically positioned, demonstrating its adaptive capacity and intent to expand.

The transformation of Tren de Aragua can be understood in three phases: consolidation within the penitentiary system; expansion into criminal governance at the community level; and transnationalization. Initially, Tren de Aragua established itself in various Venezuelan prisons, then transitioned to the second phase by creating and reinforcing a model of criminal governance in communities near these penitentiary centres. In doing so, it gained trust and recognition from civil society and consolidated its influence, establishing "zones of peace." During this phase, Tren de Aragua grew into a megabrand with the support of ex-convicts, members of other criminal groups and funding obtained through extortion of local merchants.

The transnationalization phase of Tren de Aragua coincided with the third Venezuelan migratory wave between 2017 and 2018, which was marked by an intense political, economic, social and humanitarian crisis. The vulnerability of migrants provided Tren de Aragua with new opportunities to expand its criminal activities, facilitating its transformation from a megabrand into an intermediary transnational organization. Leveraging this migratory wave, the organization established complex networks for human trafficking and smuggling, thereby extending its criminal business model beyond its traditional operations.

11 Encuesta de la Calidad de la Democracia en México, 2024.

12 This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Valeska Troncoso, Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Centro de Estudios sobre Crimen Organizado Transnacional (CeCOT), Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina.

Tren de Aragua has adopted a franchise system to manage its international expansion. This strategic approach allows the organization to maintain a predominantly vertical structure while offering flexibility and horizontal organization at some levels. The franchise system enables it to strengthen and extend its international presence by delegating criminal operations to local groups familiar with the terrain and possessing necessary contacts, thus ensuring continued economic income.

These franchises, operating under the Tren de Aragua name, allow local actors to use the group's brand and reputation, providing access to its criminal markets and territories of operation. This arrangement has created a network of criminal operations where each franchise retains a certain degree of operational autonomy, while adhering to the norms and directives established by Tren de Aragua's central headquarters, which receives financial compensation in return. In parallel, imitators have emerged that, while not officially part of the organization, use its name to commit crimes. This situation complicates the efforts of authorities to trace and attribute criminal activities directly to Tren de Aragua, reduces legal accountability, and hinders actions against the primary organization. These imitators also amplify the perceived power and influence of Tren de Aragua in a more diffuse and less controllable manner.

The transnationalization of Tren de Aragua is closely tied to its diverse sources of income, which are adapted to local and international contexts. Human trafficking and smuggling are its primary revenue sources. The organization lures migrants with promises of transportation, lodging and food, only for many of them to end up exploited in deplorable conditions, particularly in contexts of sexual exploitation. Additionally, money laundering is facilitated through the use of ostensibly legal businesses, such as nightclubs and lodging facilities. These establishments not only serve to launder illicit capital but also act as fronts for sexual exploitation and other criminal activities. The organization is also involved in local extortion, charging businesses protection fees and setting conditions for other criminal groups to operate in specific areas. While drug trafficking is not its primary activity, unlike other criminal groups in the region, it traffics limited quantities of substances like ketamine, cocaine and marijuana to supplement its income. In many instances, these drugs are smuggled by migrants coerced during their journey.

The Maras¹³

The Maras (MS-13) was founded in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s by Salvadoran immigrants fleeing the civil war that lasted over a decade and resulted in more than 70,000 deaths. Marginalized youth, who were often bullied by their peers, formed the gang for protection. Initially, the group consisted of young people who listened to rock and roll music (Wolf, 2011). Over time, MS-13 began to evolve, and United States legislation enabled the deportation of immigrants with criminal records. Consequently, members of MS-13, along with their archrivals, the 18th Street gang, were deported back to Central America. However, the United States government did not share criminal records with its Central American counterparts. Many of these deported gang members had not lived in Central America since they were children and thus "imported" the gang culture to El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

13 This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Jonathan D. Rosen, New Jersey City University.

These gangs have been elevated on the security agenda of many countries in the Americas. The Trump administration, for example, referred to MS-13 as a ruthless drug cartel affecting security in the United States (Dudley, 2020). This brief analysis will examine the Maras and explore the myths and realities surrounding them (Cruz, 2018). It argues that MS-13 fits the definition of a street gang, despite ongoing debates among scholars as to whether MS-13 should be considered an urban guerrilla group, a third-generation gang, a transnational organized crime group, or a terrorist organization (Sullivan, 2006).

In January 2021, the United States Department of Justice charged key leaders of MS-13 with terrorism. This reflects a misunderstanding of the definition of terrorism (Department of Justice, 2021), which is typically seen as a tactic or weapon of the weak. Terrorists usually have political or ideological objectives, which is not the case for MS-13. Scholarly studies indicate that MS-13 members today are still primarily young people who join the gang to find a sense of identity and protection. The underlying reasons why youth join gangs like MS-13 have remained unchanged over the past 20 years (Cruz, 2005).

By 2024, there were more than 70,000 gang members in El Salvador alone. The gang also operates in the other Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) countries, as well as in southern Mexico. In the United States, MS-13 is estimated to have around 10,000 members, with a presence in more than 40 states. Its strongholds include Los Angeles, California and Long Island, New York. In response, Central American countries have implemented “iron fist” (*mano dura*) strategies to combat gangs and gang-related violence. The Northern Triangle countries have used both military and police forces to arrest members of the Maras. Scholars note that prisons have become epicentres of gang activities, enabling the gang to organize more effectively while members are behind bars (Cruz, 2010). Today, many of the founders and leaders of MS-13 are either deceased or incarcerated in Central America.

On the streets, MS-13 competes for territory and seeks to establish a form of criminal governance in certain zones throughout Central America. The gang controls who enters and exits neighbourhoods and extorts residents by charging “rent.” Documented cases reveal that bus drivers in El Salvador have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to gangs. Recent studies also indicate that the Maras generate around \$1 billion per year from extortion activities (Martinez et al., 2016; Doherty, 2022).

While gangs such as MS-13 are involved in micro-trafficking at the street level and have alliances with larger criminal organizations, they are not major players in transcontinental drug trafficking, such as cocaine distribution. However, they often serve as hired assassins for larger criminal organizations and can be subcontracted for security operations (Cruz, 2010).

The threat posed by gangs has led governments to take drastic measures, including clandestine negotiations. For instance, in 2012, the government of Mauricio Funes in El Salvador secretly negotiated a truce between MS-13 and the 18th Street gangs. While homicide rates initially dropped, the truce eventually collapsed. By 2015, El Salvador had a homicide rate exceeding 100 per 100,000 inhabitants, making it the most violent country in the world at that time (Cruz, 2019).

In 2020, journalists from the Salvadoran newspaper El Faro reported on the Nayib Bukele government’s secret negotiations with MS-13, which had been ongoing for over a year. The United States Treasury Department later sanctioned key members of the Bukele administration. Gang members demanded improved prison conditions and other concessions in exchange for reducing violence (Martínez et al., 2020). In March 2022, the gang killed more than 60 people in a single day, sending a message to the Bukele government. This prompted the declaration of a state of emergency,

which has since been extended indefinitely, to arrest suspected gang members and house them in a mega-detention centre. While these mass arrests have bolstered Bukele's popularity, gangs remain a reality; they have not disappeared and may simply be laying low to reorganize.

A diverse array of gang structures exists in Latin America, ranging from Central American Maras to emerging groups in South America. However, it is essential to recognize that these entities typically represent smaller-scale organizations primarily engaged in local criminal activities, such as extortion, while occasionally providing logistical support to larger criminal enterprises such as cartels or prominent criminal syndicates. A distinctive phenomenon observed in the Southern Cone of South America is the prevalence of family clans. These clans are characterized by their relatively small size, control over limited territorial domains, and a highly horizontal organizational structure. Rooted in familial ties, loyalty serves as the cornerstone binding them clans together (Sampó & Quirós, 2018). Notable examples include the Clan Rotela in Paraguay and Los Monos (the Monkeys) in Argentina

4. The places

Latin America and the Caribbean have become regions characterized by the presence of multiple illegal markets. While these regions' long tradition of economic informality has facilitated activities such as smuggling, the development of networks that employ violence, strengthen territorial control and connect with other illegal markets is a relatively recent phenomenon.

As discussed earlier, activities such as migrant smuggling, human trafficking and drug trafficking have developed over several decades in various countries across the region. However, the nature of these illegal markets has evolved along at least five key dimensions: (i) the presence of multiple illegal markets is growing in every country in the region; (ii) crime statistics' national averages provide an initial but insufficient indicator, given the territorial roots of these markets; (iii) while the urbanization of violence has characterized the region over the last two decades, illegal markets now have a significant presence in peri-urban and rural areas; (iv) countries or territories that were previously considered "transit" areas now host criminal organizations connected to various illegal markets; and, (v) while violence, particularly homicide, is an indicator of the presence of illegal markets, it is not the only one. The complexity of the problem extends beyond the perception that criminal actors are only present in areas where homicides and kidnappings occur.

The following section analyses key regional realities that exemplify a broader, more widespread situation. As in the previous section, we incorporate insights from local experts who provide a detailed analysis of the challenges faced in various parts of the region.

The Caribbean

The Caribbean stands out as one of the most violent regions in the Americas, with some of the worst homicide rates on the continent (Statista, 2024). This region is also known as a tax haven, which has led major banks to avoid establishing correspondent banking relationships in the Caribbean to "de-risk" (Evan, 2023, p. 3). In addition to high rates of violent deaths and financial threats, the Caribbean suffers from other types of crime, such as kidnappings and extortion carried out by gangs, which promotes diminished state control undermined by corruption and challenged by armed violence (Manjarrés & Newton, 2024).

A study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB, 2017) in the Caribbean reveals the gradual increase in violence in the region, focusing primarily on victimization surveys conducted between 2014 and 2015 in the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. The report "emphasized the prevalence of violence in these Caribbean nations and found that approximately one in three respondents had lost someone to violence" (Yagoub, 2017).

This is explained by the gradual increase in aggressive crimes linked to other factors, such as the presence of gangs and the irregular possession of firearms. Violence is believed to start at home, and it was found that Caribbean residents had greater tolerance for violence against women and children compared to the rest of Latin America (Yagoub, 2017). This manifests as a prevalent symptom of the failure of Caribbean governments to find a balance between prevention and control.

Criminal groups, especially gangs, are involved in the region's criminal activities. In the Caribbean, gangs have come to exercise social control and co-opt the state in various ways. In countries such as Jamaica and Haiti, for example, government sectors have formed political alliances with local gangs to compensate for the neglect of certain communities by the state (Insight Crime, 2023).

Criminal activities pose a threat to people's security and undermine the rule of law in the region. The gang crisis in Haiti is the most severe in the Caribbean, with criminal gangs dominating much of the capital, Port-au-Prince. These organizations have capitalized on the security instability and the situation has worsened since the assassination of President Moïse in 2021, turning Haiti into a key point for drug and arms trafficking (see below).

A similar approach to this issue is observed with gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, where the country experienced a sharp rise in homicides in 2024. According to official projections, it "is on track to surpass the record of 605 murders recorded in 2022, with projections indicating that homicides could reach a new high of 635 by the end of the year"¹⁴ (Manjarrés & Newton, 2024). The rivalry between the Sixx and Rasta City gangs is fuelling violence in the Caribbean country. Since they split in 2017, these gangs have been responsible for escalating violence, with rising homicide rates as both groups compete for profits from illegal betting, migrant smuggling and theft, among other activities (Manjarrés & Newton, 2024). Corruption within the security forces and political elites exacerbates these issues, allowing criminal organizations to evade law enforcement (Insight Crime, 2024). This results from low public trust in security forces and limited government budgets for prevention.

According to official data, gang-related violence in 2024 accounts for 42.6 per cent of murders, with 10.7 per cent linked to drug activity and 8.4 per cent attributed to revenge killings, all categories tied to organized crime in the country, according to officials from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (Manjarrés & Newton, 2024). This dispels any doubts about the slowdown in the security policies implemented in 2015 that sought to curb the projected violence in the country; the failure of these initiatives compromises the state administration's ability to make substantial changes to the security agenda.

Haiti¹⁵

Haiti has had a long history of coup d'états, dictatorships, political repression, political turmoil, insecurity and human rights abuses. Yet since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, the scale of the chaos and violence has surprised even veteran observers of the country (BBC News, 2021).

Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, is a city of 1.2 million inhabitants where 80 per cent (AFP, 2024) of the urban area is now controlled by gangs. They outgun the police, extort, rob, destroy property, assault, injure, rape and kill with impunity. The efforts by former acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry to deploy a Multinational Security Support Mission (MSS) to the country to help the Haitian National Police in its fight against gangs resulted in even more violence, as the two main gang factions united

¹⁴ InSight Crime (2024). Prediction: Rising Homicides in Trinidad & Tobago Amid Gang Violence. insightcrime.org/news/prediction-rising-homicides-trinidad-tobagogang-violence/#:~:text=With%20a%20homicide%20rate%20of,the%20end%20of%20the%20year.

¹⁵ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Christopher Hernández, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the Americas Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

(GI-TOC, 2024) and threatened to against the government (Rivers, 2024) in a spasm of extreme violence that shook Haiti at the end of February 2024. The gangs prevented Henry from returning to the country after travelling abroad, which ultimately forced him to resign in late April, shortly after the formation of a Transitional Presidential Council.

The security situation in Haiti is dire. In the past three years, approximately 12,000 people have been killed (Segura & Da Rin, 2024). Between January and March of 2024, 2,00 people (Salvador, 2024) were killed or injured. In the first six months of 2024, five children were killed or injured in Haiti every week (Taylor, 2024). Most were hit by stray bullets, caught in the crossfire between the two gang alliances, G9 (InsightCrime, 2024) and G-Pèp (Mistler-Ferguson, 2021). The gangs have attacked government offices, hospitals, police stations, prisons and entire neighbourhoods (Robles, 2024). Nearly 580,000 people have been displaced internally by conflict (IOM, 2024) and, according to the United Nations, close to five million people in the country are facing acute hunger (OCHA, 2024). Another tragedy is occurring within this grim reality: the systematic and widespread use of gender-based violence by the gangs, who use it as a weapon of war to terrorize neighbourhoods to enforce their own control or against areas controlled by rival gangs (Hernandez-Roy & Rubio 2024). In early September, Haitian authorities expanded an existing state of emergency to the whole country as the government continues to battle the gangs that are attempting to move beyond the capital into other regions (Reuters, 2024).

Recognizing the gravity of the security situation in his country, Henry requested military assistance from the international community in October 2022 (Dupain & Alam, 2022). He made the request because of both the Haitian National Police's inability to effectively combat the gangs and because of the country's dire security situation, with its acute secondary effects on the operations of the country's ports and airport, exacerbating food insecurity, cratering economic activity, and severely restricting the provision of basic services like health services. It also created a humanitarian emergency, where the scourge of cholera once again emerged (Dupain, et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the international community took too long to respond, in part because of commitments to other global crises and because of a history of previous interventions in Haiti that did not seem to accomplish much (Coto, 2022). The MSS was devised as a novel international response. It received United Nations Security Council authorization (United Nations, 2023), but would operate outside of the United Nations framework. Kenya agreed to lead the mission, which was to be financed principally by the United States, Canada, France and Spain (Haselhof, 2023). However, it was not until late June 2024 that the first 400 Kenyan police officers assigned to the MSS deployed to Haiti (Robles & Latif Dahir, 2024). These officers were the advance group of the planned deployment of 2,500 personnel from Kenya and other countries (Matamis, 2024). While visiting Haiti in late September, Kenya's President William Ruto pledged to send 600 more police officers in subsequent weeks (Ross, 2024).

While not yet up to full strength, the MSS has shown a few tentative signs of progress. The country's main port and airport have reopened, critical roads have been opened, enabling thousands of Haitians displaced earlier to return. Gang attacks, tracked by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) tracks and characterized as "battles," fell in June to their lowest number this year (De Paris & Murillo, 2024). Prime Minister Garry Conille, a dynamic and reassuring personality (Fauriol, 2024), is working the phones "every single day" (Hu, et al., 2024) to expedite the delivery of important funds and equipment pledged to the MSS by international donors.

However, as recently as 5 September 2024, William O'Neill, the UN human rights expert on Haiti, said that the MSS is understaffed, its equipment inadequate, and its resources insufficient (OHCHR, 2024). Even at full strength, the MSS would be a much smaller force than the 12,500 personnel

deployed under the previous UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSTAH (2004-2017) (Johnston, 2011). The MSS is facing a \$160 million shortfall, and until it is resolved, additional security forces cannot be deployed (Washington Post, 2024). The United States is looking at various options, according to Brian A. Nichols, United States Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, to secure more funding and personnel for the MSS (Coto, 2024). One option is to seek United Nations Security Council approval for converting the MSS into a fully - fledged UN peacekeeping operation, which would entail United Nations financial and personnel resources, expertise and infrastructure. To that end, the United States circulated a draft Security Council resolution calling for the MSS to be renewed for one year beginning October 2024, and asking the United Nations to begin planning a transition to a United Nations peacekeeping operation in October 2025 (Nichols, 2024). On 30 September, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2751, which extended the mandate of the MSS for one year, while reaffirming that the United Nations Secretary-General may offer logistical support to the mission when requested (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The Council would discuss transitioning the MSS into a peacekeeping operation in the months to come, according to United States Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2024). Meanwhile, the United States Southern Command is trying to address some of the equipment shortages by delivering additional Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles for use by MSS personnel during joint security operations led by the Haitian National Police (United States Southern Command, 2024).

Given the delays and lack of funding and staffing, a change to a United Nations peacekeeping operation would probably be a positive development from a security perspective, assuming it can overcome obstacles within Haitian society; the previous United Nations mission in Haiti triggered a cholera outbreak that killed thousands of people (Domonoske, 2024) and was responsible for many cases of sexual abuse (Snyder, 2017). It would also have to overcome a likely Russian and Chinese Security Council veto, as these countries may cynically prefer that the Haitian crisis on the United States' doorstep continue festering.

Mexico¹⁶

The context in which transnational organized crime operates in Mexico is undergoing a major transformation. As of June 2024, the total number of homicides during the presidential term of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) surpassed 190,000, a significantly higher number than that registered during the past two administrations (INEGI, 2024). Mexico is a very dangerous country today for journalists, with high levels of impunity and corruption, making the fight against organized crime a very difficult task. The 2023–2024 electoral process was the bloodiest in Mexico's history.

In 2024, the biggest challenge facing Mexico's government is the enormous capacity of organized crime groups to establish links to multiple illegal markets and their control over vast territories of the Mexican Republic. It is worth noting that the criminal context in the country is extremely complex. It is not related entirely to drug trafficking and does not necessarily involve transnational criminal networks. Some of the criminal networks that exist in Mexico operate only locally and have nothing to do with transnational businesses. The drug trade is just one space where national and transnational organized crime operates. Other criminal activities carried out in large regions

¹⁶ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University.

of the country include extortion, kidnapping, fuel theft, money laundering, arms trafficking, human smuggling and human trafficking. All of these activities have their own logic; they often – but not always – involve both national and transnational actors. Illicit activities usually require specialization but, in some cases, one group of organized crime may perpetrate more than one illicit activity; for example, drug trafficking organizations dedicated to migrant smuggling activities may sometimes form their own extortion rings.

Much of the high-impact violence that occurs in Mexico is usually attributed to drug trafficking organizations, but that is not always correct. The two most relevant organizations today are the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG (see previous section). Other relevant criminal structures are the Gulf Cartel, the Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima, the Northeastern Cartel (*Cartel del Noreste*) and other criminal cells that were once part of more relevant regional criminal groups and now participate in the drug trade as enforcers, transporters or drug retailers (*narcomenudistas*). Many of the armed confrontations in Mexico are attributed to the so-called drug “cartels,” but some of these assessments are inaccurate. Some criminal paramilitary groups and other criminal cells specialize in extortion, kidnapping, human smuggling or other illicit activities and have nothing to do with drugs. Further, some of the cells have no involvement in transnational activities and just extort or perpetrate crimes against local/national actors or businesses. According to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels have a vast network of associates and collaborators that number almost 45,000 people (Guerrero, 2023a). The former has a presence in more than 100 municipalities of Mexico, while the latter is present in more than 350 (Guerrero, 2023b). According to the consulting Firm Lantia Intelligence, organized crime has the largest base of social support in these seven Mexican states: Baja California, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Edomex, Michoacan and Morelos (Lantia Intelligence, 2023a).

Apart from two main cartels, multiple mafias and gangs exist. According to this analysis, mafias are regional organizations formed by armed groups or gangs that work as their contractors or work independently. The five largest mafias in Mexico are La Nueva Familia Michoacana, Unión Tepito, Los Zetas Vieja Escuela, Los Metros, and the Northeastern Cartel (Lantia Intelligence, 2023b). Bands are smaller armed or criminal groups; those with a greater territorial presence in Mexico are Los Viagras, *Cártel de Tepalcatepec* and Guardia Michoacana. Bands with the largest membership are Cartel Nueva Plaza, Los Corazones, Los Paez, Mara Salvatrucha, Cartel de Tlahuac and Los Rodolfos (Lantia Intelligence, 2023c).

Corruption is prevalent in Mexico and the analysis of the criminal context in Mexico is frequently inaccurate. Criminal investigations in the country are deficient, and the lack of coordination among security agencies and among all levels of government is detrimental to the fight against organized crime.

The analyses of security issues in the country and media reports on organized crime and violence usually oversimplify the situations of extreme violence in multiple regions of Mexico, referring to fights between drug cartels for the control of drug routes (“*plazas*”). What many refer to as a cartel is “essentially a transnational network of smaller and relatively independent businesses operating horizontally”¹⁷ (Correa-Cabrera, 2023). Apart from criminal corporations, one can also consider criminal networks and criminal franchises when examining the complexity of the criminal context in Mexico. When analysing drug trafficking, it is important to think about networks or “complex adaptive systems formed by drug manufacturers, distributors, brokers, wholesalers and retailers,

17 Correa-Cabrera (2023). Perspective: The Myth of the Mexican ‘Cartels’ smallwarsjournal.com/2023/04/17/perspective-myth-mexican-cartels

sellers of precursors, and other facilitators of the drug trade of different nationalities—including United States citizens, of course—such as corrupt customs officers, politicians and law enforcement agents, financial intermediaries, paramilitary enforcers, killers, and lookouts, among others.”¹⁸ (Correa-Cabrera, 2023).

Brazil¹⁹

Brazilian criminal organizations represent a significant challenge not only to the country, but to all of South America. Their development is primarily due to two factors, both directly connected to the international drug trade (especially cocaine and marijuana).

The first is Brazil's strategic position as a transit country. A large portion of the drugs produced in the Andean countries, Paraguay and Brazil itself, reaches Europe, Africa and Asia through Brazilian ports and airports. To the north, the transit route passing through the Amazon is often called the Solimões Route. However, it is important to note that while drugs primarily travel along the Solimões River, other rivers, such as the Javari and Negro, are also significant. Additionally, small planes facilitate drug transport, exploiting the lack of air traffic technology cooperation between Brazil, Colombia and Bolivia. The Caipira Route operates to the south, where cocaine and marijuana pass through Paraguay and Bolivia by land and reach Brazilian ports and airports for export. The port of Santos is a central hub in this route, but non-traditional ports in the states of Espírito Santo, Santa Catarina and Paraná have also become important. In this lucrative market, a kilogram of cocaine that leaves Bolivia at a price of approximately €800 can be resold in Africa for up to €50,000.

The second is related to Brazil's internal dynamics. The country is the second-largest consumer market, behind the United States. This has strengthened criminal organizations, which have been quite strong in Brazil since the late 1970s (see previous section). Today, two criminal organizations are characterized as cross-border criminal enterprises, a concept introduced by Anna Sergi and Luca Storti (Sergi & Storti, 2021): the CV and the PCC.

By mid-2024, the two were competing to gain control of Brazil as a transit country for drug trafficking. The PCC dominates the Caipira Route with a strong bureaucratic organization (using member registration, a consolidated financial organization, and a robust culture based on its own internal programmatic documents). In contrast, the CV has expanded beyond Rio de Janeiro, developing a strong operational presence in the Amazon region, particularly in the states of Amazonas and Acre. By networking and spreading the same culture that established the group as the central drug trafficking organization in Rio de Janeiro, the CV seeks to cooperate with local organizations to strengthen its position. The PCC operates similarly, but faces more difficulties due to its more rigid bureaucratic system. Besides these organizations, other smaller groups operate around them, either as direct allies or through purely commercial relationships. The most important include Comando Classe A, Sindicato do Crime, Guardiões do Estado and Bonde dos Treze, among dozens of other smaller organizations that coordinate trafficking at local or state levels.

In this context, considering the global increase in drug consumption, the adaptability of organized crime, and the significant role of Brazil as a transit country, a medium-term decrease in the influence

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Marcos Alan Ferreira, Federal University of Paraíba.

of organized crime in the country and in South America is not foreseeable. The CV, PCC and other smaller organizations will continue to pose a significant challenge to social peace, as they operate in the same spaces as and thereby affect the presence of the state.

Brazil serves as both a source and destination for human trafficking, with women particularly affected by the growing presence of this illicit market. The illegal trafficking of arms is another critical issue, as Brazil is both a producer and exporter of small arms. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the country plays a fundamental role in perpetrating environmental crimes, which are predominantly, though not exclusively, concentrated in the Amazon rainforest.

The end of the “safest countries”: Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica²⁰

Organized crime activity is not new to Latin America. However, in the last two decades, homicides have shifted from a problem concentrated in a few countries and have spread, with varying intensity, throughout the region. In fact, homicide rates related to organized crime in countries previously considered safe, such as Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica, have risen in recent years. Organized crime activities account for much of the deadly violence in the region (at least 50 per cent of homicides in the region are related to it), as these groups expand their profitable illegal markets (UNODC, 2023). For example, recent data show that 56 per cent of homicides between 2012 and 2022 were due to conflicts between criminal groups, while in Chile, homicides rates increased by 40 per cent between 2018 and 2023 (Rojido, Cano and Borges, 2023).

Crime tends to be concentrated in specific locations rather than evenly distributed (Lee et al., 2017; Amemiya and Ohyama, 2019; Braga et al., 2019). For example, in Ecuador, Guayaquil accounts for 30 per cent of homicides (Mella, 2024), and in the last decade, more than 90 per cent of victims in Montevideo lived in areas covered by only four police stations (Rojido, Cano and Borges, 2023). In 2023, the city of Limón, Costa Rica reported one-quarter of all homicides in the country and its homicide rate was five times the national average. The homicide rate in Chile’s Arica and Parinacota region is 17.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, which is 300 per cent higher than the national average (Dammert, Croci and Frey, 2024). Homicides are even more concentrated at the neighbourhood level, including, for example, Casavalle (Montevideo, Uruguay), Cieneguita (Limón, Costa Rica), and downtown Santiago (Santiago, Chile). These neighbourhoods are trapped in cycles of violence and deprivation, where criminal organizations thrive and expand their influence and illegal market operations.

In addition to the absence of the state and the lack of institutional effectiveness, two other factors characterize areas where violence has grown. First, the local criminal landscape has become atomized, with groups fighting for specific markets and territories. For example, the Los Monos was previously the most powerful criminal family clan in Rosario, Argentina. Today, it is divided into five groups that use the same name but do not have a central power. They compete with at least 10 other criminal gangs operating in the city (Costa, 2024). In Ecuador, at least 11 criminal groups have a significant criminal presence, and in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, more than 100 criminal gangs are linked to criminal activities (Walker, 2022). Second, criminal groups are using new routes for trafficking illegal products. In general, Chile and Uruguay have well-developed transport and logistics infrastructures, but lack strong border and port control. Consequently, in the last decade,

²⁰ This section was prepared with the collaboration of Gonzalo Croci, Researcher Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Inseguridad y Violencia (CELIV)/Universidad ORT, Uruguay.

these countries have become a major transit point for cocaine to the European market, a market valued at €12.8 billion (Sampó and Troncoso, 2023). Similarly, Limón, located on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, has experienced increased violence, mainly attributable to criminal groups operating in the area and involved in activities such as drug trafficking, extortion and other forms of organized crime. Limón's strategic geographic location, close to important drug trafficking routes that connect South America and North America, together with weak border control and institutional presence, makes the port a key transit point for narcotics (Murillo, 2023).

Moreover, the consolidation of local consumption markets has expanded in the region and involves other markets beyond the archetypal drugs or weapons markets, now involving environmental crime, including illegal mining and logging. In this regard, local illegal markets have grown in Latin America (Durán-Martínez, 2015). For example, Uruguay has the highest per capita consumption of cocaine in the region, followed by Argentina and Chile (OECD, 2020). These countries have experienced growth in their local cocaine market as well as in other drugs, such as MDMA (ecstasy). Other illegal markets, such as arms trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling, have also consolidated (GI-TOC, 2023).

No single cause can explain the increase in homicidal violence related to criminal groups and each context deserves its own analysis (Oberwittler, 2019; Croci and Chainey, 2023). However, the most relevant hypothesis seems to be a combination of the above. In Latin America, violence arises in areas where the local criminal landscape is fragmented, associated with a diversification of trafficking routes and expansion of local illegal markets, in territories where public institutions are ineffective or absent.

Rosario, Argentina²¹

Rosario holds the grim title of Argentina's most violent city. In 2022, violence reached an all-time high with 25 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, 72 per cent of which stemmed from violent disputes between criminal groups vying for control of drug trafficking routes and territories (Observatorio de Seguridad Pública, 2023).

The city's criminal situation is complex, but it is far from that in Mexico, where the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG operate, or Brazil, home to the PCC. The scale of the transnational businesses they develop, the magnitude of the violence they deploy, and the links they have with state actors in their respective countries and other international criminal groups are not comparable to the locations analysed in this case study.

Rosario's criminal landscape is heterogeneous, involving a diverse array of actors with distinct business models and carrying out varying degrees of violence. First, it includes international criminal networks that adopt a business-oriented approach. These groups aim to operate discreetly, avoiding the use of violence as a strategy, and are believed to utilize the region's port facilities for the export of cocaine.

21 This section was prepared with the collaboration of Professor Marco Iazzetta, Universidad Nacional de Rosario.

Second, local criminal groups are involved in cocaine micro-trafficking. They are characterized by their rudimentary operations, lack of organization and limited professionalism, as well as by their high levels of improvisation. They are known for engaging in intense, highly visible and territorially-based violence (Iazzetta, 2020; Saín, 2023). Unlike organizations with rigid, pyramidal structures and strict vertical hierarchies, these groups are more fluid and decentralized. Their configurations are flexible, with fragile agreements based on particular circumstances, where loyalties are often short-lived. Members of these groups may even retain a certain level of autonomy

Crucially, there is no evidence of links between local groups and the international criminal networks mentioned earlier. No proof exists that local groups provide protection or workers to the international networks to facilitate their activities within the local sphere of influence, or that these networks supply drugs to the local market.

What is beyond doubt is that the exponential growth of the city's homicide rate is solely attributable to the actions of local criminal groups involved in cocaine micro-trafficking, particularly due to high levels of fragmentation within the city's illegal drug market. Numerous criminal groups, some more complex than others, compete for control of the business, often resolving their disputes through the use of firearms. As a result, no single actor has managed to dominate.

While two major criminal groups—the Alvarado clan and Los Monos – must be identified as key drivers of the city's criminal activity, it is equally important to recognize the chaotic conflict among numerous smaller groups with strong territorial roots. These groups have increasingly channelled their historical neighbourhood and family rivalries through the drug trade.

Most shipments allegedly originate from the region's port terminals. In fact, the most pressing issue is the unchecked violence of local groups, which even affects international criminal networks that rely on a tranquil environment and state tolerance to conduct their multimillion-dollar businesses discreetly. In this context, the police have demonstrated both well-established connections to crime and incompetence in addressing the new challenges posed by contemporary narco-criminality.

In summary, violence appears to have become the primary force behind a business that continues to expand, under the watchful eye of a political class that persists in repeating the same strategies that have contributed to the current situation.

5. Recommendations

Democracy at Stake

Criminal organizations actively undermine democratic governance and the rule of law in LAC. These organizations influence political processes, manipulate elections and, in many cases, establish parallel governance structures that compete with or replace state institutions. Understanding how criminal violence threatens democracy is crucial for addressing the region's broader governance challenges. Multiple processes erode democratic consolidation in the region, but the presence of criminal organizations and illegal markets is perhaps one of the most important. To limit this impact, some existing policies need to change and new policies are also needed:

- **Reform campaign financing:** Governments should implement reforms to ensure transparency in political campaign financing. By reducing the role of illicit money in elections, politicians will be less vulnerable to influence from criminal organizations. Independent electoral commissions should be established to oversee campaign financing and enforce strict regulations.
- **Develop stronger security frameworks:** Stronger public policies are needed to prevent and control violence during electoral processes, including for the security and justice sector, with a focus on political violence against women and reducing hate speech in digital spaces.
- **Invest in long-term economic development:** In regions where criminal organizations have established parallel governance structures, long-term investments in infrastructure, health care, education and job creation are essential. By providing alternative economic opportunities and public services, governments can reduce the influence of criminal groups.
- **Promote civic education:** Educating citizens about the importance of democratic participation, the dangers of criminal influence in politics, and the importance of the culture of legality is vital. Civic education programmes, especially in regions where criminal groups dominate, can help restore faith in democratic governance and encourage citizens to resist criminal coercion.
- **Enhance international cooperation:** Criminal organizations often operate across borders, influencing politics and governance in multiple countries. Regional cooperation is needed to share intelligence, coordinate law enforcement efforts, and prevent transnational criminal groups from undermining democratic processes.

Revisiting the concept of criminal governance

The concept of criminal governance is crucial in understanding the control and influence that criminal organizations exert over local communities. Revisiting and exploring this concept can reveal the socio-political mechanisms through which criminal organizations embed themselves in communities and the role of state institutions and highlight ways to address these challenges.

As mentioned earlier, criminal governance involves more than just illegal activities. It also involves the ways in which criminal organizations create power structures and control local populations. This occurs in several ways across LAC:

- **Service provision:** In regions where the state fails to deliver essential services, criminal organizations often step in. For instance, the Sinaloa Cartel has been known to provide security, economic support and, even, food to local populations, especially in remote areas where state services are scarce. This creates local dependency and community loyalty. In the *favelas* (shantytowns) of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, criminal gangs like the CV provide services, including water, electricity and dispute resolution. These services replace state functions and solidify the gang's power. In many of Jamaica's garrisons, criminal groups provide basic services like water, electricity and food. They mediate disputes and enforce their own form of law and order. In the absence of consistent state services, residents rely on these groups for protection and economic stability. Finally, in some communities in Trinidad and Tobago, gangs offer social assistance, such as providing financial support to families or organizing community events. This generates loyalty to and dependency on the gangs, as they provide services that the state fails to deliver consistently.
- **Establishing social control:** Criminal organizations exert control through a combination of coercion and social ties. They become quasi-governments, not only maintaining order through violence, but also establishing norms and rules within the community. For instance, in Colombia, armed groups, including remnants of FARC or paramilitary organizations, have historically exerted control in rural areas. They regulate social behaviour, punish crimes and act as arbiters in disputes, positioning themselves as the main authority. Furthermore, in most of the Caribbean, but specifically in Jamaica, criminal organizations exercise significant social control over communities, dictating who enters or leaves certain neighbourhoods, and enforcing their own moral codes. The influence of these groups often fills a governance vacuum left by the state, which has limited authority in these areas.
- **Interacting with local communities:** Criminal organizations often cultivate a complex relationship with the communities they control, alternating between violent enforcement and support. In Guatemala, drug traffickers in border regions have garnered local support by investing in public works such as road construction or funding social events, creating a strong bond with the local population. Venezuela's *colectivos* - armed groups tied to criminal or political networks - often engage with disenfranchised communities, providing food and protection in exchange for loyalty. This relationship complicates efforts to eliminate their influence. In Haiti, local gangs often exert their power through intimidation and fear, but also engage in symbolic acts of charity or support, creating a complex relationship with local populations. They fill gaps in governance and infrastructure while simultaneously perpetuating violence and exploitation.

Revisiting the concept of criminal governance would allow governments to design and implement a more multidimensional policy strategy that should include:

- **Recognizing socio-economic roots:** Understanding criminal governance requires acknowledging the socio-economic factors that lead communities to rely on criminal organizations. In many cases, it is not only fear, but a lack of alternatives, that forces communities to accept criminal governance. In fact, poverty and lack of opportunities are major drivers of criminal governance; this is especially true in areas with a weak state presence.

- **Strengthening state presence:** Improving state governance in these regions is essential. This is not limited to increasing the police presence, but also ensuring that the state provides essential services such as health care, education, infrastructure and legal avenues for resolving disputes. State presence requires tackling corrupt practices.
- **Engaging local communities:** Designing policies to counter criminal governance must include engaging with the communities themselves. Women leaders play a fundamental role. Local populations often accept the rule of criminal organizations because they feel abandoned by the state. Therefore, governments must develop policies that prioritize community needs, improve living standards and build trust. In many countries, community policing initiatives have involved efforts to work with local populations to regain state legitimacy, such as the Pacifying Police Unit in Rio de Janeiro. These programmes include social outreach efforts alongside security measures, aiming to replace criminal rule with a state presence that addresses local concerns.
- **Alternative forms of justice and services:** To counter criminal organizations that provide justice and services, governments should implement alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and make sure that they are accessible to marginalized communities. Social programmes that provide free or low-cost legal support can help reduce the community's reliance on criminal groups for mediation.

Ambivalent role of the state

In many countries, the state itself is a complex actor: while certain elements within the state apparatus work diligently to counter crime, others may collude with, benefit from or turn a blind eye to criminal organizations. This ambivalence weakens efforts to dismantle criminal networks and can create an environment where corruption flourishes and criminal organizations gain legitimacy in the eyes of local populations. Mexico exemplifies the ambivalence of the state in fighting crime. The Mexican state has launched large-scale military operations against drug cartels, but elements within law enforcement, the military and political circles have often colluded with these same cartels. In multiple countries, some factions within the military and police have been found to cooperate with cartels, providing them with information or turning a blind eye to their activities. This relationship allows cartels to operate with impunity in certain regions, while they are targeted in others. Finally, many politicians, particularly at the local and state levels, have been implicated in corruption related to organized crime. Mayors, governors and, even, national politicians have been found guilty of receiving cartel money or offering protection in exchange for political or financial benefits. This duality in governance undermines the state's ability to effectively combat cartels. Addressing it will require:

- **Political and institutional reform:** Comprehensive reform is essential to address the ambivalent role of the state in fighting crime. This requires rooting out corruption at all levels of government, particularly among those who collude with criminal organizations. In Mexico, Honduras or Peru, reform efforts should focus on increasing transparency in political campaigns, ensuring that criminal groups do not influence local and state elections and strengthening anti-corruption bodies. In Haiti, international oversight and support may be necessary to rebuild institutions and reduce the influence of gangs over politics.

- **Anti-corruption campaigns:** Such campaigns are critical to overcoming the state's ambivalence in fighting crime. These campaigns should target both high-ranking political officials and lower-level law enforcement personnel who collude with criminal organizations.
- **Strengthening the judiciary:** An independent judiciary is essential to counter state ambivalence. Limiting impunity and ensuring speedier judicial processes are key to rebuilding institutional legitimacy. Corrupt politicians and law enforcement officers must face consequences for their actions; this requires a judiciary that is free from political interference.
- **Civil society engagement:** Civil society organizations can play a crucial role in holding the state accountable and exposing collusion between political figures and criminal organizations. These groups can pressure governments to adopt anti-corruption measures, provide transparency and offer support to marginalized communities.

Need for subnational analysis and policy implementation

Latin America is marked by profound regional diversity, from urban metropolises to remote, rural communities. Each region presents unique challenges related to illegal markets, whether drug trafficking, contraband or illegal mining.

For instance, in Colombia, the dynamics of illegal coca cultivation vary greatly across regions. In areas such as Catatumbo, where state presence is weak, illicit crops thrive due to a lack of alternatives and local governance structures. In regions with a stronger state presence, eradication and substitution policies could be more effective. By the same token, in Mexico, drug trafficking and related violence exhibit different patterns across regions. Northern border states, such as Chihuahua and Sonora, face cartel-related violence and human trafficking challenges, while southern regions like Guerrero contend with marijuana and poppy cultivation, requiring distinct interventions. Finally, in the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon regions, illegal logging and gold mining call for different policy responses than urban crime in cities such as Rio de Janeiro or Lima. Environmental crimes in remote areas are deeply linked to the region's economic underdevelopment and lack of oversight, contrasting with illegal urban economies driven by gang control. In Trinidad and Tobago and in Jamaica, historic links exist between gangs and politics. Gangs have been used to sway elections and control local politics, which solidifies their power within these communities.

To be more effective in controlling illegal markets, governments should consider:

- **Regional economic structures:** Different regions in LAC have varying degrees of dependence on illegal markets, mostly due to limited economic opportunities. Policies that aim to address these illegal activities must consider the economic alternatives available to local populations. In regions that rely heavily on informal or illegal activities, economic substitution programmes may be more effective than enforcement-led approaches.
- **Social and cultural dynamics:** Policies must also consider the social and cultural contexts of regions. In areas where illegal economies are deeply entrenched within community life, such as in rural Colombia, the Mexican Sierra or the Peruvian rainforest, enforcement-heavy policies may harm local communities. Instead, policy frameworks that engage with community leaders and provide local ownership over solutions are more likely to gain traction. Women's leadership is key to building bridges, especially within indigenous communities.

- **Security and governance challenges:** Regions with weak governance or a limited state presence, such as the Amazon or border areas, require policies that strengthen institutional capacity while addressing immediate economic and security challenges. For instance, in Peru's Valley of the Rivers Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro, a stronghold of illegal coca production, policies that improve state presence through infrastructure, education and health care could help undermine the dominance of illegal economies. Specially, national frontiers have become areas of high presence of illegal markets with limited or no specific policies developed to address this.

Highlight gender impacts of criminal violence

The gender impacts of criminal violence are often overlooked in discussions about organized crime and criminal activity in LAC. However, women and gender minorities face disproportionate levels of violence and exploitation, particularly in regions where organized crime thrives. Addressing these gendered impacts, such as femicide, sexual violence, and the exploitation of women and children, is critical for a more inclusive and effective approach to combating criminal violence.

In this context, governments must prioritize gender-based violence in their crime prevention strategies as well as in victim protection initiatives. This means explicitly addressing femicide, sexual violence, and the exploitation of women and children as part of national security and anti- crime agendas. The most important initiatives include:

- **Incorporating gender-sensitive crime prevention strategies:** National security strategies must incorporate gender-sensitive approaches that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and gender minorities. This includes recognizing the intersection between organized crime and gender-based violence, and allocating resources to prevent and combat these crimes.
- **Promoting women's institutional representation:** Women should have greater representation in law enforcement and judicial systems. Having more women in positions of power within these institutions can lead to more empathetic and effective responses to gender-based violence and crimes.
- **Collaborating across borders on human trafficking:** Given the transnational nature of human trafficking, LAC countries should enhance cross-border collaboration to disrupt trafficking networks. This includes sharing intelligence, coordinating law enforcement efforts, and offering joint victim support programmes.
- **Expanding access to justice for victims:** Governments should ensure that women and gender minorities have greater access to justice. This involves streamlining legal processes, ensuring victim protection, and providing legal aid to those who cannot afford it.
- **Focusing on economic empowerment:** Many women and gender minorities are vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups due to economic hardships. Governments should invest in programmes that empower women economically, offering alternatives to criminal exploitation, such as vocational training, microloans and access to formal employment opportunities.

Importance of predatory crimes

The relevance of predatory crimes, particularly extortion, is crucial in understanding how criminal organizations affect local economies, governance and public safety across LAC. Extortion, as a form of predatory crime, involves criminal groups or individuals imposing “protection fees” or coercing businesses and citizens to make payments in exchange for safety. This practice has devastating consequences, as it undermines economic stability, erodes trust in governance and perpetuates cycles of fear and violence.

Cartels like the Zetas and CJNG, among others, have implemented systematic extortion schemes in the states they control. Small businesses, street vendors and, even, transportation companies are forced to pay “protection money” or risk violent retaliation. This stifles local entrepreneurship and discourages new investment in regions where cartels are powerful. Also, a wide array of gangs dominates through extensive extortion networks in Central America, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil. Extortion is a primary source of revenue for these gangs, particularly in densely populated urban areas.

This type of crime affects small businesses and public transportation operators. Even schools are frequently extorted. This criminal activity devastates the local economy, as business owners are forced to close or operate under severe financial stress due to the constant demands for payments. Furthermore, the threat of violence that accompanies extortion creates an atmosphere of constant fear and instability. This not only erodes public safety but also forces many citizens to migrate, further destabilizing the country’s socio-economic structure.

Governmental initiatives that could enhance policy implementation include:

- **Improving intelligence gathering:** Governments should invest in intelligence-gathering capabilities that allow law enforcement to track and monitor extortion networks. This includes the use of informants, surveillance and digital tools to intercept communications among criminals involved in predatory crimes.
- **Enhancing evidence-based policies:** There is a clear need for better data and technology that will allow for better policy design and implementation. Partnerships with universities, research institutes and civil society organizations in policy design, implementation and evaluation is key to improve effectiveness.
- **Strengthening public trust:** To successfully combat extortion and other predatory crimes, governments need to build public trust by protecting victims and encouraging them to report crimes without fear of retaliation. This could involve witness protection programmes or anonymous reporting systems that allow citizens to cooperate with law enforcement safely.
- **Creating economic incentives:** Providing incentives for businesses to invest in extortion-prone areas could help mitigate the economic damage caused by predatory crimes. Tax incentives, government grants and public-private partnerships aimed at developing infrastructure and job creation can help revitalize local economies.
- **Collaborating across borders:** Given the transnational nature of many criminal organizations involved in extortion, countries in LAC should strengthen cross-border cooperation. Regional partnerships, intelligence sharing and joint law enforcement operations can disrupt extortion networks that operate across national boundaries

- **Conducting anti-money laundering activities** under the security policy to prevent, detect and deter financial criminal activities. This involves establishing robust regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency in financial transactions, implementing stringent reporting requirements for suspicious activities, and fostering international cooperation for tracking illicit funds.

Deemphasize the drug-focused perspective

The traditional focus on drug trafficking has often overshadowed other forms of criminal activity. While drug trafficking remains a significant issue, other illicit markets and predatory crimes are equally destabilizing to economies, governance and social structures. A broader understanding of these dynamics is essential to developing more comprehensive strategies to combat organized crime and improve public security and citizen security. A broader understanding of criminal dynamics will allow governments and societies to be better prepared to deal with their consequences.

- **Interconnected criminal markets:** Criminal organizations often operate across multiple illicit markets. Drug trafficking, while lucrative, is only one aspect of their operations. Extortion, human trafficking, illegal mining and weapons smuggling can provide equally substantial revenue streams for these groups. As mentioned above, Mexican and Colombian cartels have increasingly diversified into other illegal activities, including human trafficking, cybercrime and oil theft. By broadening the focus beyond drugs, governments can disrupt these organizations' diversified business models, attacking multiple fronts of their criminal enterprises.
- **Predatory crimes as central to public harm:** Predatory crimes like extortion, kidnapping and human trafficking often have a more direct and devastating impact on local communities than drug trafficking. These crimes undermine public safety, hinder economic development and erode the social fabric of communities.
- **Governance and institutional impacts:** Non-drug-related illicit markets often erode governance structures and further destabilize countries. Illegal mining in countries such as Peru, Colombia and Brazil has ecological consequences and also contributes to state fragility, as it funds armed groups and undermines legitimate economic activities.

Challenges of informality

In Latin American countries, informal economies constitute a significant portion of total economic activity. For instance, around 56 per cent of the Mexican labour force is engaged in informal work. Informal employment accounts for more than 40 per cent of the labour market in Brazil and nearly 70 per cent of Peru's workforce is informal, ranging from street vending to unregistered small businesses. These informal sectors are crucial in providing livelihoods, especially for populations that might be excluded from formal employment due to economic barriers, lack of education or bureaucratic barriers.

Informal economies can offer viable alternatives to illegal activities and the consolidation of illegal markets. Most people working in the informal economy could be victimized by criminal organizations. To limit those situations, governments should recognize and support informal workers by:

- **Promoting local entrepreneurship:** Many individuals involved in informal economies are small-scale entrepreneurs. With adequate resources and support, they can transition to formal businesses, boosting local economies and creating employment opportunities.
- **Providing tailored financial support:** Financial inclusion efforts—such as microloans, mobile banking, and savings programmes—could encourage informal workers to grow their businesses legally.
- **Establishing appropriate legal frameworks:** Simplifying bureaucratic processes for registering businesses or offering tax incentives to small-scale entrepreneurs could motivate more people to transition from the informal to the formal economy.
- **Reforming policy:** Flexible legal frameworks that recognize the importance of the informal sector should be created that allow for the easy registration of informal

businesses, provide social protections (like health insurance), and integrate informal workers into tax systems in a progressive way.

- **Offer education and training:** Programmes aimed at improving skills and knowledge for informal workers can empower them to scale up their operations.
- **Collaborating with non-government organizations and communities:** Working with such organizations and community leaders can help bridge gaps in understanding between the formal sector and the informal economy. Localized interventions can be much more effective in delivering the right support.

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