Criminal malpractice:
Why cities can't copy their way to security*

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Abstract

International drug trafficking dominates discussions of organized crime, yet urban criminal groups that focus on dominating local markets, neighborhoods, and politics are equally common and serious. When policymakers do pay attention, they consistently repeat a critical mistake—assuming universal best practices exist—leading to ineffective or harmful interventions. But systems of organized crime are not all alike. There is no single blueprint or general solution; thus, following the latest policy fad rarely delivers desired outcomes. Instead of copying high-profile but context-specific successes like Giuliani's New York or Bukele's El Salvador, policymakers must first understand their city's specific organized crime problem, their local capabilities, and the tools most appropriate for their circumstances. This paper examines how organized crime has structured itself in Chicago, Medellín, El Salvador, New York, Bogotá, and Port-au-Prince. I argue the primary driver of these organizations and their behavior is their criminal revenue source. A second major driver is their degree of hierarchical organization, which ranges from atomized individuals and freelance cliques (prone to sporadic violence), to fragmented firms (profit-driven, volatile), competing confederations (internally peaceful but externally violent), and city-wide cartels (internally stable, politically influential). These forms emerge not just from their criminal revenue sources but also from decades-long competition among groups and with the state. Effective policy tools hinge on accurately diagnosing this local context. Reviewing evidence for various standard interventions—from crackdowns to street outreach—I explain why their impacts vary dramatically depending on the organizational environment.

1 Introduction

When it comes to our health, most of us instinctively know that good treatment follows from good diagnosis. We expect our doctor to carefully examine us and ask a structured set of questions that try to get to the root of the problem. If a physician walked in, listened briefly, then confidently prescribed chemotherapy for our chest pain, most of us would know exactly what to do: get a new doctor.

When it comes to countering crime, however, many people lose this instinct. The literature often focuses on "what works" as though there were general treatments for violent maladies. On the academic side, systematic reviews look at the average effect of policies—be that hotspots policing, focused deterrence, or violence interruption—and briefly (if ever) describe the types of criminal organizations or circumstances that will respond well to that kind of treatment. Even more rarely do evidence reviews dwell on the state and civilian capacities needed to intervene effectively.

Policymakers seem vulnerable to the same biases. In the 2000s many celebrated the apparent miracle of New York City, and raised Mayor Rudy Giuliani's policies to near mythological status.[1] The most recent candidate for miracle cure is "Bukelismo"—a hard-line, repressive approach to gangs championed by Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele. Politicians from Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and beyond are looking to El Salvador's apparent victory over gangs, and wondering if their country should emulate it.[2]

This is just one example of the tendency to copy other cities' successes wholesale. As Zimring (2011) warns, crime policy is often shaped by fads, fashion cycles, and compressed narratives. In recent decades, mayors and police chiefs in the U.S. and Latin America have tried to emulate the New York and Boston "miracles" of the 1990s by adopting policing tactics and outreach activities, with little discussion about whether the conditions are the same.[3] After Bukelismo, possibly the most celebrated new strategy is delivering cognitive behavioral therapy to high risk young men.[4] Each of these strategies have potential, given the right circumstances and capacities. But what are they?

If different ailments demand different cures, then what we need is diagnostic tools—typologies of disorders and tests to recognize them.[5] Unfortunately, there are no ready

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[1]e.g. Kelling (2009). See also the discussion of place-based approaches below.

[2]Freeman (2023); Flores-Macías (2024)

[3]For example, the Interamerican Development Bank recently produced a guide to hotspots policing (Chainey et al., 2024), but one largely based on U.S. evidence, with limited attention to specific city circumstances, and despite two Latin American experiments with mixed to null results (Collazos et al., 2021; Blattman et al., 2021). An approach known as focused deterrence is also one of the most common strategies recommended by analysts and technical agencies (Abt and Winship, 2016; Muggah, 2017), and has recently been championed by Mexico's new President (Economist, 2024), but only a few analyses focus on the preconditions for this to work (Abt and Winship, 2016; Lessing, 2017). Finally, there has been reasonably high take-up of community violence interruption approaches, with numerous U.S. organizations advising Latin American cities on how to build similar systems (CVG, 2023).

[4]Based on evidence from several countries, including El Salvador, Chicago, and Monrovia, this is one of Innovation for Poverty Action's "Best Bets", a recommended approach by MIT's Poverty Action Lab, USAID, and the University of Maryland's Violence Reduction Center (Abt and Winship, 2016; Abt, 2019; IPA, 2023; JPAL, 2024).

[5]The 2024 *Halving Global Violence flagship report* likewise insists that policymakers must understand the specific characteristics of the violence that they are targeting, and that heavy-handed, one-size-fits-all tactics

classifications or tools. This is a woefully underdeveloped area of research and policy, especially when it comes to organized crime. This paper collects case studies and evaluation research and suggest some patterns and hypotheses.

I focus on urban criminal systems in the Americas—the ways in which crime is organized around local rents in major cities. Transnational trafficking organizations receive much of the policy and media attention, and are indeed important, but these organizations are not the focus of this article. Instead I focus on the large number of cities facing everything from fragmented neighborhood criminal cliques to expansive city-wide "supergangs" and criminal confederations—an unfortunately common phenomenon, as we will see.

This paper draws heavily on eight years of experience working in Chicago and Colombia.[6] I also summarize cases and research from West Africa, the United States, Brazil, Central America, and the Caribbean. Reader beware: I am in no way an expert on most of the cases or interventions. Consider this an early attempt to synthesize some general ideas and insights across cases, and to make progress in an area where policymakers have almost no guidance.

These cases and evidence suggest that urban criminal systems vary in several important dimensions, including:

- *Major sources of rents, especially the level of development of local microtrafficking.* Extortion and protection rackets tend to be unpopular, extractive, and not that profitable. Contrast this to groups who have developed a robust retail drug market. Not only are margins potentially very high (especially if the gangs hold neighborhood monopolies), but microtraffickers also enjoy enduring consumer demand that is difficult to displace. In some circumstances, drug-selling can also counter criminal incentives to repress, extract, or wage violence. Another aspect is the degree of diversification. Once criminal groups consolidate and formalize they tend to move into new product and service markets, becoming more and more difficult to tackle as they do.

- *The degree of criminal organization and consolidation.* Neighborhood groups vary in their level of organization, ranging from informal, loosely structured cliques—often motivated more by social ties than economic rents—to hierarchical street gangs with clear leadership structures and defined criminal business lines. At higher levels, some cities see consolidation into larger criminal confederations that exert substantial control over many neighborhoods, or even city-level cartels with informal norms and organizations for managing conflict and collusion. The presence and strength of these higher-level groups, their internal cohesion, and the degree to which they have reached accommodations with one another or the state, significantly shape how criminal groups behave and respond to policy interventions.

- *Connections to large international cartels and traffickers.* While any local drug-selling gang requires a supplier, cities vary in the extent to which large transnational groups

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backfire Halving Global Violence Task Force (2024).

[6]In Chicago, I lean heavily on qualitative work performed with and by Megan Kang, as well as my work on READI Chicago with several coauthors and program partners (Bhatt et al., 2023). In Colombia, I draw heavily on an ongoing collaboration with Benjamin Lessing, Santiago Tobón, Juan Felipe Martinez, and Gustavo Duncan in Medellín (Blattman et al., 2024, 2025).

try to control local territory or criminal groups. Cities that are strategically located close to production or transit points may be targets for rival cartels. Organizing and controlling local urban criminal systems is one way to cement local control over strategic sites.

The broad point of this paper is that the same policy will often have very different effects depending on these conditions. For example:

- Policing and municipal approaches popularized in the United States—hotspots policing, community policing, or urban renewal programs—could transplant well to large Latin American cities with more atomized crime. But there are reasons to be skeptical that these approaches will reduce crime and violence in neighborhoods dominated by well-organized and hierarchical gangs and criminal structures.

- Popular "community violence interventions" such as violence interruption and cognitive behavioral therapy are also probably best suited to situations where gangs are fragmented, hierarchies are less organized, and violence is non-strategic and arises from anarchic competition between many groups. In settings where criminal groups are more integrated and organized, and where the main driver of homicides is strategic competition between large factions, these more targeted, individual-level strategies look less promising.

- More aggressive approaches—crackdowns, arrests, or "kingpin" strategies of arresting and jailing leaders—have the potential to weaken or dismantle organized criminal structures. This is especially true when their revenue streams are weak or when these organizations are exploitative and illegitimate. Predatory gangs that rely on extortion and thrive in state weakness are easier targets than armed groups with a robust drug-selling market, external sponsor, or robust governance system.

- But these repressive strategies have the capacity to backfire in several ways. Destabilizing leaders or fragmenting highly-organized structures has the potential to inflame violence. Mass arrests can push fragmented criminal groups to organize and extend their control to prisons. One of the most difficult features of tackling organized crime is that policy often involves terrible tradeoffs between combating powerful groups, reducing illegal rents, and mitigating violence.

- One strategy to mitigate these tradeoffs is to marry interventions that undermine criminal structures with policies that incentivize peace. There is no one blueprint, but as a general matter, many states are marrying more targeted arrest and kingpin strategies with targeted punishments and attention to the most violent groups and individuals.

A final message of this paper is not just to perform careful diagnosis before treatment. It is also a warning that even the most careful diagnosis can be wrong, and initial treatments are unlikely to be immediately effective. Trial and error is therefore not just useful—it is the only realistic path to better policy. This paper is not simply a call for more research; rather, it advocates adopting diagnostic, iterative, and experimental approaches as best practices

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for policy design and implementation. Rigorous research complements and strengthens this process, especially because informal experimentation alone can lead to misleading conclusions or reinforce biases. I close the paper with examples of public-private-academic partnerships from Chicago, Medellín, and Mexico City that demonstrate how careful experimentation and rigorous evaluation have worked together to achieve progress.

2   Urban criminal systems

The world (and crime) is increasingly urban. Nowhere is this trend more evident than in Latin America, the world's most urbanized region. Cities represent the majority of the region's population, economic activity, and violence. Despite comprising just 8 percent of the world's population, Latin America accounts for nearly a third of global homicides (Bisca et al., 2024). Most of this happens in large cities. Over forty of the fifty deadliest cities on earth in 2023 were in Latin America (Igarapé Institute, 2024).

## 2.1   What is and isn't an urban criminal system

There are no firm definitions or boundaries, especially because criminal groups are entrepreneurial, amorphous, and evolve over time in response to opportunities and state actions. Nonetheless, what tends to set urban gangs and mafias apart from other criminal groups is they:

- Are rooted in cities, often peripheral neighborhoods;

- Focus on local illicit rents, such as microtrafficking and extortion;

- Draw their primary power and revenues from their home turf—both territory and a population they have relations to or attempt to control; and

- Evolve sophisticated systems of criminal governance to regulate these illicit firms and markets.

Of course, such groups often have ties to international drug trafficking and markets. At a minimum, neighborhood groups need to source the drugs they sell. They may also provide transnational or rural groups valuable services—money laundering, security, or debt collection. Some local groups eventually branch into international smuggling, as in Rio de Janeiro. Or prison gangs, transnational cartels, or rural drug producers may establish a foothold in the city by integrating, branding, arming, or organizing existing street gangs. So urban criminal systems are a matter of degree.

The remainder of this paper is full of examples of urban criminal systems, and so it might be helpful to give an example of what this paper will not focus on. An obvious example is transnational cartels in Mexico or Colombia. A more nuanced illustration is the criminal systems that have evolved in Ecuador, where organized criminal activity is more spread out, focused on international transit routes, and (because of the focus on drug trafficking) groups are vastly better resourced than most urban systems.

Figure 1: Cities vary in their degree of criminal organization & structure

| Atomized | Freelance cliques | Fragmented firms | Confederations | Cartel institutions |
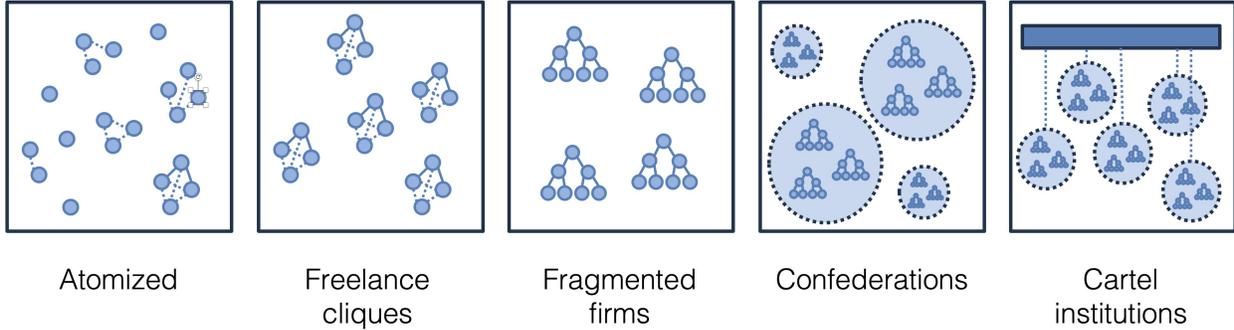
Ecuador has long been a transit hub, moving cocaine from Colombian groups through Ecuadorian ports to Mexican cartels.[7] This required control of trafficking routes and ports, and eventually led to gang proliferation in the prison system. But for the most part, these gangs did not have a major presence in cities, and their rents were not local.[8] The spike in violence since 2020 is driven mainly by competition between foreign criminal groups warring over strategic international trafficking routes and sites.[9] There is potential for urban criminal systems to develop in Ecuador, and there are growing reports of increased violence, arrests, extortion, and microtrafficking in major cities.[10] But there are relatively few existing neighborhood gangs to co-opt or consolidate, and their level of urban territorial control is unclear. What's more, given the volume and value of cocaine, it seems unlikely local rents and interests will ever play a major role in gang operations.

2.2   Varieties of urban criminal systems

Urban criminal systems vary significantly across cities. There is no well-established typology, and the number of relevant dimensions is large. One of the most important, however, is the level of organization, hierarchy, and integration. I illustrate a loose typology in Figure 1.

At one end of this spectrum are *atomized* criminal systems. Here, crime is committed by individual offenders or small, transient, and disorganized groups. Activities such as robberies, muggings, car theft, and assaults tend to be relatively unstructured, and inter-group violence levels are generally low. This structure is characteristic of cities such as Bogotá and New York City, as well as Santiago de Chile (until recently).

Moving toward greater organizational structure, some cities feature *freelance cliques*. They go by many names—mobs, cliques, *pandillas*—and are often based in lower-income residential neighborhoods. Typically these groups have begun disorganized, and relatively

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[7]Ecuadorian groups such as the Choneros dominated the trafficking for many years.

[8]Crime (2021, 2022, 2023a); Freeman (2024); Austin and Shuldiner (2024)

[9]This is primarily due to the growing international demand for cocaine, especially from Europe. Mexican, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Albanian criminal groups have been the main factions competing, but growing number of local gangs have been expanding, fragmenting, and fighting in prison.

[10]Austin (2023, 2024)

poor. They may fulfill social functions, or exist for self defense, rather than criminal earnings.[11] Criminal activities are more entrepreneurial rather than systematically coordinated—subsets might participate in drug-selling or a theft ring, but the profits do not accrue to the full group, and they do not operate as a firm. These are typically flat organizations with limited hierarchy. Cities exemplifying freelance cliques include Cali, Colombia, and many youth gangs in the United States (see below). Cities with many freelance cliques can be prone to cycles of violence when feuds and disputes escalate and they have access to lethal weapons.

As local criminal markets grow, however, these gangs often become more sophisticated, hierarchical, and profitable, evolving into *fragmented firms*. Firm-like groups often feature many-layered structures, specialization in roles, and economic rents flowing upward to organizational leaders. Common revenue streams include drug retailing, extortion, and involvement in informal but legal markets such as loan sharking and debt collection. While they are profit-oriented, these firms are often small and fragmented, leading to fierce competition and high violence. Cities characterized by fragmented firms include many US cities in the early days of the drug market boom, Monterrey, and much of Haiti from 2000 until recently. As we will see, a system of hundreds of compating firms is seldom a very stable one, and the desire to mitigate conflict anbd collude often drives these firms into coalitions.

One of the most common evolutions is the emergence of *competing confederations*. These structures represent alliances of gangs and fragmented firms that organize collectively to manage local conflict and coordinate criminal markets, such as creating local drug monopolies at elevated prices. Some have compared them to franchise organizations (Canales, 2013). Confederations attempt to reduce between-group violence by establishing rules and governance mechanisms. Even so, these entities can pose a heightened risk of intense violence when they compete against rival confederations. Examples discussed below include mob families in the United States, gang factions in El Salvador (MS-13 and Barrio 18), Rio de Janeiro's major factions, Chicago's gang nations during the 1980s and 1990s, Medellín from 2009 to 2012, and current dynamics in Haiti post-2023.

At the highest organizational level, urban criminal systems can develop city-wide *cartels*. This is a cartel in the traditional economic sense of the term—an association of firms that explicitly agree to coordinate their activities in order to maximize joint profits (Carlton and Perloff, 2015). These are city-wide structures capable of sophisticated conflict management and economic collusion, governed by institutionalized norms, governing councils, or other elite negotiations and informal institutions. They emerge slowly (if at all), often consolidating power after prolonged periods of violence. Historical examples include the U.S. Cosa Nostra, São Paulo's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), and Medellín's La Oficina during periods of relative peace (2000–09 and post-2012).

These five organizational types are shaped not only by their primary criminal revenue streams but also by political elites and state actors. The evolution from atomized violence to cartel-like stability often hinges on state tolerance or facilitation. There may even be explicit alliances between criminals and political elites Kleinfeld (2018), though from the examples below we will see that there some cities have managed to facilitate a cartel-like peace in a principled and legal fashion.

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[11]See Chapter 1 of Knox et al. (2018), for example.

Whatever the situation, it is clear that policymakers must therefore clearly diagnose their city's specific criminal structure to identify effective interventions, recognizing that each type responds very differently to standard policy tools. This is difficult. After all, we are talking about clandestine organizations who do their best to remain inscrutable. Meanwhile, normal democratic political turnover can bring new generations of policymakers who need to learn the lessons of their forebears, sometimes the hard way.

3   Cases

3.1   Chicago, USA

1960–1999

Chicago has a decades-long history of small neighborhood gangs of various ethnic origins—Irish, Jewish, Polish, Black, and Latino.[12] In the 1960s, capable and charismatic youth in Black and Latino neighborhoods reached beyond their own group and began organizing and absorbing gangs nearby. Instead of squabbling with youths on the block next door, they created local confederations that cut down local competition and conflict. Their organizing efforts accelerated with the explosion of the drug trade in the 1970s and 80s, partly because peace and cooperation meant profits and personal security. These groups developed increasingly hierarchical structures, written rules and constitutions, and a body of norms and practices.[13]

Several of these conglomerates called themselves "nations". The government labeled them "super gangs". On Southside Chicago, groups such as the Black P. Stones, Black Disciples, and Gangster Disciples emerged. The Vice Lords and the Latin Kings organized parts of the city's West Side.[14] Each meso-level nation differed, but it is useful to think of them not as a single corporate structure but as a consortium of semi-autonomous factions with distinct but related rules and organization operating under an umbrella identity, but still managing some success at quelling violent competition between internal factions.[15]

Each of these nations started to colonize and conquer new neighborhoods, especially Chicago's massive housing projects—poor, dense, mainly Black areas with too little state presence. In the 1970s and 80s, as the retail drug market boomed, these housing projects were a natural center for sales, both to local residents but also wealthier outsiders who drove in to get their crack, cocaine, or marijuana.[16]

Competition between nations (and between nations and the police) led to a massive escalation in violence. Most of the nations managed to reduce violence and squabbling between its member gangs on neighboring blocks—a reduction in anarchic competition akin to "civil war". But the confederations never managed to coordinate peace with one another.

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[12]e.g. Thrasher (2013); Hagedorn (2008)

[13]See for example documents collected on the Vice Lords Knox and Papachristos (2002).

[14]Keiser and Keiser (1969); Perkins (1987); Dawley (1992); Knox (1996, 2004); Knox et al. (2018).

[15]See for example Hagedorn (2008). These meso-level groups in turn in turn tried forming larger alliances, such as the Folk Nation (with the Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples at its core), or the People Nation (with the Black P. Stones and the Vice Lords playing central roles).

[16]Venkatesh (2000); Hagedorn (2008)

Violence in Chicago was more "international" in that neighborhood-based confederations competed violently over territory. City-wide homicide rates hovered between 30 and 40 people per 100,000. Rates in the neighborhoods where the confederations fought were an order of magnitude greater. Hence the location of 'Chicago 1980–99" in Table **??**'s "High violence / Competing confederations" tab.

There were attempts to manage this conflict. In the late 1970s and 80s, various confederations attempted to form alliances to reduce fighting, especially in prisons.[17] In 1992, community leaders and rival gang leaders also negotiated a truce in the Cabrini-Green housing projects, which was followed in 1993 by a series of controversial and largely unsuccessful "summits" of gang leaders.[18] Around the same time, Chicago's Italian mob began to counsel the west side's growing number of Latino gangs and nations, helping them form a coordination and bargaining board they called SGD—Spanish Growth and Development.[19] There is limited work on why these truces and "inter-nation" organizations were unsuccessful. In addition to internal challenges (the pressures of illicit economic competition, internal power struggles, and insufficient gang institutionalization and organization) there was little external support. The city government and some civil society organizations were hostile to these alliances, and the authorities later undermined the leaders through mass arrests.

Even if they did not find peace, these meso-level organizations were successful enough that they managed to spread. Imprisoned members began to organize themselves in Illinois prisons. Members seeking safety in other midwestern cities sometimes started local chapters.[20] Some colonizers went further afield. Los Angeles is famous for a long-running rivalry conflict between the Bloods and the Crips. One of the founding factions of the bloods was an offshoot of the Black P. Stones—a gang that originated three blocks south of the University of Chicago.[21]

The city, non-profits, and law enforcement struggled to manage the drug gangs, their "nation-building", and the spike in homicides. By the end of the 1990s, one of the more important policies was a massive crackdown on gang leadership. Ex-gang leaders speak of "getting RICO'ed". The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act of 1970 was a prosecutorial innovation developed to tackle organized crime, especially the U.S. mafia. RICO made it a crime to establish a pattern of corrupt, coercive, illegal, or fraudulent practices.[22] In the 1990s, the authorities began using the law to target drug gangs, especially Chicago's Black nations.[23]

In an elaborate and long lasting kingpin strategy, high and even low-ranking leaders found themselves imprisoned. And when these gangs began exercising control of Illinois prisons and the streets, the government responded by separating and fragmenting influential leaders, often sending them to different states, to curb this prison control. Violence remained high

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[17]The Black P Stones, the Vice Lords, and the Latin Kings formed part of the "People" coalition, for instance, and the Gangster and Black Disciples were core members of the "Folks" coalition.

[18]McCown (2017); Boring (2015)

[19]Hagedorn (2015)

[20]Hagedorn and Macon (1988) is careful to highlight the local origin of many Milwaukee gangs, for example, but notes several of the city's powerful organizations did originate with Chicago-based founders, while others mimicked the organization of Chicago gangs.

[21]streetgangs.com (2024)

[22]Jacobs (2020)

[23]Aspholm (2019)

as late as 2000, but this policy is one of several that marked a new era of crime and violence in the city.

2000–present

From 2000 onwards, Chicago's gangs and violence were shaped by two other forces in addition to this prosecutorial/kingpin strategy. One was the demolition of many huge housing projects and the relocation of thousands of residents all across the city. Suddenly a teenage Vice Lord or a twenty-something middle manager for the Black Disciples could find themselves on the same block, perhaps alongside a displaced Black P. Stone. Alongside the decapitation of the leadership, this led to fragmented and disorganized structures and massive uncertainty.[24]

Another force was the proliferation of drugs and competition in the drug market. While not especially well documented or explained, the past 30 years seems to have seen an increase in the variety of products available, the number of wholesale channels, and the variety of retailers. In addition to drug corners in poorer neighborhoods and a handful of open air markets, consumers could get their products by pickup or delivery through mobile phone and Internet, or from a seller in their middle-income neighborhood or wealthy suburb. That increase in competition and decrease in the concentration of power seems to have led to more competitive markets with much lower margins. Whereas drug gangs were once famously profitable, today the returns are comparable to low wage legal work.[25]

Decapitation, diffusion, and increased competition fragmented Chicago's nations and gangs. The result was hundreds of neighborhood groups, but few use the term "gang" to describe themselves. In Chicago, the term gang typically indicates a degree of hierarchy and institutionalization. As these groups fragmented, they began referring to themselves as "mobs", "crews" and "cliques".[26] These smaller groups often have a "chief" or leader of some kind, but the organizations are much flatter and membership is more informal and diffuse. Young men might find themselves affiliated with a local crew simply because they share the same block or friends, even if they are uninvolved with gang criminal or even social activities. Some group members sell drugs or engage in other crime, and some shoot and engage in violence, but not necessarily all. Shootings are concentrated in a very small proportion of the population.[27]

These crews typically maintained little affiliation with the grand nations. They might belong to a nation in name or tradition, but in practice the ties are typically weak or nonexistent. As a consequence, competition and conflict in this era often occurred between crew and mobs in the same neighborhood—something akin to the more anarchic period before the nations formed.

In this era, violence could still arise from violent competition over drug corners or territory, but three other reasons dominated many incidents.

- *Reactive violence.* Many shootings have their origins in hot-headed, emotional reactions to real and perceived slights. Indeed, "violence interruption" and cognitive behavioral

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[24]Aspholm (2019); Bruhn et al. (2021)

[25]Kapustin et al. (2024)

[26]Blattman (2023)

[27]Papachristos et al. (2015); Bhatt et al. (2024)

interventions were predicted on the short-sighted, automatic nature of many rivalries and reactions. Both try to slow down thinking, weigh the costs and consequences of violent actions, and consider alternatives.[28]

- *Vengeance and score-settling.* Many rivalries are long-running. Crews and mobs may be named after a fallen leader, and members often frame their activities in terms of retribution. Far from being hot-headed, many reprisals take place weeks, months, or years after a previous attack.

- *Reputation management.* Reactive shootings and revenge also have strategic value. If a crew or its members are perceived weak, there's a risk it becoming "open season" on them and their territory. Angry reactions and score-settling and means to signal seriousness and strength.[29]

As a result of these three related drivers of violence, gun violence in this period largely followed a pattern of social contagion. The vast majority of fatal and nonfatal shootings occurred with social networks containing a small fraction of the population, and any exposure to gun violence in one's network dramatically increased the odds of being a victim.[30]

We cannot tie this situation of fragmentation and contagion to either rising or falling levels of violence, however. Rather, in this era Chicago experienced first a sustained decline in violence, followed by a sustained rise.

From 2000 to 2014, homicides declined from a level over 30 per 100,000 to a low of roughly 14 in 2015. Beginning in 2015, however, Chicago saw its homicide rates climb. By 2022, they had reached the same heights of the 1980s and 90s.

The causes of this fall and rise are hotly debated. We can observe a similar trend across many American cities, as well as similar policies. As a consequence, it is difficult to know how much of the decline is due to Chicago's particular circumstances or policies.[31]

Crucially, however, decapitation and fragmentation meant that there were no criminal actors with the organization or influence to contain violence when it did break. An argument can be made that an anarchic situation with hundreds of crews and mobs has the potential to be less violent than warring "nations", but that fragmented groups are also vulnerable to violent spirals. An act of violence can escalate into cycles of retribution for multiple reasons: hot-headed emotional responses, long-simmering desires for vengeance, but also strategic calculations arising from the need to maintain reputation.

There were innumerable policy responses over these two decades, but two broad developments stand out. The first was the development of "outreach" activities by community organizations. Alongside Boston and Los Angeles, Chicago became a leader in experimenting with direct engagement with rival groups. Neighborhood non-profit organizations brought together social workers and activists with older ex-gang members and leaders to develop a package of approaches. In the aftermath of provocations or fighting, they sought to mediating and diffuse active disputes through "violence interruption" and related approaches,

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[28]Butts et al. (2015); Bhatt et al. (2024)

[29]Blattman (2023)

[30]Papachristos et al. (2013); Green et al. (2017)

[31]Sharkey (2018)

showing some success.[32] Summer jobs and other employment programs showed promise as well.[33] More recently jobs programs were combined with psychotherapy and other cognitive behavioral informed approaches.[34] All relied on organizations and people deeply embedded in the community, building local information networks, knowledge and trust.

With fewer kingpins to target, police also shifted tactics. To some extent, Chicago police shifted from a relatively blanket targeting of gangs and leaders to one that focused on drawing red lines (like high homicides) and concentrating attention on the neighborhoods and groups where those lines were crossed—a deterrence strategy sometimes called "focused deterrence" in policing circles, and sometimes called "conditional repression" in more general contexts. We'll return to the suitability and impacts of these approaches below.

3.2 Medellín, Colombia

Overview

Today, Medellin has one of the most hierarchical and well-organized systems of criminal confederations in the hemisphere. What follows summarizes key points from an in-depth study of crime with the collaborators mentioned above.[35]

Most low- and middle-income neighborhoods in Medellin have a neighborhood drug-selling gang called a combo. There are about 400 in all. Combos vary in size and organization, but most have a core of 15 to 50 permanent, salaried members. Most of these members are young men between the ages of 15 and 25, though their leaders are typically older. Combos monopolize local illegal markets, especially retail drug sales and loan-sharking. Many combos also charge protection fees to local businesses and households weekly. While this is sometimes called "extortion" by authorities and disgruntled residents, many combos provide everyday security, dispute resolution, and other governance services, and so view the fee as a tax called a "vacuna". Some residents view their combo as legitimate while others do not.

Most present-day combos have been in operation since the 1990s or 1980s. These organizations initially functioned more like youth social clubs (albeit violent ones), but were not the drug retailing, extortion machines we see today. Local drug dealing was not a significant activity until after 2000. Prior to this, to the extent they engaged in criminal activities, combo members engaged in other crime (such as bank or car theft). Many also evolved local governance and protection roles, working to expel leftist militias affiliated with rural guerrilla, and providing neighborhood security. Over time, many youth in neighborhoods without combos began to organize and imitate more established combos.[36]

Above the combos sit roughly 19 mafia-like organizations colloquially known as *bandas* or *razones*. These are also relatively small organizations of 15 to 50 members. Most have a longstanding relationship with 10 to 25 combos. razones are the wholesale supplier of guns and some criminal contracts to the combos' retail operations. razones provide governance and security for combos, and razón-level decisions to engage in war or peace shape city-wide

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[32]e.g. Butts et al. (2015)

[33]Heller (2014)

[34]Heller et al. (2017); Bhatt et al. (2024)

[35]For details see Blattman et al. (2025) and Blattman et al. (2024)

[36]Martin (2012)

conflict.

Most razones trace their beginnings to one of the major armed organizations and international drug trafficking organizations present in the 1980s and 1990s: the Medellín Cartel led by Pablo Escobar; its rival organization called los PEPEs (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar); or the paramilitary and guerrilla groups that arose as a consequence of the civil war.

razones have several origins. Some emerged in the 1990s as rivals to Pablo Escobar and his Medellin Cartel. Some began as combos, and through military success or began to control other neighborhoods and combos. In other cases razones began as paramilitary organizations that arose as a response to leftist guerrilla and militia movements in certain Medellín neighborhoods. In all cases, they originated as neighborhood-based organizations that over time managed to absorb or forcefully take over multiple other combos, and expand revenue streams beyond the neighborhood. This consolidation of power and neighborhood control and local rents only began in the 2000s, however. Prior to this, the organizations were more focused on international trafficking,

2000–08

This paper focuses on the period from 2000 onward, when Medellin's criminal organizations began to turn away from international drug trafficking and focus on local organization and rents. There are several reasons they shifted focus. One was increased concerns with arrest and (later) extradition to the United States. Another was increased competition from other trafficking organizations with better routes or connections. Finally, Medellin is a relatively wealthy city, and both combos and razones realized they could earn significant profits by developing local drug trades, protection systems, money-lending, money laundering, and other business.

After Pablo Escobar was killed in 1993 by police, his Medellin Cartel was succeeded by a rival organization of razones that called themselves *La Oficina*. La Oficina's key figure—alias "Don Berna"—gathered and organized the city's razones and combos into a hierarchical system with him at the head.[37]

One of Don Berna's accomplishments was to establish a more uniform combo management model. Under his rule, he encouraged new combos to develop in neighborhoods without combo control. He encouraged them to form more uniform organizations, hierarchies led by *coordinadores*. He also helped nascent versions of razones consolidate their control over contiguous combos into large urban zones of control.

Another accomplishment was to establish rules of behavior to minimize conflict and maximize drug profits. He encouraged combos to develop neighborhood loyalty and protection. He and other criminal leaders also forbade the killing of police or other criminals without permission from superiors. Under Berna's rule, homicides fell from a high of 180 per 100,000 people in 2002 to 34 by 2007. This peace (and ensuing profitability) was one of the principal incentives for other criminal organizations to accede to Berna's monopoly.

Finally, Berna helped to establish the current-day wholesale-retail drug relationship between razones and combos. By 2010 there was a relatively robust market for local cocaine, marijuana, and synthetics.

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[37]This history is based largely on notes and fieldwork conducted by Blattman et al. (2024), but see also Crime (2024b) for a similar overview of La Oficina.

Importantly, Don Berna and other leaders did much of this organizing prison. Arrested in 2005, like many other Medellin criminal leaders he would continue to direct street operations through subordinates.

The local state facilitated Don Berna's and La Oficina's criminal control in return for a measure of peace. Negotiations between the national government and paramilitary forces (many of whom had ties to La Oficina) facilitated the interaction between Medellín's criminal groups and the local government. This was particularly true in the period 2004-2007, during the term of Mayor Sergio Fajardo, a period known as *Donbernabilidad.*

2008–13

The national government and Fajardo's successor as mayor took a dimmer view of Donbernabilidad, and refused to either directly or indirectly support La Oficina's system of criminal control (and relative peace). In 2008, the government extradited Don Berna to the United States to face drug trafficking charges. This ended Berna's ability to influence events and destabilized the carefully managed system.

Don Berna's extradition prompted a brutal war of succession. Two factions emerged behind two competing razón leaders, "Sebas" and "Valenciano". They mobilized combos in their respective alliances to fight. The next four years featured assassinations, retaliatory killings, and violent clashes as Medellin became among the most violent places in the world. Homicide rates tripled to 94 by 2008.

Eventually, Valenciano was captured by Colombian authorities, leaving Sebastian the victor and leader of a weakened and fractured Oficina. There are indications that Sebastian had tacit support from various government and law enforcement officials, and this facilitated his rise. Even if true, once again state opinion was divided. He was arrested in 2012, held away from Medellin, and extradited to the U.S. in 2013. La Oficina was leaderless again.

Different arms of the state played multiple roles during this period of intense violence. The Mayor, the Colombian national police, and the military all attempted to crack down on the combos and razones in response to the violence. Police and military presence was heaviest in the most violent neighborhoods, though there was no explicit policy of conditional repression of violence. As La Oficina leaders were arrested, the member razones and combos were further fragmented, weakened, and disorganized. State crackdowns tended to favor Sebastian's alliance, though most criminal organizations suffered arrests and disruptions and seizures, and lost the invisibility that had been their shield.

At the same time, the state attempted to maintain informal communication channels through intermediaries. Various peace and reconciliation programs, youth engagement and economic programs (such as "Fuerza Joven") were used to maintain communication and as a mechanism to start dialogue or foster intermediaries.

2013–present

The war and La Oficina's weakness led an outside criminal cartel, the *Clan de Golfo* (or *Urabenos*) to gain a foothold in the city.[38]

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[38]In 2012, the conflict between the Sebastian and Valenciano factions was losing intensity. The entry of the Clan de Golfo re-inflamed the fighting as began warring with combos from Sebastian's winning faction.

After four years of war, however, there was little appetite for more fighting. In 2013, the razones in La Oficina and those in alliance with the Clan de Golfo negotiated a peace sometimes called *El Pacto del Fusil* ("The Pact of the Machine Gun"). La Oficina was no longer an autocratic system under the control of a powerful monopolist like Don Berna. Rather, it was a confederation of razones operating in two loose alliances corresponding to the old Oficina and the Clan de Golfo allies. Violence immediately plunged to historically low levels.

There is little indication that the state played a direct or major role in El Pacto del Fusil. Rather, the main motivation for the peace accord seems to have been the criminal groups' to get back to business. The razones and La Oficina have coordinated to sell drugs at near-monopolistic prices, capturing enormous rents. Other illicit business lines, including the roughly 150,000 vacuna payments collected weekly, add to this profitability. Finally, in addition to criminal business incentives, there are numerous unverified accounts of pressure or influence from "invisible" legal businesspersons interested in getting back to business as well.

How did the new Oficina—an oligopoly of nearly 20 razones—maintain peace for more than a decade? Arguably the most important factor was criminal interests and institutions. Don Berna had begun to establish rules and norms and organizations that could reduce violent competition between competing combos and razones. From 2013 onward, the oligopoly of razones continued to develop informal institutions and practices that would drive homicides rates steadily lower every year, to the level of 12 per 100,000 in 2023. They established better means of communication. They forbade one another from stealing another razón's combo without permission from above. And they established informal governing boards to resolve disputes and balance a combo or razón's territory and rents to their relative power.

At the same time, various arms of the government facilitated this peace in several ways:

- Generally speaking, there has been little direct or secret negotiation. The recent *Paz Total* process is an exception, where subsets of La Oficina are engaged with civil society members in talks ostensibly to normalize relations with powerful razón leaders in prison. In terms of maintaining peace and managing criminal incentives, this process is relatively minor compared to some of the more indirect state activities.

- As a result of aggressively trying to arrest and imprison leaders, the state has also de facto adopted a policy of "keeping the heads together" in prison. Some prisons have a specialized wing for middle and high-ranking leaders, where conditions are poor but not as crowded or as unpleasant as in the general population. State control over prison is sufficient to make governing the street difficult from prison, but not impossible, and most leaders continue to direct their organizations strategically from behind bars.

  As discussed below, imprisonment could facilitate criminal organization and negotiation in a few ways.[39]. It may lengthen leaders' time horizons. Moreover, the fact that leaders from opposing groups can find themselves on the same *patio* as a rival or a close confederate of theirs facilitates and incentivizes communication.

  When the peace has grown fragile, there is at least one instance of the state facilitating negotiation. In 2019, violence rose in Medellin as the razones allowed a factional dispute

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[39]See Section **??**

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to play itself out. Imprisoned Oficina leaders across the country found themselves transferred temporarily to a central prison in Medellin to be held together, and within weeks the city's homicide rate had returned to its normal, relatively low level. [40] It is unclear what state agents brought about the gathering, but the intent seems clear.

Such instances may be exceptional, however. It is unclear that the policy of keeping the heads together is purposeful. The national government may have used prison conditions and early release as incentives for some leaders to cooperate and keep peace on the streets, but these are difficult to document. Many of the potential benefits of imprisoning leaders are speculative, often accidental, and must be weighed against the cost of increased criminal organization and control.

- Local police, prosecutors, and the Mayor's office also have followed (to some degree) a policy of conditional repression—directing raids, investigations, seizures, and arrests at the more violent gangs. There are many competing state actors and not all repress conditionally. At times aggressive arrests have endangered the peace. But generally speaking the state appears to have been careful not to destabilize the city. One example is the tenure of Federico Gutierrez 2016-19, which featured a mix of negotiations, unconditional crackdowns, and later more careful conditional repression.

- Policies varied from government to government, however. The city government between 2012-2015, the mayoralty of Anibal Gaviria, was timid and permissive in its dealing with criminal groups. La Oficina managed its initial peace without direct state efforts.

3.3 San Salvador, El Salvador

Like Medellín and Chicago, El Salvador evolved a system of micro-level gangs coordinated to varying degrees by meso-level actors, who were mostly focused on local rents and control rather than international trafficking. But the case differs in a few important respects: a dependence on extortion revenues rather than drug sales, an inability of the meso-level to self-regulate local violence, and a state with lower law enforcement capacity.

1990–2019

El Salvador's system of urban organized crime began, like so many places, in the 1980s and 1990s with fragmented turf-based youth gangs known as *clicas* and *maras*. These groups tended to be young, informal, nonhierarchical, and arguably more social than criminal organizations.[41]

Beginning in the mid-1990s, two groups—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang)—began consolidating clicas and expanding turf control under their factional brands.[42] Barrio 18 later fractured around 2005 into two rival confederations known

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[40]Based on interviews collected for Blattman et al. (2024).

[41]Wolf (2011); Cruz (2009)

[42]Other groups such as the Maquina and Mao Mao consolidated and persisted but were much less influential and much less of a security threat, and probably composed less than 10–15 percent of clica members from the late 1990s onwards Wolf (2011); Cruz (2009).

as the *Revolucionarios* and (Revolutionaries) and the *Sureños* (Southerners), making for three major meso-level organizations.[43]

Whereas Chicago and Medellín's meso-level evolved primarily from local actors, however, MS-13 and Barrio 18 partly trace their origins to outside criminal organizations. Many of the early organizers and leaders were Los Angeles gang members deported to El Salvador in the mid 1990s.[44] Coming from a more developed criminal landscape, they were more organized and had more sophisticated weapons and lifestyles than the country's existing clicas.

It would be a mistake to characterize MS-13 or Barrio 18 as foreign, however. The vast majority of MS-13 and Barrio 18 members were and are Salvadoran-born. The organizational seeds, arms, and branding came from abroad. All were key to their success. Some of MS-13 and Barrio 18's growth and consolidation involved expansion and violent takeovers. But the organization, weapons, and cultural style of the formerly American gangs were appealing to existing clicas and new youths. This facilitated their expansion.[45]

El Salvador's micro-level clicas and meso-level confederations grew more sophisticated over time, partly in response to competition between one another, and partly as a strategic response to state repression in the 2000s. For instance, through the 2000s, most member clicas developed more sophisticated initiation rites, structures, and systems of rules for members. Many also increased their degree of territorial control, with defined borders, checkpoints, and control over residents.[46] Mass incarceration and growing control of prisons (discussed below) also seems to have facilitated new franchises, recruitment, and each meso-level group's national coordination.[47]

Even after years of maturation and growth, however, neither MS-13 nor the Barrio 18 factions should be viewed as integrated, consolidated organizations. Rather, they are confederations of reasonably autonomous cliques who share a brand name and—especially in the case of MS-13—have developed coordinating and decision-making bodies.[48]

As the gangs have consolidated under these meso-level organizations and brands, gang violence became more inter-factional. From 2000 onwards, it seems that violence levels varied based on the degree to which the state accommodated or repressed the gangs, or the extent to which the meso-level factions were able to contain warfare between themselves. Interestingly, the early period of consolidation also coincided with a decline in violence. Homicide rates fell from 138 per 100,000 in 1994 to roughly 36 by 2001–03, despite the rising number of firearms.[49] Whether consolidation contributed to the 1994–2003 fall in violence is hard to

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[43]Cruz et al. (2017)

[44]See Wolf (2011); Melnikov et al. (2024). As both groups appear to have had a foothold prior to the escalation of deportations in 1996, the early organizers may also have arrived from Los Angeles by other means.

[45]Wolf (2011); Cruz et al. (2017)

[46]Moncada (2022); Nuño and Maguire (2023); Melnikov et al. (2024)

[47]Lessing (2016); Cruz (2009)

[48]According to Cruz (2009) and especially Cruz et al. (2017), some clicas have managed to expand beyond their original neighborhood and control a collection of franchises they call a *sectores*. There are also regional-level *programas* and a national *ranfla* composed of leaders who coordinate the entire structure. But it seems that clicas and sectores are still relatively autonomous. Barrio 18 groups are apparently less structured. Some experts reported regional "tribus" that help to coordinate neighborhood groups, but there does not appear to be a hierarchical decision-making body. And while there are MS-13 and Barrio 18 factions across the U.S. and Central America, formal coordination across borders appears limited.

[49]See Cruz (Cruz). As these are national figures, however, rates in the main metropolitan areas is likely

say, however. There are limited data and analysis on this period. There were also multiple sources of violence in the post-civil war period, and gangs were not necessarily the most important.

Finally, one essential distinguishing feature from Chicago and Medellín is the source of criminal revenues. In most cases, a clica's main source of income is pervasive extortion. Clicas used their territorial control and threats of violence to extract large sums from transport companies, distributors, shops, and residents.[50] They call this *la renta*. Members also profited from kickbacks from goods sold on their turf and also from property crime.

El Salvador is a lower-middle income country, and the clicas were centered in relatively poor neighborhoods. Compared to gangs in Medellín or Chicago, these are not highly lucrative enterprises. Indeed, what limited data exists sugests that low and middle raking members tended to be paid very poorly.[51]

Crucially, El Salvador was never a significant area for the transshipment of drugs, nor did it develop a significant local retail drug market.[52] Some clicacas dealt drugs directly while many collected renta from dealers rather than selling themselves.[53] In any event, drug sales are not a major source of income for most clicas.

State policy Broadly speaking, before 2000, the state broadly neglected the growth of gangs, paying attention to other post-war issues. As the influence and violence of criminality grew, however, public demands grew to address gang violence, extortion, and oppression. From 2000–20, successive administrations tried many strategies. Each struggled with a relatively low-capacity security apparatus, and each encountered an enthusiasm for repressive polices from the general public, from inside the security forces, and from U.S. law enforcement.

The years 2000 until at least 2006 were notorious for a relatively indiscriminate, heavy-handed *mano dura* approach. Police and military street patrols, gang sweeps, and increasingly larger mass arrests had the aim of weakening or dismantling the micro and meso-level groups, as well as cut down on violent crime and homicide. This approach began at least as early as 2000, but was formalized and greatly intensified in 2003, likely as a vote-getting strategy for the 2004 elections.

El Salvador was hardly the only country to pursue a policy of mass arrest. Chicago, as described above, launched its RICO-centered policy of targeting leaders around the same time. Chicago, New York, and other American cities also pursued "zero tolerance" policing of infractions small and large. U.S. law enforcement agencies promoted these strategies abroad. Nonetheless, by design or circumstance, the approach in El Salvador was for more sweeping,

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to have been much higher. Note, however, that there is significant disagreement on the involvement of gangs given that the vast majority of murders had unknown perpetrators and investigations are limited Wolf (2011).

[50]Moncada (2022); Brown et al. (2024); Melnikov et al. (2024)

[51]Melnikov et al. (2024)

[52]Central America cocaine trafficking is largely controlled by Colombian and Mexican cartels. Salvadoran gangs and members appear to provide some logistical or security support, but shipments tend to pass through the country without being unpacked, transferred or distributed. What's more, major routes do not appear to pass through El Salvador Wolf (2011).

[53]Papadovassilakis (2023)

indiscriminate, and extralegal than these American examples. For a time, the constitutional rights of arrestees were even suspended in order to facilitate sweeps and avoid trials.[54]

While persistently popular at the polls, many analysts argue that El Salvador's approach to mano dura backfired in several respects.

- First, there was no drop in homicides. If anything, lethal violence rose as due to police–gang conflict and the destabilization of gang structures and leadership—perhaps the most common reaction to indiscriminate repression of criminal organizations.[55]

- Second, competitive pressures from the state probably contributed to the increased organization and professionalization of the clicas.[56]

- Third, the policy increased MS-13 and Barrio 18's control of prisons, and thereby enhanced their control of the street and clicas.[57] The meso-level federations already possessed a degree of prison control prior to mano dura. Mass incarceration of gang members sharply increased the population of prisoners under their control, including (as a result of indiscriminate sweeps) a large number of non-gang members. Both meso- and micro level sophistication and organization increased over the 2000s.[58]

- Finally, all of the above developments facilitated and incentivized the clicas to increase their extortion demands, if only to support their imprisoned colleagues.[59].

In the late 2000s, as the problems with mano dura became clear, the government shifted its law enforcement focus towards the investigation of influential criminal leaders and the organized structures. While suppression polices were still common, the state improved its legal and investigative system somewhat, and made some attempts at reintegrative polices.[60]

From at least 2011 until 2014 the government engaged in a brief, controversial effort to broker and maintain a ceasefire between the three major meso-level factions. On the positive side, homicides halved when the truce took hold.[61] On the negative side, some scholars have argued that the truce allowed MS-13 and Barrio 18 leaders to solidify control over the street and their own structures.[62]

The truce ultimately collapsed in the face of public opposition, politicking, and legal challenges. By 2014 homicides climbed to 68 per 100,000. The government resumed crack-dows in 2015 and homicides climbed over 100 in 2015—making El Salvador the most violent country in the world.[63]

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[54]Hume (2007); Bruneau (2011); Wolf (2012); Lessing (2016)

[55]Lessing (2017)

[56]Wolf (2011); Cruz (2009); Serrano (2021); Aguilar (2007)

[57]Lessing (2016); Wolf (2012)

[58]MS-13 and Barrio 18 demonstrated this power in 2010 when imprisoned leaders helped induce a transportation strike in order to demand better prison conditions and the veto of an anti-gang law Lessing (2016).

[59]Wolf (2011)

[60]Bruneau (2011); Cruz (2011)

[61]Cruz (2019)

[62]Moncada (2022)

[63]Cruz (2019); Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024)

The contrast to how Colombian authorities incentivized a criminal peace is stark. The negotiations began in secret at least as early as 2011, with the government offering improvements in prison conditions and cash payments to gangs, potentially among other incentives. As in Medellín, moreover, the gangs also had a natural interest in avoiding war. Not only is conflict costly and risky to the meso- and micro-level organizations, but peace negotiations can also strengthen the influence of meso-level organizations over their micro-level member groups.[64]

Nonetheless, the truce was short-lived for a variety of reasons. As we know from conflict mediation in general, these agreements are often difficult to maintain, especially when there are multiple actors.[65] The truce also proved to be highly unpopular with the public when it was exposed by journalists in 2012. Politicians alternately endorsed and distanced themselves from the policy (often both, depending on the circumstances). After the truce collapsed, some of the government officials who facilitated the negotiations were indicted and jailed.[66]

2019–present

The next high-profile policy in El Salvador—perhaps its most notorious to date—came in 2021, with a return to the mano dura approach, this time with starkly different results. President Nayib Bukele and the Legislative Assembly declared a state of exception that suspended due process. They then embarked on an unprecedented crackdown of gang leaders and members—mass arrests, the construction of a specialized prison for detainees, at the widely-publicized cost of overcrowding, degenerate conditions, and a large number of non-gang members arrested and detained.

The policy is widely credited for reducing violence. The registered homicide rate dropped from 18 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 8 in 2022 and an incredible 2.4 (according to official statistics) in 2023.[67] The results are an amazing contrast to the widespread view that repressive policies are the resort of politicians who do not understand criminal dynamics, and states that do not have the capacity to implement more sophisticated and effective strategies .[68].

The first sign that there is more to the story is the fact that the six years before the state of exception and mano dura witnessed a much more dramatic fall in violence, from over 100 in 2015 to 51 in 2018, 36 in 2019 and 20 in 2020. Clearly there is much more to the story. This pre-mano dura change and its causes receive much less attention.

One source of the pre-crackdown homicide decline was a secretive truce with between Bukele's administration and imprisoned MS-13 and Barrio 18 top leadership, the *ranflas*. Rank and file on the street refrained from violence and imprisoned leaders received better conditions and, in some cases, protection from extradition and early release.[69] The post-crackdown decline in violence is only a third of the decline brought about in this period of truce.

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[64]Blattman (2023)

[65]Blattman (2023)

[66]See Cruz (2019); Cruz et al. (2017)

[67]Crime (2024a)

[68]Hume (2007)

[69]Dudley (2020); Papadovassilakis (2023); Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024)

The truce may have facilitated the subsequent crackdown, however. One argument is that, as in the past, the truce helped the ranflas consolidate power. That also made the structures easier to isolate and effectively decapitate, fragmenting the gangs and making coordination and retaliation difficult.Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024); Meléndez-Sánchez and Winter (2024) New prisons that could cut off leadership from their gangs may have played a role (unlike in Medellín, where this control over the streets was tolerated). While this decapitation argument is surely relevant, fragmented criminal organizations are not always associated with lower violence, and so this is unlikely to be a full explanation.

A further possibility is that the government acted so swiftly and intensively that the gangs were effectively caught off guard. The broad alignment of the entire security and justice sector around the policy of mass arrest and suspension of due process aided that intensity.[70] Moreover, when gangs briefly broke the truce in 2020 and 2021, the state responded in a tit-for-tat repressive manner, after which violence subsided. It is possible that the gangs mistook Bukele's grand crackdown for a "tat" and stood down for long enough to be vulnerable.[71] While also plausible, the mass imprisonment took over a year to complete, and so the fact that gangs continued to lie low for months is unusual.

Very importantly, one facet that is surely important is the lack of a developed drug market. If there hundreds of thousands of users and addicts, those customers would still be demanding what the clicas sold in the weeks and months after mass arrest. New actors would have emerged to supply. But few if any residents and businesses demanded the "protection" the clicas provided in return for extractive rentas.

A final consideration is that the answer to "is Bukele's policy effective" may still be "too soon to say". Previous mass incarcerations have often strengthened rather than weakened prison gang control, especially in lower-capacity systems. And a third of MS-13 and Barrio 18 membership is still at large.[72]

3.4 Parallels to other cases

It is worth noting some of the parallels and differences we observe in other important cases of organized and disorganized crime.

3.4.1 New York, USA

New York is relevant first for its organized crime syndicates and the city's central role in the fight against *Cosa Nostra*—the Italian-American mob. This was a fight that was for the most part won on two fronts. First, government policy and changing markets slowly undermined their main sources of revenue. Second, the organizations fell victim to a long, careful, and sustained law enforcement effort led by the federal government.

New York is also relevant for a (mostly unrelated) decline in fragmented street crime and violence, a decline widely attributed in part to more (and more effective) policing, but where broader array of community and non-governmental responses probably played a role.

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[70]Papadovassilakis (2023)
[71]Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024)
[72]Papadovassilakis (2023)

The rise and decline of Cosa Nostra The first half of the 20th century saw Italian-American mafia organizations rise—in part to fill a black market for alcohol, gambling, and sex, and in part due to decades of neglect from law enforcement. From the 1920s until the 1970s, Italian-American mafias in New York consolidated their control over a range of illicit businesses—labor racketeering, gambling and numbers games, prostitution and pornography, the control and extortion of legal markets, and (to some degree) drug-selling. They were given their greatest boost by national alcohol prohibition in 1919, but leveraged their resources and organizational capital to dominate these other criminal markets after alcohol was legalized again in 1933.[73]

Known collectively as the Cosa Nostra ("our thing"), at least 20 U.S. cities possessed Italian-American mafia groups. Typically, each city was organized under a single "family". Like many meso-level organizations, however, Cosa Nostra families are more akin to confederations heavily influenced by a single leader, rather than a bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations. Other than the "open cities" of Miami and Las Vegas, most U.S. cities had a single family. New York was notable for having five main families who coordinated informally with one another, avoiding war between one another for decades.[74]

Authorities did little to tackle these crime families until the 1970s. The FBI was more concerned with national security and counter-espionage under J. Edgar Hoover's tenure, 1924–72. Meanwhile, local authorities were poorly equipped to tackle the rackets and were easily corrupted or threatened. Local, state and federal agencies also tended to be rivalrous rather than cooperative.

In the 1970s and 80s, however, Presidents Nixon and Reagan (among other national leaders) made countering organized crime a major focus of the FBI and Department of Justice (DOJ). These federal agencies dramatically intensified their intelligence gathering, investigation, and prosecution. They established specialized "strike forces" that combined federal prosecutors along with state and local authorities. Congress also passed several important laws that facilitated evidence-gathering and prosecution, including: electronic wire tapping; the RICO Act (criminalizing racketeering enterprises); forfeiture acts to seize criminal assets and businesses; and establishing the witness protection program. Local authorities in New York increased their intelligence activities and prosecution. They also adopted public bidding and business licensing strategies that would bar Cosa Nostra-captured organizations from contracts and strategic sites.[75]

This legalistic approach to taking down the mob took years to produce results. Prosecutors were slow to adopt RICO, and it was only a decade after its passing that it because the routine tool to target mafia leaders. The strike forces also took years to overcome push-back and jurisdictional disputes from local authorities, and to build effective cases.

At the same time, like much of the Cosa Nostra, New York's five families saw a decline in the traditional rents and control. The decline of urban political machines loosened mafia control over New York elections and institutions. The legalization of gambling and lotteries undermined their numbers games, and the decline of unions reduced the returns from labor racketeering. The prostitution and pornography markets changed in ways that made it

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[73]Raab (2016)

[74]Raab (2016); Jacobs (2020)

[75]Jacobs et al. (1994); Jacobs (2020)

harder to control (something that the Internet later accelerated). In other markets, such as drug-selling, the families faced increased competition, new criminal groups, and so the Cosa Nostra were never able to dominate and organize the market as they had with gambling or labor racketeering. Many observers attribute the weakening and shrinking of of Cosa Nostra, and the success of the prosecutorial strategy, to this decline in the organization's criminal rents.[76] There is no way to evaluate these claims, but it seems highly plausible that a more robust Cosa Nostra with enormous drug-selling or other profits would have been more difficult to tackle.

The rise and decline of street crime and violence   Events in New York City resemble a broad national U.S. pattern: a rise in crime and violence from the 1960s to the 1970s, relatively high levels of crime and violence until the 1980s, and then a sustained decline from the late 1980s through the mid 2010s. By some measures, 2014 was the least violent year in American history.[77] Among other large U.S. cities, however, New York stands out for an unusually large and sustained decrease in crime and violence.

This has made New York and its approach a model for other cities worldwide. But is it the right model, and do we understand it correctly? Frank Zimring, in his book on New York's crime decline, regrets that the city's experience "has been condensed into a sound bite in which a heroic mayor and aggressive police created a zero tolerance law enforcement regime that drove crime rates down in the 1990s."[78]

Most analysts agree that changes in policing were an essential part of the decline in crime in the U.S. generally, and New York City in particular. New York began growing its police force in the late 1980s and early 1990s—both street patrols but also detectives and investigative capacity. Across U.S. cities, an increase in the size of the police is associated with lower crime, with especially large effects on murder, robbery, and motor vehicle theft.[79] In addition to having more officers, New York's police department increased its top down control, and shifted towards more data-driven crime analysis and management. It also changed its priorities, targeting open drug sales and trying to remove guns from the street. Finally, police embarked on new, more targeted policies, including a focus on the highest crime areas ("hot spots policing") and also more aggressive "preventative" policing approaches—including stop and frisks, and arrests for minor offenses such as marijuana prevention.[80] There were also several other forces at work, including an expansion of private security guards, of public surveillance, and a tremendous increase in incarceration. A range of community actors also began to develop counter-violence programming in their neighborhoods.

With so many shifts in policing and policy, it is difficult to apportion credit to any one change. Analyses across many U.S. cities, however, provide reasonable support for more targeted and focused approaches that direct police resources to the highest crime people, places, and behaviors.[81] More aggressive approaches—zero tolerance policing and mass incarceration—have the weakest evidence base, but arguably contributed to the crime

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[76] Kroger (2008); Jacobs (2020)

[77] Zimring (2011); Sharkey (2018)

[78] Zimring (2011)

[79] Chalfin and McCrary (2017, 2018)

[80] Zimring (2011); Sharkey (2018)

[81] Chalfin and McCrary (2017); Abt (2019)

and violence decline as well.[82] We return to these place-based approaches—both by police and community organizations—in Section **??** below.

The nature of crime in New York City is important to understanding the success of this broad set of societal responses. Most of all, from the 1960s onwards, the city's crime and violence has been more atomized and its gangs smaller and more fragmented than cities such as Chicago. Unlike other meso-level confederations we have seen, New York's five families never tried to organize and integrate the city's full micro-level organizations.[83] Nor did other ethnic "supergangs" emerge to organize the city's micro level. Thus, when the cocaine and crack boom arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, the gangs and crews that took it up did not have the same neighborhood roots or inter-gang institutions as other cities.[84] As we will see, the entire evidence base for more focused and targeted approaches comes from mostly U.S. and other OECD cities with relatively atomized, fragmented criminal structures.

3.4.2 Bogotá, Colombia

What makes Bogotá an important case is that, like other major cities (such as Santiago or Lima) the city has recently undergone a frightening shift from a system of relatively atomized and non-violent crime to one where micro- and meso-level gangs are moving in from outside and bringing extortion, loansharking, microtrafficking, and violence with them. Bogotá's groups are not focused on international smuggling of drugs, nor are they terribly well organized yet. Rather, like Medellín's early combos and El Salvador's nascent clicas, the city's emerging groups seem focused on developing local rents and neighborhood control. These groups are still fledgling, however, and their entrenchment and organization should not be exaggerated.

Before 2015, Bogotá's violent crime rates were low, and most violent and property crimes were committed by individuals or small bands of professional robbers. There was relatively modest street gang presence and microtrafficking.[85]

In the mid-2010s, factions connected to Medellín-area razones began to colonize several poor, peripheral Bogotá neighborhoods. Most prominent was a meso-level group called El Mesa. El Mesa began as a small neighborhood combo in Bello (a municipality just to the north of Medellin) but by the 2010s El Mesa had not only grown to become one of the most powerful conglamorates in the Medellin area, but had begun to colonize other cities. As early as 2018 they had established extortion, loansharking, and drug selling businesses in

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[82]At the same time, even opponents of mass incarceration acknowledge that incapacitating offenders played some role in the decline of crime and violence, although these benefits are likely to be diminishing and have other obvious disadvantages. See for example King et al. (2005); wes (2014); Chalfin and McCrary (2017).

[83]New York's five families did try to monopolize their labor, gambling, and other rackets, including regulating and demanding tribute from Jewish, Black and other ethnic gangs. More integration and hierarchy than this may have been impeded by an ethnocentrism that emphasized doing business with those of Italian (or even Sicilian) heritage. Later, the drug market was arguably too large and competitive, and the mafia families may too slow to enter, for the five families to control the narcotics market.

[84]Hagedorn (2008)

[85]See Blattman et al. (2021) for an overall picture of crime patterns in 2015–2017. Two local groups, known as the Camilos and the Aguaceros, were the largest microtraffickers but their control of neighborhoods was limited (Manjarrés, 2022). One notable exception was a central location–the "Bronx"—that authirities dismantled in 2016.

the capital.[86]

This same period saw Venezuelan migration to Bogotá explode. A small number of these migrants were members of a Venezuelan organized criminal confederation called *El Tren de Aragua*. An investigative report by Insight Crime described three stages of the group's evolution in Bogotá: (1) An exploration phase where small cells opportunistically facilitate the flow of migration or victimize vulnerable migrants; (2) A penetration phase where the cells expanded into other criminal markets, such as loan sharking, retail drug sales, protection, and so forth; and (3) A consolidation phase where they increase control over neighborhoods, attempt to corrupt local politicians and police, and begin to recruit, engage, and merge with other local criminal actors. The report recounts a similar process in several other Colombian, Peruvian, and Chilean cities.[87]

We should be careful not to exaggerate the degree of consolidatiwhen it comes to the ne actors from Medellin and Venezuela, the Bogotá cells might be growing but they appear to be small, semi-autonomous, and operating under the brand of one of the meso-level factions.[88] There is no evidence that a powerful outside organizations are orchestrating a takeover of the city. Nonetheless, violence has increased. Some of these reflect competition and territorial disputes between various local clicas—the pre-existing local microtraffickers (the Camilos and the Aguaceros), El Mesa, Tren de Aragua, and interfactional strife between Venezuelan groups. Some of the violence and instability arises from police actions against these groups, which can heighten factional fighting and power struggles.[89] But there is relatively limited public information or intelligence, and the scope and nature of the problem is poorly understood.

The parallels to the early establishment of MS-13 and Barrio 18 are obviously concerning. Outside organizations bring all the advantages of a franchise—a frightening brand, access to weapons, managerial capital, a nascent source of rents—to poor and marginalized groups and neighborhoods with weak existing criminal organization. The differences are also important—a more stable and higher-capacity state and fewer fledgling gangs to co-opt work against gang expansion. But a wealthier market for drug-selling and other criminal rents could work for the entrenchment of outside groups.

3.4.3 Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2015–present

The evolution of gangs and violence in Haiti has several parallels to the development of urban criminal systems we have seen in some of the other cases. Of course, there are important differences. For instance, many gangs in Port-au-Prince (known as *bandi* or bandits) began as small, relatively unstructured actors dependent on politicians for patronage. Historically, these criminal and paramilitary actors surrounded political leaders rather than territories, with many members and leaders originating in armed forces and political parties. Over the last decade, however, these groups become more autonomous, better armed, and more organized, as well as spreading to urban peripheries and rural areas.[90] Other differences

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[86]Matta Colorado (2018)

[87]Crime (2023b)

[88]Cardenas (2023); Navarrete (2019)

[89]Manjarrés (2022); Castrellon and Alvarez (html)

[90]Cockayne (2014); GIATOC (2022); Grandmaison et al. (2024)

from other cities in the region include relatively low levels of state capacity, a thinly-spread and widely-corrupted national police force, and in March 2024, the collapse of government control.[91]

Nonetheless, Haiti's last decade exhibits some familiar patterns. First, meso-level groups seem to have expanded and consolidated control of territory. They have also begun to develop alliances and confederations to reduce competition and violence. Estimates vary, but there are currently roughly 200 gangs in greater Port-au-Prince. Most appear small, poor and disorganized, but a handful of larger and powerful groups have emerged and claim control over large neighborhoods.[92] These groups have proclaimed two main coalitions—the G9 and the G-Pèp (G-People) alliances.

Second, one of the main forces driving gangs and alliances to organize and cohere is violent conflict between competing factions. If the other cases are any guide, any competition from authorities (foreign or domestic) could increase these incentives to become more hierarchical and controlled, and eliminate the weakest groups.

Third, while there are indications of increasing hierarchy and organization,[93] these meso-level groups and confederations are nascent enough that they are potentially still weak. The intense infighting that compels many gangs to organize is relatively recent, and state repression has been weak.[94] The cohesion and organization of both micro- and meso-level groups is easily exaggerated. This is one purpose of branding—it can enhance the appearance of organization and control. Successful branding may also help meso-level groups and alliances attract and consolidate member groups.

Fourth, like the case of El Salvador, their rents appear limited. There is a limited local drug market, perhaps because of the poverty of the population. When it comes to international drug trafficking, Haiti has been a minor transit hub (at least so far). As a result, their main sources of rents are diverse but predatory: neighborhood extortion, robbery and kidnapping, and charging for access to trade, transport, utilities, and markets.[95]

Fifth, Non-state extortion, fees, and taxation are typically highly unpopular. And unlike Medellín or other metropolises, Haiti's gangs seem to be providing little in the way of governance.[96] Indeed, reports suggest large scale violence against civilians, looting of businesses, and burning of houses.[97] The one potentially enduring source of "demand" for gang services could come from political elites. Should the situation stabilize, and gangs be brought under control, politicians could be an enduring source of support for consolidated gangs—something that undermined the operational success of previous foreign missions in

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[91]Rios and Seelke (2024)

[92]Note, however, that these gangs are extremely heterogeneous in structure, organization, and leadership. What's more, the degree of micro-level organisation underneath these meso-level organizations is unclear (Da Rin, 2024). If we take a group such as Delmas 6, led by Jimmy Cherize (notoriously known as Barbeque) it is unclear the degree to which Delmas 6 is locally rooted in its claimed territory, whether it has amalgamated or unified local youth gangs, or is more of an outside colonizing force.

[93]Grandmaison et al. (2024)

[94]Da Rin (2024)

[95]GIATOC (2022); Da Rin (2024)

[96]Da Rin (2024)

[97]UNHCHR (2024); Peralta and Rascoe (2024)

curbing gangs and violence.[98].

4   Implications for policy

In 2016, a new mayoral administration in Bogotá used its first 100 days in office to launch a U.S.-style "place-based" approach to crime reduction. They identified thousands of high-crime blocks, then reorganized existing police and city services to concentrate patrols and street cleanup on these hot spots. Over the following months, crime fell in these areas, at little extra cost to the city. While property crimes may have been simply pushed to nearby blocks, violent crimes decreased without much displacement. This was because of the nature of these acts—much of Bogota's violence appeared to be reactive and situational, rather than planned or the product of violent rivalries.[99] In many ways, this hotspots approach was well-suited to Bogotá's more atomized system of urban crime.

About the same time, the mayor of Medellin embarked on a similar hotspot policing effort. Unlike Bogota, however, the tactic had little impact on property or violent crime.[100] In retrospect, hotspots policing was a poor fit for the city's hyper-organized system of crime, where criminal violence was more strategic and many gangs already strove to keep order on the streets.

Medellin's failure to match treatment to diagnosis was a wasted opportunity, but did little harm. Unfortunately, this tendency to blindly import public safety policy is not always so benign. Take the current enthusiasm for hardline policies and mass detention of suspected gang members—sometimes called the "Bukele model" or "Bukelismo" after the Salvadoran President's apparent success.

Consider Ecuador. In 2024, the Noboa regime adopted an aggressive approach to counter the country's rocketing homicide rate and increasingly bold criminal violence and protest. The media and many politicians have been quick to compare Ecuador's reaction to Bukele's model. But although the Noboa approach has several important similarities and differences, what makes the comparison so poor is that the two countries face extraordinarily different threats. El Salvador faced a system of street gangs with growing central organization but few sources of income. Ecuador faced a set of far more sophisticated, well-resourced, often foreign-based criminal groups violently competing to control international cocaine flows through Ecuador (amongst other rents).[101] A more militarized approach that enhances police powers could very well be part of Ecuador's path to peace, but El Salvador is arguably the least useful comparison in the hemisphere.

Which policies are more amenable to what circumstances? Are there any guiding rules, theoretical guidance, or empirical evidence? This section summarizes what the cases and the literature tell us.

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[98]Cockayne (2014)

[99]Blattman et al. (2021)

[100]See Collazos et al. (2021). One exception is car thefts, which fell in more intensely policed blocks. Not all crime in Medellin is organized, and car thefts are one of the chief examples of this. While gang members may steal cars, they do so on their own time and not as an organized group.

[101]Dalby (2024); Hurtado and Winter (2024); Austin (2024)

4.1 Place-based approaches

Place-based interventions focus on the locales where crime occurs rather than the people responsible, and often includes intensified police patrols or urban renewal.[102] Sometimes this involves the reallocation of existing police and personnel to the highest-crime places (as in the Bogotá and Medellín discussion above). In other cases, special forces and new resources are committed to the most violent or disorderly areas of a city. More and more Latin American cities are adopting these tactics.[103]

In the U.S., the consensus is that place-based policies reduce crime, and may even diffuse their benefits nearby, at least on average.[104] Caution is warranted given the small size of many experiments (especially some of the studies with the largest effect sizes). Also, it is very difficult to statistically detect whether crime is displaced to areas nearby, and arguably most studies are underpowered to do so.[105] Nonetheless, there is enough evidence in favor of place-based approaches that using them allocate existing forces seems like a reasonable measure.

The trouble arises from the fact that many large Latin American cities look more like Medellin and Chicago than Bogota and New York. Their first concern is not mobile phone thefts in busy shopping districts, or late-night bar brawls and other sporadic, low-persistence violence (both of which a robust police presence might deter). Instead, these governments face well-organized, well-financed criminal groups that strategically respond to state presence, and may be so well-resourced that they can buy off police patrols rather than evade them. Typically a President, Mayor, or Chief of Police has the political capital to implement a small number of public safety reforms. In that case, it's not clear that place-based tactics should be anywhere near the top of the priority list.

4.2 Community violence intervention

Community violence intervention, or CVI, is a U.S. concept referring to a wide range of activities that try to prevent or respond to serious violence through targeted social and "outreach" services. Interventions range from violence interruption to psychotherapy.[106] Behind some of the rhetoric, these tactics share a few characteristics:

- They target services to the small number of highly violent groups and individuals;

- These services are delivered by NGOs and community organizations, often by social workers and (in many cases) by "outreach" workers formerly involved in gangs or violence; and

- Targeting and engaging the right people tends to require a deep, long term neighborhood presence, relationships, and trust.

There are numerous CVI approaches. Three of the most common include:

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[102]Weisburd and Telep (2016); Braga et al. (2015); Weisburd et al. (2012); Farrington and Welsh (2008)
[103]Abt and Winship (2016)
[104]Chalfin and McCrary (2017); Braga et al. (2019); Weisburd and Telep (2016)
[105]Blattman et al. (2021)
[106]See for example DOJ (2024)

1. *Violence interruption.* This is one of the most widely studied and adopted interventions, exemplified by organizations such as Cure Violence.[107] Outreach workers—many of whom are former gang members—leap into active disputes, especially shootings and threats, in an effort to avoid cycles of retaliatory violence. They attempt to cool emotions, help parties think through the consequences of their actions, and find non-violent ways to respond, save face, or achieve justice. They are highly promising, but the community-level nature of the intervention makes it more difficult to evaluate. Evidence on its efficacy is positive but mixed.[108]

2. *Cognitive behavioral approaches.* Another increasingly common CVI approach is more preventative, targeting the highest-risk individuals with intensive services like psychotherapy and economic assistance before they enter into an active dispute. Cognitive behavioral techniques (CBT) aim to help individuals become aware of their biases and emotions, to think more systematically about the situations they are in, and plan ahead. Developing this awareness and skills can help curb violent and self-destructive tendencies.[109] Evidence from eight experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations suggests these programs have been effective in reducing criminal, violent, and antisocial behaviors across a range of contexts and populations.[110]

3. *Group-level mediation.* Finally, a less studied but potentially important form of outreach is group-based mediation. Whereas violence interruption tends to focus on individual disputants, outreach workers commonly need to negotiate between the leaders or membership of rival gangs, crews, and cliques. It can involve facilitating the setting of ground rules, opening lines of communication and monitoring, and seeking compensation of restorative justice for past offenses. Mediation between rival groups happens informally in many CBT interventions. More recently, non-aggression pacts have been introduced more systematically into Chicago-based CBT programs, and they are the focus of CVI organizations in cities such as Monterrey, Mexico.[111]

One potential advantage of CVI is their cost-effectiveness. By virtue of being highly targeted at the small number of highest-risk individuals and criminal groups, they have the potential to be far less costly that broad-based interventions. And to the extent that CVI successfully curbs the worst disorder and violence, the social externalities could be enormous. READI Chicago estimated a benefit-cost ratio as low as 4:1 and as high as 18:1 in the first

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[107]Butts et al. (2015)

[108]See Skogan et al. (2008); Wilson and Chermak (2011); Butts et al. (2015); Fox et al. (2015); Webster et al. (2012); Picard-Fritsche and Cerniglia (2013); Buggs et al. (2022). Some studies report large reductions in homicides and shootings in specific neighborhoods of Chicago and Baltimore that researchers attribute to the intervention (Skogan et al., 2008; Webster et al., 2012), while others find no such impacts or even evidence of adverse effects (Wilson and Chermak, 2011). A recent study by Buggs et al. (2022) tries to overcome the confounding challenges in this literature by using synthetic control methods to construct more reliable comparison neighborhoods.

[109]Cognitive behavioral techniques also often aim to help participants improve their self-image, adopt identities that are associated with less violent norms of behavior, and relate and adapt to their environments, which can further promote behavioral change that reduces crime and violence. See JPAL (2024).

[110]Heller et al. (2016); Blattman et al. (2017, 2023); Bhatt et al. (2023); JPAL (2024); IPA (2023)

[111]Papachristos (2023); Moe (2021)

20 months, despite the fact that the jobs and CBT cost tens of thousands of dollars per participant. In Monrovia, the STYL pilot program cost a mere \$555 per participant, and reduced the average number of thefts and robberies alone by 250 per participant over the next 10 years.

A second advantage of CVIs is that they have been successfully run in relatively low capacity environments—including Liberia, El Salvador, and Mexico. That said, impacts like those seen in Chicago or Monrovia likely require enough capacity for fidelity to the model. Sustained and effective implementation at scale probably requires certain capacities and conditions, including: (1) organizations with the ability to identify the very highest-risk individuals in many neighborhoods; (2) access to cognitive behavioral technical expertise and assistance; and (3) large, sustained resource commitments for targeting and servicing the (roughly) 1,000 most violent individuals for every 1 million residents of a city.

Outside of capacity, when are these approaches most likely to work? By design, violence interruption and psychotherapy are targeted to more reactive, hot-headed, or short-sighted violence rather than strategic competition. These interventions are designed to help disputants slow down and think through the consequences of violent actions. As a result, they are best suited to situations where this type of violence is most prevalent—cities with atomized offenders or many fragmented gangs.

Mediation, however, and some of the dispute resolution practices of violence interruption have wider potential relevance. In a low-information environment, where every gang's strength is shifting and uncertain, rivals can find themselves using violence as a form of reputation management to signal toughness. They may lack other means of communication or credible ways to send messages of strength or resolve. Coordinating with many rivals is also challenging. Thus, not only can mediation reduce misconceptions and reactive violence, it has the potential to reduce strategic forms of violence by providing forums for communication, or having trusted intermediaries communicate information.

This implies that cities with fragmented as well as more organized gangs structures could benefit from interventions to improve communication and provide a bargaining forum. Indeed, absent outside intervention, criminal groups may develop these norms and institutions themselves. The long peace between razones in Medellin and between mafia families in New York are in part due to structures that facilitated negotiation between rival confederations, and (in the case of Medellin) government policies that helped leaders negotiate with one another behind bars. We return to this below.

4.3   Focused deterrence and conditional repression

The logic is straightforward: authorities identify a costly behavior and which groups are engaged in it; they draw red lines around that behavior; they communicate their intention to punish violations; and they carry out swift, certain, sanctions against groups that cross the line. The principle as been enshrined in U.S. policing as "focused deterrence" and sometimes "pulling levers".[112] Similar principles underlie how some Latin American governments, especially Colombia, have used "conditional repression" to reduce drug violence.[113]   They

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[112]Abt and Winship (2016)
[113]Lessing (2017)

also underlie some approaches to international sanctions.[114]

This approach treats criminal groups as strategic actors and tries to shift their incentives away from costly behavior such as homicide, drug sales, or extortion. The keys to deterring bad behavior include the capacity to: (1) monitor violations; (2) credibly commit to swift and certain sanctions; and (3) communicate these capacities and resolve in advance.

In principle, conditional repression should be effective for a wide range of violence. It is a deterrence for vendettas and long-running feuds. It is also a deterrent to strategic violence. For instance, swift and certain sanctions could also deter gangs from taking advantage of shifting power balances and temporary opportunities to deal a blow to an adversary—what political economists call commitment problems.[115]

The strategy could also be used to diminish non-strategic violence, however. Young people prone to reactive or hot-headed violence are not wholly irrational, and swift and certain consequences could give them pause. Fellow members and leaders also have incentives to restrain them—something we observe in Medellin and New York's five families.

This versatility could be why so many quasi-experimental studies in the United States suggest that focused deterrence policies are one of the most effective tactics for reducing crime and violence. Some caution is warranted due to the small sample size of most tests.[116] Still, the combination of a sound theoretical logic, the accumulation of similar results from many small studies, and the intervention's versatility in many different situations makes focused deterrence one of the most promising crime and violence reduction approaches.

In principle, focused deterrence can be employed by governments with varying levels of capacity, as the approach emphasizes using available tools and resources in creative ways. That said, the conventional approach in U.S. cities is institutionally demanding, requiring: strong partnerships between police, service providers, and community members; the ability to collect and analyze intelligence and data to identify groups of offenders and their behaviors; the ability to conduct timely special enforcement operations against groups that violate conditions; and the ability to communicate clearly, directly, and repeatedly with offending groups.[117]

How focused deterrence can be executed in more weakly institutionalized settings, and how it fares against more hierarchical and organized groups in Latin America remains to be formally tested. But conditional repression—credibly committing to investigate, arrest, and disrupt gangs that use violence—is arguably a core element of the Medellín strategy discussed above. Ben Lessing has argued that conditional repression was also a core element of success in Rio de Janeiro's 2008–12 pacification program until they moved away from the

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[114]Blattman (2023)

[115]Blattman (2023) In these low-information environments, where the strength of one's rival isn't known, focused deterrence gives criminal groups incentives to use non-violent actions to signal strength and resolve. (To the extent that groups know their rivals face similar incentives, it may reduce the perceived need for violent signaling altogether.)

[116]See, for instance, the systematic review by Braga et al. (2018) and discussions by Braga and Kennedy (2021). While some question the validity of quasi-experimental comparisons of treated neighborhoods to matched controls, potentially the more serious limitation of many studies is that there may be fewer than 10 treatment and control communities in total in the study, limiting the statistical power of the tests and leading to small sample biases in conventional standard error estimation.

[117]See Abt and Winship (2016) on carrying out focused deterrence in the U.S. versus Latin American contexts.

practice.[118]

4.4   Jailing leaders

Another focused approach to criminal organization is the so-called kingpin strategy—targeting top leaders in organized criminal groups for prosecution. Unlike focused deterrence, this repression is not necessarily conditional on a group's good behavior. Many kingpin strategies look like that of Chicago or Medellin—the most violent or troublesome leaders might get more attention, but the attempt to imprison them is relatively broad-based.

Evidence on the impact of kingpin is limited and mostly based on case studies. There are indications the strategy is destabilizing in the short term. Long term impacts are more subtle, and arguably depend on the details and circumstances.

In terms of short-run effects, some of the most rigorous evidence comes from Mexico, where successive papers have shown that that arresting transnational cartel leaders exacerbated violence, at least for a few months after the arrest.[119] This immediate increase in violence is intuitive—decapitation changes the sometimes delicate balance of power within and between criminal organizations. An unexpected arrest can lead to succession wars, efforts by rivals to seize turf, or defensive maneuvers. It can also disrupt the institutional arrangements and other deals between rival kingpins.

Two of our cases—Chicago and Medellin—suggest that the long term the effects of kingpin strategies are more varied.

In Chicago, years of sustained arrests of meso- and micro-level leaders left gangs fragmented and transformed. The hierarchical structures of the 1980s and 1990s gave way to a larger number of smaller, flatter, less hierarchical and younger organizations that called themselves cliques, mobs and crews (as "gangs" connoted more organization and formality).[120] The Chicago case is remarkable in part because the decapitation of meso-level structures and street gangs was so sustained and complete. Street control was difficult from in-state maximum security prisons, and made more difficult still when leaders were transferred faraway in state or (especially) out of state.

The years following these arrests, however, saw one of the largest and sustained decreases in violence in the city's history. Cities across the U.S. experienced a similar decline in violent crime, and so it is hard to say whether the kingpin strategy played any major role. But there is little evidence that arresting leaders destabilized Chicago. That said, as violence and retaliatory shootings spiraled upwards 2015–2023, former gang leaders (many turned peacemakers) bemoaned their inability to check or control the violence. Speculatively, leaderless structures like the cliques and mobs of Chicago were less vulnerable to the major inter-factional wars fought by meso-level organizations in the 1990s, bringing the risk of large-scale war down. But fragmented groups may be more vulnerable to escalatory dynamics, where a shock to violence levels results in long-running feuds.

In Medellin, leader arrests were widespread but there were several important differences. Many leaders continued to be housed in or nearby the city, which facilitated their influence over the street. Leaders transferred away could petition to be moved closer to home, which

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[118]Lessing (2024)

[119]e.g. Calderón et al. (2015); Velasco (2023); Estévez-Soto and Esteban (2024)

[120]Aspholm (2019)

was sometimes granted. (There is little evidence of explicit state policy to keep the heads together. Rather, the policy may have been a de facto outcome of the limited number of maximum security prisons for senior leaders in Medellin.) As a result, organizations were not so much decapitated as disciplined.

As discussed above, in the case of Medellin, grouping leaders in the same prison may have facilitated communication and negotiation, and there are instances of authorities using prison and prison transfers to facilitate and pressure for a peace deal. In some ways, this resembles the conditional repression and focused deterrence approach discussed above. Mexico's more violent kingpin strategy could have resulted from less targeted and discriminatory arrest and action.[121]

In the context of U.S. prison gangs, David Skarbek has argued that long prison sentences extend leaders' time horizons, encouraging them to create stable systems of governance within prisons to minimize chaos and create opportunities for profit and increased control. Looking at Brazil, Ben Lessing has also argued that prison confinement shifts leaders' focus from short-term violent strategies to long-term governance and control.[122] As we saw in the cases above, similar dynamics played out in Illinois and Salvadoran prisons.

In sum, imprisoning leaders may in some instances increase their incentives and ability to bargain with one another, give the state a degree of leverage over these powerbrokers, and thus facilitate truces and other negotiated deals.

At the same time, several kingpin strategies have also increased levels of criminal organization and control—both of prisons and the street—strengthening the bargaining power of criminal leaders with the government. As with so many other organized crime strategies, this one involves difficult and uncertain trade-offs.

4.5   Crackdowns and mano dura

"Crackdowns" and "mano dura" approaches have many meanings. It is perhaps most useful to define them by what they are not—targeted. They are not focused on the most violent groups, nor groups crossing clear red lines. And they are not limited to top leadership. In this paper, by mano dura I imply a dragnet strategy, using large-scale searches, surveillance, seizure, arrest, or prosecution to punish or capture a wide range of criminal actors.

Even here, it is hard to put all crackdowns in one category, partly because they vary dramatically in their intensity. El Salvador's crackdown was not only distinct for its intensity and for its combination with changes in prisons (the capacity to hold prisoners and to isolate them from other imprisoned populations) but also by the suspension of due process and other civil rights.

In discussing El Salvador's apparent success, I raised several cautions. One is that homicides declined far more in the years prior to the crackdown, in part due to a prior, secret negotiated truce—a fact that enthusiasts sometimes overlook. Another caution is that it may still be too soon to say whether the strategy is successful, since mass imprisonment has so often empowered criminal organizations in the long run. At the same time, there are several features of El Salvador's crackdown that arguably made success possible—the

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[121]Lessing (2017)

[122]See Skarbek (2014); Lessing et al. (2019). Also see Castillo and Kronick (2020) for the theoretical link between horizon length and factional violence.

absence of a well-developed drug market; loose international connections and ties; a highly concentrated gang leadership structure; a President with sufficiently few checks and balances that a crackdown of this magnitude was possible; a well-equipped, well-funded state police/military apparatus; and, perhaps, a degree of luck. Tackling well-organized international drug traffickers in an unconditional way would be an entirely different manner.[123]

Several other governments have attempted Bukele-style crackdowns but with limited success. I discussed the case of Ecuador above. Perhaps a better comparison is Honduras in 2022. The country faced more domestic-oriented gang structures that depended largely on extortion. The country declared a state of emergency and engaged in mass arrests (although more limited in scope than in El Salvador).[124] Gangs also responded violently, and violence has not declined.

There are interesting parallels to the literature on state repression of political movements. Christian Davenport notes how, for centuries, centralized authorities have consistently turned to repressive force against regime threats—what he calls a "Law of Coercive Responsiveness". Despite this, the effects are decidedly mixed. Repression works except when it doesn't. Some argue that repression is more likely to work when it is total and complete (hearkening back to Bukele's relatively unfettered power and well-organized military forces) but this too is disputed. The literature on when and why repression works is largely inconclusive, arguably because success or failure depends on the local circumstances.[125]

Despite the uncertain and limited conditions for their success, unconditional crackdowns remain a popular policy at the polls and among inexperienced policymakers.[126] Arguably, the fundamental problem with the strategy is that there are few diagnoses for which this treatment fits.

4.6   Negotiation and mediation

Fighting is costly, and all else equal, mature and better organized criminal groups prefer to avoid it. This is the arguably the fundamental role of meso-level criminal organizations—in neighborhoods with dozens of gangs, crews or militias, meso criminal groups mediate and act as guarantors of the peace.

One of the main incentives is financial. As one Chicago gang member explained, "When we keep on losing money you got to think, if a building doin' $100,000 in drug sales a day, shit, you wanna stop this war. You wanna get back to the money."[127] When Black and Latino gangs attempted to negotiate short-lived truces, they labelled their efforts "Growth and Development".[128]

In Chicago, however, truces were small, infrequent, and short-lived. Arguably the gangs were too weakly institutionalized and plagued by in-fighting and factionalism. With time, they may have evolved differently, but Chicago authorities also made the decision (and had the state capacity) to mostly crush the nations through a massive kingpin strategy followed

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[123]As argued in the case of Calderon's Mexico in Lessing (2017).
[124]Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024)
[125]See Davenport (2007); Hill and Jones (2014)
[126]Rosen and Cutrona (2021)
[127]Boring (2015)
[128]McCown (2017); Hagedorn (2015)

by a policy of unconditional repression.

With sufficient criminal group cohesion and organization, however, civil society actors and states to facilitate and enforce truces. José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez cite repeated examples in El Salvador and Medellin of reducing criminal violence through pacts of some kind, some of which we documented above.[129] But state support for meso-level truces was often controversial and short-lived—a major source of instability for such agreements.

Still, the role of civil society mediation should not be dismissed, especially in the absence of meso-level actors. In Chicago's current fragmented and meso-less context, community violence organizations are increasingly seeing non-aggression pacts as important complements to their violence interruption and prevention activities.

4.7   Tackling rents

One of the least studied but most important strategies to tackle urban organized crime is to target local revenue lines. Rather than seizing assets after they are earned, interrupting money laundering, or disrupting production and shipment, I mean efforts to reduce revenue streams in cities.

Arguably, the easiest stream of rents to target are coerced goods and services—extortion and protection rackets, or control of legal goods markets. Other illegal goods, such as retail drugs, will be harder to tackle when there is robust consumer demand. For cities that do not yet have a robust local drug market, however, curbing its development should be a priority. Unfortunately there is too little work on how to do so.

Two of the American case studies highlight the value of rent reduction. In tackling New York's Cosa Nostra through the courts, prosecutors and academics stressed the mob's economic weakness as a great advantage to the government. For decades, the mafia's income streams were running more slow and sluggishly for a range of reasons: the rise of state-sanctioned lotteries and casinos, the decline of unions (and with it opportunities for labor racketeering), and increased competition in the pornography and drug markets. Arguably, this made the criminal network easier to battle and shrink permanently.[130]

Similarly, in Chicago, the weakness of today's fragmented gangs, cliques and crews not only comes from the relentless prosecution and jailing of leaders, but from increased competition in drug retailing as well. Not only are there no meso-level organizations with the potential to coordinate price-setting, but the variety of new products and changes in technology (including mobile and online ordering, and personal delivery) have increased the number of players. The legalization of marijuana likely reduced earnings opportunities as well (see below). There are few formal studies documenting these trends, but qualitatively, drug-selling in Chicago appears to be highly competitive and margins are correspondingly low.[131]

I will not dive deeply into these strategies, in large part because there is almost no rigorous evidence. But I do want to highlight some of the main issues and trade-offs, and draw attention to some of the most promising areas for new programs and policies.

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[129]cru (2016)

[130]Kroger (2008); Jacobs (2020)

[131]Aspholm (2019)

Countering coercive markets

Some gangs, as in Medellin, sell protection services and enjoy a degree of legitimacy, but even there, extortion is highly unpopular and residents and businesses are eager to see the government tackle it.[132]. There is little consumer demand for coercive services.

There is little work on how to tackle extortion rackets. One case study comes from Addiopizzo—a grassroots movement in Palermo that collectively organized consumers and businesses to refuse to pay the "pizzo" or extortion money through a sustained social norms change campaign.[133] It's unclear how feasible this is in other contexts, especially where criminal groups are violent and the the state is weak, but the apparent (untested) success of Addiopizzo bears more investigation.

Focused deterrence is another promising approach to counter extortion. Prosecuting extortion is difficult—it is typically a long, arduous process that often requires a small number of extortion victims to publicly denounce a collector, sending the low-level operator to jail and leaving the group unscathed. In a focused deterrence setting, however, authorities could draw clear red lines around extortion of business and households, and punish offending gangs quickly through arrests, seizures, or interruption of other rents (such as drug sales).

These policies are speculative, however, largely because the absence of documented efforts or innovation.

Competition policy

One of the biggest threats posed by meso-level organizations is their market power. They use peace and their power of coordination to reduce competition in illegal markets, accumulate massive rents, and extend their markets and control further. Where drug and other high-consumer demand markets exist, it might be the in public interest to mitigate meso-level coordination and promote comeetition.

Peace allows gangs to allocate labor away from defense to growing and serving local markets. In many cases, it grants them local monopolies and market power. Some meso-level organizations increase this market power further by helping micro-level organizations coordinate on higher oligopolistic or monopolistic prices. From 2000 onwards, meso-level coordination in Medellin helped gangs develop and grow markets for both retail drugs and governance and protection, as well as enter legal goods markets in their neighborhoods.[134] El Salvador's 2016 truce allowed gangs to ramp up extortion rates to distributors (and likely households as well).[135]

In a free market, higher prices would have the benefits of lower quantities. In illicit markets, however, criminal market power seldom translate into fewer businesses extorted or fewer drugs consumed. Rather, gangs used their economic and military might to expand their extortion rackets and co-opt policies and politics. In Medellin, they invested monopolistic profits in growing their base of drug users—both the territories where they sell and the density of users in those territories.

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[132]Blattman et al. (2024a)
[133]Gunnarson (2014); Lipari and Andrighetto (2021)
[134]Blattman et al. (2024)
[135]Brown et al. (2024)

The strongest argument for permitting meso-level structures to form or persist is violence control—maintaining peace in the city. Disrupting an established meso-level carries a further risk: creating more competitive drug markets, lowering prices (and presumably increasing consumer demand) in cities with large and longstanding user bases.

The strongest argument for for combating these oligopolies, however, is the enormous value of rents that accrue to these confederations, and the growing economic, political, and military power this cedes to criminal actors over time. The situation resembles a classic commitment problem—fighting meso-level organizations is costly today, but leaving them be would grow their bargaining power to potentially unacceptable levels.[136]

Decriminalization and legalization

For proponents of legalization, the case of Cosa Nostra is instructive for two reasons—New York's mafia emerged and grew because of prohibition, and it was only after drug, gambling, and other markets were legalized that the mob was weak enough for the government to gain ground.

This topic is too large, too contentious, too short of evidence, and too far from my expertise to get a detailed treatment here. There are important questions of the effect of legalization on social welfare—health, adolescent behavior, road accidents, spillovers to domestic violence or property crime, and so on. Most academic papers focus on these externalities, but these are not the focus of this analysis.

Instead, we are interested on the impacts on organized criminal groups—impacts that for obvious reasons are difficult to measure. Intuitively, permitting legal sales of drugs should increase competition and lower quantities sold by street gangs. In cities with low levels of organized crime, this could mitigate the emergence of drug-selling gangs. But legalization may not eliminate existing group. Drugs are a differentiated product, and to the extent that illegal groups are more conveniently located, have established customer relationships, or face lower taxes and regulation, there may still be demand for their products. What's more, gangs may use threats and force to intimidate buyers or competing sellers. Unfortunately, I am unaware of formal studies or tests of these propositions. Debates on marijuana legalization also entail a much wider range of social issues and considerations, which unfortunately seem to dominate the discussion of impacts on organized crime.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Terrible trade-offs

In tackling everyday crime, the tradeoffs are obviously difficult. Having more and better-trained security forces usually lowers crime.[137] But this comes at a steep fiscal cost, collides with systems and cultures that are resistant to change, and buffets some continuities with heavy-handed tactics.

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[136]Powell (2006); Blattman (2023)
[137]Chalfin and McCrary (2017)

In cities with established gangs and organized crime, however, mayors and police chiefs wish their tradeoffs were so easy. At least in the short run, there are almost never options that reduce violence, drug use, criminal power, and political corruption at the same time. Achieving some of these objectives often comes at the expense of others.

Take crackdowns and mano dura approaches. These policies can "work" in the sense that they disrupt illicit business, fragment powerful criminal factions, and loosen criminal control of neighborhoods and politicians. They use existing police capabilities, without asking forces to do something new or different. And the effects are immediate and easy to splash on the pages of newspapers. The public often supports these efforts, at least at first. All this help explain why these policies are often popular among police and politicians.

As we've seen, however, heavy-handed and unconditional tactics bring new challenges. In the worst case, they lead to a more fragmented landscape. Decapitating criminal organizations can destabilize a city's fragile criminal systems, launching inter-factional wars of succession and dominance. And when state control over prisons is weak (as in El Salvador before 2019), competition and mass imprisonment has often prompted criminal confederations a chance to consolidate and strengthen.

Strengthening state capabilities is no panacea. Cities like Chicago managed to completely dismantle their meso-level structures. Perhaps El Salvador has accomplished the same. But in the U.S., at least, the effect on violence has been mixed and at times unstable. Lower control by confederations stopped large-scale inter-factional warfare. It also eliminated these rich and powerful structures from the social and political scene. But the remnants of these former empires—the fragmented, anarchic landscape of hundreds of small street gangs—has proven almost impossible to eradicate, and has been vulnerable to violence spirals that are hard to control.

A more savvy and focused approach—cracking down on the most violent gangs, and incentivizing the meso actors to maintain a city-wide peace—carries trade-offs too. Medellín has managed more than a decade of incredible peace, with homicides dropping to a historic low of 12 per 100,000 in recent years. But its criminal factions have leveraged this influence to enrich themselves and city's gangs—fixing retail drug markets and earning monopolistic profits, growing the ranks of drug consumers and addicts, expanding into legal markets like consumer products and security-provision, and channeling some of these winnings into political influence and police corruption.

In previous work my collaborators and I have called this the "terrible tradeoff" between violence and criminal control. Ben Lessing has also called it a trilemma.[138] Policymakers want low violence, weak criminal groups (with low control over the state), and low drug flows, but they can seldom achieve all three at the same time. The more a city tackles drug flows and weakens criminal group control, the fewer incentives criminal groups have to maintain peace, and the more potential for violent spirals.

While these trade-offs are real, there is some reason for hope. First, Chicago (like many American cities) experienced an improvement in all three during the great homicide decline of the late 1990s to roughly 2014. They are trying to recreate that success now by combining more and better policing with focused deterrence and funding a "civilian architecture" for community violence reduction—one of the largest and most targeted outreach and service

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[138]Lessing (Lessing, 2017)

efforts in history.[139] New York gradually whittled down its organized crime problem through years of creative prosecutorial and policing strategies. Medellín's new mayor is also trying to attain all three goals by maintaining incentives for peace (through conditional repression) while simultaneously weakening the economic power of the gangs in a variety of ways.

5.2   Becoming problem-oriented, adaptive, and iterative

Some problems are relatively straightforward to solve. They have clear causes and measures for progress, the technology exists to solve it, it doesn't require enormous local adaptation, they don't require the coordination of many actors, or if they do, that logistical effort isn't complicated by conflicting interests and information. If we stick with the medical analogy that started this article, a good example would be the delivery of flu or smallpox vaccines.

Other problems are "wicked" in nature. This is a technical term, coined in the 1960s by a management scholar to describe the really hard-to-solve social challenges. The causes are unclear, the metrics are hard to observe, the right tools don't exist, and if they do they require customization and adaptation. Implementing them requires coordinating many actors, most of them with conflicting interests, where it's hard to observe their effort or intentions.[140]

Wicked problems are not insoluble, however, and a longstanding literature on tackling wicked policy problems contains a few lessons that we can apply to organized crime.[141]

Problem-driven and diagnostic   Instead of leaping to policy solutions—crackdowns, hotspots policing, focused deterrence, or cognitive behavioral programs—we have to understand the ailment before prescribing a treatment.

Typically, most cities have enough local experts and police intelligence to quickly assess the basic organizational structures and criminal situation. Going beyond the basics takes more investment, but organized crime is also a problem that will take decades to tackle, and so any investment in diagnostic and monitoring has a great deal of time to deliver returns. Common diagnostic investments include:

- Organizations tend to manage what is measured, and a first step is to establish metrics and measurement systems, especially to capture systematically unmeasured outcomes (such as gang activities, extortion payments, and criminal and state legitimacy

- Foster a research community to do the descriptive research–qualitative and quantitative research—to establish the facts and regularities on the ground, and to build this intelligence gathering and processing capacity within and also outside of government

- As circumstances often vary by neighborhood, build out the local capacity to understand and communicate with local criminal actors—not just within the state apparatus, but also through the "civilian architecture" of neighborhood-level outreach organizations that understand, build relationships with, and address the issues of the most violent groups and actors

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[139]See https://www.nonviolencechicago.org/civilianarchitecture
[140]Rittel and Webber (1973)
[141]e.g. Andrews et al. (2017); Kelkar and Shah (2019)

- Establish incentives for the invention, proposal, and piloting of new policy solutions—within the bureaucracy, but also in the public sphere, by making information and data public

One example, building on the experience of U.S. cities, is Thomas Abt's Community Violence Problem Analysis (CVPA).[142] In U.S. cities, violence tends to cluster around small networks of people and places. Shootings among these fragmented groups or atomistic individuals often occur in cascades of retaliatory violence. "Problem analyses" are designed to identify these high-risk networks through the systematic analysis of incidents, studying groups and social networks, and identifying the highest-risk places. The goal is to interrogate and challenge assumptions, while also focusing policy attention on the small number of highest-risk people. groups, places, and behaviors. Many of the same tools could be applied in situations of more hierarchical organized crime, especially the idea of intelligence gathering on groups, with the proviso that the most powerful groups may be committing the least violence.

Another example example is an ongoing collaboration in Medellín, Colombia between local and international universities, a research organization, the local government and police, as well as local media and experts. Independent, full-time ethnographers and journalists conduct continuous interviews with community members and criminal group members to understand criminal business lines, organization, hierarchies, peace arrangements, and causes of violence. We collaborate with the city government to conduct annual city-wide surveys of gang and state governance, fee payment, and legitimacy (published in the main newspaper). We also support the city government in building their information systems and analyzing data. We work with the national and local governments to integrate administrative data on neighborhoods, blocks, and individuals to track crime and other issues, and to build predictive models of crime and extortion for targeting. And we help the school system build mechanisms for monitoring dropout and recruitment risk and to target interventions to reduce risk.

This "urban lab" draws in many ways on the success of the University of Chicago Urban Labs—a nearly two-decade collaboration between the government, foundations, police, and non-profits designed to develop and share data, challenge assumptions, and inspire new approaches. The main question is why so few cities in the hemisphere have developed similar partnerships and capabilities.

Becoming iterative and experimental The trouble with any first diagnosis is that it is probably mistaken. The first round of policies and solutions are probably wrong as well. And if they do work, criminal groups are smart and strategic and will adapt. Therefore, cities do not simply need the capacity to diagnose at intervals, they need to be able to engage in a process of trial and error, trying our multiple approaches and solutions at once, carefully trying to discern which are working or not, and using the patterns of observed success and failure to re-diagnose the problem.

The information systems discussed above–metrics, surveys, qualitative, and administrative data—are important here. Consider Medellín again. The annual surveys identified

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[142]Abt and Hahn (2024)

surprisingly high levels of gang governance and legitimacy in the city. Further investigation revealed that historical increases in police presence did not have the expected effects on criminal rule—often, the threat of police presence was the main factor driving gangs to provide order on the street, to protect drug profits. Increasing police presence pushed gangs to behave better, but did not counter gang rule. Retrospective analysis and a experimental pilot suggested that gang rule was a response to a strong and capable state, especially in sectors where drug rents are high.[143] This pointed the administration to focus on strategies that reduce rents while also maintaining gang incentives to avoid abusing and extorting residents.

Another example comes from studying gang entry among adolescents. While the city of Medellín had many promising youth programs, investigation revealed that the highest-risk youth were difficult to reach and engage, and often not deliberately targeted, meaning programs were not reaching the right recipients. Schools were also good at judging who had already joined a gang, but had few capabilities to identify the risk in advance. Large-scale surveys in schools identified the factors most predictive of gang entry, and these are now being integrated into routine administrative data collection. In partnership with non-profit organizations, Medellin's schools are now testing and refining a series fo counter-recruitment programs.

Another model for identifying and incentivizing experimentation is through competitive calls. The two major cognitive-behavioral programs in Liberia and Chicago that inspired so many community violence interventions around the world each emerged from competitive bids for new and innovative violence reduction programs—one from the UN Peacebuilding Fund and Liberian government, the other from the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

Fostering self-correcting mechanisms One challenge with these recommendation is that few city administrations or police have incentives to diagnose and iterate. Policymakers who want to engage on careful trial and error constantly compete against political opponents who promise big, bold steps against organized crime. Worse still, crackdowns, kingpin strategies, and *mano dura* approaches are simple and clear, and often prove popular at the polls, at least temporarily.

As for schools, mayor's offices, or police departments, trial and error asks these bureaucracies not to do what they are already equipped to do, but rather develop new capabilities that may or may not prove effective. It is one thing to ask authorities to be nimble and to adopt the best programs for their city's circumstances, and another to ask them to innovate and iterate on their own. This points to the need for public–private partnerships between the state and universities, community organizations, and the media. Schools and police departments seldom have the analytical capabilities, the bandwidth, or the skills to engage in diagnostics or trial and error alone.

Ultimately, however, there needs to be accountability for results. This is a further advantage of the data produced through the diagnostics and monitoring described above. Bureaucracies have a tendency to mange what is measured. Most police commanders can tell you how crimes per sector have changed since last year, but not whether gangs have sold more drugs. Mayors and newspapers can quote week to week changes in homicide rates but

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[143]Blattman et al. (2025, 2024b)

not gang legitimacy. Better information systems, available to the public and newspapers, and transparent evaluation is one step towards accountability for improvement on these unmeasured margins.

Tackling organized crime is the ultimate wicked problem. Success will not come from simply importing solutions from abroad. Nor will it come from simply funneling more fiscal resources into policing or intelligence systems. It was be more difficult than that, requiring a change in mindset and approach.

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