



Policy brief

# Crime and communities:

Life under criminal group control

**Ashley Jackson, Florian Weigand and Theo Tindall**  
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## Key messages

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Academics and policy-makers tend to categorise and analyse so-called ‘criminal’ groups, which are primarily motivated by profit, separately from ‘political’ groups – ignoring critical commonalities between the two.

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This paper argues that we should not see them as separate categories. Instead, we should envision a spectrum of motives and practices across all armed groups, regardless of how they are labelled.

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This paper specifically examines practices that armed groups use to influence civilian behaviour. Even beyond direct violence, we find that criminal and political groups use similar techniques to control communities. Understanding these tactics is essential to helping people affected by violence.

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With growing recognition of the blurred lines between conflict and crime, more integrated and comparative study is required to improve our understanding of and engagement with armed groups.

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## About this publication

This paper is a joint output of ODI and the Centre on Armed Groups. The Centre supports efforts to analyse and engage with armed groups to reduce violence and end armed conflict. It does so through conducting innovative research, creating spaces for dialogue, and providing advice.

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# 1 Introduction

There is growing attention in the media and academia to the role of criminal groups in controlling people and territory. During the height of the pandemic in Mexico, El Chapo made the news for handing out relief supplies and in Brazil, gangs enforced strict curfews to stem the spread of disease. Meanwhile, in Italy, different mafia groups organised the delivery of food parcels.

This phenomenon of gangs and cartels playing what appeared to be a governance role garnered comparisons to the shadow governance systems of insurgent groups like the Taliban and al-Shabaab. It also underscored the weakness of governments in these contexts. Yet the social control imposed by these groups is nothing new. Organised criminal groups are present in almost every country on earth, and interacting with them is an unavoidable condition of life for millions of people. Moreover, criminal activity has long been responsible for many more deaths worldwide than armed conflict and terrorism combined (UNODC, 2019).

Despite them using many of the same tactics as insurgencies, academics and policy-makers tend to categorise and analyse so-called criminal groups separately. Certainly, there are important differences between more economically driven groups, such as mafias and gangs, and more politically oriented groups, such as insurgents and rebels. But in one sense, all non-state armed groups are illegal. And the separation of so-called criminal groups from the wider study of armed groups has impeded our understanding of organised violence. Consequently, the practices criminal groups use to control populations and influence their behaviour, and the implications (for law and order, but also for security, peacemaking and protection of civilians), remain poorly understood.

This briefing note explores what we know – and what we don’t – about how ordinary people engage with ‘criminal’ groups and vice versa. A wealth of research exists on how communities engage with ‘political’ (or, rather, primarily politically motivated) groups, but we know comparatively little about how people navigate life amid criminal (primarily economically motivated) groups. As part of a larger research programme on civilian–armed group relations, this briefing evolved from a roundtable expert discussion held in December 2022. It builds on our prior work on civilian–armed group relations in conflict zones. It outlines the implications for aid provision, security and peacebuilding, with an eye toward a future comparative research agenda.

## **A note on terminology**

Before we get into the paper’s substance, we must first clarify our terminology. When it comes to neatly defined theoretical categories such as ‘civilians’ or ‘armed groups’, the real-life boundaries are fuzzy and hard to define. Criminal group ‘members’ (just like those of at least some ‘political’ armed groups) are often deeply embedded in the wider population and are part of society, so separating them out is not easy. Some people may also drift in and out of criminal activities, or

have ambiguous links to criminal actors, raising questions about who should be considered a ‘member’ of a given group. Similarly, the term ‘civilian’ can be questioned (as the authors of this paper have debated extensively). After all, not all contexts where criminal groups operate are war contexts (although the two may overlap)<sup>1</sup> and ‘civilian’ is a term typically associated with international humanitarian law, used to distinguish people from ‘combatants’ and confer certain protections (Melzer, 2009).

For the sake of simplicity, we use the terms ‘communities’ – defined as those who do not participate in any substantial way in criminal activities as part of an organised group – and ‘criminal groups’ or ‘criminal actors’ – those who actively participate in criminal activities as part of an organised group. We recognise that these are imperfect terms and more analysis and research in the future will undoubtedly yield a clearer way of framing these interactions and relationships.

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1 For a discussion of questions relating to the relationship between crime, insurgencies and armed conflict see, for example Ahmad (2022), Andreas (2022), Brenner (2022), Gallien and Weigand (2022), Goodhand et al. (2022), Idler (2022), Schouten (2022), Thakur (2022), Weigand (2020) and Wennmann et al. (2021).

## 2 Criminal versus political

The primary distinction between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’ groups rests on motives. Criminal actors are seen as having an illicit or illegal, and primarily economic, agenda. They are, in blunt terms, mainly motivated by profit and financial gain. Political armed groups, by contrast, are often motivated by ideological objectives and social grievances. They usually seek the overthrow of the state or secession from it.

In reality, the lines between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’ actors are profoundly blurred. For instance, the Taliban in Afghanistan – a group widely viewed as political – has benefited significantly from taxing trade, including in illicit goods such as opium (Amiri and Jackson, 2022). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has made tens of millions through kidnap and ransom, as well as the trafficking of drugs and illicit goods (Thurston, 2020). Famously, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) raised the question of whether armed groups in civil wars that are presumably ‘political’ are driven by ‘greed’ or ‘grievances’.

Similar questions can be raised about groups that are traditionally viewed as ‘criminal’. For instance, the Italian mafia and some Mexican cartels (for example, Felbab-Brown, forthcoming; Pansters, 2018; Stack et al., 2019) have gained significant control of the formal political space, co-opting politicians or even capturing entire sectors of the state (see also, for example, Arias, 2009, on Brazil; Nieto-Matiz, 2022, on Colombia). Gangs in Haiti have brought the government to its knees, with the leader of the G9 gang federation recently blockading the country’s main oil terminal and demanding the President’s resignation (International Crisis Group, 2022). Further blurring the lines, state actors may label certain groups as ‘criminal’ to delegitimise them, including groups that see themselves as possessing a legitimate political agenda.

Moreover, there is arguably as much difference within these categories as between them. For example, ‘criminal’ groups can take a vast range of forms, from street gangs and bandit networks to mafias and multinational cartels. This is also true of ‘political’ groups, which may range from Islamist groups seeking to establish caliphates, to national liberation movements seeking to secede, to extremist right-wing groups targeting ethnic minorities. Some have questioned the utility of a binary distinction between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’, suggesting instead that all such groups could be grouped within the broader category of ‘political violence’ (Barnes, 2017).

Another aspect to consider is an armed group’s relationship with the state. In general, political groups are seen as directly, and violently, opposing the state, and criminal groups as competing with other criminal groups and often ‘embedded’ within the state. Again, the reality is far more variable. Some rebel groups simultaneously or alternately oppose, collude and collaborate with the state. Some criminal groups benefit from close ties and ‘deals’ with state actors (Gallien and

Weigand, 2021; Weigand, 2020). In other words, ‘antagonism with the state is just one endpoint along spectra of “wartime political orders” and “crime–state relations” that include mutual toleration and even active collaboration’ (Lessing, 2021: 4).

Rather than dividing armed groups into two broad categories – the ‘criminal’ and the ‘political’ – we may instead imagine a spectrum of motives and practices. Within this, we assume that armed groups can have a range of different motivations and practices at the same time (and that these will shift over time). Many armed groups will be primarily motivated by either the desire for political power or the desire to profit. And some will be motivated by both. Among these groups, some will see profit as a secondary motive, necessary to obtain financial resources for their armed struggle. Others will see political power as a means to protect and expand their economic rackets. These different motives, and the practices they drive, are not mutually exclusive, but how they are prioritised matters because it will ultimately influence how the group and its members behave. However, various members are likely to have different personal motives, even within any armed group. Even the most ideological of political groups may find opportunists who seek financial gain in their ranks.

While motives are important to investigate, they are hard to empirically determine and vary over time and within groups. That is why it is essential to also look at practices. The practices that criminal – or primarily profit-motivated – groups engage in, and how non-members respond to them, are more easily observable.

This way of seeing things also opens up the possibility of different responses. Seeing criminal groups as purely revenue seeking and apolitical tends to dictate a law enforcement approach. For aid providers and peacemakers, it often rules out the possibility of negotiating or otherwise engaging with them. They also tend to be left out of peace deals, even though their buy-in is essential to ensuring a genuine cessation of violation. That said, the increasing recognition of the role criminal groups play in elite politics, and growing awareness of the need to bring them into political settlements, is gradually challenging status quo responses (Rocha Menocal, 2022).

## 3 Community-criminal group relations

While insurgent governance is a well-established field of study, we know relatively little about how criminal groups seek to control populations. Only recently has the idea of criminal governance coalesced into a field of study. Yet we know from the study of insurgent governance that different kinds of groups may take vastly different approaches to governance. Just like political groups, not all criminal groups control territory or govern. And it is important to stress that not everything criminal groups do is ‘governance’. Some groups might even be conducting activities – such as online or financial crime – that do not involve any direct interaction with communities at all.

These caveats aside, criminal governance can be thought of as ‘the structures and practices through which organised criminal groups control territory and manage relations with local populations’ (Barnes, forthcoming). It is only through certain factors and circumstances that specific groups begin to develop and sustain criminal governance systems and structures. Lessing (2021) argues that there are three stages of criminal governance. The first step is for a group to govern its members, the second is to govern criminal spaces (that is, prisons, illicit markets, the ‘criminal underworld’), and the third is governing communities. While they may not be engaged in ‘competitive state-building’ like rebel groups (Kalyvas 2006), some criminal groups nevertheless provide some essential services, security and dispute resolution functions.

What then are the implications for how criminal groups deal with communities and – conversely – how communities deal with them? Much of the literature in this regard tends to focus on how communities resist criminal actors (Ley et al., 2019; Arias 2019; Moncada 2022; Herbert et al., 2022). But overt resistance is not the norm and tends to be dangerous. We know that, as with insurgents in most civil wars, communities will try to avoid criminal groups as far as they can. Yet, if they survive for long enough, criminal groups tend to become an unavoidable feature of everyday life – as they have in parts of Mexico and southern Italy. And just like with established rebel groups, criminal groups will often need communities to cooperate with them in certain ways if they are to achieve their objectives.

The remainder of this section explores three notable techniques that criminal groups use to influence or control communities. Many political armed groups use the same or remarkably similar tactics, although their motives may be different. In outlining how ‘criminal’ groups use these techniques, we aim to provide a broader basis of comparison across the wider spectrum of armed groups.

### 3.1 Coercion

Undoubtedly, violence shapes much of the relationship between criminal actors and communities. But for violence to be useful in enforcing a group's objectives, it must be intentional and strategic. Political armed groups often use violence to send signals to civilians to compel certain behaviours (Hirose et al., 2017; Hoffmann and Verweijen, 2019; Eck and Hultman, 2007) and criminal groups are no different. Yet the more subtle and strategic aspects of how they use coercion are overlooked.

Putting aside for the moment more overt acts of violence, and looking at more subtle forms of coercion, allows us to see more clearly how the threat of violence is used to control populations. This may take an array of forms. Atmospheric coercion, or the 'ripple effect' created on the wider community by overt violence and threats, signals the costs of going against the armed group's interests. Some forms of indirect coercion may be more targeted. Havard et al. (2021) explore how coercive control specifically targets young women within the wider communities where gangs operate in the UK, finding that the mere background threat of sexual violence creates a powerful tool to control young women's behaviour.

In situations of protracted criminal group presence – such as the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria (Italy) – the 'echo' of violence is in itself enough for a criminal group to 'engage in extortion by simply whispering words, without explicit threats, intimidating just by being present' (Sergi, 2022: 65). In such circumstances, even a 'caffè pagato' (literally a 'paid coffee', with the term referring to the practice of 'Ndrangheta members' paying for community members' food and drink at bars) can serve as an intimidating reminder of a criminal group's pervasive presence in a community (Sergi, 2022). As with the 'Ndrangheta, the ability to use violence in such a targeted way is a sophisticated tactic, requiring significant cohesion within the group.

We know that coercion is often most effective when combined with some form of reward for cooperation. Thus, groups may simultaneously use violence to enact both 'coercive and cooperative' forms of order (Arias and Barnes, 2017). Coercion – backed up by physical violence – ensures that communities do not interfere with the groups' illicit activities. At the same time, the group uses its coercive power to do things like keep public order or resolve disputes. These services create an added incentive for the population to cooperate. Using this kind of 'carrot and stick' approach also enables some groups to enhance their claim to legitimacy (explored further below).

All that said, coercion – whether exercised through overt acts of violence or the signalling of criminal group authority – is a central element of criminal groups' interactions with communities. This capacity for violence is ultimately the main source of power these groups hold over communities. Against this background of criminal groups' coercive capacity, they engage in legitimacy-building activities or bargaining processes with civilians.



### 3.2 Claiming and cultivating legitimacy

Even if a given group's primary motivation is profit, it may still seek legitimacy in the eyes of communities. Violence and coercion can cow people into submission, but are often not sufficient on their own. In addition, achieving social and behavioural control is costly to maintain in the long run and brute violence can fuel resistance. Hence, some groups offer services that are supposed to enhance their legitimacy and thus their control. Similar to contexts in which more politically motivated armed groups are active (Weigand, 2022), practices such as dispute resolution or providing other basic goods and services are common techniques for such purposes. While criminal groups can exist within or alongside states, it is often in areas where the state has left a 'legitimacy vacuum' that criminal groups are best placed to exploit low levels of state presence for their own ends. In the process, they may be viewed as more legitimate than the state in the eyes of communities.

Drawing on their coercive capacity, criminal groups provide security to build legitimacy. The security provided by some criminal groups may simply be protection (from the violence they, or others, might inflict). JNIM (*Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*) in Burkina Faso, a group that, despite its Islamist credentials, engages in extensive illicit financial activities and cooperates with local criminal groups in cross-border smuggling, is one example. JNIM also gains significant legitimacy among communities (and thus cooperation) by facilitating petty smugglers and protecting them against bandits and security forces (Beevor, 2022). The Opec Boys, 'social bandits' examined by Titeca (2022) in Uganda, use their authority to negotiate with the government on behalf of groups such as market vendors or motorcycle taxi drivers. However, security provision may also be more institutionalised than that. For example, research by Arias and Rodrigues (2006) shows that some gangs in Brazil enforce a certain rule of law, which results in an improved sense of security.

Dispute resolution is another key practice applied by criminal groups to build legitimacy. For example, Lessing (2021) shows how *debates* (tribunals) – originally set up by the criminal group PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital) in Sao Paulo, Brazil, as an internal governance mechanism within prisons – took on a wider governance function and became an important resolution mechanism for community disputes.

Some criminal groups may also facilitate social activities. Barnes (2022) illustrates how so-called '*baile funk* parties' in Rio de Janeiro provide both an opportunity for revenue-generating drug sales and a source of entertainment for residents. Meanwhile, Densley (2012) showed how many street gangs in London had initially started as 'recreational groups' and continued to offer a range of social activities for their members.

Furthermore, criminal groups may provide basic goods to build local-level support – such as the food aid delivered by Italian mafias and Mexican cartels during Covid-19. These instances of service provision cited by the media at the outset of the pandemic often turned out to be limited and short-lived (Sampaio, 2021). In other cases, however, such as with Italian mafias, the delivery of services is an old and established practice of governance and population control (Tondo, 2020).

In areas of weak state control or in areas in which the state is seen as predatory or corrupt, criminal groups may enjoy greater *de facto* legitimacy among some communities than the state. This can be a boon for recruitment. For instance, members of Kuluna gangs in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, cite a sense of injustice and frustration as driving their decision to join, alongside a desire for security which the state is unable to provide (Lagrange and Vircoulon, 2021).

Finally, it is important to note that the state-defined boundaries between ‘illicit’ and ‘licit’, ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’, or ‘criminal’ and ‘lawful’ may not reflect the perceptions of legitimacy and lived experience of communities. Communities may not perceive a given group as being ‘criminal’ – particularly when the state itself is not seen as a legitimate authority (Titeca, 2022) or when the best options for income generation are criminalised (Herbert et al., 2022).

Criminal groups, while they may not seek the overthrow of the state, do nevertheless in many cases engage in legitimacy-building practices more conventionally associated with ‘political’ armed groups. While these practices, in most cases, do not develop to the level of ‘competitive state building’, in cases of low levels of state presence or widespread state failure to provide essential services, criminal groups can take on the role of a ‘legitimate authority’ in the eyes of communities, a status which they can exploit to further their core, revenue-generating aims.

### **3.3 Bargaining**

When there is little alternative, and people cannot simply avoid criminal groups, they must find ways to navigate their presence. In some instances, they may seek to bargain with criminal actors. Whether and how communities bargain varies widely. In general, this will likely be dependent on the specificities of the political economies in which they are embedded, the time horizons of criminal groups (that is, if they are entrenched and pervasive), and the degree of criminal capture of the police and the state (Moncada, 2022). Criminality may become a seemingly irrevocable feature of everyday life, through its embeddedness, omnipresence and stubborn resilience. As with entrenched insurgencies, if communities believe criminals will be around forever, and the state can do nothing to stop them, then people are likelier to believe that they must simply find a way to deal with them (Jackson and Minoia, 2018; Kalyvas, 2006; Sergi, 2022).

Criminal group ‘members’ (just like those of at least some ‘political’ armed groups) are often deeply embedded in the wider population and are part of society. They might be a person’s neighbour, brother or son. Moreover, individuals may engage in ad hoc criminal activities or have ambiguous links, raising questions about who should be considered a ‘member’ of a given gang or group. As in Dennis Rodgers’s (2016) work on gangs in Nicaragua, young people may work occasionally and irregularly for gangs (for example, selling drugs) or, as in his study of former gang member Bismarck, may retain skills (including a willingness to solve problems through violence) acquired during their time in a gang.

These multiple and overlapping social linkages are referred to elsewhere as ‘intimacies’ (Naef, 2023). Zubillaga et al. (2015) write of a woman in Venezuela negotiating for protection with gang members, who were in fact her sons and nephews. Familial links may also bind communities to criminal groups (just as they can to rebel groups) – if a group member is killed or imprisoned, families may rely on criminal groups to financially support them (Bangerter 2010). These relationships themselves produce and maintain certain forms of social order, entrenching armed groups at the same time as they provide ordinary people with leverage to engage with them (Jensen and Rodgers, 2022). Relationships also provide leverage. In El Salvador, one strategy used by communities to negotiate down the ‘taxes’ levied on them by gangs was to emphasise the shared social and familial ties between gang members and communities (Moncada, 2022).

Because communities are often seen as victims of crime (or of state failure to address crime), the ways they exert agency are often overlooked. For instance, Herbert et al. (2022) illustrate how communities successfully engage with criminal groups. One way of understanding this bargaining dynamic is to think about it as a form of capital (see Jackson et al., 2022). Capital can be social (such as family links), economic (for example, paying money, providing some economic asset the group wants) or political (for instance, through influence with, or the power conferred by, the state). Depending on who they are, different community members can draw on these different forms of capital. An individual might use family links to negotiate protection, as the woman in Venezuela did, or draw on community relationships to bargain down demands for money, as in the example from Nicaragua. Some people may actively use the dynamics between the state and criminal groups to their advantage – they may, for example, sanction criminal groups perceived to have failed to fulfil their governance function by calling the police (Gordon, 2020). Further empirical research – alongside deeper consideration of the ways in which criminal groups function as complex political, social and economic actors – is essential for better understanding the ways in which communities respond to and engage with criminal groups.

## 4 Implications

This paper has explored relations between criminal groups and communities, from a perspective that situates criminal groups more firmly within the broader category of armed groups as a whole. It has argued that instead of focusing on categories such as ‘criminal’ or ‘political’, we must look at motives and practices. Regarding motives, we can assume that armed groups will have a range of different motivations at the same time, and that these will be both political and profit-making in nature. The order in which these motives are prioritised matters, as do the group’s overall objectives. A complementary focus on the practices and techniques that different groups use to achieve their objectives provides a basis for comparing how communities navigate life amid armed groups – regardless of whether we consider them to be ‘political’ or ‘criminal’.

We have focused on three practices – coercion, legitimacy and bargaining – which we believe can form the basis for further comparative as well as conceptual work in this area. Understanding the similarities between – and differences among – armed groups is essential to those working on conflict, civilian protection, aid provision and peacebuilding. Siloed ways of thinking have obscured a deeper understanding of how armed groups exploit state weakness and seek to control populations. With growing recognition of the blurred lines between conflict and crime, more integrated approaches are needed. Further comparative research can yield important insights for protection, peacebuilding, the rule of law and security.

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