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Citizen Security and Organized Crime

The Rebellion of Criminal Networks: ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

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Organized crime in Latin America is undergoing constant and substantial changes, positioning itself as a relevant strategic actor in the hemisphere, reconfiguring geographic borders, penetrating political and social structures, playing a significant role in the economy, and threatening progress in building the state and strengthening democratic systems. Although its manifestations differ from place to place, organized crime is present in every country in the region and has become one of the biggest challenges governments face. To combat organized crime governments debate whether to employ traditional—mostly “iron fist”—policies or adopt newer—and largely unproven—alternatives.

In light of the constant changes in criminal structures and their capacities to learn, innovate, and adapt, it is useful to examine the factors that explain these constant shifts as well as how such organizations have managed to expand their influence and presence despite the efforts and policies implemented by Latin American states. This essay introduces a concept—the “rebellion” of criminal networks—to explain the current dynamic of and context within which organized crime operates. The essay concludes with ten recommendations for addressing this challenge.

The Rebellion of Criminal Networks

The current dynamic is marked by efforts of various criminal factions to break out of a state of subordination (internal and external), establish links to the global economy, raise levels of profit,

reduce the number of intermediaries, diversify products and investments, and, to the extent necessary, reconfigure the legal as well as institutional order. The era of the rebellion of criminal networks is characterized by: 1) disputes between criminal factions that opt to compete rather than to reach agreements; 2) reprisals of criminal groups against the state; 3) the search of “legal” actors for greater involvement in criminal activities; 4) the violent expression of criminal density² and social accumulation of violence and illegality;³ and 5) the replacement of *capos* (bosses) with “brokers.”

The rebellion of criminal networks produces changes in the way criminal organizations establish and manage their illegal connections, in the stability of hierarchies, in the means of communicating between and among networks, and the very context in which criminal groups operate. Even as criminal organizations act as mafia-like organizations at the local level, at the national and international levels they operate as companies that provide illegal goods and services and adopt more fluid, flexible, and less hierarchical organizational forms.

At the micro level, the *capo*—the boss of the cartel (or *comando* in Portuguese) maintains clientelistic relationships not only with those who have power but also with those who need access to power. At the national and international or “macro” level, the main figure is the “broker” who manipulates information, maintains key contacts, and establishes connections among illegal factions and also between the legal and illegal worlds. As

¹This bulletin is based on the Spanish-language article “La rebelión de las redes: El crimen organizado en América Latina y las fuerzas que lo modifican” written by the author for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. This summary is also available in Spanish.



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Nigel Coles has observed, “It’s not what you know – It’s who you know that counts.”⁴ The formation of the criminal network displaces attention from the *capos*, who administer territories, people, goods, and resources, to “brokers” who can manipulate information and connect the local with the regional and global, without having the responsibility of leading a criminal organization. The study of criminal networks in Mexico and Colombia by Luis Jorge Garay and Eduardo Salcedo underscores this aspect: the authors conclude that the most important actors in the criminal social network are not necessarily the most central figures or even those occupying the highest position in a hierarchy,⁵ but rather, those that connect illegal factions with legal institutions.⁶

The threat of organized crime is more severe in countries that combine a high criminal density with a long history of accumulated illegality and violence. As noted earlier, criminal density is understood as the existence of armed local and national organizations with high territorial presence and capacity for corruption. The social accumulation of violence and illegality is defined as the effect that the existence of criminal organizations (who provide illegal goods and services and dispute the state for the legitimate use

of force) has on people’s attitude, values, and perceptions about criminal activities over time (for example, tolerance of violence and lack of respect for the rule of law).

Density and accumulation are two concepts that help explain the persistent presence of organized crime in Latin America. The current situation in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) can be understood in the context of a historical process of criminal development which becomes a public concern when it is expressed in a violent manner. The increase in violence and the growing presence of criminal factions in countries characterized by a low exposure to transnational organized crime, such as Costa Rica and Peru, are warning signs: if governments do not respond quickly and in appropriate fashion, criminal density could increase, stimulating the process of social accumulation of violence and illegality.

Recent changes in the criminal world are linked to the speed with which illegal factions are evolving and their capacity to develop connections with the legal world and with international markets. Although the majority of criminal organizations operate within a

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Citizen insecurity poses a rising challenge to democratic governance and the exercise of citizenship throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Homicide rates are among the highest in the world and citizens throughout the region cite crime, followed by unemployment, as the dominant concern of daily life. Transnational organized crime, including but not limited to narco-trafficking, exacerbates levels of violence, compromises state institutions, and undermines democratic quality and the rule of law.

The Latin American Program fosters comparative research and dialogue among scholars and policymakers from throughout the Americas regarding local, national, and international public policies to address citizen insecurity and related efforts to strengthen institutions, the observance of human rights, and the rule of law. The Program also focuses special attention on the changing sub-regional dynamics of organized crime and explores ways to diminish its pernicious effects on governance and insecurity. The Latin American Program sponsors a blog on citizen security, www.sccla.wordpress.com, which has become a key resource for citizens and public officials throughout the region.

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comfort zone that is defined by the theft of national products and rents, more and more structures are willing to branch out into new areas of the illegal economy. This implies broadening their influence within society and seeking greater autonomy within the criminal world. State action against specific illegal economies, such as drug trafficking, shifts organized crime into other criminal activities.

Through this process of change criminal organizations gain greater autonomy; that is, they move from stealing existing goods to supplying illicit products that society demands, despite legal prohibitions. Crime no longer simply involves the exploitation of defenseless citizens who are victims of property theft, but rather, the creation of consumer markets for unregulated goods, thereby establishing a symbiotic relationship between the worlds of legality and illegality. The greatest profits come from selling illegal goods and services. Activities such as “express” kidnapping and extortion constitute economies of “subsistence” that maintain a base of the criminally “employed,” a phenomenon that has a significant impact on public safety.

The result of the rebellion of criminal networks is the fragmentation and increased competition among criminal groups. These two factors have repercussions not only for the configuration of the criminal world but also for the way that the state attempts to combat it. The availability of illegal merchandise and weapons, the weak territorial presence of the state, the emergence of a third generation of criminals willing to defy traditional hierarchies, and high levels of corruption within the security forces all contribute to the dizzying pace of transformation of the criminal world.

What are the dynamics behind the reorganization of criminal networks? What explains their desire to rebel? What has led criminal groups to get involved in other illegal activities? Four factors contribute to this rebellion:

1. Power vacuums resulting from the implosion of criminal factions or from state action against criminal groups;
2. The availability of clandestine networks with experience in the trafficking of illegal goods and services;
3. The emergence of local illegal markets characterized by growing supply and a constant demand for illegal products and services;
4. State offensives in the midst of institutional fragility and the willingness of illegal clandestine networks to confront the state.

Power vacuums resulting from the implosion of criminal factions or from state action

The capture or death of the leader of a criminal organization rarely leads to its demise. Typically, the absence of the leader creates both a vacuum of power and a process of fragmentation of the criminal enterprise. In this situation, one or more factions attempt to preserve the established order, while others seek to take advantage of the situation to rebel in an attempt to seize control.

The capacity of the state in Latin America is limited and it is difficult to sustain an offensive against all criminal groups simultaneously. In general, state actions are directed against only a portion of the criminal organizations at any one time, creating an advantage for the criminal organizations not targeted by the state. Offensives by the state do not necessarily lead to the routing of criminals or an end to their life of crime. Rather, state offensives provide an opportunity for the renovation of criminal structures and the emergence of previously subordinate illegal factions.

It is critical to understand that organized crime is not defined by the existence of a specific structure but rather by a system of relationships. The criminal faction—whether called a cartel, band, *comando*, or gang—is only the most visible part of the system, but in no way constitutes its totality. The system is based on a series of complex relationships that connect the legal and illegal worlds and that are rooted in the deficiencies of the state that allow for the emergence of autonomous powers based on illegal activities. Thus, the arrest of leaders or even of an important number of members of a faction can have a temporary effect, without signifying the disarticulation of what Alan Block calls the “social system” of organized crime. According to Block, the social system “refers to the notion that organized crime is a phenomenon recognizable by reciprocal services performed by professional criminals, politicians, and clients. Organized crime is thus understood to lie in the relationships binding members of the underworld and upper world institutions and individuals.”⁷ Organized crime is thus a form of social organization, which revolves around the production, distribution, and consumption of illegal goods.

Toine Spapen makes another important contribution to our understanding by proposing the concept of “criminal Macro Network.” He defines such networks as “the set of individuals who have the motivation, skills, and access to the resources needed to engage suc-



cessfully in organized criminal activities. These individuals need to be directly or indirectly connected by criminal relations.”⁸ Spapen assumes that not every member of the macro network is actually involved in criminal acts all the time. As he argues, “the criminal macro network is present before the actual illegal activity commences, and it remains in place after the criminal business process is completed.”⁹ This is an important observation: according to Spapen, criminal relations are constructed from existing relationships, which may include family ties, political relations, and economic ties.

Hence, actions against the most visible criminal factions result in a temporary reduction in their physical presence, but leave intact the clandestine networks with connections between the worlds of legality and illegality; these networks include politicians linked to criminal activities, judges, and prosecutors prepared to alter sentences for money, policemen and military personnel involved in illegal economies and citizens who consume illegal goods and services.

The availability of clandestine networks with experience in the trafficking of illegal goods and services

Throughout Latin America the ready availability of clandestine networks with experience in trafficking illegal goods and services is key to understanding the mutation of criminal organizations, their learning processes, and their adaptation to change. “New” criminal organizations are generally born out of existing networks engaged in contraband, corruption, or clientelism; these extralegal systems of relationships emerge as autonomous spheres of power.

Although it might appear obvious, it is important to remember that organized crime does not emerge in abstract situations, but rather, where states lack the capacity to execute and enforce their own laws. Moreover, some criminal structures originated from within the state, going through a process of degeneration and privatization for the purpose of engaging in crime. In some cases state security forces charged with combating crime have provided criminal factions with weapons, personnel, networks, territory, and immunity. Some have even assumed a wholly illegal identity.

Organized crime does not have a monopoly on infiltrating institutions, impeding and weakening the justice system, or channeling public resources to benefit certain individuals and organizations. What

criminal groups do is take advantage of and deepen the vulnerabilities of Latin American states, reproducing relationships of clientelism, expanding networks of corruption, and reducing the public attributes of the state.

The relationship between the state and crime can be understood from two perspectives: the rise of crime in areas of state weakness; and the rise of crime in partnership with state agents. In the first instance, the problem is that the state is not present. In the second instance the issue is that the state works in collusion with criminals or criminal activity emanates from state actors themselves.

Guillermo O’Donnell, for whom the unequal application of the rule of law and the absence of territorial control gives rise to areas in which violence has a central role, adheres to the first perspective. According to O’Donnell, in certain areas the presence of the state is weak or non-existent, the rights of citizens are not respected, and there are no institutions to ensure compliance with the law. In these territories, power that has been privately exercised reproduces discriminatory and authoritarian practices.¹⁰ In such areas, communities are ruled by criminal organizations which impose a certain form of social control; the state is absent (or almost absent) and criminals unilaterally determine relationships between populations and criminal structures.

Political scientist Desmond Arias takes the second viewpoint. Referring to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, he writes: “persistently high levels of violence... result not from the failure of institutions, [but] rather, from Networks that bring criminals together with civic leaders, politicians, and policemen... Rather than creating “parallel states” outside of political control, these Networks link trafficker dominated areas with Rio’s broader political and social systems.”¹¹ According to Arias, focusing only on institutional failure leads one to ignore the active political constellations that promote violence and resist meaningful reforms. In Arias’s view, the relationship between criminals and politicians does not occur directly but is mediated by local brokers who provide politicians access to a source of votes. Organized crime uses existing leaders in the community to establish connections with politicians and residents. These local leaders also help traffickers to gain control of non-profit activities and mediate conflicts with citizens.¹²

Arias’s interpretation calls into question the notion of the absent state and includes political actors as part of the criminal system. Ultimately, however, the two

perspectives are not incompatible. In the same city or country, it is possible to find areas where the state is absent and also areas where the institutional presence has been reconfigured in ways that facilitate criminal activities.¹³ In the scenario of the absent state, organized crime arises to fill a vacuum of power and succeeds in creating a parallel state; the relationship with communities is authoritarian and based on subordination. In the scenario of the complicit (or agent) state, the relationship between the community and criminal structures is more complex, with the intermediation of community leadership and the existence of institutions that continue to operate but at the service of illegal activities.

Political scientist Ming Xia, analyzing criminal organizations in China, states that to maximize organizational efficiency and security (to evade punishment), criminals have to first approach their institutional environment. Depending on the nature of the state, the availability and structure of the market, and the characteristics of the family structure, criminal groups will identify their niche to survive and adopt a specific organizational type to thrive. As Xia writes "...they either apply a strategy of difference so that they invent unconventional, flexible, and indiscernible organizational forms to minimize disturbance to and attention from the hegemonic institutions; or, they apply a strategy of mimicry to adopt the forms and symbols from hegemonic institutions to camouflage the parasitic and sabotaging nature of their activities."¹⁴

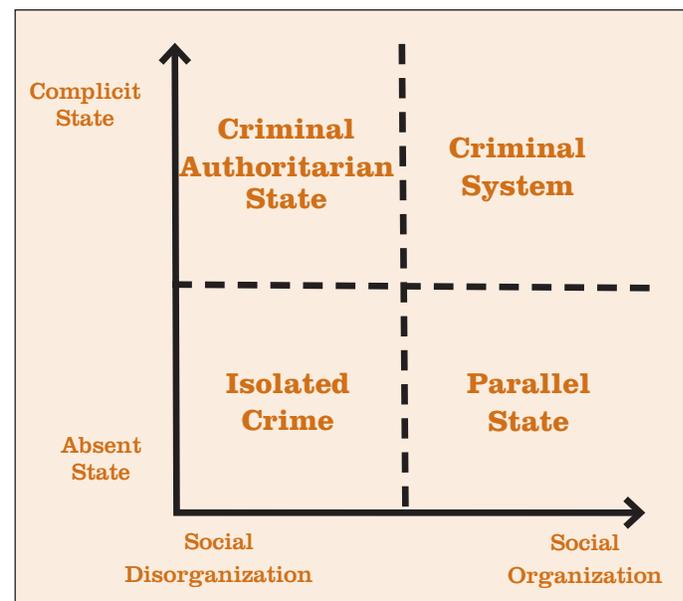
What is interesting about Xia's thesis is the idea that organized crime operates according to existing structures, adapting to or using these structures or creating new forms of relationships with society. Organized crime can operate in contexts of high or low social organization¹⁵ and high or low state presence. The combination of these alternatives reveals four possible scenarios:

Isolated Crime: In this scenario, the state is absent and there is no specific type of social organization. This situation can be found in isolated areas with little or no population density. In some cases, the development of specific criminal activities does not need the involvement of communities. An example is the production of cocaine in forested areas or the transit of illicit goods through unpopulated zones without institutional presence.

Criminal Authoritarian State: This scenario reflects the combination of state institutions that have been captured by criminal organizations and a context of social disorganization. In this situation, illegal groups enforce their rules and impose an illegal order on communities. The population is not cohesive and the social environment is broken. Examples of this scenario can be found in areas in which organized crime in complicity with the state disrupts society in a violent manner, without generating linkages with local inhabitants, who are subject to collective fear.

Parallel State: In this case, the state is absent and social cohesion is based on illegal activities. Criminal groups fulfill functions of the state, providing services, resolving conflicts, and imposing order. There is no institutional presence and such institutions are rejected by the inhabitants themselves. This situation can be found in some *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, some *comunas* of Medellín, and also in some municipalities in Mexico.

Criminal System: In this scenario both the state and society are organized around criminal activities. Legality is displaced by a culture of illegality in which social, political, and economic relations are subjected to a new logic. Institutions exist but their function is reconfigured to encourage criminal actions. The community has direct connections to the illegal economy. This situation can be found in areas of Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, as well as in suburbs of major Latin American cities, where there is a heavy presence of drug trafficking or other forms of organized crime.



Source: Elaborated by the author

The elaboration of these various scenarios helps to establish a differentiated analysis that accounts not only for the presence of organized crime in areas of low institutional presence and high social disruption, but also for territories in which institutions are present and communities are articulated. Each variant requires a particular public policy suited to the needs of the specific situations. It is not always the case that more institutional presence and more community activities constitute the best alternative for fighting criminal organizations. On the contrary and quite paradoxically, strengthening institutions and communities can further strengthen organized crime and provide more resources to protect and propagate illegal networks.

The emergence of local illegal markets characterized by growing supply and a constant demand for illegal products and services

Notwithstanding differences among countries, over the last decade all of Latin America has experienced the robust growth of domestic illegal markets. Although the profit margins are lower than those obtained through the export of illegal goods, domestic illegal markets offer criminal groups a number of advantages. Local markets 1) provide a constant and easily accessible cash flow; 2) involve the contracting of a local labor force, thereby providing criminal organizations with a social base; 3) serve as effective vehicles for the laundering of assets; and 4) interact with the informal sector (which is quite large in many Latin American countries), thereby opening up possibilities for infiltrating the legal economy.

The small-scale sale of drugs (*narcomenudeo*) has been identified throughout the region as a primary source of public insecurity, linked to an increase in crimes such as robbery committed by young addicts seeking to finance drug consumption. This has created the false assumption that domestic drug trafficking is *barrio*-based and it should be treated just as a local or municipal issue.¹⁶

Four recent changes have fostered the emergence of local markets for illegal drugs. First, interdiction efforts and an increase in attempts to seize international narcotics shipments have forced incentives for drug traffickers to sell their products in the internal market. Second, illegal drugs have become a form of payment for other illicit activities. Third, drug traffickers who once purchased

raw materials such as coca leaf now buy processed drugs, leading to a corresponding shift by peasant farmers and communities towards the processing of narcotics in small-scale labs or “kitchens.” A final change involves the development of new drug routes, with cities serving as way stations to collect and ship illicit drugs destined principally for the United States and Europe.

Latin American countries are feeling the pressure of criminal organizations and economies that establish themselves at the local level, creating illegal markets, providing services, supplanting state functions, and, when necessary, challenging the state. The idea that non-producer countries serve only as drug corridors and are otherwise relatively unaffected by drug trafficking is now obsolete.

Criminal organizations have opted to create local markets for their products and are attempting to establish a social base among the marginalized sectors of Latin American society. They take advantage of the informal sector to launder their assets and are availing themselves of trade liberalization both to inject illicit goods into new markets (especially in Eastern Europe and Asia) and to acquire low-cost contraband. The consumption of illegal products in Latin America appears to be on the rise whereas state actions, rather than having a decisive effect on containing supply, appear mostly to have forced the illegal trade to interior areas of the country.

State offensives in the midst of institutional fragility and the willingness of illegal clandestine networks to confront the state

The term “failed state” is used freely by those who argue that none of the approaches taken thus far has been effective and that the institutions of the state have failed in their duties. The term is often used carelessly and with little knowledge of the realities of Latin American countries. Quite apart from any evaluation of the role and capacity of the state in countries of the region, there are three characteristics upon which analysts seem to agree: a) the weakness of institutions; b) the uneven presence of the state in areas of the national territory; and c) the cooptation of the state (in most cases only partial and selectively focused).

This is the framework within which criminal organizations have operated. The context undergoes changes as governments in the region work to improve institutions and recover state-ness (under-

stood primarily as a recovery of the monopoly on violence). Whether or not one agrees with the extent of change or the means adopted to achieve it, it is difficult to ignore the increased willingness of governments and political actors to confront the challenge of public insecurity. Actions taken by security forces throughout the region have broken existing equilibriums, altering the conditions within which clandestine networks operate and frequently leading to increased levels of violence.

Common sense suggests that criminal organizations prefer to avoid confrontation with the state, which is costly and disrupts business.¹⁷ But what happens when actions by the state impede the functioning of the illegal economy? In such cases, criminal organizations calculate that the cost of tolerating the government actions is greater than the cost of fighting back. This implies an additional calculation on the part of criminal groups: that they have the ability to force the state into make concessions. This assumption is more likely to prove true in situations in which the government decides to confront organized crime but lacks the institutional capacity to do so.

When organized crime groups opt to confront the state, openly defying its authority and legitimacy,

they behave as adversaries acting in defiance of the law and eroding institutions in order to achieve economic goals. The armed wing of criminal organizations gains notoriety, adopting tactics and strategies similar to those of insurgent groups. However, analyzing criminal groups through the lens of counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism distorts their nature and limits our understanding.

The current situation in Latin America requires overcoming the main stream vision of some security circles in Washington, D.C., which give primacy to military and police responses, often ignoring the complexity of a phenomenon with deep social and political roots and connections. More creative responses are needed to prevent the phantom of a previous era's "National Security Doctrines" from reappearing, this time to combat organized crime. It is of special concern that the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere in December 2011 approved a counter-insurgency plan for Mexico aimed treating drug cartels like terrorist organizations in order to combat them. Although the fate of this initiative in the Senate remained uncertain, it constituted a bad signal for a region such as

Equating organized crime with insurgent or terrorist groups ignores that:

- The motivations of organized criminal groups are economic, not political; their aim is not to take power, but to reshape it to favor and advance the development of illegal economies. Paradoxically, the same people who defined the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) guerrilla group as drug traffickers now also define Mexican cartels as insurgency groups.
- Violence is a manifestation of organized crime, a tool rather than an end in itself, and is directed at protecting or expanding illegal activities that generate profit. Some areas with a high presence of organized crime can have low levels of violence.
- Organized crime cannot be defined by the actions it takes in response to state offensives or in confronting other illegal groups. The reality is much more complex, with connections between legality and illegality, formality and informality, in contexts marked by institutional weakness and the deterioration within society of a culture of legality.
- Whether focused on combatting drug trafficking or carried out under a rubric of counterinsurgency, strategies to combat organized crime have failed and have come at a high cost, particularly to the observance of human rights.¹⁸ As the report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy states, "The global war on drugs has failed... vast expenditures on criminalization and repressive measures directed at producers, traffickers and consumers of illegal drugs have clearly failed to effectively curtail supply or consumption."¹⁹ In March 2009 in Mexico, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton similarly noted that "Clearly, what we've been doing has not worked," adding that the United States' "insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade."²⁰ Most citizens of the United States agree with this perception: an October 2008 national survey conducted by the polling firm IBOPE Zogby and the Inter-American Dialogue found that 76 percent of likely voters considered the so-called war on drugs to be "failing."²¹



Latin America that demands a new approach to deal with organized crime.

Ten Recommendations for Responding to the Challenge of Organized Crime

1. Change the way “success” is measured

Statistics on deaths, arrests, and drug seizures must be complemented by an approach that gives priority to institutional presence, the recovery of territories, and the ways that local communities are being affected by illegal economies. It does not help to capture cartel leaders, arrest thousands of criminals, and confiscate hundreds of weapons if, at the end of the day, organized crime continues to operate in the same areas and the whole context of illegality remains unaffected by state action. One key indicator would be a decrease in the number of territories in which criminal factions are operating.

2. Contain the expansion of local illegal markets

To date, policies to combat illegal markets have emphasized the international dimension of interrupting the trafficking of illegal goods from areas of production to areas of consumption. Very little attention has been paid to the formation of local markets, an ever greater focus of local criminal groups. Shifting focus would require paying less attention to small-scale dealers and addicts and going after big suppliers. Additionally, to the extent that citizens take responsibility for the consequences of consuming illegal goods—the profits of which can end up financing criminal organizations—the market would contract.

3. Attacking “black holes” in the fight against organized crime

An important first step would be to open a discussion about who benefits from criminal activity, who controls the resources from illegal markets, and how such resources are being spent. Important strides have been made in several countries, but the arrest of businessmen, public officials, or candidates with ties to criminal activities continues to be a rare occurrence. Numerous “black holes” in the fight against transnational organized crime remain: the illegal financing of political campaigns, money laundering, the channeling of public resources to criminal groups, and the ongoing activities of companies that profit from the sale of chemicals used to produce cocaine and synthetic drugs or from the proliferation, sale, and circulation of small arms.

4. Confront illegal economies in their totality and move beyond the drug trafficking “monologue”

The debate over how to confront drug trafficking has been in many ways a monologue. Generally only one point of view is presented (be it prohibition, legalization, “iron fist,” or prevention); there is no dialogue with those of opposing views and almost always the connection between drug-trafficking and other illegal economies is downplayed or ignored. This situation derives from the assumption, erroneous in certain circumstances or countries, that doing away with illegal drug trafficking will put an end to crime. However, the evidence shows that other illegal economies are expanding and that criminal groups have branched out, taking control of these activities so they can begin to break their dependence on drug trafficking.

5. Fill vacuums of power with functioning institutions

Establishing the physical presence of public security forces in criminal organizations’ areas of influence is only a first step. The state’s offensive must be backed up with institutions that reestablish trust with citizens and recognize both the needs and capacities of communities. Absent such efforts, police and military operations will bring only partial victories, notably the temporary withdrawal of criminal groups (something that happens when a state of siege is declared) or the incursion of new factions. The critical question is whether Latin American states have the capacity to establish an institutional presence in remote communities where criminal groups have control. The answer depends on two key factors: the efficiency and transparency of public spending, and the commitment of political and economic elites to providing the funding necessary for the state to carry out its basic duties.

6. Prevent the recruitment of youth by criminal structures

The recruitment of young people, primarily from marginal urban areas, constitutes one of the principal ways that criminal organizations in Latin America renew and refresh their ranks. A priority should be the establishment of early warning systems that alert authorities when youth are being co-opted by criminal factions and that help identify the geographic areas most affected. In the short term, the goal is to provide young people with protection; but over the long term, the challenge is to provide employment opportunities. There are a number of successful experiences

in the region that can be shared and replicated, taking into account the particularities of each case.

7. Shield the informal sector from the influence of organized crime

Ideally, the goal should be to reduce the informal sector to the absolute minimum. In practice however, the informal sector in Latin America has grown to such massive proportions—in some countries seven out of every ten citizens are employed in the informal sector—that formalizing these activities or creating new employment is a medium-term goal. In the short term, the priority must be to protect the informal sector from the influence of organized crime. This means keeping citizens who work in this sector from getting involved in criminal activities and establishing a dialogue with representatives of the principal “informal guilds” to identify protection mechanisms that would prevent the penetration by criminal factions. Repression of citizens employed in this sector serves only to further distance them from state institutions, ultimately driving them towards the illegal economy.

8. Establish systems to monitor deserters from the police and army in areas where organized crime groups are active

The desertion of members of the police and military who then join the ranks of criminal organizations is something that can be monitored and prevented. In most cases, criminal groups target for recruitment members of specific units and from certain geographic areas. This recruitment is generally coordinated from within the security forces. Thus, needed measures include good intelligence and counter-intelligence, incentives for police officers and soldiers to report recruitment efforts, and the adoption of specific penalties for members of the security forces who get involved in criminal activity. Preventing desertion implies improving working conditions, particularly for the police.

9. Interrupt the flow of weapons from North to South

Legislative reform is essential to reduce the flow of weapons to the region. The current political climate in the United States appears to favor lobbyists for the right to bear arms, including assault weapons, over those seeking stiffer penalties for those who make (illegal) purchases of weapons on behalf of third parties and then export the weapons as contraband to other countries. The punishment for this crime rarely

exceeds five years in prison and a fine of \$10,000.²² Adopting laws mandating stiffer sentences for third-party purchases of weapons—or enacting stricter laws to block such purchases—is not the only solution but would constitute an important step.

10. Open spaces for citizenship in the context of violence

The first step is to recognize local communities as active participants in overcoming violence and reducing crime. Local residents must be afforded a leading role in security strategies. This requires transcending a focus on citizens solely as informers and identifying and supporting mechanisms and initiatives that foster resilience and contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric.

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the UK emphasized the need for such efforts in a policy brief, “Broadening Spaces for Citizens in a Violence Context.”²³ The paper recommended working at the community level; undertaking a detailed analysis of power structures, actors, and relationships at the local level; developing intervention strategies that take local particularities into account (renouncing “magic bullets”); recognizing that citizen responses are not always positive in that they can reproduce violence and anti-democratic tendencies; and building on existing community resources and structures that can drive change.

A study by the World Bank, *Violence in the City: Understanding and Supporting Community Responses to Urban Violence*,²⁴ also recognizes the central role played by citizens. The report emphasized the need to restore trust in the community through clear signals that the current situation is going to change; improve relationships between the state and local communities; address the relationship between different types of violence, particularly domestic violence and other more public expressions of violence; and create the necessary conditions for collective action on the part of affected communities.

There is much to be done. Scholars, politicians, and decision-makers must be willing to put aside current intervention strategies as well as the notion that there are magic formulas. The emphasis, rather, should be on learning from the experiences of communities: recognizing their capacities and supporting their efforts.



NOTES

1. Specialist, Department of Democratic Sustainability and Special Missions, Secretariat for Political Affairs, Organization of American States (OAS). The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent positions of the OAS.
2. In this paper, criminal density is understood as the existence of armed local and national organizations with an extensive territorial presence and capacity for corruption. The concept is used by Guillermo Valdez to explain the increase of violence in Mexico. See Guillermo Valdez, “Nuestra Guerra. Una mesa redonda organizada por Nexos sobre violencia e inseguridad,” *Revista Nexos*, No. 407, November 2011.
3. In this paper the social accumulation of violence and illegality is defined as the effect that the existence of criminal organizations (who provide illegal goods and services and dispute the state for the legitimate use of force) has on people’s attitude, values, and perceptions about criminal activities over time (for example, the tolerance of violence and lack of respect for the rule of law). The concept of “social accumulation of violence” is described by Michel Misse to analyze organized crime in Brazil. See Michel Misse, “La acumulación social de la violencia en Río de Janeiro y en Brasil: algunas reflexiones,” in *Co-herencia*, Vol. 7, No. 13, julio-diciembre, 2010, 19-40, published by the Universidad EAFIT, Medellín, Colombia.
4. Nigel Coles, “It’s not what you know – It’s who you know that counts: Analysing Serious Crime Groups as Social Networks,” *British Journal of Criminology*, 2001.
5. As Jackson, Herbrinck, and Jansen state, the implication is therefore that the most important actors in the criminal social network are not necessarily the most central figures or even those occupying the highest position in a hierarchy. See J. L. Jackson, J. C. Herbrinck, and R. Jansen, “Examining Criminal Organisations: Possible Methodologies,” *Transnational Organized Crime*, 2:4, 1996, 86.
6. Luis Jorge Garay and Eduardo Salcedo, “Institutional Impact of Criminal Networks in Colombia and Mexico,” *Criminal Law and Social Change*, 2011. Nov. DOI 10.1007/s10611-011-9338-x.
7. Alan A. Block, *East Side-West Side: Organizing Crime in New York City, 1930-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction), 1994.
8. Toine Spapens, “Macro Networks, Collectives, and Business Processes: An Integrated Approach to Organized Crime,” *European Journal of Crime: Criminal Law and Justice*, 18:2, 2010, 185-215.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Guillermo O’Donnell, “Acerca del Estado, la democratización y algunos problemas conceptuales,” *Desarrollo Económico*, 130, julio-septiembre 1993.
11. Enrique Desmond Arias, “The Dynamics of Criminal Governance: Networks and Social Order in Rio de Janeiro,” *Journal of Latin America Studies*, 38, 2006, 293.
12. *Ibid.*, 302.
13. Garay and Salcedo redefine the capture of the state—understood as a social relationship established in one direction, from unlawful agents outside the state, towards lawful agents inside the state – proposing the concept “co-opted state reconfiguration,” defined as “the action of lawful and unlawful organizations, which through unlawful practices seek to systematically modify from inside the political regime and to influence the drafting, modification, interpretation, and application of the rules of the game and public policies. [These practices are undertaken with the purpose of] obtaining sustained benefits and ensuring that their interests are validated politically and legally, as well as gaining social legitimacy in the long run, although these interests do not follow the founding principle of social welfare.”

14. Ming Xia, "Organizational Formations of Organized Crime in China: Perspective from the State, Markets and Networks," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17:54, February 2008, 5.
15. The term "social disorganization" has a central place in the ecological theory of crime; Sampson and Groves define it as "...the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social control... social disorganization can be measured in terms of the prevalence and interdependence of social networks in a community." See Robert J. Sampson and W. Byron Groves, "Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94:4, Jan. 1989, 774). Where the community is "structurally" cohesive, its ability to identify criminal conduct and control adolescent behavior is greater. Therefore, it is less likely that organized crime will take root. The findings of Browning, Feinberg, and Dietz question the ecological approach, pointing out that communities can be socially organized and still have high rates of crime. According to the authors, "... the density of ties and frequency of exchange in some neighborhoods results in more extensive integration residents who participate in crime into existing community-based social networks. The resulting accumulation of social capital for offenders may limit social control efforts directed against them, resulting in diminished regulatory capacity at the community level." See Christopher R. Browning, Seth L. Feinberg, and Robert D. Dietz, "The Paradox of Social Organization: Networks, Collective Efficacy, and Violent Crime in Urban Neighborhoods," *Social Forces*, 83:2, December 2004, 510. Under this framework, the existing social organization serves as the ideal platform for crime to spread its activities and expand its influence.
16. Ariel Fernando Ávila, "Criminalidad urbana y narcomenudeo," *Revista Arcanos* (Published by Colombia's Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris), 2011, 48 - 61.
17. John Bailey y Matthew Taylor, "Evade, Corrupt, or Confront? Organized Crime and the State in Brazil and Mexico", *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 1, 2, 3-29.
18. U.S.-backed counter-drug military operations began in 1983, when Special Forces were deployed in the Andean region to provide counter-narcotics training to Latin American officers. President Reagan subsequently issued a National Security Decision Directive (NSDD-21) in April 1986, identifying drug trafficking as a "lethal" threat to the United States. From July to November 1986, the Reagan administration set Operation Blast Furnace in motion. Operation Blast Furnace was described by a senior U.S. officer as the "first publicized employment of the United States Army combat forces on the sovereign soil of another country to conduct joint anti-drug efforts." See Col. Michael Abbot, "The Army and the Drug War: Politics or National Security?" *Parameter*, December 1988, quoted by Martin Jelsma, "The Development of International Drug Control: Lessons Learned and Strategic Challenges for the Future," *Global Commission on Drug Policy*, January 2011, 6.
19. Global Commission on Drug Policy, *War on Drugs*, June 2011, <http://www.globalcommissionon-drugs.org/Report>.
20. Quoted by John M. Walsh, "Assessing U.S. Drug Policy in the Americas: Time to Revisit Goals and Strategies," U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, October 15, 2009, 8.
21. Ibid.
22. Julie López, "Seguridad en Centroamérica, a merced de la voluntad política," *Plaza Pública*. <http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/seguridad-en-centroamerica-merced-de-la-voluntad-politica>.
23. Lyndsay McLean-Hilker et. al., "Broadening Spaces for Citizens in a Violence Context," *Citizenship DRC Policy Briefing*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK.
24. World Bank, *Violence in the City: Understanding and Supporting Community Responses to Urban Violence*, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/244362-1164107274725/Violence_in_the_City.pdf



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