Criminal Networks and Security Policies
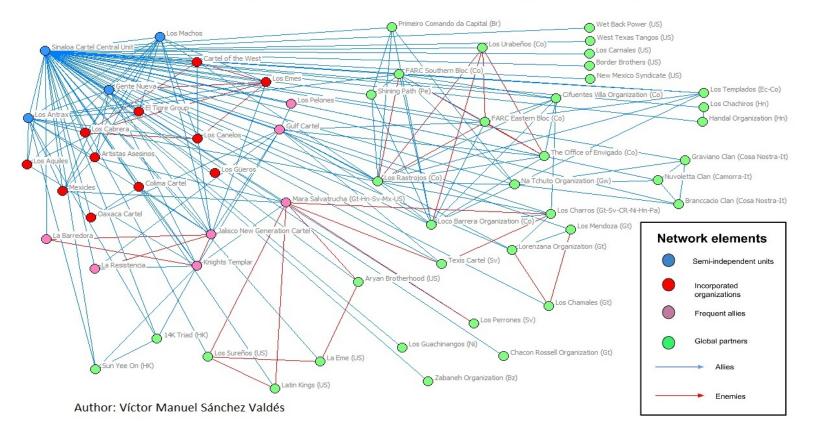
By Victor Manuel Sánchez Valdés

The internal structure of large criminal organizations has changed dramatically in the past 50 years. It is increasingly difficult to find criminal groups with a vertical structure, operating solely in a region or engaged exclusively in criminal activity. Instead, we find very complex structures; criminal groups now share risks, divide tasks, and generate dynamic patterns of alliances that can be reconfigured at any time. Paradoxically, the way many governments are fighting these criminal organizations has scarcely changed over the same period. Usually, government strategies are limited to the local level, and mechanisms designed to combat it as a transnational phenomenon are rarely implemented. It is also assumed that the capture of big bosses (*capos*) must lead to the disappearance of the criminal organizations they head, when empirical evidence and the organizations' architecture indicates that that it is more profitable to seek the dismantling of criminal networks from the simultaneous arrest of several of its members.

This article seeks to defend three fundamental ideas, the first of which is that, because criminal organizations have a complex architecture, the best way to model its internal structure or its relationship with other criminal organizations is through networks rather than through hierarchical diagrams; the second is that, from the network analysis, we can obtain relevant information for the design of public safety policies; and the third is that network analysis can help us build scenarios and is therefore a useful tool to make predictions on the behavior of one or more criminal organizations in certain cases.

We can use an example to explain the ability of these ideas to explain the reality of criminal organizations. It is a network constructed from newspaper sources, which includes 57 criminal groups in early 2012 in alliance or a business relationship with the Sinaloa cartel, but before we start the analysis, some clarifications with respect to this network should be made. The first is that it is an incomplete network; it is almost a given that the Sinaloa Cartel worked with a larger number of organizations in early 2012 than those mentioned here, since it has operators in countries such as Bolivia, Japan, India, Russia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Mozambique, and Ghana, and it would be feasible that the cartel had a business relationship with criminal organizations in those countries. However, we do not know the name of these organizations; therefore, they could not be

included in the chart. The second point is that this network represents a snapshot of a specific time (the first quarter of 2012), which means that the current structure of the network may now be different than that presented in the article. The third clarification that needs to be made is that it is an egocentric network; i.e., it was deliberately built around a criminal organization, in this case, the Sinaloa Cartel, which is why the chart does not show the rest of the organizations' allies.

Partner organizations of Sinaloa Cartel (early 2012).

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Presenting the Sinaloa Cartel's structure as a network has several advantages. The first is that it is evident that the Sinaloa Cartel is not an organization that is present in each of the stages of a criminal activity, such as drug trafficking. However, it has generated a large network of partners with which it shares risks and benefits. Criminal groups in Colombia, Peru, and Hong Kong provide the raw materials, Central American and African organizations work with them by transporting the drugs, and gangs in the United States are responsible for their local distribution. It is also important to note that no link in the chain of drug trafficking is a monopoly organization in that particular activity; i.e., if a supplier, dealer, or transporter fails, the Sinaloa Cartel can easily replace it with another.

It is also important to note that despite the fact that the Sinaloa Cartel has a central position in the network, its relationship with other organizations is not vertical, but rather horizontal. A demonstration of this is that even though all organizations are its allies, they see between

themselves some direct confrontation, which would be unthinkable in a vertical structure where the Sinaloa Cartel could force them to agree to a cessation of hostilities. In a horizontal logic, each organization makes its own decisions, a situation that is not only feasible, but normal.

Another advantage of network analysis is that such structures can represent the role of each organization or actor. It is a tool that allows the authorities to plan their interventions—and differentiate them—from the particular characteristics of each organization. It is not the same to target *Gente Nueva, Los Mexicles* or *Los Artistas Asesinos,* which fulfill the role of hired killers, than to deal with the Cifuentes Villa Organization, around which money laundering mechanisms are constructed; or to have the *Loco Barrera* or *Los Charros* as an objective, since they function as the intermediaries between drug producers and the Sinaloa Cartel.

It is also clear from the chart that it would be a tactical error to focus on fighting only one of the organizations, as the network is so complex that the lack of a node is insufficient to stop the criminal behavior that the strategy seeks to eradicate. Stated differently, neutralizing one of the nodes in the network will hardly affect the exchange between its actors, which is one of the lessons to be drawn from this analysis; it is a mistake that States limit their strategies to combat criminal organizations in their territories. On the contrary, a successful approach requires the design and implementation of transnational policies that involve the exchange of information between governments, and sometimes joint action, to hit several nodes simultaneously.

The last advantage that emerges from network analysis is that it allows for the construction of different scenarios, which in turn are useful to predict events and will therefore help the authorities to implement contingency plans to minimize the potential impact of such events. A particular case clarifies the point: it is likely that the recent capture of the Sinaloa Cartel's leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, generates changes in the structure of this network and, in the process, outbreaks of violence arise within the network. The authorities should be interested in knowing what organizations might be involved in these outbreaks of violence and what geographic areas might be affected by them. Network analysis can help us answer these questions. It is more likely that the outbreaks of violence will arise between those organizations that hold a hostile relationship with each other. For example, we can expect a substantial increase in the clashes between the *Canelos* and the *Cartel del Poniente,* and since these organizations operate in Durango and Coahuila, the Mexican government can anticipate events and send troops to that area to prevent any possible outbreak of violence.

In short, network analysis is an important tool that is available to governments around the world to fight organized crime, but governments need to work on three areas to improve the effectiveness of these tools: i) the staff dedicated to intelligence tasks needs to be trained in the use of such systems and methodologies; ii) the formation of research groups engaged in the thorough study of each criminal organization is required, so that the inputs needed for the construction and analysis of these networks can be generated; and iii) information exchange between agencies and governments is needed to enrich the data used to represent criminal networks.

About the Author

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