

Governing the underworld: How organised crime governs other criminals

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Abstract

This article explores how organised criminal organisations exercise criminal governance over other individual criminals and gangs using lethal and extra-lethal violence. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, over 250 press reports, and an original database on inter-criminal lethal violence, we demonstrate that while these organisations use violence to build their reputation as actors willing to use force, they also provide benefits to other criminals such as financing and protection from state and competitors. This article contributes to the literature on criminal governance by expanding the understanding of how the criminal world is organised and how OCGs use their political influence to legitimize criminal governance.

Keywords: Criminal governance, gangs, organised criminal groups, Barranquilla, Colombia, lethal violence.

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, the paramilitary group United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia [AUC] killed at least 17 people in Barranquilla, Colombia, for engaging in criminal activities such as robbery or drug trafficking (Superior Court of the Judicial District of Bogota, Justice, and Peace Chamber, 2011). Ironically, the AUC was an illegal armed group that relied heavily on drug trafficking and extortion for income (CNMH, 2022).

The above is an example of how organised criminal organisations (OCGs) play a role in regulating certain aspects of community life, including illegality, in many cities. Extensive literature has shown that many OCGs not only extract rents for their criminal activities, but also *govern* civilians in the territories they control (Civico, 2012). These groups provide conflict resolution services (Blattman et al., 2020), enforce codes of behaviour (Arias, 2006), and collect taxes (Naef, 2023). This phenomenon is known as criminal governance (Lessing, 2020).

Scholars have devoted less attention to the way in which OCGs govern criminals that falls outside their own structure. Shelling once noted that 'organized crime is usually monopolized crime' (Shelling, 1971). Nevertheless, OCGs do not always seek to integrate other illegal actors into their structure. For example, an armed group involved in international drug trade may have little interest in incorporating small groups of criminals engaged in housebreaking. Many OCGs do not even attempt to do so (Lessing, 2020).

Among those that do, the literature has identified multiple reasons why this happens. First, armed groups can extract additional rents by taxing certain illegal activities (Leeson and Skarbek, 2010). Second, by controlling other illegal activities, armed groups can gain protection for themselves (Skarbek, 2011). Third, this may also lead to a reduction in violence and, consequently, an increase in the legitimacy of the OCG in the governed population (Arjona, 2017). Finally, there may also be normative commitments that lead to the prohibition of certain forms of violence, such as sexual violence or certain forms of political violence (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014).

In this article, we aim to understand *how* OCGs govern the criminal world rather than *why* they do it. Although violence is a primary mechanism of this form of governance (Campana and Varese, 2018), it appears insufficient to explain why structured organisations capable of violence also adhere to criminal governance (Duncan, 2013). Furthermore, there are few detailed examples in the literature that explain the mechanisms by which OCGs achieve control over illegal activities, even if violence is the only factor.

To gain insight into this phenomenon, we conducted a case study of Barranquilla that utilised a variety of qualitative data sources. These included over 250 press reports, reports from local authorities and the Colombian National Police, an original database on inter-criminal lethal violence, as well as interviews with members and former members of criminal organisations, civilians, and local authorities. Our findings suggest that governance over other criminal actors in Barranquilla is primarily achieved through three mechanisms: i) the utilisation of lethal violence to eliminate competition and enforce rules, ii) the use of public messaging and extra-lethal violence to build a reputation among other

criminals, and iii) the provision of benefits, such as financing or protection from state and other competitors, to co-opt gangs and other criminals.

This article adds to the existing literature on criminal governance by providing new insights into the ways in which the criminal world is organised. Furthermore, it sheds light on the complex relationship between organised crime and the state, showing that OCGs can leverage their political influence and corruption networks to strengthen their forms of criminal governance. In addition to the coexistence between the state and OCGs, state corruption networks play a functional role in legitimizing criminal governance. In the remainder of the article, we briefly introduce the discussions on criminal governance of illegal markets, explain the methodology to be used and show how our argument works through the case study.

Governing the underworld

The governance of the criminal world by OCGs is unsurprising. Given that many of the goods offered in these markets are illegal, the state is naturally absent in their governance. However, these markets are not necessarily chaotic. Quite the contrary: there are rules and customs that are generally adhered to with some level of stability (Butler et al., 2018; Peirce and Fondevila, 2020; Skarbek, 2014). The question is: how did these criminal markets come to function in this way?

Violence is a fundamental resource. In the absence of alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes, violence becomes a crucial tool for organised crime (Friman and Andreas, 1999; Korzé et al., 2022). In order to establish norms that other criminals will abide by, OCGs must be more powerful than their competitors (Campana and Varese, 2018). Hierarchies matter, because only in this way will those at the bottom of the pyramid understand whose orders to follow (Hagan, 2006). These hierarchies often result from conflicts over territorial control (Del Río, 2022), requiring OCGs to secure economic resources, armed personnel, and superior capabilities for using violence (Atuesta, 2017; Skarbek, 2014). Turf wars frequently involve high levels of lethal violence (Trejo and Ley, 2022), so it is not surprising that OCGs seeking to govern criminal activities beyond their own structures must first demonstrate their capacity to use force effectively and efficiently.

A second factor that explains the governance of criminal markets is reputation. Merely establishing norms is insufficient, as those norms must be recognized and adhered to by those *governed*. To achieve this, the armed group must establish mechanisms for enforcing the codes of conduct and make them credible (Gambetta, 1993; Jaspers 2019; Murray, 2013). If an armed group has already established itself through the use of force, it must create a reputation that guarantees the punishment of those who violate its orders (Campana and Varese, 2013; Skarbek, 2014). Thus, 'authority is exercised through the threat of violence, rather than its actual use' (Campana and Varese, 2018, p. 138). OCGs must be willing to use violence and establish a reputation among those they govern to effectively enforce their rules (Gambetta, 2009; Smith and Varese, 2001).

Finally, criminal governance typically involves both demands from armed groups and certain benefits for those who are governed. In addition to coercion, armed groups use certain 'soft power' techniques to consolidate their legitimacy (Lessing, 2022). These public goods that OCGs offer are

more studied for civilians than for criminals (Blattman et al., 2022; Bonilla-Calle, 2022). Nevertheless, it is expected that armed groups offer something in return for their rule, whether it is protection or access to certain illegal rents (Lessing and Willis, 2019; Sanchez and Cruz, 2023). Otherwise, the governed criminals would have incentives to seek a less violent government or even challenge authority with violence if they are capable of doing so (Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018).

Research Design

This research involves a case study approach, which focuses on a detailed examination of a specific instance of the governance of an OCG over other criminal actors, rather than a broader study of the phenomenon in general. While we acknowledge the limitations of single case studies in terms of generalizability (Van Evera, 2016), we believe that this methodological strategy is the most suitable for our purposes in this case. First, a case study will help us gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underlie established theories on the governance of criminal markets by armed groups (Gerring, 2004; Bennett, 2004). Given that many other publications have already studied *why* armed groups rule other criminals, our study offers a fresh perspective on the *how* this phenomenon occurs.

Second, our goal is not to develop a new theory, but rather to deepen our understanding of existing hypotheses. A case study enables us to examine in detail a phenomenon that has been explored unevenly in the literature (Flyvbjerg, 2011), namely, how OCGs govern other criminal actors. Typically, studies of this subject have been undertaken as part of broader research programs. Conducting a case study allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon when few such cases are available for analysis.

We chose Barranquilla (Colombia) as our case study for three reasons. First, it is the fourth largest city in Colombia and the most populous in the Colombian Caribbean region, making it a representative scenario for the phenomenon we are studying. Although criminal governance is not limited to cities, a significant portion of the population living under these regimes is in Latin American cities (Uribe et al., 2022). Therefore, we hope that our research can provide insights into this phenomenon to study other urban scenarios. Second, Barranquilla offers an ideal setting to study the criminal governance of illegal groups due to the presence of a variety of criminal expressions of different sizes and capacities, ranging from transnational groups to localised gangs (LSV, October 06, 2022). Typical cases of a phenomenon, such like this, have a higher possibility of being representative, allowing further possibility of reproduction in other cases (McGill et al., 2023). Finally, over the past 10 years, Barranquilla has been the site of several disputes between armed groups (Trejos-Rosero et al., 2022). The multiplicity of actors and ongoing conflicts allow us to study the variation (or lack thereof) of these criminal governance systems according to the dominant actors.

Empirical Data

The method of information analysis is pattern matching. Our purpose is to link the prediction patterns derived from theory with the patterns observed in our case study (Sinkovics, 2018). We have followed the steps for pattern matching proposed by Almutairi et al. (2014) and Vargas-Bianchi (2020) which involves:

Step 1: Obtaining the expected patterns of the case (Sinkovics et al., 2014): We obtained the expected patterns from previous research on criminal governance, which suggests that armed groups establish norms and enforce them through the use of violence, reputation, and provision of public goods.

Step 2: Transforming the expected patterns into observable manifestations (Trochim, 1985): We transformed the expected patterns into observable manifestations by identifying specific indicators for each pattern, which are summarized in the table above.

Step 3: Assessing whether the expected patterns match the observed patterns (Stuckey, 2015): With the information collected, we compared the expected patterns to the observed patterns and evaluated whether they were consistent or not with the theory.

Details about the data we used is available in the Table 1 above.

[\[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE\]](#)

Organising Crime in Barranquilla

Use of Violence

Using lethal violence is an effective way for an armed group to establish itself as superior to other criminals, as it sends a clear message of strength and power (Campana and Varese, 2018). While different forms of violence may also be used, lethal violence is often the most reliable and accurate information available to understand the relationship between armed groups and other criminals. This is because homicides are usually well-documented and recorded with a high level of accuracy, making it easier to analyse and understand the motives behind them (Trelles and Carreras, 2012). Other forms of violence such as torture, attacks, and forced disappearances may be more difficult to track and document, making them less reliable sources of information for understanding the dynamics of criminal organisations (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2021; Stanley, 2004).

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of our data, we excluded (to the best of our understanding) homicides unrelated to organised crime and homicides by organised crime against non-criminal civilians. Instead, we focused on cases that the Colombian National Police declared to be a 'settling of scores.' This expression is used to denote cases in which both the victims and the perpetrators were involved in criminal activity, and the homicide is suspected to be a way to resolve disputes between them (Cozzi, 2016). By including only such cases in our database, we aimed to eliminate noise and provide a more accurate picture of cross-criminal lethal violence in Barranquilla.

We have identified 212 homicide cases that were categorized as 'settling of scores' and reported in the media with more information on the profiles of the victims between 2013 and 2022. Our database is not comprehensive, as there may be cases that were not reported in the media or not categorized by the police as 'settling of scores.' For instance, between January and November 2014, the police indicated that there were over 60 homicides in the south of the city (El Heraldo, November 16, 2014), but we were only able to identify 23 for the entire year. However, given that our goal is to demonstrate

a pattern of homicidal violence against other criminals rather than to record all cases -which would be nearly impossible given the high levels of impunity in Colombia (LeGrand et al., 2017)-, this does not limit the scope of our analysis.

Violence against rivals

In about 70% of the cases identified, the OCG responsible for the homicide was known as 'Los Costeños'. In 15% of the cases, another OCG called 'Los Papalopez' was responsible. Between 2013 and 2022, 'Los Costeños' and 'Los Papalopez' have been the armed groups that have most attempted to consolidate rule over the rest of the city's criminal organisations.

Prior to 2013, 'Los Costeños' operated as a faction of the 'Los Rastrojos' armed group based in Cali. However, in that year, 'Los Costeños' launched a wave of deadly attacks against their former leaders and took control of the drug sales and extortion markets in the southern neighbourhoods of Barranquilla, forcing the former group out of the city (El Universal, May 24, 2013). At the same time, 'Los Costeños' also targeted another gang known as 'Los 40 Negritos,' which had been dominating the micro-trafficking trade in three neighbourhoods (Primero de Mayo, Las Ferias, and El Ferry). Between 2013 and 2014, 'Los Costeños' killed at least 12 members of 'Los 40 Negritos,' leading the latter group to surrender and become a subsidiary of 'Los Costeños' (Blu Radio, September 11, 2017).

In 2014, a gang called 'Los Papalopez' emerged in Barranquilla in the La Chinita and La Luz neighbourhoods. 'Los Papalopez' and 'Los Costeños' were allied in the city initially. It was only after a member of 'Los Papalopez' was killed that tensions arose and led to a war for control of the neighbourhoods (El Heraldo, May 19, 2014). Between 2014 and 2017, 'Los Costeños' killed over 15 members of 'Los Papalopez', which was estimated to have a membership of around 80 people by the police (El Heraldo, August 05, 2018). This campaign to eliminate 'Los Papalopez' had the effect of nearly wiping out the gang, and in mid-2017, the remaining members of 'Los Papalopez' announced an alliance with 'Los Costeños'. As a result, 'Los Costeños' were able to consolidate their dominance over the entire drug sales and extortion market in the city (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017).

The use of violence to subdue rivals was confirmed by several former OCG members. One of them stated: 'With these people, you can't negotiate without acting first. You need to kill someone to let them know that you are angry' (Interview 3). Another ex-member stated: 'You know that the war is advancing because of the dead. If you get a lot of people killed from your gang, the others start to get upset because they understand that then our gang is not in charge' (Interview 2). An official from a government entity stated: 'Homicides go up when these people are at war. They kill each other to define who is dominant' (Interview 8).

Violence against common criminals or gangs

In addition to imposing themselves against gangs that tried to challenge their dominance, 'Los Costeños' used homicide as a way to reinforce their governance against other non-organised criminals. Some of the ways in which homicide was used to govern other criminals were as follows:

1. ***Enforcing payment for illegal activity permits in gang-controlled territories:*** ‘Los Costeños’ began to charge criminals for access to the territories where they had a presence. Thus, all persons who carried out illegal activities within the neighbourhoods where they dominated had to pay a permit to operate, under penalty of being killed (El Universal, June 06, 2015). This same strategy was used by ‘Los Papalopez’ in their neighbourhoods during their war with ‘Los Costeños’ (El Herald, April 11, 2015). Homicide then functioned to punish anyone who failed to comply with this rule. According to our records, at least 63 people were killed for refusing to pay this fee. This includes drug dealers, thieves, and hired killers (El Herald, September 02, 2018). An example of this is a recorded telephone discussion between a leader of ‘Los Costeños’ and a hitman in the La Luz neighbourhood. The former tells the latter: ‘I am the one in charge in La Luz. Here they can't pay you to kill just anyone. You need permission’. Because of the hitman refusal to comply, he was killed by the armed group (El Herald, August 19, 2015).
2. ***Punishment for working for a different OCG:*** Those who paid a fee to an OCG other than ‘Los Costeños’ were also killed. At least 47 people were killed for this reason. Drug sellers could also only buy drugs from this armed group, otherwise, they could be killed (El Herald, August 12, 2014). Extortionists who collected money and did not report it to ‘Los Costeños’ could also be killed (El Herald, January 14, 2017).
3. ***Imaginary borders:*** ‘Los Costeños’ also established imaginary borders for the gangs. This allowed them to control who could perform illegal acts in some areas and who could not. Those who crossed these borders were killed, since their permit of illegality only worked up to these borders (El Herald, October 21, 2015). This information was confirmed by government officials, one of whom stated that ‘several people had paid the OCG to operate in one neighbourhood, but then they went to rob or sell drugs to another and were punished. The permit worked only in some neighbourhoods’ (Interview 1).
4. ***Maintaining control of violence in the neighbourhood:*** ‘Los Costeños’ came to enjoy a certain level of legitimacy within the civilian population. This legitimacy went so far that, on one occasion, civilians made a human shield to prevent the assassination of one of its leaders (El Herald, May 19, 2014). This legitimacy, in part, stemmed from the idea that the OCG kept neighbourhood violence at controlled levels (El Herald, January 19, 2014). In fact, there was a time when the population prevented the police from capturing an OCG leader, arguing that without him, security would end (El Herald, June 25, 2017). This control of violence was achieved by punishing anyone who violated permitted levels of violence in the neighbourhood through fights, homicides, or unauthorized robberies. In our database, at least 30 people were killed for increasing levels of unauthorized violence. As one resident explained, ‘this doesn't mean there was not any crime in the neighbourhood, but at least there were rules. You knew they were not going to kill you for a street fight or that they were not going to break into your house’ (Interview 6).

Reputation

Governing other criminals implies the risk that they may use violence against the armed group that is giving the orders (Ng'weno, 2007). The consensus on who is in charge in the criminal world is fragile and can be broken very easily (Willis, 2015). To control this, armed groups need to build a reputation in which it is not only clear that they are willing to use violence but also that they will punish those who do not comply with their orders. However, it is difficult to access communication between criminals because of the codes used and the privacy they seek to escape state action (Gambetta, 2009; Paoli, 2020). There are, however, three forms of communication that are accessible to researchers: lethal violence, extra-lethal violence, and public messaging (Johnson and Gillooly, 2023).

To analyze *lethal violence*, we utilized the aforementioned database. *Extra-lethal violence*, as defined by Fujii (2013), refers to physical acts that 'transgress shared norms and beliefs about appropriate treatment of the living as well as the dead' (p. 411). In this case, we will study six cases of extra-lethal violence in Barranquilla: cases of dismemberment against members of rival armed groups or common criminals who failed to comply with the norms of the governing OCG. Extra-lethal violence implies that whoever performs these acts seeks to impress an audience (Fujii, 2021). Therefore, we believe that this selection of cases can help to demonstrate how extra-lethal violence was used to build a reputation for the OCG among other criminals.

Finally, the public messages containing the threats were compiled from press reports and also obtained during fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2022. The data that we have collected reveal that 90% of homicides committed by OCGs in Barranquilla against other criminals were done as a form of punishment. OCGs in the city have killed at least 180 people for violating their rules. However, it can be argued that this may not necessarily build a reputation, as the killings could be attributed to other armed groups, or the actual reason for the punishment may not be known among other criminals. This is why we believe it is important to examine public messaging as well. Although they may be a minority, as most information is kept private and only transmitted among criminals, public threats provide an indication of the reputation an armed group wishes to create, and if carried out, their actual willingness to use violence. All information was triangulated with the interviews.

'Los Costeños' have made multiple threats of violence over the past decade. In 2013, they threatened a hitman from a rival organization in a pamphlet and subsequently attacked his house (El Heraldo, September 30, 2013). Members of the armed group who were imprisoned were threatened with assassination if they spoke out against the organization (El Heraldo, April 11, 2015). One former member who served as a witness for the authorities was fatally stabbed in prison (El Heraldo, February 02, 2019) and another was forcibly disappeared after leaving prison (El Heraldo, November 01, 2016). Additionally, one of the leaders of 'Los Costeños' killed the leader of another gang because he refused to pay a portion of his earnings from illegal business (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017). Following the murder, 'Los Costeños' published a pamphlet stating that their 'sole objective is to prevent the reorganization of criminal gangs serving other armed groups' and threatened to kill several individuals who were subsequently killed in the weeks that followed (RCN Radio, January 18, 2017). 'Los Costeños' also killed at least 12 individuals who had harmed or attacked members of the organization

or their families (El Heraldó, December 30, 2019). The group made threats (which they carried out) to commit massacres (El Heraldó, March 12, 2019) or to dismember individuals (El Heraldó, August 19, 2015).

In addition to these targeted homicides, ‘Los Costeños’ used extra-lethal violence in the form of dismemberment of bodies. We analysed six cases in which people were killed for belonging to a rival OCG (two cases), carrying out criminal activities without the organization's permission (two cases), or failing to comply with prohibitions made by the armed group (two cases). In all six cases, the torso, limbs, and head of the bodies were left in different public areas across the city. This suggests a performative act that clearly sought to communicate a message.

For example, body parts of rival OCG members were found in the same area where they carried out their criminal activities. In one case, the dismembered person had murdered a member of ‘Los Costeños’ in the La Luz neighbourhood. His head was found in the same neighbourhood after he was threatened with murder if he did not leave the area (El Heraldó, May 08, 2016)³. In the other case, a video of the dismemberment was circulated through WhatsApp, in which the person committing the act explained that it was punishment for the victim's betrayal of ‘Los Costeños’. In the video, the person doing the dismembering shouted at the victim that ‘this is happening to you for being a traitor. Here in the neighbourhood, we rule, but you decided to ally yourself with the competition’ (El Tiempo, September 24, 2021).

Regarding the two cases of common criminals who were dismembered for not paying operating permits, it was a double homicide. A member of the organisation had threatened the two young men because they bought drugs with the excuse of personal use, but then resold them without authorization. On one of the occasions when they went to buy drugs in the neighbourhood dominated by ‘Los Costeños’, they were dismembered (Pulzo, September 01, 2018).

There were two cases of individuals who were dismembered for failing to comply with the organization's orders to limit the levels of violence in their neighbourhoods. In one case, the victim had a sign next to their body reading ‘this happened to him because he was a thief. In this neighbourhood, thief is not allowed’ (RCN Radio, November 08, 2022). The other victim was ordered to stop being a hired thug in the neighbourhood by ‘Los Costeños’, but he refused to comply. As a result, his wife was killed, and her body was distributed throughout different neighbourhoods (El Heraldó, August 19, 2015).

People in the criminal world were well aware of ‘Los Costeños’ reputation for (extreme) violence. A drug dealer, when asked about the group, stated that he ‘would never be able to work in the area again if he spoke ill of them’ (Interview 10). A former member of ‘Los Costeños’ stated that ‘it was no longer just a matter of survival. These people did not just kill you; they disfigured and tortured you. If they threatened you, you knew your days were numbered’ (Interview 9). Another

¹ We have included sources to verify the cases. However, out of respect for the victims and the protection of our key informants, we respectfully suggest deleting all references before publication.

member of a rival group, 'Los Papalopez', was killed by 'Los Costeños' after receiving threats. After being threatened, he travelled to where his family was to say his goodbyes before his death (El Heraldo, November 22, 2019). This demonstrates that those involved with the group understood that 'Los Costeños' would not hesitate to expel or kill them as punishment. The group's reputation was well established.

Benefits

Finally, while violence may be the necessary condition for executing the governance of the criminal world, armed groups also need to offer benefits to their governed to avoid incentives for rebellion. In Barranquilla, we have identified four benefits that gangs or common criminals receive by coming under the governance umbrella of an OCG.

- 1. Control of criminal borders:** As already mentioned, refusing to pay a share of the proceeds of illegal activities can mean being punished, either through banishment or homicide. In contrast, those who adhere to the governance of the criminal world of a stronger armed group obtain permission to run their criminal activities in an area and to be left unmolested by other criminals. Imaginary borders are one way of guaranteeing this: 'Los Costeños' managed to divide their zones of influence in such a way that smaller groups, such as 'Los 40 Negritos', could 'own' a neighbourhood without worrying about border control (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017). One drug seller stated that: 'it is better to pay the fee, because that way you don't have to worry about others wanting to steal your area. You have your space and people know you are authorized' (Interview 10).
- 2. Protection from the authorities:** 'Los Costeños', in addition to a solid criminal structure, had access to a wide network of corruption that involved everything from police in their territories (El Heraldo, June 17, 2018), to judges (El Heraldo, August 13, 2015), and politicians (Vorágine, March 12, 2023). One of the benefits of criminal governance was access to the protection that these corruption networks offered. 'Los Costeños' offered criminals under their umbrella the possibility of executing criminal activities without being caught, or prior warnings about police operations (El Heraldo, July 27, 2015). 'Los Costeños' even offered criminals who joined them prison ransoms for some of their members (Interview 9).
- 3. Protection from competitors:** Criminals and gangs that adhere to criminal governance can still fall victim to OCGs seeking to replace the armed group that is currently the leader. Therefore, one of the benefits offered by 'Los Costeños' is the organization's footing to defend them in the event of war. That is what happened with 'Los 40 Negritos'. This gang was attacked by 'Los Papalopez', but 'Los Costeños' were the ones who responded to this aggression (El Heraldo, August 05, 2018). 'Los Costeños' provided protection to gangs under their governance by responding to attacks and aggression from rival gangs, as one former gang member stated: 'being in that alliance was very good for us small gangs. Here there were several who tried to steal our neighbourhood and those people would respond and kill a few to show them that we were with them' (Interview 3).

- 4. Provision of supplies:** Finally, the larger armed groups also offer gangs or common criminals the possibility of access to weapons, vehicles, training, or financial resources in exchange for shelter under their umbrella. For example, 'Los Papalopez' had one of its members in charge of storing firearms in his house for the purpose of renting them to gang members for robberies, extortion, or homicides (El Heraldo, June 07, 2015). In turn, 'Los Papalopez' have received hitmen, motorcycles, cars, and weapons from the Gulf Clan, an organization with transnational links that recently entered into a dispute with 'Los Costeños' (El Heraldo, October 15, 2018). 'Los Costeños', for their part, finance the stipends of several local gang members (El Heraldo, May 24, 2022; Interview 9).

Conclusions

Our article delves into a phenomenon that has received limited attention through case studies, despite numerous theoretical reflections: the criminal governance of the underworld. While additional cases should be analysed to validate or challenge our findings, the similarities with the literature's identified elements of criminal world governance suggest a broad correlation. Therefore, we provide detailed evidence for explaining the mechanisms that underlie such theoretical insights.

Based on a review of relevant literature, we have identified three common characteristics that seem to be present in criminal underworld governance: the use of violence, the building of a reputation, and the provision of benefits to those who are governed. In order to explore these characteristics further, we conducted a review of over 250 local press articles, engaged in fieldwork between 2018-2022, and constructed an original database to analyse the patterns of lethal inter-criminal violence in one of Colombia's most important cities. Our research provides a detailed account of how criminal underworld governance operates in an urban setting.

Our study has led us to draw three main conclusions. Firstly, it seems that lethal violence is an effective tool for eliminating rivals and enforcing the rules that govern the criminal underworld. Organised crime groups have developed various mechanisms to manage their illegal markets, such as charging fees for permits to carry out criminal activities, creating arbitrary boundaries for illicit operations, and regulating the use of violence during criminal acts. Homicides have proven to be an effective means of enforcing these rules.

Second, establishing governance over the criminal world requires the ability to wield violence credibly. In Barranquilla, OCGs relied on public threats that were subsequently carried out to establish their governance structure. This implies that simply using violence is not enough; it is also essential to claim responsibility and communicate the reasons for the violence. Building a reputation in this realm largely depends on effectively communicating one's actions. This is why armed groups often distribute pamphlets or make public announcements that can attract media or institutional attention - they need to demonstrate to their target audience that they are in control.

Third, paradoxically, the governance of the criminal underworld is also mediated by benefits offered to those under the umbrella of the OCG in charge. We have identified four main benefits. Firstly, control of criminal frontiers becomes the responsibility of the governing organization.

Secondly, gangs or individual criminals gain access to corruption networks that allow the larger OCG to operate with a certain degree of impunity. Thirdly, the governing OCG provides protection in the event of armed competition. Finally, the governing OCG offers funding, supplies, and training to gangs under its control. This contradicts the notion that violence is the sole determinant of successful governance over other criminals. As with civilians, the provision of goods can be functional in sustaining criminal governance.

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Interviews

Interview 1: Officer of the Colombian National Police, 13/03/2021

Interview 2: Former member of an OCG, Barranquilla, 17/03/2021.

Interview 3: Former member of an OCG, Barranquilla, 15/05/2022.

Interview 6: Resident of a neighbourhood dominated by 'Los Costeños', Barranquilla, 24/07/2022.

Interview 8: Officer from the Colombian Ombudsman's Office, Barranquilla, 17/11/2022.

Interview 9: Former member of an OCG, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 12/01/2023.

Interview 10: Drug dealer, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 25/01/2023.

Predicted Pattern	Observable Manifestation	Collected Evidence
<p>Use of violence: The armed group that dominates the territory will use violence to maintain its control over other criminal actors.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Targeted assassinations of members of rival armed groups. 2. Targeted assassinations of common criminals. 	<p>In our research, we conducted an archival review of four local newspapers (El Heraldo, La Libertad, Zona Cero and Al Día) and cross-referenced the information with a Colombian National Police database on homicides in Barranquilla. Through this process, we were able to identify more than 200 homicides committed between 2013 and 2022 that were presented as 'ajustes de cuentas' (settling of scores), which is the form used by the police to refer to murders between criminals. We then proceeded to identify the armed group most likely to have committed the homicide through the membership of the victim's organization, the location of the events and the information available in local newspapers. With this, we built an original database on inter-criminal lethal violence that includes: date of the event, criminal organization of the victim and criminal organization most likely to have committed the murder.</p>
<p>Reputation: The governing OCG aims to establish a reputation as a powerful actor that can enforce its rules through violence and earn recognition from other criminal actors.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lethal and extra-lethal violence. 2. Public messaging. 3. Perceptions of other criminals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We built an original database on dismemberments in the city of Barranquilla and, through fieldwork and review of press archives, determined the organisations in charge of dismemberment. 2. Through the archival review mentioned earlier, we collected and analyzed published statements made by criminal actors in the city. We identified the ways in which these armed groups make threats against their opponents or acknowledge/challenge them. 3. We conducted interviews with members and former members of OCGs to gather their perceptions of other armed groups.
<p>Benefits: The OCG that governs will offer benefits that give them legitimacy in the eyes of those they govern.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Those higher up in the criminal hierarchy provide benefits to the subordinate group. 2. The criminal group exerting governance provides benefits to common criminals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Through a review of press archives spanning the last ten years and a content analysis of news and reports from Colombian state security agencies, we identified occasions when a criminal group or common criminals received benefits from an armed group, which were then grouped into the categories shown below. 2. We conducted interviews with members and former members of OCGs, civilians, and Colombian state officials to confirm the benefits found in our content analysis.

Table 1. Explanation of data collection process for the pattern matching.