

# Sustaining criminal governance with horror: The use of extra-lethal violence to regulate community life

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## Abstract

This article investigates why organised criminal organisations opt for dismemberment, a costly and resource-intensive practice compared to targeted killings. We argue that dismemberment serves two functions for OCGs: first, it demonstrates OCGs' willingness to use gruesome violence against those who challenge their territorial hegemony, and second, it sustains criminal governance regimes by punishing individuals who violate OCGs' regulations. To demonstrate this argument, we analyse 25 cases of dismemberment in Colombia that we compiled during more than four years of fieldwork, review of press archives and databases provided by local authorities. This article contributes to extending the concept of extra-lethal violence to organised crime studies.

**Keywords:** Criminal governance, extra-lethal violence, organised crime, dismemberments, strategic calculations, inter-criminal violence.

## Resumen

Este artículo busca entender por qué las organizaciones del crimen organizado utilizan el desmembramiento, una práctica costosa y que requiere muchos recursos, en lugar de asesinatos selectivos. Argumentamos que las organizaciones criminales utilizan los desmembramientos para disuadir rivales de retar su hegemonía territorial y para reforzar las reglas establecidas en su gobernanza criminal. Para demostrar este argumento, analizamos 25 casos de desmembramiento en Barranquilla que recopilamos durante más de cuatro años de trabajo de campo, y contrastamos esta información con revisión de archivos de prensa y bases de datos provistas por autoridades locales. Este artículo contribuye a extender el concepto de violencia extra-lethal a los estudios sobre crimen organizado.

**Palabras clave:** Gobernanza criminal, violencia extra-lethal, crimen organizado, desmembramientos, cálculos estratégicos, violencia intercriminal.

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## Introduction

Why do organised criminal organisations (OCGs) choose to dismember people when this is a more complex and costly practice than targeted killings? Dismemberment is an unusual form of homicide. It involves the mutilation of the victim's body parts (usually the head or limbs). Sometimes dismemberment is, in itself, the way of executing a person, while in other cases this procedure is done after the homicide.<sup>3</sup> Some authors argue that the purpose of dismemberment is to conceal the identity of the victim,<sup>4</sup> to obstruct investigations by the authorities<sup>5</sup> or to hide evidence incriminating the perpetrator.<sup>6</sup> Other authors have found that dismemberment may also be a deliberate form of cruelty to the victim's body.<sup>7</sup>

Although this literature offers reasonable explanations for dismemberments, most of it has focused on individual rather than collective perpetration. However, dismemberments have also been used in the context of civil wars<sup>8</sup> and by OCGs.<sup>9</sup> In civil wars, this phenomenon is puzzling. Jeremy Weinstein, for instance, affirms that some acts of 'brutality (...) are above and beyond what is required to send a signal of the costs of defection'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that some deeds are done more viciously during civil wars than during peacetime.<sup>11, 12</sup>

To account for this puzzle, some scholars have introduced the concept of 'terror as spectacle', whereby armed groups use violence as a form of terrorism to generate a general sense of insecurity.<sup>13, 14</sup> Others argue that the events of chaotic violence in civil wars desensitise combatants, making them more prone to extreme violence.<sup>15</sup> Some also argue that brutality during civil wars serves to reinforce pre-existing institutions, with those of

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<sup>3</sup> Victor G. Petreca, Ann W. Burgess, Michael H. Stone and Gary Brucato, 'Dismemberment and Mutilation: A Data-Driven Exploration of Patterns, Motives, and Styles', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 65: 3 (2020), pp. 888-896. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14274>

<sup>4</sup> Wataru Zaitsu, 'Criminal mutilation homicides in Japan: Corpse dismemberment and disposal pattern types, and offender characteristics', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 65: 3 (2020), pp. 888-896, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14274>.

<sup>5</sup> Jana Matzen, Benjamin Ondruschka, Antonia Fitzek, Klaus Püschel and Eilin Jopp-van, 'Dismemberment and Body Encasement—Case Report and an Empiric Study', *Biology*, 11: 2 (2022), pp. 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/biology11020328>.

<sup>6</sup> Victor G. Petreca, Gary Brucato, Ann W. Burgess, Jessica Flores and Terence Leary, 'Female murderers who mutilate or dismember their victims: An exploration of patterns and sex differences', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 67: 6 (2022), pp. 2376-2386, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.15136>.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Guggenheimer, Shilan Caman, Joakim Sturup, Ingemar Thiblin and Brita Zilg, 'Criminal mutilation in Sweden from 1991 to 2017', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 66: 5 (2021), pp. 1788-1796, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14736>.

<sup>8</sup> María Victoria Uribe, *Matar, rematar y contramatar. Las masacres de La Violencia en Tolima, 1948-1964* (Bogotá: Controversia, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Eugénia Cunha, Amanda R. Hale, & Ann H. Ross, 'Criminal Dismemberments: A Discussion of Their Multidisciplinary Nature and Guide to Best Practice', in Ann H. Ross & Eugénia Cunha (eds.), *Dismemberments: Perspectives in Forensic Anthropology and Legal Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2018), pp. 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-811912-9.00001-0>

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Dara Kay Cohen. *Rape during Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?', *Politics & Society*, 37: 1 (2009), pp. 131–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329208329755>

<sup>13</sup> César Sanabria-Medina and Hadaluz Osorio-Restrepo, 'Dismemberment of Victims in Colombia: A Perspective From Practice', in Ann H. Ross & Eugénia Cunha (eds.), *Dismemberments: Perspectives in Forensic Anthropology and Legal Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2018), 7-41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-811912-9.00002-2>

<sup>14</sup> Maria Morcillo-Méndez and Isla Campos, 'Dismemberment: cause of death in the Colombian armed conflict', *Torture*, 22: 1 (2012), pp. 5-13.

<sup>15</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

perceived lower social status more likely to be victimized.<sup>16</sup> These explanations are divided between those that attribute brutality to instrumental reasons<sup>17</sup> and those that attribute it to factors other than rationality.<sup>18</sup>

However, the applicability of these explanations to criminal violence is not straightforward due to differences in the logics of violence between civil wars and criminal violence.<sup>19,20</sup> Extensive literature suggests that OCGs seek to hide their violence to evade law enforcement,<sup>21</sup> unlike dismemberments which tend to elicit strong institutional reactions and media attention.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in some Colombian cities, OCGs have publicised their dismemberments and openly taken responsibility for them.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, dismemberment is a resource-intensive practice compared to targeted killing. According to reports from Colombia, dismemberments are usually carried out by three to eight people, while a targeted homicide is usually executed by one or two people.<sup>24</sup> Given these factors, why would OCGs opt to use dismemberment in certain situations?

Similar to the literature on civil wars, arguments regarding the instrumental or non-instrumental use of dismemberment by OCGs are divided. On one hand, some authors argue that extreme violence, including dismemberment, is functional for OCGs to claim territorial control.<sup>25</sup> By employing extreme violence against rival groups, OCGs send a message to rivals, the state, and the community about their dominance and authority over certain markets or territories.<sup>26, 27</sup> On the other hand, some authors argue that extreme violence is used by OCGs to build their organisational identity.<sup>28</sup> By brutalising perceived enemies, OCGs create a sense of unity and identity, which may be more difficult to establish compared to civil wars where ideological referents are present.<sup>29</sup> Some authors move away from both positions, arguing that dismemberments are produced by spontaneous situations outside the control of criminal organisations.<sup>30</sup>

While these studies provide valuable insights into the use of dismemberments by OCGs, there are still unanswered questions. First, why do some armed groups continue to use extreme violence, including dismemberment, against individuals who are not rivals of the organisation or during times when there is no competition for territory? Second, why do smaller groups without significant military capabilities resort to

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Farr, 'Extreme War Rape in Today's Civil-War-Torn States: A Contextual and Comparative Analysis', *Gender Issues*, 26 (2009): pp. 1-41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-009-9068-x>

<sup>17</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, 'The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War', *Journal of Ethics* 8: 1 (2004), pp. 97-138. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOET.0000012254.69088.41>

<sup>18</sup> Kiera Mitton, 'Irrational Actors and the Process of Brutalisation: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leonean Conflict (1991–2002)', *Civil Wars*, 14: 1 (2012), pp. 104-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2012.654691>

<sup>19</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, 'How civil wars help explain organized crime—and how they do not', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59: 8 (2015), 1517-1540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715587101>

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Lessing, 'Logics of Violence in Criminal War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59: 8 (2015), 1486-1516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715587100>

<sup>21</sup> Angelica Duran-Martinez, 'To Kill and Tell?: State Power, Criminal Competition, and Drug Violence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59: 8 (2015), pp. 1377-1402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715587047>.

<sup>22</sup> Guggenheimer, *Criminal mutilation in Sweden*, p. 1788.

<sup>23</sup> Colombian Ombudsman's Office, *Alerta Temprana No. 029-2022* (Bogotá: Sistema de Alertas Tempranas, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> El Espectador, 'Capturan a ocho personas por "casas de pique" en Barranquilla', May 02, 2016. Available at: <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/capturan-a-ocho-personas-por-casas-de-pique-en-barranquilla-articulo-630187/>

<sup>25</sup> Marcelo Bergman, *Illegal Drugs, Drug Trafficking and Violence in Latin America* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Phil Williams, 'The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24: 2 (2012), pp. 259-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.653019>

<sup>27</sup> David Shirk and Joel Wallman, 'Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59: 8 (2015), pp. 1348-1376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715587049>

<sup>28</sup> Valentín Pereda, 'Macabre ceremonies: How Los Zetas produces extreme violence to promote organizational cohesion', *Violence: An International Journal*, 2: 2 (2021), pp. 278-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024211059840>

<sup>29</sup> Paolo Campana and Federico Varese, 'Cooperation in criminal organizations: Kinship and violence as credible commitments', *Rationality and Society*, 25: 3 (2013), pp. 263-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463113481202>

<sup>30</sup> Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

extreme violence, including dismemberment? Most of the existing research focuses on drug cartels as case studies, as they often have significant military and operational capacity, which has been used to explain their reliance on extreme violence. Finally, existing studies often focus on specific moments when extreme violence appears, but how can we explain cases where extreme violence, including dismemberment, is recurrent over many years?

In this article, we address this puzzle by connecting the literatures on extra-lethal violence and criminal governance. We argue that dismemberment, one form of extra-lethal violence, serves two functions for OCGs. First, it enhances the credibility of an armed group's territorial establishment by demonstrating its willingness to use extreme violence against rival groups, deterring competitors and asserting dominance. This notion is supported by existing literature on the use of extreme violence by OCGs. Second, dismemberment is utilized as a tool for consolidating and sustaining criminal governance regimes. By using dismemberment as a form of punishment for those who violate the OCG's codes of conduct, the organisation can regulate the behaviour of the *governed* and maintain social control. In this sense, the armed group makes the rules it has established credible.

We demonstrate this argument drawing upon an original database on dismemberments in Barranquilla (Colombia) and extensive fieldwork. In Barranquilla, there are no major drug cartels or open warfare with the Colombian state military forces. Even so, there have been at least two dismemberments every year for the past ten years, most of them related to OCGs. We constructed this database on data obtained from the Attorney General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, Legal Medicine, and the National Police. We triangulated this information with a review of more than 150 local press archives and interviews with members and former members of criminal organisations, civilians, and local authorities. Information was anonymised to protect the identities of the victims.<sup>31</sup> This article contributes to connecting the literatures on brutality in civil wars, on the use of extra-lethal violence in scenarios of organised violence, and on the functioning of criminal governance.

## Criminal governance

Lessing defines criminal governance as the 'imposition of rules or restriction on behavior by a criminal organisation. This includes governance over members, non-member criminal actors, and non-criminal civilians' (p. 857).<sup>32</sup> Although, in practice, this implies that armed groups usurp some of the functions that are the prerogative of the state, in reality the purpose is hardly ever to overthrow the state.<sup>33</sup> In fact, given that the police can intervene in criminal governance scenarios,<sup>34</sup> armed groups may even reduce some forms of visible violence so as not to attract the attention of the state.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> We include the news stories that demonstrate our arguments for peer review purposes, but hope to remove them before publication of the article, as some of them may identify victims or family members.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Lessing, 'Conceptualizing Criminal Governance', *Perspectives on Politics*, 19: 3 (2020), pp. 854-873, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720001243>.

<sup>33</sup> Andrés Uribe, Benjamin Lessing, Noah Schouela, Elayne Stecher and Douglas Block, 'Criminal Governance in Latin America: An Initial Assessment of its Extent and Correlates', (forthcoming). doi:10.2139/ssrn.4302432

<sup>34</sup> Beatriz Magaloni, Édgar Franco-Vivanco and Vanessa Melo, 'Killing in the slums: Social order, criminal governance, and police violence in Rio de Janeiro', *American Political Science Review*, 114: 2 (2020), pp. 552-572, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000856>.

<sup>35</sup> Ciro Biderman, João De Mello, Renato De Lima and Alexandre Schneider, 'Pax Monopolista and Crime: The Case of the Emergence of the Primeiro Comando da Capital in São Paulo', *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 35 (2019), pp. 573-605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-018-9393-x>

OCGs have a variety of incentives to engage in criminal governance. Through security fees they can make a profit<sup>36</sup>. By providing order to the neighbourhoods they govern, they can gain legitimacy.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, criminal governance allows them to protect some of their core businesses, such as drug sales.<sup>38</sup> Although not all OCGs establish criminal governance regimes, by some estimates around 80,000,000 people in Latin America probably live under this system of governance. Notably, a significant portion of this population resides in urban settings, which suggests that greater state presence does not necessarily correlate negatively with the strength of OCGs.<sup>39</sup>

Such governance is exercised by large drug cartels,<sup>40</sup> street gangs<sup>41</sup> and prison gangs alike.<sup>42</sup> Given this variety of OCGs, the way they govern is also multifaceted. Charismatic leaders may use their personality and reputation to gain and maintain power over a community,<sup>43</sup> while more bureaucratic groups rely on established rules and procedures to govern.<sup>44</sup> This has consequences both for the way in which armed groups exercise violence and the way in which they carry out their criminal activities.<sup>45</sup>

A less explored aspect of criminal governance has to do with the mechanisms used to establish and sustain it over time. Armed groups may use community actors and NGOs to engage with communities.<sup>46</sup> They also use corruption to avoid law enforcement.<sup>47</sup> In some cases, OCG members use their own identity as community members to exercise criminal governance.<sup>48</sup> Some may even reduce the use of violence in order to be recognised as 'less evil' than competing organisations.<sup>49</sup>

However, none of these strategies alone is sufficient to explain how an OCG manages to establish itself in a territory, defeat its competitors and gain the legitimacy of the population it governs. While existing studies on criminal governance have focused on understanding its functioning, there is still a need to investigate the mechanisms OCGs use when they have not yet consolidated their criminal governance and how they respond to armed competitors who challenge them. This article aims to address this aspect of criminal governance.

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36 Eduardo Moncada, 'Urban Violence, Political Economy, and Territorial Control: Insights from Medellín', *Latin American Research Review*, 51: 4 (2016), pp. 225-248. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2016.0057>

37 Christopher Blattman, Gustavon Duncan, Benjamin Lessing and Santiago Tobón, 'Gang Rule: Understanding and Countering Criminal Governance', NBER Working Paper 28458 (2022). doi:10.3386/w28458

38 Enrique Desmond Arias, 'The Dynamics of Criminal Governance: Networks and Social Order in Rio de Janeiro', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38: 2 (2006), pp. 293-325. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X06000721>

39 Uribe et al., *Criminal Governance in Latin America...*, p. 3.

40 Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, 'High-profile criminal violence: Why drug cartels murder government officials and party candidates in Mexico', *British Journal of Political Science*, 51: 1 (2021), pp. 203-229. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000637>

41 José Miguel Cruz and Jonathan D Rosen, 'Leaving the Pervasive Barrio: Gang Disengagement under Criminal Governance', *Social Problems*, spac001 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac001>

42 David Skarbek, 'Governance and Prison Gangs', *American Political Science Review*, 105: 4 (2011), pp. 702-716. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000335>

43 Moritz Schuberth, 'The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 36: 2 (2015), pp. 296-320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2015.1061756>

44 Benjamin Lessing and Graham Denyer Willis, 'Legitimacy in Criminal Governance: Managing a Drug Empire from Behind Bars', *American Political Science Review*, 113: 2 (2019), pp. 584-606. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000928>

45 Lessing, *Conceptualizing Criminal Governance*, p. 893-895.

46 Arias, *The Dynamics of Criminal Governance...*, p. 310.

47 Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán-Martínez, 'Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52 (2009), pp. 253-273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-009-9195-z>

48 Patrick Naef, 'The Criminal Governance of Tourism: Extortion and Intimacy in Medellín', *Journal of Latin American Studies* (2023), pp. 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000019>

49 Lessing, *Conceptualizing Criminal Governance*, p. 886.

## Extra-lethal violence in criminal governance

Adriana Cavarero has coined the term *horrorism* to describe the dismemberments of bodies, among others forms of contemporary violence. This is because it is a form of violence that exceeds death by also destroying the body. As she explains, 'What is at stake is not the end of a human life but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies' (p. 8).<sup>50</sup> By dismembering, the victims' bodies are destroyed as a form of ultimate punishment, destroying their humanity.<sup>51</sup>

However, there are two elements of Cavarero's argument that are difficult to transpose to the violence of organised crime. The first has to do with the notion of the vulnerability of the victims of horror. Cavarero constantly uses the idea of innocent victims to define *horrorism*.<sup>52</sup> As she herself explains in differentiating terrorism from *horrorism*, this condition of innocence derives not only from being defenceless, but also from the condition of randomness. In the violence of *horrorism* anyone can be a victim and no reason is needed; that is what makes victims vulnerable.<sup>53</sup>

The violence of organised crime, although laden with the dehumanisation of the body that Cavarero describes, is far from random and, then, far from fulfilling this notion of vulnerability and innocence. As we will show below, several of the victims of dismemberment were members of the same criminal organisation or members of other OCGs. They were punished precisely because they had committed crimes. Therefore, it is not possible to argue that this is random violence.

The second element of the argument that does not coincide organised criminal violence is the lack of an instrumental character. According to Cavarero, *horrorism* surpasses the logic of strategic calculations. It is not strategic because the purpose is the violence itself, rather than any consequences that may stem from it.<sup>54</sup> Although *horrorism* has consequences for the audience, the perpetrators' initial intentions do not account for these effects. This violence is exercised for reasons other than the horror it produces in the observer.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, organised criminal violence is typically instrumentally motivated. While OCGs may use indiscriminate violence, it is almost always driven by instrumental reasons.<sup>56</sup> Since the use of violence carries a cost in terms of potential state response, OCGs try to minimise its use whenever possible.<sup>57</sup>

In cases of dismemberments committed by OCGs, this logic also seems to hold true, since the horror inflicted on the victims' bodies is not always the end goal for these groups. Several OCGs have publicly displayed their

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<sup>50</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism, Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Gregory, 'Dismembering the dead: Violence, vulnerability and the body in war', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:4 (2016), pp. 944-965. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115618244>

<sup>52</sup> Cecilia Cassinger, 'The potential of vulnerability', *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization*, 10: 1 (2010), pp. 82-85.

<sup>53</sup> Cynthia Webber, 'Encountering Violence: Terrorism and Horrorism in War and Citizenship', *International Political Sociology*, 8: 3 (2014), pp. 247-255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12056>

<sup>54</sup> Agustina Varela Manograsso, 'From Violence to Terror: Beyond Instrumental Violence in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought', *Society. Education. Language*, 5 (2017), 29-38. Doi: 10.19251/sej/2017.5

<sup>55</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas, 'The communication of horrorism: a typology of ISIS online death videos', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 35: 1 (2018), pp. 24-39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1393096>

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> John Bailey and Matthew M. Taylor, 'Evade, Corrupt, or Confront? Organized Crime and the State in Brazil and Mexico', *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1: 2 (2009): pp. 3-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X0900100201>



victims<sup>58</sup> or inscribed messages on their bodies.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the aim was not only to punish and dehumanise the victims, but there was also a propagandistic aim in the act.<sup>60</sup>

Lee Ann Fujii's concept of extra-lethal violence helps overcome these challenges. Fujii introduces this term to refer to 'face-to-face acts of violence that transgress shared norms about the proper treatment of persons and bodies' (p. 411).<sup>61</sup> Extra-lethal violence is not randomised violence; instead, it is directed against specific people and displayed to a particular audience.<sup>62</sup> This type of violence can be committed for instrumental or expressive purposes, as well as being premeditated or spontaneous. A single episode of extra-lethal violence may feature some or all of these dimensions. The central point of extra-lethal violence is to put violence on display, thereby constituting a particular social order: those who commit these acts are asserting their identity in front of an audience.<sup>63</sup> When extra-lethal violence is exercised, those who exercise it are asserting their authority in the most graphic terms possible.<sup>64</sup>

Our argument is that the dismemberment of bodies is functional for the OCGs to constitute and sustain the social order they desire in their criminal governance regime. This form of extra-lethal violence serves two purposes. First, it contributes to the establishment of criminal governance by eliminating rivals. As the literature has already shown, dismemberment functions as a deterrence exercise. The organisation in charge of dismembering its rivals is demonstrating that it has the capacity to use force, and that other members of the rival organisation may suffer a similar fate.<sup>65</sup> Thus, by exerting extra-lethal violence on rivals during turf wars, armed groups can establish their hegemony and begin to build criminal governance.

Second, dismemberments are functional to punish non-compliance with the codes of behaviour established by armed groups after they have established their criminal governance. In other words, when criminal governance is not challenged, dismemberments are not primarily directed at rivals, but at the *governed* community. This community includes the criminal group's own members, criminals outside of their structure, and non-criminal civilians. By disciplining the community through the use of extra-lethal violence, armed groups enforce their established codes of behaviour and maintain their criminal governance.<sup>66</sup> This shows that criminal governance regimes are not only protected through violence against competitors, but also through disciplining the community itself.

## Research Design

This study adopts a case study approach, focusing on a specific instance of a phenomenon (dismemberment) rather than examining the phenomenon as a whole.<sup>67</sup> The method of data analysis used is process tracing, which

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<sup>58</sup> James Cockayne, *Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organised Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Howard Campbell, 'Narco-propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War"'. An Anthropological Perspective', *Latin American Perspectives*, 41:195 (2014), pp. 60-77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X12443519>

<sup>60</sup> Louis-Alexandre Berg and Marlon Carranza, 'Organized criminal violence and territorial control: Evidence from northern Honduras', *Journal of Peace Research*, 55:5 (2018), pp. 566-581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317752796>.

<sup>61</sup> Lee Ann Fujii, 'The Puzzle of Extra-Lethal Violence', *Perspectives on Politics*, 11: 2 (2013), pp. 410-426. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713001060>

<sup>62</sup> Lee Ann Fujii, *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

<sup>63</sup> Fujii, *Show Time*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> Mark Shaw and Prem Mahadevan, 'When terrorism and organized crime meet', *Policy Perspectives*, 6/7 (2018), pp- 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000292077>

<sup>66</sup> Lessing, *Conceptualizing Criminal Governance*, p. 886.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Bennett, 'Case Study Methods: Design, Use, and Comparative Advantages', in Detlef F. Sprinz & Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (eds.), *Models, Numbers, and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MA: University of Michigan press, 2004), pp. 19-55.

involves demonstrating that previously identified intervening variables behave as predicted by the theory.<sup>68</sup> The goal of the study is to explain a specific event that is difficult to understand (the use of dismemberment by organised crime when less costly alternatives, such as targeted killing, exist)<sup>69</sup> using the approach outlined by Beach and Pedersen.<sup>70</sup> The purpose is not to demonstrate that the argument is applicable in all contexts, but rather to provide the best possible explanation for the case under study.<sup>71</sup> Further research with more cases should be done to generalise our argument.

### *Empirical evidence*

Our argument posits that OCGs utilise dismemberment to establish and maintain a criminal governance regime. The underlying mechanism is that dismemberments serve as propaganda tools to either i) deter rivals during the establishment of criminal governance or when it is challenged, or ii) punish the governed population for breaching established codes of behaviour. Following Beach, we have operationalised three observable manifestations, as outlined in the table below.<sup>72</sup>

**Table 1. Observable manifestations of our process tracing.**

Observable manifestation	Reasoning	Evidence
<b>Dismemberments as propaganda</b>	If our argument is true, OCGs will not only dismember their victims but they will also take public credit for it. It would make no sense to assume that OCGs use dismemberment as a mechanism for regulating community life if they do not openly disclose what they did and why. Moreover, this must occur systematically: a good number of the dismemberments must have been used propagandistically.	<p>We have constructed a database by triangulating information requested from the Colombian National Police, the Attorney General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, Legal Medicine, a private database of William Colina Paez, a journalist from a local media outlet who has been in charge of covering the dismemberments, and a review of archives in local media.</p> <p>Not all dismemberments were presented to the community equally. In some cases, the body is left on public roads, while in others, the bodies have not even appeared. We attempted to categorise these dismemberments as public (when they were distributed in the communities) or private (when, despite being announced, the bodies were not distributed). Through fieldwork and archival review, we qualitatively reconstructed the details for each case.</p> <p>This classification and subsequent analysis were conducted using the performative analysis approach suggested by Fujii.<sup>73</sup> According to this</p>

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'Process tracing: From philosophical roots to best practices', in Andrew Bennett & Jeffrey T. Checkel (eds.), *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 3-38.

<sup>69</sup> John Gerring, 'Single- Outcome Studies: A Methodological Primer', *International Sociology*, 21: 5 (2006), pp. 707– 34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580906067837>

<sup>70</sup> Derek Beach and Rasmus Pedersen. *Process-tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

<sup>71</sup> Adam R. Humphreys, 'The Heuristic Application of Explanatory Theories in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17: 2 (2010), pp. 257-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109344008>

<sup>72</sup> Derek Beach, 'Process Tracing Methods', in Claudius Wagemann, Achim Goerres & Markus B. Siewert (eds.), *Handbuch Methoden der Politikwissenschaft* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020), pp. 699-719.

<sup>73</sup> Fujii, *The Puzzle of Extra-Lethal Violence*, 413-414.



		<p>approach, extra-lethal violence is considered a performance because it involves an audience and the staging of actions. Therefore, it is important to understand how a particular scene was staged to understand its meaning.<sup>74</sup> To achieve this, we reconstructed the processes of dismemberment by examining, at the limits of our possibility, the reasons behind it, the settings in which it occurred, the treatment of body parts, and the explicit messages conveyed.</p>
<b>Dismemberments of various profiles</b>	<p>If our argument is true, victims of dismemberment should have varied profiles (members of the armed group, members of other criminal organisations and non-criminal civilians).</p>	<p>Not all dismemberment victims had the same profile. Based on Lessing's conceptualisation, media reports and interviews, we have categorised each dismemberment case according to a profile: i) rival, ii) member of the organisation, iii) criminal outside the organisation and iv) non-criminal civilian. We have anonymised the information to respect the identity of victims and their families.</p>
<b>Changing dismemberment profiles according to the violent context</b>	<p>If our argument is true, victim profiles will vary according to the context. In situations of competition among OCGs, the victims are likely to be members of rival organisations, while in established criminal governance regimes, the victims are more likely to be those <i>governed</i> who have breached the codes of behaviour established by the OCG.</p>	<p>We have reconstructed the history of violence in our case study city between 2006 and 2022. Thus, we have identified the moments of competition for territory and the moments of hegemony of an armed organisation. This has been done through intelligence reports, reports from the Ombudsman's Office, a review of local press archives and the levels of homicides during these years. We then identified the trajectory of dismemberments and their variation in different years to verify whether dismemberments of rival members increased during times of competition.</p>

*Source: Elaborated by the authors.*

### **Case selection**

According to a database provided by the Colombian National Police, 383 people have been dismembered in Colombia between 2006 and February 2023. Of all these dismemberments, 65% are concentrated in four departments: Atlántico, Antioquia, Cundinamarca, and Valle del Cauca. Our research objective is to understand the use of dismemberment by OCGs. In several of the municipalities in Colombia with cases of dismemberment, there is still a presence of rebel groups, making it virtually impossible to distinguish between dismemberments carried out by OCGs and those carried out by rebel groups. Thus, we have decided not to include any municipalities with a presence of rebel groups. At the same time, our period of analysis begins in 2006, since almost all of these cities had a paramilitary presence before then.

We have only considered the inclusion of municipalities with more than 15 cases of dismemberments, since otherwise, it would be hard to find trends. Thus, we reduced the universe of municipalities to five cities: Barranquilla, Medellín, Bogotá, Cali, and Buenaventura. Within these municipalities, we conducted a convenience sample, given that Barranquilla is the only city in which dismemberments virtually disappear until 2013. Although there were several turf wars between 2006 and 2013, there was no dismemberment in Barranquilla during these years. At the same time, while in other cities dismemberments only appear during the years of competition for territory, in Barranquilla, they are recurrent during periods of turf wars and periods of criminal hegemony. Given that our purpose is to understand i) when dismemberments appear (presumably in

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<sup>74</sup> Fujii, *Show Time*, 7-10.

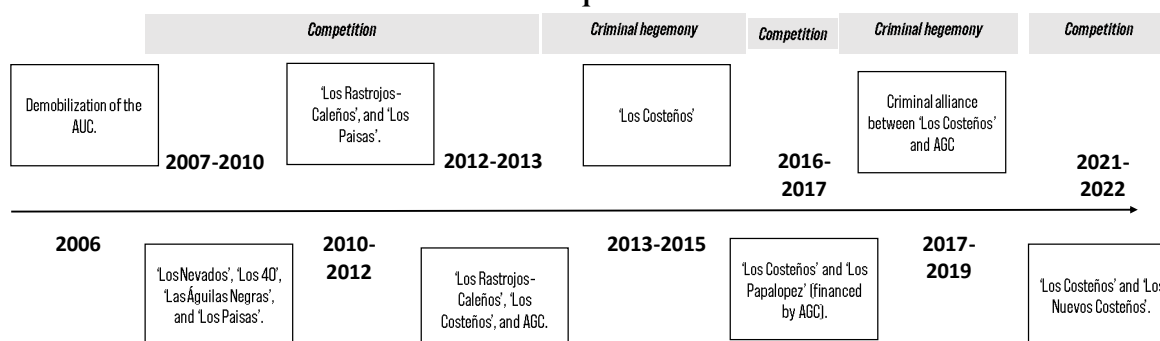
times of armed competition) and ii) how their use transforms after criminal governance is established, Barranquilla offers an ideal scenario to understand the phenomenon over the last ten years.

## Dismemberments in Barranquilla: Communicating through extra-lethal violence

Barranquilla is the most populous city in northern Colombia and the fourth on a national scale. Due to its economic development, it has been considered "the capital of the Colombian Caribbean".<sup>75</sup> In 2006, the José Pablo Díaz Front of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) demobilised. This ended a cycle of violence resulting from the Colombian armed conflict in the city. However, this did not mean the end of criminal violence. During the second half of the 2000s, the Colombian Ombudsman's Office denounced the presence of several OCGs that took advantage of the vacuum left by the paramilitary group to implement new systems of extortion and drug distribution in the outskirts of the city.<sup>76</sup> Until 2013, the city was in the midst of several disputes between criminal groups.

However, towards the end of that year, following a dispute between three armed groups ('Los Rastrojos-Caleños', 'Los Costeños', and the 'Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia' [AGC] -also known as the Gulf Clan-), 'Los Costeños' gained criminal hegemony in the city. This hegemony remained virtually uninterrupted, with the exception of 2016-2017, when the AGC returned to the city financing a group called 'Los Papalopez', and 2022, when a local armed group called 'Los Nuevos Costeños' also challenged their hegemony.<sup>77</sup> Figure 1 summarises the disputes between different armed groups in the city of Barranquilla since the demobilisation of the AUC.

**Figure 1. Moments of competition or hegemony in the criminal scenario in Barranquilla.**



**Source:** Elaborated by the authors with information collected from newspapers, intelligence reports, press review and fieldwork.

The databases reviewed differ with respect to the total number of dismemberments that have taken place between 2006 and 2022 in Barranquilla. The National Police identifies 20 in the metropolitan

<sup>75</sup> Gerson Pérez, 'Barranquilla: avances recientes en sus indicadores socioeconómicos y logros en la accesibilidad geográfica a la red pública hospitalaria', In Gerson Pérez, María Aguilera, Luis Galvis, Andrea Otero, Andrés Sánchez-Jabba & Karina Acosta (eds.), *Economía de las grandes ciudades en Colombia: seis estudios de caso* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2014), pp. 1-43.

<sup>76</sup> Colombian Ombudsman's Office, *Informe de Riesgos No. 001-09* (Bogotá: Sistema de Alertas Tempranas, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Luis Trejos-Rosero, Reynell Badillo-Sarmiento, Camila Orozco-Flórez and Luis Parra-Arrieta, 'Organized Crime and the Selective Use of Violence: Trajectories of Post-Demobilization Urban Violence', *Anal. Polit.*, 34:102 (2022), pp. 54-75. <https://doi.org/10.15446/anpol.v34n102.99933>

area, whilst the database of journalist William Colina Pérez identifies 27. Through our archival review and fieldwork, we have been able to identify at least 25 dismemberments committed by OCGs. All dismemberments were committed between 2013 and 2022.

### *Dismemberments as propaganda*

The first observable manifestation of our argument is that homicides are used by OCGs as a form of violence for propaganda purposes. That is, OCGs seek not only to punish their victim but also to use the horror produced by their killing to send a message. If this is true, then an observable manifestation of this argument would be that armed groups, after dismembering their victims, do their best to make the dismemberment and the reasons for it known to potential recipients of the message.

In Barranquilla, 76% of the identified dismemberments were made public by the perpetrators. There were three main ways of doing this. The first consisted of leaving the body parts in full view of the entire community on public roads or in areas heavily frequented by the inhabitants. About 52% of the cases of dismemberment that were public were found in this way. In 42% of the cases, the body parts were piled up in bags, small coolers or sacks and left on public roads. In one case, the dismemberment was broadcast live on social media while threatening messages were sent to members of a rival armed group.

The way in which the body was dispersed also suggests that the purpose was to convey a message. In only 16% of cases, the remains of the dismembered individuals were discovered in the same location. In 75% of cases, the limbs were left in one neighbourhood, the torso in another, and the head (which usually appeared days after the first remains) in the neighbourhood where the victim lived. The neighbourhoods chosen to distribute the dismembered parts were the same areas where the armed group had a continuous presence. In at least three cases, messages were written explaining the reasons for the killing, in addition to leaving the dismembered body in public.

In the remaining 24% of cases, the dismembered remains were not discovered until months later, as they had been buried or hidden by members of the OCG. However, in these cases, a message was still sent: the victims' families were informed of the dismemberment very early on, and the community was made aware of the reasons why they had been killed.<sup>78</sup> In five of the six cases in which the victims' remains were not distributed, the individuals killed were members of the same organisation responsible for the dismemberment. This indicates that the decision not to distribute the remains was primarily a matter of showing respect for the murdered person while still making the reason for the punishment known.<sup>79</sup>

The use of dismemberments as forms of propaganda was confirmed by several members of the organisation. One of them stated that 'it was not just about punishing the person, but you had to show why. You had to be careful to think about where and how the bodies were left so that it would be discovered who was dismembered and why'.<sup>80</sup> Another interviewee mentioned 'the head could appear close to where he could be recognised, but the other parts close to where he committed what he was

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<sup>78</sup> Authors Interview with a civilian, family of one of the victims of dismemberment, Sabanagrande, 15/03/2021.

<sup>79</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Sabanagrande, 21/03/2021.

<sup>80</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Malambo, 15/02/2023.

accused of'.<sup>81</sup> A public official also explained that there were some symbols, such as covering the mouth when the dismembered person was accused of leaking information, or leaving inscribed messages close to the body.<sup>82</sup>

### *Dismemberments of various profiles*

The second observable manifestation of our argument is that victims of dismemberment have different profiles. Specifically, we believe that if our argument is correct, there should be at least four victim profiles of dismemberment:

1. **Rivals:** The literature on organised criminal violence has identified that the use of gruesome homicides is associated with the punishment of members of rival groups<sup>83</sup> or a sign of establishment in a territory.<sup>84</sup> Given that, as we have just shown, there have been some moments of competition for territory in Barranquilla, we assume that among the victim profiles, there will be members of rival organisations. This would function to deter other members of the organisation from continuing to challenge the hegemony of one of the armed groups or to demonstrate the territorial control that the group responsible for the dismemberment exercises.
2. **Members of the organisation:** The literature on criminal governance has shown that OCGs, in addition to establishing norms of behaviour for communities, have established codes of behaviour for their own members<sup>85, 86</sup>. Failure to comply with these codes often results in exemplary punishments that can be brutal to deter other members from following these behaviours.<sup>87</sup> Our argument assumes that, in an environment where dismemberment is used by criminal groups, their own members who violate the organisation's codes of behaviour may also be victims of this form of violence.
3. **Criminal civilians:** When armed groups exercise territorial control, they not only establish codes of behaviour for their members, but many have also established a system of rules for criminals outside their structure<sup>88, 89</sup>. Some armed groups have established punishments for

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<sup>81</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Barranquilla, 21/10/2022.

<sup>82</sup> Authors Interview with a Police Officer, Sabanagrande, 15/02/2023.

<sup>83</sup> Campbell, *Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War"*, 67.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Lantz, 'The performativity of violence: abducting agency in Mexico's drug war', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 25: 2 (2016), pp. 253-269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1148019>

<sup>85</sup> Alexandra Abello-Colak and Valeria Guerneros-Meza, 'The role of criminal actors in local governance', *Urban Studies*, 51:15 (2014), pp. 3268-3289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013519831>

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin Lessing, 'Counterproductive punishment: How prisons gangs undermine state authority', *Rationality and Society*, 29:3 (2017), pp. 257-297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463117701132>

<sup>87</sup> Marcos Alan Ferreira and Anna Beatriz Gonçalves, 'Criminal governance and systems of parallel justice: Practice and implications in Brazilian urban peripheries', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 68 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2021.100519>

<sup>88</sup> José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez, 'Hiding violence to deal with the state: Criminal pacts in El Salvador and Medellín', *Journal of Peace Research*, 53: 2 (2016), pp. 197-210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315626239>

<sup>89</sup> Jorge Mantilla and Andreas E. Feldmann, 'Criminal Governance in Latin America', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

those who engage in theft within the community,<sup>90</sup> sexual violence,<sup>91</sup> drug use,<sup>92</sup> or so-called "social cleansing" campaigns in the name of stopping waves of violence.<sup>93</sup> Thus, we assume that if a group has established criminal governance, it will also begin to establish rules for criminals outside its structure. Non-compliance can lead to severe punishments, including dismemberment.

4. **Non-criminal civilians:** The main element that the literature on criminal governance has pointed to is the ability of these armed groups to establish codes of behaviour for civilians.<sup>94</sup> Around the world, different armed groups have established everything from rules on conflict management<sup>95</sup> to rules on how state borders function.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, we could hardly argue that there is a system of criminal governance if there were no system of norms in place for civilians.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, if we argue that armed groups in Barranquilla have used dismemberments to sustain their criminal governance, then we should have evidence that some of these killings were committed against non-criminal civilians for failing to comply with the norms established by the OCGs. This would coincide some a recent literature identifying that armed groups exercise violence against civilians even when they control the territory<sup>98</sup>.

In testing this observable manifestation in Barranquilla, we found the following (Table 2):

**Table 2. Profiles of dismemberment victims.**

Victim profile	Number of dismemberments
Rivals	6
Members of the organisation	7
Criminals outside the organisation	6
Non-criminal civilians	6

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

<sup>90</sup> Verónica Zubillaga, Rebecca Hanson and Francisco Sánchez, 'Criminal Governance in Times of Post-Chávez Revolution and Questioned Legitimacy: A Look at Different Territorial Orders and Armed Actors in Caracas', *Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc.*, 15: no. spe4 (2022), pp. 497-527. <https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15esp4.52528>

<sup>91</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín, 'Organization and Governance: The Evolution of Urban Militias in Medellín, Colombia', in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir & Zachariah Mampilly (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 246–264.

<sup>92</sup> Gabriel Feltran, *Irmãos: uma história do PCC* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Ana Arjona, 'Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28: 4-5 (2017), pp. 755-778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322328>

<sup>94</sup> Andreas E. Feldmann and Juan Pablo Luna, 'Criminal Governance and the Crisis of Contemporary Latin American States', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 48 (2022), pp. 441-461. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030420-124931>

<sup>95</sup> Daniel Bonilla-Calle, Emerson do Nascimento and Marcela Vergara-Arias, 'Pandemia, governança criminal e mecanismos de regulação social e econômica em três contextos latino-americanos', *Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc.*, 15: spe4 (2022), pp. 261-285. <https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15nesp4.46488>

<sup>96</sup> Viviana García-Pinzón and Jorge Mantilla, 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 24 (2021), pp. 265-281. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-020-09399-3>

<sup>97</sup> Enrique Desmond Arias, 'Social Responses to Criminal Governance in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Kingston, and Medellín', *Latin American Research Review*, 54: 1 (2019), pp. 165-180. doi:10.25222/larr.375

<sup>98</sup> Andrés F. Aponte González, Daniel Hirschel-Burns and Andrés Uribe, 'Contestation, Governance, and the Production of Violence Against Civilians: Coercive Political Order in Rural Colombia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming).

**Rivals:** Between 2013 and 2022, 24% of the dismembered persons were related to the rival OCG to which the dismemberment was attributed. The victims' parts were spread across different neighbourhoods, including La Luz, La Chinita, Barlovento, Rebolo, Siape and Las Flores. These were all neighbourhoods in dispute and close to the river, which allowed river connections for the entry and exit of drugs into and out of the city.<sup>99</sup> This information was confirmed by the police, who stated that these cases of dismemberment were 'settling of scores for the control of drug trafficking and micro-trafficking in the city'.<sup>100</sup> In one case of dismemberment, the victim was filmed and the video was later circulated through WhatsApp. In the video, the person doing the dismemberment was shouting 'this is happening to you for being a traitor. Here in the neighbourhood, we rule, but you decided to ally yourself with the competition'.

**Members of the organisation:** The most common victim profile identified was that of members of the organisation itself, with a total of seven cases of intra-organisational dismemberment recorded. The armed group cited two main reasons for carrying out this punishment: theft of the organisation's money and betrayal.<sup>101</sup> Between 2013 and 2014, 'Los Costeños' dismembered some of its members for allegedly stealing money belonging to the organisation. These members were responsible for extortion and underreported the amount of money they collected to their leaders.<sup>102</sup> In times of competition with other armed groups, both 'Los Costeños' and 'Los Nuevos Costeños' dismembered members of their own organisation, accusing them of being affiliated with rival OCGs. One of the members of the organisation said that 'we were all told when the war started that whoever changed sides was going to be punished. The other organisation could offer you more money or even threaten you, but you knew they could dismember you'.<sup>103</sup> Another reason for dismembering a member of the organisation was to hand over information to the authorities. A member of the organisation who allegedly handed over evidence to incriminate one of the 'Los Costeños' leaders was dismembered, and the video of the event was distributed among members of the armed group.<sup>104</sup>

**Criminals outside the organisation:** We were able to identify six of the dismembered persons as criminals who did not belong to the organisation. In one case, the person was killed for murdering a member of 'Los Costeños'. In the other cases, all the killings were because the persons were carrying out criminal activities in the OCG's territory, but without its permission. In one case, the person killed was working as a hitman, and days before he was dismembered, he received a threatening phone call saying 'in La Luz (the neighbourhood) I am in charge, so you cannot work on your own. We're in charge here'.<sup>105</sup> After his dismemberment, some of his limbs appeared in La Luz neighbourhood. In another case, the victim's body appeared in the same place with a sign that read: 'This happened to him

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<sup>99</sup> Verdad Abierta, 'Infierno en Bendición de Dios' (June 22, 2015). Available at: <https://verdadabierta.com/infierno-en-bendicion-de-dios/>

<sup>100</sup> El Heraldo, 'Descuartizado sí era el taxista desaparecido', (September 27, 2013). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/descuartizado-si-era-el-taxista-desaparecido-126231>

<sup>101</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Sabanagrande, 21/03/2021.

<sup>102</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Soledad, 13/12/2021.

<sup>103</sup> Authors Interview with a member of an OCG, Soledad, 03/03/2023.

<sup>104</sup> Semana, 'Esto pasará con el hotel en donde fue asesinado y desmembrado un hombre en Barranquilla', (June 23, 2022). Available at: <https://www.semana.com/nacion/barranquilla/articulo/esto-pasara-con-el-hotel-en-donde-fue-asesinado-y-desmembrado-un-hombre-en-barranquilla/202214/>

<sup>105</sup> El Heraldo, 'Así amenazó alias el Oso a hombre que fue descuartizado', (August 19, 2015). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/asi-amenazo-alias-el-oso-hombre-que-fue-descuartizado-212377>



because he was a thief and this will happen to the other criminals of this neighbourhood. This will happen to all those who continue to do harm here. Robbery is not allowed'.<sup>106</sup> In two other cases, people were killed after the OCG discovered that they were reselling the drugs they bought as consumers, without being authorized to be dealers.<sup>107</sup> All these cases demonstrate that the dismemberments were used to enforce the orders given by the armed groups on criminality outside the organisation. From the prohibition of contract killings outside the organisation, to the need to register as drug dealers with the armed group and the prohibition of robberies. The OCG controlled criminal activity even when it was outside its main functions.

**Non-criminal civilians:** Six of the victims of dismemberment between 2013 and 2022 were not identified in any of the above-mentioned profiles. The reasons identified for their homicide were twofold: sentimental involvement with the partner of a member of the armed group and breaking the 'law of silence'. On the first point, two people were dismembered after it was discovered that the partners of members of the organisation had been unfaithful with them, which was forbidden<sup>108, 109</sup>. However, the most common cause of civilian dismemberment was the breaking of the "law of silence". In some neighbourhoods, 'Los Costeños' had established a law that they called 'the law of nobody saw and nobody knew anything' ('*nadie vio y nadie supo nada*').<sup>110</sup> Basically, this meant that in neighbourhoods under the control of this armed group, people were not allowed to talk about "drug seizures, captures of criminals, criminal attacks, or any other matter of public order".<sup>111</sup> An inhabitant of the Las Flores neighbourhood said that 'here we already know the issues that cannot be touched. To talk about it is to put a gun to one's head'.<sup>112</sup> The dismemberments of these people were in response to the fact that they revealed information to the National Police about some of the events happening in these neighbourhoods. In addition to the law of silence, the armed groups also set hours when people are not allowed to leave their homes and patrol to verify compliance.<sup>113</sup> They also offer cash lending services and charge fees to traders to let them operate.<sup>114</sup>

### *Changing dismemberment profiles according to the violent context*

<sup>106</sup> El Heraldo, 'Identifican a hombre desmembrado hallado en Sabanalarga', (November 05, 2022). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/desmembrado-en-sabanalarga-es-identificado-por-las-autoridades-952537>

<sup>107</sup> El Heraldo, 'En video | Los dos cuerpos estaban en una sola fosa en Villa del Rosario' (September 01, 2018). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/en-video-los-dos-cuerpos-estaban-en-una-sola-fosa-en-villa-del-rosario-537094>

<sup>108</sup> El Heraldo, '"Un tal 'chino' le cortó la cabeza a mi hijo"', (November 09, 2013). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/tendencias/un-tal-chino-le-corto-la-cabeza-mi-hijo-131579>

<sup>109</sup> El Heraldo, '"A 'Los Centrales' se les investiga por un desmembramiento": Policía', (September 07, 2018). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/los-centrales-se-les-investiga-por-un-desmembramiento-policia-539184>

<sup>110</sup> Al Día, 'El macabro hallazgo de un cuerpo sin cabeza en un barrio de Barranquilla', (March 17, 2017). Available at: <https://www.aldia.co/mundo-serio/el-macabro-hallazgo-de-un-cuerpo-sin-cabeza-en-un-barrio-de-barranquilla>

<sup>111</sup> El Heraldo, 'La 'Ley del silencio' sigue imperando en Las Flores', (September 05, 2015). Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/la-ley-del-silencio-sigue-imperando-en-las-flores-36592>

<sup>112</sup> El Heraldo, *La 'Ley del silencio' sigue imperando en Las Flores*, par. 3.

<sup>113</sup> Verdad Abierta, *Infierno en 'Bendición de Dios'*, par. 2.

<sup>114</sup> El Universal, 'Capturan en Atlántico a integrantes de "Los Costeños Plutones"' (June 24, 2022). Available at: <https://www.eluniversal.com.co/regional/atlantico/capturan-en-atlantico-a-integrantes-de-los-costenos-plutones-AL6739552>

According to several authors, levels of organised criminal violence increase in times of competition for territory.<sup>115, 116</sup> When armed groups do not have other actors challenging their dominance, then they will potentially seek to reduce violence to avoid attracting media or institutional attention, as it may affect their business. However, if another armed group is challenging its criminal governance regime, the OCG would have much greater incentives to increase levels of violence against its rivals.<sup>117</sup> In this scenario, for our argument to be true, dismemberments would then need to have been used differently by armed groups according to the context. We would thus expect an increase in dismemberments during the years when they were establishing criminal governance in competition with other armed groups (2013) or when this criminal governance was challenged by other actors (2016-2017 and 2021-2022). During the last ten years, there were five years of established criminal governance and five of contested criminal governance.

Figure 2 helps to situate the patterns of dismemberments by year. In total, 76% of the dismemberments happened during the years when there were competitions for territory. All dismemberments of rivals occurred in 2013, 2021, and 2022. In addition, all dismemberments of gang members accused of betrayal occurred between 2016-2017, except for one, which happened in 2021. In other words, all the events that could be related to the competition for territory (either the dismemberment of rivals, or of members of the organisation suspected of having allied themselves with rivals) happened during the years of dispute. In fact, the first dismemberments in Barranquilla occurred in 2013, the year in which 'Los Rastrojos-Caleños' 'Los Costeños' and the AGC first clashed. This likely suggests that 'Los Costeños' used dismemberments to establish its criminal governance regime by deterring its main rivals in 2013. Subsequently, during the other years of competition, the dismemberments were a way to defend the criminal governance they had already built. Figure 2 shows the cases of dismemberment by year and profile of the victim.

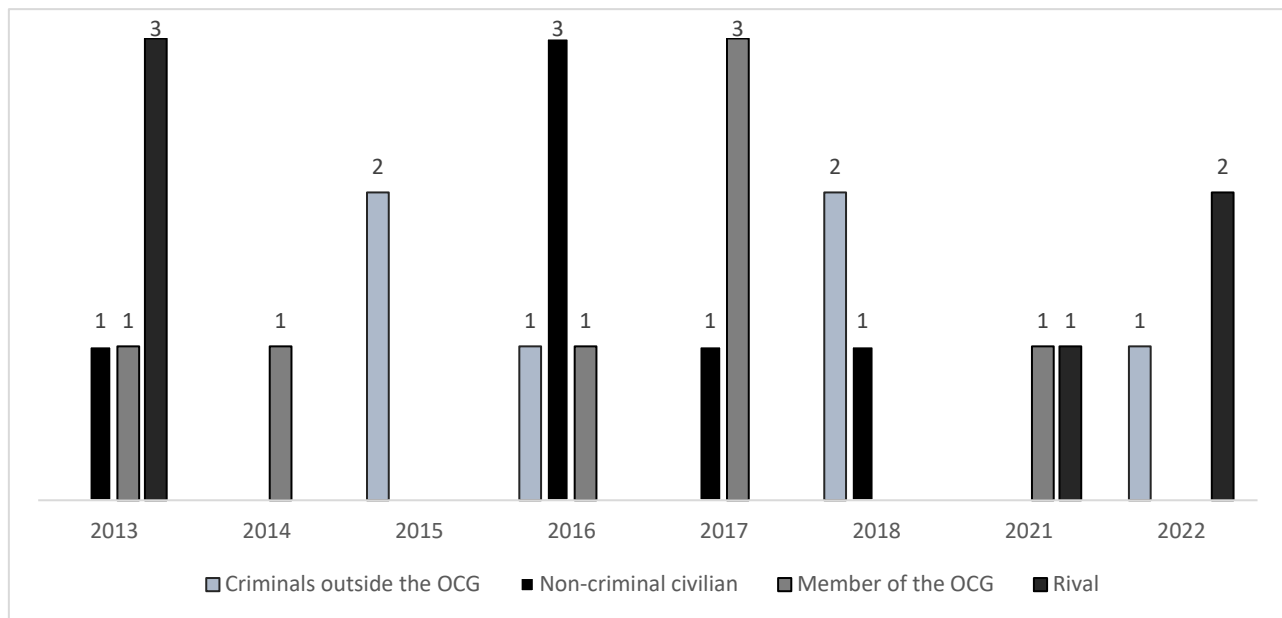
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<sup>115</sup> Deborah Yashar, *Homicidal Ecologies. Illicit Economies and Complicit States in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>116</sup> Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>117</sup> Dorothy Kronick, 'Profits and Violence in illegal Markets: Evidence from Venezuela', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 64: 7-8 (2020), pp. 1499-1523. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200271989888>

Figure 2. Dismemberments in Barranquilla by profile and year.



Source: Authors elaboration.

## Alternative explanations

There are still three hypotheses in the literature that could be useful in explaining the cases of dismemberment by criminal groups. Although some of their premises have been contradicted by the data presented so far, we will dedicate the rest of the article to briefly explain why we consider them insufficient for explaining the case of Barranquilla and, likely, any other case where OCGs use dismemberment recurrently.

### *Hiding the identity of the victim*

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, there is a large body of literature that suggests that dismemberments serve the function of hiding the identity of the victim and, with it, the information that could be useful for the authorities to find the perpetrators.<sup>118</sup> Although this hypothesis seems to be very useful for thinking about individually committed dismemberment cases,<sup>119</sup> it has also been used to explain the actions of some armed groups during civil wars.<sup>120</sup> Dismemberment may not be discovered for a long time and, when it happens, body parts may be difficult to identify. It makes sense that OCGs, which have as one of their central objectives to conceal their violence so as not to attract state and media attention,<sup>121</sup> would use this tactic.

<sup>118</sup> Jonghan Sea and Eric Beauregard, 'Mutilation in Korean Homicide: An Exploratory Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34: 4 (2019), pp. 2863-2877. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516663898>

<sup>119</sup> Nadine Wilke-Schalhorst, Ann Schdröder, Klaus Püschel and Carolin Edler, 'Criminal corpse dismemberment in Hamburg, Germany from 1959 to 2016', *Forensic Science International*, 300 (2019): pp. 145-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forsciint.2019.04.038>

<sup>120</sup> María Victoria Pérez Poveda and Samuel Carrero Gelvez, 'Hallazgo de fosas comunes en Colombia. El tiempo de las víctimas: Tributo a la memoria del dolor y posibilidad de reconciliación nacional', *Rev. Crim.*, 50: 1 (2008), pp. 351-370.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Friman, 'Drug markets and the selective use of violence', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52 (2009), pp. 285-295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-009-9202-4>

We believe there are two reasons to think that this hypothesis does not apply to the case of Barranquilla. First, 75% of the dismembered bodies in Barranquilla were found on the same day or, at the most, one day after the dismemberment. In fact, we observed that the perpetrators often left the victim's head close to their place of residence. Therefore, it is unlikely that the perpetrators were attempting to conceal the victim's identity or delay its identification. On the contrary, they appeared to want the victim to be identified to convey their message. This was also confirmed by some members of the OCGs interviewed.

Secondly, the distribution of body parts was not random. Armed groups openly left them in neighbourhoods where they had influence or were in conflict with their rivals. In some cases, the body was accompanied by a message, which was delivered to the community by members of the organisation. It was clear that the dismemberment was a form of punishment, and the perpetrators wanted to make clear who they had punished and why. Concealing the identity of the victim was not their objective.

### *Crime to disfigure the victim*

A second hypothesis that could explain these cases is that dismemberment happens because the perpetrator wants to unload all his violence on the victim's body. According to this idea, the strategic and instrumental logic is insufficient because the purpose is to disfigure the body rather than simply to kill.<sup>122</sup> Dismemberment has been understood as an act of cruelty against bodies that does not necessarily bring with it a strategic calculation, but rather is leveraged in pedagogies of cruelty.<sup>123</sup> It happens because people have learned to be cruel during war, but not because they want to use the event for ulterior purposes.<sup>124</sup>

We believe that this explanation cannot be immediately dismissed if we consider that some of the crimes happened for reasons that could be considered very passionate (such as betrayal or infidelity). Moreover, there is no doubt that dismemberment is an act of extreme violence to the victim's body.<sup>125</sup>

However, we believe that, although it may be part of the story, this explanation leaves out cases in which the bodies were not distributed as a sign of respect for the victims (who were almost all members of the organisation). The dismemberment happened, but the leaders of the organisation gave the order that their bodies were not to be displayed.<sup>126</sup> If they were not going to show the victim's body, they could have used selective killing. Still, they decided to go for dismemberment.

What we argued is that this was a compliance with a rule and not an act of hatred against the person. Therefore, it is not just a dehumanising crime (which it is), but a crime that serves an ulterior purpose: to enforce the norms that underpin criminal rulers. Dismemberment makes it possible to maintain the rational-bureaucratic order of a given regime of criminal governance. Otherwise, there would be no

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<sup>122</sup> Narendran Kumarakulasingam, 'The horror of 'horrorism': laundering metropolitan killings', *Third World Quarterly*, 40: 2 (2019), pp. 250-265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1551057>

<sup>123</sup> Jaime Santamaría, 'El Salado Massacre as a Paradigm of Paramilitary Sovereign Violence', *Eidos*, 34 (2020), pp. 161-191. <https://doi.org/10.14482/eidos.34.303.6>

<sup>124</sup> Samuel Ritholtz, 'The Ontology of Cruelty in Civil War: The Analytical Utility of Characterizing Violence in Conflict Studies', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2: 2 (2022), pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac014>

<sup>125</sup> María Victoria Uribe, 'Dismembering and Expelling: Semantics of Political Terror in Colombia', *Public Culture*, 16: 1 (2004), pp. 79-96. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-1-79>

<sup>126</sup> Authors Interview with a former member of an OCG, Malambo, 15/02/2023.

point in having committed these dismemberments that they concealed, or others that could have been better dealt with by selective homicide (such as those who violated the law of silence or who were minor criminals in the neighbourhood). Dehumanising is an inherent part of dismemberment, but by itself it does not solve our puzzle.

### *Narco-terrorism*

As already mentioned, many published studies examining the extreme violence exhibited by OCGs have focused on Mexican drug cartels as case studies. Due to the intensity and visibility of such armed groups, there has been ongoing debate on whether it should be classified as terrorism.<sup>127</sup> The predominant conclusion among researchers is that gruesome violence is often employed during struggles for territorial control<sup>128</sup> or attempts to establish dominance in new markets.<sup>129</sup> The purpose of such violence is twofold: to terrorise the population and rival groups,<sup>130</sup> and to foster intra-organisational cohesion.<sup>131</sup>

The first strand of research (gruesome violence aims to terrorise population to consolidate territorial control) is mainly focused on inter-criminal violence and moments of armed competition. Armed groups are cruel to their enemies because they have dehumanised them<sup>132</sup> or because they need to make credible the threat of violence against all those who try to encroach on their territories.<sup>133</sup> However, we argue that extra-lethal violence also occurs during periods of consolidated territorial control.

For instance, in Barranquilla, only 25% of dismemberments over the past decade were directed against rivals, while 75% were perpetrated against criminals outside the organisation, non-criminal civilians, and members of the armed group itself. While this partial explanation sheds light on some scenarios, we believe it may not fully account for territories with persistent high levels of dismemberment over an extended period.

The second explanation, which suggests that gruesome violence is aimed at building intra-organisational cohesion, also offers a partial understanding. It is true that extra-lethal violence can foster a sense of community and identity within armed groups. However, our case study in Barranquilla revealed elements of dismemberment practices that deviate from ritualistic logic. For example, there were cases where dismemberments were only communicated to organisation members without displaying the bodies, indicating a different motivation beyond ritual. In these cases, rather than a ritual, it seemed to be a punishment. One of the interviewees confirmed this by saying this about one of the dismemberment cases "we knew that they were people who were very respected by the bosses. It was

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<sup>127</sup> David Teiner, 'Cartel-Related Violence in Mexico as Narco-Terrorism or Criminal Insurgency', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 14: 4 (2020), pp. 83-98.

<sup>128</sup> Brian J. Phillips, 'Terrorist Tactics by Criminal Organizations: The Mexican Case in Context', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12: 1 (2018), pp. 46-63.

<sup>129</sup> Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen, 'Is Narco-Violence in Mexico Terrorism?', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 33: 2 (2014), pp. 158-173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12145>

<sup>130</sup> Brian J. Phillips and Viridiana Ríos, 'Narco-Messages: Competition and Public Communication by Criminal Groups', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 62: 1 (2020), pp. 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2019.43>

<sup>131</sup> Pereda, *Macabre ceremonies*, 281.

<sup>132</sup> Samuel Logan, 'Preface: Los Zetas and a new barbarism', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22: 5 (2011), pp. 718-727. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.620809>

<sup>133</sup> Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, 2021. *Los Zetas Inc Austin* (TX: University of Texas Press, 2021).

not a spectacle to watch for anyone, as with others, but a punishment for doing something against the organisation. Out of respect, we only knew about it, but we did not observe it".

### **Conclusions**

In this article, we have explored a phenomenon that has received relatively little attention in organised crime studies: human dismemberment. This is a rare form of violence compared to others: in Colombia, over the past 15 years, there have been 383 dismemberments, while in 2022 alone there were more than 12,000 homicides. Still, the link between dismemberments and organised crime is not minor. Most of the dismemberments took place in cities where there is a sustained presence of OCGs. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that this is part of the violent repertoire of these organisations.

To evaluate this nexus between dismemberments and organised crime, we have analysed the case of Barranquilla. Our methodological strategy consisted, first, in understanding how many of the dismemberments were potentially related to OCGs. To do so, we triangulated all available databases on the phenomenon in the country and in the city. Although the numbers vary between 20-27 homicides, through review of press archives and extensive fieldwork we were able to identify that at least 25 cases were related to OCGs.

Having identified this pattern, we then analysed the information based on three elements: i) the ways in which dismemberment is presented to the community, ii) the profiles of the victims of dismemberment and iii) the variations over time of this form of violence. With this information, the argument we present is that dismemberments are used by armed groups for two central purposes.

The first is to make the territorial establishment of an armed group credible. Dismemberments against rivals increase when one armed group attempts to challenge the territorial establishment of the other. Thus, the message sent to rivals is that there is a willingness to defend that territory with a significant level of viciousness, which is intended to deter competitors. The second purpose is to consolidate and sustain a criminal governance regime. By establishing themselves in a territory, armed groups may decide to establish codes of conduct for the population. When this happens, punishments must also be established for those who break them. Dismemberment here functions as a punishment to enforce those norms against the *governed* (members of the organisation, criminals outside the organisation, and non-criminal civilians). In this way, they would discourage further challenges to criminal governance. Our article thus connects the literatures on dismemberment in civil wars, on extra-lethal violence in settings of organised violence, and on criminal governance.

### ***Future research***

There are two questions related to dismemberment that our research did not resolve and that may be useful for further research. The first is: Why do some groups use dismemberment and others do not? As we show here, dismemberment appears to be useful both for deterring rival organisations and for generating credibility for the system of norms produced by criminal governance. It is pertinent, then, to ask what makes some OCGs use it, whilst others do not. The literature on civil wars can be useful in this regard, showing how such violent acts are taught and how they become practically mandatory



for members of some armed groups.<sup>134</sup> More comparative research is needed to understand this phenomenon.

The second question is: What is the reaction of the state and society to dismemberments? It is worth remembering that these happen mainly in cities (in the Colombian case) and that on at least 19 occasions human remains appeared in different neighbourhoods of the city. Even so, our fieldwork and archival press review shows that there has been neither a large-scale institutional response nor a public reaction against this practice. On the contrary, for ten years the authorities have tended to claim that these are not systematic events, but rather settling of scores between criminals that should not be of concern to civilians.<sup>135</sup> This framing of violence has the potential to limit public solidarity as well. If it is suspected that the murdered person was involved in criminal affairs, it is likely to be assumed that the phenomenon will not be a problem for others. It is therefore necessary to study not only dismemberments, but also the way in which the media, citizens and authorities talk about and respond to dismemberments.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, an issue on which there is still much room for research is the micro-politics of dismemberments: is the decision to dismember headed by someone specific? How does the norm of dismemberment as punishment for the organisation come about and is it adopted? How does the organisation get its members to internalise these ideas? This is one of the most difficult avenues of research to pursue given how secretive some armed groups can be and how messy these processes can sometimes be. Still, it is worth considering these possibilities to better understand these small decision-making processes that can also contribute to better policies to combat the phenomenon.

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<sup>134</sup> Jaime Santamaría, 'The El Salado Massacre: Necropolitics, Necroaesthetics, Resistances', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidad de los Andes, 2020).

<sup>135</sup> El Heraldo, 'La historia de cómo descuartizaron a Johnny en La Chinita', May 08, 2016. Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/la-historia-de-como-descuartizaron-johnny-en-la-chinita-259379>

<sup>136</sup> Natán Skigin, 'Prosocial Behavior amid Violence: The Deservingness Heuristic and Solidarity with Victims', (forthcoming).