

Thematic  
Document

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# ORGANIZED CRIME AND DRUG MARKETS:

RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS FROM  
LATIN AMERICA  
ACADEMIA:

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This Thematic Document summarizes contributions from academic research published in Latin America during 2018 on public policy that addresses organized crime related to drug trafficking. These publications call for rethinking state interventions focused on the use of force that can result in human rights violations. Evidence shows that the most effective policies to reduce violence in the fight against organized crime are those that frame the use of legal force within social programs. It is therefore urgent that we better understand the context and dynamics of organized crime in relation to economic and cultural dimensions. In addition, the complexity of the problem of organized crime requires public policy whose potential impact and measurement are thought from long-term perspectives.

## The use of force in the fight against organized crime can lead to human rights violations

State response focused on the use of force has been the central axis of the war on drugs. Far from reducing violence, current policies have caused considerable social damage, including severe human rights violations and exacerbating poverty and marginalization, as suggested by the report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, "Drug Policy and the Sustainable Development Agenda " (2018). Therefore, we can infer that the approaches most countries have used in the fight against drugs have gone against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The use of legal force by the state, which has set the tone in the war on drugs in Latin America, has increased levels of violence and has not been effective in reducing the scale of illegal drug markets.

An increase in homicide rates is one of several unwanted consequences of the use of force in the fight against organized crime. Several studies look at the causes and consequences of violence related to illegal drug markets. In Mexico, Jason M. Lindo and Marta Padilla-Romo (2018) estimate that the capture of a drug cartel leader is followed by an immediate and sustained increase of 61% in homicide rates in the municipality where the capture took place and where the criminal gang operates. According to the authors, this increase in lethal violence is due to the fact that the

fall of a leader generates fighting among the middle ranks or with other criminal gangs in their rush to fill the power void. According to this study, the side-effects of fallen leaders can explain 31.5% of the increase in homicides between 2006 and 2010 in Mexico.

But the effects of violence extend beyond homicides. Recent research suggests that violence has an impact on school dropout rates and the time that mothers invest in developing cognitive skills in their children, which leads to a detriment to their mental health.

In "The Short-Term Impact of Crime on School Enrollment and School Choice: Evidence from El Salvador," Martínez (2018) explored variations in violence after a truce negotiated by the country's two largest gangs (Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha) to estimate the effect of homicides on school dropout rates. The study concludes that the homicide rate induces changes in migration between and outside the education system for young women and men of working age. It also indicates a significant impact on the decision to enroll in girls under the age of 15, and in young men between the ages of 15 and 22.

In "The acute effect of community violent crime on maternal engagement in cognitive and socio-emotional stimulation", Cuartasa, McCoy and Molano (2018) conclude that mothers exposed to a violent crime near their home report having done less stimulating activities with their children (compared to unexposed mothers), which inhibits cognitive development in their children.

The work carried out by Flores and Atuesta (2018), "Mourning our dead: The impact of Mexico's war on drugs on citizens' depressive symptoms", concludes that violent confrontations between the government and criminal gangs have a negative and significant effect on the mental health of citizens. These harmful effects may be even greater when the government's actions to combat organized crime are not adequate.

As noted by the International Drug Policy Consortium in "Balance of a decade of Drug Policy" (2018), countries must respect their citizens' human rights above all. It is imperative to formulate different approaches that work with and for society. In particular, the evidence suggests that the approach towards the use of legal force should be changed and the deep-rooted internal social dynamics of organized crime should be attacked from diverse perspectives.

# Police and armed force interventions must be framed using a social perspective

Several studies suggest that it is necessary to change policy focus to effectively respond to the phenomenon of organized crime. The state must provide services to citizens beyond using force to "attack" the enemy. This approach not only turns out to be more effective in reducing violence, but also respects human rights and mitigates the unwanted consequences of these interventions.

After analyzing 68 academic papers evaluating policy in the fight against organized crime in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Venezuela, Muggah and Aguirre Tobón (2018) conclude that the most effective policies to reduce violence in the fight against organized crime are those that frame the use of state force within social programs.

The most effective policies to reduce violence in the fight against organized crime are those that manage to frame the use of state force within social programs.  
Muggah and Aguirre Tobón (2018)

Although it is necessary to train public force agents and develop alternatives to the use of force, it is equally important to understand the relationship between organized crime and society. Repressive interventions can control circumstantial factors, but social policies help solve structural problems underpinning crime: poverty, inequality, culture, legitimacy and citizens' trust in the state, among others. Organized crime is a vicious circle that cannot be broken exclusively with the use of force.

## Understanding the context and social dynamics of organized crime

Peer-reviewed studies published in 2018 suggest that in order to design policy that positively impacts civil society, we need to understand that crime and the drug markets are also part of society. Fighting organized crime requires understanding how it has inserted itself into modern culture and how it has contributed towards establishing the economic and social dynamics of a given community.

Drug trafficking has permeated cultural production, fashion, homes, articles, music and the very lifestyle of Mexican society, as shown in the "Narcoculture? Narco-trafficking as a semiosphere of anticulture". In this study, Haidar and Chavez (2018) use semiology to characterize a culture that produces and reproduces a status quo of terror and barbarism.

Although it seems very difficult to counteract these deep-rooted and harmful trends, the book *Cultivemos Paz, a collective reflection from science, sustainable development and journalism* (Mercadillo and Enciso, Eds 2018) shows how through interdisciplinary efforts we can understand the causes of violence, and bring about a change from a culture of war to a culture of peace. This work presents a vision and a strategy to mitigate the type of culture that organized crime has created in some Mexican communities.

In another study, "Psychosocial wounds: laceration of organized crime" (2018), psychologist and anthropologist Cecilia López Pozos makes a heroic effort in understanding the daily dynamics in marginalized areas with a high presence of organized crime, such as the Mexican Central Highlands. The study gathers interviews with young people linked to the cartels, which portray a region absorbed in violence and poverty where various illicit activities, torture and police corruption have become normal. One of the main findings is the strong correlation between economic need and the decision to participate in organized crime.

In order to successfully take on organized crime, we first need to break the cycle of poverty that links the two together. A 2018 article concluded that violence is a side-effect of poverty, based on the results from a poverty mitigation program in El Salvador. The study measured the impact of the Temporary Income Support Program (PATI) deployed throughout the country between 2009 and 2014. Acosta and Monsalve (2018) find that this program resulted in a reduction in most types of crime indicators, which lasted beyond the program's cycle. This is an excellent example of a social program that fights organized crime in its economic dimension.

In order to fully understand the context and internal dynamics of a society that has long lived under the influence of organized crime, we also need to make marginalized populations more visible. Those immersed in dynamics imposed upon them by organized crime and where social maladies manifest in greater proportion.

The World Bank report “Afro-descendants in Latin America: towards an inclusion framework”, analyzes the largest excluded minority in the region (Friere, Díaz-Bonilla, Schwartz, Soler and Carbonari 2018). Afro-descendants represent the poorest population in Latin American countries and have fewer opportunities for social inclusion. In addition, most homicide victims in Latin America are black men. To break this cycle of marginalization, it is essential we formulate differentiated policies based on informed discussions. The report presents a database that manages to consolidate and compare a variety of data and statistics from Latin American countries. The report not only presents the current situation of the Afro-descendant population, but also discusses possible inclusion strategies. This is an example of an exhaustive publication that can be used to better understand the situation of a population greatly affected by inequality and thus formulate social policies to fight organized crime from a social inclusion perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

During 2018, several studies looked at the causes and consequences of violence derived from illicit drug markets, and the effects of different drugs and safety policies implemented throughout the region. Although these made a great contribution towards better understanding illicit drug markets and organized crime for public policy design, there are three important aspects that should be improved upon.

First, public policy impact analysis should begin to assess long-term effects. Limiting the study of drug and safety policies to short term results may lead to recommendations that have unexpected long-term outcomes. It is essential we evaluate the long-term impact of our public policies.

Second, very few of these quantitative studies make an in-depth analysis of the context in which the phenomena under study occur. International literature on crime and violence suggests that local context may be essential in understanding the causes, dynamics and consequences of these phenomena. The empiric research carried out in Latin America will be able to make a greater contribution if it takes into account the particularities of local communities where the phenomena associated with crime and violence occur.

Finally, the absence of comparative studies in the region is surprising. Despite studying similar phenomena and analyzing highly similar public policy challenges, academics in our region do not usually do comparative or collaborative work. Moreover, studies on a phenomenon in one country tend to ignore studies on the same

phenomenon in other countries in the region. It is essential that studies on safety and drugs in Latin America benefit from the progress already made by other Latin American researchers.

**CESED Thematic Documents are a tool to facilitate access to evidence and information resulting from research on safety and drugs in Latin America.**

**The Center for Studies on Safety and Drugs (CESED) seeks to promote a broad and informed debate on drug and safety policies in Colombia.**

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## BRIEF SUMMARY OF OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Below, we present a brief summary of other studies carried out during 2018 that were not included in the main narrative due to length constraints, and do not denote differences in rigor or quality.

"Voices from the coca fields" (Bautista, Capacho, Martínez, Pereira and Ramírez 2018) is a study based on participatory interviews and methodologies that tell of the injustice, discrimination and stigmatization suffered by women in the coca leaf fields of Colombia. It presents policies and actions required to break this cycle.

In "Internal forced displacement and crime: Evidence from Colombia", Mejía, Velasquez and Sanchez (2018) look at how forced displacement in Colombia has been tied to some criminal dynamics. They conclude that forced displacement is related to an increase in homicide rates and a decrease in personal injuries in receiving municipalities.

In "Categories, patterns and determining factors in the assassination and threats to social leaders" Gonzalez Pozo (2018) makes an in-depth analysis of the precarious security conditions of social leaders in Colombia and draws attention to the need to take specific action to solve this crisis.

The report "Peace with women: special edition on women leaders and defenders of human rights in Colombia" (Benjumea, Eraso and Otaegi 2018), deals with the alarming security condition of these remarkable women. In "Killing Social Leaders for Territorial Control: The Unintended Consequences of Peace", Prem, Rivera, Romero and Vargas (2018) estimate the effect of the recent peace processes in Colombia on the assassination of social leaders.

In "Trees and Crime in Bogota, Colombia: Is the link an ecosystem disservice or service?", Escobedo, Clerici, Staudhammer, Feged-Rivadeneira, Bohorquez and Tovar (2018) use statistical methods that take into account geographical dynamics and detailed features of green areas. The study questions the commonly accepted theory that green areas lead to an increase in crime.

In "Barriers to addiction prevention and treatment in communities with organized crime: The perspective of health providers" Gómez and Almanza (2018) discuss the difficulties of treating and preventing addiction in places under the influence of organized crime in Mexico. They call attention to the need to ensure safety for both medical staff and patients.

On the fight against organized crime, the article "Drug policy in Mexico: a cause of national tragedy" (Zedillo, Perez, Madrazo and Alonso 2018) proposes changing course in the fight against drugs in Mexico. The studies "Excarceration: ending mass incarceration for drug offenses" (MUCD 2018), "Criminological aspects of recidivism and its problems" (Larrota, Gaviria, Mora and Arenas 2018), "A proposal for a comprehensive model of social reinsertion for law breakers" (Morales, Pantoja, Pinol and Sanchez 2018) and "Promoting Drug Policies with a Gender Approach in Bolivia" (Ledebur and Youngers 2018) look at extreme overcrowding in the Latin American prison system.

We found three academic publications written from the perspective of the armed forces in Latin American countries. Namely, "Security in the Pacific Alliance: A platform for the Colombian State?" (Gonzalez, Quintero and Ripoll De Castro 2018), "Transnational organized crime as a hybrid threat to the Triple Frontier (Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil)" (Cuervo 2018) and "The fight against organized crime and terrorism in Uruguay: the challenge we face" (Rodríguez 2018). These articles discuss the opportunities and challenges to consolidate national and international efforts in the fight against organized crime.



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