FORUM: General Assembly

ISSUE: Measures to Combat Organized Crime and Economic Corruption in Latin America

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Introduction

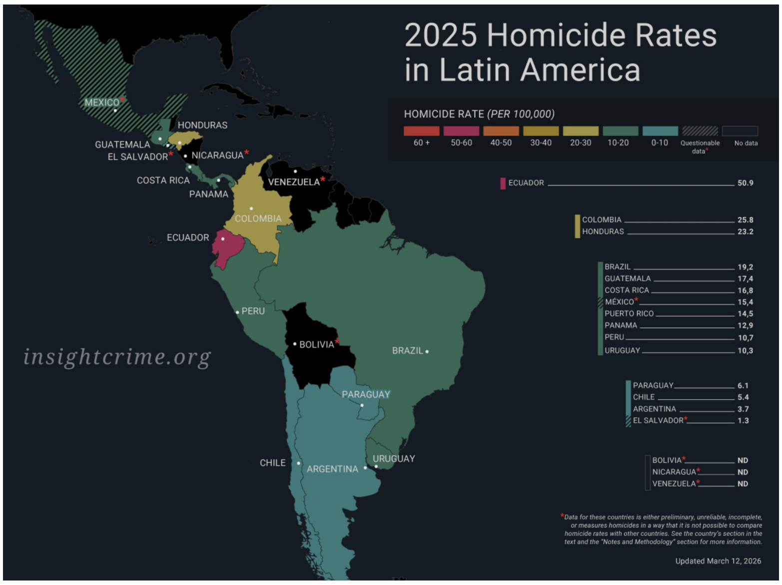

Figure 1: 2025 Homicide Rates in Latin America

Organized crime refers to crimes characterized by coordinated planning and participation of individuals. This issue is particularly prevalent in Latin America, which accounts for nearly one-third of global homicides, with approximately 40% linked to organized criminal activity, despite representing only 9% of the world's population. Organized crimes are significantly interconnected with the contextual realities, including factors such as social conditions, technological advancements, political dynamics and levels of human developments. In Latin America, a region that is formed with weak state institutions and a high level of inequality, poverty, corruption and systematic impunity, this background works as a fertile environment for organized crimes to prosper. Furthermore, characteristics such as labor informality allows illegal markets and consolidation of criminal organizations to be prevalent.

These criminal organizations hold a rational stance and prominently driven by profit-seeking motives as they plan their operations while prioritizing protections of their members to provoke law enforcements and fight against rival criminal groups. By having extensive adaptability, these organizations are able to diversify their illicit business to align with market demands. To do so, they utilize both positive and forceful measures, such as violence to justify their operations within local communities and ensure smooth operation. In order to facilitate their measures, they exert influence over public and private officials through bribery and murder, to ensure the success of their operations. Specifically, impunity plays a crucial role in protecting the wealth of the criminals and safety of the corrupt officials, to further allow perpetuation of criminal power (Dammert and Sampó).

Consequently, organized crime persistently threats development and well-being of Latin America, as their activities have allowed them to extend control over not only institutions but also entire local communities. With state failing to consolidate, these voids are filled with criminal networks with alternative, often violent form, of governance. This form of control reproduces high inequalities and undermines the rudimentary foundations of social integration and democracy. In this vein, it is essential for the General Assembly to create feasible yet effective solutions that can combat organized crime and economic corruption in Latin America for the region to be able to thrive with real commitment of the State and society to human development (Dammert and Solórzano).

Background

Figure 2: Map of Organized Crime in the Americas

Although it is difficult to find the reason behind the recent escalation organized crime in the region, series of overlapping factors are contributing. In the 2010s, demand for cocaine, illegal gold and migrant smuggling rapidly increased. Governments started to intensify their enforcement against organized crime groups since 2005, which resulted in numerous reorganizations of crime groups competing for new influence. The issue was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the criminal groups started to gain legitimacy and power in weak-state areas or areas where state forces were unavailable. This provided opportunities for the groups to improve upon their businesses and recruited more forces from the impoverished populations. Moreover, expanded production and availability of arms facilitated the growth of organized crimes into new areas and markets. Unprecedented growth in technology, such as cryptocurrencies allowed criminal groups to expand into transnational levels. For further understanding, the following are four core characteristics of organized crime in Latin America (Maloney, et al.).

Territorial control

The organized crime groups control territories that ranged from few blocks in urban areas to large rural areas. In these areas, the group monopolized illicit markets through coercion and violence. Currently, it is known that large parts of territories in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela are under control by criminal groups. This territorial control often incorporates lethal violence which are related to conflicts between groups over territories or markets (Maloney, et al.).

Criminal governance

Under the controlled territories, criminal organizations provide services to the community instead of the government by responding to the citizen's demand. However, sometimes, they limit the freedom of the citizens, as they control their behavior and forces obey to their rules. For instance, in Puerto Leguizamo, the organized crime group dictates the time in which the civilians can use the river and who may carry on their boats. Furthermore, the organized crime group forbid their consumption of alcohol and enforces punishments to the citizens as well to control crime activities from occurring (Maloney, et al.).

Extortion

Imposing "taxes" from businesses is a widespread custom of organized crime groups in their controlled territories. They are often concealed as sale of protection services, local justice or social assistance. Nonetheless, this is a threat the crime groups can use for those who do not pay for their services. As extortion falls on top of the taxes collected by governments, many smaller businesses have to undergo financial burden. A case of extortion can be vividly exemplified by El Salvador, in which approximately 79% of the businesses had to pay extortion fees to the cartels in the past, which consisted 14% of their GDP in 2014. This reveals how organized crime controls the economic activities in the region to a large extent (Maloney, et al.).

State capture

This level of criminal activity is only possible by the ability of criminal groups to manipulate states officials at both national and subnational levels by combination of coercion and briberies. Sometimes, this capture extends to a degree of controlling electoral processes for their favor by murder and financing,

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threatening democracy of the region. For instance, in 2023, an Ecuadorian presidential candidates Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated just days before the election. This allowed organized crimes to become the strongest power source at local levels in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Ecuador (Maloney, et al.).

Problems Raised

Government corruption and weak state institutions

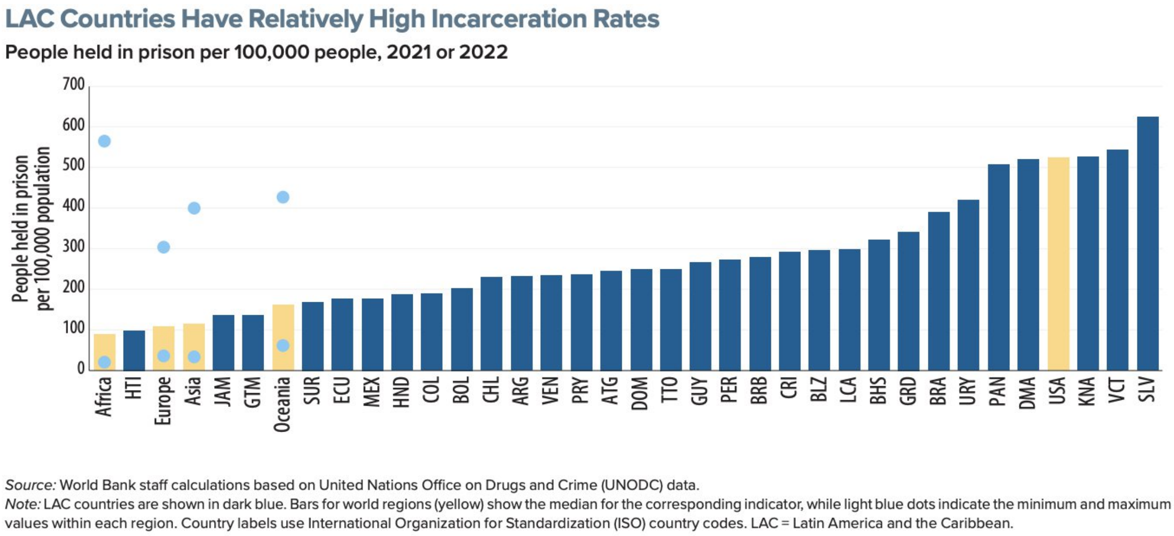


Figure 3: High Incarceration Rates in Latin American and the Caribbean

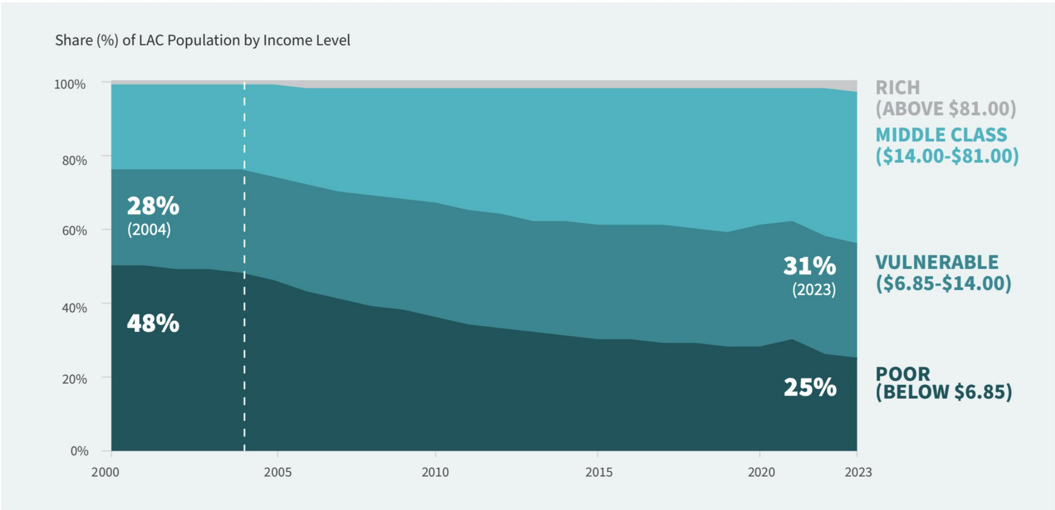
Although complete eradication of organized crimes may be unlikely to be achieved, improved power of the state can help to manage it and its long-standing effects. Latin America stands out for its weaknesses on the three key pillars of security policy, which includes prisons, police forces and justice systems, which fuels the problem into a further degree (Maloney, et al.).

To start, prison system fails to successfully incapacitate and resocialize the offenders. Currently, countries in Latin America and the Caribbeans (LAC) has the highest rate of incarceration. Nonetheless, the organized crime groups have taken control over prisons and manage outside crime from within. Instead, it now serves an initial step in a gang criminal's career, where they can be recruited and trained. Once they are released, it grows in size and reach, forming transnational criminal organizations. Many famous gangs such as MS-13 have originated behind the bars of Los Angeles. With arousing issues on corruption, geographical strategies, resource allocations, under-training and lack of coordination with other state agencies, polices in Latin America are often mistrusted by their own community, causing the entire police system to be ineffective (Maloney, et al.).

The most serious issue above all lies on the justice systems. Currently, judicial systems in the region lack the capacity to properly investigate and process high impact offenses and sometimes are even captured by offenders. This shows how the countries lack the ability to detect and dismantle the criminal organizations to halt the activities that undermines the lives of their citizens. High level of impunity also contributes to the harmful cycle that interconnect the continuum of criminal activities and expands social, economic and political disadvantages (Maloney, et al.).

Growing barrier to development

Figure 2 Despite decreasing poverty levels, vulnerability in LAC remains unchanged



Notes: Monetary thresholds are expressed in terms of 2017 US Dollars, Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). The Caribbean includes data for the Dominican Republic.
Source: World Bank's LAC Equity Lab (October 2024 update).

Figure 4: Percentage Share of Latin America and the Caribbean Population by income level

Organized crime halts the development in Latin America by causing further poverty, labor informality, institutional corruption and social exclusion. By limiting formal and legal opportunities, this makes illegal markets to appear more attractive for the citizens. The region's lack of opportunities for young men, the primary victims and main perpetrators of criminal violence allow recruitment to be continued for criminal organizations. In many cases, recruits are not forced, as the criminal groups provide significantly better income opportunities than the legal markets. Simultaneously, it offers elements of respect and appreciation, promoting by using emotions that youth often desire. Furthermore, 64% of children under 15 are known to have experienced violent practices at home from young age, which further encourages them to internalize aggression for survival mechanism. With weak state institutions, the criminal groups substitute as a form of governance which exacerbates the region's political inequality, causing lack of education and significantly hinders economic development in the region (Maloney, et al.).

For instance, in nations such as Peru or Brazil, illegal mining not only destroys the environment but also displaces the indigenous community. Furthermore, it captures resources that can be utilized for health, education, or infrastructure. For human trafficking cases, criminals often use forced migration as a profitable business from the sexual and labor exploitations of women, girls and boys. Even in the countries where sense of security and stability was secured for a long time such as Costa Rica or Uruguay, the rates of homicides, drug trafficking and illegal markets are rising. This shows how the threat is being spread to the entire region of Latin America. Hence, organized crimes disintegrate the rights to a dignified life, education, health and freedom. Consequently, this hinders economic development for the region and roots deep sense of mistrust for democracy.

International Actions

Shield of the Americas Summit

Figure 5: Latin American Leaders with President Trump at the "Shield of the Americas" Summit

One event that vividly illustrates this issue is the recent "Shield of the Americas" summit launched at March 7, 2026, led by the United States' Trump administration to join the leaders of Latin America to combat violent cartels that poses threat to national security. During the summit, seventeen leaders of Latin America signed to "Americas Counter Cartel Coalition", promising to mobilize military action against criminal groups to ensure peace and security. Specifically, it incorporates four major objectives including: signing a coalition for shared effort, advancing peace, taking actions for border security and narcoterrorism and cooperating to enhance security.

Nonetheless, it receives criticism upon its lack of detail, as no long-term commitments are addressed for burden sharing. Key solutions such as financial funding or regionally integrated plans for multilateral cooperation to investigate economic and political corruption is not consistently elaborated. Building on, the issue of partisanship engenders from this issue, as many points out how like-minded leaders are establishing cooperation upon security and narcotic issues during the summit. All leaders that were present at the summit were known to be in favor of the Trump administration and shown active support. Noticeably, the three missing figures from the summit were the leaders of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. These three administrations have previously revealed their stance against the US administration, which was prominently demonstrated when they have condemned the US operation to abduct Venezuela's former president Nicolas Maduro. This absence is significant since these three countries not only represents more than half of Latin America's GDP but also is a home to large part of the region's illicit markets, the intended targets of the summit. Considering how electoral volatility in the Western Hemisphere has brought rapid changes in the political interest of the governing bodies, this portrays how partisan based groupings are unlikely to cohere, albeit causing unsustainable in long term to effectively address the issue.

United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) is an international legal agreement for the fight against transnational organized crime. Entered into force in September 2003, this Convention represents a significant development in international cooperation to address the transnational organized crime. Through ratification of the Convention, nations commit to adopting a series of measures such as criminalization of participation in an organized criminal group, money laundering, corruption, impediment of justice. Furthermore, it suggests frameworks for topics such as extradition, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement and advertises training and technical assistance to strengthen national capacities. Hence, it serves as a global legal foundation for coordinated international action against transnational organized crime to prevent, cooperate and build capacity among Member States (About the Convention). Although the Convention's widespread ratification is a notable achievement, key obstacles such as inconsistencies in national legislation, lack of standardized data, untimely Independent Review Mechanism hinders its ability to create impactful results. Thus, many suggests that robust data collection, greater transparency, deeper engagement with the local society is required to strengthen UNTOC (Shaw, et al.).

Key Players

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC)

Figure 6: Launch of the Master's Program in Anti-Corruption and Compliances in El Salvador

Having established in 1997, UNDOC works under UN to prevent issues rising from drugs, crime, terrorism and corruption in the world. To resolve the issue of rising organized crimes in Latin America, UNDOC consistently makes approaches to target various sectors of the Member States. For instance, it aided civil society in Mexico extending public-private partnerships to combat human trafficking by preparing more than 1,000 tourism and transport sector staff in Mexico with tools to identify and respond to such cases. Furthermore, it raised awareness among over 269,000 people through creative measures such as art exhibition to display trafficking routes and victims' testimonies. Additionally, it provided help to the government of El Salvador. In 2024, UNDOC supported the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador in the development and establish of a master's program in anti-corruption and compliance, specifically designed for public officials. By providing this program, it aided more public officials in El Salvador to receive advanced anti-corruption practices to align with justified international standards. Moreover, it supported the establishment of the Model Code of Municipal Ethics, that was approved by the Governmental Ethics Tribunal. This will be adopted to the foundation for the codes of ethics in 44 municipalities, creating a standardized framework to promote accountability and integration. Hence, UNDOC is a significant contributor to this topic (UNDOC).

El Salvador

When Nayib Bukele assumed the presidency of El Salvador, a nation filled with gang violence, in 2019, he began to extend policies to reduce violence and prop up his political support base. From March 27th of 2022, he established a nationwide state of emergency that allows the suspension of many constitutional rights. During the process, more than 90,000 convicted criminals were arrested, and murder rate dropped from 53 per 100,000 people in 2018 to 2.4 per 100,000 in 2023. Due to the suspension of rights, some detentions process significantly lacked due process. For instance, the arrest not only involved criminals but also innocent journalist and civil society groups. It is estimated than thousands of people have been unjustly detained as well.
Nonetheless, Bukule's action led to increase of his popularity, as he was reelected in 2024. The actions in El Salvador expanded internationally in February 2025, President Trump formed a deal with Bukele to imprison some of the Venezuelan criminals deported from the United States in a Salvadoran mega-prison. Considering the increase in quality of life that Bukele was able to provide for the citizens, this case exemplifies the dilemma caused by organized crimes; where people have to trade their democracy for security (Bigley).

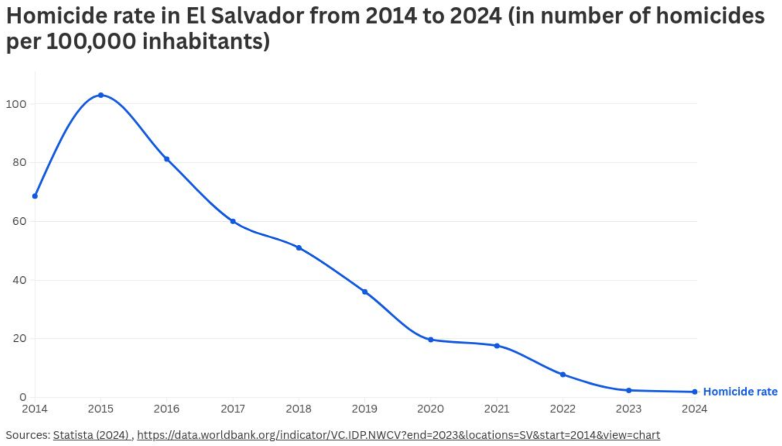


Figure 7: Homicide Rate in El Salvador from 2014 to 2024

Possible Solutions

Restoring democracy

Considering how criminal organizations are threatening the stability of democracy in Latin America, it is crucial to change and create polices to address the issue. To start, reforming campaign financing during elections to ensure transparency is necessary. Through eliminating a role of illicit money available during elections, it will create strength to resist against the influence of criminal organizations. To do so, independent electoral commissions are recommended to be established to oversee campaign procedures and enforce strict regulations. Building on, developing a stronger security framework to prevent and control violence during electoral processes is another key measure. This will allow reduction on political violence against women and decline the number of hate speeches in the digital space. Finally, promoting civic awareness on democratic participation through education is a crucial step to take.

Educating citizens on the dangers of criminal forces in politics in regions where criminal groups dominate will be essential to restore faith in democratic governance and allow citizens to resist criminal coercions.

Incorporating active regional judicial cooperation

To combat transnational organized crimes, it is essential to acquire cooperation at a global level. By utilizing active regional judicial cooperation, especially with the developed states, developing states in Latin America can strengthen their institutional and legal capacities to effectively tackle organized criminal networks. This cooperation should involve support for Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), allowing law enforcement agencies from different Member States to share intelligence, coordinate investigations, and collectively address criminal organizations that operate across national borders. Moreover, enhanced Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) should be installed to facilitate the exchange of evidence, extradition and cooperation between judicial authorities. Cooperation should also embrace assets recovery and confiscation policies to allow states to trace, freeze and recover the financial assets illegally obtained through organized criminal activities. To establish these measures effectively, regular regional and international conferences should be utilized to evaluate the success of each measure, share successful practices, and identify emerging forms of organized crime. Additionally, it is essential for the international cooperation to incorporate diverse and fair participation to enable all states to contribute their perspectives regardless of their political orientation. This will allow developing states, especially ones in Latin America to not only be recipients of assistance but also be active participants in decision making to make international cooperation to become more effective and sustainable (EU-Latin America step up justice cooperation against transnational organised crime).

Promoting local economy

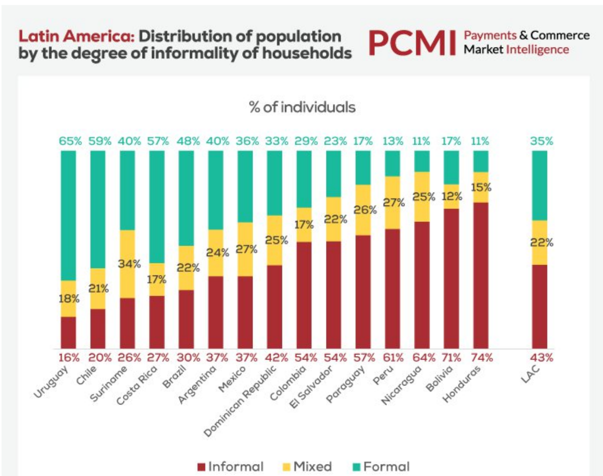


Figure 8: Distribution of Formal and Informal Economy in Latin America

In order to boost economic development in Latin America where organized crimes and economic corruption are prevalent, it is crucial to firstly identify regional economic structures. Policies should first aim to address the elimination of illegal markets and provide economic alternatives to the local populations. To do so, addressing informal economy is essential to provide livelihoods to populations that are excluded from employment due to lack of development in their region. In order to support the informal workers, the Member States can promote local entrepreneurship through resources and support to transition into a formal business. Financial support such as microloans, mobile banking and savings programs can also be efficiently employed to encourage informal worker to grow their businesses in a legal manner. Furthermore, reforming policies to provide adequate frameworks that can recognize the importance of the informal sector should be created to allow convenient registration, such as providing social protections including health insurance, and including them into the tax system and more. All of these measures can be collaborated to enhance local economies and create more employment opportunities to regions where illegal markets once dominated. Yet, to achieve a long-standing economic development, investing in formal economy will remain as an inevitable task.

Glossary

Organized crime

Organized crime refers to criminal activity by structured groups for profit or power.

Economic corruption

Economic corruption is an abuse of power for personal or financial profit.

Gang

Gang consists of a group of individuals to who may engage in criminal or illegal activities.

Judicial system

Judicial system refers to the system of courts and legal institutions that administer justice regarding the law.

Incarceration

Incarceration is a confinement of an individual in prison as a legal punishment.

Frameworks

Frameworks is a structured system of policies or rules used to guide actions or analysis.

Impunity

Impunity refers to exemption from punishment or legal consequences for wrongdoing.

Informal economy

Informal economy is an economic activity that operates outside official government supervision and taxation. For instance, a street vendor and handmade product sellers will count as an example of informal economic activity.

Formal economy

Formal economy is an economic activity that is officially regulated, documented and subjected to taxation. For instance, officially registered restaurants and government employees will be an example of formal economic activity.

Cartel

Cartel refers to an organized criminal group that works together to control and profit from illegal activities. It is bigger and transnational compared to a gang.

Human trafficking

Human trafficking refers to the unlawful act of transporting or coercing people in order to benefit from their work or service, typically in the form of forced labor or sexual exploitation.

Money laundering

Money laundering is the process of disguising illegally obtained money so that it appears to come from legitimate sources.

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