

Authors

Christopher Blattman
The University of Chicago

Benjamin Lessing
The University of Chicago

Santiago Tobón
Universidad EAFIT

SOC ACE Serious Organised Crime &
Anti-Corruption Evidence
Research Programme

Briefing Note

4

May 2022

The terrible trade-off: How the hidden cost of organised crime harms cities, and what can be done about it

Christopher Blattman,¹ Benjamin Lessing,² and Santiago Tobón³

Summary

Organised crime poses one of the greatest threats to national security and development in the 21st century. Despite this, most policy, data collection, and scholarly research focuses on individuals and disorganised violence.

Our work addresses several critical gaps in knowledge:

1. What are the incentives for gangs to engage in violence and socially costly behaviour?
2. Which are the trade-offs that practitioners face when deciding how to engage with organised violence?
3. What type of information do relevant decision-makers need to inform their policies?
4. Which are the most relevant tools for tracking down gang behaviour and use of violence?

¹ A faculty member in The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts, Chris Blattman focuses on why some people and societies are poor, unequal, and violent, and how to fix these issues. In his day-to-day research, Blattman works with governments and civil society to design and test approaches to reduce violence and poverty. Most of Blattman's work uses interviews, surveys, natural experiments, lab experiments, and field experiments. Blattman leads the Peace & Recovery program at the Institute for Poverty Action (IPA) and the Crime and Violence Initiative at MIT's Poverty Action Lab. He is an affiliate of the National Bureau of Economic Research, UChicago Urban Labs, the Center for Global Development, and the International Growth Center. blattman@uchicago.edu

² Benjamin Lessing, associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago, studies "criminal conflict"—organised violence involving armed groups that do not seek formal state power, such as drug cartels, prison gangs, and paramilitaries. His first book, *Building Peace in Drug Wars: Coalitions and Control in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, Studies in Comparative Politics Series, 2017), examines armed conflict between drug trafficking organizations and the state in Colombia, Mexico and Brazil. One of several recipients of the Outstanding Academic Titles for 2018, it was awarded in Latin American Politics and Society, Foreign Affairs, and Journal of Peace Studies. bllessing@uchicago.edu

³ Santiago Tobón is a Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, and a Professor of Economics at Universidad EAFIT in Medellín, Colombia. He is also affiliated with Innovations for Poverty Action—IPA, Evidence in Governance and Politics—EGAP, J-PIL's Crime and Violence Initiative (as an invited researcher) and Hivos/Global Conflict Networks—GCN. Tobón is a developing economist with a special interest in crime, violence, organized crime, and public policy. He uses experimental, quasi-experimental, and qualitative methods. Before joining Universidad EAFIT, he was a Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of Chicago Pearson Institute & Innovations for Poverty Action Peace and Recovery Program. shtobon@eafit.edu.co



Vigilante Media/Unicon

The Terrible Trade-Off: How the Hidden Cost of Organised Crime Harms Cities, and What Can Be Done about It

Organised crime poses one of the greatest threats to national security and development in the 21st century. Despite this, most policy, data collection, and scholarly research focuses on individuals and disorganised violence. Our work addresses several critical gaps in knowledge:

1. What are the incentives for gangs to engage in violence and socially costly behaviour?
2. Which are the trade-offs that practitioners face when deciding how to engage with organised

violence? 3. What type of information do relevant decision-makers need to inform their policies? 4. Which are the most relevant tools for tracking down gang behaviour and use of violence?

May 01, 2022