



COVID-19 and organized crime: an introduction to the special issue

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Accepted: 13 January 2023 / Published online: 27 January 2023

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Abstract

This is an introduction to the articles submitted to the special issue of *Trends in Organized Crime* on ‘COVID-19 and Organized Crime’. The aim of the special issue is to draw together a range of empirical studies from around the world to explore the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for both organized criminals and law enforcement agencies. The pandemic required organized criminals to adapt their practice in light of government restrictions, but it also created new profitable opportunities. At the same time, however, COVID-19 posed significant challenges for law enforcement.

Keywords Corruption · COVID-19 · Law enforcement · Organized crime

At the time of writing, in early 2023, COVID-19 has largely faded into the background of social life and news commentary, at least in the West. China’s continued ‘Zero-COVID’ policy has resulted in the emergence of significant social protest but, for many of us, life has retreated into relative normalcy, aside from an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, war in Europe and the return of austerity policies. COVID-19 pops up occasionally with the emergence of new variants and we temporarily return to debates about face masks or travel restrictions. However, the legacy of COVID-19 is something that we will have to contend with for decades to come (Ellis et al. 2021), and the background context of significant political economic change has long-standing repercussions (Winlow and Winlow 2022). The emergence of a novel respiratory virus in late 2019 and the unprecedented range of restrictions and interventions enacted to combat the disease have touched all aspects of our lives (Briggs et al. 2021a). In this introductory paper, we do not intend to recap the myriad effects of COVID-19 as these have been considered and discussed in exhaustive detail

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elsewhere (Briggs et al. 2020, 2021a, b; Lloyd 2022). Instead, we intend to focus on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the study of crime, particularly in the area of organized crime. As with everything impacted by the pandemic, the implications for organized crime and law enforcement responses require special attention. Indeed, as Aziani et al. note in this issue, COVID-19 and the suite of containment policies enacted by national governments modified the environment in which criminal groups operate. This special issue represents a first attempt to draw together new empirical research to highlight this changing context and help address this reconfigured challenge.

Research and analysis on organized crime during the pandemic has covered a number of contexts including – among others - Mexico (Balmori de la Miyar et al. 2021), the Balkans (Djordjevic and Dobovsek 2020), and Italy (Riccardi 2022). Findings show that challenges and opportunities emerged for organized criminals. Some were able to use the pandemic to build up support from sections of the community by providing COVID-19 assistance in the form of food handouts (Balmori de la Miyar et al. 2021). Italian ‘Mafia groups’ used fake charities to supply packages to those in need while ‘Yakuza groups’ in Japan handed out free face masks (UNODC 2020). Following Riccardi (2022), much of the emergent research falls into five categories: illicit lending and usury to businesses lacking liquidity; acquisition of firms in financial distress; interest in high-demand sectors linked to pandemic management such as pharmaceuticals, transport and logistics or medical supplies (see also UNODC 2020); acquisition of public funds and stimulus spending; and the requirement to adapt or modify practices disrupted by government restrictions and heightened law enforcement efforts.

As Levi and Smith (2021) note, governments around the world provided fiscal stimulus packages to support businesses and the wider public. This presented opportunities for exploitation by a range of actors including those working in legitimate business and organized crime. This demonstrates both the often-blurred lines between legitimate and illegitimate business (Hall and Antonopoulos 2016) as well as the convergence in motivation across legal and illegal boundaries (Lloyd 2020). According to Transparency International, around 20% of all COVID-19 response contracts awarded by the UK government raised red flags for corruption. This amount totals billions of pounds. Contracts for Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) were awarded in partisan and biased ways, often to unsuitable companies or at abnormally high prices. The UK’s test and trace system was an inadequate failure that cost over £30 billion. The opportunities for corruption were vast as governments around the world turned on the financial spigot and circumvented established tendering processes. The demand for particular goods and services and the opportunities this presented drew in legitimate actors and organized criminals alike. Indeed, a UNODC report (2020) concluded that both stable and structured criminal groups and looser networks of criminal actors used the crisis to supply markets with high demand goods, such as medical supplies. They also capitalised on the opportunity to respond to government restrictions that tightened enforcement on the movement of people, thereby constricting established markets such as people smuggling.

In research on the pandemic, it has been suggested that COVID-19 represented another example of Klein’s (2007) ‘shock doctrine’ or Mirowski’s (2013) belief

that capitalism never wastes an opportunity created by a serious crisis (Briggs et al. 2021b). Where 9/11 created the conditions for the expansion of digital surveillance in the name of security and the threat of terrorism (Zuboff 2019), the pandemic created conditions whereby a biomedical security model can use digital surveillance to protect public health (Telford et al. 2022). As political-economic shifts take place, criminal groups adapt to new circumstances and exploit emerging situations. Aside from the various critiques and concerns associated with digital certification and social exclusion (see Telford et al. 2022; Kheriaty 2022), this represents a new criminal market ready for exploitation by actors willing to circumvent legal strictures and provide counterfeit digital certificates. In this special issue, Andrew Childs outlines the emergence of fake vaccine passports in Australia as the injunction for digital certification meets with dissatisfaction and concern over rights and freedoms. Organized crime historically adapts to new market opportunities and the pandemic appears no different.

On a different level, the pandemic containment policies enacted around the world have been implicated in significant delays across global supply chains (Winlow and Winlow 2022). Davies (2020) noted prior to the pandemic that long supply chains in certain sectors, including agriculture, created conditions within which illegal and exploitative activity, particularly around employment practices, were prevalent. Long supply chains result in smaller profit margins for those further down the chain and operators often cut corners or resorted to illegal activity to ensure maximum revenue. However, the ‘just-in-time’ global supply chains characteristic of the neoliberal era have stalled (Briggs et al. 2021a; Jones and Hameiri 2022) and this also creates opportunities for criminal exploitation. Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2022), in a recent study of counterfeit aircraft parts, demonstrate that supply chain problems linked to the pandemic have impacted on the proliferation of unapproved parts used in commercial aircrafts. According to the UNODC (2020), crime groups almost immediately moved into sectors with huge demand, including pharmaceuticals, medical devices, food retail, cleaning and funeral services. There can be little doubt, then, that the pandemic created further opportunities for adaptation and exploitation.

It is evident to us that the pandemic and associated containment policies have had significant impact on both a macro and micro level. We can point to challenges and impacts in a range of contexts from domestic violence, mental health, educational inequalities, wealth disparities, labour market upheaval, unemployment, health challenges and more (Briggs et al. 2021a, b). Indeed, previous research on the pandemic has drawn together findings from across the world to identify a range of effects (Briggs et al. 2021c; Ellis et al. 2021; Lloyd 2022; Kotzé and Antonopoulos 2022). Criminal groups offering community support, enforcing lockdown restrictions, and exploiting government support is yet another indicator of a failing regulatory governance model characteristic of neoliberalism (Jones and Hameiri 2022), and echoes Streeck’s (2016) contention that the seemingly permanent political-economic crisis is evident in the ‘under-institutionalisation’ of the modern state. The institutions of the state – government, health care, law enforcement, education – may exist in a symbolic fashion but in practical terms are unable to deal with the realities it faces on a daily basis.

For Streeck, corruption is characteristic of this under-institutionalised society. This is the terrain upon which organized criminals operate and the pandemic has undoubtedly created even more fertile ground for the criminal undertaker.

The pandemic also features in a macro-level discussion about political economic change and future directions of the global economy (Raymen and Smith 2021; Winlow and Winlow 2022). At this stage, it is perhaps too early to predict whether or not neoliberal capitalism will continue or be replaced by an alternative but early predictions abound: perhaps Blakeley's (2020) 'corona capitalism', which shifts from finance capitalism to monopoly capitalism; Schwab and Malleret's (2020) 'great reset' to stakeholder capitalism, characterised by deglobalisation, shorter supply chains, onshoring, digital and AI, and green energy; Kotkin's (2020) 'neo-feudalism' characterised by a greater concentration of wealth and property and reduced social mobility (see Morozov 2022 for critique); Malm's (2020) renewed use of the state to intervene in climate change; or Kheriaty's (2022) biomedical security state. What is evident is that there are predictions of significant upheaval in the global economy in the coming years. This will inevitably lead to further opportunities for criminal exploitation and organized crime will, as it ever has, adapt to new realities. For example, if wealth continues to filter upwards in the way it has during the pandemic, more and more working-class people, particularly young people, face uncertain futures: as de la Miyar et al (2021) point out, organized criminal groups will benefit from the growth in unemployment and economic uncertainty as it will facilitate the recruitment of new members, who are increasingly devoid of legitimate opportunities. The pandemic has changed the environment in which organized crime operates and that environment may change significantly further in the years to come. This special issue represents a starting point, but it is critical that research continues to chart the impact of the pandemic to track those changes further.

The special issue

In the first article, *Alberto Aziani, Gianluca A. Bertoni, Maria Jofre and Michele Riccardi* provide a systematic content analysis of media coverage and institutional reports from the first 9 months of the pandemic. Their analysis shows that five clear dynamics exist in relation to criminal groups and their operation throughout the pandemic: they provided goods in high demand, such as food, water, sanitary products and face masks; they imposed social distancing measures on their local populace; they deferred collection of protection payment from local businesses; they infiltrated industries; and they misappropriated funds intended to mitigate the impact on the economy. Ultimately, the provision of illegal governance exploited weaknesses in official responses. Governing authorities struggled to enforce lockdown measures and provided slow and inadequate economic assistance which created opportunities for criminal groups to increase or solidify their local standing. 'Structured' crime groups were able to take advantage of the huge liquidity pumped into the global economy to tackle the COVID-19 recession – from manufacturing and marketing counterfeit pharmaceuticals or PPE to the purchase of legitimate businesses for the same ends. 'Unstructured' criminal groups, without the power to reach into the

‘upper world’, were less likely to do this. Their work shows that the pandemic modified the environment in which criminal groups operate and many saw opportunities in these circumstances.

Andrew Childs takes up this point in the second article, looking at the specific context of the online distribution of fake COVID-19 vaccine certificates in Australia. The environment created by COVID-19 and the range of government interventions to manage the pandemic has included, controversially, the introduction of vaccine certification to variously support ‘Zero-COVID’ policies or as part of a roadmap back to normal. Childs’ paper uses social media analysis of posts on alt-tech platform Gab to identify the motivating factors related to both the supply and demand of fake digital vaccine certificates. The wider environment around the pandemic has created the opportunities to support both anti-vax and anti-surveillance ideologies through online cybercommunities, which create and distribute fake vaccine certificates, free of charge. Online illicit networks crowdsourced ideas and information, suggestions and improvements to products, as well as offering a degree of ‘cyber-crime as a service’ by ensuring customer service past the point of initial transaction or consumption. Although vaccine mandates largely receded during 2022, there remain wider concerns about digital identification and this paper makes an important contribution in terms of identifying emerging markets for fraudulent products, as well as a critical consideration of motivation from both the supply and demand side.

In the third article, *Ben Brewster, Grace Robinson, Bernard W. Silverman and Dave Walsh* consider the impact of the pandemic on County Lines operations, law enforcement responses and the safeguarding of children and young people in the UK. Through interviews with 46 practitioners including police officers, local authority professionals and youth workers, they identify an analytical challenge regarding the causative impact of the pandemic and lockdown on the County Lines supply model. While adaptation had clearly taken place, for example through less reliance on rail networks, runners making fewer journeys or longer stays, and recruitment of local young people rather than traditional models of exploitation, it remained to be seen whether or not this was caused by the pandemic and government restrictions or more general changes to tactics. Safeguarding children and young people from criminal exploitation was clearly impacted by the pandemic and the curtailment of face-to-face and doorstep interactions. It was difficult to determine whether the statistical decline in the number of reported missing children was real or limited by reduced safeguarding capacity to accurately report numbers. Practitioners demonstrated clear frustration with the impact of restrictions on their engagement with vulnerable young people who were at greater risk of being groomed into County Lines activity.

Finally, *Sarah Schreier and Katharina Leimbach* provide an original account of German law enforcement agencies and their investigations into organized crime during the pandemic. They ask which narratives law enforcement agencies provide for the impact of COVID-19 on organized crime and their work in the investigation of organized criminals and, through 32 qualitative interviews with law enforcement professionals, offer three answers. Schreier and Leimbach contend that an ‘us vs. them’ narrative, always present in the antagonism between law enforcement and crime groups, was heightened during the pandemic with law enforcement

professionals seen to be at a disadvantage in terms of responding to both the pandemic and the actions of organized crime. A narrative of ‘nationalization vs. internationalization’ shows how COVID-19 triggered a renewed focus on the *national*, particularly in terms of national mandates for lockdowns, face masks, travel restrictions and border controls. Organized crime may not stop at the border but differences in pandemic management across national borders was seen as a challenge for law enforcement. Border restrictions did create challenges for criminal groups, but their adaptive capacity was particularly evident in overcoming those challenges. The final narrative, ‘conservatism vs. innovation’ pitted inherently conservative law enforcement agencies against innovative criminal groups, particularly in terms of each side’s response to the pandemic. While criminal groups innovated to sell counterfeit face masks or secure government business grants, law enforcement agencies were hindered by work-from-home orders, social distancing and other restrictions. Schreier and Leimbach’s paper shows how the pandemic may have affected both law enforcement and organized criminals but the narratives emerging from law enforcement show clear differences and challenges.

We would like to thank all contributors for their work and the timely delivery of drafts, all reviewers for their time, valuable suggestions, and critical perspectives. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organized crime is one that is starting to emerge but will occupy researchers’ attention for some time to come. We hope this special issue generates debate and discussion around the implications of the pandemic for organized crime and law enforcement response, as well as avenues for future research and investigation.

Declarations

Human and animal participants This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of interest Justin Kotzé, Anthony Lloyd and Georgios A. Antonopoulos declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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