



# Governing the underworld: how organized crime governs other criminals in Colombian cities

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## Abstract

This article explores how organized criminal organizations exercise criminal governance over other organized and non-organized criminals using public messaging, lethal and extra-lethal violence. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, over 350 press reports, and an original database on inter-criminal lethal violence, we show, in line with recent literature on organized crime, that while these organizations use violence to build their reputation as actors willing to use force, they also provide benefits to other criminals such as financing and protection from state and competitors. This article contributes to the literature on criminal governance by elaborating on the mechanisms shown in recent work and by detailing an unexplored case study in Barranquilla (Colombia).

**Keywords** Criminal governance · Gangs · Organized criminal groups · Barranquilla · Colombia · Lethal violence

## Introduction

In the early 2000s, the paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia [AUC] killed at least 17 people in Barranquilla, Colombia, for engaging in criminal activities such as robbery or drug trafficking (Superior Court of the Judicial District of Bogota, Justice, and Peace Chamber 2011). Ironically, the AUC was an illegal armed group that relied heavily on drug trafficking and extortion for income (CNMH 2022).

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This incident illustrates how organized criminal organizations (OCO)<sup>1</sup> regulate aspects of community life, involving not only extracting rents from their criminal activities but also governing civilians (Arias 2006; Civico 2012). These groups offer dispute resolution, behavior enforcement, and tax collection. This phenomenon is known as criminal governance (Blattman et al. 2020; Lessing 2020; Naef 2023). Nevertheless, OCGs do not always seek to control other illegal actors (Lessing 2020).

Among those that do, literature identifies several motives. First, armed groups tax illegal activities for additional income (Leeson and Skarbek 2010). Second, by controlling other illegal activities, armed groups can gain protection for themselves (Skarbek 2011). Third, this curbs violence and enhances OCG legitimacy (Arjona 2017). Normative commitments against specific violence (e.g., sexual or political) may also play a role (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014).

In this article, we aim to understand *how* OCGs govern the criminal world rather than *why* they do it in an intermediate Colombian city. Although violence is “the most crucial resource” of this form of governance (Campana and Varese 2018, 1383), it appears insufficient to explain why structured organizations capable of violence also adhere to criminal governance (Duncan 2013). Gambetta (1993) and Campana and Varese (2013) assert reputation-building and benefits to other criminals as mechanisms to enhance authority. This is supported by several case studies in the United States (Haller 1990; Smith and Papachristos 2016), Italy (Lavorigna et al. 2013), Mexico (Durán-Martínez 2017), Russia (Varese 2001) and Honduras (Berg and Carranza 2018), to mention just a few examples.

In Colombia, armed group governance has mostly been studied in rural areas due to civil war’s impact (Arjona 2016; Ibáñez et al. 2023). However, these analyses may not be seamlessly applicable to Colombian cities. First, even rebels have adapted their governance tactics when operating within urban environments (O’Connor 2023). Second, the presence of the state varies significantly in both domains—rural and urban—which consequently affects the degree of state involvement, whether as an adversary or an ally (González 2003). Lastly, urban areas host a convergence of armed groups operating at the national or transnational level, alongside local neighborhood-based gangs (Perea-Restrepo 2020). Consequently, organized crime in urban Colombian contexts remains understudied.

Existing studies are mainly centered on Medellín, and occasionally Bogotá (Moncada 2016; Rieken et al. 2020). Blattman et al.’s (2022) Medellín study unveiled criminal governance dynamics over civilians and state interaction. To our knowledge, this is the sole systematic study on Colombian urban criminal governance.

Our contribution unfolds in three ways. First, we advance qualitative case studies of urban Colombian criminal violence, spotlighting Barranquilla—an intermediate

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that there are discussions about the differences between OCGs, criminal syndicates, mafias or criminal groups (Reuter and Paoli 2020). However, in this article we will refer to OCGs in a general way to refer to groups engaged in illegal activities capable of regulating the actions of other criminals. It is beyond the scope of this article to understand whether there are variations in these forms of governance according to the features of each group, since we are focusing on a single case study.

city distinct from Medellín. By doing that, we build upon Blattman et al.'s (2022) work. Second, unlike Blattman et al. (2022), we solely focus on criminal interactions. We explore solely how OCG oversees illicit operations by other groups or individuals. Lastly, our in-depth case study reinforces the ideas put forth by researchers working in organized crime across different contexts across the world, validating them in a different context.

To gain insight into this phenomenon, we conducted a case study of Barranquilla that utilized a variety of qualitative data sources. Our study used over 350 press reports, local authority and police reports, an original database on inter-criminal lethal violence, and 24 interviews with current/former criminals, civilians, and authorities. Our findings show that governance over other criminals in Barranquilla relies on: i) lethal violence to enforce rules and eliminate rivals, ii) public messaging and extra-lethal violence for reputation-building, and iii) benefits like financing or protection to co-opt gangs and criminals. In the remainder of the article, we briefly introduce the discussions on criminal governance of illegal markets, explain the methodology to be used and show how our argument works through the case study.

## Governing the underworld

The governance of the criminal world by OCGs is unsurprising. On the one side, many of the goods offered in these markets are illegal, yet the demand remains robust. Thus, armed groups have incentives to regulate those markets (Cook 2017). On the other hand, even for legal goods or informal activities, states may not exercise authority over some sectors (either voluntarily or involuntarily), which opens the door for organized crime to regulate them (Acemoglu et al. 2020; Dipoppa 2021).

However, these markets are not necessarily chaotic. Quite the contrary: there are rules and customs that are generally adhered to with some level of stability (Butler et al. 2022; Peirce and Fondevila 2020; Skarbek 2014). The question is: how did these criminal markets come to function in this way?

Violence is a fundamental resource. In the absence of alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes, violence becomes a crucial tool for organized crime (Friman and Andreas 1999; Kotzé et al. 2022). In order to establish norms that other criminals will abide by, OCGs must overpower rivals (Gambetta 1993; Campana and Varese 2018). Then, OCGs must secure economic resources, armed personnel, and superior capabilities for using violence (Atuesta 2017; Skarbek 2014). Turf wars frequently involve high levels of lethal violence (Trejo and Ley 2021), so OCGs aspiring to govern beyond their structure must demonstrate effective force.

Reputation is another factor. Merely establishing norms is insufficient, as those norms must be recognized and adhered to by those *governed* (Gambetta 1993; Murray 2013; Jaspers 2019). Armed groups must enforce conduct codes and build a reputation for punishing violators (Campana and Varese 2013; Skarbek 2014). Thus, 'authority is exercised through the threat of violence, rather than its actual use' (Campana and Varese 2018, p. 138). Violence may affirm dominance, but upholding

reputation will allow the rule enforcement with minimal violence alteration (Gambetta 2009; Smith and Varese 2001).

Finally, criminal governance typically involves both demands from armed groups and certain benefits for those who are governed. In addition to coercion, armed groups use certain 'soft power' techniques to consolidate their legitimacy (Lessing 2022). These public goods that OCGs offer are more studied for civilians than for criminals (Blattman et al. 2022; Bonilla-Calle 2022). Nevertheless, even for the *governed criminals*, there is evidence that suggest that organized crime is not only predatory. Varese (2017) states that one of the main benefits that these armed groups offer is 'private protection'. This implies, among other advantages, protection against extortions, the recovery of loans, the settlement of disputes and freely movement between areas controlled by other criminals (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Varese 2017). Thus, it is expected that armed groups offer something in return for their rule (Lessing and Willis 2019).

Certainly, there is a large body of literature that has studied how armed groups govern other criminals (Paoli 2008; Konrad and Skaperdas 2012; von Lampe 2016). However, this literature has focused primarily on what criminologists call mafias, which normally have long traditions, large memberships and a criminal subculture (e.g., Varese 2001; Paoli 2020; Daniele and Le Moglie 2020). In Latin America, scholars have mainly studied large-scale criminal groups, such as Mexican and Colombian drug cartels (Correa-Cabrera 2021; Trejo and Ley 2018), guerrilla and paramilitary groups (Schultze-Kraft 2018; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019), or very powerful armed organizations mostly in Brazil and Central America (Ferreira and Gonçalves 2022; Sanchez and Cruz 2023).

Usually, it is argued that the ability to provide settlements services in the criminal world is exclusive of large criminal groups (Reuter and Paoli 2020; Paoli et al. 2023). Nevertheless, Latin America showcases localized organizations in city areas that recurrently organize criminal markets (Blattman et al. 2022). This study explores this in a mid-sized Colombian city, using insights from studies of mafias and large transnational OCGs.

## Research design

Our approach employs a case study to deeply examine a scenario of OCGs governance over other criminals. While we acknowledge the limitations of single case studies in terms of generalizability (Van Evera 2016), we believe that this methodological strategy is the most suitable for our purposes. First, a case study will help us gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underlie established theories on the governance of criminal markets by armed groups (Gerring 2004; Bennett 2004). Second, our goal is not to develop a new theory, but rather to deepen our understanding of existing hypotheses (Flyvbjerg 2011).

We chose Barranquilla (Colombia) as our case study for three reasons. First, it is the fourth largest city in Colombia and the most populous in the Colombian Caribbean region, making it a representative scenario for the phenomenon we are studying. Although criminal governance is not limited to cities, a significant

portion of the population living under these regimes is in Latin American cities (Uribe et al. 2022). Therefore, we hope that our research can provide insights into this phenomenon to study other urban scenarios. Second, Barranquilla offers an ideal setting to study the criminal governance of illegal groups due to the presence of a variety of criminal expressions of different sizes and capacities, ranging from transnational groups to localized gangs (LSV, October 06, 2022a). Typical cases of a phenomenon, such like this, have a higher possibility of being representative, allowing further possibility of reproduction in other cases (McGill et al. 2023). Finally, over the past 10 years, Barranquilla has been the site of several disputes between armed groups (Trejos-Rosero et al. 2022). The multiplicity of actors and ongoing conflicts allow us to study the variation (or lack thereof) of these criminal governance systems according to the dominant actors.

### **Empirical data**

This article relies primarily on two sources. The first source encompasses 24 in-depth interviews with a varied range of individuals, comprising public officials (6), journalists specializing in organized crime (2), current and former OCG members (10), and local civilians (6) from Barranquilla and nearby municipalities. The second source involves a thorough examination of Barranquilla's principal newspapers—El Heraldo, Al Día, La Libertad, and Zona Cero. This comprehensive data collection spanned over five years of fieldwork within the city.

Interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2023 in Barranquilla and neighboring municipalities. All participants provided explicit and informed consent for their responses to be used exclusively for academic purposes. To uphold participant confidentiality, identities were concealed, and any potentially identifying information was omitted (Venkatesh 2008; Milliff 2022). Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling. We began by contacting, in unrelated circumstances, public officials in charge of public security in Barranquilla, former members of armed groups now not involved in crime, and a journalist who has covered organized crime in Barranquilla for more than a decade. These contacts then led us to similar profiles and, in some cases, to active members of criminal groups who offered to talk as long as their identity could not be revealed.

The interview approach varied based on the participants' profiles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with public officials primarily to validate information gathered from other sources and to gain access to additional insights, such as unpublished reports or knowledge about armed group structures. Journalist interviews primarily aimed to compare the information obtained from the press reviews and to corroborate details provided by current and former armed group members. For civilian interviews, the goal was to comprehend their perceptions of armed groups organization and their influence on various aspects of community life within their local neighborhoods. Interviews with current and former armed group members were structured around three main thematic blocks of questions:

- i. **Use of Violence:** This section delved into the organization's employment of violence against its rivals, if at all.
- ii. **Reputation:** Participants were asked to share insights on how the armed group perceived its own reputation within the criminal landscape, as well as the reputations of its competitors.
- iii. **Benefits:** The discussion revolved around how the armed group believed it benefited and how it contributed to the benefit of other criminal entities.

In addition to conducting interviews, an extensive archival review of four local newspapers—El Herald, La Libertad, Zona Cero, and Al Día—was undertaken. Additionally, we accessed a database on inter-criminal homicidal violence sourced from the Colombian National Police. The information gleaned from these sources was utilized in two main ways.

Firstly, it served as the foundation for constructing a database concerning inter-criminal violence spanning from 2013 to 2022. This database encompasses over 300 homicides categorized by the National Police as "settling of scores." Within this dataset, we identified the armed group affiliated with the deceased individual, the armed group responsible for ordering the execution, and the rationale behind the killing. Moreover, details such as event locations and other details reported in the newspapers were incorporated into the database when available. This compilation inadvertently led to the creation of a secondary database, focusing on dismemberments targeting members of armed groups. This latter database mirrors the contents of the first, capturing identical information. We classified each homicide according to four categories: violence against rivals, violence against non-organized criminals, homicide by reputation or homicide to offer a benefit.

The second objective behind utilizing these sources was to gain access to additional details concerning the armed groups under study and to cross-reference the amassed information. The press articles aided us in pinpointing events referred to by interviewees and acquiring supplementary details to enrich our understanding.

## Limitations

Two primary limitations pertain to the collected data. First, as certain details mentioned in the interviews involve illegal activities, interviewees might be inclined to misrepresent, exaggerate, or downplay these facts. In response, we have undertaken a triangulation approach, cross-referencing each statement among different interviewee profiles and corroborating them with information from secondary sources. These sources encompass press articles, reports from public entities, academic papers, and accessible intelligence reports. This triangulation aids in either qualifying or disproving statements (Renz et al. 2018; Tzagarakis and Kritas 2023).

The second limitation pertains to the quality and comprehensiveness of the data obtained from newspapers. Not all instances of inter-criminal homicides are documented in the media, rendering our database inherently incomplete. Nevertheless, considering our focus is not centered on a systematic analysis but rather on

identifying prevailing patterns, this limitation does not undermine the integrity of our findings.

### **Observable manifestations**

Following Eisenhardt (2021), we validated our argument by assessing three observable manifestations:

1. ***Use of violence:***

- a. Armed groups will carry out selective assassinations against rivals when other armed groups compete with them.
- b. Armed groups seeking to rule other criminals will carry out selective assassinations when their instructions are not complied with.

2. ***Reputation:***

- a. Armed groups will claim responsibility for acts of lethal and extra-lethal violence in order to consolidate the perception that they are capable of carrying out violence.
- b. Armed groups will claim responsibility for acts of brutality against people who are affecting their reputation as a dominant group.

3. ***Benefits:***

- a. Armed groups that exercise criminal governance will provide benefits to criminals they subordinate.

## **Organized crime in Barranquilla**

### **Context**

Barranquilla, Colombia's largest northern city and fourth in national population, is a thriving hub in the Caribbean region, attracting migrants and industries (Pérez 2014). With historical ties to drug trafficking due to its proximity to the Caribbean Sea and Magdalena River, the city has hosted several armed groups (Trejos et al. 2022) (Table 1).

In the 1980s and 1990s, drug cartels and extortion gangs operated in Barranquilla. The AUC paramilitary group gained dominance in 1999, suppressing rivals before disbanding in 2006 after negotiations with the Colombian government (Trejos et al. 2022). Between 2006 and 2013, various armed groups vied for control with limited success (Colombian Ombudsman's Office 2009; 2013). In 2013, "Los Costeños," a splinter group of "Los Rastrojos" (also known as "Los Rastrojos-Caleños"), alongside the AGC, ousted rivals, establishing criminal governance during the next ten years, briefly challenged in 2016–2017 and 2021–2022 due to AGC and Los

Costeños conflict (LSV, October 06, 2022a). So effective is this system of governing criminal violence that in August 2023 Los Costeños decreed a ceasefire for a week and homicides practically disappeared in the city during this time (El Tiempo, August 08, 2023).

This study narrows its scope to the 2013–2022 period due to the inability to verify a consistent criminal governance structure over other armed groups between 2006 and 2013. The criminal governance configuration in Barranquilla, observed over a decade, unfolds as follows.

- **Dominant Groups:** The AGC primarily uses the city for cocaine transit, with an alliance formed with Los Costeños. Los Costeños manage shipments and control drug distribution within the city. They supervise various illicit markets, imposing fees for extortion, killings, and land theft.
- **Medium-sized Factions:** Groups like Los Rastrojos-Costeños or Los Pepes challenge the dominance of the AGC or Los Costeños intermittently. Their presence in the city is usually restricted by Los Costeños, which is why they have established themselves in nearby municipalities or in a few neighborhoods.
- **Neighborhood Gangs:** Smaller groups like Los Papalópez, Los 40 Negritos, or Los Vega are neighborhood-based and often form alliances to resist Los Costeños. While Barranquilla is home to over 290 neighborhood gangs, this study focuses on groups for which information was obtained, acknowledging potential variations in other structures.

## Use of violence

### Violence against rivals

Out of the 314 homicides categorized as ‘settling of scores’ between 2013 and 2022, around 20% (62 cases) were directed towards members of rival armed groups. The years with the highest number of such homicides were marked by territorial conflicts, including 2013, 2016, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

In 2013, ‘Los Costeños’ emerged in Barranquilla as a faction of ‘Los Rastrojos’, a group whose leaders operated mainly in Cali. However, they swiftly launched lethal attacks against their former leaders, taking control of drug sales and extortion markets in southern Barranquilla and driving ‘Los Rastrojos’ out of the city (El Universal, May 24, 2013). They also targeted ‘Los 40 Negritos,’ a gang dominating drug sales in three neighborhoods, resulting in 12 casualties between 2013 and 2014. This compelled ‘Los 40 Negritos’ to surrender, becoming a subsidiary of ‘Los Costeños’ (Blu Radio, September 11, 2017).

In 2014, ‘Los Papalopez,’ based in La Chinita and La Luz neighborhoods, emerged. Initially allied with ‘Los Costeños,’ tensions escalated after a ‘Los Papalopez’ member was killed, leading to a neighborhood turf war (El Herald, May 19, 2014). By 2017, ‘Los Costeños’ had killed over 15 ‘Los Papalopez’ members, nearly eradicating the gang. In mid-2017, the remaining ‘Los Papalopez’ members aligned with ‘Los Costeños,’ solidifying the latter’s dominance (El Herald, June 25, 2017).



A new wave of homicides against rivals emerged in 2021 due to a fragmentation within ‘Los Costeños.’ Leaders El Negro Ober and Digno Palomino split from the group, forming ‘Los Rastrojos Costeños’ and ‘Los Pepes.’ These factions engaged in lethal clashes over extortion and micro-trafficking control, primarily in Barranquilla’s metropolitan area and nearby municipalities.

Homicides against rivals serve not only to punish rivals but also to signal dominance and discourage others, as they often motivate agreements between armed groups. In this regard, a member of one of these organizations said: ‘With these people, you cannot negotiate without acting first. You need to kill someone to let them know that you are angry’ (Interview 3). A former member of one of these armed organizations also said: ‘You know the war is advancing because of the dead. If you get a lot of people killed from your gang, the others start to get upset because they understand that then our gang is not in charge’ (Interview 2). A former local government official sums it up: ‘The worst thing that can happen is that these groups start fighting because they immediately start killing. (...) They kill each other to define who is dominant’ (Interview 8).

### **Violence against non-organized criminals or gangs**

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of homicides committed in Barranquilla by OCGs are not against rivals, but against criminals who are not part of any organization<sup>2</sup> or who are part of small gangs. Around 53% (165 cases) of the identified homicides fall under this category. While various groups have been involved, Los Costeños were presumably responsible for two-thirds of these instances. Four patterns of violence against non-organized criminals emerged, all linked to non-compliance with established norms by governing OCGs:

1. ***Enforcing payment for illegal activity permits in gang-controlled territories:*** ‘Los Costeños’ demanded payment from criminals operating in their territories. Thus, all persons who carried out illegal activities within the neighborhoods where they dominated had to pay a permit to operate, under penalty of being killed (El Universal, June 06, 2015). This same strategy was used by ‘Los Papalopez’ in their neighborhoods during their war with ‘Los Costeños’ (El Herald, April 11, 2015b, c). Homicide then functioned to punish anyone who failed to comply with this rule. According to our records, at least 94 people were killed for refusing to pay this fee. This includes drug dealers, thieves, and hired killers (El Herald, September 02, 2018). An example of this is a recorded telephone discussion between a leader of ‘Los Costeños’ and a hitman in the La Luz neighborhood. The former tells the latter: ‘I am the one in charge in La Luz. Here they cannot pay you to kill just anyone. You need permission’. Because of the hitman refusal to comply, he was killed by the armed group. Another case involved two minors who sold drugs for the armed group, but stopped paying the fee. The armed group gave them an ultimatum to pay, and

<sup>2</sup> We called them “non-organized criminals”.

after they refused to do so, both were killed the same day by hitmen from the organization in different locations (Interview 15).

2. ***Punishment for working for a different OCG:*** Individuals paying fees to OCGs other than Los Costeños risked being killed. At least 71 people were killed for this reason. Drug sellers could also only buy drugs from this armed group, otherwise, they could be killed (El Heraldo, August 12, 2014). Extortionists who collected money and did not report it to ‘Los Costeños’ could also be killed (El Heraldo, January 14, 2017). Violence derived from this mechanism usually increases in times of competition for territory, as people may consider that they obtain better fees with another armed group and decide to change their private protector. At the same time, it can be a time of uncertainty for the *governed criminals*, since they do not understand to whom they must answer. One drug dealer stated:

When another equally strong group arrives, it is a danger because you don’t know who to listen to. You finally identify them by seeing who they kill. If they kill people who pay the people you are paying, then you pray that you won’t be next and look to switch to the other group. If they kill people who pay the new guys, then you know you have to do nothing. Anyway, in those cases sometimes it’s better to stay away from the business for a while because that’s when the most people get killed (Interview 16).

3. ***Imaginary borders:*** ‘Los Costeños’ also established imaginary borders for the gangs. This allowed them to control who could perform illegal acts in some areas and who could not. Those who crossed these borders were killed, since their permit of illegality only worked up to these borders (El Heraldo, October 21, 2015). This information was confirmed by government officials, one of whom stated that ‘several people had paid the OCG to operate in one neighborhood, but then they went to rob or sell drugs to another and were punished. The permit worked only in some neighborhoods’ (Interview 1). A member of a small gang also confirmed this, saying that “you are allowed to steal in one area, but not in the whole city. If you go to steal in those other areas, they may attack you. They can even kill you. It is not always going to be the big group, but those who do it know they cannot have permission from them because you are crossing a border that you cannot pass” (Interview 23). The attempt by one gang to disrespect these borders led to a confrontation with members of another armed group that displaced 59 families in a sector known as “Lower Manhattan” in 2021 (El Heraldo 17/12/2021). These informal rules also often lead to clashes between gangs, which consider that they have rights over certain territories and, consequently, start wars against others to recover them if they feel that another armed group is taking them over. One gang member said, “sometimes it is not about [an OCG] getting into a fight, but rather that they give you permission, weapons, and that you know you are fighting for what is right. If we are in this territory, why are we going to allow another group to come and work here? That is why we pay” (Interview 24).
4. ***Maintaining control of violence in the neighborhood:*** ‘Los Costeños’ garnered legitimacy by controlling violence in neighborhoods. This legitimacy went so far that, on one occasion, civilians made a human shield to prevent the assassination of one of its leaders (El Heraldo, May 19, 2014). This legitimacy, in part,

stemmed from the idea that the OCG kept neighborhood violence at controlled levels (El Heraldo, January 19, 2014). In fact, there was a time when the population prevented the police from capturing an OCG leader, arguing that without him, security would end (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017). This control of violence was achieved by punishing anyone who violated permitted levels of violence in the neighborhood through fights, homicides, or unauthorized robberies. In our database, at least 36 people were killed for increasing levels of unauthorized violence. As one resident explained, ‘this doesn’t mean there was not any crime in the neighborhood, but at least there were rules. You knew they were not going to kill you for a street fight or that they were not going to break into your house. We even sleep with the doors unlocked! Not even in the north of Barranquilla [the richest part of the city] could you do that.’ (Interview 6).

## Reputation

Determining whether a homicide should be classified as reputational is challenging due to the nuanced nature of such violence. As one gang member mentioned, every homicide can impact an armed group’s reputation: “if one of your own gets killed, your gang is seen as weak. If you are the one who kills, everyone sees you as stronger” (Interview 23). However, we classified as reputational homicides those explicitly intended to establish a group’s reputation for enforcing its norms and disciplining members. These homicides typically had three reasons: rebellion by group members, disrespect for a group member, or violation of an imaginary boundary set by the group. These homicides often share two characteristics.

## Public messaging

The groups openly admit committing these homicides. For example, ‘Los Costeños’ and the AGC, when committing such acts, distributed pamphlets or videos explaining the killings and sometimes indicated future targets. Another way they recognize it is talking privately to family members or acquaintances of the victims and to the inhabitants of the neighborhoods. Public messaging provide insight into the reputation these armed groups aim to create and their willingness to employ violence (Johnson and Gillooly 2023).

‘Los Costeños’ have made multiple threats of violence over the past decade. In 2013, they threatened a hitman from a rival organization in a pamphlet and subsequently attacked his house (El Heraldo, September 30, 2013). Members of the armed group who were imprisoned were threatened with assassination if they spoke out against the organization (El Heraldo, April 11, 2015b, c). One former member who served as a witness for the authorities was fatally stabbed in prison (Semana, February 02, 2019) and another was forcibly disappeared after leaving prison (El Heraldo, November 01, 2016). Additionally, one of the leaders of ‘Los Costeños’ killed the leader of another gang because he refused to pay a portion of his earnings from illegal business (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017). Previously, ‘Los Costeños’ had published

a pamphlet stating that their ‘sole objective is to prevent the reorganization of criminal gangs serving other armed groups’ and threatened to kill several individuals who were subsequently killed in the weeks that followed (RCN Radio, January 18, 2017). ‘Los Costeños’ also killed at least 12 individuals who had harmed or attacked members of the organization or their families (El Herald, December 30, 2019). They and the AGC made threats (which they carried out) to commit massacres (El Herald, March 12, 2019) or to dismember individuals.

### Extra-lethal violence

Several of these reputational homicides involved a form of extra-lethal violence, which are forms of viciousness in the killing with the purpose of conveying a message (Fujii 2013). ‘Los Costeños,’ in particular, employed dismemberment as a form of extra-lethal violence, while the AGC used massacres.

We analyzed six cases in which people were killed for belonging to a rival OCG (two cases), carrying out criminal activities without the organization’s permission (two cases), or failing to comply with prohibitions made by the armed group (two cases). In all six cases, the torso, limbs, and head of the bodies were left in different public areas across the city. This suggests a performative act that sought to communicate a message.

For example, body parts of rival OCG members were found in the same area where they carried out their criminal activities. In one case, the dismembered person had murdered a member of ‘Los Costeños’ in the La Luz neighborhood. His head was found in the same neighborhood after he was threatened with murder if he did not leave the area.<sup>3</sup> In the other case, a video of the dismemberment was circulated through WhatsApp, in which the person committing the act explained that it was punishment for the victim’s betrayal of ‘Los Costeños’. In the video, the person doing the dismembering shouted at the victim that ‘this is happening to you for being a traitor. Here in the neighborhood, we rule, but you decided to ally yourself with the competition’ (El Tiempo, September 24, 2021).

Regarding the two cases of common criminals who were dismembered for not paying operating fees, it was a double homicide. A member of the organization had threatened the two young men because they bought drugs with the excuse of personal use, but then resold them without authorization. On one of the occasions when they went to buy drugs in the neighborhood dominated by ‘Los Costeños’, they were dismembered.

There were two cases of individuals who were dismembered for failing to comply with the organization’s orders to limit the levels of violence in their neighborhoods. In one case, the victim had a sign next to their body reading ‘this happened to him because he was a thief. In this neighborhood, thief is not allowed’. The other victim was ordered to stop being a hired thug in the neighborhood by ‘Los Costeños’, but

<sup>3</sup> Some news references have been intentionally omitted in the published version (after having been included in the peer review process) to ensure the anonymity of some individuals.

he refused to comply. As a result, his wife was killed, and he was dismembered and his body was distributed throughout different neighborhoods.

People in the criminal world were well aware of ‘Los Costeños’ reputation for (extreme) violence. A drug dealer, when asked about the group, stated that he ‘would never be able to work in the area again if he spoke ill of them’ (Interview 10). A former member of ‘Los Costeños’ stated that ‘it was no longer just a matter of survival. These people did not just kill you; they disfigured and tortured you. If they threatened you, you knew your days were numbered’ (Interview 9). Another member of a rival group, ‘Los Papalopez’, was killed by ‘Los Costeños’ after receiving threats. After being threatened, he travelled to where his family was to say his goodbyes before his death (El Heraldo, November 22, 2019). A drug dealer told us: ‘you know that they are the ones in charge because there comes a point when they stop killing. They just call you to "scare you" and people know what to do’ (Interview 16). This demonstrates that those involved with the group understood that ‘Los Costeños’ would not hesitate to expel or kill them as punishment. The group’s reputation was well established (Tables 1 and 2).

## Benefits

In Barranquilla, we have identified at least 41 cases of homicides where the armed group responsible was trying to deliver some benefits to other gangs or non-organized criminals. First, we identified five people who were killed for cooperating with the justice system to convict a member of the armed group. Second, we identified 36 homicides against people who exercised unauthorized violence in the neighborhood.

However, offering benefits to other criminals is not necessarily mediated by violence. We were able to identify four benefits offered by OCGs to gangs and non-organized criminals in Barranquilla.

1. **Control of criminal borders:** Armed groups established territories and boundaries, providing smaller groups and criminals protection and permission to operate within specific areas without interference from rival group or other criminals. Imaginary borders are one way of guaranteeing this: ‘Los Costeños’ managed to divide their zones of influence in such a way that smaller groups, such as ‘Los 40 Negritos’, could ‘own’ a neighborhood without worrying about border control (El Heraldo, June 25, 2017). One drug seller stated that: ‘it is better to pay the fee, because that way you do not have to worry about others wanting to steal your area. You have your space and people know you are authorized’ (Interview 10). One drug dealer even mentioned that he asked for protection on occasions when other people tried to rob his place: ‘people came from other places and they did not know how things are here. They didn’t believe me, but I told *Kevin*<sup>4</sup> and he made the call himself. After that they did not come back’.

<sup>4</sup> We changed the name and avoid to specify some data about location to protect our informant. The person was referring to one member of a bigger armed group to which s/he paid a fee.

**Table 1** Overview of armed groups, membership, activities and relationship between them, Barranquilla (Colombia), 2013–2023

Armed group	Size (members)	Main activities	Relationships
AGC	> 3,200	Transnational drug trafficking Extortion	<b>2013–2015; 2018–2023:</b> Alliance with Los Costeños to sell them drugs that they then distribute to other groups in the city. Also, Los Costeños protect drug shipments leaving the ports that belong to the AGC <b>2016–2017:</b> Temporary rupture of their relationship with Los Costeños. Alliance with Los Papalópez for them to fight Los Costeños <b>2013–2023:</b> Overseeing of other armed groups in the city. Drug distribution. Collecting a fee to allow other criminals to conduct illegal activities
Los Costeños	~500	Drug trafficking in the city Extortion Land theft	<b>2016–2017:</b> Rivalry with Los Papalópez (financed by AGC) <b>2021–2023:</b> Rivalry with Los Pepes, Los Rastrojos-Costeños, Los Vega and Nuevo Bloque Costeño <b>2020–2023:</b> This structure, led by alias "Negro Ober," has clashed with Los Costeños for control of extortion
Los Rastrojos-Costeños	~300	Extortion Drug selling Land theft	
Los Pepes	~200	Sicariato (hired assassination) Extortion Drug selling Sicariato (hired assassination) Land theft	<b>2022–2023:</b> This structure, under the command of alias "Digno Palomino," a former leader of Los Costeños, was created in 2022 and is fighting with Los Costeños for control of the city
Los Papalópez	~80	Sicariato (hired assassination) Drug selling Thefts	<b>2016–2017:</b> This armed group formed an alliance with the AGC to confront Los Costeños. However, Los Costeños killed several members and brought them into their structure <b>2022–2023:</b> Alliance with Los Pepes to fight against Los Costeños

Table 1 (continued)

Armed group	Size (members)	Main activities	Relationships
Los 40 Negritos	~80	Sicariato (hired assassination) Drug selling Thefts	<b>2014–2023:</b> under the surveillance of Los Costeños
Los Vega	~10–25	Sicariato (hired assassination) Drug selling Thefts	<b>2021–2023:</b> Confrontation with Los Costeños. By the middle of 2023, Los Costeños practically annihilated the entire structure by carrying out a massacre against the family that commanded the group
Los PVC	~15–20	Sicariato (hired assassination) Drug selling Thefts	<b>2013–2023:</b> under the surveillance of Los Costeños
Other localized gangs (around 290)	~10–100	Sicariato (hired assassination) Drug selling Thefts	These gangs have mostly been under the surveillance of Los Costeños. However, each of the aforementioned groups have various small structures that responds to them

Source: Elaborated by the authors with information collected from interviews and archive review from El Heraldo, Al Día and La Libertad

**Table 2** Classification and reasons for inter-criminal homicides in Barranquilla (2013–2022). *N*: 313

Classification of the homicide	Specific reason for the homicide	Homicides	Main armed groups responsible
Violence against rivals	Member of a rival organization: 58 Allies of rival organizations: 4	62	Los Costeños: 25 AGC: 17 Los Rastrojos Costeños: 11 Los Papalópe: 6 Others: 3
Violence against non-organized criminals or gangs' members	Did not pay fees for criminal activities: 94 Pay fees to another armed group: 71	165	Los Costeños: 109 Los Papalópe: 19 Los Rastrojos Costeños: 19 Los 40 Negritos: 11 Others: 7
Violence to build a reputation	Disrespect to member of armed group: 26 Rebellion: 17 Imaginary borders: 2	45	Los Costeños: 29 Los Papalópe: 7 Los 40 Negritos: 5 AGC: 4
Violence to sustain benefits to other criminals	Witness in a case against members of the armed group: 5 Unauthorized violence in the neighborhood: 36	41	Los Costeños: 26 Los 40 Negritos: 11 Los Papalópe: 3 AGC: 1



2. **Protection from the authorities:** ‘Los Costeños’, in addition to a solid criminal structure, had access to a wide network of corruption that involved everything from police in their territories (El Heraldo, June 17, 2018), to judges (Semana, March 15, 2023), and politicians (Vorágine, March 12, 2023). One of the benefits of criminal governance was access to the protection that these corruption networks offered. ‘Los Costeños’ offered criminals under their umbrella the possibility of executing criminal activities without being caught, or prior warnings about police operations (El Heraldo, July 27, 2015). ‘Los Costeños’ even offered criminals who joined them prison ransoms for some of their members (Interview 9). One of the cases of extra-lethal violence, for example, involved the dismemberment of the person responsible for providing information to accuse some members of Los Costeños, including one of the ringleaders.
3. **Protection from competitors:** Criminals and gangs that adhere to criminal governance can still fall victim to OCGs seeking to replace the armed group that is currently the leader. Therefore, one of the benefits offered by OCGs in Barranquilla is the organization’s footing to defend them in the event of war. That is what happened with ‘Los 40 Negritos’. This gang was attacked by ‘Los Papalopez’, but ‘Los Costeños’ were the ones who responded to this aggression (El Heraldo, August 05, 2018). ‘Los Costeños’ provided protection to gangs under their governance by responding to attacks and aggression from rival gangs, as one former gang member stated: ‘being in that alliance was very good for us small gangs. Here there were several who tried to steal our neighborhood and those people would respond and kill a few to confirm that we were with them’ (Interview 3).
4. **Provision of supplies:** Finally, the larger armed groups also offer gangs or common criminals the possibility of access to weapons, vehicles, training, or financial resources in exchange for shelter under their umbrella. For example, ‘Los Papalopez’ had one of its members in charge of storing firearms in his house for the purpose of renting them to gang members for robberies, extortion, or homicides (El Heraldo, June 07, 2015). In turn, ‘Los Papalopez’ have received hitmen, motorcycles, cars, and weapons from the AGC (El Heraldo, October 15, 2018). ‘Los Costeños’, for their part, finance the stipends of several local gang members (El Heraldo, May 24, 2022; Interview 9).

These benefits can be assimilated to some of those that armed groups provide for civilians in their areas of operation. In some neighborhoods of Barranquilla, for example, businesses must pay OCGs a "registration fee" (*matricula*) to start their businesses and then must constantly pay a fee to avoid being vandalized or prevented from opening their stores (El Tiempo, January 14, 2021). The OCGs also regulate which products can be sold in certain neighborhoods in accordance with these fees. For instance, there are warehouses belonging to allies of the armed groups, and only the products stored there are allowed to be distributed to the small stores in the neighborhoods they control (El Heraldo, December 29, 2017). Also, certain civilians receive benefits, such as vouchers for making purchases, or mediation with other people for the forgiveness of debts or the

**Table 3** Comparison of the benefits offered by OCGs to civilians and criminals

Dimension	Civilians			Criminals		
	Mechanism	Benefit	Consequence of non-compliance	Mechanism	Benefit	Consequence of non-compliance
Economic/criminal activities	<p><b>Territories controlled by Los Costeños:</b> Civilians are required to pay a "starting fee" (<i>matricula</i>) for businesses and subsequent biweekly/monthly fees</p> <p>Other organizations only charge extortion fees, but do not necessarily offer benefits for that</p>	OCGs regulate certain markets, preventing the sale of products by those who do not pay, or encouraging civilians to purchase from certain establishments	<p>Violence against the business</p> <p>Prohibition to continue exercising economic activities</p> <p>Homicide</p>	Required to pay daily/weekly/biweekly/monthly fees to carry out illegal activities	Control of criminal borders so that other criminals do not compete with them	<p>Prohibition to continue exercising criminal activities</p> <p>Homicide</p> <p>Extra-lethal violence</p>
Protection	Charged a "security fee" for living in controlled neighborhoods	<p>Protection from violence by criminals of the organization or non-organized criminals operating in the area</p> <p>Reduction of crime (violent and non-violent) in neighborhoods</p>	<p>Burglaries of homes of non-payers</p> <p>Threats</p> <p>Homicide</p>	Gangs must declare loyalty and avoid cooperating with other OCGs	<p><b>Protection from authorities:</b> little police presence and illegal alliances with police officers to allow crimes by certain groups or individuals</p> <p><b>Protection from competitors:</b> Organizational footprint to support in case of violence from another OCG</p>	<p>Delivery of incriminating information to authorities</p> <p>Stop protection for members of armed groups in prisons</p> <p>Attacks against members of armed groups</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Dimension	Civilians		Criminals	
	Mechanism	Benefit	Mechanism	Benefit
Provision of goods and services	Eligibility for goods and services based on loyalty to the armed group	Dispute resolution Vouchers for groceries in some stores Housing construction elements	Gangs must declare loyalty and avoid cooperating with other OCGs Non-organized criminals considered loyal to the OCG have access to the illegal market provided by them	Access to weapons Training for members of armed groups Monthly payments to gang members Specialized men for certain missions (homicides, combat or dismemberment)
		No access to benefits		No access to benefits
		Consequence of non-compliance		Consequence of non-compliance

This is not an extensive review of benefits offered by armed groups to civilians. Here we only include those that can be compared to what armed groups offer to other criminals

resolution of interpersonal conflicts. Table 3 shows a comparison of the mechanisms used for their regulation in Barranquilla (Interview 15; Interview 20).

## Conclusions

Our article delves into a phenomenon that has received limited attention in Colombian cities: the criminal governance of the underworld. Through several interviews, an extensive press review, reports from public entities and an original database on inter-criminal violence, we examined the mechanisms used by OCGs to govern other criminals in Barranquilla, Colombia. We have identified three common characteristics that seem to be present in criminal underworld governance: the use of violence, the building of a reputation, and the provision of benefits to those who are governed.

We draw three main conclusions that are in line with recent literature on organized crime. First, it seems that lethal violence is an effective tool for eliminating rivals and enforcing the rules that govern the criminal underworld. OCGs have developed various mechanisms to manage their illegal markets, such as charging fees for permits to carry out criminal activities, creating arbitrary boundaries for illicit operations, and regulating the use of violence during criminal acts. Homicides have proven to be an effective means of enforcing these rules.

Second, establishing governance over the criminal world requires the ability to wield violence credibly. In Barranquilla, OCGs relied on public threats that were subsequently carried out to establish their governance structure. This implies that simply using violence is not enough; it is also essential to claim responsibility and communicate the reasons for the violence. Building a reputation in this realm largely depends on effectively communicating one's actions. This is why armed groups often distribute pamphlets or make public announcements that can attract media or institutional attention—they need to demonstrate to their target audience that they are in control.

Third, the governance of the criminal underworld is also mediated by benefits offered to those under the umbrella of the OCG in charge. We have identified four main benefits. First, control of criminal frontiers becomes the responsibility of the governing organization. Second, gangs or individual criminals gain access to corruption networks that allow the larger OCG to operate with a certain degree of impunity. Third, the governing OCG provides protection in the event of armed competition. Finally, the governing OCG offers funding, supplies, and training to gangs under its control.

Our article adds to a growing literature on criminal governance in Latin America and details an urban setting, which is important given that criminal governance in Colombian cities has been understudied. Our case study aligns with the findings of other scholars in Medellín. More research should be done to more systematically compare these scenarios and understand similarities and differences.

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## Declarations

**Research involving human participants and/or animals** Yes.

**Informed consent** All participants explicitly and informedly agreed to participate in this study as long as their information was not disclosed and was treated strictly for academic purposes. Each interviewee gave explicit informed consent prior to the start of the interview.

**Conflicts of interest** The authors have no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

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## Interviews

- Interview 1: Officer of the Colombian National Police, 13/03/2021
- Interview 2: Former member of an OCG, Barranquilla, 17/03/2021
- Interview 3: Former member of an OCG, Barranquilla, 15/05/2022
- Interview 6: Resident of a neighborhood dominated by ‘Los Costeños’, Barranquilla, 24/07/2022
- Interview 8: Officer from the Colombian government, Barranquilla, 17/11/2022.
- Interview 9: Former member of an OCG, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 12/01/2023
- Interview 10: Drug dealer, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 25/01/2023
- Interview 15: Father of a victim of Los Costeños, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 08/05/2023
- Interview 16: Drug dealer, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 12/05/2023
- Interview 20: Civilian, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 11/05/2023
- Interview 22: Civilian, Barranquilla, 20/01/2023
- Interview 23: Gang member, Sabanagrande (Atlántico), 09/05/2023
- Interview 24: Gang member, Malambo (Atlántico), 17/05

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