

# In the Crevices of the State: Criminal Governance in Unexpected Contexts

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## Abstract

Many countries experience the presence of criminal organizations with different degrees of territorial control. In some cases, these organizations develop governance strategies—de facto control over different aspects of social, economic and political life in the territories where they operate. Studies of criminal governance in Latin America assume relative state weakness as an important factor behind the growth and entrenchment of criminal organizations. We build on recent research that challenges this assumption and argue that in Uruguay, a case of relative state strength, criminal governance takes on a particular form: it is circumscribed to the control of illicit markets, as opposed to other spheres of social life. To build our argument, the project employs a mixed-methods design, combining in-depth interviews with community leaders, members of NGOs, state and local authorities, and an extensive public opinion survey (the first of its kind) containing network scale-up questions as a mechanism to assess the prevalence of criminal governance at the local level. Our findings provide support for our argument, approximately 15 to 25 % of our respondents have had some experience of criminal governance.

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We fail to find evidence of criminal governance beyond mechanisms circumscribed to the control of drug markets. We would expect to find similar dynamics in cases similar to Uruguay.

# 1 Introduction

Criminal governance—informal tools of control over different aspects of social, economic and political life employed by gangs, mafias, drug cartels with the goal of controlling illicit markets (Lessing, 2020; Arias, 2017; Barnes, 2022)—is a pervasive but poorly understood phenomenon resulting from the relationship between criminal organizations, the state, and the communities where these organizations are embedded (Arias, 2017; Barnes, 2017). Existing theories of criminal governance emphasize state weakness as a central explanatory factor (Arias, 2017, 2006; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Lessing, 2017; Durán-Martínez, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Yashar, 2018). If existing theories are correct, one should not expect criminal organizations to emerge in contexts of relative state strength. However, evidence shows that criminal organizations are present in a wide variety of contexts (Auyero and Berti, 2013; Auyero and Sobering, 2019; Flom, 2019; Luna, 2017). Does state strength alter the dynamics of criminal governance? If so, how? To date, there are no systematic studies that seek to understand the dynamics of criminal organizations in unexpected contexts<sup>1</sup>. Understanding these cases is highly informative; it is possible that the theoretical expectations and conclusions derived from existing research may not travel to contexts of relative state strength where we also see criminal organizations. By implication, current explanations may be biased, and are therefore incomplete.

In this paper we focus on understanding the manifestations of criminal governance in cases where one would not expect to find it. Drawing on the case of Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay, we argue that state presence—manifesting through welfare policy and security policy—limits criminal organizations to controlling drug markets at the micro-level, preventing them from attempting to control other spheres of com-

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<sup>1</sup>One exception is Uribe et al 2022, which provides data on 18 countries in Latin America, but the paper does not specifically focus on unexpected contexts

munity life. Combining qualitative fieldwork and a survey, our results indicate that in Uruguay criminal organizations circumscribe their actions to illicit markets. Whereas in other contexts, criminal organizations are deeply involved in politics and societal life, this does not seem to be the case in relatively strong states. We also find that, similar to other cases, criminal groups develop violent and non-violent tools to control communities. Specifically, our results suggest that nonviolent tools are prevalent.

We contribute to theory development by providing new descriptive insights about the features and dynamics of criminal governance in seemingly unexpected contexts. Based on our descriptive data we develop a new theory about criminal governance in cases of relative state strength. We contribute empirically by mapping out the myriad governance tools that criminal organizations deploy in our case, and by identifying the extent of criminal governance through the implementation of methods to study hard-to-reach populations.

## **2 Insights from the study of criminal governance**

When criminal organizations impose formal or informal rules and regulate life with the ultimate goal of controlling illicit markets, they build governance. We argue that controlling illicit markets—through violent or nonviolent tools—is a necessary and sufficient condition to observe criminal governance. Criminal governance may also involve other spheres of society, in addition to controlling illicit markets: control can be political, social, economic, or a combination (Trejo and Ley, 2020; Ley, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2020a; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2020b; Lessing, 2020). To control illicit markets, criminal groups use different tools that can be violent, such as extortion, or nonviolent, such as paying for groceries or certain public services like electricity (Magaloni et al., 2020a,b; Ley et al., 2022; Olson, 1993; Arjona, 2014; Blattman et al., 2022b). However, conceptual development remains weak. Currently, there are no studies of

when one specific form of governance may emerge, transform into another, or disappear. In addition, violent and nonviolent tools can correspond to different forms of criminal governance, just observing one type of tool is not sufficient to ascertain the type of governance is being established. For instance, groups can use threats to control illicit markets only, but they may use them also to influence politics. Furthermore, existing research suggests that whether groups choose violent or nonviolent tools results from the relationships they establish with other groups, the state and communities, but there is no consensus around the conditions under which violent or nonviolent tools may be more prevalent. This lack of conceptual clarity limits our understanding and our ability to predict when certain forms of governance might arise.

Recent studies focus on relationships between groups, either as competitive or non-competitive. A dominant argument suggests that when one group controls territory and there is no competition with others, under long time horizons nonviolent strategies are more likely (Staniland, 2012; Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2016; Moncada, 2019; Yashar, 2018). In turn, when contestation happens, it leads to the prevalence of violent relationships with communities (Magaloni et al., 2020b; Barnes, 2022; Moncada, 2019). Other scholars emphasize that because criminal organizations are not driven by political incentives in the same way as other groups (such as rebels, or terrorist organizations) the dynamics of control are more fragile, uncertain, and short lived (Trejo and Ley, 2020). Thus, the threat of violence is always present, affecting the types of relationships they are able to develop with communities (Barnes, 2022). Still others suggest that violent and nonviolent strategies can be equally as prevalent in contexts of competition (Ley et al., 2022). In addition to the divergence in expectations, existing data on criminal organizations is limited and researchers resort to assumptions to generate expectations about behavior. Because criminal organizations and those proximate to them are hidden populations (Khoury, ming), they are hard to research, therefore, scholars resort to

simplifying assumptions to study them. But sometimes, those assumptions may lead to equivocal inferences. One common operating assumption is that when there are multiple groups present, competition should be expected. But research has demonstrated that groups also collaborate and build alliances ([Blattman et al., 2022b](#); [Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 2016](#)). Thus, the number of organizations should not be interpreted as synonymous with competition.

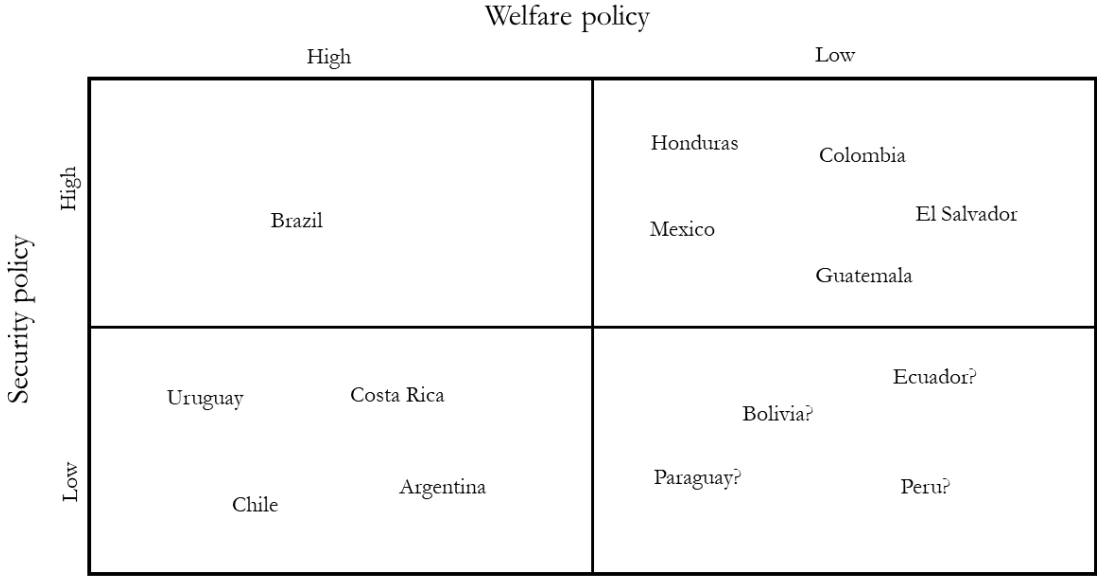
Another set of explanations focuses on the relationship between criminal organizations and the state and its impact on violence towards communities. Magaloni et al (2020), for example, explain that when the state and criminal organizations are in confrontation, violence towards communities will be reduced. Increased police repression might lead criminal organizations to seek community support through nonviolent means ([Magaloni et al., 2020b](#)). Nevertheless, competition with the state also affects competition between groups because it impacts time horizons, which in turn has spillover effects towards communities ([Barnes, 2022](#)). Other research posits that criminal organizations coordinate with the state. As long as they keep levels of violence low, the state may choose to turn a blind eye to their activities ([Denyer Willis, 2015](#); [Lessing, 2020](#)). In contexts of high uncertainty about state expected behavior, criminal organizations may choose to use violence towards the state and towards populations ([Trejo and Ley, 2020](#)). Others posit that the strength of communities is relevant to understand the behavior of criminal organizations ([Staniland, 2012](#); [Berg and Carranza, 2018](#)). When communities have tight connections, illicit actors have fewer opportunities to control them, and thus violent strategies should be less prevalent ([Arias, 2017](#); [Magaloni et al., 2020a](#); [Arjona, 2016](#); [Kaplan, 2017](#); [Ley et al., 2019](#)).

The extensive body of existing research makes important contributions to explain criminal governance in contexts of relatively lower state strength, or state absence ([Skaperdas, 2001](#); [Gambetta, 1993](#)). More recent work has qualified some of the as-

assumptions about state presence and capacity. Researchers describe the emergence of spaces of informality that criminal organizations begin to fill because states face difficulties occupying them (Lessing, 2020; Yashar, 2018). Although this research recognizes that criminal organizations can emerge in spaces where the state is present, the focus is on state capacity understood as either coercive capacity or low corruption. This research conceives of state strength mainly in terms of security policy: when the state develops punitive, iron-fist policies, or it has high capacity for enforcement, it inadvertently strengthens criminal organizations (Lessing, 2020; Dipoppa, 2023; Trudeau, 2022). However, they reach these conclusions because they focus on state capacity as coercive capacity, when in fact states perform other functions, or they may develop security policies that are less coercive, or other forms of intervention in societies. These theories cannot explain the development of criminal organizations in contexts where the state is present through other means, such as the development of social policy. The contexts where these inferences are produced, are not useful to understand the characteristics of the same phenomenon in contexts where the security policy is less punitive. Few recent studies shed light on the provision of social services and its impact on criminal governance. Studies of Medellin, a city where social policies at the local level have recently been expanded, argue that the state and criminal organizations simultaneously provide services (Blattman et al., 2022b; Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza, 2014). This research provides building blocks to theorize about cases of state presence. Nevertheless, these are cases where state intervention in terms of social welfare is more recent, and they are not cases where the welfare state has been consolidated as part of a longer historical process. What is different about high state presence that should lead us to different expectations? We develop a theory positing that in contexts of high state presence the space to develop criminal governance is more constrained than in others. When there is strong welfare provision, it limits criminal organizations' ability

to exercise governance.

Based on the discussion above, criminal governance varies based on two dimensions of state strength: security policy and welfare policy. In Latin America, cases are distributed along these dimensions as illustrated in Figure 1. Existing research is concerned with explaining cases where iron-fist security policies are present, the upper half of the table. The scope of our theory applies to cases contained in the lower left corner of the table. In this paper, we focus on the case of Uruguay, one of non-iron fist security policy and expansive welfare state. Figure 1 illustrates the importance of establishing theoretical scope conditions to establish the extent of applicability of our inferences.



**Figure 1** Theory of Criminal Governance



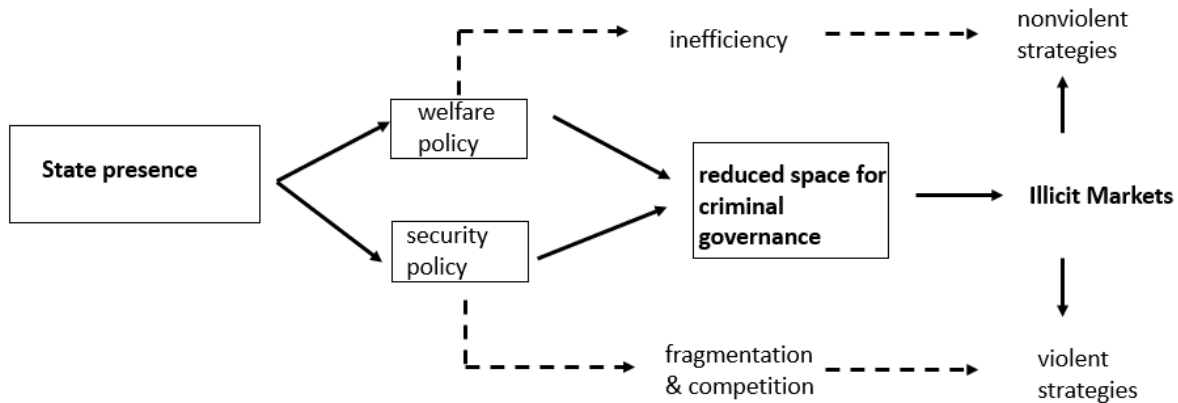
### 3 The development of criminal governance in contexts of relative state strength

Our theory, summarized in Figure 2, posits that high state presence reduces the space for criminal governance to its minimal expression: the control of illicit markets. State presence manifests through two simultaneous paths: welfare policies (social policies), and security policies (policing, justice system). The provision of services allows the state to maintain its legitimacy (Blattman et al., 2022a). Because there is high state presence in the territory, neighborhood residents not only utilize its multiple services (day cares, schools, clinics, among many others), they also rely on those services to help them manage everyday violence and coexistence issues. The existence of welfare policies reduces groups' ability to get involved in socio-political aspects of life in the neighborhoods where they are present, restricting them to controlling illicit markets. High state presence also leads to the implementation of crime control strategies, which prevent groups from forming larger, more powerful organizations with the capacity to develop more sophisticated mechanisms of control, also resulting in restricting control to that of illicit markets.

Even though the state provides services, it does so inefficiently (it is slow and insufficient), which creates space for criminal organizations to expand governance through a number of tools. Criminal groups are able to provide some services that the state may take too long to provide (temporary jobs, small donations, or small investments in neighborhoods), which they use as nonviolent tools to win residents over (Blattman et al., 2022b). In addition, because security policies prevent groups from growing, they are limited by their own precariousness, and so are the nonviolent tools at their disposal.<sup>2</sup> Because security policies fragment groups, increased competition triggers

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<sup>2</sup>Another limitation may come from internal group characteristics; capturing more fine grained in-



**Figure 2** Theory of Diversification of Criminal Tools in Contexts of High State Presence

violent tools of population control.

Paradoxically, high state presence, much like its absence, might lead to the proliferation of violent criminal tools. In contexts where the state is routinely absent, violent strategies are the only means it can use to contain criminal organizations, since it is not present in the territory in other meaningful ways. This violent response triggers the escalation of violence locally. Conversely, in contexts where the state is routinely present, even though it does not prevent the emergence of criminal groups, it limits their possibilities of encroachment. State presence acts as a counterweight to the development of criminal governance tools in the long run, and their potential extension to other spheres of community life, such as political participation. Criminal groups may not control large territories, but their violent interactions generate negative externalities for neighborhood residents.

We derive three hypotheses from this argument, which we test using different methods:

H1: High state presence limits criminal governance to the control of illicit markets;

H2: High state presence leads to the existence of violent and nonviolent tools of criminalization about groups is beyond the scope of this project.

inal control;

H3: High state presence leads to a higher prevalence of violent tools vis-à-vis nonviolent ones.

## 4 Research Design

To understand criminal governance and its manifestations, we implemented a mixed-methods strategy that combines in-depth interviews, review of documents, and press with an original survey. We use the qualitative information from the interviews and press to understand the context, how criminal groups have evolved, and the types of criminal governance that exist. Additionally, we use this information to generate relevant survey questions (Pérez Bentancur and Tiscornia, 2022).

Implementing this project presents several challenges: residents affected by the presence of criminal organizations can be considered a hard-to-reach or hidden population (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004; Khoury, *ming*). Because of safety concerns, or connections with criminal groups, neighborhood residents may be reluctant to express their opinions or beliefs directly. Estimating the pervasiveness of criminal presence, or identifying the size of the population affected by criminal organizations and the precise governance mechanisms that criminal groups implement, is also a challenge. Furthermore, security concerns and the illicit nature of criminal organizations pose ethical challenges in investigating these populations. Furthermore, we also face a case-specific challenge: criminal organizations in Uruguay are a relatively new phenomenon (last two decades) and the data available are scarce.

Our combined methods aid us in addressing these challenges in four ways: 1) our preliminary review of documents, in particular newspaper articles, allows us to identify areas of operations, as well as some descriptive features of groups; 2) in-depth in-

interviews with a range of actors (community leaders, members of NGOs, and state and local authorities), are a means to get first-hand accounts of experiences of (in)security in neighborhoods, as well as descriptions of mechanisms of control; 3) the online survey helps us understand variation in governance in the neighborhoods; 4) including indirect questions in the survey that leverage recent developments in network models allows us to estimate the size of hard-to-reach populations. These models rely on aggregated relational data to approximate the size of the population affected by criminal presence using information from respondents' friendship networks. Following [Ventura et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Calvo and Murillo \(2013\)](#) we include eighteen indirect items to estimate the size and structure of respondents' networks. This set of questions allows us to ask about respondents' exposure to criminal organizations by asking about people they know who have been exposed to them.

#### 4.1 Qualitative fieldwork

To qualitatively assess criminal governance tools in Montevideo, we combined two sources: the systematic review of 169 press articles between 2012 and 2022, obtained from the four newspapers with highest national circulation, and 66 in-depth interviews with a variety of local actors (neighborhood residents, NGO workers, teachers, local government officials).<sup>3</sup> Even though we did not explicitly look to interview members of criminal organizations, we interviewed individuals who had different levels of access to and contact with criminal organizations. We constructed our pool of interviewees based on a snowball sampling technique, taking into account how likely it might be that our interviewees would be proximate to our dependent variable of interest.

We used the qualitative information to generate a better understanding of the context where criminal groups operate in Montevideo, how they evolved over time, and some of their features. The revision of newspaper articles and interviews reveals that

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<sup>3</sup>El País, El Observador, La Diaria, and Búsqueda.

different criminal organizations are present in about a third of the neighborhoods of Montevideo, and they deploy various strategies. Criminal presence is represented graphically in Figure 5. According to the map, areas colored in red show the presence of at least one group between 2019 and 2022. Additionally, we used our fieldwork to inform the design of a survey that included direct and indirect questions about the presence of criminal groups in all of Montevideo.

## 4.2 Survey

Our survey (n=2,688) consisted of a series of questions aiming at understanding whether and where criminal organizations were present, as well as respondents' relationship to the state. To that aim, we included direct and indirect questions. We directly asked participants whether they believed there are criminal organizations in their neighborhoods, and whether they witnessed criminal groups in their neighborhood engage in any of the following activities:

1. Threatening neighbors
2. Evicting neighbors from their homes
3. Making donations to neighbors
4. Offer work to neighbors

With the goal of ensuring more realistic and effective measurement of outcomes, we defined this list of actions based on insights from our qualitative fieldwork. During fieldwork, and from our press review, we identified a longer list of activities that criminal groups engage in as mechanisms to control the local drug market. We chose these four to be included in our survey because they were the ones our interviewees mentioned the most, and the most recurrent in the press, as Table 2 indicates. We categorized the first two as violent actions, and the remaining two as nonviolent.

Table 1 Network scale-up questions

| How many X do you know, who also know you, with whom you have interacted in the last year in person, by phone, or any other channel? |  |
|--|--|
| People from Las Piedras  | Public employees                             |
| Men between 25-29 year old   | Welfare card holders                         |
| Police officers  | People registered with a political party     |
| University students  | People with children attending public school |
| People who had a kid last year   | People who did not vote in the last election |
| People who passed away last year   | People currently in jail                     |
| People who got married last year   | People recently unemployed                   |
| Women between 45-49 years old  | [CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE TOOL]                   |

Our indirect questions, which included the same items we asked about directly, were included in a series of network scale-up questions (Laga et al., 2021). Following recent applications of this method in Political Science (Calvo and Murillo, 2013; Ventura et al., 2022), we present respondents with sixteen items. For each one, respondents are asked to indicate how many people they know in each category. Table 1 shows the list of items. For the last item in brackets, respondents were randomly presented with one of the four criminal organization strategies listed above.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of including network-scale up questions is to use the baseline group to estimate the size of a respondent’s personal network, which one can then use to estimate the size of the unobserved group of interest. Traditionally, the goal is to use known population quantities among the baseline groups to estimate the size or proportion of the unobserved group in the population of interest (Zheng et al., 2006; Laga et al., 2023). However, these estimates are only valid under the assumption that any respondent in the sample has the same baseline probability of knowing someone in the unobserved group (Laga et al., 2021). We believe this does not hold in our case, as people living in different parts of Montevideo have different propensities to crime

<sup>4</sup>We presented criminal governance tools at random to align with the sensitive item presented in a list experiment. The list experiment did not work as intended, so we do not report the results here. We deal with this issue elsewhere.

exposure.

Instead, we follow the modeling strategy in recent political science applications and model exposure to criminal governance strategies within our sample (Calvo and Murillo, 2013; Ventura et al., 2022). We model responses to the network scale-up questions as following the distribution

$$y_{ik} \sim \text{negative-binomial}(\text{mean} = e^{\alpha_i + \beta_k}, \text{overdispersion} = \omega_k) \quad (1)$$

Where  $y_{ik}$  is the size of group  $k$  for respondent  $i$ ,  $\alpha_i$  is the (logged) expected degree for person  $i$ , and  $\beta_k$  is the (logged) expected degree for group  $k$ . Note that degrees denote the number of edges in a network. So  $\alpha_i$  can be interpreted as a function of the size of respondent  $i$ 's network, but  $\beta_k$  cannot be interpreted in terms of size. The parameter  $\omega_k$  allows for variance in the propensity to know someone for group  $k$  (for details see Zheng et al., 2006).

We fit this model via maximum likelihood estimation twice. In the first step, we exclude the criminal governance strategy of interest to generate predictions for its size based on a respondent's baseline network. In the second step, we fit the model including the group of interest to measure its actual size for each respondent.

This allows us to express whether a respondents exposure to criminal governance strategies relative to the size of their personal network as

$$r_{ik} = \sqrt{y_{ik}} - \sqrt{e\alpha_i + \beta_k} \quad (2)$$

Where  $r_{ik}$  is the standardized residual between the actual and expected size of group  $k$  for respondent  $i$ . Individuals with high  $r_{ik}$  know disproportionately more people who have experience the criminal governance strategy of interest given the size of their personal network, whereas the reverse is true for individuals with low  $r_{ik}$ .<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Up to here our approach is the same as Calvo and Murillo (2013) and Ventura et al. (2022).

Our ultimate goal is to estimate the proportion of respondents who can be considered as exposed to the criminal governance strategies of interest. That means we need to convert this continuous measure into a binary indicator. We report results using a generous and conservative conversion. The most generous approach would be to consider any value of  $r_{ik} > 0$  as exposed. A more conservative approach would be to count respondents as exposed only if they have above average residuals. Since the average residual is around zero, our conservative approach counts  $r_{ik} > \text{mean}(r_{ik}) + \text{SD}(r_{ik})$  as exposed. In either case, this allows us to estimate the proportion of respondents exposed to the criminal governance strategies of interest through a simple means, which implies that our estimates are directly comparable with the direct questions.

#### 4.2.1 Sample size and Recruitment

We recruited survey participants through an advertisement on Facebook containing the following message: “Take this short survey and participate in a raffle for a smartphone.” The advertisement contained a link that redirected the respondent to the survey questionnaire in Qualtrics.<sup>6</sup> To target the Facebook ads we specified characteristics based on the information present in individuals’ public profiles: residents of Montevideo who are 18 years of age or older.

The choice to use Facebook for recruitment as opposed to conducting the survey through a polling agency responds to two criteria: cost and access. The cost of fielding a survey of this size in Uruguay is high. In addition, we seek to get respondents from neighborhoods that are difficult to access given current security issues, polling agencies are reticent to send canvassers to those areas. The use of Facebook Ads provides a tool to access these respondents. For a detailed description of our recruitment through Facebook see the appendix.

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<sup>6</sup>We use Facebook exclusively as a recruitment tool, information resulting from the survey, was stored and protected by Qualtrics.



We seek to minimize concerns with sensitivity bias as well as protect participants as much as possible. The use of online tools for recruitment provides respondents with another layer of anonymity (as opposed to face to face responses). Facebook has increasingly become a popular tool to recruit survey participants. As a result, we know that the samples obtained from these studies are biased towards younger, more educated individuals (Jäger, 2017). Nevertheless, Facebook also allows access to populations that are hard to reach in face-to-face surveys. Even though this is in tension with emphasis on producing samples that are representative of a population, studies that used Facebook to recruit survey participants also demonstrate that it is possible to achieve some level of representativeness with this type of recruitment (Samuels and Zucco, 2013; Broockman and Green, 2014; Jäger, 2017). However, for this particular study, we prioritize the implementation of survey instruments to minimize sensitivity bias over producing a representative sample.

## 5 The Case of Uruguay

In the last two decades, criminal groups involved in local drug-trafficking have begun to concentrate in urban areas with high poverty levels in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. While there is no evidence that criminal groups have established liberated zones, or that they dominate entire communities, their presence and behavior are many times violent, which creates a wide range of coexistence problems of different magnitude for local populations. The presence of these groups correlates with increased levels of insecurity. Conflicts between them often result in shootouts and the escalation of homicides and revenge killings. Official data does not systematically disaggregate the proportion of homicides resulting from conflicts between criminal gangs. However, according to the Interior Ministry's Bi-Annual (2018-2019) Homicide Report (Ministerio del Interior, 2019), in 2018 50% of homicides were classified as resulting

from conflicts between criminal gangs. That year Montevideo reached an all-time high homicide rate of 16.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants ([Ministerio del Interior, 2019](#)).

<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon takes place simultaneously with the expansion of the welfare state as well as an expansion of security policy, making the case of Montevideo rather puzzling.

### **5.1 The evolution of the welfare state**

During the first half of the 20th century, based on the Import Substitution Economic Model (ISI), social spending grew significantly. Uruguay developed a welfare matrix with a corporate profile and universalist approach that reached most formal workers, mainly urban ones ([Collier and Collier, 1991](#); [Haggard and Kauffman, 2008](#); [Pribble, 2013](#)). Even though social spending in this period had a strong clientelistic component, particularistic distribution was so extensive that it forged the image of a middle-class country and the notion of a “hyper-integrated” society ([Filgueira and Filgueira, 1994](#); [Rama, 1971](#)).

After 1958, a long process of stagnation ensued and social indicators (poverty, unemployment, inequality, etc.) began to worsen ([Astori, 2001](#); [Cancela and Melgar, 1985](#)). Social segregation and gentrification also worsened in Montevideo—the capital city—which concentrates half of the population of the country (roughly 1.4 million people). “Poverty belts” and “shanty towns” formed in the outskirts of Montevideo leading to the creation of precarious neighborhoods, with very limited infrastructure, such as Casavalle (originally a smaller area called “Unidad Casavalle”) and nearby areas, like Marconi. These processes of marginalization and exclusion persisted and worsened during the twelve-year-long military dictatorship (1973-1985) ([Alvarez-Rivadulla, 2017](#)). After the democratic transition in 1985, some socioeconomic indica-

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<sup>7</sup>The World Health Organization identifies epidemic levels of homicides as those surpassing 10 per 100,000 population.

tors improved, until 2000 where the worst economic crisis in the history of Uruguay led to a sharp escalation in poverty levels. In 2003, 30% of the population was below the poverty line (INE, 2006). Yet, since 2005 a new period of expansion of social policies began, improving social indicators substantially.

Between 2005 and 2020, during the so-called “left turn”, a fifteen year period of leftist governments, the successive Frente Amplio (Broad Front) governments systematically increased social expenditure (Pribble, 2013). As a result, social indicators improved. For instance, the GINI coefficient improved from 0,47 in 2002 to 0,39 in 2017 (CEPAL, 2018), and poverty levels decreased from 32,5% in 2006 to 8,8% in 2019 (Brum and De Rosa, 2020). This new period of incorporation includes not only trade unions—as in the first incorporation process—but also informal workers (Silva and Rossi, 2017).

In this context, many peripheral neighborhoods of Montevideo received considerable social and infrastructure investments. An example of this is the design of what was known as “Plan Cuenca Casavalle.” With the objective of improving living conditions, as well as accessibility and environmental aspects in Casavalle and nearby neighborhoods, this policy required coordination across multiple state institutions<sup>8</sup>. The plan included investment in state infrastructure, such as the construction of healthcare centers, cultural and sports centers, educational centers, new housing, squares, parks, and streets (OPP, 2019). In addition, the state extended conditional cash transfer programs to the more vulnerable populations and expanded care centers for young children, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods (Pribble, 2013).

Increased public spending resulted in the marked improvement of several social indicators in Casavalle and nearby areas. For example, according to data from the eval-

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<sup>8</sup>State institutions involved in "Plan Cuenca Casavalle" were: Ministry of Social Development (MIDES), Ministry of Interior (MI), Ministry of Housing (MVOTMA), Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), Ministry of Work and Social Security (MTSS), Ministry of Economy (MEF), National Administration of Public Education (ANEP), National Drug Council (JND), Municipality of Montevideo, and Municipality D.

uation of the Plan Cuenca Casavalle, the percentage of households below the poverty line decreased from 2.4% in 2009 to 0.2% in 2017. Furthermore, the percentage of households in irregular settlements decreased from 21% in 2010 (the highest point) to 14% in 2017. At the end of the left turn, Uruguay was one of the Latin American countries that had improved its social indicators the most (CEPAL, 2018). As Figure 3 shows the state is extensively present throughout the urban territory of Montevideo.

The recent emergence and growth of criminal organizations is puzzling precisely because it takes place in a context of high state investment and presence, and particularly after many recent important changes in terms of social policy. Many of these changes, albeit central to life in peripheral neighborhoods, may be insufficient for some, which creates an opportunity for criminal organizations. State local officials and neighbors describe this phenomenon as follows:

“The timing of governments and people is different. The government says, ‘yes we are going to do such and such...’ but time goes by, and we want solutions for yesterday, not for tomorrow.”<sup>9</sup>

“When I arrived here, the ECLAC reports said that Casavalle was the neighborhood with the highest level of poverty, of exclusion, and that beyond the intervention of the State, it was impossible to reverse it. It is as if you are always in that tension that you go with a concrete proposal, and in reality, the demand is so great that you end up overwhelmed (...) and in reality, the demand is real because the people are in an informal settlement that is on private land and there is a need for sanitation and improvement of the streets. And you’re going to tell them you’re going to build a public space. So this tension is always present in all interventions.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Interviewee 26, June 17, 2020.

<sup>10</sup>Interviewee 15, March 2, 2020.

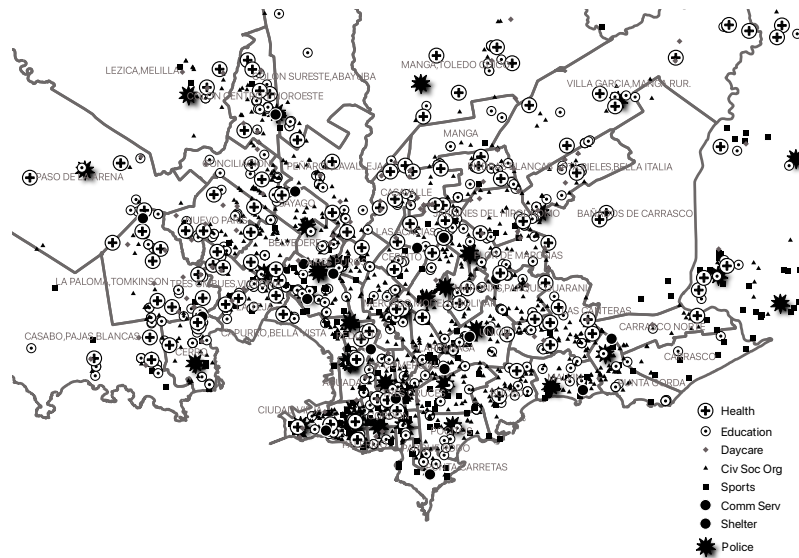
“As a city council, we have worked in the Plan Cuenca Casavalle, based on an ECLAC survey in 2004. We realized that there were state interventions and NGOs working in the territory, but there was something that did not change: the social fracture.”<sup>11</sup>

As the quotes illustrate, extended state presence still leaves spaces where needs are not fully met.

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<sup>11</sup>Interviewee 6, June 4, 2019.

**Figure 3 State Presence in Montevideo**



**(a) State services in Montevideo**



**(b) Urban areas in Montevideo**

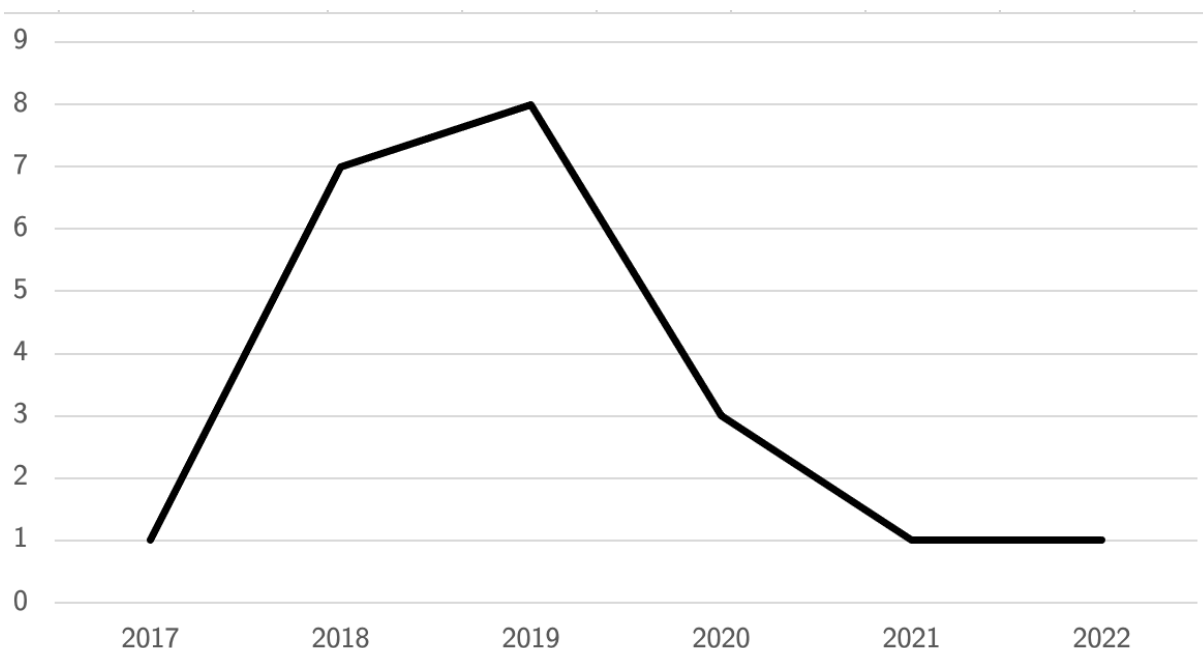
## 5.2 The evolution of the security policy

Policing policies in Uruguay changed only recently, in line with a regional shift towards professionalization, but also punitiveness in Latin America (Flores-Macías and

Zarkin, 2019; Visconti, 2019; Tiscornia and Perez Bentancur, 2019). Around 2009, a sharp increase in public opinion concern with insecurity follows a precipitous decline in material concerns (such as education, the economy and unemployment) (Consultores, 2020), pushing politicians and policymakers to rethink policing strategies. In 2016, the National Police underwent an extensive reform with the objective of increasing effectiveness, amid increases in levels of crime, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods. A notable change was the implementation of the Programa de Alta Dedicación Operativa (PADO, loosely translated as Program of High Operational Dedication), a hot-spot policing program designed to increase patrolling in high-crime areas.

PADO began in Montevideo in 2016 in the neighborhoods with the highest homicide levels: Casavalle, Marconi, and Cerro. Its main objective was to reduce property crime and increase efficacy in solving crimes, as well as to increase citizens' trust in police and improve the population's perception of safety and security. It aimed to prevent crime by deploying deterrent patrolling, and it garnered high support, notably, in the neighborhoods where it is implemented (Tiscornia and Perez Bentancur, 2019).

PADO units were composed of full-time police officers who received special compensation. It also implemented 'crackdowns,' operations consisting of inundating a neighborhood with police and conducting raids, among other tactics. PADO units are generally associated with more frequent and intense displays of force than regular police (Chainey et al., 2021). Figure 4 extends data compiled by (Bogliaccini et al., 2022) using publicly available data from the Ministry of Interior. It displays information on police crackdowns in neighborhoods of Montevideo between 2017 and 2022. As the figure shows, the intensity of operations grew dramatically in 2018 and 2019 and they were concentrated in 11 of the 62 neighborhoods of Montevideo. It is unclear whether these operations have had positive impacts in long term crime reduction and coexistence issues, rather they have created a sense of quick improvement in the extent of



**Figure 4** Number of Police Crackdowns 2017–2022

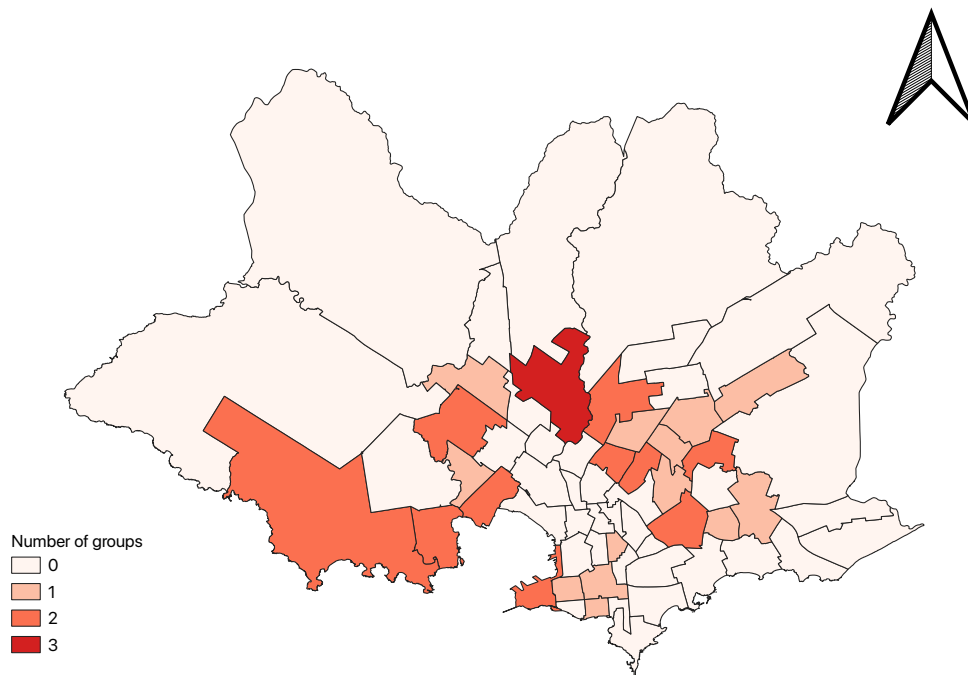
violence in some areas ([Tiscornia and Perez Bentancur, 2015](#)), but they have also contributed to destabilizing local dynamics among criminal groups. Much like in other contexts, violent state involvement to curb criminal organizations' presence, led to the proliferation of more groups ([Calderón et al., 2015](#); [Phillips, 2015](#)).

## 6 Analysis

We tested three hypotheses: 1) that in contexts of high state presence, criminal governance is relegated to the control of illicit markets; 2) that in contexts of high state presence, we should identify the presence of violent and nonviolent criminal actions; 3) that violent actions should be more prevalent than nonviolent ones. We used the qualitative fieldwork to test H1 and H2, the survey also provides evidence for H2 and H3. We present our results by discussing each hypothesis at a time, combining quantitative and qualitative sources of evidence.

Descriptively, our results show that criminal groups are concentrated in urban areas





**Figure 5** Criminal presence

of Montevideo, with high poverty levels. From the analysis of press and in depth-interviews, groups vary in size and capacity for violence, and there is sometimes more than one group present in certain neighborhoods.

Figure 5 shows a rough indicator of this phenomenon based on the systematization of press between 2012 and 2022. The areas in red represent neighborhoods where criminal groups linked to drug trafficking are present. Based on our press review, we identified 36 criminal groups that have operated in 24 of Montevideo’s 62 neighborhoods over the last decade. The darker colors correspond to neighborhoods with a greater presence of criminal groups, such as Marconi–Casavalle in the center-north of Montevideo, or Cerro, Santa Catalina, and Casabó towards the south-west.

Our in-depth interviews reveal that these groups originated from families who were

involved in criminal activities and who expanded their illicit business to incorporate local drug dealing and set up operations in the neighborhoods where they live. Because of their historical ties, these families are well-known to neighborhood residents. When more than one group is present, they tend to be involved in disputes over drug sales in the area. Newspaper reports identify common confrontations between "Los Chinga" and "Los Camala" in Casavalle, and "Los Alvariza" and "Los Ricarditos" in Cerro. We discuss our hypotheses in light of our evidence next.

*H1: In contexts of high state presence, criminal governance is relegated to controlling illicit markets*

As expected, and in line with H1, we find evidence that criminal groups in Montevideo are focused on controlling illicit markets, but they do not appear to be involved in other areas of social life. As one interviewee points out:

“Politics for them does not exist, they are in the business [of selling drugs]. Politics is the business of other people, they are interested in having economic means quickly, but politics is not their strong suit.” <sup>12</sup>

“They are not well-organized enough to be involved in other things.” <sup>13</sup>

These quotes represent suggestive evidence that criminal groups are not involved in politics. In our 66 interviews, we did not come across any evidence suggesting otherwise. Nevertheless, it may be possible that we did not come in contact with interviewees that would know the groups’ motivations from the inside. It is possible that we lacked access to the evidence and therefore we cannot discard the alternative hypothesis that groups are involved in other spheres of social life. One possibility is

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<sup>12</sup>Interview 37, March 18, 2022. Second wave.

<sup>13</sup>Interview 13, June 17, 2019. First wave.

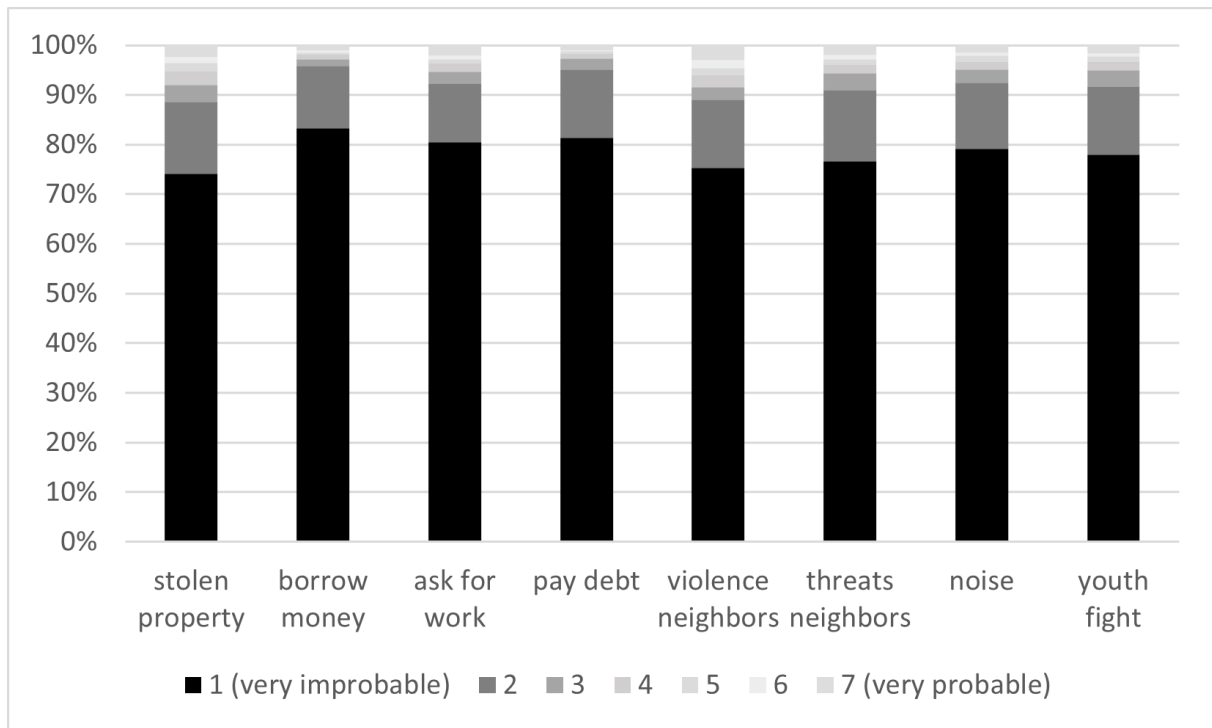
to assess the probative value of the evidence we have based on how proximate the interviewees are to our outcome of interest. That is, if we can establish that our interviewees are close enough to our outcome of interest, we can reasonably argue that absence of evidence is, in fact, evidence of absence (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 200). These quotes are from individuals who are politically and socially active, involved in their communities, they know the local dynamics very well.

In addition to our interview evidence, our survey asked a series of questions regarding whether neighborhood residents asked criminal groups for help in a variety of scenarios, to get a sense, observationally, about groups' ability to mediate interpersonal relations and coexistence in neighborhoods. Figure 6 summarizes the results, and suggests that the vast majority of respondents who previously stated they live in neighborhoods where criminal groups are present, do not resort to these groups to resolve coexistence issues.

Taken together, this is necessary evidence to be reasonably confident in our assertion that criminal groups' actions are restricted to illicit drug markets, as posited by H1, but it is not sufficient to confirm it.

*H2: In contexts of high state presence, violent and nonviolent actions are observable*

Regarding H2, our evidence shows that as part of the activities in the neighborhoods where they operate, criminal groups carry out violent and nonviolent actions that impact residents. From our 66 interviews, we extracted 76 references to criminal organizations' actions. Similarly, from 169 press articles, we obtained 50 references to criminal organizations' actions. Table 2 contains a summary. Although not exhaustive, the table illustrates the variation in these actions. While mentions of violent actions are



**Figure 6** Social control by criminal groups

more common in the press, the interviews highlight both violent and non-violent ones.

**Table 2** Variation in strategies by source

|                    |                          | Source             |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                    |                          | Interviews         | Press              |
| <b>Violent</b>     | Evictions                | 33% (n=25)         | 54% (n=27)         |
|                    | Threats                  | 12% (n=9)          | 34% (n=17)         |
|                    | Control of movement      | 8% (n=6)           | 6% (n=3)           |
|                    | Abduction                | 1% (n=1)           |                    |
|                    | <b>Subtotal</b>          | <b>54% (n= 41)</b> | <b>94% (n=47)</b>  |
| <b>Non-violent</b> | Help to the neighborhood | 31% (n=24)         | 2% (n=1)           |
|                    | Private donations        | 8% (n=6)           | 4% (n=2)           |
|                    | Job offers               | 7% (n=5)           |                    |
|                    | <b>Subtotal</b>          | <b>46% (n= 35)</b> | <b>6% (n=3)</b>    |
| <b>Total</b>       |                          | <b>100% (n=76)</b> | <b>100% (n=50)</b> |

Among the violent actions, our interview data suggests that evictions are the most frequently employed ones, together with threats and the control of movement within the neighborhood. For example some interviewees illustrate these events as follows:

“They have areas in the neighborhood, they occupy houses, they take people out of their homes, and they take over those places.”<sup>14</sup>

“Gangs occupied houses, violently removing people who were not related to them, they were marking their territory.”<sup>15</sup>

“They threatened a neighbor because they thought he had reported them to the police.”<sup>16</sup>

“They intimidate or do not allow certain people to pass or walk in their neighborhood.”<sup>17</sup>

As for nonviolent actions, our interviewees mention that some seek to aid neighbors or the neighborhood, such as buying gifts for kids’ soccer clubs, donating food for soup kitchens, or paying neighbors’ electricity bill. Interviewees also point out that group members offer jobs to young people.

“They give money to the neighbors, when they have to go to the doctor they give them money for the cab.”<sup>18</sup>

“Gang members offered help in an activity for children in the neighborhood.”<sup>19</sup>

“They made a huge meal in the soup kitchen, they fed about 300 people during the pandemic.”<sup>20</sup>

“They help the neighbors. For example, they are the first to contribute when someone’s house catches fire.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Interviewee 14. November 23, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

<sup>15</sup>Interviewee 8. November 18, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

<sup>16</sup>Interviewee 37. March 18, 2022. Second wave of interviews.

<sup>17</sup>Interviewee 22. May 6, 2020. First wave of interviews.

<sup>18</sup>Interviewee 16. November 23, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

<sup>19</sup>Interviewee 29. December 7, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

<sup>20</sup>Interviewee 26. June 17, 2020. First wave of interviews.

<sup>21</sup>Interviewee 17. November 23, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

“They sent us a carafe as a gift to cook for the children in the neighborhood.”<sup>22</sup>

“They have a business as a front, and they hire teenagers for that business. But if they don’t continue studying, they don’t get to keep the job.”<sup>23</sup>

“They give jobs to the women of the neighborhood as drug dealers.”<sup>24</sup>

The interview evidence is in line with H2, we find that groups systematically carry out violent and nonviolent actions. However, because we only conducted in-depth interviews in specific neighborhoods and not across Montevideo, it may be that we only observe this mix of activities in those neighborhoods and not beyond. Regardless, the neighborhoods where we conducted interviews include most of the areas where criminal groups are present and active. We used the survey to garner a better understanding of how widespread these actions are across all neighborhoods of Montevideo, as well as systematic evidence of their relative prevalence. We present those results next, and we also discuss evidence regarding H3.

*H3: Violent actions should be more prevalent than nonviolent ones*

Our interviews suggest that asking about the prevalence of criminal governance strategies in a survey directly would lead to misreporting, which may complicate making statements about the prevalence of violent and non-violent actions. Therefore, we also rely on the results of the network scale-up questions described in the previous section.

Figure 7 presents these results. Each point estimate indicates the proportion of respondents who have seen criminal groups engaging in the corresponding type of ac-

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<sup>22</sup>Interviewee 29. December 7, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

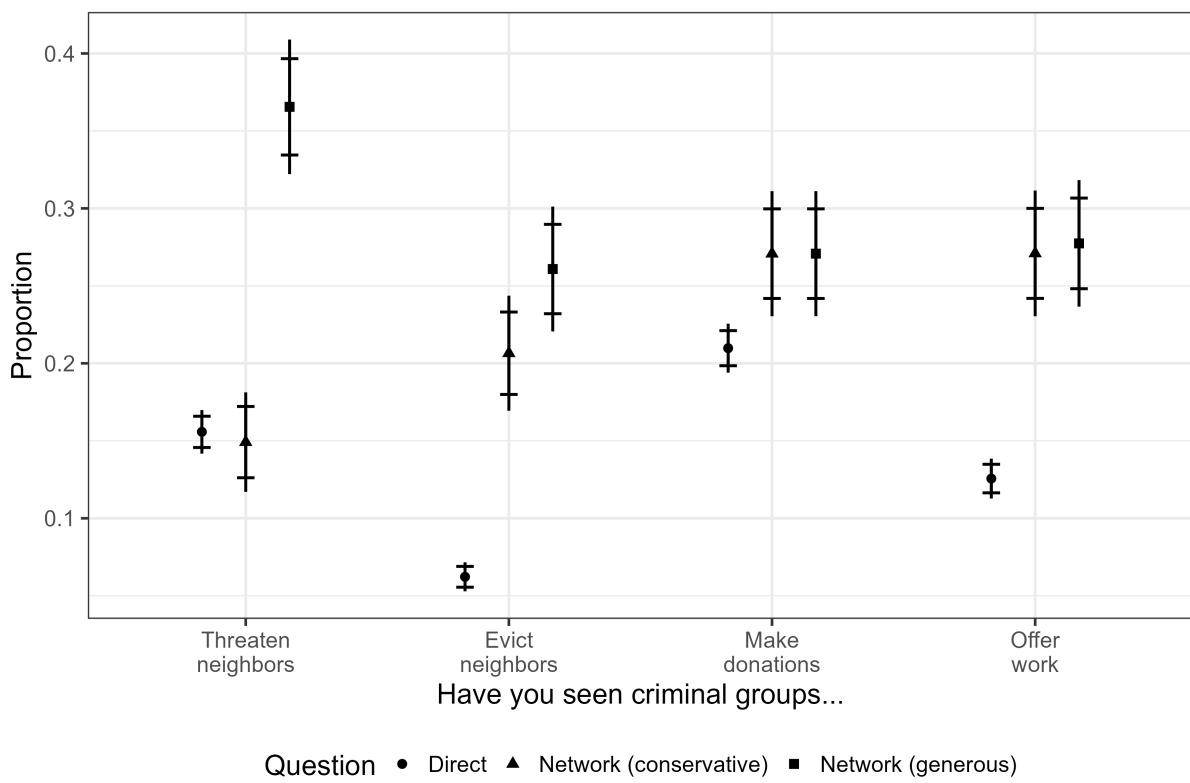
<sup>23</sup>Interviewee 10. June 23, 2019. First wave of interviews.

<sup>24</sup>Interviewee 31. December 9, 2021. Second wave of interviews.

tion under different approaches to direct and indirect questioning. The vertical lines denote 95% confidence intervals, whereas the horizontal ticks indicate 84% confidence intervals that are more appropriate to evaluate the hypothesis of any two means being different (Goldstein and Healy, 1995). Even when taking a conservative approach to estimate the size of the network (residuals one standard deviation above the mean), the results are quite striking. The proportion of neighborhood residents in our sample who have been exposed to criminal organizations ranges between 15 and 25 percent. Except for threats, all other estimates are higher than reported through the direct question. Notably, the prevalence of non-violent strategies seems to be higher. Our results are consistent with estimates from Uribe et al 2022. Using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), their estimates for criminal governance and criminal presence for the case of Uruguay range between 6% and 36%. These results provide additional support to our findings.

To summarize, our survey results provide support for H2, but they are opposite to the expectation in H3. Findings from extant research suggest that we should expect the prevalence of violent strategies when criminal organizations are in competition for turf, this does not appear to be the case in our sample.

These results differ from our initial hypothesis, however they do not undermine our argument. High state presence confines the implementation of control strategies to the illicit drug market, but it does not correspond with a higher prevalence of violent activities as compared to non-violent ones. High state presence in terms of security policy implies that the state responds to crime reporting. Previous research underscores significant legitimacy and trust in the police among the Uruguayan population (Tiscornia and Perez Bentancur, 2017). As a result, criminal groups are likely to refrain from engaging in actions that would make them more visible, increasing the likelihood of reporting (Durán-Martínez, 2017). Thus, because the state is present and responsive, it

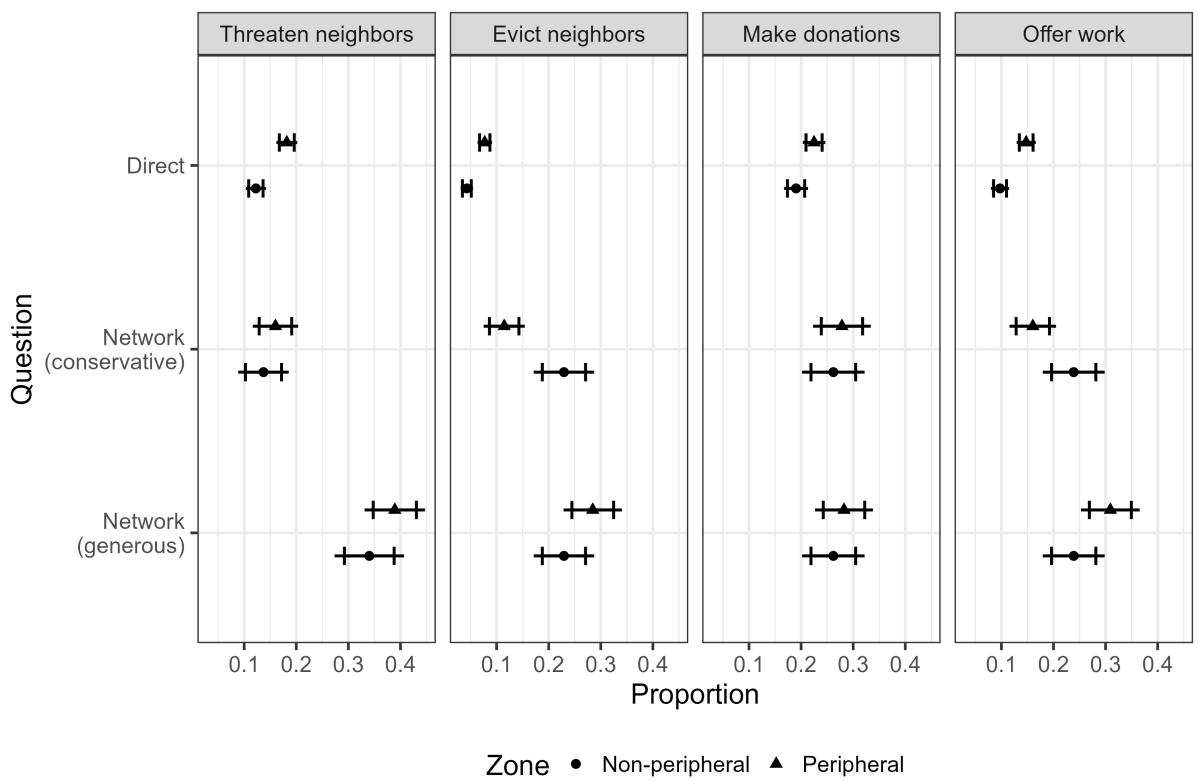


**Figure 7** Relative prevalence of criminal governance tools



is reasonable to observe criminal groups pursuing loyalty through non-violent activities. This does not preclude the possibility of violence, but it implies a more selective use, as high state presence compels groups to exercise restraint in their use of violence.

A persistent question is whether the prevalence of these strategies varies by neighborhood type. Extant research emphasizing state presence would suggest that we should expect higher prevalence of violent tools in peripheral areas. Figure 8 contains the proportion of direct responses by strategy and by zone. As the figure suggests, even though there is a higher overall prevalence of tools in peripheral neighborhoods (Zone B), these tools are also present in nonperipheral ones (Zone A), which suggests that criminal organizations are present in affluent and nonaffluent areas alike. As we show in the discussion of the case, population affluence and state presence are not synonymous. Our findings suggest that state presence seems to be a less relevant factor to understand criminal presence, but it is central to understand what these organizations do.



**Figure 8** Relative prevalence of criminal governance tools by zone

## 7 Conclusion

Many studies of criminal governance in Latin America assume relative state weakness as an important factor behind the growth and entrenchment of criminal organizations. Building on recent research that challenges this assumption, we argue that in Uruguay, a case of relative state strength, criminal governance takes on a particular form: it is circumscribed to the control of illicit markets, as opposed to other spheres of socio-political life. To build our argument we leverage the advantages of a mixed-methods design. We combine 66 in-depth interviews with community leaders, members of NGOs, state and local authorities over the course of two years, with an extensive public opinion survey across all 62 neighborhoods of Montevideo (n=2,688) containing network scale-up questions to assess the prevalence of criminal governance at the local level.

Our findings provide strong support for our theory. The phenomenon of criminal governance in Montevideo is extensive: our survey results indicate that 15 to 25 % of our respondents have had some experience of criminal governance. Because the phenomenon of criminal governance tends to affect hidden populations, our methodological approach attempted to estimate its prevalence resorting to network-scale-up methods, but our estimates are imprecise. Coupled with our interview evidence, our survey results also show that criminal governance operates through violent and non-violent tools, but it appears to be restricted to illicit markets. We do not find systematic evidence suggesting that it is also present in other spheres, contrary to evidence from research in different contexts. Taken together, these findings provide strong support to our argument that in strong states, criminal governance is restricted. To validate our theory, this design should be replicated in contexts similar to Uruguay.

Our results generate new questions about the concept of criminal governance and

its manifestations. Research to date has emphasized either the relevance of relatively weaker states, or a one-dimensional perspective on state strength (usually as law enforcement). We show that emphasizing these explanations results in an incomplete picture of the nature and characteristics of criminal governance. One possibility is that criminal governance in weaker states is ontologically different, and thus not comparable to cases like ours. In contrast, our findings suggest the possibility that relative state strength (or weakness) contributes to the emergence of different types of criminal governance. Based on our theory, state strength (understood as the operation of welfare and security policies) circumscribes criminal governance to a minimal form: the control of illicit markets. In other cases, criminal governance may encompass other spheres of socio-political life, in addition to illicit markets.

Even though this type of criminal governance is restricted, it has severe implications for neighborhood residents, including high levels of violence, and numerous restrictions to civil liberties, such as the inability to move freely, or to gather freely. In contrast to other cases, criminal organizations do not always intend to create these restrictions deliberately, rather many of these limitations emerge as negative externalities from groups' behaviors.

Regardless of the intensity of violence, over time we would not expect criminal governance in Uruguay to reach the levels of control or violence that exist in other contexts. Based on our argument, one should expect criminal governance to be restricted, as long as the state continues to implement welfare and security policies in the way posited by our theory. One should not expect the phenomenon of criminal governance to disappear either: it would not be feasible for individual state actions to eradicate it, because criminal governance at the local level responds to global dimensions of illicit markets. Eradication would require transnational coordinated efforts of a magnitude that would be difficult to achieve, but states have agency over the concrete types of

criminal governance that emerge at the local level.

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## A Appendix 1: Facebook Use in Uruguay

A possible concern might be variability in the use of devices like computers and smartphones, internet access and social network use. According to a recent survey conducted by the national statistics institute (INE), 7 out of 10 urban households with individuals older than 14 years of age have at least a desktop computer, a laptop and/or a tablet. Furthermore, in 2016 64% of households in the lowest income quintile had access to a computer (81% for the highest quintile). In urban Montevideo (which is almost the totality of the department) 73.3% of households had access to a computer, and 82.8% had internet access. Moreover, in urban Montevideo, 77% of households in the lowest income quintile had internet access (INE-AGESIC 2016).

Internet access could be a concern. Nevertheless, according to the same INE survey, in 2016 3 out of 4 people in Uruguay had a smartphone, 74% of urban population. In the lowest quintile, 76.2% of individuals used a smartphone, and of those 82% used internet one or more times daily (INE-AGESIC, 2016). Finally, Facebook has extensive coverage in Uruguay, in particular in Montevideo. According to a recent study (Con-

[sultores, 2018](#)), 68% of the population of Uruguay use Facebook. Furthermore, 77% of individuals between 18 and 34 years of age who use social media, use Facebook, 72% of those between 35 and 59, and 46% of those who are 60 and older. Of those users with little education 56% use Facebook, and 75% of those users with some education use Facebook. The population of Uruguay is roughly 3.5 million, with about 1.4 million living in Montevideo, thus, the likelihood that there are users in the neighborhoods with exposure to criminal groups is high. Other mechanisms such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk are not available.