

# Research Brief on Transnational Organized Crime



**United Nations**  
Office on Drugs and Crime





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## **Review and comments**

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# Executive Summary

## Organized crime is as deadly as armed conflicts

Since the adoption of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2000, **organized crime has been responsible for approximately 95,000 homicides every year**. This is roughly the same as the annual number of deaths caused by armed conflicts worldwide over the same period. However, unlike armed conflicts that can draw significant international attention, much of the human suffering caused by organized crime remains hidden and not fully understood.

While violence targeting the community, rival groups or the State is perhaps the most visible manifestation of organized crime, the absence of violence does not necessarily indicate the absence of organized crime. Dominant organized criminal groups may actively suppress violence in the areas they control by solving disputes and enforcing alternative rules to those of the State.

Competition between rival organized criminal groups can have considerable repercussions. For example, higher levels of lethal violence in Latin America can be partly attributed to competition between organized criminal groups over cocaine markets.

## Organized crime is a multi-billion dollar industry

**Organized crime groups engage in highly profitable activities, providing groups with significant financial leverage.** The global illicit drug trade is likely to generate hundreds of billions of dollars for organized criminal groups each year. In the period 2019–2022, UNODC estimates that between US\$3.4 and US\$6.9 billion in illicit financial flows related to opiate and methamphetamine trafficking have crossed borders every year along the Balkan route, amounting to a sizeable share of the gross domestic product of some countries along the route such as Afghanistan (US\$17.2 billion in 2023) and North Macedonia (US\$16.7 billion in 2024). While drug trafficking remains the financial backbone of most transnational organized criminal groups, they are involved in a wide range of other forms of trafficking, from trafficking in persons to firearms, from wildlife to waste, and from fuel to counterfeit products. Cybercrime has also become

an important source of income; financial losses from online scams targeting victims in East and Southeast Asia alone were estimated to range from US\$18 billion to US\$37 billion in 2023.

## Organized crime contaminates licit economy, including legal businesses, financial sectors and livelihood

The actors involved in illicit markets associated with natural resources are highly diverse, with **organized criminal groups hiding behind legal businesses and professional service providers, blurring the line between legal and illegal markets**. Crimes that affect the environment typically involve a wide array of actors. In forest crime and mineral crimes, for instance, they range from organized criminal groups to legitimate companies and individuals. Businesses operating legally in these sectors may shift into illegal practices, engaging in bribery, collusion with officials, or violating permit conditions to maximize profits. Members of local populations – including unemployed youth, marginalized groups, Indigenous Peoples and migrant workers – may participate in illegal logging, whether to sustain livelihoods or under coercion. In trafficking in persons, the available evidence indicates that different actors operating under legal façades get involved in the exploitation of victims in forced labour, for instance in the form of licenced recruitment agencies, in the fishing industry, and agriculture and construction sectors among others. These networks are fluid, with illicit actors and lawful corporations often connected through supply chains. The result is a complex web of actors, motivations and relationships that blurs the line between legal and illegal activity.

## Criminal organizations converge into the same areas for different markets

**Organized crime actors often converge in geographical hotspots to exploit different criminal and criminal financial opportunities.** This convergence of organized crime is evident in some parts of Latin America, where drug trafficking proceeds are used by organized criminal groups to further exploit the territories under their control through land speculation, illegal logging, illicit mining and wildlife crime. Trafficking in

persons for forced labour and for forced criminal activities has also been documented in these contexts. Similarly, in some parts of Africa, armed groups recruit children to extract gold and cooperate with organized criminal groups to smuggle these minerals across national borders into international legal markets, while in the so-called “Golden Triangle” in Southeast Asia, organized criminal groups exploit weak jurisdictions to set up industrial-scale cyberfraud compounds, where victims of trafficking are coerced into carrying out online scams.

### **The organized crime use of cyberspace to target and profit from victims globally**

The rapid development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has amplified opportunities for organized criminal groups worldwide. **New technologies have enabled criminal groups to more easily target victims globally and exploit the dependence of institutions, businesses, and individuals on ICTs.** While cybercriminals often operate as part of loosely organized networks that form and dissolve around specific projects, some cybercrime groups exhibit more hierarchical structures, carrying out industrial-scale online fraud and extortion operations. No country or community is immune to the threat posed by cybercrime, with increases in incidents reported in developing and developed countries alike. Technological developments have also facilitated the adoption of new money-laundering schemes. For example, virtual assets are used by criminals to launder funds from a wide range of predicate offences, including from fraud, ransomware attacks or drug trafficking.

# Introduction

Marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC or “Palermo Convention”), this Research Brief analyses the features and dynamics of organized crime from a transnational perspective. It is based on UNODC studies and data that deal with organized crime at global, regional and national levels, or that examine organized crime through the lens of different illicit markets. UNODC sources were complemented by peer-reviewed academic studies, publicly available research reports and official information provided to UNODC by Member States.

The analysis is supplemented by 12 empirical case studies from different world regions. The case studies are presented in the Annex and illustrate the various trends, dynamics, and mechanisms shaping organized crime today. They are not meant to be comprehensive and should not be interpreted as representing the most harmful manifestations of transnational organized crime. Instead, they serve an illustrative purpose, highlighting issues of particular analytical and policy relevance. As with all desk-based research, the findings are shaped by the availability and quality of the available information. The Brief does not provide an exhaustive account of organized crime worldwide, but instead offers an analytically driven exploration of selected issues using a wide geographical perspective.

The Brief is structured around four chapters. The first chapter maps out the different manifestations of organized crime today and highlights its negative impacts on individuals and societies. The second chapter explores how organized criminal groups<sup>1</sup> (OCGs) establish and maintain criminal governance, enforcing alternative rules to those of the State in the territories under their control. The third chapter analyses how organized crime leverages modern technology to expand its criminal activities, while chapter four explores the different illicit markets in which OCGs are active, from drug trafficking to trafficking in persons and from crimes that affect the environment to firearms trafficking.

To conclude, the Brief presents key policy considerations for Member States, which emerge from 25 years of UNTOC implementation worldwide.

# The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

The Convention against Transnational Organized Crime is one of the most widely ratified international treaties, with 114 Parties as of February 2025.<sup>2</sup> The Convention is further supplemented by three protocols, which target specific areas and manifestations of organized crime: trafficking in persons<sup>3</sup>, smuggling of migrants<sup>4</sup> and the manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms.<sup>5</sup>

In line with Article 1, the Convention aims to promote international cooperation to more effectively prevent and counter transnational organized crime. To that end, it seeks to bridge differences across national legal systems, set standards for domestic normative responses and establish mechanisms for international cooperation.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Convention, tackling transnational organized crime remains a challenge that cannot be addressed by one State in isolation. OCGs continue to operate across national boundaries and take advantage of discrepancies in national legal systems, law enforcement structures and prosecution practices. Closing gaps in national legislation and enabling seamless international cooperation is at the core of effective responses to transnational organized crime.

In that respect, the Convention performs a dual function. First, it provides a subsidiary normative framework enabling cooperation where no bilateral or multilateral agreements exist. Second, it enables normative convergence by aligning national legal systems with international standards, thus promoting greater coherence in cross-border criminal justice efforts. The Convention regulates mutual legal assistance, extradition, and the transfer of criminal proceedings, as well as cooperation in the confiscation of proceeds of crime or property. These mechanisms allow authorities to gather evidence, access critical information, freeze and seize assets derived from criminal activity, and apprehend fugitives who might otherwise evade justice.

A key feature of the Convention is its open-ended definition of "serious crime" contained in Article 2. This prevents the Convention's obsolescence, enabling it to remain functionally adaptable in the face of new, emerging and evolving forms of crime, including, for example, the smuggling of commercial goods, trafficking in cultural

property, and organized fraud (including cyber-enabled fraud) among others.

The UNTOC Review Mechanism, launched in 2020, reinforces this framework by providing for the systematic assessment of States Parties' implementation of the Convention and its three supplemental protocols. The process helps States Parties identify gaps, good implementing practices and technical assistance needs, thereby promoting the effective and coherent alignment of national frameworks with the international legal standards set forth by the four instruments.





The manifestations  
and impacts of  
**organized crime today** |

# Key points



- Since the adoption of UNTOC in 2000, organized crime has been responsible for approximately 95,000 homicides every year, roughly as many as the annual number of deaths caused by armed conflicts worldwide.
- Globally, around one-fifth of intentional homicides are caused by organized criminal groups. In the Americas, organized crime-related homicides represent around half of all intentional homicides.
- Organized crime today has many different manifestations, often eluding traditional labels and blurring legal categories.
- While more hierarchical organized criminal groups frequently employ violence to establish territorial control, groups with more horizontal structures are less likely to resort to violence, focusing instead on the efficient, short-term exchange of illicit goods and services.
- The proceeds derived from illicit activities provide organized criminal groups with significant financial leverage. For example, the illicit drug trade alone generates hundreds of billions of dollars per year. These profits enter and destabilise the international financial system and enable transnational organised crime groups to expand.

## The challenge of labelling organized crime

UNTOC provides a legal and authoritative definition of organized criminal groups as “a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences [...] to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.”<sup>6</sup> In practice, a wide range of actors may be engaged in illicit activities, including gangs, insurgents, militias, private security contractors, logistics companies, and even licenced businesses. In many instances, these actors can be found to cooperate along the same supply chains.<sup>7</sup> However, no matter which specific terminology is used to describe the different groups engaged in illicit activities, they all have in common the commission of crimes for the purpose of financial gain.

Using strict labels for organized crime can be challenging. Some groups labelled as rebels, insurgents, terrorists or armed groups in conflict settings have adopted organized criminal practices to fund their political agenda; in South America, for instance, the armed groups *Ejército Gaitanista* de Colombia and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* are involved in transnational organized crime, including cocaine production and trafficking.<sup>8</sup> In the

Mekong region, ethnic armed groups and militias play a key role in protecting physical sites of transnational organized crime, including cyber-enabled fraud compounds (“scam farms”)<sup>9</sup> and gambling operations. In some cases, armed groups have been reported to hold direct stakes in the online fraud and gambling industries.<sup>10</sup>

The diversity of actors and practices that are part of or linked to organized crime is particularly evident in relation to crimes that affect the environment. In forest and minerals crime, for instance, involved actors range from OCGs to legitimate companies and individuals. Businesses operating legally in these sectors may shift into illegal practices, engage in bribery or violate permit conditions to maximize their profits.<sup>11</sup> Members of local populations – including unemployed youth, marginalized groups, Indigenous Peoples and migrant workers – may participate in illegal logging and mining, whether to sustain their livelihoods or under coercion.<sup>12</sup> Criminals who engage in trafficking in persons may in turn disguise themselves behind the façade of a licenced recruitment agency,<sup>13</sup> while online gaming platforms in Southeast Asia may appear to be legal entities, even though they engage in industrial-scale money-laundering activities at the service of transnational OCGs.<sup>14</sup> The result is a complex web of actors, motivations and relationships that blurs the line between legal and illegal activities and makes it difficult to use traditional labels for organized criminal groups.

# The multitude of actors involved or connected with organized crime

Legally registered companies that knowingly or unwittingly are part of the supply chain of illegal markets

Corrupt public officials and politicians

Community members involved in illicit production of commodities that feed illicit markets (farmers, poachers, etc)



Community members involved in the retail selling of small quantities of illicit markets commodities

Criminal groups concealing their activities behind legitimate fronts

Terrorists groups, armed groups, militias that engage in organized criminal activities

Individuals that offer financial, legal or managerial services, brokers

## Characterizing organized crime<sup>15</sup>

UNTOC provides a global legal reference point to define OCGs. It does not differentiate between different types of organized groups or the structure of the groups, as long as the group is engaged in profit-driven (serious) criminal activities involving three or more individuals and operating over a period of time.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the academic literature discusses additional defining characteristics of OCGs, such as internal hierarchies, the use or threat of violence, the use of corruption, continuity beyond present membership, and group adherence to an internal code.<sup>17</sup> Much of the academic literature argues that violence is a constitutive factor of organized crime. However, some OCGs, including those that traffic drugs, may not necessarily need to employ or threaten violence.

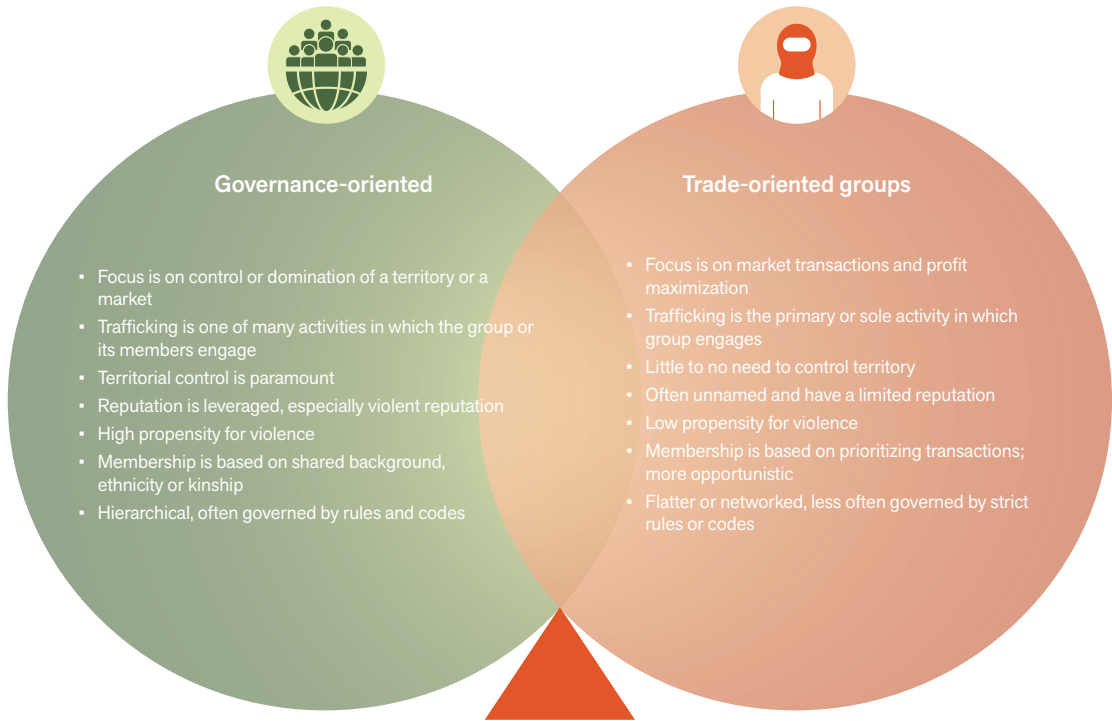
In relation to drug trafficking groups, the academic literature has analysed how groups vary in their activities and structure, but it is challenging to identify clusters of groups with the same characteristics. Like any other social organization, OCGs find ways to adapt to the environment in which they operate. Each groups' characteristics are dynamic and can change across places and time – shaped by issues such as State capacity to enforce the rule of law and underlying political, cultural

and social conditions. This makes every group unique. But within this diversity and fluidity, groups generally appear to be oriented either towards governance or towards trade.

For example, drug trafficking groups oriented towards trade are generally more agile and prioritize market transactions and profit maximization, whereas those oriented towards governance are found to be more hierarchical and seek to control territories or the legal and illegal markets and people within them.<sup>18</sup> A key dimension to consider in analysing an OCG is whether it engages in criminal governance as a distinct activity from illicit trade or purely in predatory activities.<sup>19</sup> Groups oriented towards criminal governance have been identified as engaging in a variety of activities, both legal and illegal, in order to dominate a market or a geographical area.<sup>20</sup> They may have fixed hierarchies and use internal codes of conduct to maintain order. They typically regulate criminal (and sometimes non-criminal) activities, employing violence or the threat of violence to establish and maintain control of their territory, keep members in line, settle disputes and protect the group's reputation.<sup>21</sup> Corruption may also be utilized, including grand corruption that compromises State institutions. Control is paramount to governance-oriented groups, especially control over physical territory and services. Control can also extend to extortion in the form of taxes levied on the activities, licit or otherwise, that are carried out in that territory or market.<sup>22</sup>

# Organized criminal groups

can be characterized around a continuum of activities that are oriented towards governance or trade



## Transnational organized crime

impact crime



### Spread violence

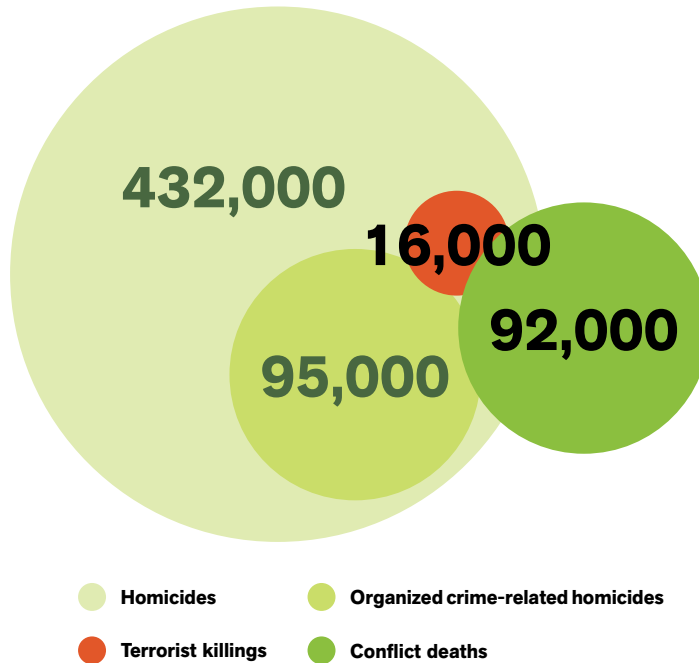
- > 95,000 homicides per year
- > Spread fear among population
- > Violence against state actors

### Multidimensional impact

- > Harm to peace and security
- > Harm to governance and role of law
- > Harm to socio-economic development
- > Harm to environment
- > Harms to - financial stability and financial sector

# Average annual number of deaths

caused by homicide, organized crime-related homicide, terrorism and armed conflict, 2000–2023



Sources: Estimates are based on UNODC homicide statistics. Conflict death estimates are from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset and include deaths from state-based violence, non-state violence, and one-sided violence. Terrorist killings estimates are from the Global Terrorism Database. Data on terrorist killings for the years 2021-2023 are not available.

Note: Death as a result of terrorist activities is counted as intentional homicide (ICCS). International datasets on conflict deaths and terrorism, on the one hand, and UNODC homicide statistics, on the other, have a certain degree of overlap. The same killing may meet the ICCS criteria, the criteria of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) database and those of the Global Terrorism Database.

By contrast, drug trafficking groups that are oriented towards illicit trade often have flatter structures than governance-oriented groups. This flatter structure facilitates the completion of transactions and enables flexibility in membership and roles.<sup>23</sup> The more fluid organizational structure reinforces their adaptability in different markets or regions.<sup>24</sup>

## The global harm of organized crime is high, but much of it is hidden and not directly measurable

No country or region is unaffected by organized crime. OCGs operate in all environments, from local communities to entire sub-national regions, the high seas, and warzones. Across all these geographical areas, organized crime causes wide-ranging harm.

Violence is often the most visible manifestation of the harm generated by OCGs. Quantifying the global impact of violence caused by such groups remains challenging due to limited data. However, a rough estimate indicates that between 2000 – the year of the adoption of UNTOC – and 2023, organized criminal groups were responsible for approximately 95,000 homicides every year, roughly as many as the average annual number of deaths caused by armed conflicts (92,000).<sup>25</sup> Around one-fifth (22 per cent) of intentional homicides globally with information on their situational context are caused by organized criminal groups. In the Americas, organized crime-related homicides represent half (50 per cent) of all homicides with information on the situational context.<sup>26</sup>

Illicit activities are often carried out by individual criminals or opportunistic associations of criminals, but when OCGs engage in these activities, they tend to result in comparatively greater harm. For example, when OCGs engage in human trafficking, they tend to traffic more people than non-organized traffickers, for longer periods and in more violent ways.

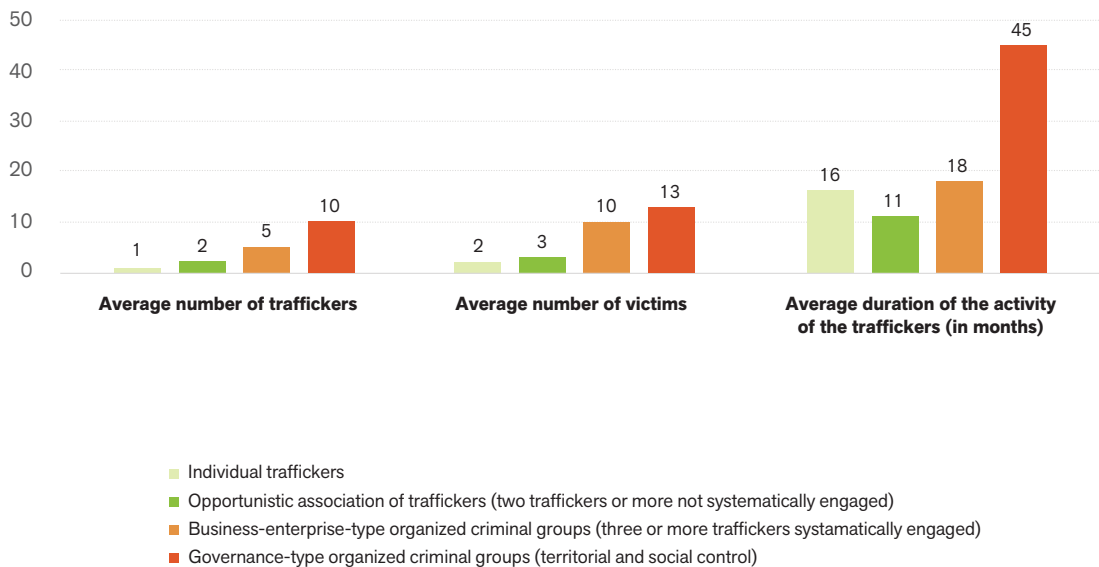
# Share of homicides by type

## global and regional - 2021 (or latest year available)



Source: UNODC homicide statistics. Note: Data are from 108 countries that reported at least one data point on a homicide type. Missing values for homicide types are set to zero and the difference between reported total homicides and reported homicide types is assigned to the unknown homicide category. The lower bound share refers to the proportion of a reported homicide type over the total reported homicides. The best estimate share refers to the proportion of a reported homicide type over the sum of all reported homicide types (excluding the unknown homicides). The upper bound share refers to the proportion of the sum of a reported homicide type plus the unknown homicides over the total reported homicides. Unknown homicides are “re-assigned” at the regional level rather than the country level. Regional shares are computed by using the simple average shares of countries with data for countries without data. The global share refers to the average national shares weighted by the number of estimated homicides in each country for the year 2021. The total is not equal to 100 per cent due to rounding.

**FIG. 1** Average number of traffickers, average number of victims and average duration of traffickers' activity per single case, by type of criminal actor.



Source: UNODC GLOTIP collection of court case summaries.

Note: Based on information on 3,121 traffickers convicted in 942 court case summaries.

Violence is only one part of the harm generated by organized crime. For example, the impact of organized criminal activities on public health is widely documented.<sup>27</sup> Globally, the use of drugs supplied through illicit markets is estimated to lead to millions of premature deaths and healthy years of life lost due to disability every year.<sup>28</sup> In territories where journalists, community leaders, and human rights defenders are targeted or killed for exposing the activities of organized crime, civic spaces shrink and public trust is eroded by fear. Trafficking in cultural property destroys irreplaceable heritage while also funding terrorist operations.<sup>29</sup> Crucially, organized crime also undermines the effectiveness, independence and legitimacy of government institutions, disrupts legitimate trade and financial systems, and exacerbates poverty and inequality.<sup>30</sup> Organized criminal groups may interfere with democratic processes, including by intervening in local elections, capturing local governance institutions, and murdering and intimidating politicians or community members.

The global scale of organized criminal activity and its impacts on the economy are difficult to reliably estimate due to the lack of quality data and the hidden nature of such activities. While estimates of the illicit proceeds from drug trafficking vary, the illicit drug trade is likely to generate hundreds of billions of dollars each year worldwide.<sup>31</sup> Proceeds derived from illicit activities provide organized criminal groups with significant financial leverage over local State institutions, enabling

them to infiltrate key government institutions (see *Chapter 2: Criminal governance – how organized crime captures communities and institutions*). Research on illicit economies has shown that they can distort the legal economy and undermine investment and sustainable growth. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), examining the economic correlates of crime and violence in Latin America and the Caribbean, estimates that a 10-percentage point increase in the share of “crime-related news” is associated with a 2.5% contraction in industrial production three quarters later.<sup>32</sup> The cost of crime in the same region has been estimated at some 3.4 per cent of the countries’ GDP.<sup>33</sup>

OCGs can also undermine the equal distribution of public resources, compromising and diverting public funds<sup>34</sup> that could be invested in health, education, infrastructure, and other public services.<sup>35</sup> Illicit financial flows from organized crime activities drain resources needed for sustainable development, hindering domestic resource mobilization efforts. Furthermore, OCGs can penetrate the legal economy through illegal means, for example by exerting influence over public administrations to unlawfully obtain public contracts or subsidies. Together with extortion rackets, these practices distort market competition and can drive up the costs of basic goods and services (see *Chapter 2: Criminal governance – how organized crime captures communities and institutions*).



# Criminal governance

how organised crime captures  
communities and institutions



# Key points



- Criminal governance refers to the capacity of organized criminal groups to establish and enforce alternative rules to those of the State, often through coercion, corruption, selective service provision, and market manipulation.
- Control over financial assets/proceeds of crime enables TOC groups to establish territorial and governance control and community capture.
- Extortion of local businesses is frequently used as a source of revenue for organized criminal groups engaged in criminal governance.
- No country or community is immune to the threat of criminal governance, which can occur at different levels of sophistication and in diverse contexts, from neighbourhood-level control to the systemic infiltration of national institutions.
- The result of criminal governance is often the erosion of State legitimacy and efficiency, including its capacity to provide protection and security to citizens and businesses.
- Territorial control also allows groups to consolidate and expand illicit activities, facilitating for instance the spread of drug trafficking.

## Capturing institutions and communities

Criminal governance is one of the key global threats emanating from organized criminal groups. Criminal governance refers to the capacity of such groups to establish and enforce alternative rules to those of the State, through means that include coercion, intimidation, corruption, selective service provision, and market manipulation.<sup>36</sup> Criminal governance is not a new phenomenon. It has been widely documented since at least the nineteenth century and in all world regions.<sup>37</sup> Yet, it remains a significant threat to countries and communities worldwide. The impact of criminal governance is often the erosion of State legitimacy and efficiency, including its capacity to provide protection and security to citizens and businesses. And it extends to the people living in the affected communities as shown for example by the use of sexual violence against women and girls in the territories under OCG control and instances of recruitment of children in organized criminal groups (see *Case study 1 - Gangs and governance in Haiti: A fragile State at the crossroads of illicit markets*).

## No country is immune to the threat of criminal governance

Not all OCGs engage in criminal governance,<sup>38</sup> but those that do pose a significant threat to the rule of law, democratic institutions, and human rights. Criminal governance can occur at different levels and contexts, from neighbourhood-level control to the systemic infiltration of State institutions.

Haiti is a particularly telling example of how criminal gangs can severely compromise State authority. In 2024, Haitian criminal gangs were estimated to control about 85 per cent of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and significant areas beyond. By seizing ports, border crossings and other key access points to the country and key financial resources, they have been able to weaponize crucial supply chains and exert further pressure on Haiti's State institutions.<sup>39</sup> In parts of the world where the rule of law is stronger and countries have greater institutional and financial capacity, OCGs may operate in a much more constrained environment.

# Criminal governance

is secured in two ways

## By cooperation

Organized crime controls communities by providing services



## By coercion

Organized crime controls communities by using violence, threats and intimidation



## Targets of organized crime violence

1



Against communities and civil society

2



Against other criminal groups

3



Against state actors and institutions

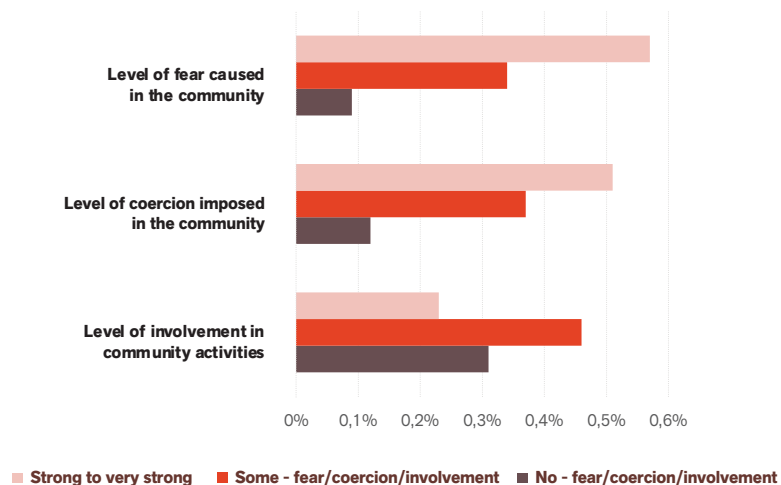
However, wherever they are active, governance-type OCGs typically seek to position themselves as an alternative source of authority over markets – both illegal and legal – as well as citizen's everyday lives.<sup>40</sup>

High income countries with comparatively strong institutions and entrenched rule of law are not immune to the threat posed by criminal governance, as criminal organizations try to infiltrate the texture of society wherever and whenever they find opportunities to do so. In Sweden, for example, research by the National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has shown that OCGs exercise territorial control and criminal governance in local communities. They divide up neighbourhoods to control drug markets, set rules, and claim a share of the profits from local sales.<sup>41</sup> The "physical, territorial control" of OCGs in certain Swedish communities, including through geographical surveillance control over drug markets, and the creation of an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, contributes to a culture of silence, where residents are unwilling to testify or cooperate with authorities.<sup>42</sup> These developments have given rise to what Brå refers to as "parallel structures", where criminal

actors exert informal authority, influence local decision-making, and interfere with the provision of services and distribution of resources,<sup>43</sup> often through the systematic use of threats or violence.<sup>44</sup>

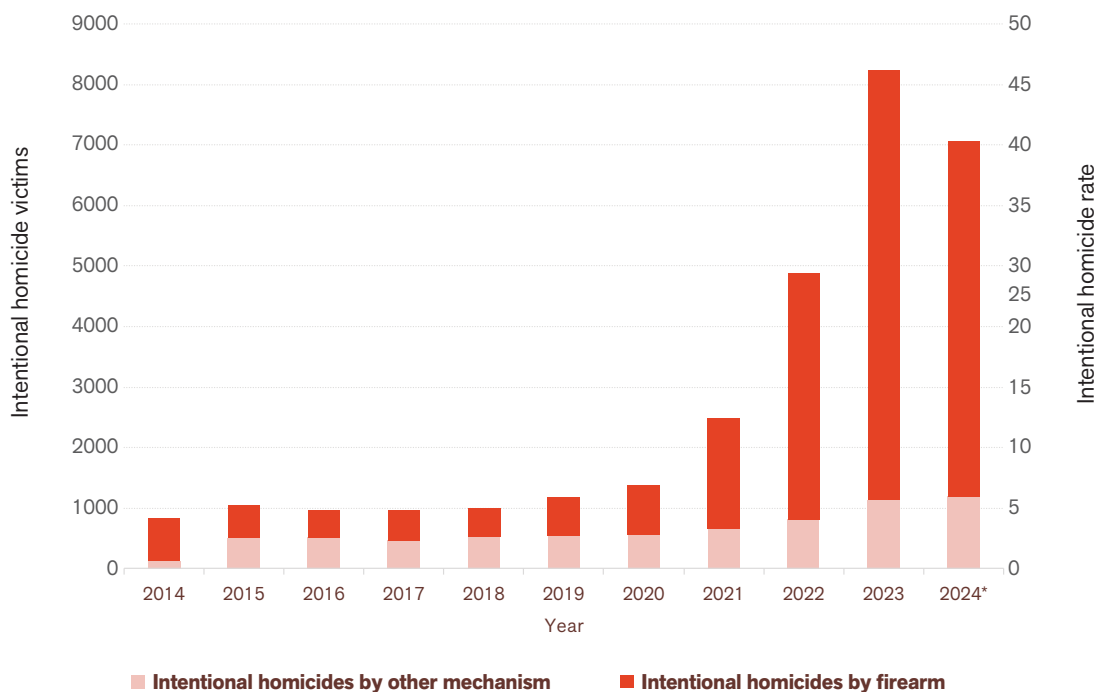
OCGs exercise criminal governance primarily through a mix of coercion – mainly fear – and consent – mainly through service provision.<sup>45</sup> Fear is established through the threat or use of violence, while consent is obtained by the provision of jobs, forms of livelihood, and basic services, such as the regulation of petty crime in the local neighbourhood. Nationally representative surveys conducted in 18 Central and Latin American countries in 2020 point to this double-sided reception of criminal governance by the affected communities. On average, one in three respondents reported the presence of organized criminal groups, gangs or armed groups in the area where they lived. When asked what role criminal groups played in their neighbourhood, 33 per cent reported that the groups use violence against people, 15 per cent reported that they control theft and improve security, and 12 per cent reported that they maintain order in the neighbourhood.<sup>46</sup>

**FIG. 2** Police officers' witnessing of fear, coercion and involvement imposed by organized criminal groups in the community, Iztapalapa, Mexico City, 2020.



Source: 2020 Survey on Illegal Governance as cited in Report of the Urban Safety Governance Assessment in Iztapalapa, Center of Excellence in Statistical Information on Government, Crime, Victimization and Justice, UNODC, 2021, p. 119.

**FIG. 3** Victims of intentional homicide in Ecuador, by mechanism of killing, 2014–2024.



Source: UNODC based on official data submitted by the Government of Ecuador. \*Data for 2024 are from the Ministry of Interior (Policía Nacional del Ecuador)<sup>17</sup>. Population estimates used to compute homicide rates are from the UN World Population Prospects 2024.

# Criminal governance by coercion and violence

The use of violence is a key characteristic of OCGs and one of the main mechanisms through which they instil fear and control communities, extort businesses, protect and expand illicit markets against potential rivals, and threaten State actors to ensure impunity. In Latin America, certain countries have reached very high intentional homicide rates due to the violence perpetrated by OCGs.<sup>48</sup>

## Violence against communities

To secure control and instil fear in communities, OCGs may target “exposed” citizens such as journalists and community activists. For example, in the period 2020–2022, about 200 journalists were killed globally, 20 per cent of whom were killed in connection to reporting on crime.<sup>49</sup> Local businesses are another segment of the community that is particularly exposed to violence by organized criminal groups.

In Haiti, homicides and kidnappings have increased dramatically as criminal gangs have strengthened their territorial control in recent years.<sup>50</sup> The systematic use of sexual violence against women and girls in areas under gang control and the recruitment of children as members of the gangs also highlight the significant impacts that criminal governance can have on community members.<sup>51</sup>

The extent to which OCGs exercise territorial control over communities through threats and violence was documented in Mexico City's most populous borough (Iztapalapa) in 2020 through a study.<sup>52</sup> Seventy per cent of the 1,261 police officers surveyed for the study indicated the involvement of OCGs in community activities and nearly four in ten perceived strong or very strong community interaction with organized crime, underscoring the territorial dimension of criminal governance.<sup>53</sup> Officers further reported that these groups exerted influence over illicit markets, particularly illicit drugs, counterfeit goods and illicitly sourced firearms.<sup>54</sup> Six in ten officers reported that OCGs generated significant fear in the community, while nearly half noted high levels of coercion being imposed on communities.

The businesses community is also particularly affected by OCG-related violence. The threat or use of violence to extort local businesses is frequently used by OCGs as a source of revenue. Nationally-representative surveys conducted in 18 Central and Latin American countries in 2020 suggest that, on average, about one third of respondents across all countries report organized criminal groups engaging in extortion in their neighbourhood.<sup>55</sup> In Italy, in the first half of 2023 alone, about 5,500 extortion cases by OCGs were reported.<sup>56</sup> Countless cases of intimidation, vandalization, violence and murder against businesspeople at the hands of these groups have been recorded by Italian authorities.<sup>57</sup>

Extortion is a secure and stable income for OCGs.<sup>58</sup> It can take the form of compelling businesses to purchase goods, services, or labour at rates slightly above market value.<sup>59</sup> These practices distort market competition and can, for example, drive up costs of basic goods and services (see *Case study 1 - Gangs and governance in Haiti: a fragile State at the crossroads of illicit markets*). Non-compliant businesses face threats, violence, or destruction of assets. Where there is criminal governance, OCGs can infiltrate the legal economy using criminal methods, influencing the public administration to award public subsidies illegally, and taxing small-scale criminals.<sup>60</sup>

## Violence against rivals

Dominant controlling OCGs may also extort less powerful criminal groups that operate illicit businesses in the same territories. For example, some OCGs extort or ‘tax’ migrant smugglers to cross the territories under their control. Payment of the ‘tax’ is meant to guarantee migrants a safe passage. Failure to pay can result in the migrants’ abduction, torture and killing.<sup>61</sup>

Ecuador today is a telling example of the lethal violence that can be unleashed by rival criminal groups competing for control over territory and illicit markets. Competition between different OCGs, including local and transnational cocaine trafficking groups, has fuelled a dramatic escalation of violence in the country in recent years.<sup>62</sup> Until the late 2010s, Ecuador recorded relatively low rates of intentional homicide compared with other countries in South America.<sup>63</sup> However, from 2020 onward, intentional homicide rates in Ecuador increased dramatically year-on-year, from 7.8 victims per 100,000 population in 2020 to 45.7 victims per 100,000 population in 2023.<sup>64</sup> While in 2024 Ecuador recorded, for the first time since 2016, a reduction in intentional homicides, preliminary data for 2025 indicate that this reduction was only temporary in nature. In the period from January to June 2025, there were 4,619 intentional homicides in Ecuador, compared with 3,149 over the same period in 2024.<sup>65</sup> (see *Case study 3- The rise of organized crime violence in Ecuador*).

## Violence against State institutions

Violence against State institutions and their representatives can be common in territories where OCGs try to establish criminal governance. Two examples of this type of violence expanded on in the Annex of this Brief relate to Brazil in 2006 and more recently in Haiti. In 2006, the Brazilian prison-based OCG *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) orchestrated a number of riots in prisons across the State of São Paulo. At the same time, the PCC targeted individuals outside prisons, including police and prison officers, as well as carrying out assaults on banks, public transports, supermarkets, and police stations (see *Case study 2 - The Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC): from local prison gang to transnational threat*).<sup>66</sup> In February 2024, a coalition of Haitian criminal gangs launched at least ten attacks

against the National Palace, as well as the Ministries of Justice, Defence and the Interior, the general hospital, and Haitian national police units, including the Port-au-Prince police station, with the intention to establish a common front against the Government and disrupt the political transition.<sup>67</sup> (see *Case study 1- Gangs and governance in Haiti: a fragile State at the crossroads of illicit markets*).

## Criminal governance by consent and provision of financial resources and services

While violence can be a defining feature of organized crime, the presence of OCGs does not always translate into high rates of violence. Instead, the consolidation of territorial and illicit market control by a single dominant OCG may suppress violence. By solving disputes, imposing rules and establishing a parallel (criminal) order, OCGs can suppress violence in the areas they control.<sup>68</sup>

In Mexico, studies have documented how OCGs impose criminal governance in the territories under their control. The analysis of 2021 data from the National Survey of Urban Public Safety (ENSU) have shown that overall, greater presence of organized crime does not always translate into a higher level of violence.<sup>69</sup> The *Cártel de Sinaloa* is reported to operate protection–extortion schemes while also moderating violence, thereby fostering a local social base.<sup>70</sup> The rival *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) has likewise undertaken initiatives to exert control and gain some support over communities by imposing order and security against petty crime.<sup>71</sup>

The perceived ability to provide security and resolve disputes is a common feature of OCGs trying to establish themselves as alternative authorities. In connection with solving disputes over criminal markets, a number of studies show that the presence of large criminal organizations in a territory may result in a reduction of violence. The term *pax mafiosa* has been used in Italy to describe how organized crime leaders deliberately reduced overt violence, resulting in fewer mafia-related killings.<sup>72</sup> Similar dynamics have been observed in Latin America, where the related concept of *pax narcotica* has referred to periods of tolerance toward drug trafficking that kept violence at comparatively low levels.<sup>73</sup>

A similar mechanism can also be observed in settings with much lower levels of violence and less entrenched OCGs. Using official police data from an ‘average’ police force in the United Kingdom for the period 2018–2021, it was found that organized crime exerts a dual effect as both a driver and a suppressor of violence. Higher levels of organized crime presence in a neighbourhood were associated with increased violence, yet a greater prevalence of organized crime members among all

active offenders corresponded with lower overall violence.<sup>74</sup> This correlation is indicative of the capacity of organized crime to create high-risk environments, while simultaneously imposing order within illicit markets. This violence-suppressing role of dominant OCGs may conceal their consolidation, enabling such groups to entrench themselves in community life while progressively eroding the legitimacy, effectiveness, and integrity of institutions.<sup>75</sup>

Where organized criminal groups exert territorial control, the illicit economies they foster may also create short-term economic opportunities and help to legitimize their activities among local communities. But the long-term costs for society can be substantial, as illicit economies typically exploit public resources for the undue gain of a few, as in the case of illegal mining in the Sahel, which is providing some immediate relief to local communities, but undermining public benefits.<sup>76</sup>

## Criminal governance as a springboard for other illicit trade and profit seeking activities

Control over a territory gives OCGs opportunities to start or expand other illicit activities. In this way, criminal governance can provide not only a consistent income stream via extortion and a way to cement a power base, but also a springboard for developing other illicit activities. In other cases, criminal governance could come as a result of consolidating control over other activities, particularly illicit trade.

Ecuador’s geographical location between major cocaine production areas in Colombia and Peru<sup>77</sup> makes it a significant hub for cocaine trafficking and organized crime activity.<sup>78</sup> Yet, until recently, Ecuador did not have ‘home-grown’ OCGs with the capacity to coordinate transnational drug trafficking operations.<sup>79</sup> However, since the early 2020s, there have been indications that Ecuador’s local OCGs, traditionally involved in small-scale robberies, kidnappings and extortion, have expanded their operations and become increasingly interlinked with foreign transnational OCGs active in international cocaine trafficking operations.<sup>80</sup> Strengthened through alliances with international drug trafficking groups, local groups have developed into professionalized criminal organizations, operating across international borders.<sup>81</sup>

In the Sahel, the groups that for a long time have exercised territorial control over informal trading routes have in the past two decades evolved into a more criminalized ecosystem with the transit of cocaine and other high-value commodities across the region, triggering competition over access to significant profits. Within this context, OCGs have played an important role in influencing the Sahel’s current political and security challenges.<sup>82</sup>

## Prisons at risk of criminal governance

The assumption that once an individual is incarcerated, organized criminal activity ceases, that criminal networks are permanently disrupted or that communication between associates ends, is often premature. Evidence from an increasing number of countries shows that prison systems are highly vulnerable to the risk that members of organized crime continue or consolidate their engagement in crime and project significant power within and beyond prison walls, especially when prison systems are marked by systemic deficiencies, such as overcrowding,<sup>83</sup> inadequate conditions, severe resource constraints and weak management capacities or compromised institutional integrity. The evolution of digital technology has further enhanced the capacities of members of organized criminal groups to operate from within their cells and to rapidly adapt to traditional prison security and disruption measures.<sup>84</sup>

As regards logistical and hierarchical structures, organized crime in prisons differs widely at international level, ranging from informal prison hierarchies dominated by high-level criminals, violent prison gangs and prison-based criminal organizations to a much less visible entrepreneurial trading culture run by professional criminals. What they do have in common is the profit-driven provision of illicit goods and services. If left unaddressed, organized crime has a devastating impact on safety and security in both custodial and community settings.

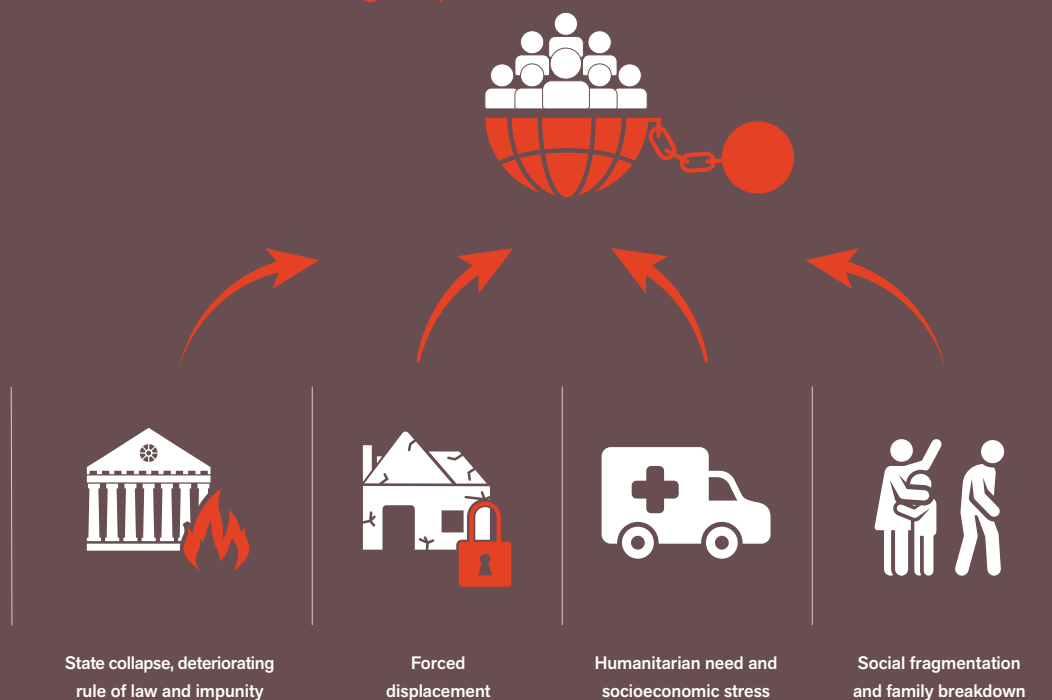
Prisons throughout Latin America and the Caribbean struggle to contain the unprecedented level of control that prison-based criminal organizations closely linked to drug trafficking have assumed. Violent clashes between rivaling prison gangs have left hundreds of prisoners dead and led to states of emergencies having been declared on various prison systems.<sup>85</sup> The trajectory of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (see *Case study 2 - The Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC): from local prison gang to transnational threat*) demonstrates how prison-based gangs can evolve into sophisticated transnational criminal organizations; the group started by providing goods and services to prisoners and support to their families, financed through membership fees, creating cohesion, compliance, and a reputation that

facilitated recruitment.<sup>86</sup> It very rapidly managed to build on this core capacity to become a powerful international drug trafficking organization. Similarly, Ecuadorean gangs are primarily prison-based organizations, whose logistical centres are penitentiaries and prisons; these have become part of the struggle for territorial control and recruitment strategies (see *Case study 3 - The rise of organized crime violence in Ecuador*).

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, organized crime has often taken the form of powerful criminal networks led by high-level criminals ("thieves-in-law"), which first emerged back in the 1930s in the detention facilities of the Soviet Union.<sup>87</sup> Despite a progressive decline in their influence, influential figures from the criminal underworld continue to play an important role in prisons of the region.<sup>88</sup> More recently, for instance, national authorities in Ukraine dismantled several criminal organizations running call-centres operating frauds from correctional facilities in the country targeting relatives of Ukrainian military personnel (see *Case study 7 - Organized crime involvement in scam centres in Ukraine*).

In the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), transnational criminal networks are exploiting the region as a "staging post" for cocaine shipments towards Oceania.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, the Pacific's strategic location between the two main global methamphetamine source regions – Southeast Asia and North America – further heightens its territorial vulnerability.<sup>90</sup> Recently, transnational OCGs from a variety of regions have been attracted to this part of the world, operating and cooperating along trafficking routes through the Pacific region.<sup>91</sup>

## Factors increasing vulnerability to Trafficking in persons in armed conflicts



### How organized criminal groups profit from armed conflict

Armed conflicts can disrupt the activities of OCGs, but they can also offer fertile ground for organized crime. While a comprehensive analysis of the role of OCGs in armed conflict situations is beyond the scope of this Brief, previous UNODC studies have documented the links between organized crime and conflict, with conflict creating favourable grounds for OCGs, which in turn may exacerbate conflicts. The breakdown of State institutions and resulting impunity that are characteristic of many armed conflicts contribute to an environment where organized crime can thrive.<sup>92</sup> One aspect concerns people affected by conflict who become at higher risk of falling prey to organized crime. The populations that are forcibly displaced as the result of conflict are vulnerable to becoming victims of various forms of organized crime such as human trafficking<sup>93</sup> and fraud.<sup>94</sup>

Beyond exploiting vulnerabilities, organized crime can also exacerbate conflicts. In the Sahel for example, OCGs with large financial resources fuel armed conflicts by increasing armed competition for illicit profits and territorial control in a region where firearms trafficking underpins a significant proportion of deadly violence.<sup>95</sup> OCGs operating in these territories provide financial and human resources to conflicting parties and delay conflict resolution. In the same region, the competition for control

over gold mining sites has also fuelled tensions,<sup>96</sup> and similar patterns have been recorded in conflict-affected areas of Southeast Asia.<sup>97</sup>

There are multiple examples of organized crime activities in areas with geopolitical tensions and conflict, some directly perpetrated by parties to the conflict and some perpetrated by OCGs in cooperation or under the protection of parties to the conflict. For example, in 2023, 80-90 armed groups active in Africa trafficked children and used them in conflict-related operations. These groups recruited children to use them as fighters, support personnel, or force them to work to generate income. Trafficking by armed groups, both non-State and State actors, is carried out in different contexts.<sup>98</sup>

In 2023, cases of children recruited from villages and exploited in gold mining sites were reported after sustained clashes between *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo* (CODECO) factions and *Zaire* militias for the control over illegal mining sites in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, in the Eastern Provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the convergence of trafficking in persons, minerals trafficking and armed groups has been documented. These provinces are rich with precious minerals attracting armed groups to set up illegal mining operations to finance their activities. Armed groups traffic children to extract minerals and

# Organized criminal and armed groups in South-East Asia



Source: UNODC World Drug Report 2024, p. 13.

cooperate with organized criminal groups to smuggle these minerals out of the country. The UN has reported gold, tin, tantalum and tungsten being sold by armed groups active in this area, to be then smuggled to international markets, with profits laundered in the region and large international financial centers.<sup>99</sup>

The opportunistic partnership between OCGs and armed groups has also facilitated the convergence of different forms of trafficking, money laundering and illicit markets in the “Golden Triangle” in Southeast Asia. Exploiting instability and rule of law challenges, organized crime has flourished and methamphetamine production has surged in recent years, outpacing the production of traditional opiates, with groups also diversifying their illicit activities beyond drug production, engaging in crimes that affect the environment and industrial-scale cybercrime activities.<sup>100</sup>

In the Golden Triangle area, transnational OCGs have established a large number of casinos and scam farms where profits are laundering using professional money-laundering services. These services are available to a wide variety of groups, including the multi-billion industry of online fraud. In these areas, OCGs exploit the absence of government control, as well as the complicity of the armed groups de facto controlling these territories (see *the case studies Scam farms in Southeast Asia – highly lucrative criminal enterprises that exploit territories with*

*rule of law challenges and The role of the casino industry in money-laundering in Southeast Asia*).

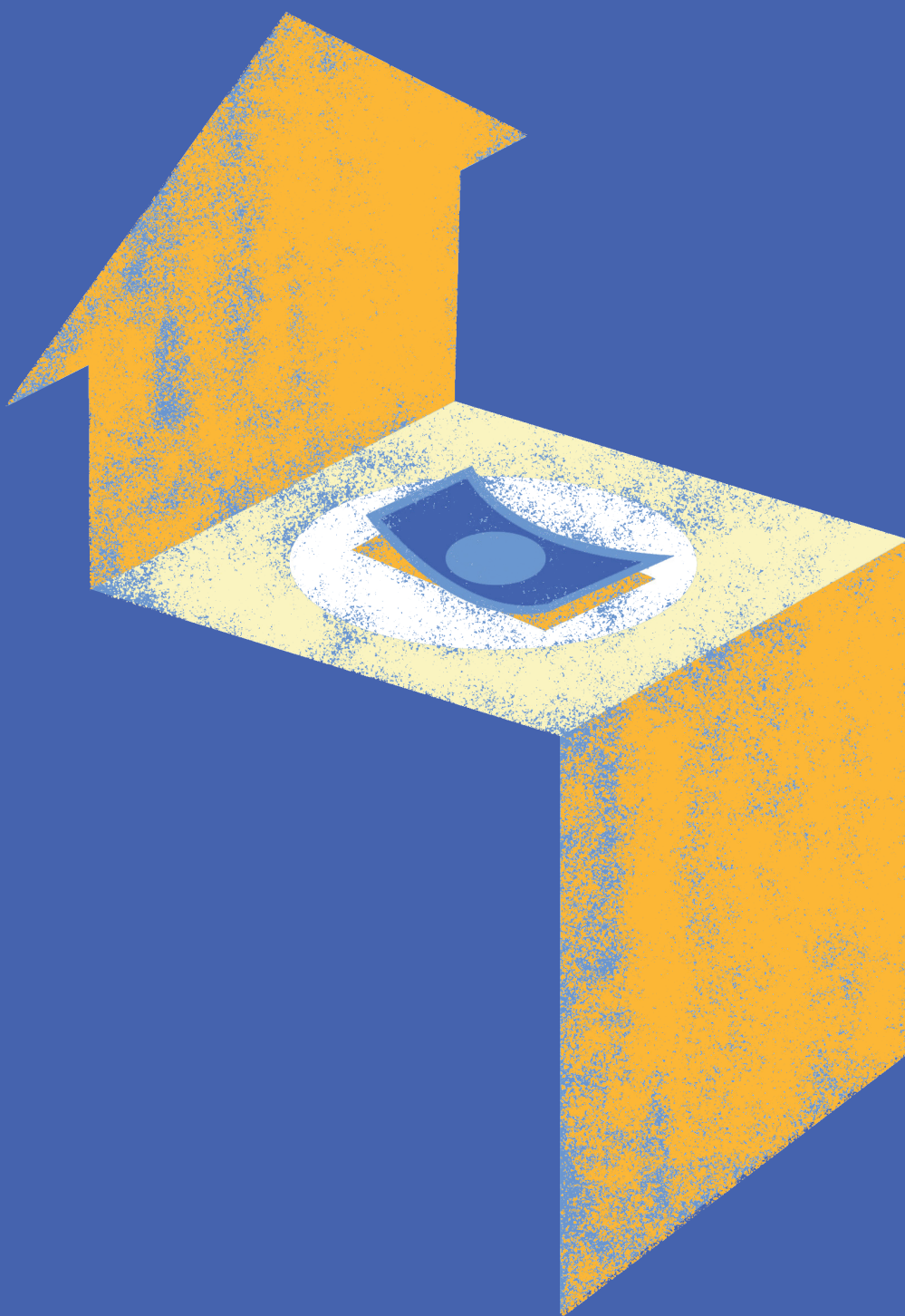
In the context of Ukraine, the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation in February 2022 has affected trafficking routes, disrupted criminal organizations, and spawned new forms of organized crime.<sup>101</sup> OCGs are now active in the Ukrainian scam-call centres industry, where the war has created conditions conducive for organized fraud targeting displaced people as recipients of State subsidies or deceiving the families of those missing from the frontline with the promise of selling them information about their loved ones.<sup>102</sup> (See *Case study 7 -Organized crime involvement in scam centres in Ukraine*)

Armed conflict and firearms trafficking are closely linked: conflict can exacerbate firearms trafficking and firearms trafficking can exacerbate conflicts.<sup>103</sup> Armed conflict tends to increase the demand for weapons and, therefore, may also result in increased firearms trafficking. At the same time, conflicts can also be a ‘source’ of such trafficking, since it may be more difficult for authorities to maintain effective control over State stockpiles during conflicts and firearms may end up in the hands of criminals or non-State armed groups. When the conflict is over, a pool of weapons may also remain accessible outside of legal control mechanisms. The availability of such conflict-legacy weapons can significantly undermine peacebuilding and stabilization efforts.<sup>104</sup>



# Illicit markets and their profits

the lifeblood of  
organised crime



# Key points



- Drug trafficking remains one of the most profitable activities for organized criminal groups. However, organized crime is involved in a wide range of other forms of trafficking, from trafficking in persons to trafficking in firearms, wildlife, waste, fuel and counterfeit products.
- Transnational drug trafficking today is a highly specialized enterprise involving actors from numerous groups and networks.
- Comparatively high levels of lethal violence in Latin America and the Caribbean can be partly attributed to competition between organized criminal groups over cocaine markets as well as the availability of firearms.
- Actors involved in illicit markets associated with natural resources are particularly varied, with criminal groups cooperating with legal businesses, blurring the line between legal and illegal markets.
- When structured organized criminal groups operate in the field of trafficking in persons, they traffic more people, for longer, across greater distances and in more violent manners than individual or loosely connected traffickers.

Organized criminal groups are fundamentally profit-driven and engage in a wide range of criminal activities that span both illegal and legal economies. Their operations impact both local and transnational economies and, in some cases, they can affect national security and geopolitical relations. The illegal economies that OCGs may create, manage or simply profit from opportunistically are varied in nature. As analysed in Chapter 2, some profits arise from forms of criminal governance whereby OCGs exert control over local territories and profit, for instance, from extortion. However, OCGs likely derive most of their income globally through the illicit production and trafficking of goods and services that constitute the so-called illicit markets.

The range of goods trafficked and services provided by OCGs continues to evolve, often driven by gaps between demand and the availability of legal, regulated supply or by the comparative ease and profitability of unregulated markets. Certain forms of trafficking have remained consistently lucrative for decades. Drug markets remain today the financial backbone of most organized criminal groups operating across the globe. The profitability of other types of trafficking has fluctuated in response to shifting economic and political conditions.

For instance, fuel trafficking surged in the Sahel when disparities in fuel subsidies across national borders created lucrative opportunities (see *Case study 9 - West Africa and the Sahel – regional hubs for illicit trafficking*). In other parts of the world, international sanctions have triggered new trafficking operations. Illicit gold trafficking has in turn intensified during periods of rising global gold prices, while the illicit trade in rosewood has adapted over time by targeting different species to meet persistent demand, despite increasing international protections. These trends highlight the adaptability of organized crime in operating across illicit markets, exploiting regulatory gaps and market dynamics.

The role of OCGs in illicit markets and the business model adopted by OCGs to profit from the trafficking of goods and services vary by group, type of market and geographical reach (see also *Chapter 1, section Different dimensions of organized crime*), but they typically involve a division of roles among groups operating across jurisdictions, with groups – or elements within one group – specialized in the different stages of the supply chain, including production, procurement, shipment, document fraud, and financial transactions.<sup>105</sup> In some cases, OCGs are the primary actors; in others, they are facilitators.

Sanction evasion is one example of a “crime-as-a-service” model with national security implications, whereby OCGs act as enablers of trafficking across different illicit supply chains.<sup>106</sup>

OCGs can have different characteristics, strategies and objectives. Some groups may focus primarily on trafficking and be trade-oriented, focusing on efficient, short-term exchanges of commodities such as drugs, often adopting flatter, more flexible structures and minimal hierarchy. These groups exploit global supply chain vulnerabilities to move drugs or other commodities across borders and typically avoid violence to minimize law enforcement attention.<sup>107</sup> Other groups are more focused on controlling illicit markets, rather than just trading in them.<sup>108</sup> For example, governance-oriented groups typically approach drug activities in the context of controlling a territory. They therefore tend to prioritize control over smooth business operations and they may make greater use of violence or the threat of violence even if it risks destabilizing the market.<sup>109</sup> In some cases, groups exert criminal governance in one territory and adopt a trade-focused approach in other territories, following a strategy that researchers have termed ‘functional diversification’.<sup>110</sup>

Illicit markets constitute an important source of profits for OCGs, but not all aspects of illicit markets are managed by OCGs. For example, the markets of plant-based drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, originate from the illicit cultivation of coca leaves or opium, which can be done in remote rural areas by local people looking for income opportunities, with little or no connection to an organized criminal structure.<sup>111</sup> Illegally sourced natural resources, such as gold, timber or wildlife, may also end up in the legal supply chain and be sold, knowingly or unknowingly, at retail level by legitimate businesses.<sup>112</sup>

While illicit markets constitute a major source of revenue for OCGs, they are not the only actors involved; many participants are small-scale or subsistence-level operators who require responses distinct from those designed to target organized criminal groups. This is particularly evident in the illicit trade of natural resources and drugs.<sup>113</sup>

This chapter reports on some of the key global trends and patterns pertaining to the involvement of organized crime in different forms of trafficking, from trafficking in drugs, firearms and natural resources to trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants.

## Organized crime and global drug trafficking

Drugs remain one of the most profitable markets for OCGs. Different groups are involved in drug trafficking, adopting more or less centralized structures and varying levels of hierarchical control over their members, as well as operating with orientations that range from purely trading activities to governance and control of markets

and territories.<sup>114</sup> OCGs typically operate within transnational drug markets in a business-like fashion, coordinating their activities with other groups along the supply chain. This operational model is characterized by an opportunistic focus on exploiting business opportunities and a tendency to minimize violence.<sup>115</sup> In other contexts, OCGs may seek to control the drug trade within territories under their influence, which can generate violent confrontations with competing groups (see *Case study 2 - The rise of organized crime violence in Ecuador*).<sup>116</sup> The dynamics of OCGs can have a considerable impact on drug flows. For instance, when new groups entered the cocaine transnational trade between South America and Europe, the market grew significantly in size (see *Case study 12 - From local facilitators to international players: the growth of Balkan organized crime groups*).<sup>117</sup>

Organized criminal groups are known to operate in virtually all drug markets around the globe.<sup>118</sup> Evidence from Australia, European Union (EU) countries, Japan and the United Kingdom shows that drug trafficking is a major activity for a considerable proportion of OCGs, ranging from more than 50 per cent of groups involved in drug trafficking in the EU to about 80 per cent in Australia.<sup>119</sup> In Albania, drug production and trafficking of cannabis, heroin, and cocaine to the EU were the main activities of the majority (60%) of OCGs active in 2022–2023.<sup>120</sup> In Brazil, drug trafficking was the most common predicate offence linked to financial crimes in 2023, accounting for 31% of cases – up from 17% in 2014. This increase is believed to reflect the expansion of organized criminal activities related to drug trafficking over the past decade.<sup>121</sup>

In Japan, police report that drug trafficking – especially in methamphetamine – is the main income source for OCGs, including the *Yakuza*. In 2020, *Yakuza* members were linked to about 31% of drug offences in the country, with methamphetamine involved in over 80% of those cases and cannabis in around 15%.<sup>122</sup> In Australia, research indicates that more than 70% of OCGs are involved in methamphetamine trafficking, followed by trafficking in cocaine, cannabis, and heroin. This is unlike the situation in the EU, where cocaine dominates drug trafficking activities.<sup>123</sup>

Transnational drug trafficking today is often a highly specialized enterprise involving actors from numerous groups and networks. For example, drug trafficking organizations operating in the EU are typically not vertically integrated across the drug supply chain; they operate only at certain stages of the supply chain and specialize in specific tasks. Some only produce cannabis, for instance, while others only handle distribution or transport. Evidence from the EU suggests that groups that cover only part of the trafficking process tend to be active for fewer years than those whose control extends over multiple stages of the supply chain (or in some cases, end-to-end control).<sup>124</sup>

In Australia, polydrug trafficking groups that supply many different types of drugs (which account for more than half of the groups active in the country) are significantly more

likely than mono-drug trafficking groups to be involved at multiple stages of the supply chain.<sup>125</sup> People involved in the retail selling of drugs may operate at individual level, handling relatively small quantities.<sup>126</sup>

Drug trafficking is often linked to other serious crimes. For example, persistently high levels of lethal violence in Latin America and the Caribbean can be attributed to complex dynamics relating to criminal groups, including competition for control over illicit markets, record-breaking drug production and the availability of firearms.<sup>127</sup> But the convergence between drug trafficking and violence is not limited to this region. In Germany and Australia, for instance, between 21 and 36% of OCGs have engaged in violence; this figure goes up to 68% when looking at the EU as a whole.<sup>128</sup> Drug- and firearm-related crime can also overlap. The case of Haiti shows that firearms and drug trafficking can in some cases operate in opposite directions; firearms are smuggled into the country, sometimes by the same groups and via the same routes used to traffic drugs out of the country (see *Case study 1 - Gangs and governance in Haiti: a fragile State at the crossroads of illicit markets*).<sup>129</sup> In some contexts, drug trafficking is linked to trafficking in persons, when groups recruit and exploit victims to participate in drug-related activities, including serving as couriers, distributors, or spotters.<sup>130</sup> In Colombia, UNODC has documented the convergence of crime related to coca cultivation and illegal gold mining, as well as with the deforestation of rural areas. This link is deeply connected with the use of the territories for different criminal interests, but also serving the purpose of reinvesting the proceeds of these criminal activities.<sup>131</sup>

Drug trafficking is obviously strongly linked to money-laundering. As documented by literature and investigations money laundering is the enabler of drug trafficking, one cannot exist without the other.<sup>132</sup> Finally, groups may engage with or infiltrate legitimate businesses to support their criminal operations.<sup>133</sup>

## Cocaine trafficking: Specific groups may change, but supply chains remain resilient

As for other types of trafficking, in cocaine trafficking from South America to destination markets, the entire supply chain is rarely controlled by one organized criminal group. Different actors operate at different stages, often establishing mutually beneficial partnerships.

These business collaborations can be more or less transitory and volatile. Such volatility contributes to competition among organized criminal groups for control over trafficking corridors or distribution points, sometimes resulting in violence. In other instances, however, groups may cooperate at various points along the supply chain without resorting to violence.<sup>134</sup>

In 2023, it was assessed that small- and medium-sized criminal groups were playing an increasingly important role in global cocaine trafficking. These groups operate as part of larger networks, managing only parts of the supply chain and forming partnerships with other groups. This fragmentation has been observed across regions, accompanied by a trend towards greater specialization among actors.<sup>135</sup>

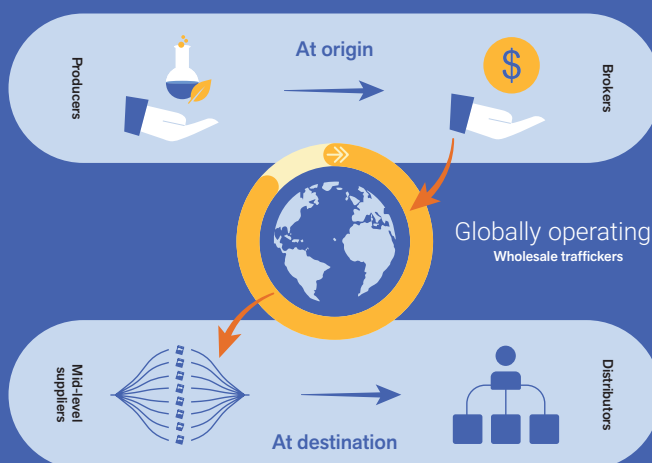
Linked to the shift toward decentralized cocaine trafficking networks has been the growth of a system of “service providers” that manage parts of the supply chain without owning the drugs. Their tasks include collecting shipments from ports, arranging local transport, or protecting the shipments.<sup>136</sup> In exchange, they guarantee delivery for a fee – sometimes in cash, sometimes in quantities of cocaine – fuelling cocaine availability in transit countries.

The profound changes observed in the global cocaine market in the last decade underscore how changes in the landscape of OCGs can transform a global drug market. The

increased direct involvement of Balkan groups in supplying cocaine to Europe around 2012 facilitated an increased supply in Europe that shortly after started to lead to increased use. On the other side of the Atlantic, the dynamics around cocaine production in Colombia also changed following the demobilization of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in 2016, and the involvement and later consolidation of groups that started to concentrate their presence in certain areas (see *Case study 10 - Continuity and adaptation: Colombia's enduring centrality in the global cocaine trade*), becoming more efficient and taking cocaine production to record highs. As the result of changes in OCG dynamics in both supply and demand markets, the current cocaine market continues to expand.

The latest data show that cocaine production reached records high in 2023, and while trends in seizures, drug use, and related treatment and deaths also indicate the expansion of the global cocaine market. These indicators reinforce the upward trajectory observed over the past decade in production and availability, and over the past five years in treatment and mortality outcomes.<sup>137</sup> Cocaine trafficking routes have also evolved alongside changes in actors and alliances. For instance, routes to Europe have diversified, with Colombia's ports playing a reduced role. From the mid-2010s, cocaine shipments started to increasingly transit through other South American countries en route to Europe (via the ‘Southern Cone’ route).<sup>138</sup> Since then, points of arrival in Europe have also shifted, with Northern European ports surpassing the Iberian Peninsula as the main hubs. These trends appear connected, as seizures linked to the Southern Cone route are increasingly detected in North Sea ports.<sup>139</sup> In recent years, Ecuador has increasingly become a main transit point for cocaine, a development that has coincided with a significant rise in violence since 2021 (see *Case study 2 - The rise of organized crime violence in Ecuador*).

## Cocaine supply chain type of actors and roles



Source: UNODC (2023), *Global Report on Cocaine*. United Nations Publications, p. 140.

## **Los Blancos - A transnational response to a transnational drug trafficking organization**

Operation *Los Blancos*, described as “an unprecedented operation” involving judicial and police authorities from many countries between Europe and South America, led to the dismantling of the transnational organized criminal group *Kompania Bello*, considered one of the most active cocaine trafficking networks in Europe. The investigation was launched in 2015 by the Italian Police following violence that erupted among members of the group over different criminal activities. The investigation led to the identification of an Albanian-speaking organized criminal group which, through its contacts in Ecuador, was able to traffic large amounts of cocaine by managing different phases, from purchase to transport, storage and distribution, with presence and corruptive powers in different European countries.

### **A highly structured, hierarchical group with trading capacities**

*Kompania Bello* was able to traffic significant quantities of cocaine from South America by container ship. The group established cooperation with criminal actors in Ecuador using front export companies and individuals employed in the ports of departure and of arrival. The cocaine entered the European market, including by using corruption along the routes and at destination. The group had a stable structure with a clear division of roles, responsibilities, and resources, including weapons and equipment. The group members were mainly Albanian nationals. The criminal group, however, had a base in Apulia (Italy) and had placed members and associates in strategic locations, particularly in Antwerp (Belgium), Rotterdam (the Kingdom of the Netherlands) and Bremen (Germany), and others running activities in South America.

The level of criminal governance of this group emerged clearly from a number of very typical characteristics: it imposed a bond of silence on the associates in the event of arrest, under penalty of serious retaliation; it allocated part of the proceeds from cocaine consignments to paying salaries to associates, covering legal costs and maintaining families of arrested members; it recruited new affiliates who were entrusted with executive or manpower tasks; and it could count on the support of allied criminals in Albania with significant corruptive power. As its trafficking capacity increased, the group created a solid commercial network to ensure constant supplies of excellent-quality drugs at competitive prices. The system adopted included the use of non-suspicious individuals used as couriers who transported the imported cocaine across a variety of European countries. The group enjoyed a dense network of corruption along the cocaine route, and it relied on encrypted forms of communication.

From the financial aspect, the group made use of a complex system of internal financing and self-laundering of proceeds from the importation and sale of drugs. This system financed new shipments directed to the European market. Further, it exported large sums of

cash in euros and pounds sterling from illicit activities to Ecuador and Albania, reinvesting them in commercial and real estate activities.

### **Trading across continents**

The top figures of the group were reported to be considered equal partners with the drug trafficking groups operating in Ecuador, maintaining also close ties with the *Cartel de Sinaloa* and different Colombian groups based in the cocaine-producing areas. The sourcing, acquisition and shipment of cocaine was handled by members of the organization based in Guayaquil (Ecuador) in direct contact with the Ecuadorian criminal groups.

While the Latin American suppliers were able to offer a choice of shipping methods based on the financial resources of the buyers, the latter, i.e. members of *Kompania Bello*, were able to choose, through feasibility studies, the port of arrival for the cargos. Once the drug was unloaded in European ports, it came under the complete control of *Kompania Bello*. Through its network of cells across the continent, the organization collected the cocaine, stored it in specially rented apartments, concealed it in specially designed compartments in vehicles, and ultimately handled the collection of the proceeds. The group even conducted specialized workshops for couriers on how to best conceal the drugs during transportation.

The cocaine was then forwarded to the consumption markets in various European countries via a network of couriers based on purchase orders, using lorries and cars equipped with false bottoms and automatic concealment devices. Further, the South American drug traffickers were paid using “*fei chi'en*”, an informal money transfer system run by another criminal group called *Agenzia*, operated mainly by East Asian nationals. The money-laundering group charged fees ranging from 22 to 27 per cent of the amount transferred.

### **Investigations and arrests across the regions**

In December 2016, a joint investigation team was set up between the Italian and Dutch judicial authorities, with the participation of the national police forces, as well as the assistance and funding of Eurojust and Europol. The operation led to the identification of three different criminal organizations that made up *Kompania Bello*. The investigation brought the arrests of the apical figures of the group active in Europe and South America. As a result of the investigation, 84 people were arrested in Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, Malta, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Ecuador, while authorities seized four tons of cocaine, weapons and €5.5 million (about US\$6.5 million).

## Illicit firearms trafficking

Illicit firearms trafficking<sup>140</sup> encompasses cross-border transfers of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition that have not been authorized by one or more of the States involved.<sup>141</sup> It is a crime that affects all parts of the world and impacts on society in multiple ways. Firearms are instrumental in much violence, particularly homicide; they are often used by OCGs, and they support operations related to armed conflicts and terrorism. Firearms are the most commonly used weapon in homicides related to gangs or organized crime.<sup>142</sup>

Beyond their role as a commodity, OCGs may use firearms to enforce compliance and sustain control over territories, populations, and illicit activities. In contexts of weak governance or limited State presence, access to firearms facilitates criminal groups to exercise forms of de facto authority, regulate access to routes and markets, and impose rules through violence or the threat thereof.<sup>143</sup> The most common form of weapons trafficking involves small arms and light weapons; however, the character of this trafficking can vary significantly in different geographical contexts and in relation to different weapons.<sup>144</sup>

A variety of methods are used by organized criminal groups to carry out illicit firearms trafficking. Generally, larger consignments of firearms are trafficked via sea and ships, and smaller quantities are trafficked using vehicles on land, or through strategic 'ant trafficking'.<sup>145</sup> This type of trafficking involves many people transporting small consignments – often only what could be considered a violation of possession regulations – to avoid potential trafficking charges, while still meeting the demand for firearms in the destination market.<sup>146</sup> It has also been documented that mail services are exploited for firearms trafficking.<sup>147</sup> These trafficking methods frequently overlap with those used for other forms of contraband. Organized criminal groups commonly reuse the same facilitators, transport routes, concealment techniques, and logistical infrastructure to traffic firearms alongside drugs, migrants, or other illicit goods.<sup>148</sup> This convergence reflects the poly-criminal nature of many organized crime networks, in which firearms trafficking functions as an enabling activity rather than a standalone market.

Firearms trafficking-related cases reported by European countries show the involvement of street gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs.<sup>149</sup> These actors are often simultaneously engaged in drug trafficking, extortion, and other serious crimes, with firearms serving as a cross-cutting enabler rather than a standalone market.<sup>150</sup> Cases reported by countries in South America in turn indicate the involvement of drug trafficking organizations in the illicit importation of firearms into major illicit drug production areas as well as into drug selling areas where groups sought to maintain a monopoly of violence.<sup>151</sup> In such contexts, firearms trafficking is closely intertwined with drug trafficking and other illicit economies.

## Trafficking in natural resources and crimes that affect the environment

Natural resources are finite, and rising global demand is creating stronger incentives for organized criminal groups to engage in crimes that affect the environment as a means of securing profits. Crimes that affect the environment encompass a series of different illicit activities, including wildlife crime, forest crime, crimes in the fisheries sector, minerals crime, waste crime, and pollution crime. Different from drug trafficking, for example, where the business is illicit from production to retail distribution, most of the trafficking related to natural resources may be licit at a certain point of the supply chain. Some minerals, for example, may be legally extracted and processed but exported against national regulations and still sold in legal markets.

Trafficking in natural resources spans all regions of the world. For instance, between 2015 and 2021, wildlife trafficking seizures were recorded in 162 countries and territories, involving around 4,000 plant and animal species.<sup>152</sup> Any country – regardless of its level of development or geographic location – can serve as a source country for trafficking of wildlife, timber, or fisheries products.<sup>153</sup> For instance, several organized criminal networks have been identified as trafficking European glass eels from Europe to Asia. European nationals typically conduct the illegal fishing, while Asian counterparts coordinate logistics and transport. Some eels are poached, while others are diverted from the legal European market. Local fishers often use illegal methods that damage river ecosystems. Criminals also exploit legitimate European companies to launder illegal catches.<sup>154</sup> Compared to some other illicit markets, the trafficking of natural resources is characterized by a wider range of actors and by a more nuanced distinction between legal and illegal economies. For example, in several trade chains in wildlife crime, local people in remote areas might find income opportunities from involvement in illegal wildlife harvesting.<sup>155</sup> In other cases, for example in illegal fishing, more sophisticated and organized actors are involved. At an industrial level, illegal fishing operators often use flags of convenience and complex multi-jurisdictional business ownership networks to avoid exposure to law enforcement. Profits from a wide range of fisheries have attracted the involvement of organized criminal groups.<sup>156</sup> In forest crime, a great variety of organized criminal groups has also been observed: groups that are mainly profit-oriented, groups that are politically motivated, and loosely connected networks.<sup>157</sup>

OCGs rarely operate alone in the illegal markets of natural resources. For instance, organized criminal groups, actors operating under a legal façade, corporate criminals and legitimate businesses<sup>158</sup> are all implicated in forest crime, creating reinforced networks that intensify harm to communities, natural resources, and the environment.<sup>159</sup>

In Latin America, OCGs committing minerals crime create and use shell companies to launder money from drug trafficking.<sup>160</sup> They typically establish intricate transnational networks involving corporations in various countries to launder illicit proceeds.<sup>161</sup>

Illegal markets related to natural resources are particularly volatile, expanding and disappearing with criminal actors quickly moving from one type of resource to another to overcome the shortage of resources due to overexploitation or stricter regulations. This is particularly evident for rosewood, where trafficking is continually shifting from one species to another.<sup>162</sup>

OCGs involved in illegal markets related to natural resources may also exercise illegal governance. Some of the groups involved in illegal extraction and production of minerals for example, exercise control over the communities and the territories where there are minerals with the purpose of ensuring their exclusive extraction (for example in the case of crimes related to critical minerals in the Sahel and in Southeast Asia).<sup>163</sup> At the same time, the production and trade of natural resources may also come as the result of territorial control. In the Amazon for example, territorial OCGs involved in drug trafficking finance and provide support for illegal mining, illegal deforestation and wildlife trafficking.<sup>164</sup> OCGs may exercise violence to impose illegal governance over areas with natural resources that they want to exploit. A recent study from Latin America indicates that OCGs identify forest areas of interest and approach landowners to negotiate access, often offering minimal compensation. When landowners resist, intimidation and violence are employed, and in some cases, timber is harvested without consent or payment. Although landowners have reported such incidents to national authorities, inspections are frequently undermined as criminal groups use threats, kidnappings, and bribery to secure silence or compliance from local communities, private companies, and State officials.<sup>165</sup> There are also groups that are exclusively focused on the illegal trade of natural resources with no connection to illegal governance, such as criminal groups involved in the wholesale trafficking of ivory.<sup>166</sup>

The harms of OCGs engaged in crimes that affect the environment can take different forms, including loss of biodiversity due to wildlife and forest crime,<sup>167</sup> over-exploitation of natural resources such as fish, and pollution of the air, land and water in communities where minerals are illegally extracted and processed, waste is illegally trafficked, or synthetic drugs are illicitly manufactured.<sup>168</sup> Wildlife crime generates biodiversity loss, ecosystem damage, and deforestation, while also threatening food security, spreading zoonotic diseases and undermining preservation of natural heritage. Crucially, crimes that affect the environment undermine governance and the rule of law by fuelling corruption, money-laundering, and illicit financial flows. They deprive governments of revenue from legal activities such as timber licences, export fees, and taxation. Ultimately, this threatens biodiversity, weakens communities, and destabilizes economies.<sup>169</sup> In the Sahel, some transnational organized criminal groups control mining operations and smuggle gold across

borders to Western Asia, depriving Sahelian countries of millions of dollars in fiscal revenue each year.<sup>170</sup> Gold extracted from artisanal and small-scale gold mining often bypasses formal channels, evading taxation and regulatory oversight. This allows criminal networks and, in some cases, armed groups to profit from gold laundering, using the proceeds to fund insecurity and interfering with local governance.<sup>171</sup>

Emerging patterns of convergence between crimes that affect the environment and other (serious) crimes have been observed. For instance, convergence between illicit drug trade and illegal deforestation has been highlighted in the context of Latin America. Through a process called 'narco-deforestation,' drug trafficking proceeds are laundered into land speculation, agriculture, cattle ranching, and related infrastructure, creating growing risks for the Amazon forest. Evidence also points to a reverse dynamic: in parts of the Amazon, profits from illegal logging generated by OCGs are reinvested into illicit coca cultivation.<sup>172</sup> Also in South America, OCGs have been documented taking control of gold mining sites while engaging in other criminal activities, such as extorting miners for fees, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and trafficking in persons.<sup>173</sup> These organizations are diversifying their activities, using their technical skills and networks to trade other raw materials, including precious metals and minerals.<sup>174</sup>

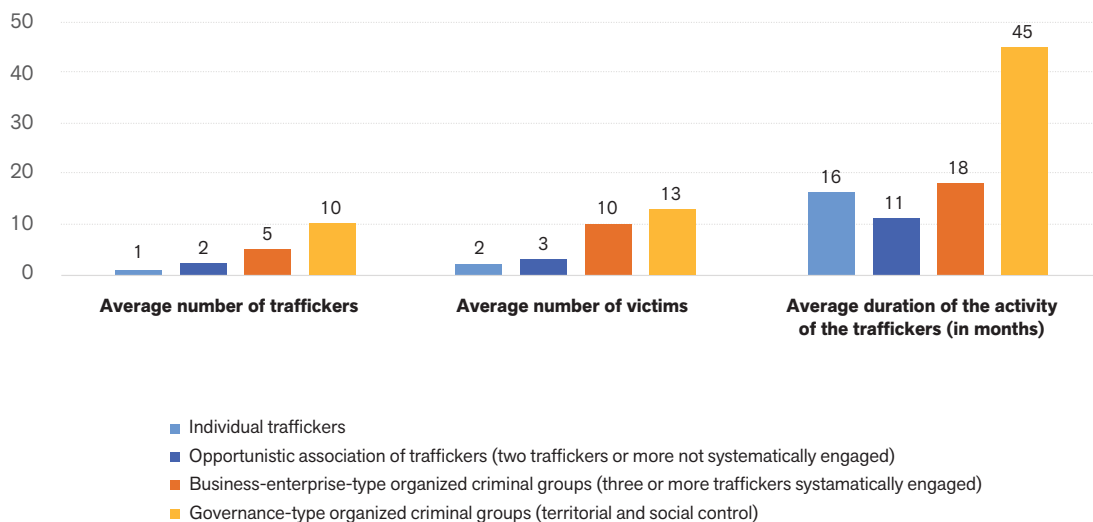
Crime convergence has also been reported in the Sahel region, where many gold-mining areas are along trafficking routes with linkages to various illicit economies, such as drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, arms trafficking and banditry. The regional instability has also facilitated the proliferation of OCG activities around gold-mining areas, which have often become logistical hubs for trafficking activities.<sup>175</sup> In the Sahel, some transnational OCGs control mining operations and smuggle gold across borders to Western Asia, depriving Sahelian countries of millions of dollars in fiscal revenue each year.<sup>176</sup>

## Smuggling of migrants

Smuggling of migrants refers to the facilitation, for financial or other material gain, of irregular entry into a country where the migrant is not a national or resident.<sup>177</sup> The criminals behind this business seize the opportunity created by the need or desire of people to escape not just poverty and lack of employment opportunities but also natural disaster, conflict or persecution.

Migrant smugglers may be organized in loose networks, which do not exhibit strict hierarchies. Smugglers may operate with much autonomy in different parts of the smuggling process, for instance, facilitating a certain border crossing, recruiting a particular group of migrants, counterfeiting documents or preparing vessels for sea smuggling. They do not work exclusively with only one smuggling network and the links connecting these operators are similar to business relations. Smugglers with 'broker' functions play key

**FIG. 4** Average number of traffickers, average number of victims and average duration of traffickers' activity per single case, by type of criminal actor.



Source: UNODC GLOTIP collection of court case summaries.

roles in this system as they are able to connect different actors along smuggling routes.<sup>178</sup>

Other smugglers belong to large and well-organized hierarchical criminal operations with transnational links, capable of organizing sophisticated smuggling passages that might involve the use of falsified or fraudulently obtained travel documents. Often, smuggling is sold as a 'package' that involves migrants travelling long distances, using multiple modes of transportation.<sup>179</sup>

Generally, smuggling networks seem not to be involved in other forms of major transnational organized crime. In some parts of the world, however, smuggling networks have links with violent criminal organizations to which smugglers have to pay for the 'right' to safe passage for migrants. In other cases, smugglers may hand over migrants to such groups for extortion of ransom, robbery or other forms of exploitation.<sup>180</sup> One of the most prevalent crimes perpetrated by smugglers is deprivation of liberty and extortion of their clients. The smugglers either demanded a ransom or detained them at 'credit houses' until they paid the full smuggling fee.<sup>181</sup>

## Trafficking in persons

Trafficking in persons is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them.<sup>182</sup> In 2022, 42 per cent of all victims detected globally were trafficked for forced labour, 36 per cent for sexual exploitation, 8 per cent for forced criminality – from drug trafficking to working in online scam compounds – while

the remaining detected victims were trafficked for other forms of exploitation.<sup>183</sup>

Trafficking in persons is perpetrated by actors with different levels of organizational structures.<sup>184</sup> Perpetrators may include youth who recruit younger schoolmates into sexual exploitation, parents who force their children to beg, street gangs, brokers negotiating child labour in rural villages, transnational organized criminal groups, as well as licenced multinational recruitment agencies and legal companies.<sup>185</sup> Most of the traffickers appear to operate as criminal networks loosely connected in a business-type relationship.<sup>186</sup> However, large criminal organizations with territorial control and governance functions also engage in trafficking in persons (18 per cent of the traffickers in court cases analysed by UNODC<sup>187</sup>). When these governance-type criminal groups engage in trafficking in persons, they appear to traffic more people, for longer, across greater distances and in a more violent manner compared with opportunistic traffickers or business-type trafficking networks that lack territorial control and governance functions.<sup>188</sup>

A structured organized criminal network can operate much longer than loosely connected business-type trafficking networks – an average of 45 months versus 18 months.<sup>189</sup> UNODC has reported examples of groups specialized in trafficking for sexual exploitation across regions operating for more than a decade before being dismantled. These well-organized groups are typically involved in other crimes. Some West African groups trafficking victims to Europe, for example, systematically engage in drug trafficking, money-laundering, financial

fraud and other transnational crimes, as reported by national authorities.<sup>190</sup>

Trafficking in persons cases investigated by national authorities and submitted to UNODC provide examples of how organized trafficking groups engage in multiple types of crimes, including money-laundering, fraud and smuggling of migrants. The criminal phenomenon of trafficking victims exploited in scam centres in Southeast Asia is presented in a supplementary case study to this Brief (see *Case study 6 - Scam farms in Southeast Asia: highly lucrative criminal enterprises that exploit territories with rule of law challenges*).<sup>191</sup> The cases also reveal how governance-type organized criminal groups traffic victims from distant regions for the purpose of sexual exploitation by preying on victims' desire to migrate and exploiting them based on the supposed debt incurred from travel and document procurement.<sup>192</sup>

Analysis of traffickers operating in Africa shows how the continent has a unique landscape of traffickers, with large-scale and systematic operations carried by transnational OCGs, as well as small-scale and less organized operations, including individual and community-based traffickers.<sup>193</sup>

# Technology

how organized crime exploits  
global connectivity



# Key points



- Technological developments have made it easier for organized criminal groups to carry out extremely profitable, industrial-scale fraud, extortion and other serious crimes, targeting victims across borders.
- Technological developments have also facilitated the adoption of complex new and traditional money-laundering schemes involving professional enablers. Virtual assets, bank and non bank financial institutions, hawala and other similar service and payments providers and professional money laundering networks.
- Cybercriminals often operate as part of loosely organized networks that form and dissolve around specific projects. However, some cybercrime groups exhibit more hierarchical structures, carrying out industrial-scale cybercrime operations out of so-called scam centres.
- UNODC estimates financial losses between US\$18 billion and US\$37 billion from scams targeting victims in East and South East Asia in 2023 alone.
- Scam operators are frequently trafficking victims who are forced to commit cybercrimes.
- Large scale Scam Centres are known to proliferate in South East Asia and Africa and are increasingly detected in all areas of the world.

## Technology amplifies opportunities for organized crime

The rapid development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has amplified opportunities for organized criminal groups worldwide. New technologies have enabled criminal groups to more easily target victims globally and exploit the dependence of institutions, businesses, and individuals on ICTs. As a result, organized criminal groups are now carrying out online extortions, frauds, and scams at an industrial scale.

Technology has not only amplified the scale, speed and scope of traditional crimes – making them potentially more harmful when cyber-enabled – but technology has also given rise to entirely new forms of crime, often referred to as cyber-dependent crimes.<sup>194</sup> Cyber-dependent crimes can be committed only through the use of ICTs, where the devices are both the tool and the target of the crime. For example, this can include crimes such as illicit intrusions into computer networks (hacking) or the disruption or downgrading of computer functionality and network space through malware or denial of service attacks.<sup>195</sup>

Both cyber-enabled and cyber-dependent crimes affect countries across all regions and income groups. They are extremely profitable due to their ability to victimize huge numbers of organisations and individuals which can transfer money via on-line channels. They pose a growing threat to individuals and businesses, regardless of their resources or digital resilience. Interpol reported a sharp increase in cybercrime incidents across Africa in 2025, with cyber offences accounting for over 30 per cent of all reported crimes in both Western and Eastern Africa.<sup>196</sup> Online scams<sup>197</sup> have been identified as the most frequently reported cybercrime in African countries, followed by ransomware, business email compromise, and other malware-based threats. Digital sextortion and identity theft have also emerged as significant and growing threats in African countries.<sup>198</sup> These trends have made cyber-criminal activity a major law enforcement and security concern on the continent,<sup>199</sup> demanding a greater level of cross-border cooperation among law enforcement, and greater engagement with the private sector.<sup>200</sup> Limited capacity in many African countries, jurisdictional hurdles, and slow access to cross-border data continue to impede cybercrime investigations.<sup>201</sup>

In the EU, according to a 2024 assessment by Europol, ransomware attacks and online fraud schemes remain the most threatening manifestations of cybercrime.<sup>202</sup>

## Technology

connects perpetrators, victims and service providers in multiple locations



Among all cyber-enabled fraud schemes reported in the EU, investment fraud, business email compromise and romance fraud were identified as the most common types.<sup>203</sup> Ransomware and multistage extortion schemes are key examples of cyber-dependent crimes affecting EU citizens and businesses, possessing a very high disruption potential.<sup>204</sup> In the EU, cybercrime groups increasingly target small and medium-sized businesses because of their lower digital defences, often relying on Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) providers.<sup>205</sup> According to Europol, the actors involved in cyber-criminal activities in the EU are wide-ranging, from lone actors to groups and networks with various levels of expertise and capability.<sup>206</sup>

In North America, national authorities assess that cyber-enabled fraud and scams remain a common form of cybercrime affecting citizens and organizations. Investigative reports involve ransomware, viruses and malware, data breaches, and others.<sup>207</sup> Ransomware is considered one of the most disruptive forms of cybercrime, as it can hinder an organization's ability to function and produces significant volumes of stolen data that may be used to facilitate further criminal activities.<sup>208</sup> Since 2020, ransomware attacks have grown in scope, frequency, and complexity in North America.<sup>209</sup> Increasingly, cyber criminals provide services and tools which enable less skilled criminal actors to commit cyber-attacks. The development and proliferation of this business model have contributed to the increasing number of attacks. By lowering skills barriers to entry in

this criminal activity, this model enables individuals with limited technical expertise to participate in cybercrime, thereby broadening the pool of actors involved.

## Technology has changed the notion of the geography of crime

Technological developments have made it easier for criminal groups to target victims across borders, leading to a separation between the jurisdictions where offenders operate and where victims are located. This dynamic is increasingly reshaping the geography of crime and challenges traditional criminological notions that place perpetrators and victims within the same physical space.<sup>210</sup> As a result, crime prevention strategies based on situational opportunity theories,<sup>211</sup> where crimes are understood to occur as the result of the convergence in time and space of motivated offenders and suitable targets (in the absence of capable guardians),<sup>212</sup> are less effective, as evidenced, for example, in the case of online scam farms (see *Case study 6 - Scam farms in Southeast Asia: highly lucrative criminal enterprises that exploit territories with rule of law challenges*) as well as online financial sextortion of minors and adolescents (see *Case study 5 - Online financial sextortion: how West African crime groups leverage technology and social media to exploit vulnerable groups abroad*).

Internet technology has broadened the geographical scope of traffickers' operations. The Internet helps criminal organizations to operate across borders and in multiple locations at the same time, while physically targeting victims in other locations. Further, this evolution results in transforming traditionally very localized and small-scale crimes – such as fraud, extortion, gambling or others – into new forms of cyber-facilitated transnational organized crime activities operating at a global scale, which require international and multinationals responses.

Organized crime has rapidly adapted to the digital age, often operating out of industrial-scale scam centres that target victims across multiple countries. These operations are frequently based in regions or areas affected by armed conflict, rule of law challenges, and illiciteconomies – conditions that offer greater protection from detection and interdiction. In recent years, for example, a number of organized criminal groups have diversified their activities into cyberfraud<sup>213</sup> operations in several countries in Southeast Asia.<sup>214</sup> Various East and Southeast Asian organized criminal groups, including networks linked to the *14K Triads* and other groups traditionally active in drug trafficking in the region, have been involved in these operations, in addition to armed groups operating in the region.<sup>215</sup> Elsewhere, in Ukraine, call centres dedicated to telephone and online frauds have been identified and linked to the *Dniprovski* and *Khimprom* criminal organizations.<sup>216</sup> Registered fraud crimes in Ukraine have rapidly increased in recent years, from around 15,000 in 2022 to more than 50,000 instances in 2023.<sup>217</sup>

Advances in technology have given rise to increasingly sophisticated and harmful cybercrime schemes. For instance, by using artificial intelligence (AI) to create computer-generated images and voices that are indistinguishable from real ones, cybercriminals are now executing social engineering techniques to defraud victims by exploiting their trust for financial gain,<sup>218</sup> as well as deepfake videos featuring legitimate public figures for investment fraud.<sup>219</sup>

In the case of online financial sextortion schemes, offenders approach victims on social media, gaming sites, and messaging apps using fake profiles, frequently posing as women or girls of a similar age.<sup>220</sup> After victims are deceived into sharing compromising content, they are blackmailed and threatened with the release of the sensitive content unless the victim pays money, sends gift cards, or transfers cryptocurrency.<sup>221</sup> Criminal groups involved in cybercrime often operate through flexible, loosely organized networks that form and dissolve around specific projects, though some develop more structured and hierarchical arrangements.<sup>222</sup>

Personal data of the victims are often a core asset in the operations of cybercriminals, which are subsequently used in phishing schemes and other fraudulent activities.<sup>223</sup> Some criminal groups behind organized fraud operations use the dark net<sup>224</sup> to procure sensitive data for criminal exploitation, such as bank client, postal courier service and mobile operator customer data.<sup>225</sup>

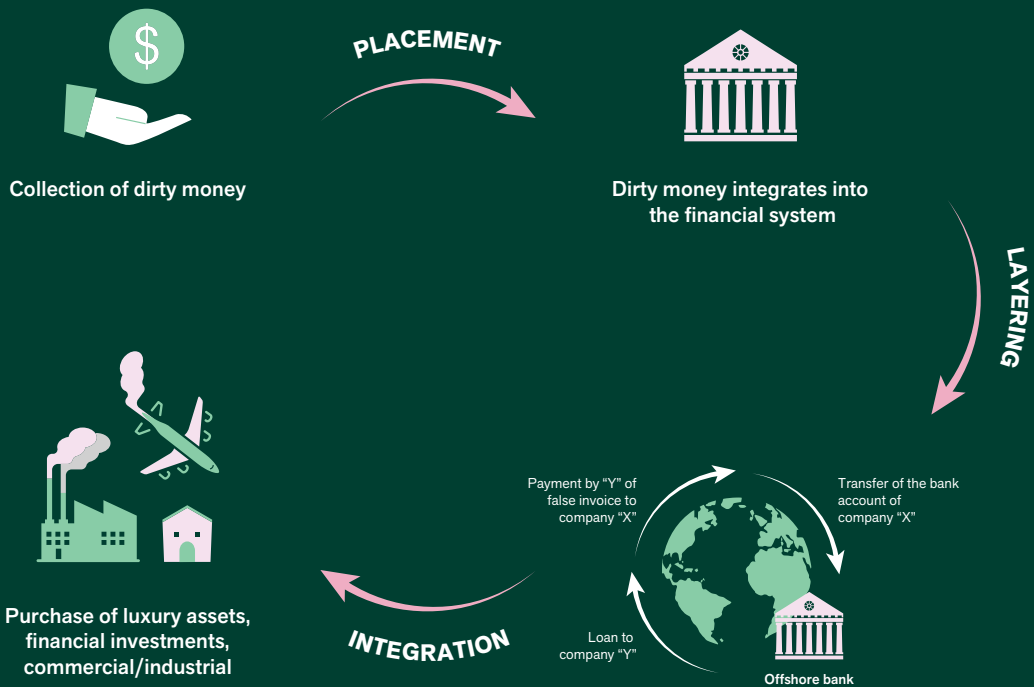
## Large-scale cybercrime operations often concentrate in physical scam centres

Cybercrime can be perpetrated by single individuals operating remotely in many different locations, but large-scale cybercrime operations that involve OCGs tend to concentrate in specific geographical locations and involve large numbers of operators. For example, the centres operating online and telephone fraud in Ukraine involve large numbers of operators in different locations. In a single case, national authorities dismantled a network of centres operating across 16 regions of Ukraine, with some 2,500 operators employed across the network. Before being dismantled, the criminal network's annual turnover was reported to be around US\$74 million, highlighting the significant scale of the criminal operation.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, some online financial sextortion schemes have been documented in specific geographical hubs in West Africa, where horizontal, flexible structures of organized criminal actors are involved.<sup>227</sup> These cybercrime networks collaborate on a project basis with temporary hierarchical relationships, but with no permanent hierarchy within the group.<sup>228</sup>

Large-scale cybercrime operations typically require anonymity – like the scam centres that operate in Ukraine under the façade of IT companies – and weak rule of law. The large scam farms in Southeast Asia, for example, are located in territories characterized by loose regulations and weak jurisdictions, including border areas controlled by armed groups.<sup>229</sup> In these geographical hotspots, it is estimated that several hundreds of thousands of cybercrime operators carry out various cyberfraud and scam activities.<sup>230</sup> UNODC estimates financial losses between US\$18 billion and US\$37 billion from scams targeting victims in East and Southeast Asia in 2023 alone, with a high proportion of these losses attributed to scams committed by OCGs in Southeast Asia.<sup>231</sup>

In some of the large scam centres in Southeast Asia, people are trafficked and forced to perpetrate cybercrimes. Reports of trafficking in persons and deceptive recruitment into these scam centres began emerging in the early 2020s. In the scam centres, victims are confined in compounds, their passports are confiscated and they are compelled to carry out cyber-enabled fraud.<sup>232</sup> They are forced to interact with social media users and may be given a daily target of numbers of potential new victims with whom they have established contact.<sup>233</sup> While the full scale of trafficking in these centres is difficult to assess, multiple sources, including police reports, court documents, rescue and anti-trafficking groups, survivor testimonies, and media investigations, indicate that it may be widespread. Trafficking victims can find themselves in the same scam centre as individuals who participate voluntarily, as not all scam operators are coerced.<sup>234</sup> Most trafficked victims in scam centres in Southeast Asia are from the region, though recruitment of victims has been documented across South and Central Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America,

# Money laundering cycle



Source: UNODC. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/money-laundering/overview.html>.

## A basic introduction to money-laundering

The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime provides a legal definition of the laundering of proceeds of crime in its Article 6.<sup>235</sup> Money-laundering is one of the offences established under the Convention. The international community first called for the criminalization of money laundering in its 1988 Convention on Narcotics.<sup>236</sup> The UN Convention against Corruption contains multiple provisions for preventing money laundering.<sup>237</sup> The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) sets the global anti money laundering, countering the financing of terrorism and counter proliferation financing standards.<sup>238</sup>

In Australia, for example, money-laundering has been considered an intrinsic enabler of serious crimes and organized criminal groups, and has been carried out at different levels of sophistication by most, if not all, organized criminal groups.<sup>239</sup> The interconnectedness of money-laundering networks in Australia and the variety of laundering methods used by organized criminal groups are indicative of a truly global system of criminal business.<sup>240</sup>

In theory, money-laundering can take place in three stages: placement, layering and integration. Placement involves removing the funds from direct association with the crime; layering involves creating complex financial transactions to disguise the source and ownership of the

funds; and integration involves making the money available to the criminals again by introducing it back into the economy, but now from seemingly legitimate sources.

In reality, money-laundering schemes may not always exhibit all three stages; some stages could be combined, or several stages repeat several times. For instance, if cash from drug sales is divided into small amounts, then deposited into banking accounts by “money mules”, and afterwards transferred as payment for services to a shell company, placement and layering occur simultaneously.<sup>241</sup>

Organized criminal groups that generate income through drug trafficking or other illicit activities typically launder their income to hide its illicit origins. This frequently involves moving large amounts of assets across national borders. For example, it has been estimated that in most countries along the so-called Balkan route,<sup>242</sup> within the time period 2019–2022, between a quarter and half of the illicit net income from illicit drug markets related to opiates and methamphetamines was moved abroad.<sup>243</sup> These estimates suggest that within the defined time period, between US\$3.4 and US\$6.9 billion crossed borders every year along the Balkan route as illicit financial flows related to the two drugs.<sup>244</sup> The illicit profits accumulated by producing and trafficking opiates and methamphetamine along the Balkan route amount to a sizeable share of the gross domestic product (GDP) of some countries such as Afghanistan (US\$17.2 billion in 2023) and North Macedonia (US\$16.7 billion in 2024).<sup>245</sup>

reflecting the expanding geographical reach of these operations.<sup>246</sup> Available evidence also indicates that this criminal business model is rapidly spreading to other parts of the world, with groups establishing themselves in the Pacific,<sup>247</sup> Africa,<sup>248</sup> and South America.<sup>249</sup>

## Casinos and online gambling have multiplied the opportunities for illicit gambling and facilitated new forms of money-laundering

Using modern ICTs, organized criminal groups have adopted new money-laundering schemes, increasing the challenges for criminal justice systems in tracing and seizing assets. An example of this technology-driven transformation is in the (mis)use of both online and onsite casinos, junket operations,<sup>250</sup> and online gambling to launder proceeds of crime (see *Case study 8 - The role of the casino industry in money-laundering in Southeast Asia*).

Advances in Internet speed and mobile app functionalities have expanded the online gambling sector, bringing additional opportunities for organized criminal groups not only to expand their operations in illicit gambling, but also to use the sector to launder money.<sup>251</sup> Law enforcement agencies reported that, throughout East and Southeast Asia, online casinos have been misused to serve as integral components of the money-laundering infrastructure, just as onsite casinos have.<sup>252</sup> The illicit nature of gambling transactions has generated an unprecedented demand for laundering-as-a-service providers, i.e., operators able to process transactions between players and operators that engage in illicit gambling seeking to circumvent detection. Such operators have been found to be introduced and controlled by organized criminal groups.<sup>253</sup> Additionally, such infrastructure built to launder illicit gambling operations has also been heavily utilized by other powerful criminal networks engaged in many other illicit activities.<sup>254</sup>

The rise of online social gaming has also changed the gambling industry and its associated money-laundering risks as so-called 'crypto casinos' and non-fungible token (NFT) play-to-earn games become more popular.<sup>255</sup> The online gambling sector is characterized by actors that operate remotely and anonymously, interconnected over the Internet, a minimal, if any, number of compliance staff, and large and complex volumes of transactions and financial flows that often span different jurisdictions. The speed and scale of financial transactions together with differences in legal frameworks, as well as legal loopholes, have created enforcement gaps and grey areas, allowing organized criminals to set up professional money-laundering operations.<sup>256</sup>

In East and Southeast Asia, casinos, junkets<sup>257</sup> and online gambling have become critical pieces in the underground banking and money-laundering infrastructure that serves transnational organized crime.<sup>258</sup> Several junkets in the region have been infiltrated or are directly controlled by organized criminal groups such as the *Lazarus Group*, *Sam Gor* or the *14K triad*, who use junkets to move money through and across casinos in order to launder their illicit proceeds.<sup>259</sup>

More broadly, what makes casinos – both online and onsite – together with their junkets and online gambling operations particularly attractive to organized criminal groups is that they can provide an end-to-end money-laundering service covering the entire laundering cycle.<sup>260</sup> Attractive features for organized criminal groups include large cash volumes, anonymous transactions, safekeeping arrangements and cross-jurisdictional credit relationships – all of which facilitate the concealment of illicit origins and the movement of value across jurisdictions.<sup>261</sup>

Organized criminal groups linked to this sector have demonstrated the ability to rapidly evolve and adapt to shifting contexts, regulatory frameworks, and institutional responses.<sup>262</sup> They have aggressively diversified their operations and increasingly exploit highly technical supply chains, complex transactions, and opaque money flows, as demonstrated by the case of online gambling.<sup>263</sup> Online gambling platforms often present themselves as legitimately registered businesses or as 'neutral third parties', sometimes appearing to be affiliated with larger business networks. In reality, many operate without authorization to conduct online payment processing, cryptocurrency trading and exchange, or related activities – functioning with little to no regulatory oversight.<sup>264</sup>

## Cheap, fast, and anonymous – the use of virtual assets for money-laundering

Virtual assets<sup>265</sup> are used by criminals to launder funds from a wide range of predicate offences, including from online frauds and scams, ransomware attacks, trafficking in drugs and chemical precursors as well as corruption.<sup>266</sup> Virtual assets are also used for financial transactions in illicit markets (e.g. illicit drug markets), in terrorism financing and proliferation financing,<sup>267</sup> as well as by international money-laundering networks, including for money-laundering services offered directly on dark net<sup>268</sup> marketplaces.<sup>269</sup> This does not, however, suggest that the existence and use of virtual assets are solely for criminal purposes. On the contrary, virtual assets are widely used in global finance and can offer access to finance and value movement for the poorest in society, often at less cost than traditional bank accounts. According to some estimates, which are subject to considerable uncertainty, the use of cryptocurrency in the context of crime represents less than one per cent of the total on-chain transaction volume.<sup>270</sup>

In recent years, Member States have reported the combined use of blockchain-based transactions<sup>271</sup> with other value transfer methods, including Hawala-type methods to launder crime proceeds.<sup>272</sup> In the Northern American context, for example, a recent case documented the work of international money-laundering networks using virtual assets to collect funds in one jurisdiction and making the equivalent value available in another, often by swapping virtual assets for cash.<sup>273</sup> The use of privacy coins<sup>274</sup> and technologies that can hide the identity of the parties involved, the amount being transferred, or even the existence of the transaction itself, has also been reported in relation to transnational money-laundering.<sup>275</sup> Stablecoins<sup>276</sup> have rapidly become the preferred medium for illicit financial transactions (compared with other types of cryptocurrency),<sup>277</sup> which criminals can combine with the use of mixers,<sup>278</sup> bridges,<sup>279</sup> and cross-chain swaps. The appeal of stablecoins lies in low volatility, fast settlement, and high liquidity – features that are valued by criminals.

Where there is the convergence between different forms of organized crime, virtual assets offer a common financial tool for money-laundering purposes. For example, in Southeast Asia, criminal networks involved in fraud, human trafficking for forced criminality, drug trafficking, gambling, and underground banking are increasingly intertwined.<sup>280</sup> Virtual assets are often a common denominator that connects these networks.<sup>281</sup> Criminals rely on over-the-counter brokers, unregistered exchanges, and nested accounts on major platforms to move and layer funds without detection. This convergence creates a resilient and globally connected ecosystem for illicit finance.<sup>282</sup>

# Strategic priorities for action against organized crime

More than 25 years after the adoption of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its supplementing Protocols, countering transnational organized crime increasingly requires a multilateral and multi-pronged response, including to address its ability to exploit technological advancements and its interlinkages with corruption, terrorism, conflict and development. Despite shifts in how organized crime operates, the Convention remains the central framework guiding these efforts, providing a flexible and robust basis for addressing traditional and new, emerging, and evolving forms of organized crime.

A number of actions have been identified below on how to respond to the current and prospective reality of transnational organized crime.

**Action: When crime goes digital, so must the global response. As organized crime moves to the cyberspace, the international community must develop strategic responses to address the misuse of technology**

Organized criminal groups are exponentially exploiting artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies as tools to carry out their activities. They also often take advantage of the increasing digitalization of public sectors and target key infrastructure to achieve financial gain. Governments, the private sector, and international institutions should strengthen joint threat analysis, improve cross-sector information exchange, and align responses to technology-enabled crime. Unlike traditional forms of organized crime, where public authorities were able to autonomously collect all relevant information for investigation and prosecution of cases, nowadays, cooperation with the private sector is indispensable, given that they are the main holders of key data.

Law enforcement and judicial authorities must be equipped with specialized training that includes real case scenarios, mock trials and simulations, as well as advanced digital forensic tools and software to enable rapid cross-border exchange of admissible digital evidence. Legal frameworks should be updated in line with the UN Convention against Cybercrime to address online- and AI-enabled threats, including the

criminalization of deepfake abuse, large-scale organized fraud, and AI-generated exploitative content.

**Action: Organized crime is borderless. So must be the institutional response to it. The international community needs to scale up its capacity to building partnerships and strengthen cross-border judicial and law enforcement cooperation**

National competent authorities in countries involved in investigations, prosecution of judicial proceeding in respect to the same offences should enhance coordination. The deployment of liaison officers or magistrates, and the designation of specialized and stable focal points for international cooperation across jurisdictions has proven key to responding to the sophistication of organized criminal operations. Liaison magistrates act as an interface between the national central authorities of the deploying country, to which they maintain reporting lines, and the hosting country. In addition to their traditional functions which include facilitating the exchange of information and the transmission of Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) requests, the Liaison Magistrates provide legal advice and solicit the prompt follow-up on cases and execution of MLA requests with the relevant authorities in the deploying country.

In relation to law enforcement cooperation, the expansion of joint investigations and the use of controlled delivery and other special investigative techniques, such as electronic or other forms of surveillance and undercover operations, have also proved especially impactful in combating organized crime across borders.

Adoption of digital technology solutions to enhance the scope and to speed the communication and the cooperation among national authorities should be in the agenda of the international community to combat transnational organized crime.

**Action: Confronting criminal governance with integrated action. Territorial control of organized crime over vulnerable communities is increasing.**

## Implementing multi-pronged interventions is required to limit such reality.

A combination of measures extending beyond the remit of the criminal justice system is essential to (re)establish State presence and legitimacy in the territories under the influence of the organized crime governance. In many contexts, this will require sustained long-term interventions aimed to reduce the dependence of local communities on criminal economies.

Individuals at the lower levels of the organized crime operations, such as farmers, small-scale smugglers and those involved in drug dealing due to poverty and limited livelihood options should be offered lawful socioeconomic alternatives, alongside focussed interventions to address structural drivers enabling the thriving of illicit activities, including deep-rooted poverty, underdevelopment, insecurity and inequality. Funding for such schemes may be mobilized through partnerships with the private sector, as well as through the social use of confiscated criminal assets. Human rights considerations should sit at the core of any anti-crime intervention.

### Action: Profit is the main drive of organized crime. Target the criminal profits and illicit financial flows to disarm the criminal organizations

Transnational organized crime is incentivized and enabled by its proceeds. Disrupting illegal financial flows, confiscating, and recovering the proceeds of crime through anti-money-laundering/combating the financing of terrorism/combating proliferation financing and anti-corruption measures is one of the most impactful ways in which Member States can combat transnational organized crime.

Such cooperation must be multi-sectoral, bringing together law enforcement authorities, financial intelligence and investigation bodies, prosecutors and the private sector. At the national level, priority should be given to strengthening financial investigation capacities, enhancing anti-money laundering frameworks, and ensuring the effective use of seizure, confiscation, and asset recovery mechanisms.

Cryptocurrencies are increasingly used for illicit purposes, the logic of following the money has expanded to include tracing the mining, transfer, and eventual confiscation of digital assets, including, where relevant, analysis of the energy consumption required to generate them. In response to this threat, digital technology needs to be used as a tool to combat illicit financial flows carried out through digital assets. Capacity-building for national authorities remains key to train relevant officials in the use of digital technologies for the investigation and prosecution of organized crime activities.

### Action: Organized crime and instability are increasingly interconnected and interrelated. Address organized crime as agent of instability in conflict and related crisis areas

United Nations entities and other international actors, including peacekeeping personnel, must be able to identify and report organized crime dynamics within their mandates. Children recruited by terrorist and non-state armed groups are subjected to compounded violence and exploitation. At the same time, among displaced populations and veterans, the initiation of, or transition to, harmful use of substances is complex, and it often needs to be addressed against a backdrop of limited health infrastructures and constrained social and economic resources. Successful reintegration requires on targeted programmes combining educational and vocational opportunities, health and psychosocial support, crime prevention, and community-based inclusion measures for affected individuals and their families.

Border authorities and national law enforcement agencies should be strengthened to effectively detect, intercept, investigate, and prosecute illicit arms trafficking and manufacturing, particularly in conflict, post-conflict, and other fragile settings where risks of diversion and proliferation remain acute. These efforts should be reinforced through comprehensive arms control and preventive measures, including systematic record-keeping, marking and tracing, and safe and secure stockpile management to prevent diversion from national holdings.

In conflict situations, armed groups establish criminal partnerships with organized criminal groups to exploit territories under their control, ranging from the extraction of precious minerals to the establishment of scam centres, and from oil smuggling to drug trafficking. Illicit drug economies can flourish in situations of conflict. At the same time, conflicts may also disrupt traditional commercial trade and travel patterns, altering trafficking routes and methods, including drugs that are often concealed within legitimate channels. Systematic monitoring of these patterns based on a sound threat assessment methodology and solid evidence is needed to limit the impact and extension of conflicts.



# Endnotes

- 1 The definition of organized criminal group specifically refers to a structured group that acts “to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or material benefit” (Art. 2 (a) of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime).
- 2 Currently, only four UN Member States are yet to adhere to UNTOC (Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Congo, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu). More information: [https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtmsg\\_no=xviii-12&chapter=18&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtmsg_no=xviii-12&chapter=18&clang=_en).
- 3 The “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children”, was adopted by General Assembly resolution 55/25. It entered into force on 25 December 2003. It is the first global legally binding instrument with an agreed definition on trafficking in persons. The intention behind this definition is to facilitate convergence in national approaches with regard to the establishment of domestic criminal offences that would support efficient international cooperation in investigating and prosecuting trafficking in persons cases. An additional objective of the Protocol is to protect and assist the victims of trafficking in persons with full respect for their human rights.
- 4 The “Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air” adopted by General Assembly resolution 55/25, entered into force on 28 January 2004. It deals with the growing problem of organized criminal groups who smuggle migrants, often at high risk to the migrants and at great profit for the offenders. A major achievement of the Protocol was that, for the first time in a global international instrument, a definition of smuggling of migrants was developed and agreed upon. The Protocol aims at preventing and combating the smuggling of migrants, as well as promoting cooperation among States parties, while protecting the rights of smuggled migrants and preventing the worst forms of their exploitation which often characterize the smuggling process.
- 5 The “Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition” was adopted by General Assembly resolution 55/255 of 31 May 2001. It entered into force on 3 July 2005. The objective of the Protocol, which is the first legally binding instrument on small arms that has been adopted at the global level, is to promote, facilitate and strengthen cooperation among States Parties in order to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition. By ratifying the Protocol, States make a commitment to adopt a series of crime-control measures and implement in their domestic legal order three sets of normative provisions: the first one relates to the establishment of criminal offenses related to illegal manufacturing of, and trafficking in, firearms on the basis of the Protocol requirements and definitions; the second to a system of government authorizations or licensing intending to ensure legitimate manufacturing of, and trafficking in, firearms; and the third one to the marking and tracing of firearms.
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225 UNODC, *Ukraine: Organized Crime Dynamics in the Context of War*, 30. ; Ukraine National Police, "Natspolitsiia spilno z latviiskymy kolehamy vykryla orhanizatoriv mizhnarodnoi shakhraskoi skhemy z misiachnym oborotom 5 mln hrn," March 16, 2023, <https://www.npu.gov.ua/news/natspolitsiia-spilno-z-latviiskymy-kolehamy-vykryla-orhanizatoriv-mizhnarodnoi-shakhraskoi-skhemy-z-misiachnym-oborotom-5-mln-hrn>. ; Dnipropetrovsk Region Prosecutor Office, "The Activities of Fraudulent 'Call Centers' That Defrauded Citizens of the European Union Countries Have Been Suspended in the Dnipropetrovsk Region," [https://dnipr.gp.gov.ua/ua/news.html?\\_m=publications&\\_c=view&\\_t=rec&id=329796](https://dnipr.gp.gov.ua/ua/news.html?_m=publications&_c=view&_t=rec&id=329796).

226 UNODC, *Ukraine: Organized Crime Dynamics in the Context of War*, (July 2025), 28.

227 Lazarus, S., "Cybercriminal Networks and Operational Dynamics of Business Email Compromise (BEC) Scammers: Insights from the 'Black Axe' Confraternity," *Deviant Behavior* 46, no. 4 (2025): 467.

228 Ahissan, A. K., Okpo, A. N. and Azi, J. W., "Cybercriminalité et réseaux criminels à Abidjan," *Revue Internationale de Recherches et d'Etudes Pluridisciplinaires* 26 (2017): 63–74, as cited in Cretu-Adatte, C. et al., "Unravelling the Organisation of Ivorian Cyberfraudsters: Criminal Networks or Organised Crime?" *Journal of Economic Criminology* 3 (2024): 100056, 4.

229 UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia* (2024), 54.

230 Ibid.

231 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud* (2024), 22.

232 Ibid., 43–45.

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

235 According to article 6 of UNTOC, the laundering of proceeds of crime is the intentional "(a)(i) conversion or transfer of property, knowing that such property is the proceeds of crime, for the purpose of concealing or disguising the illicit origin of the property or of helping any person who is involved in the commission of the predicate offence to evade the legal consequences of his or her action; (ii) concealment or disguise of the true nature, source, location, disposition, movement or ownership of or rights with respect to property, knowing that such property is the proceeds of crime; and, subject to the basic concepts of its legal system, (b)(i) the acquisition, possession or use of property, knowing, at the time of receipt, that such property is the proceeds of crime; (ii) participation in, association with or conspiracy to commit, attempts to commit and aiding, abetting, facilitating and counselling the commission of any of the offences established in accordance with this article". The same definition of laundering of proceeds of crime is provided in the UN Convention against Corruption, Article 23.

236 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988, <https://www.incb.org/incb/en/precursors/1988-convention.html>.

237 United Nations Convention against Corruption, 2003, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNCAC/Publications/Convention/08-50026\\_E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNCAC/Publications/Convention/08-50026_E.pdf).

238 The FATF Recommendations set out a comprehensive and consistent framework of measures which countries should implement in order to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as the financing of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Countries have diverse legal, administrative and operational frameworks and different financial systems, and so cannot all take identical measures to counter these threats. See Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *The FATF Recommendations* (Paris: FATF, 2012, updated 2023), <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfrecommendations/Fatf-recommendations.html>.

239 Australian Crime Commission, *Organised Crime in Australia 2015* (Canberra: Australian Crime Commission, 2015), 12.

240 Ibid., 13.

241 UNODC, "Money Laundering," <https://www.unodc.org/romena/en/money-laundering.html>.

242 The Balkan route is a major corridor for trafficking opiates and, more recently, methamphetamine, from Afghanistan toward Western and Central Europe.

243 UNODC, *Balkan Route* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025), 37, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/IFF/2025/Balkan\\_Route.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/IFF/2025/Balkan_Route.pdf).

244 Ibid.

245 World Bank, *GDP (Current US\$)*, World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

246 UNODC, *Inflection Point* (2025) 32.

247 Ibid., 47.

248 Ibid., 53.

249 Ibid., 56.

250 A junket operation is a legitimate business arrangement, whereby an intermediary (known as a junket operator) organises and facilitates groups of gamblers - often high-rollers who spend large sums - to visit a casino, typically in another jurisdiction. Recent law enforcement action has revealed that some junket operators serve as international bank-like entities that provide a variety of underground financial services, as well as an infrastructure for organised criminal groups to move financial assets across borders, including for the purpose of money-laundering. See: UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat*, 1.

251 Ibid., 19, 41.

252 Ibid., 41

253 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud*, 70.

254 Ibid.

255 UNODC *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia*, 41.

256 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud*, 69.

257 A junket is an arrangement between a hosting casino and a junket operator to facilitate gambling by an individual or a group of high-wealth players for a period of time through VIP programmes or tours. Through their relationships with casinos, junket operators can offer incentives and perks to their VIP members and other prospective VIP gamblers. Recent law enforcement action has demonstrated the scale at which some junket operators have been able to serve as international bank-like entities, providing a variety of underground financial services including credit issuance, currency exchange and multi-currency payment and settlement solutions, remittances, and extra-legal debt collection mechanisms which have been exploited by organized crime.

258 UNODC *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat*, 29; UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud*, 68.

259 Ibid.

260 Ibid., 30.

261 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud*, 68.

262 UNODC, *Inflection Point*, 10.

263 Ibid., 37.

264 Ibid., 11.

265 Virtual assets (or crypto assets) are defined by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as any digital representation of value that can be digitally traded, transferred or used for payment. It does not include digital representation of fiat currencies. For more information, see <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/topics/virtual-assets.html>.

266 Chainalysis, *The 2025 Crypto Crime Report* (2025), <https://go.chainalysis.com/2025-Crypto-Crime-Report.html>.

267 Chainalysis. 2025. The 2025 Crypto Crime Report. Proliferation financing refers to financing in support of the illegal manufacture, acquisition, or use of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

268 Dark net content is not indexed and consists of overlaying networks that use the public Internet but require unique software, configuration, or authorization to access. For more information, see <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/a-primer-on-darknet-marketplaces>.

269 US Department of Justice, "International Crypto Vendor Sentenced for Money Laundering Conspiracy," 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edky/pr/international-crypto-vendor-sentenced-money-laundering-conspiracy>.

270 Chainalysis, *The 2025 Crypto Crime Report*, 4. In the context of cryptocurrencies, the term "on-chain" refers to activities and transactions that occur directly on the blockchain (see below) and that are permanently recorded.

271 The technology behind several cryptocurrencies, blockchain is an open, distributed ledger that can record transactions between two parties efficiently, and in a verifiable and permanent way.

272 *Hawala* is a Money or Value Transfer Service (MVTS) that has been used for centuries, originating in the Middle East and South Asia. It is overwhelmingly used for legitimate purposes, including personal and business financial transactions and for the sending of remittances by migrants and refugees to family members. For more information, see UNODC, *The Hawala System: Its operations and misuse by opiate traffickers and migrant smugglers* (2023).

273 US Department of Justice, "International Crypto Vendor Sentenced for Money Laundering Conspiracy," 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edky/pr/international-crypto-vendor-sentenced-money-laundering-conspiracy>.

274 Privacy coins are cryptocurrencies designed for anonymity and reduced traceability.

275 Europol, *Cryptocurrencies: Tracing the Evolution of Criminal Finances*, Europol Spotlight Report (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

276 Stablecoins are cryptocurrencies that peg their value to a real-world asset, typically the US dollar.

277 Chainalysis, *The 2025 Crypto Crime Report*, 6.

278 Mixers are services that combine and redistribute multiple users' crypto assets so as to obscure the trail back to the assets' original source.

279 Bridges are platforms that facilitate the transfer of assets and data from one blockchain ecosystem to another.

280 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud* (2024).

281 Ibid.

282 Ibid.