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## **Call for Research Proposals**

### **Organized Crime and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean**

#### **A Research Network Project RG-K1198**

#### **1. Background**

Organized crime is a complex and evolving challenge for development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Broadly understood as the coordinated and sustained involvement of criminal groups in illicit activities for economic gain, it encompasses a wide range of manifestations—from drug trafficking and illicit mining to cybercrime and extortion—and operates at multiple levels, from local actors to transnational networks.

Organized crime notably affects a complex security landscape in LAC. Although the region is home to less than 10% of the world's population, it accounts for approximately one-third of global homicides. A significant portion of the population reports being directly affected by crime, perceptions of insecurity have increased markedly over the past decade, and trust in law enforcement remains low across many countries in the region. Within this environment, organized crime plays an increasingly prominent role: criminal organizations are estimated to be responsible for about half of all homicides in the Americas (UNODC, 2023), and their presence is acutely felt at the local level. More than half of households in LAC report the existence of nearby criminal groups (Uribe et al., 2022), and in many contexts, organized crime is perceived as the leading threat to citizen security.

The consequences extend beyond violence. Recent estimates place the direct costs of crime at 3.44 percent of regional GDP, equivalent to nearly 80 percent of public education spending (Pérez-Vincent et al., 2024). Yet these figures likely capture only a portion of the overall impact. Organized crime can weaken state institutions, deter investment, restrict access to services, and contribute to environmental degradation.

In light of these issues, addressing organized crime is not only a matter of citizen security but also a development imperative. The IDB Group's Institutional Strategy identifies citizen security, the rule of law, and institutional capacity as key areas of operational focus in achieving the broader goals of reducing poverty and inequality, bolstering sustainable growth, and addressing environmental degradation (IDB, 2023). The Bank's Fragility, Conflict, and Criminal Violence Framework reinforces

the importance of tailored, subnational approaches that address the interplay between insecurity and institutional weakness (IDB, 2024). In addition, recognizing the need for a coordinated regional response to this challenge, the IDB launched the Alliance for Security, Justice, and Development in December 2024. This initiative, endorsed by 22 countries, focuses on protecting vulnerable populations, strengthening security and justice institutions, and disrupting illicit markets and financial flows. It works on priorities identified by member countries and provides a platform for collaborative action against organized crime.

Furthermore, to support this agenda, the IDB has partnered with CAF and the World Bank under a Memorandum of Understanding that includes a joint commitment to advancing research and policy dialogue on criminal violence in the region.

While some aspects of organized crime are well documented, important knowledge gaps remain. In this context, research can play a vital role by helping to more precisely understand the dynamics of organized crime—its local expressions, underlying patterns, and scope. It can also help to identify the risk and protective factors that shape its emergence and persistence. Research is essential to assess the differentiated impacts on specific populations and the mechanisms through which those impacts occur. Finally, it can contribute by evaluating institutional vulnerabilities and the effectiveness of existing policies. Taken together, these insights are critical for informing the design of targeted, preventive, and context-sensitive strategies across the region.

This Call for Research Proposals is part of these efforts. It seeks to generate high-quality, policy-relevant evidence to enhance understanding of organized crime in LAC and to support effective, context-sensitive responses to one of the region's most pressing challenges.

## **2. Objectives**

This Call for Research Proposals aims to advance knowledge on the dynamics, drivers, consequences, and policy responses related to organized crime in LAC. While progress has been made in documenting the presence and impacts of organized criminal activity, substantial knowledge gaps remain. These gaps limit the ability of policymakers and practitioners to design effective, evidence-based strategies that can prevent its emergence and persistence, reduce harms, build institutional resilience, and promote inclusive development.

We invite proposals that address one or more of the following four research axes. Particular priority will be placed on studies with a strong empirical focus, especially those exploring causal relationships and leveraging administrative data, survey instruments, or innovative data sources. While the emphasis is on well-identified causal analysis, we also welcome high-quality descriptive and other empirically grounded approaches.

## **2.1. Understanding the Landscape of Organized Crime**

Although organized crime is a longstanding issue in the region, many of its forms remain underexplored or poorly understood, particularly at the subnational level. Monitoring is essential not only to track changes over time but also to assess the effectiveness of policies and anticipate emerging challenges. Better metrics are also needed to capture the multiple and sometimes competing impacts of organized crime. Focusing narrowly on certain outcomes—such as levels of violence—may overlook other forms of harm, including coercive control, economic capture, or institutional erosion. Robust and multidimensional monitoring systems are essential to understanding these trade-offs and evaluating whether interventions are achieving their intended effects.

Guiding questions include the following:

- What are the most effective methods for mapping and monitoring the presence and influence of organized crime at the subnational level?
- How can administrative data, geospatial tools, and non-traditional sources (e.g., social media, news scraping, remote sensing) be used to improve detection and measurement?
- What new indicators can help capture the full range of organized crime impacts beyond violence—such as social control, corruption, or disruption of public services?
- How do different manifestations of organized crime evolve over time, and what early warning indicators can inform policy responses?
- What frameworks or data strategies can help assess the unintended consequences or trade-offs of policy interventions aimed at combating organized crime?

Potential studies include the following: the use of administrative, geospatial, or unstructured data (e.g., social media, news) to monitor trends in the presence, activity (e.g., criminal markets), influence, and violence associated with criminal groups; as well as survey experiments comparing different tools for measuring exposure to and perceptions of organized crime, or assessing supply and demand within criminal markets, among other topics.

## **2.2. Identifying Causes, Drivers, and Protective Factors**

Understanding what contributes to the emergence, persistence and expansion of organized crime is critical for its prevention and response. This includes not only structural and institutional factors but also localized, social, and economic dynamics. Identifying risk and protective factors at the individual, household, or community level can help tailor interventions and target resources more effectively.

Guiding questions include the following:

- What individual, social, institutional, or geographic factors are associated with the presence or growth of organized criminal groups?
- What are the causal mechanisms through which organized crime embeds itself in communities or state institutions?
- How do local dynamics—such as social cohesion, trust, or informal governance—affect the expansion or containment of organized crime?

- What protective factors—at the individual or collective level—support resilience to the influence of organized crime?

Potential studies include causal analyses at the individual, community, or subnational level to assess the impact of potential drivers (such as inequality, unemployment, or governance quality) on the presence or expansion of organized crime or illicit markets; or predictive models to identify changes in trends related to criminal group presence, activity, influence or violence.

### **2.3. Assessing the Development Impacts of Organized Crime**

The economic and social costs of organized crime go well beyond immediate security concerns. Its impacts can be felt across a range of development outcomes—from education and health to investment, and public service delivery—often affecting vulnerable groups most severely. Understanding how these costs are distributed across populations and transmitted through different channels is essential for designing effective mitigation strategies. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms can also help identify which sectors and institutions are most affected and therefore most relevant to a comprehensive response. Research in this area can strengthen the evidence base for coordinated, multisectoral approaches at both national and local levels.

Guiding questions include the following:

- How does organized crime affect development outcomes such as education, health, investment, or public service delivery?
- What are the mechanisms through which organized crime imposes costs on communities and institutions?
- How are different population groups—such as youth, women, or rural populations—differently affected?
- How can impacts be quantified more accurately at national or subnational scales?

Potential studies include causal estimates of organized crime’s impact on outcomes such as health, education, and economic activity, among others, with attention to underlying mechanisms and variation across populations or locations.

### **2.4. Evaluating Policy Responses and Institutional Effectiveness**

Ultimately, the goal of research in this area is to inform more effective and accountable policies. As governments and communities respond to organized crime, it is critical to evaluate what has worked, what has not, and why. This includes not only direct interventions (e.g., policing, social programs) but also the institutional factors that shape policy implementation and sustainability.

Guiding questions include the following:

- What policies or programs have shown promise in disrupting organized crime or reducing its harms?
- How can policy effectiveness be measured in contexts with limited or contested state presence?
- What institutional capacities or coordination mechanisms influence the success or failure of responses?
- How do policy responses interact with broader governance, legal, and social systems?

Potential studies include impact evaluations of policy interventions (such as social prevention programs, law enforcement strategies, or institutional reforms) and causal analyses linking institutional capacity or coordination to their effectiveness.

### 3. Content of the Research Proposal

This research initiative will fund original empirical studies that address one or more of the key research axes outlined above. Proposals should aim to generate new, policy-relevant evidence on the dynamics, causes, consequences, or policy responses related to organized crime in LAC. Studies must clearly articulate their central research question, the empirical strategy to be employed, and how the findings will contribute to the design or evaluation of public policy in the region.

We particularly encourage proposals that:

- Rely on quantitative methods, with a preference for designs that allow for causal inference;
- Use original or administrative data, or innovative sources such as geospatial or unstructured data;
- Address underexplored subnational dynamics and population heterogeneity;
- Explore the mechanisms through which organized crime affects development outcomes or is shaped by institutional factors;
- Include impact evaluations of policy responses where feasible.

Proposals should describe:

- a) The research question and its policy relevance;
- b) The data to be used and their availability;
- c) The empirical strategy, including identification methods where applicable;
- d) A preliminary outline of expected findings or contributions;
- e) The timeline and proposed budget.

### 4. Selection Criteria

**Only research institutions from LAC** may present proposals for this research network. Although we expect to fund 6-7 proposals, the final number of proposals accepted will depend on the quality of the submissions and the proposed budget of each proposal. As noted above, the proposed budgets will be evaluated considering the scope of work and the resources required to complete it.

Since this *Call for Research Proposals* is open for a limited period, we encourage the submission of short proposals (no more than 8 pages, but potentially fewer) that:

1. Identify a clear and policy-relevant research question related to the dynamics, drivers, impacts, or policy responses to organized crime in LAC, and explain how answering it will contribute to the design or evaluation of public policy.
2. Describe the originality of the proposed study and how it builds on or departs from existing literature. Proposals should explain whether the contribution lies in new data, empirical strategy, context, or application.

3. Clearly specify the data sources to be used and their accessibility. If data are not yet in hand, proposals should discuss the feasibility and timeline for access or collection. Demonstrating credible access to data and capacity for empirical implementation is essential.
4. Present some initial ideas about the key components of the proposed paper (conceptual framework, analysis of trends, review of empirical studies, discussion of policy implementations in the region and potential policy recommendations).
5. The proposal should describe how the findings of the research can inform policy recommendations in LAC.
6. Proposals must be submitted in **English**.
7. The decisions of the evaluation committee will be final and unappealable.

The selected teams must be willing to receive and respond to comments from the advisors of the Call for Research Proposals and from the IDB Group specialists throughout the execution of the study, as well as to participate in the discussion seminars.

Final papers will be considered for dissemination as IDB working papers or technical notes, depending on the approach followed and the nature of the methodology and analysis performed. This will require a peer review process prior to publication in the IDB Working Paper series. Authors have the option to submit the manuscript for publication to the journal of their choice after publishing the document as an IDB Working Paper or IDB Technical Note, but they must mention that the study was financed with the support of the Latin America and the Caribbean Research Network of the Inter-American Development Bank.

All raw data and properly documented programming code that produced results should be submitted with the final draft. The project coordinators may explore the possibility of having the studies published in an academic journal, in which case they would be subject to a system of standard peer review. Proposals may include suggestions for further dissemination of the final version of the study.

## 5. Proposal Submission

Interested **research institutions** should submit a proposal no later than **July 31, 2025** through the **Web Submission Form** and using the **provided proposal form** (do not modify the form and respect the word limit specified. Use the blank space to enter answers in each section).

To apply, teams must download and complete the application form (in English) and submit the duly completed form through the **Web Submission Form**. For any questions or issues regarding the submission of a proposal, please contact Elton Mancilla at [eltonma@iadb.org](mailto:eltonma@iadb.org). Proposing research institutions should be based in the LAC region. U.S. and European institutions do not qualify. However, researchers from these regions can participate in research teams from proposing institutions. Specialist from the IDB Group can participate as well but they are not eligible to receive compensation for their contribution.

The research team should include the names of all the researchers and evidence of their ability to meet the objectives of the investigation (including previous relevant experience) and the curriculum vitae (CV) of each participant (maximum 3 pages per person). The CV should highlight experience

and publications about the subject of this Call for Research Proposals. All members of the research team must be citizens of one of the **48 IDB member countries** and must not have family members currently working at the IDB Group up to the fourth degree of consanguinity and second degree of affinity, including spouse. It should be noted that research teams may include specialists from the IDB Group. It is crucial to note that any change in the composition of the research team after proposal selection must be approved by the IDB, but the principal investigator of the proposal should lead the entire project until its full completion. Unauthorized changes to the team may be grounds for termination of the agreement.

## 6. Coordination

The project will be coordinated and administered by the Research Department (RES/RES) and Citizen Security Division (IFD/CIS) of the IDB. The scientific committee consists of Carlos Scartascini (RES/RES), Santiago Perez Vincent (IFD/CIS), Ernesto Schargrotsky (UTDT-IDB), Marcela Melendez (World Bank), Verónica Frisancho (CAF), and Chris Blattman (University of Chicago).

## 7. Activities and Schedule

During the execution of the research proposals, two discussion seminars (conducted in English) will be held to present preliminary versions of the studies and receive feedback from external advisors and IDB Group specialists. These seminars are designed to foster ideas for coordination and exchange among the participating researchers or research teams. The intermediate and final drafts of the research study will be submitted to a peer review process by the external advisors of this Call for Research Proposals. The final product will be the presentation and approval of the publishable version of the research study, along with a response letter to all comments received in the various peer reviews, with the aim of publication in the IDB Working Paper series or Technical Notes depending on quality. In all cases, the final dataset employed in the analysis will be delivered to the IDB along with the research paper and replication codes (an exception may be made in the case of proprietary data, in which case the team should provide the appropriate documentation. In those cases, however, providing the replication code and data at some level of aggregation may nonetheless be required). The tentative schedule of activities is as follows:

- **July 31, 2025:** Due date for **receiving proposals**. Institutions should ensure that the complete documentation is submitted through the web submission form mentioned in Section 5.
- **September 1, 2025:** Announcement of **selected research proposals**.
- **October 1, 2025: First Discussion Seminar** with the research leaders of the studies for the purpose of presenting their proposals and the methodologies to be used in the studies, as well as brief preliminary discussions.
- **November 20, 2025:** Due date for receiving a **first draft** of the research paper. This draft should include an outline of the paper, a draft discussion of the related literature, a description of the context and institutional background, a detailed description of the methodology, and a description of the data to be used.
- **April 2026: Second discussion seminar** of the project to discuss updated drafts of the research papers.

- **July 1, 2026:** Due date for receiving a **second draft** of research papers and delivery to the IDB of complementary support documents utilized in the research paper, incorporating the changes associated with the feedback received from the coordinating team during the Second Discussion Seminar.
- **October 30, 2026:** Due date for receiving a **final version** of research papers, and delivery to the IDB of any further versions of the datasets utilized in the research paper. Research papers must follow the **IDB Manual of Style** for working papers. Studies that are of good quality at this stage will be considered for publication in the **IDB Working Papers series**.

## 8. Financial Contribution and Payment Schedule

The IDB will contribute up to **US\$30,000** or the equivalent in local currency (the final budget will depend on the scope and complexity of the proposal) as a contribution to the total budget of each study. The funds provided must be used exclusively for financing research activities, collecting primary data, and/or accessing secondary data sources. The IDB reserves the right to revoke this Call for Research Proposals at any time prior to the signing of the agreement. Payment schedule is as follows:

- **20 percent** within 30 calendar days upon the date of the last signature of the agreement between the IDB and the institution.
- **30 percent** within 30 calendar days upon receiving and approval by the IDB of the **first draft of the research**. This outline should provide a clear roadmap for the research and demonstrate that data collection and analysis are feasible.
- **20 percent** within 30 calendar days upon receiving and approval by the IDB of the **second draft** of the research paper.
- **30 percent** within 30 calendar days upon receiving and approval by the IDB of the **final research paper** and delivery to the IDB of the databases and code utilized in the study.

## 9. References

- Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). (2023). IDB Group Institutional Strategy: Transforming for Scale and Impact.
- Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). (2024). Framework to Support Populations in Situations of Fragility, Conflict, and Criminal Violence, 2024–2027. Washington D. C.: IDB.
- Perez-Vincent, S. M., Puebla, D., Alvarado, N., Mejía, L. F., Cadena, X., Higuera, S., & Niño, J. D. (2024). The Costs of Crime and Violence: Expansion and Update of Estimates for Latin America and the Caribbean (IDB-MG-1244). Inter-American Development Bank.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2023). UNODC Homicide Statistics. <https://dataunodc.un.org>
- Uribe, A., B. Lessing, N. Schouela et al. 2022. Criminal Governance in Latin America: An Initial Assessment of its Extent and Correlates.