

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Mexico, organized criminal groups (OCGs) did two things conventionally thought to be in tension: they handed out grocery boxes and offered loans to residents shut in by the lockdown, and they threatened and beat those who ventured outside. Current accounts of criminal governance treat these as alternatives chosen by different kinds of groups: one that dominates its territory builds support among its population, while one fighting rivals for turf coerces it ([Arias, 2017](#); [Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020](#); [Magaloni et al., 2020](#)). Provision signals control; violence signals its contestation. By this logic, criminal competition should push groups toward coercion and away from provision. Yet during the pandemic groups employed both strategies jointly, and as we show, they were prevalent where criminal competition was highest. When do criminal groups govern through provision and coercion?

We preregistered this expectation: that criminal competition would increase coercive control and decrease provision of goods. We tested it using an online survey with an embedded list experiment, fielded to a national sample of Mexicans in late 2021¹. The first half of the prediction holds: coercive control rises with competition. The second does not: OCGs keep providing goods where competition is high, rather than pulling back. This unexpected pattern, we argue, is a clue rather than a nuisance. It suggests that social control—the regulation of people and their resources ([Jentzsch and Steele, 2023](#), 453)—should be distinguished from the territorial control with which it is usually conflated: rather than following mechanically from territorial position, it responds to two distinct logics. Coercion follows a logic of territorial contestation: it deters rivals and holds ground, and rises where turf is disputed. Provision follows a

¹This survey and instrument received IRB approval.

logic of legitimacy competition: it wins the population whose acquiescence, information, and support groups need. It too rises with competition, because the social base is what rivals are fighting over. Winning residents over is a way of winning turf—so groups facing rivals reach for carrots and sticks alike. We conclude that social control is not derivative of territorial control but analytically distinct from it.

Criminal governance is widespread: by one estimate, thirteen percent of Latin Americans have witnessed it, most often as the provision of local order ([Uribe et al., 2026](#)). A growing literature across political science, economics, criminology, and sociology has established how OCGs impose rules on members and residents alike ([Lessing, 2020](#))—regulating elections and policy ([Arias, 2017](#); [Albarracín, 2018](#); [Trejo and Ley, 2020, 2021](#)), extraction and markets ([Moncada, 2022](#); [Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020](#)), and social life ([Herrera, 2023](#); [Zubillaga, Hanson and Sánchez, 2022](#); [Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022](#)). Yet the social dimension remains less well understood and hard to observe. Economic and political controls are visible and their effects tangible, while social control is experienced in silence and has been documented mostly through ethnography, whose inferences are bound to particular places ([Barnes, 2025](#); [Moncada, 2022](#)). Recent survey instruments have begun to measure social control systematically ([Magaloni et al., 2020](#); [Blattman et al., 2024](#); [Osorio and Brewer-Osorio, 2025](#)); we contribute to this effort, using the pandemic as a natural magnifying glass for a phenomenon that is too subtle to capture at scale.

The paper makes three contributions. Theoretically, we separate social from territorial control and specify two logics that link criminal competition to the choice between coercive and non-coercive strategies. Methodologically, we introduce a survey instrument that measures the prevalence of social control at national scale, and a new municipal-level measure of criminal competition that travels beyond this study, built from an external record of which organizations operate where rather than from homi-

cide counts or perceptions of control. Substantively, by examining a moment when the state's attention was consumed by a health emergency, we obtain a sharper view of criminal social control.

Mexico is a crucial setting for these questions. Its criminal organizations vary widely in size, structure, and strategy, and over three decades their number has multiplied—from five cartels that peacefully divided the country to more than thirty organizations today, six national cartels and over two dozen regional groups, now fighting for territory (Trejo and Ley, 2020; LantiaIntelligence, 2020). That variation in competition is what lets us assess its role in shaping governance. During the pandemic, newspapers reported OCGs imposing some form of control, coercive or otherwise (Berenzon Flores, 2021), in at least sixteen of the thirty-two states, giving us the geographic variation our argument requires. Our findings contribute to those in other cases exploring the impact of the pandemic on criminal organizations' behavior, notably Brazil and Colombia (Davis and Hilgers, 2022; Bonilla-Calle, Nascimento and Arias, 2022).

The paper proceeds as follows: we begin by reviewing existing research on criminal governance and what the pandemic reveals about how it operates. We then present our argument and hypotheses, followed by our research design, and findings—including where they depart from what we expected—before developing the two logics of social control that they illustrate.

Criminal governance: Concepts, practices, and comparative evidence

The study of criminal governance is still nascent, only recently have enough studies of its manifestations accumulated to support further conceptual development. Some work focuses on the rules organized crime imposes on its own members (Gambetta,

2009; Skarbek, 2011), whereas other turns attention to the capacity of OCGs to shape electoral processes (Arias, 2006; Albarracín, 2018; Arias, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020). Political control coexists with other efforts to impose rules on populations, from conflict resolution and social mobilization to taxation, goods provision, and the regulation of local economies (Blume, 2021; Lessing, 2021; Magaloni et al., 2020; Moncada, 2022; Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022). Despite some differences, there is general agreement that criminal governance refers to the imposition of rules to regulate behavior (Holland and Rios, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Lessing, 2020; Feldmann and Luna, 2022; Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022; Herrera, 2023), and that governance spans different spheres of life: economic, political, and social.

Economic controls attempt to regulate licit and illicit markets: defining who may work, where, and when; setting prices; collecting taxes and extortion quotas. They serve organized crime's drive for rent maximization, pushing groups to expand into and exploit both markets (Moncada, 2022; Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022; Estancona and Tiscornia, 2025). Extortion is a recurring mechanism across Latin America, with significant effects on victimization and resistance (Moncada, 2020). With the exception of Magaloni et al. (2020), our understanding of this dimension rests largely on ethnographic work (Moncada, 2022).

Political controls span attempts to regulate elections—from campaigns and candidate selection (Albarracín, 2018) to the composition and mobilization of the electorate (Arias, 2006)—and to shape policymaking, especially in security and justice (Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017). Organized crime's interest in the political sphere derives largely from its need for protection (Snyder and Duran-Martinez, 2009; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Trejo, Tiscornia and Albarracín, 2026): a government willing to overlook behavior outside the law, whether by halting investigations, sharing strategic information, or crafting rules that favor criminal activity is essential to criminal survival ². The targeting

²There are multiple examples of state protection in Latin America, from the emblematic case of the

of candidates and officials, as well as disclosure of their ties to organized crime, have yielded a rich record of a vast repertoire of political tools ([Albarracín, 2018](#); [Blume, 2017](#); [Trejo and Ley, 2020](#); [Trudeau, 2022](#)).

Social controls regulate the behavior of people who live in proximity to OCGs. Because residents can report criminal activity to the authorities, OCGs seek to control what they say and do—limiting what the state can discover, reducing police attention, and weakening resistance. These practices are diverse: rules of coexistence and conduct, from dress and mobility to mediation and conflict resolution; the regulation of sexual and intra-family violence; control over local information; the provision of food, medicine, and loans; and the organization of local events ([Lessing, 2021](#); [Bonilla-Calle, Nascimento and Arias, 2022](#); [Briceño-León, Barreira and Aquino, 2022](#); [Fuentes and Alves, 2022](#); [Zubillaga, Hanson and Sánchez, 2022](#); [Trejo and Skigin, 2024](#)). Studies of social control have relied on qualitative immersion in particular towns or cities, capturing interactions too complex for any single indicator ([Barnes, 2025](#); [Moncada, 2022](#)). Survey instruments and multi-method designs have also begun to assess the incidence, logic, and effects of social control ([Magaloni et al., 2020](#); [?](#); [Blattman et al., 2024](#); [Osorio and Brewer-Osorio, 2025](#)).

Criminal governance does not require all three types of control, in any fixed order or form. The presence of one type is often suggestive of a group's broader capacity to impose rules, and sometimes of other, less visible controls. As [Durán-Martínez \(2024\)](#) argues, criminal governance is not a matter of presence or absence but of degree—of depth, complexity, and the combination of practices a group prioritizes.

These controls can be exercised through coercive or non-coercive means. Close collaboration with authorities during elections has been documented alongside brutal

joint participation of organized crime, municipal authorities, and the military in the disappearance of 43 students in Guerrero, Mexico, to the explicit support of the national Venezuelan government and local authorities to *colectivos* in the January 23 zone in Caracas, Venezuela ([Briceño-León, Barreira and Aquino, 2022](#); [Zubillaga, Hanson and Sánchez, 2022](#)).

attacks on candidates and officials (Trejo and Ley, 2020; Austin, 2024); entanglement and negotiation with social organizations coexist with a rising toll of attacks on social leaders (Arias, 2006; Berg and Carranza, 2018; Blume, 2021; Rosen and Cruz, 2022; Albarracín and Wolff, 2024). Even at the neighborhood level, groups may provide goods in one place and terrorize residents in another (Barnes, 2025). This variation, and the difficulty of capturing it—especially for social control—motivates our central question: what explains the diversity in how criminal governance is established and exercised? We take up that question for the case of social control. The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for organized crime to impose rules on communities—through violence to control mobility and goods provision to build legitimacy and protection. We ask what conditions favor coercive over non-coercive control during the lockdown, and develop our hypotheses in the section that follows.

Criminal governance and territorial control amid COVID-19

Existing research has established that criminal governance along economic, political, and social dimension is analytically separable even if empirically entangled (Arias, 2017; Lessing, 2021; Trejo and Ley, 2020). Yet the social dimension has too often been collapsed into a more familiar variable: territorial control. In the study of wartime and criminal order alike, an influential tradition treats the regulation of civilian life as a function of who holds the ground: degrees of territorial control are thought to drive civilian collaboration, and with it the depth and character of social regulation (Kalyvas, 2006; Arjona, 2016). In this view, social strategy is not chosen independently of territorial position—it is determined by it. Our own pre-analysis plan inherited this logic.

Following [Olson \(1993\)](#)’s “stationary bandit,” where a single organization enjoys uncontested territorial control, time horizons lengthen and interest shifts toward stability and the cultivation of a compliant, even supportive, population ([Magaloni et al., 2020](#)). Overt violence is costly in this setting—it draws state attention and erodes the support on which extraction and protection depend. As a result, the monopolist has both the means and the motive to provide goods and services: social recognition within the community enables direct distribution through existing networks, and the absence of rivals lets the group capture the resulting goodwill without competing for credit. Where control is contested, time horizons shorten and predation prevails ([Arias, 2017](#); [Magaloni et al., 2020](#); [Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020](#); [Trejo and Ley, 2020](#); [Moncada, 2022](#)): resources flow to weapons, bribes, and the logistics of confrontation, competing groups use threats and attacks to secure contested protection from public officials and candidates ([Trejo and Ley, 2021](#)), and violence becomes the default instrument for asserting dominance over both turf and residents ([Trejo and Ley, 2020](#); [Barnes, 2025](#)). Goods provision remains available in principle, but it is also more expensive under competition—resources are already stretched financing turf wars—and harder to execute, since it depends on the established community relationships that violent contestation disrupts. Under this logic, coercive and non-coercive social control are substitutes selected by territorial position: monopolists provide, competitors coerce. This is the logic our pre-analysis plan formalized into predictions.

The pandemic did not halt these dynamics; it altered the environment in which they played out. The closure of borders and communication channels limited access to precursor chemicals, mobility restrictions curtailed street sales and trafficker–consumer contact, and the broader economic slowdown shrank both legal and illegal markets, pushing OCGs to diversify in search of income: from bank robbery into wildlife trafficking and cybercrime, among other activities ([Davis and Hilgers, 2022](#); [Muggah and](#)

Dudley, 2021), including efforts to infiltrate public funds (Aziani et al., 2021; UNODC, 2020), as extortion became harder to collect under stay-at-home orders (Bullock and Pellegrino, 2021). At the same time, an overloaded state, absorbed by the health emergency, struggled to enforce lockdowns and deliver assistance (Kotzé, Lloyd and Antonopoulos, 2023). OCGs filled this gap. Drawing on the Armed Non-State Actor COVID-19 Response Monitor³, Breslawski (2022) shows that groups worldwide combined three tools of social control: providing food and medicine, easing extortion, and imposing mobility restrictions, similar to other instances when criminal groups replaced the state: the Yakuza distributed relief after Japan's 2011 tsunami, and the Gulf Cartel delivered food after Hurricane Ingrid struck Tamaulipas in 2013 (UNODC, 2020).

Mobility restrictions—the pandemic's signature form of control—could serve either type of group, but their enforcement would differ: a monopolist risks little by keeping residents home gently, whereas for competitors, violence is already the currency of control, and imposing confinement by force draws little additional state attention beyond what the contest already invites. This logic is compatible with Barnes (2025) who traces the suppression of provision under competition to the existential threat rival groups pose, rather than to shortened time horizons.

The pandemic also offers an unusual vantage point on these dynamics—a natural magnifying glass for a phenomenon that is ordinarily difficult to observe. Social control is typically subtle, experienced in silence, or folded into everyday life, which is why it has been documented largely through micro-level ethnography (Barnes, 2025; Moncada, 2022; Herrera, 2023). The pandemic shed light into this phenomenon in at least two ways: it escalated the population's need for order and assistance, increasing the payoff to any group willing to supply them, and it distracted the state, lowering

³This instrument includes information on a diverse set of actions implemented by 74 Armed Non-State Actors operating in 32 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

the cost and risk of conspicuous social control. The same shock that made social regulation more valuable to criminal groups made it more visible to observers. Mobility restrictions, meanwhile, constrained how far groups could reach; expansion, where it occurred, was therefore more likely to be intensive than extensive. Groups privileged a deepening of the social base in and around accessible territory and at contested margins, rather than moving into distant fronts.

These considerations yield the two expectations we pre-registered. Groups locked in territorial contests had reason to enforce lockdowns violently, to signal strength to rivals and residents and consolidate contested ground; groups enjoying monopoly had the opportunity and incentive to raise their standing by meeting residents' immediate needs. Formally:

- H1.** Violent enforcement of lockdown measures is more prevalent in places contested by criminal groups.
- H2.** Goods provision measures are more prevalent where there is low territorial contestation among criminal groups.

Both hypotheses rest on one assumption worth stating plainly: that territorial position is what selects between coercive and non-coercive control, so that a group's choice of tool can be read directly off where it stands in the contest for turf. There is a different way to draw this same map, however. [Jentzsch and Steele \(2023, 453–455\)](#) distinguish two axes that the control-first tradition runs together: groups may control territory, people, or both, and social control—the control of people and their resources—is analytically separate from territorial control. In this view a group need not hold territory to exercise social control, and holding territory neither requires nor guarantees an interest in the people in it. This does not mean the two axes are unrelated: the Mexican organizations we study—cartels and mafias locked in territorial competition—are territorially oriented, so their social control is predominantly, though not definitionally,

bound up with territorial ends. Nor is it at odds with a point that [Barnes \(2025\)](#) presses: physical presence is what makes governing a population possible at all; it only questions the further step of treating competitive dominance as what fixes social strategy. A group must be present to act on a population, but need not prevail over rivals to choose how.

We do not adjudicate between these two readings in advance. The substitution logic behind H1 and H2 is testable on its own terms, and, as we show below, our results give us reason to revisit it.

Criminal governance in Mexico

Mexico's criminal organizations offer a useful setting for these hypotheses, given their documented reach across all three spheres of governance. Existing studies document the economic controls OCGs exercise in Mexico—extortion, the distortion of agricultural prices, the exploitation of natural resources—primarily as ways to diversify income and finance territorial conflict ([Dube, García-Ponce and Thom, 2016](#); [Magaloni et al., 2020](#); [Moncada, 2022](#); [Herrera and Martínez-Alvarez, 2022](#)). But some of the most salient manifestations of criminal governance have emerged in the political sphere, where violence is systematically deployed—particularly during elections—to shape the composition of government. Between 2007 and 2012, [Trejo and Ley \(2020\)](#) recorded 311 direct attacks by organized crime on elected officials, candidates, party leaders, activists, and public servants. Using the same method, [DataCívica \(2024\)](#) registered nearly 1,200 such attacks between 2018 and 2024, and identified a new pattern—attacks on security forces and relatives of political figures—amounting to roughly 800 additional incidents. About eighty percent of the attacks are concentrated at the municipal level. Overall, organized crime's pursuit of political control has intensified sharply over time, from just over 300 attacks in five years to nearly 2,000 in six.

Among the most public forms of social control in Mexico is violence against journalists, activists, and community leaders—crucial channels of information and mobilization. Though no comprehensive database exists, reports point to a rising trend of attacks on human rights defenders ([ColectivoEPUMX, 2023](#)), environmental activists ([QuintoElementoLab, 2023](#)), journalists ([Trejo and Skigin, 2024](#)), and religious leaders ([Petri and Flores, 2021](#)). Beyond attacks on social actors, Mexican OCGs have provided goods during holidays ([Reforma, 2021, 2022](#)). Other social controls—conflict resolution, the imposition of behavioral rules—are less public; the case of Michoacán, however, reveals OCGs regulating sexual and domestic violence and policing socialization in public spaces ([Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022](#)).

The pandemic further exposed these controls across Mexico. At its height, newspapers reported OCGs operating a range of governance mechanisms in at least sixteen of the thirty-two states—delivering groceries and other goods in many communities while forcibly imposing lockdowns in others ([Berenzon Flores, 2021](#)). Because violence is costly and groups could have chosen to exercise control through non-coercive means, the resort to it is puzzling. Following our framework, we examine whether the choice was shaped by the context of competition or monopoly each group faced at the time of the lockdown.

Research Design

To map the strategies OCGs used during the pandemic, we fielded an online survey to a national sample of Mexicans in November 2021. Given the presence of OCGs and their capacity for violence, we embedded a list experiment to minimize risk to respondents and reduce social desirability bias. List experiments can reveal the incidence of violent and non-violent interactions between residents and OCGs without asking respondents to disclose them directly ([Blair and Imai, 2012](#)).

Our outcome of interest is variation in social control across municipalities—non-violent (e.g., goods provision) and violent (e.g., lockdown enforcement). Measuring its extent requires information on both the individuals who encountered criminal groups and the location and behavior of those groups. This study contributes systematic measurement of where different strategies were used, complementing existing descriptive evidence.

To identify OCGs’ strategies and locations, we first drew on newspaper reports, which informed the experimental design. To construct realistic treatments—ones resonant with situations respondents would plausibly have encountered ([Seawright, 2021](#))—we assembled a database of roughly 100 articles from 30 local and national Mexican outlets describing OCG–resident interactions throughout 2020, and used them to write the sensitive items ([Pérez Bentancur and Tiscornia, 2022](#)).

The design consists of a list experiment with two baseline lists and four sensitive items; respondents report how many, but not which, of a set of activities they experienced over the past 12 months. Two sensitive items capture non-coercive strategies—distributing groceries (despensas) and giving loans—and two capture coercive ones—assault and threats used to force people to stay home. We also asked the same four items directly, allowing us to compare list-experiment estimates against direct reports. Table 1 summarizes the design.

Table 1 Experimental Design

Baseline List 1	Baseline List 2	Sensitive Items
I tried to eat healthier foods	I watched more TV	I saw criminal groups distributing groceries in my neighborhood
I drank more alcohol than before	I learned to value my family	I saw criminal groups giving loans to residents in my neighborhood
I worked more than before	I had disagreements and arguments with people who live in my house	I saw criminal groups assault people who were outside their home
I had more free time to look after my family	I chatted more with my friends	I saw criminal groups threaten people so they would stay home

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and distributed through Netquest. Qualtrics’s

geolocation is essential for identifying geographic variation in OCG strategies. Online administration was also a viable option in Mexico given high internet penetration:⁴ it reaches areas where polling agencies hesitate to send enumerators, and lets respondents report sensitive experiences without disclosing them to an interviewer. Netquest, a survey-data service with infrastructure across Latin America, improved the precision of our measures and helped us access hard-to-reach populations while providing samples balanced on relevant sociodemographic features.

Following [Magaloni et al. \(2020\)](#), we stratified the sample into high-, medium-, and low-violence groups. High-violence comprises the minimum set of municipalities accounting for 25 percent of homicides against young men in Mexico in 2019 ($n = 11$); medium-violence comprises the minimum set that, combined with high-violence, accounts for half of such homicides ($n = 36$); all others fall in the low-violence group. We aimed to divide 3,000 respondents equally across the three strata, but recruitment constraints in high-violence municipalities left the final sample slightly unbalanced (Table 2). Figure 1 maps the sampling frame and final recruitment, which extends across the Mexican territory and includes key high- and medium-violence locations in the North, Center, and South.

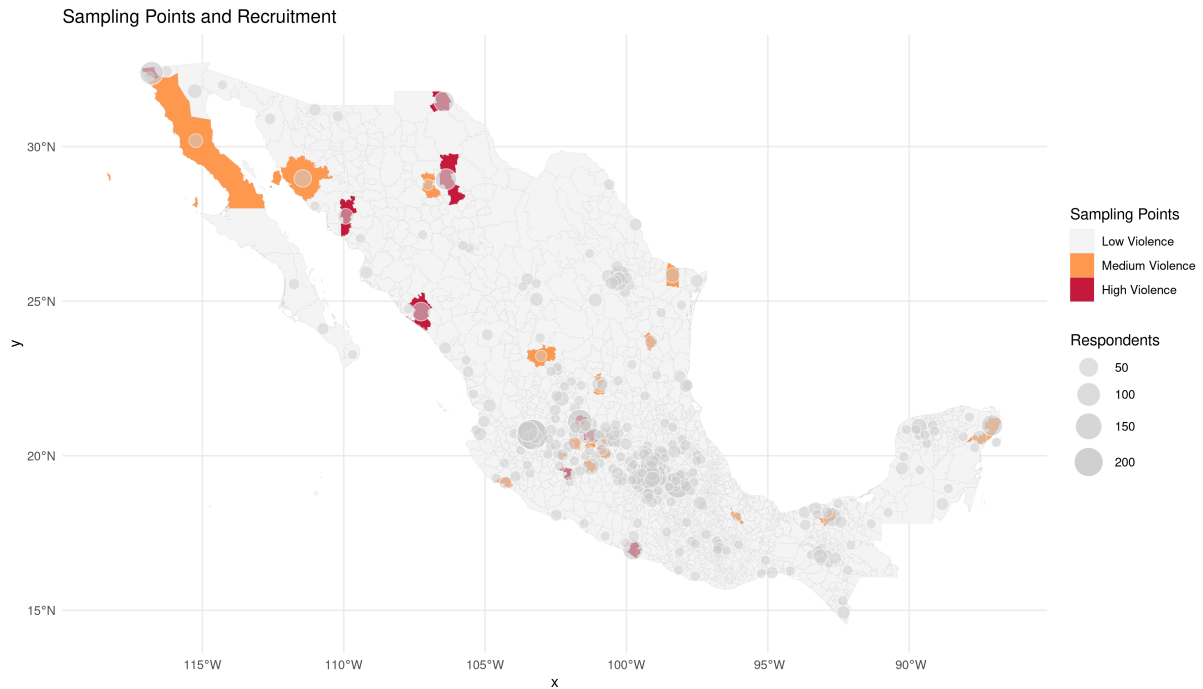
To determine sample size we used DeclareDesign ([Blair et al., 2019](#)); using [Magaloni et al. \(2020\)](#) as a benchmark for effect size, we calculated that a minimum of 2,500 respondents would be required for 80 percent power. The wide geographic coverage lets us capture the range of governance strategies, which we argue are shaped by territorial control and competition, both of which also vary across space. We evaluate whether treatment effects—coercive and non-coercive alike—vary with municipal institutional and socioeconomic features, interacting treatment assignment with these variables.

⁴According to the 2020 National Survey on Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Households (ENDUTIH), conducted by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), an estimated 84.1 million people in Mexico used the internet, representing 72% of the population aged six and older.

Table 2 Balance of Respondents across Levels of Violence

Violence Levels	High	Medium	Low
Respondents	686	1017	1319

Figure 1 Geography of survey sampling and recruitment



Note: Graphical representation indicating the stratification of the sampling strategy, and the recruitment of respondents in each Mexican municipality

Measuring criminal competition

Estimating criminal competition precisely is difficult. Given the absence of public data on criminal groups from Mexican agencies, *Lantia Intelligence* has built the most comprehensive dataset to date, drawn from open sources—newspaper reports, government press releases, investigative journalism, and specialized security news—the dataset covers events ranging from *narcomantas* (public messages left by criminal organizations) to inter-group confrontations. Lantia’s analysts read each report and discard

those unrelated to actual criminal activity (an arrest, for instance, does not imply that a group operates where it occurred).⁵ Unlike automated approaches, the dataset is built by coders who have become security experts over more than a decade of work.

Lantia distinguishes three types of organizations, defined as follows: cartels, confederations of mafias and gangs with regional or national reach, whose member organizations operate independently but in coordination with one another; mafias, regional organizations built on family or friendship networks that often serve as private armies for cartels; and gangs, with only local presence, involved in high- and low-impact crime and typically working for higher-level organizations.

A raw count of these organizations would misstate competition, since it treats all groups as fighting equally for territory regardless of structure and capacity. Instead, given the vertical organization of the Mexican criminal market—cartels, mafias, and gangs (Trejo and Ley, 2020)—we build a graded measure. Because cartels are the primary actors, most oriented toward territorial control and most capable of violence, we first register cartel competition (Lantia’s data show a maximum of two cartels per municipality in 2020). We then add mafia competition, since mafias also fight for territory, whether subcontracted or independent (Trejo and Ley, 2020). We exclude gangs: their activities vary widely and are not always embedded in organized-crime structures; their expansion is often endogenous to cartel competition (a cartel deploying gangs against a rival); and their counts vary enormously (reaching 28 in Puebla City, where organized crime is far less prominent than in places like Solidaridad, Quintana Roo, where criminal competition is fierce).

This logic yields nine levels of competition (Table 3), capturing the range of configurations between cartels and mafias. The scheme acknowledges that competition can arise from multiple cartels or mafias, that mafias may vie for a larger role even under a cartel monopoly, and that alliances between cartels and mafias can create imbalances

⁵See Appendix for more information on Lantia’s dataset.

and trigger territorial battles. Note that the “no competition” category (level 0) does not imply the absence of criminal groups; it indicates only that no intense competition or organized-crime violence was identified. We contend that this operationalization improves on measures that proxy competition with homicide counts, since high homicides can be a symptom of competition as well as of unrelated factors (Yashar, 2018); it also refines measures centered solely on cartel competition (Alcocer, 2025).⁶

In taking criminal competition as an objective, municipal-level property, our measure also differs from survey-based approaches that record respondents’ perceptions of territorial control (Osorio and Brewer-Osorio, 2025). Each choice carries a cost. A perceptual measure avoids imputing municipal aggregates to individuals, but cannot easily separate competition from the fear it generates; our measure accepts a level-of-analysis tradeoff in exchange for an external, behavior-based record of which organizations operate where.

Table 3 Levels of Criminal Competition

Number of cartels	Number of mafias	Level of Competition
0 = no cartel competition	0 = no mafia competition	0 = no criminal competition
0 = no cartel competition	1 = mafia monopoly	1 = mafia monopoly
0 = no cartel competition	2 or more = mafia competition	2 = mafia competition
1 = cartel monopoly	0 = no mafia competition	3 = cartel monopoly without mafia
1 = cartel monopoly	1 = mafia monopoly	4 = cartel monopoly with additional mafia support
1 = cartel monopoly	2 or more = mafia competition	5 = cartel monopoly with potential mafia competition
2 = cartel competition	0 = no mafia competition	6 = cartel competition without mafia
2 = cartel competition	1 = mafia monopoly	7 = cartel competition with unbalanced mafia support
2 = cartel competition	2 or more = mafia competition	8 = cartel competition with mafia competition

⁶The Appendix includes further analysis of how our categorization maps onto the geography of homicides in Mexico and other details that support our operationalization.

Modeling strategy

Our final sample totaled 3,022 respondents. We first estimate individual exposure to OCG strategies, then test whether criminal competition drives variation in those strategies. Using the list experiments as outcomes, we estimate:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_t \cdot T_t + \sigma_k \cdot X_{ik} + \lambda_m \cdot Z_{im} + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ij} is the number of items selected by respondent i in list j , T_t denotes the treatment arms, and X_{ik} and Z_{im} are individual- and municipal-level covariates. At the individual level, beyond demographics (age, gender, education), we control for conditions that shape reliance on criminal assistance during the pandemic—current income, income change over 12 months, employment, and welfare receipt—as well as victimization and perceived community cohesion. At the municipal level, we control for indicators of criminal activity in 2020: following [Calderón et al. \(2015\)](#), the firearm-homicide rate among young men (15–39), which most closely tracks organized crime-related deaths; following [Jarillo et al. \(2016\)](#), a measure of turf-war exposure; measures of state presence (municipal police, federal pandemic support, military operations); and the population-adjusted COVID-19 case rate. To assess social desirability bias ([Blair, Coppock and Moor, 2020](#)), we compare list-experiment estimates against direct-question estimates.

Results

We first examine the extent of social control reported during the pandemic, then test our hypotheses about the role of competition, and finally present interactive models that unpack the determinants of OCG behavior.

Exposure to OCGs during the COVID-19 pandemic

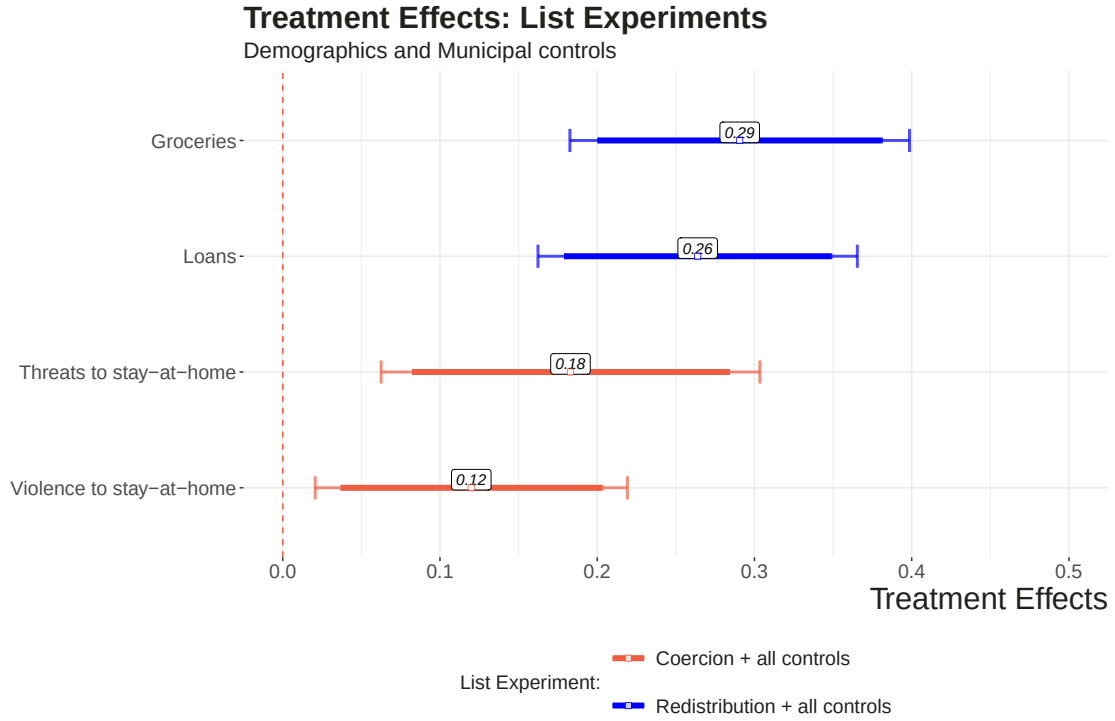
Figure 2 displays exposure to each strategy, controlling for individual and municipal covariates. Non-coercive strategies are more prevalent than coercive ones: on average, 29.1 percent of respondents reported seeing OCGs distribute groceries and 26.4 percent reported seeing them give loans, while 18.3 percent saw OCGs threaten people to keep them home and 12 percent saw them assault people who left their homes. This echoes [Magaloni et al. \(2020\)](#), who find that “narco help” in Mexico is roughly twice as prevalent as coercive strategies such as extortion. These results demonstrate the prevalence of criminal social control across Mexico and reveal that its non-coercive forms are especially widespread.

A common question is whether a direct question would suffice to gauge exposure to OCG strategies. Here that question is especially important, since respondents may be unwilling to disclose interactions with criminal organizations. Figure 3 compares list-experiment and direct-question estimates. The gap is considerable: direct questions cut estimated exposure roughly in half, confirming that criminal activity is a sensitive topic respondents hesitate to report, and that the list experiment substantially mitigates this underreporting.

The effect of territorial competition on OCG strategies

To test our hypotheses, we examine the effect of criminal competition—measured through our nine-level scheme—on each of the four coercive and non-coercive strategies. We split the criminal competition measure into three categories: low (0–2), medium (3–5), and high (6–8) criminal competition. This is a substantive decision rather than a methodological one: the cut points reproduce meaningful distinctions from our measurement strategy. Low competition captures municipalities where no cartel operates—at most, mafias hold or contest local turf; medium competition captures munici-

Figure 2 List Experiment: Exposure to OGCs strategies

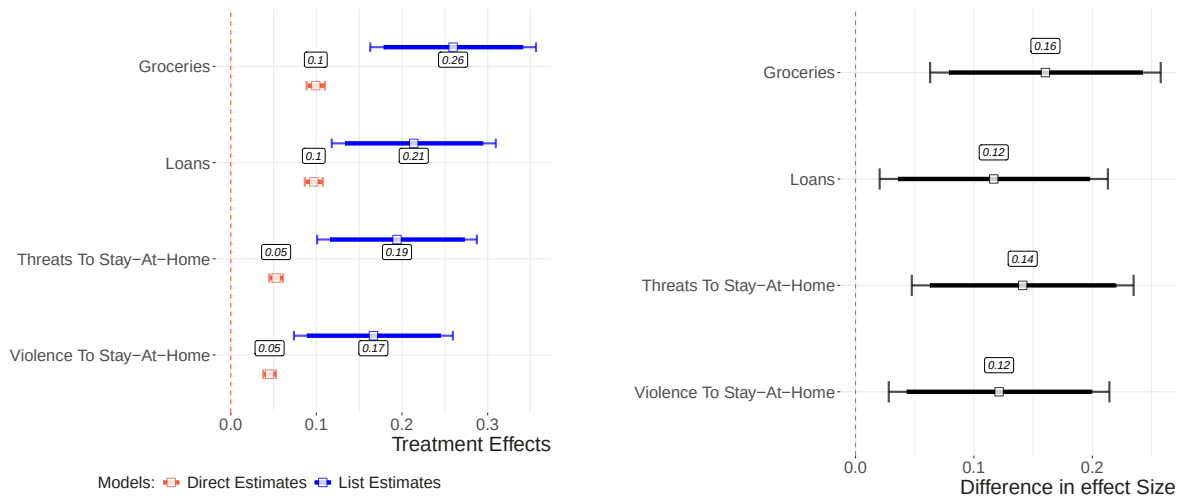


Note: Results come from linear models using respondents' choices in a list experiment as the dependent variable. Point-estimates indicate the share of respondents (x-axis) who answer positively to the sensitive item in each list experiment (y-axis). We add individual- and municipal-level controls to the models, as specified in equation (1). Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. See SI Appendix, Table 4 for full numerical results

palties under cartel monopoly, with varying degrees of mafia support; high competition captures municipalities where cartels contest territory.⁷ The models interact each list treatment with the categorical measure, taking low competition as the reference category, and estimate the marginal effect of each sensitive item within each configuration. All models include the full set of individual- and municipal-level controls, with standard errors clustered at the municipality level.

⁷Methodologically, a linear specification would force the difference between a mafia monopoly and mafia competition (levels 1 and 2) to equal the difference between cartel monopoly and open cartel competition (levels 5 and 6)—an assumption our theory does not support. Nevertheless, we present results using a linear specification for criminal competition in the Appendix (Table 7 and Figure 3).

Figure 3 Sensitivity Bias: Comparing List Experiment and Direct Questions



a) Direct vs List Experiments

b) Estimate Differences

Note: List experiments results are as reported in Figure 2. The direct estimate comes from post-treatment survey questions asking directly about the exposure to each OCG strategy. Respondents were asked to answer "Yes" or "No" to the following question items: *"During the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico in your neighborhood, have you seen organized crime groups: (a) distributing groceries; (b) giving loans; (c) physically assaulting people who were outside their homes; (d) threatening people so they would not leave their home."* See SI Appendix, Table 5 for full numerical results

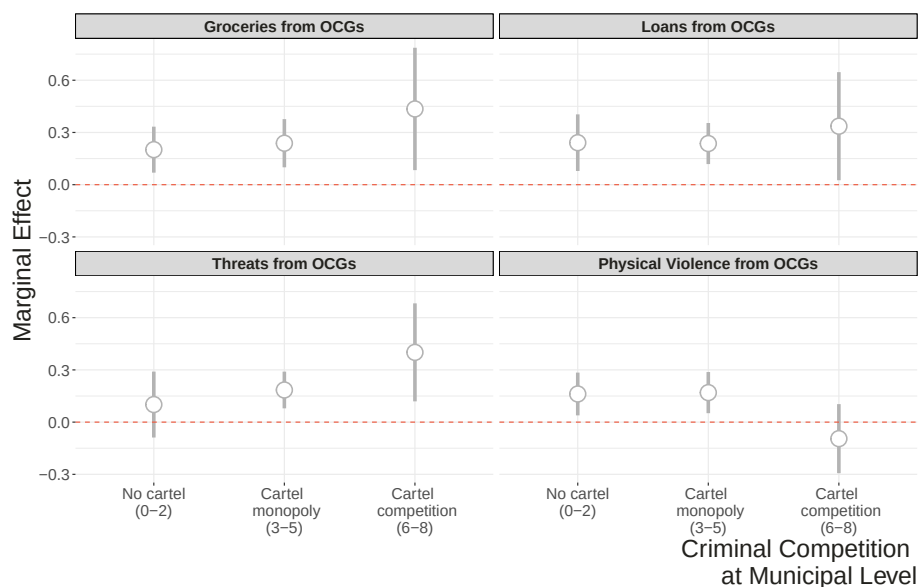
Figure 4 presents the conditional marginal effects by levels of criminal competition for each OCG strategy.⁸ The results are only partially consistent with our expectations. First, the variation in the use of coercive and non-coercive strategies seems to concentrate in high-competition areas; no strategy shows a statistically significant variation between low and medium competition. However, in high-competition municipalities, where no cartel monopoly exists, exposure to threats from OCGs—a coercive strategy—rises from 10 to 40 percent (interaction = 0.30, $p = .09$), while exposure to grocery offers from OCGs—a non-coercive strategy—is 20 percent under low competition and 44 percent under high competition. That gap is large in magnitude but imprecisely estimated, and it does not reach statistical significance (0.23, $p = .22$). At a minimum, the

⁸See regression table with full numerical results in the Appendix, Table 8.

finding shows that OCGs do not pull back on non-coercive control when competition rises, contrary to what H2 anticipated. Loans from OCGs remain flat across the three levels. The marginal effect for exposure to physical violence trends reduces across competition levels; this effect is not distinct from zero at conventional levels.

These findings are only partially consistent with H1. Criminal competition does not trade non-coercive control for coercive control: threats rise in areas where competition between OCGs is high, while provision remains high, instead of declining. This patterns raises the possibility that the two are not substitutes but strategies answering to different logics. We did not anticipate this complementarity, we return to it in the discussion. Furthermore, the use of coercive strategies does not seem uniform either, as episodes of physical violence do not rise with competition, while threats seem to substantially increase.

Figure 4 Prevalence of OCGs strategies conditional on OCGs competition



Additional analysis: the state and the local context

Beyond our pre-registered hypotheses, we estimate a set of interactive models to unpack other possible determinants of OCG behavior; we report these additional analyses as exploratory. To facilitate interpretation, we combine the four items into non-coercive and coercive strategies, and examine how each responds to municipal characteristics: the local COVID-19 case rate and state pandemic assistance; state presence and capacity (number of military operations in 2021, police per 100,000, and municipal tax revenue per capita); the ongoing context of criminal violence (a turf-war indicator adapted from [Jarillo et al. \(2016\)](#)); and survey-based aggregates of criminal presence, community cohesion, and victimization. Table 4 presents the results.

Focusing on the interaction between each strategy and its moderator, a clear asymmetry emerges: only non-coercive strategies vary systematically across municipalities. As military operations intensify, non-coercive control declines—consistent with OCGs avoiding the attention that visible goods provision might attract. Following the same logic, non-coercive control also declines as municipal tax revenue per capita rises: where the state is more capable of providing public goods, there is less room or need for OCGs to fill that role, and less legitimacy to be gained by doing so. Conversely, where state authorities extended visible pandemic assistance, non-coercive control expands—suggesting that a conspicuous show of state provision pushes OCGs to mirror it to remain relevant in the eyes of the community. Coercive strategies show no comparable sensitivity. As prior work suggests, criminal violence depends not on state capacity but on state-sponsored protection networks, which can emerge at any level of state capability ([Snyder and Duran-Martinez, 2009](#); [Trejo and Ley, 2020](#)), and it is resilient to social interventions unless matched by strong local ties ([Berg and Carranza, 2018](#)); coercive social control, moreover, serves tactical ends—enforcing control, deterring rivals—that are largely indifferent to the state.

Table 4: Regression Models: Interactive Effects

	Intercept		Sensitive Item		Sensitive Item x Moderator	
	Est.	p	Est.	p	Est.	p
Non-Coercive x Perceived Presence of OCGs	4.3229*	0.0275	0.3770**	0.0022	-0.0510	0.2365
Coercive x Perceived Presence of OCGs	4.4039*	0.0411	0.0465	0.6909	0.0450	0.3216
Non-Coercive x Community Cohesion	4.2827*	0.0302	0.3825**	0.0068	-0.0774	0.3123
Coercive x Community Cohesion	4.4230*	0.0407	-0.0122	0.9348	0.0994	0.2290
Non-Coercive x Crime Victimization	4.3803*	0.0258	0.2649*	0.0411	-0.0075	0.8811
Coercive x Crime Victimization	4.4266*	0.0411	0.0692	0.5679	0.0396	0.4219
Non-Coercive x Covid Rate	4.1886*	0.0326	0.3328***	<1e-04	-0.0028	0.1084
Coercive x Covid Rate	4.3788*	0.0428	0.1575**	0.0073	0.0001	0.9505
Non-Coercive x Military Operatives	4.3234*	0.0283	0.2742***	<1e-04	-0.0162+	0.0640
Coercive x Military Operatives	4.3718*	0.0428	0.1527***	0.0009	0.0045	0.5577
Non-Coercive x State Aid	4.3987*	0.0274	0.2119***	<1e-04	0.3422*	0.0368
Coercive x State Aid	4.3042*	0.0476	0.1366***	0.0008	0.2243	0.1458
Non-Coercive x Firearms Homicide Rate	4.4592*	0.0235	0.2717***	<1e-04	-0.0003	0.5585
Coercive x Firearms Homicide Rate	4.4434*	0.0415	0.1397*	0.0124	0.0003	0.6676
Non-Coercive x Turf War	4.5531*	0.0197	0.2588***	<1e-04	-0.6163	0.2939
Coercive x Turf War	4.4046*	0.0419	0.1537***	<1e-04	0.3638	0.4741
Non-Coercive x Police Presence	4.3968*	0.0253	0.2141**	0.0076	0.0362	0.5899
Coercive x Police Presence	4.4109*	0.0416	0.1442*	0.0142	0.0172	0.7487
Non-Coercive x Taxes per capita	5.9125*	0.0247	0.4196***	<1e-04	-0.0001**	0.0045
Coercive x Taxes per capita	6.7792**	0.0072	0.1435*	0.0261	0.0000	0.7289

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Each row is one model interacting the pooled non-coercive or coercive index with the row moderator. All models include the remaining municipal moderators, binned criminal competition (no cartel / cartel monopoly / cartel competition), and the full set of individual- and municipal-level controls (omitted). OLS with standard errors clustered at the municipality level.

Discussion: Two logics of social control

Our results partially confirm the first of our registered expectations and disconfirm the second. Consistent with H1, coercive social control, measured through threats, rises with competition: where more organizations contest a municipality, residents are more likely to report threats used to enforce confinement. Physical violence, however, does not respond uniformly to criminal competition. Our second hypothesis does not hold. Non-coercive control—groceries and loans—is not mitigated by competition. Groups facing rivals do both.

Rather than interpreting the results as a null, we understand them as an advancement over the framework that generated H2. That framework treated non-coercive provision as what monopolists do instead of fighting—goods as determined by settled territorial position. The pattern is inconsistent with that assumption, and—because this was our registered test—its disconfirmation is itself the strongest evidence that social strategy is not determined by territorial position. A decoupling of territory from population would lead us to expect persistent non-coercive control even when territory is unsettled. If social control does not require territorial control, groups can cultivate a population even where they have not secured the turf, and competition gives them a reason to do so.

We take this to indicate that coercive and non-coercive social control respond to two distinct logics. Coercive social control follows a logic of territorial contestation: it deters rivals and seizes ground, is deployed where turf is disputed, and is largely indifferent to the state. Non-coercive social control follows a logic of legitimacy competition: it aims to win the population—the acquiescence, information, and support that form the foundation of criminal governance—wherever that social base is contestable, whether the rival is another criminal group or the state. Because the social base is

what territorial rivals fight over, this logic predicts provision will rise with competition, not fall: winning residents is a means of winning turf. The finding that criminal groups compete with the state in supplying aid, and pair that provision with coercion rather than choosing between them, is in line with [Osorio and Brewer-Osorio \(2025\)](#), who document both patterns across four countries during the pandemic. Our online survey in Mexico also converges with their findings on the second point in particular. The substitution logic made social strategy be determined by territorial position; ours makes it a tool wielded from any position, whose selection follows a logic of its own.

This interpretation is in line with [Barnes \(2025\)](#), for whom active rival competition should extinguish provision. The tension turns on what our measure captures. The Lantia index registers the presence of rival organizations—closer to what Barnes calls latent competition than to the active, existential conflict for which he expects provision to collapse—and latent competition is the condition under which his account allows coercion and provision to coexist. Consistent with the boundary his theory draws, the interaction of our turf-war indicator with non-coercive control is negative where competition turns acute, though not statistically distinguishable from zero, so we take it as suggestive rather than a test. This is also what lets us hold apart two senses of territorial control—physical presence, which makes governing a population possible, and competitive dominance, which does not fix what a group does with that possibility. Presence is not what varies where several groups are active at once; dominance is. That provision continues, and threats rise, precisely where no group has secured the turf indicates that groups need to be present to act on a population, but need not prevail to do so.

Our exploratory analyses sharpen the distinction further. The two strategies respond differently to the state: only non-coercive control varies with state capacity and state assistance, while coercive control does not. If social strategy simply read off terri-

torial position, we would expect the state to move both strategies together, or neither; the two-logic view explains why it moves one and not the other. Violence rises and falls with the territorial contest and depends on protection networks rather than state capacity (Snyder and Duran-Martinez, 2009; Trejo and Ley, 2020; Berg and Carranza, 2018), whereas provision varies with a legitimacy contest in which the state is itself a competing supplier. The asymmetry is exploratory but it points back at our registered claim: it is hard to reconcile with anything but a social control that has a logic that territory cannot supply.

That the state moves provision at all speaks to a debate about whether state and criminal governance substitute for one another. Our two state findings appear, at first, to conflict: structural capacity (municipal tax revenue) reduces criminal provision, while conspicuous crisis assistance increases it. They pull together once we distinguish a standing governance environment from a salient act of provision during an emergency. Where the state reliably supplies public goods, there is little legitimacy for a group to win by supplying them too; where it makes a punctuated show of assistance, it raises the stakes of a contest the group can enter, and groups mirror it so as not to be outbid. This distinction speaks to Blattman et al. (2024), whose Medellín experiments find that increasing state services does not crowd out gang governance. Our crisis-assistance result agrees: more state provision need not reduce criminal provision, and here it increases it. Our capacity result adds a margin their design does not isolate—where the state’s advantage is structural rather than performed, and the good in question is fungible material aid rather than the dispute resolution and security in which gangs hold comparative advantage, provision does crowd out. The state has two faces here, and holding both explains a pattern that neither substitution nor pure coexistence anticipates.

A competing interpretation deserves attention: where state and criminal provision

rise together, the correlation might reflect not competition but entanglement—criminal actors embedded in local governance, co-producing or colluding with state provision through shared political networks ([Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza, 2014](#)). In Mexico, where criminal violence rests on protection networks reaching into state institutions, such entanglement is real, likely on the coercive side—but it fits our pattern poorly. Generalized entanglement would predict coordination across both strategies, not just non-coercive provision’s response to state assistance, and it cannot explain why more capable states see less criminal provision. Competition with comparative advantage accounts for both crowd-out and mirroring; entanglement accounts for neither cleanly, so while we cannot rule it out, a legitimacy contest fits the pattern better than collusion alone.

Seen together, these results recast the pandemic’s role and return us to social control itself. The pandemic amplified both logics at once—raising the value of the social base by deepening residents’ needs, and lowering the cost of competing for it by absorbing the state’s attention—so groups invested social control on both fronts, even where territory was contested. That they reached for social control when territory was most in play is consistent with the foundational status we ascribe to it: when the ground is uncertain, the first move is to secure the population on which every other form of control depends. The distinction we have drawn between social and territorial control is, in the end, what the whole pattern turns on—competition structuring coercion, the state moving provision, groups competing through provision—none of which a theory that reads social strategy off territorial position can accommodate.

We advance this two-logic account as an interpretation prompted by our findings, not a hypothesis we tested. The persistence of provision under competition, and the asymmetric responsiveness of the two strategies to the state, were not anticipated in our pre-analysis plan; the moderator analyses were not pre-registered and are ex-

ploratory. We nonetheless think the pattern is clear enough, and sufficiently at odds with a pure territorial-position account, to warrant the reframing—and to motivate designs, in future work, built to test the two logics directly.

Conclusion

Drawing on prior research and an extensive review of news reports on the pandemic in Mexico, we examined two strategies of criminal social control—coercive and non-coercive—through a list experiment fielded to a national sample. Following existing work, we expected violent strategies to dominate where competition was high and provision to dominate where it was low. Our hypotheses were only partly confirmed: coercive control does rise with competition, but non-coercive actions continue, and OCGs keep supplying goods where competition is high.. We read this not as noise but as evidence that social control is not a readout of territorial position—and that coercive and non-coercive strategies respond to two logics, one of territorial contestation and one of legitimacy competition. The asymmetric responsiveness of the two strategies to the state, visible only in the non-coercive case, is the clearest sign of that distinction.

The project makes a central contribution: social control is an understudied dimension of criminal governance, hard to observe and measure, and we bring it into view. We do so, first, by mapping its variation with a research design suited to a phenomenon that direct survey questions cannot adequately capture—our comparison of direct and indirect measures shows list experiments to be a valuable tool for studying OCG behavior in Mexico. Second, we contribute a new measure of criminal competition. Rather than proxy competition with homicide counts—which can reflect much besides inter-group conflict—or with respondents’ perceptions of control, we build a graded, municipal-level index from an external record of which organizations operate where, distinguishing configurations of cartels and mafias across nine levels of competition.

This measure travels beyond our study, offering an objective, behavior-based alternative for capturing a variable central to the study of criminal governance. And third, we argue for treating social control as foundational rather than derivative: the layer of acquiescence, information, and support on which economic and political control are built.

Criminal governance is a fast-moving phenomenon whose transformation poses theoretical and empirical challenges that demand interdisciplinary work and a wide methodological toolkit. This project contributes to a growing agenda that will benefit from further comparative analysis. Because our survey was conducted during the pandemic lockdown, we hope subsequent work can also illuminate how that extraordinary moment reshaped organized crime—and whether the two logics we identify here persist once the magnifying glass is removed.

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