Internal Displacement in the Context of Organised Criminal Violence
Volume 2

Internal Displacement Caused by Violence Perpetrated by Organised Criminal Gangs and Networks: Drivers and Dynamics

This second volume in our series on 'Internal Displacement in the Context of Organised Criminal Violence' looks at how violence involving organised criminal groups and networks causes significant displacement, above all in Latin America and the Caribbean. The first part of this paper examines the drivers and structural factors that underpin violence and risk from organised criminal groups and how this manifests to cause displacement, with a focus on the role of the state, either by its action or inaction. The second part examines what displacement by violence and risk from organised criminal groups look like, describing distinct displacement dynamics that ensue and the general lack of effective responses.

The initial five papers in this series draw on research by experts at the Internal Displacement Research Programme of the Refugee Law Initiative (RLI), working collaboratively with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in relation to her 2025 Call for Inputs on this theme.

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Victorie Knox

Part I. Factors underpinning criminal violence and displacement caused by criminal groups

Locating violence

Many of the countries most deeply affected by violence involving organised criminal groups and networks have violent historical backgrounds, which may include more recent political repression, dirty wars or civil conflict, or past colonial domination. Violence linked to criminal groups is particularly prevalent in Mexico, northern Central America, and parts of the Caribbean and South America. While certain countries and cities are more impacted than others, within these, those areas most affected are often the most marginalised and deprived areas, although some areas may be considered strategically attractive for criminal activities (such as drug trafficking or production, or border areas for smuggling) or have resources of economic interest. Within countries and cities that are widely understood to be affected by organised criminal networks and groups – for instance, Mexico and San Pedro Sula in Honduras – some areas are safe and relatively unaffected, some are moderately affected while other areas are affected by extreme levels of violence. In this respect, rather than specific geographical locations, areas most affected by criminal activities are usually distinguished by their demographic characteristics – as places of social exclusion and an absence of effective state presence – or by their strategic importance to criminal groups.

Local dynamics and political changes can lead to sudden and perhaps unpredicted and volatile increases in violence and incursions into previously unaffected or less affected areas. This happens with incursions of criminal groups into new areas or markets, or when criminal groups battle for control over territory, economic activities or local illicit markets. There may also be rifts or power struggles within organised criminal groups or changes to their activities that cause areas to be affected by new or higher levels of violence, leading to displacement of families, households and communities, including incidents of mass displacement, resulting in the breakdown of the social fabric and abandoned 'ghost towns'. Most recently, significant increases in gang violence have occurred in Haiti, Trinidad and parts of Ecuador and Mexico.

Gang violence has exploded in Haiti since 2021 amid political instability, particularly in the capital Port-au-Prince, causing extremely high levels of

violence and homicides as well as a breakdown of essential services. A million people have fled violence, although conditions in displacement are dire and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are vulnerable to further violence – especially gender-based violence – and secondary displacement. In Ecuador, alongside displacement caused by gang violence, extortion and forced recruitment, thousands of households have been forcibly displaced as criminal groups seize homes to establish themselves and their operations. Recently, violence and displacement have risen in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, as large criminal groups – notably the Sinaloa Cartel and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – battle for control of strategic areas for illicit trafficking in a region also affected by conflict over natural resources. Rifts between two entities of the Sinaloa Cartel in the latter part of 2024 have caused extreme violence to erupt in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, resulting in widespread displacement of individuals and communities as the groups battle amongst themselves and with state security forces.

Underlying drivers and structural factors

A core underlying driver of the establishment of violent criminal groups is a lack of effective state presence, from the perspectives of both security and social provision. This creates vacuums in which criminal groups can establish and assert their authority, enforcing it with violence. In this context, such groups usurp key elements that are normally monopolised by the state: use of force, taxation and cross-border trading.

The establishment of violent criminal groups has deep roots in the absence of effective state presence and services in marginalised communities and the political, economic, and social marginalisation and exclusion of people who live there, especially the young. Poverty, a lack of opportunities, job insecurity and entrenched inequality and disadvantage also make people vulnerable to involvement in criminal activities as a survival strategy, for both economic and protection reasons, and this may be heightened by family breakdown or parental absence because of work or emigration. Within this context, in addition to finding recruitment opportunities, criminal groups may become important social actors, providing services to local communities that the state has failed to deliver. This may range from providing healthcare, housing, and jobs in

Sinaloa, Mexico to controlling household utilities in northern Central America.

Patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes contribute to the extreme machoism of organised criminal groups and to the intersections of gang violence with GBV and SOGI violence. Within this context, boys and young men are most vulnerable to forced recruitment and homicide. Gangs consider women and girls within their territory as their 'property', systematically using threatened or actual sexual violence, sexual torture and rape to terrorise and control, to punish 'disobedience' and to force compliance, and sexually exploiting and abusing minors.

While access to illicit markets and activities – such as the trafficking of drugs, weapons and human beings, drug manufacture, local drugs markets, and people-smuggling – is attractive to criminal groups, their activities are not limited to these, and to conceptualise them solely in this manner would not be conducive to developing effective responses. Gangs operate widespread extortion within areas under their territorial control, and large criminal groups in Mexico also collect dues, known as *piso,* on the transit of licit and illicit goods through their territory – or from smaller groups conducting certain criminal activities within it. Groups are increasingly involved in ostensibly legitimate commercial activities – including cattle-ranching, timber extraction and natural resource exploitation – to launder money and generate income.

The role of the state

Although the perpetrators of criminal violence are non-state actors, the role of the state must not be underestimated. This is particularly so in contexts where there is entrenched corruption and strategic links between organised crime and officials that enable criminal groups to operate and flourish. Organised criminal groups rely on a weak rule of law to develop and operate freely, but the state role in this is not just passive. To maintain power, criminal groups require state acquiescence through impunity or collaboration through corruption, and ensure this through strategies of coercion, collusion, infiltration, force or threats. This can produce its own distinct violence, which may become more extreme in times of political change and elections, as demonstrated, for instance, in

targeted violence against candidates in elections in various states of Mexico.

Impunity in the context of organised crime and corruption derives from three intersecting factors. Firstly, in the context of a weak rule of law, corrupted state agencies and criminal gangs' code of silence (known in central America as *ver, oír y callar* or 'see, hear and shut up'), there is a reluctance to report gang crime because of a fear of violent reprisals, amplified by the fear of information being leaked to gangs by corrupt or coerced state agents. Secondly, there can be practical challenges to effective responses, such as institutional weakness and a lack of capacity to respond to the volume of widespread violence. Thirdly, the corruption of state institutions and authorities prevent the meaningful pursuit of justice, undermining people's confidence in the authorities to provide effective protection or guarantee confidentiality. Nonetheless, these problems must be understood as part of much greater state failings in terms of their responsibility to prevent violent crimes, punish offences and provide legal remedy.

Adverse impact of security responses

State security operations and responses to organised crime can aggravate situations, restrict civil liberties and displace criminal groups to previously unaffected areas. Repressive responses to organised crime and gang activity may adversely cause further displacement. Young people living in gang-affected areas in El Salvador and Honduras flee arbitrary harassment, police violence, and death squads that conduct 'social cleansing' by killing suspected gang members, while other residents flee after night-time raids, fearing persecution either from gangs or the police. In both Honduras and El Salvador, increased raids and security operations in gang-affected urban areas have led gangs to move to previously unaffected rural areas, which in turn has caused some rural residents to flee. Furthermore, security-based responses to generalised violence do not address the root causes of such violence, such as inequality, poverty, exclusion and discrimination, or equip people for non-violent conflict resolution. While the recent crackdown on criminal gangs in El Salvador has resulted in reduced violence, many actions taken under this

repressive response do not comply with international human rights norms, and the sustainability of this approach remains to be seen.[1]

Part II. Displacement dynamics caused by criminal violence

Fleeing threats

Displacement is often a by-product of criminal activity, threats and violence, with people fleeing to escape increased risk. This may be due to rising levels of violence locally or a targeted threat, where people flee to escape the violent enforcement of gang demands. The triggers of displacement include murder attempts or violent assaults, the murders of close relatives or partners, death threats, forced recruitment, extortion, sexual exploitation of minors, and witnessing crimes. People targeted by gangs have heightened security concerns before and after displacement and may be pursued by gangs to secure their demands or mete out violent punishment. The level and immediacy of risk and the extent to which risk persists after displacement depend on how serious gangs perceive such 'infractions' to be.

Not complying with gang demands (e.g. extortion) or resisting their authority (e.g. refusal to collaborate) can incur actual or threatened violence and death threats, often provoking displacement. Resisting forced recruitment is an affront to gang authority and usually punished with murder, with risks extending to family members. Being a witness, reporting a crime or cooperating with authorities is a violation of the gang rule of silence, and those who cooperate with authorities are viewed as traitors. They and their family are at risk of murder, which continues after displacement as gangs might pursue such people relentlessly. Children and adolescents targeted for forced recruitment, collaboration or sexual exploitation in Central America may be sent to live with relatives in another part of the country, forced into self-containment (*autoencarcelización,* i.e. living in hiding),[2] or flee with their family.

Targeting of distinct profiles

People with certain profiles may be ordered to leave because a criminal group does not want them in the area, and others may be forced to flee because of violence or threats related to these. This may be an innate

characteristic that conflicts with the machoism of criminal groups, such as their sexuality. For instance, LGBT+ people may be ordered to leave gang territory in northern Central America.

Others may be targeted because of their work, with certain groups at particular risk of being targeted with harassment, threats and violence, including journalists working on issues such as corruption and organised crime, human rights defenders, and people working on violence prevention and youth projects. Police and military officers and their families may be forced to flee. People in certain professions may be disproportionately targeted for extortion and, therefore, resort to displacement in response. This includes transport workers (bus drivers, taxi drivers), small business owners and street traders, as well as school teachers, who may also be forced to allow gangs access to schools for criminal activities and falsify grades. Others may be extorted for their professional services, such as nurses and doctors who are forced to give clandestine care to members of criminal groups. People with these distinct profiles may experience difficulties in re-establishing themselves internally and/or finding safety, even though some states may offer – in principle – special protection mechanisms or relocation opportunities for certain professions.

Deliberate displacement

Criminal groups may employ displacement as a strategy to secure property or land, forcing families or entire communities to flee, resulting in somewhat distinct displacement dynamics. This is perpetrated by various actors in different contexts – from the usurping of a single house for criminal purposes to the seizing of land for overtly criminal or ostensibly legitimate activities. Groups expropriate strategically located houses for use as lookouts or places where they can store illicit goods, or for gang members or their families to live, forcing residents to vacate with death threats or actual violence, with the police often reluctant to intervene. Street gangs in Honduras expropriate properties in this manner or for use as *casas locas* ('crazy houses'), where they conduct illicit activities, and criminal groups in Ecuador have seized people's homes to consolidate power and develop operational bases.

Entire communities or multiple communities within a region may be forced to flee by criminal organisations who want control of their land for illicit activities, such as drug-trafficking or production or the cross-border smuggling of goods and people. Thousands of people and numerous communities have been forcibly displaced in Chiapas, Mexico in recent years as large criminal groups vie for control of strategic border zones and terrestrial routes. Mass displacement is also provoked to facilitate the involvement of organised criminal groups in resource extraction and other ostensibly legitimate activities, either for money laundering or as additional sources of income in their portfolio – from gold mining in Colombia to cattle-ranching in Honduras to avocado production in Mexico. To secure access to such resources, groups order communities to leave. In Guerrero, Mexico, numerous rural communities have been forced to flee by criminal groups, who seize control of regions rich in resources such as timber and precious metals.

Intersecting displacement drivers and the blurred lines between perpetrators

Criminal violence may also intersect with other displacement drivers or sources of violence. There may be blurred lines between state and criminal actors in some contexts, where perpetrators of violence may have shared interests, criminal actors may be coopted by state actors, or an array of interlinked actors, including private security companies, criminal groups, and paramilitaries, work complicitly with the security forces and state entities at the local and/or national levels. State actors or local elites may engage criminal groups as 'security' to force through megaprojects (mining, tourism, dams, etc) with harassment and violence or to harm, assassinate or remove local resistance and land-defenders, as is happening in parts of Honduras and Mexico. While such projects and the associated violence may cause displacement in the broader community, defenders may adopt immobility as a form of resistance.

Likewise, the broadening of criminal portfolios can lead to incursions into new economic markets, such as timber, mining and cattle-ranching, provoking displacement. For instance, organised criminal groups have become involved in natural resource extraction in Mexico's resource-rich states, causing further violence and displacement. There are also blurred

lines around some vigilante groups, community police and self-defence groups (*autodefensas*) that form in response to the presence of organised crime. While some *autodefensas* that formed in Michoacán, Mexico in 2013 were absorbed by state forces as rural police, others morphed into criminal groups, joining an array of interlinked perpetrators of violence, causing significant and protracted displacement.

What displacement looks like

People who are at immediate or imminent risk of highly targeted violence or persecution, together with their close relatives or partners, tend to flee quickly and discretely, often without much time to plan. This displacement happens in an atomised, or drop-by-drop, manner, with individuals or families leaving one-by-one, although such displacements can result in whole streets or neighbourhoods being slowly abandoned. Because a place of safety is not the same for all, people's movements are unpredictable and ostensibly random, but their decisions and individual trajectory follow the same logic of an individual safety plan.

Internal displacement in El Salvador and Honduras is precarious, transient and often abandoned for cross-border flight. The lack of state responses and the pervasive reach of gangs and their communications networks mean there are limited options in-country. Internal displacement is, therefore, often ineffective and unsustainable, with people unable to find a place of genuine and lasting safety. Three distinct characteristics of displacement have been observed: repeated displacements, with several temporary moves; self-containment; and the abandoning of internal displacement for cross-border flight.

IDPs are displaced in the context of the state conditions that have allowed or enabled this violence, whether by corruption and impunity, the weak rule of law, or the failure to prevent human rights violations and tackle the root cause of violence. As well as perpetuating violence, state failure to provide effective responses and protections for victims of crime means that many IDPs are unwilling or unable to access protection, and this contributes to displacement and shapes displacement dynamics. Those with limited economic means might have to rely solely on social capital during displacement. They may even be unable to travel to find safety and thus resort to self-containment.

People may be too scared to approach the state for protection as information may be leaked to perpetrators by corrupt or coerced state agents, resulting in violent reprisals or murder. IDPs tend to fear ongoing risk and pursuit by gangs after displacement. Likewise, IDPs might be rejected by the host community and even family members, who fear for their safety if they offer refuge or – in some parts of Guerrero, Mexico – even speak to IDPs who arrive. This clandestinity and the reluctance to approach authorities present significant challenges to securing protection during displacement. This also makes it difficult to accurately record and track displacements, thus adversely affecting the development and implementation of effective responses and preventative measures.

Victorie Knox is a lecturer in Refugee Studies at the University of London's Refugee Law Initiative. This short piece draws on her research on organised crime, corruption and displacement in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean since 2011.

This paper is part of the Researching Internal Displacement series on 'Internal Displacement in the Context of Organised Criminal Violence'. The first five volumes in this series draw on research by experts at the Internal Displacement Research Programme of the RLI, working collaboratively with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in relation to her 2025 Call for Inputs on this theme.

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[1] See also Cantor, DJ, 2025 "Criminal Groups and Internal Displacement – What Lessons Can We Learn from Central America Ten Years On?"

[2] A type of forced immobility, undertaken as a protection strategy, either before or after displacement.