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Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic:

Competing for Governance and Legitimacy with Organized Criminal Groups in the time of COVID-19

This research brief is part of the FCDO-funded project 'Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic' led by Impact:Peace, Kroc Institute of Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

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Please note that the information provided is accurate at the time of writing but is subject to change.

PEACE IN OUR CITIES

The Peace in Our Cities platform was launched on International Day of Peace in September 2019 out of an urgent demand to reverse trends of urban violence around the world. Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) brings together the political leadership of Mayors, local and international peacebuilders, the imperatives of the Sustainable Development Goals, and a bold assertion that we have the tools and knowledge to build peace and save lives in urban areas. With eighteen cities and more than two dozen organizing partners signed on to date, PiOC represents over 20 million people globally. Working together through evidence-based approaches, PiOC is committed to achieving a 50% reduction in urban violence by 2030.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by three organizations: Impact:Peace, Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; +Peace; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Find out more about Peace in Our Cities: www.sdg16.plus/peaceinourcities

Competing for Governance and Legitimacy with Organized Criminal Groups in the time of COVID-19

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than 80 million cases and 1.8 million deaths worldwide.[1] Its impact modified social and economic interactions like no other event in this generation. An estimated 3.9 billion people (more than half the world's population) were under some type of lockdown by the first week of April 2020[2], which was followed by a plethora of ever-changing restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. The global economy took a major hit with US$28 trillion in lost output and an average 4.4 percent contraction.[3] Weaknesses in government service delivery and response capacity were further exposed, with many countries' health systems and other services succumbing to the virus.

Overall, organized criminal group (OCG) activity seems to have increased worldwide during the pandemic (Box 2), affecting governments' legitimacy as providers of security, economic stability, public health, and social services. OCGs have been quick at adapting to the

> **Box 1: Organized Criminal Groups**
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> In this brief, organized criminal groups are broadly understood using The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime definition which includes four criteria: 1) A structured group of three or more persons; 2) the group exists for a period of time; 3) it acts in concert with the aim of committing at least one serious crime; and 4) to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.
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> Focus throughout the document centers on larger, more organized groups; however, smaller, looser groups are not excluded from the analysis. Also, youth gangs are included in the analysis for practical purposes, although it is understood that they are not necessarily categorized as organized crime. Insurgent and terrorist groups are excluded from the analysis.

pandemic, and the strongest have further consolidated their control in their territories. This brief summarizes the medium to long-term implications of OCGs actions on local governments' legitimacy and proposes immediate actions at the local level to strengthen governance against these groups. It also presents best practices to enable cooperation between municipal law enforcement and social service providers to ensure security responses to organized crime that do not place communities at risk of further economic or social insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing restrictions have had an impact on OCGs. Its effects have not been homogeneous, however, given different pre-existing socioeconomic conditions, governance capacity, and variation in types of crime.[4] The impact on homicides – one-fifth of which can be attributed to OCGs worldwide, and which constitute more deaths than conflicts and terrorism combined[5] – provides an important glimpse into OCG activity, demonstrating an initial hit and posterior adaptation of OCGs to the pandemic globally.

In March and April 2020, lockdown restrictions resulted in a 25 percent decrease in homicides in countries for which comparable data is available.[6] For instance, South Africa recorded 94 homicides during the initial weeks of the lockdown, compared with 326 during the same period in the previous year.[7] In India, officials reported a decline in the number of murders, citing data from the state of Kerala where a 40 percent reduction in homicides was recorded during the first two months of the lockdown.[8] However, in some

places, crime was unaffected, and it even increased. Mexico saw its most violent month on record in March 2020 with more than 2,500 homicides.[9] Similarly, in the northern Brazilian state of Ceará, violent crime soared by 98 percent just a few days into the lockdown.[10]

Most reductions in homicides were short-lived. Immediately after the loosening of lockdown measures, homicides went back to pre-pandemic levels in countries as diverse as Chile, Ecuador, Italy, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Spain.[11] The United States experienced a 28 percent increase in violence during the first 9 months of the pandemic.[12] The Philippines recorded a 47 percent decrease in crimes between March and September 2020; however, police killings related to the government's "War on Drugs" was 50 percent higher between April and July 2020 than in the previous quarter.[13]

Box 2: Impact of COVID-19 on other crimes perpetrated by organized criminal groups[14]

Property crime: As millions of people are off the streets and in their homes, robbery, theft, and burglary has fallen by more than 50 percent in a group of 30 countries for which information is available. The decline may also be due to a decrease in the number of crimes reported. Property crimes are likely to increase in the near future due to the COVID-19 economic downturn.

Trafficking in persons: The pandemic has exacerbated the conditions that contribute to labor and sexual exploitation. In the United States, a human rights organization reported a 185 percent increase in human trafficking cases during the pandemic. Two-thirds of survivors surveyed by Tech Against Trafficking reported receiving less support during the pandemic. Europol, as well as countries such as Sweden and Spain, have reported an increase in online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM).

Drug trafficking: In destination markets, supply and quality of drugs are down, but prices are up. Trends in drug seizures have varied among countries: in Italy, Niger, and some countries in Central Asia, seizures have decreased. On the other hand, Morocco, Iran, and Belgium have reported large seizures. Reports from Nigeria also show that drug trafficking has continued uninterrupted. Opium harvesting has been affected in Afghanistan by the restrictions, while the cocaine price drop in Peru may have discouraged coca cultivation in the short-term. The unavailability of precursors may be limiting the production of synthetic drugs; however, OCGs are rapidly adapting to the new circumstances.

II. Criminal governance: Medium to long-term implications of organized criminal groups' actions on local governments' legitimacy

The pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the capacity of governments at all levels to provide effective governance.[15] OCGs have quickly stepped in to fill this void and impose social order through the provision of goods and services. Criminal governance in communities is being shaped by OCGs' ability to overcome forgone economic opportunities and exploit the new operating environment to further their objectives.[16] Their actions on local governments' legitimacy could have at least the following six social and economic implications in the medium to long-term.

1. OCGs are expected to build up political and social capital and strengthen their status and position in communities.

OCGs are using the COVID-19 pandemic's economic slump and restrictions to further boost political and social capital.[17] Cartels in Mexico have provided groceries to the communities under their control.[18] In Italy, mafia groups have used fake charities to distribute food, clothing and money to underprivileged families.[19] Yakuza groups in Japan handed out free masks, toilet paper, and tissues to kindergartens and pharmacies, and even offered to disinfect the Diamond Princess cruise ship.[20] Gangs in Cape Town established a temporary

truce to deliver food to struggling households.[21] OCGs have also enforced lockdowns to boost their position in communities, particularly in the Americas. Drug gangs in Brazil, youth gangs in El Salvador, *colectivos*[22] in Venezuela, and dissident FARC groups and paramilitaries in Colombia have enforced curfews, threating violators with violence including death. Other non-state armed groups around the world have allegedly engaged in similar actions to bolster their credentials in their territories.[23]

OCGs' use of their soft power is not new; in fact, the large and strong ones have been doing it for decades, as they need their communities' support to survive and maximize profits from their illegal activities.[24] However, this relationship can also be symbiotic. The current "altruism" is solidifying OCGs loyalties in their communities, strengthening them, and further reducing public trust in governments for their lack of action. OCGs emerge more powerful from crises, as it occurred with yakuza groups in Japan and the Italian mafia after WWII's economic downturn,[25] and the COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be no exception.

2. OCGs will endeavor to expand control of illicit and licit markets as a result of the economic slump

The pandemic's impact on the global economy resulted in 400 million full-time jobs lost in the second quarter of 2020, with up to 100 million people pushed into poverty.[26] Lack of economic opportunities may cause people to engage in illicit livelihoods and presents an opportunity for OCGs to recruit vulnerable populations, especially youth. In Kenya, child recruitment into gangs has increased during the pandemic.[27] In Cape Town, gang members reported that sixty days into the pandemic, it had become increasingly easy to organize community members to loot businesses alongside them.[28] Struggling licit businesses with limited access to public capital will seek OCGs liquidity to survive. OCGs will attempt to take over these businesses and use them to further their criminal activities through money laundering.[29] In Italy, early into the pandemic mafia groups were already engaged in loan sharking, where desperate business owners have been accepting illicit lifelines despite being aware of the consequences.[30] In Mexico City, OCGs offered loans to small businesses to ensure they could reopen after the pandemic.[31] Some OCGs have countered and downplayed local government's lockdown measures for their economic gain. In South Africa, gangs took advantage of people's resistance to the lockdown to continue selling drugs on the streets.[32] In Rio de Janeiro, militia groups – paramilitary-style organizations made up of active and retired police officers who control up to 33.1 percent of the city – prohibited businesses from closing to avoid losing income from extortions.[33]

3. OCGs are likely to exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency to make a profit in collaboration with corrupt state officials

Corruption erodes public trust in government institutions, and it is particularly damaging during times of crisis.[34] Governments have injected large amounts of funds – both national and international – to procure medical supplies and equipment to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This has created opportunities for OCGs to exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency. Crises often provide an opportunity for OCGs to influence the misappropriation and embezzlement of public funds. In 2010, post-hurricane infrastructure projects were awarded to firms controlled by drug trafficking groups in Honduras. In Japan, yakuza groups' companies were awarded massive reconstruction contracts in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake.[35] During the Ebola epidemic, it is estimated that 30 percent of the development assistance given to the government of Sierra Leone was unaccounted for due to fraud and corruption.[36] OCGs interference has also occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. In El Salvador and Guatemala, gangs have

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tried to profit from government emergency aid and health care equipment. Salvadoran authorities have been forced to include gang families among the beneficiaries of subsidies and handouts.[37] In Kenya, Somalia, South Africa, and Uganda, there have been corruption cases related to COVID-19 emergency funds.[38] This is particularly troubling given that in 40 of the 54 African countries, state-embedded criminal actors have significant or severe influence on society and state structures.[39]

4. Corrupt and abusive security forces with potential ties to OCGs could further erode trust in local government institutions

Security forces (police and the military) have been tasked with enforcing communities' compliance with lockdown measures and restrictions. As such, they have largely become the public face of countries' response to the pandemic.[40] Reports of police abuse and collaboration with OCGs have been reported during the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. In Guinea-Bissau, criminal groups and the police allegedly closed the Osvaldo Vieira Airport, citing COVID-19 restrictions as a facade to let planes carrying cocaine land.[41] In Cape Town, restrictions were enforced brutally by security forces, as people refused to comply with them due to a historical mistrust in an ever-absent police force. Some of these police officers have allegedly supplied drugs to gangs and been working under the orders of gang leaders.[42] Reports from Kenya suggest that at least 16 people have been extrajudicially killed by the police while enforcing the lockdown, and that corrupt police officers have been passing information to gang members on police patrols, so they can target businesses for looting.[43] Security forces are not corrupt across the board, and many have become infected by the virus and died enforcing lockdowns. However, instances where pre-existing patterns of police abuse and corruption have been exacerbated will make it difficult for affected citizens to follow government recommendations to contain the spread of the virus. Instead, they will seek support from groups who already govern their territories, regardless of their activities.

5. OCGs are expected to offer counterfeit and trafficked medical products[44] for COVID-19, thwarting governments' efforts to contain the spread of the virus

The surge in demand for medical products to address the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in the trafficking of substandard and counterfeit products. This has greatly occurred through cyberattacks and fraudulent websites claiming to offer medical products for the virus. German health authorities procured €15 million worth of face masks through a cloned website of a legitimate company in Spain.[45] The *Jalisco Nueva Generación* cartel in Mexico has been promoting the production of fake COVID-19 medical products and forcing pharmacies to sell them.[46] The government of Slovenia ordered 3 million medical masks worth €300,000 that were never delivered from a company in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[47] In April 2020, Thailand seized 3,300 thermometers smuggled from China and Vietnam via Laos.[48] Multiple similar cases have occurred worldwide, including cyberattacks to hospitals. In March, a hospital in the Czech Republic was forced to postpone urgent surgical interventions and reroute new acute patients to a nearby hospital due to a cyberattack.[49]

On the internet, these substandard and fake medical products claiming to treat, or cure COVID-19, are also targeted to regular people who are desperate to protect themselves from the virus. The impact of this type of crime on local governance is threefold: 1) given that medicines claiming to cure or treat COVID-19 are available online, people question governments' claims on the unavailability of treatments for the virus and whether those claims are based on lack of capacity; 2) the consumption of fake or substandard

medicines can exacerbate the public health crises and further use up limited state resources; and 3) public resources lost in fraudulent purchases makes citizens questions their representatives' ability to govern.

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Box 3: INTERPOL warns about OCGs threat to COVID-19 vaccines[50]

With the successful development of the COVID-19 vaccine, INTERPOL issued an alert to members' law enforcement institutions warning them to prepare for OCGs targeting vaccines physically and online. Possible OCG and corruption threats to the vaccine include:

- Vaccines may be stolen during the transportation process and diverted to the black market or for personal use.
- Vaccines may be stolen by public health staff for resale in the black market or use in their private practices.
- Limited vaccine supplies may result in bribes to public health professionals to obtain a vaccine.
- Health professionals may demand a payoff from patients to access the vaccine, affecting poor, marginalized, and vulnerable populations.
- Corruption may occur during the procurement process of the vaccine, leading to misappropriation of public funds or embezzlement.
- Corruption may occur with the large amounts of funding directed for the purchase and distribution of the vaccine.
- OCGs may manufacture and traffic falsified and substandard vaccines.
- Conflict of interest may influence vaccine selection and policy decisions.

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6. Scammer's posing as government officials will probably prey on vulnerable local populations

There have been reports around the world of door-to-door scammers who impersonate government officials providing informational material, offering hygiene products, carrying controls, or conducting COVID-19 tests.[51] In Lombardy, Italy, scammers disguised as Health Service officials have targeted the elderly, telling them that they are carrying out COVID-19 controls to break into their homes and steal money and other valuables.[52] In Switzerland, criminal groups claiming to be from state agencies have been breaking into properties to supposedly disinfect them from COVID-19.[53] In South Africa, the National Reserve Bank has alerted of scammers who claim to be bank representatives collecting contaminated bank notes with the virus.[54] These scams can generate distrust in governments even when they have not been responsible for these acts, since the immediate reaction to this type of crime will be to "be cautious of government officials." Law enforcement agencies in countries around the world have attributed some of these activities to organized criminal groups[55]

III. Immediate actions at the local level to strengthen governance against organized criminal groups

State neglect had created the conditions for many social and economic problems – including crime – to emerge in marginalized communities even before the pandemic started. COVID-19 exacerbated these conditions, and consequently, it is not surprising that those communities affected by crime and other issues are also the ones who have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Strengthening capacities at the local level, can have positive outcomes at the national and international levels in the fight against OCGs. The following are 4 immediate actions at the local, national, and international levels to address the implications of OCG actions on local governments' legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Start building social capital at the community level immediately

OCGs depend on strong networks in communities to operate. In turn, communities often seek alternative social control structures when the state is not present. Communities with strong internal social capital and positively reinforcing interactions with government can help to reduce the likelihood of crime. Local governments that invest in the social contract can help to build trust, thereby countering OCG influence and control in their communities. This is a long-term and continuously evolving process.

> **Box 4: The Municipality of Quito offers free Wi-Fi[56]**
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> In August 2020, the Municipality of Quito, Ecuador, installed 703 free Wi-Fi hotspots, particularly in neighborhoods with low internet connectivity. The mayor emphasized that these hotspots will support telemedicine and tele-education, so students can have access to their curricular activities. Beneficiaries will be able to connect to the municipal network for up to two hours daily. Through a partnership with Google, the municipality has been able to place pins on Google Maps, so users can find the locations of the several hotspots in the city.

Local governments around the world have provided subsidies and handouts to vulnerable populations; however, this has often occurred at centralized locations, forcing citizens to break lockdowns and social distancing measures to receive their benefits.[57] Where possible, local governments should provide these benefits inside communities. Establishing presence through setting up health clinics, providing information on the virus, or offering free internet access to students, are immediate actions that local governments can do to build rapport in communities. For example, city authorities in Abidjan, Johannesburg, and Lagos have delivered personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies such as gloves, masks, disposable gowns, bleach, hand washing devises, hospital beds, and other equipment to communities, social workers, and health centers.[58] In Brazil, the Municipality of Barra Mansa distributed basic goods baskets to 17,000 families of students at their public schools in their communities to alleviate the pandemic's negative impacts.[59] These actions can concurrently address risk factors associated with OCG joining and recruitment, such as low educational attainment, negative peer influence, and substance abuse,[60] demonstrating the extended returns of social capital investments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has weakened some loose and opportunistic criminal groups, opening an opportunity for local governments to build trust in communities. These actions can have an impact at the national and international levels, as OCGs strength expands through the consolidation of networks that emanate from communities all the way to transnational criminal organizations. Hence, building social capital at the local level can go a long way for both OCGs and local governments. As such, local governments should start reclaiming social control in their territories through inclusive policies.

2. Provide economic relief packages for businesses and people

Seven out of ten workers in developing countries work in informal markets and most of them are engaged in activities that cannot be carried out from home.[61] Consequently, the COVID-19 lockdowns have exacerbated their vulnerability to engage in criminal activity. To counter this, local governments can work with their national counterparts to provide temporary unconditional cash assistance[62] to the people most vulnerable to poverty. In May 2020, a monthly budget of €250 million to provide a minimum income guarantee to 850,000 families and 2.3 million individuals was approved in Spain.[63] Similarly, the government of Colombia launched the *Solidarity Income* plan to provide assistance to 3 million vulnerable households and increase cash transfers to 12 million people during the pandemic.[64] Some governments

have also provided electricity and water subsidies to help people and small businesses afront the crisis. For example, in Machakos, Kenya, water bills were waived from May 1 until December 31, 2020 for its residents.[65]

To prevent OCGs from financing and taking over businesses, easy-to-access financial support should be offered to them. A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) survey of 21 African countries showed that 90 percent of countries surveyed were providing COVID-19 support to small businesses, including direct cash disbursements, short and medium-term forgivable loans and deferment of payments, as well as tax rebates.[67] In India, the government has committed $50 billion to help small businesses face the pandemic.[68] Cities have also joined efforts in providing support to businesses. In Buenos Aires, public bank *Banco Ciudad* launched a new reduced-interest loan program to provide funds to small and medium-sized businesses for their payroll payments.[69] The Tokyo metropolitan government provided financial aid to small and medium-sized businesses that agreed to suspend its operations to contain the spread of the virus.[70]

> **Box 5: Milan establishes a mutual aid fund[66]**
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> In March 2020, the mayor of Milan announced the creation of a mutual aid fund to help those most in need due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support recovery of city activities. The City Council approved the allocation of €3 million to start the fund, known as the San Giuseppe Fund, which is open to economic contributions of individual citizens, companies, and associations. The fund raised €800,000 on it first day on March 14, 2020 and has disbursed €3,850,900 — approximately half of what it raised – to 2,039 people since.

Economic stimuli must be sufficient and targeted to produce a significant effect against crime. Thus, if necessary and possible, governments should seek additional support from multilateral and regional organizations not only for financial but for technical assistance too. In Ecuador, through its agencies, the United Nations is helping more than 120,000 small and medium businesses increase their capacity to offer their products and services online to weather the effects of the pandemic.[71] The City Council of Bilbao, Spain, has set up an online and telephone consultancy service for small and micro businesses to provide information for free on different palliative opportunities and options to afront the pandemic.[72] Similarly, Lisbon has created a support team to ensure information on all existing support reaches micro, small, and medium-sized businesses to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.[73] Providing fast economic support and knowledge to vulnerable businesses and people can prevent crime from expanding during the pandemic, while increasing government legitimacy in historically marginalized locales.

3. Empower communities and civil society, and strengthen local governments to fight COVID-19-related corruption

Evidence demonstrates that OCGs can exercise more influence over local institutions than national counterparts.[74] Therefore, efforts to counter corruption should be strengthened at the local level. This could include involving Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) and Anti-Corruption Authorities (ACAs) in consultations on the design and management of emergency aid and procurement.[75] These bodies possess prior knowledge of state institutions and can provide recommendations on areas where additional oversight and attention may be required.[76] For example, the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) developed guidelines for the Executive Committee of Coronavirus Response in charge of preventing the risk of fraud and corruption in the distribution of food and funds.[77]

Robust due diligence and transparent processes of procurements and distribution of funds at the local level can also prevent corruption and counter OCG influence. Suppliers must continue being verified, technical requirements for goods and services should be clearly specified, and competitive prices with thresholds should be determined to ensure the proper use of public funds.[78] The local government in South Chungcheong, South Korea, is operating a "Watchdog for Proper Budget Spending," where residents participate in monitoring and on-site investigations with officials.

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Box 6: Citizens come together to fight corruption in Patzicia, Guatemala[79]

In Patzicia, a municipality located 60km from Guatemala City, more than 150 neighbors have organized to fight corruption in their city. They are part of the Patzicia Neighbors Against Corruption Association, an organization that is overseeing the implementation of COVID-19 initiatives by the municipal government. Specifically, the association requested information from the municipal government on a food baskets program to help vulnerable families who have been affected by the pandemic. The information requested trough the Municipal Access to Public Information Office includes the criteria used to select program beneficiaries, the contents of the food baskets, the number of families who benefitted from the program, a list with the full names of the basket recipients, the neighborhoods selected, and the number of baskets distributed. On July 30, the municipal government disseminated the requested information partially and committed to disclose the rest of it in ten additional days, per the Access to Public Information Law.

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To strengthen accountability, local governments can invite civil society organizations (CSOs) and private citizens to be part of anti-corruption task forces or other oversight initiatives to monitor and guarantee the implementation of COVID-19 funds.[80] In Latin America, Transparency International organized a 13-country taskforce to identify corruption risks in COVID-19 emergency public procurements as well as measures to mitigate them.[81] Another important immediate step that local institutions could take is subscribing to open government practices to allow effective public oversight of current COVID-19 contracts and their future inspection. A step in this direction was taken in 2020 by 56 municipal governments around the world who joined the Local Open Global Partnership, a global network representing more than two-billion people to promote accountable, responsive, transparent, participatory, and inclusive local governance.[82]

Corruption reporting mechanisms should be encouraged to be used and established where they do not exist. Additionally, local and national governments must ensure that whistleblowers are protected and that any reports of corruption are taken seriously and investigated. Countries such as Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo have created special hotlines to report corruption during the pandemic. In Toronto, the fraud reporting hotline in 2020 received 89 reports – equivalent to 10 percent of all complaints – directly related to COVID-19.[83] Reporting mechanisms must be supported by effective judicial systems to rapidly process cases and dictate sentences, and states must continue guaranteeing access to justice during the pandemic.[84] To overcome lockdown restrictions and ensure access to justice, jurisdictions around the world have been having court hearings online and are requiring that evidence is submitted online.[85] In Washington, DC, the Superior Court has been conducting hearings remotely, except for a limited number of Criminal Division hearings, which have been done partially remotely[86]. The DC courts have also provided remote hearing sites for those without a home computer or laptop, good internet connection, or for any other reason that would prevent them from connecting from their homes.

4. Generate awareness about fraudulent COVID-19 medical products, and engage in multiagency and international cooperation to stop the trafficking of medical supplies

Local governments must ensure that citizens are aware of the risks associated with counterfeit medical products online, the threat of door-to-door scams, and the consequences of corruption related to the disbursement and allotment of COVID-19 funds. In Sevilla, municipal health authorities and the Civil Guard issued a warning to residents from Aljarafe – a predominantly elderly community – about a home vaccination scam reported in the city. Residents were urged to report any suspicious activity to the Civil Guard's hotline or through mobile app Alertcops.[88]

Awareness raising campaigns are necessary for people to know how to identify threats online, assess the

> **Box 7: Women fight COVID-19 in Nairobi's communities[87]**
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> Female community health volunteers in Nairobi's informal settlement of Kawangware go from house-to-house talking about COVID-19, showing residents how to wash their hands, and answering COVID-19-related questions. They are usually recruited and trained by local governments and NGOs, and have experience providing support from past disease breakouts. This group of women volunteers have been essential in debunking myths about the virus, especially those pertaining to false claims of medicinal cures. The local government relies on these women, as they can pass on messages to the communities that the government cannot. Female community health volunteers are also active in communities in Tanzania, Ethiopia, Malawi, Liberia and South Africa. Generally, they are poorly paid, or not paid at all. Local governments should set aside funds to pay for the impactful work that these women are carrying out.

legitimacy of the information consumed, and report fraud and corruption. Additionally, people should understand the risks associated with utilizing substandard medicines and medical products. This information can be disseminated via social media, internet platforms, television, radio, and online and physical newspapers, among others.[89] In Järva Vald, Estonia, the municipality is using a community engagement app to keep its citizens informed about the COVID-19 pandemic to counter misinformation.[90] The City of Chicago and Chicago Public Health Departments are advising residents through its official channels and social media not to respond to calls, text messages, or emails, offering early access to a COVID-19 vaccine, as they are scams.[91] In the beginning of the pandemic, Chicago also encouraged residents to be cautious of COVID-19-realted consumer fraud.[92]

> **Box 8: The City of Los Angeles counters misinformation[97]**
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> The Los Angeles City Attorney stopped companies from advertising and selling unapproved home test kits, anti-COVID disinfectants backed by fabricated scientific studies, COVID-19 prevention/cure vitamins, radish paste as a purported COVID-19 prevention/cure, and other false claims. The city's work led to collaboration with the U.S. Attorney's COVID-19 task force and case referrals from multiple federal, state, and local agencies.
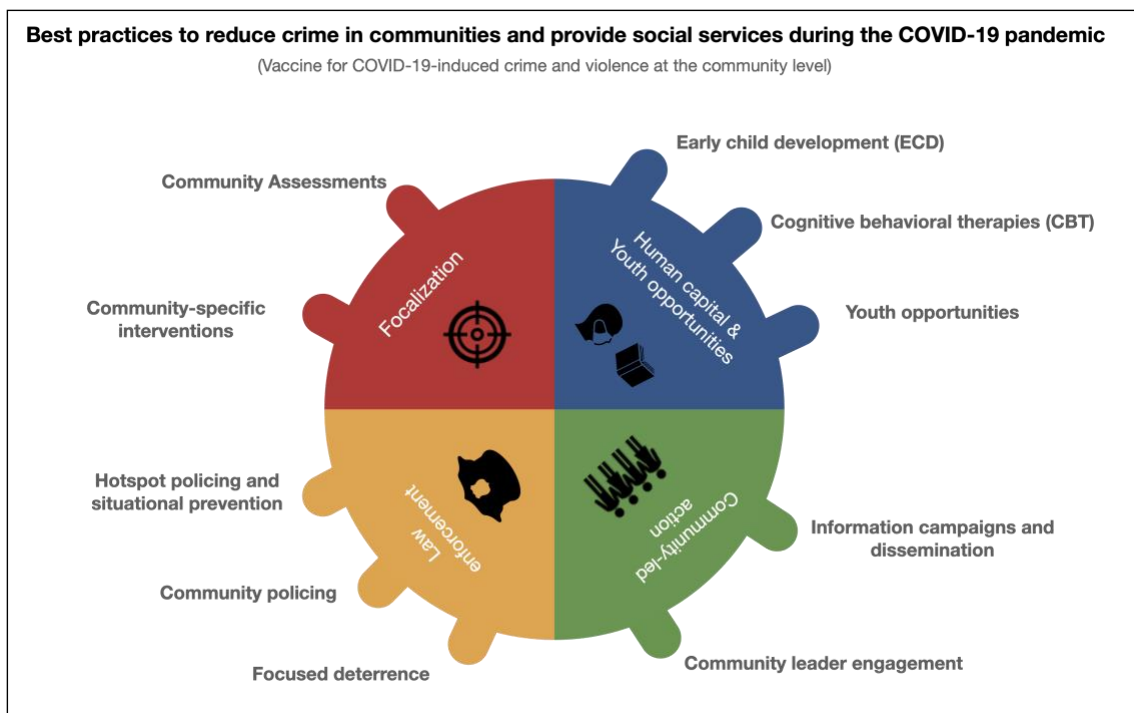
Engaging CSOs is also important for innovative practices in support of disseminating accurate information. NGO "Coronavirus Facts Database" monitors COVID-19 disinformation through factcheckers in 70 countries, while "Accountability Lab" debunks pandemic rumors to help governments deliver accurate information.[93] The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNODC have also produced materials for members states to communicate about the risks of purchasing fake and substandard medical products.[94]

Sharing information among national and international law enforcement, civil society, financial intelligence units, the private sector, and regional oversight institutions to identify criminal schemes can have positive results.[95] In March 2020, INTERPOL

carried out Operation Pangea XIII to target illegal online sales of medical products and medicines. Health regulatory authorities and law enforcement from 90 countries partook in the operation which led 121 arrests globally and the confiscation of fake and substandard face masks and US$14 million worth illicit pharmaceutical products.[96] A total of 37 OCGs were blocked and 2,500 web links taken down.

IV. Municipal law enforcement and social service provision

Approaches to prevent OCG activities have primarily focused on law enforcement and criminal justice processes to incapacitate offenders and groups.[98] However, although useful, these approaches tend not to focus on the structures and conditions that enable OCG activity. Enabling factors often arise at the local level and, hence, must be addressed to 1) disrupt networks before they become large and powerful, 2) prevent further recruitment into OCGs, 3) build resilience in communities through social service provision and human capital accumulation, and 4) build trust in government as well as its legitimacy in communities. The following are best practices proven to reduce and prevent crime and violence in communities. These interventions ensure social service provision and address risk factors associated with crime and violence. Additionally, they can be carried out complementarily with the actions presented in the section above to maximize results. An important caveat to this section is that given the multifaceted nature of OCGs, the recommendations below may not apply to all types of OCGs or their vast array of illicit actions. However, carrying out these activities at the local level, particularly in at-risk areas, have the potential to greatly prevent youth and other individuals from engaging and being recruited. Further, these interventions can build the social capital needed for communities to rebuff, condemn, and report OCG activity.

Best practices to reduce crime in communities and provide social services during the COVID-19 pandemic
(Vaccine for COVID-19-induced crime and violence at the community level)

Focus

- **Do**: Carry out community assessments to understand the structures and conditions (risk factors) that may be driving youth and others to engage in criminal activity. Understand that drivers of crime and violence are likely to be different even in neighboring communities. The same applies to individuals.
- **Do**: Design community-specific interventions for the particular characteristics of communities. Mexico City launched the *Barrio Adentro* (Inside the Neighborhood) program in November 2020. The program is based on specific community needs and has a localized approach to provide social services to vulnerable communities and to prevent youth recruitment into organized criminal groups.[99]
- **Don't**: Use one-size-fits-all approaches to reduce crime. Limiting access to drugs and alcohol is a common strategy to reduce crime and violence. However, this restriction provided Cape Town gangs' an opportunity to sell alcohol in the black market and emerge stronger during the COVID-19 lockdown.[100] As a result, it is imperative that interventions are carried with an in-depth understanding of the context to avoid exacerbating current conditions and strengthening OCGs.
- **Don't**: Associate poverty with crime. Poverty is not a predictor of crime. Latin America, despite seeing major reductions in poverty, has experienced an increase in violent crime. Associating poverty with crime stigmatizes marginalized communities and creates further exclusion.

Law enforcement

- **Don't**: Use repressive "tough on crime" policies. Evidence shows that these types of policies do not work and increase criminal activity instead of deterring it. According to the UN, violence in Central America's Northern Triangle intensified between 2005 and 2010 as a result of these policies.[101] Similarly, enforcing COVID-19 lockdown measures through coercion has had negative outcomes throughout the world.[102]
- **Do:** Implement community policing initiatives to generate collaboration between the police and communities to identify and solve community problems. In theory, community policing fosters trust between communities and police officers. In Quito, community police have been offering concerts and K-9 shows that residents can enjoy from their windows or balconies. A police puppet named Paquito has also been providing educational activities for children via Zoom – all in an effort to alleviate the phycological effect of the pandemic on people.[103]
- **Do:** Carry out "hotspot policing." Evidence shows that focusing on the "hot" people and places can reduce crime. The strategy leverages the fact that it is typically less than 5 percent of the population in any given locale that is responsible for the majority of violence, in some instance with 50 percent of crime occurring in only 3 - 8 percent of cities' street segments.[104] Further, hotspot policing is an ideal strategy during the pandemic given that law enforcement is overstretched enforcing lockdown measures. After a series of violent crimes in Oakland's Chinatown during the pandemic, the Oakland Police Department is reallocating resources so more officers can focus on addressing crime in this area.[105] This strategy should be complemented with situational prevention initiatives, including urban upgrading and better urban planning.[106] Improved spaces can increase sense of belonging and place attachment, which in turn strengthen social capital and can reduce crime.
- **Do:** Consider adapting focused deterrence to reduce crime and violence. This strategy focuses on high-rate offenders, including group members and drug sellers, where police officers, influential voices in the community and social service providers interact directly with high-risk individuals, communicating clear consequences for criminal activity alongside direct messages of support. Incentives include the community's willingness to provide social services, such as job training, job opportunities, drug

treatment, etc.[107]   Oakland and New Orleans, among others, have had positive results implementing this strategy in recent years.[108]

Community-led action

- **Do:** Carry out information campaigns with trusted community leaders to disseminate messages. This will be very important to debunk any myths people may have about vaccines. In Mahwah Village, Liberia, authorities engaged local leaders to inform the community about the Ebola virus and secure their cooperation, ensuring an effective response to the epidemic.[109] In Addis Ababa thousands of women community health workers, who are trusted in their communities, are spreading awareness about COVID-19 and identifying people with symptoms.[110] Community strategies, such as community mobilization have also been successful in reducing crime, as well as work through credible messengers to stop violence in communities.
- **Don't**: Impose ideas or projects on communities. Communities know better than anyone what they need. Consult with communities on their needs and orient assistance around their priorities.

Human capital accumulation and youth opportunities

- **Do:** Invest in human capital. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the provision of health and education, so investing in these areas is of paramount importance. By providing social services and support in these two key areas, local governments can establish presence and legitimacy in vulnerable and marginalized locales.
- **Do:** Invest in health initiatives such as cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT). These interventions are the most successful in reducing recidivism in prison populations, with declines of up to 52.[111] Evidence shows that these interventions are as effective in community settings as they are in prisons.[112] Studies have also shown that CBT is helping populations cope with anxiety and depression during the pandemic.[113] Cities such as Lima, Barcelona, Philadelphia, and Istanbul are providing free online and/or in-person mental health services for their residents as part of their COVID-19 response efforts.[114]
- **Do:** Invest in early child development (ECD). ECD programs are one of the most cost-effective ways to prevent risky behaviors among youth - mainly for those who are most disadvantaged. In January 2021, community-based organizations (CBO) representing 9 cities in the U.S. joined Safer Childbirth Cities, a grants-driven initiative that supports cities with a high burden of maternal mortality and morbidity. The focus of the interventions in these cities will include addressing the impact of COVID-19 on pregnant women and new mothers to improve maternal health outcomes, reduce racial inequalities in care, and ensure long-term support before, during, and after childbirth.[115] Investing in EDC is more important than ever given that for the first time in 60 years, child mortality may increase due to the indirect effects of the pandemic on children, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries.[116]
- **Do:** Provide life skills, job training, vocational training, job search and placement support for youth. Build partnerships with the private sector to provide job training and guarantee a specific number of jobs for youth in the community. The Agency for Employment of the Municipality of Madrid is offering free online courses to people who are currently unemployed. A total of 1,000 spaces will be provided with the purpose to improve the employability of residents. Additionally, for every 50 hours of online study, residents can request €100 to further support their studies.[117]

V. Conclusion

Studies of historical trends in violent crimes highlight the importance of good governance and the rule of law, as well as of trusted and professional police and justice systems, in reducing crime and violence. Governments must work to build up social capital in communities, provide prompt and sufficient economic support, deter corruption at all levels, and provide clear communication and information to counter further criminal activity and strengthening during the current crisis. As a conclusion, this brief recommends that the immediate actions to counter the influence of OCG on communities are complemented and supported by longer term actions at the community level to address the main drivers of violence. This way, law enforcement, judicial, and root-cause initiatives can work concomitantly to reduce opportunities for increased OCG activities. It is imperative that with the current experience, local governments start preparing and building resilience against crime in communities for the next crisis. Local governments must be innovative and constantly update their arsenal of tools to quickly adapt to ever-changing situations. As Guillermo Cespedes, Chief of Violence Prevention of the City of Oakland, posits:
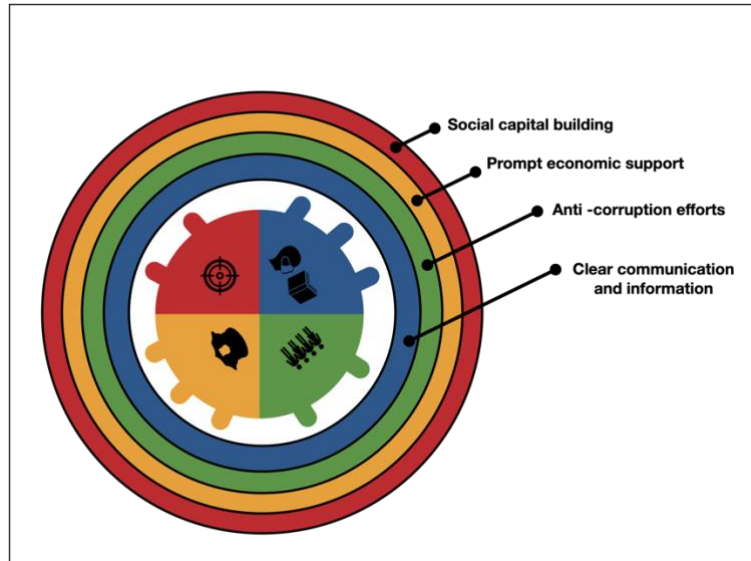
"We cannot use pre-COVID thinking to tackle the current challenges… the analysis must be contextualized. The new context must take into account long-term historic inequities in availability to health care, a re-imagined transformational version of public safety, and emphasis on corrective actions to address the impact of systemic racism on individuals, families, and communities. This is the case whether we are focused on the favelas of Brazil, the barrios of Central America, or the urban ghettos of the U.S."[118]

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