

Gang Rule: Understanding and Countering Criminal Governance

Chris BLATTMAN

Abstract:

Urban criminal groups rule tens to hundreds of millions of people worldwide. In Medellin, Colombia, gangs resolve disputes, police neighborhoods, enforce contracts, and tax businesses in their territories. The literature suggests that gang rule arises not only because governments fail to project their power, but also because they delegate governing to criminals. We first document and describe criminal governance, its correlates, and its origins in Medellin, qualitatively and quantitatively. We then look observationally at the effect of long-run state presence on criminal rule. Finally, we worked with the government to develop the first ever gang-level randomized trial. Most policy solutions are coercive and repressive. We identified a nonviolent approach to intensify municipal and community governance and attempt to displace gang rule. The city identified 80 neighborhoods where their governance is weak and gangs are strong. For 18 months the city intensified outreach and services to a random 40 of these neighborhoods—a 10-fold improvement in street-level staff plus an intensification of municipal services. The intervention had the expected effects in gang neighborhoods where gangs elect not to govern. In neighborhoods where gangs seek to govern, however, the city's effort backfired, reducing citizens' use of the state and state legitimacy. We conclude with paths forward.