

**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# CRIME AND CONTAGION

The impact of a pandemic  
on organized crime

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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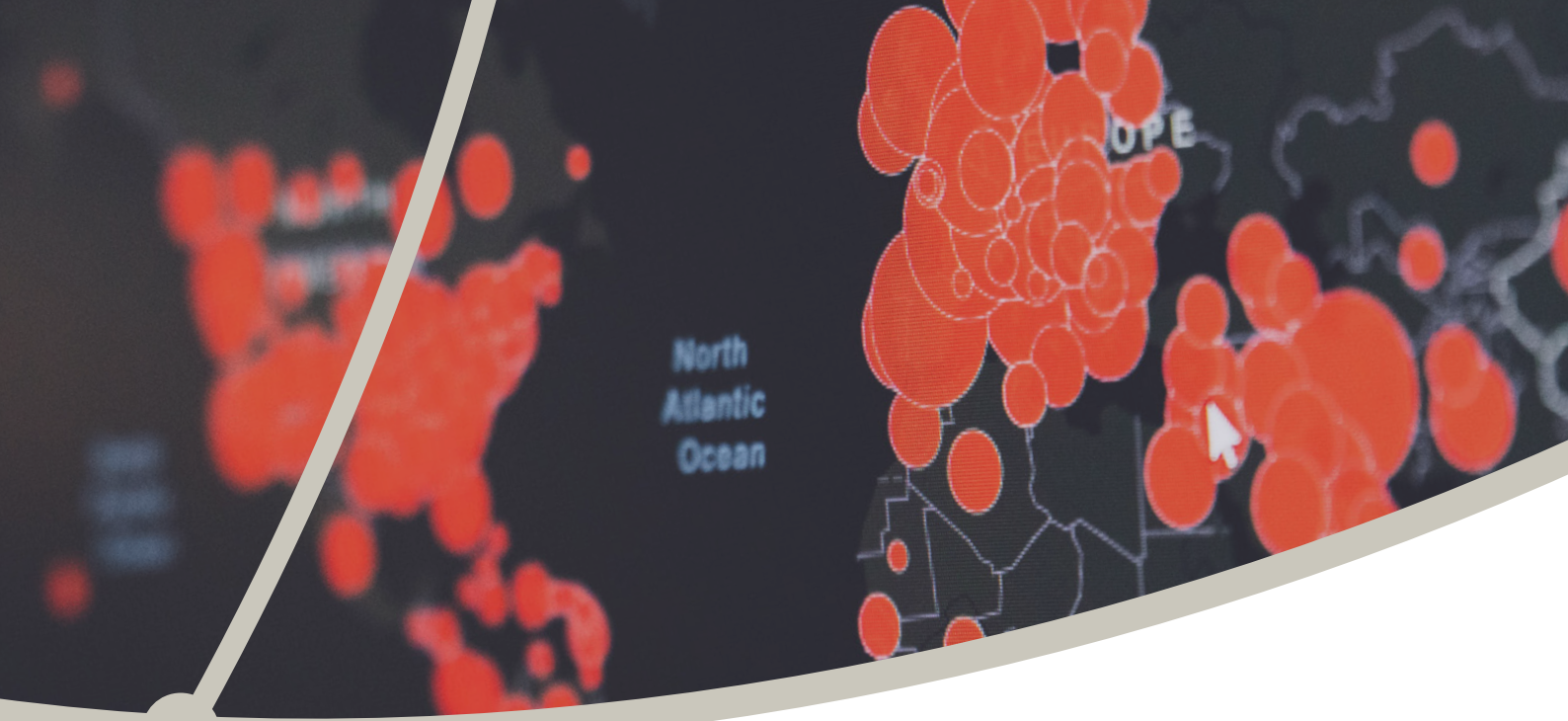
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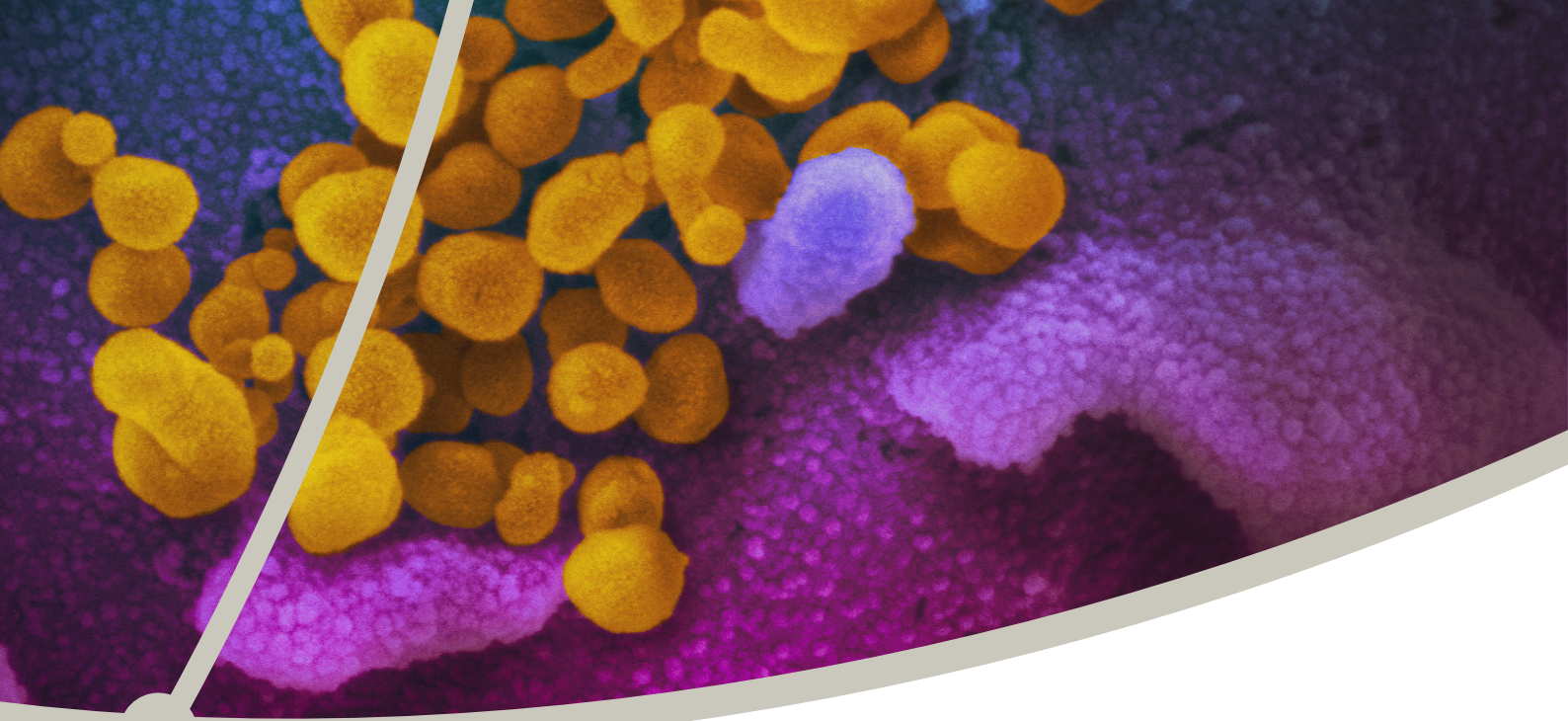
## INTRODUCTION

**T**he fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic is having profound impacts on society and the economy, and it will also influence and shape organized crime and illicit markets. The institutional response to the pandemic and the consequent reshaping of socio-economic norms worldwide will affect how criminal networks operate, as well as the nature of law-enforcement responses to them.

At these early stages of the pandemic, these impacts may be difficult to fully understand, and appropriate responses difficult to gauge. What seems clear, however, is that the pandemic has reduced some organized-criminal activities while simultaneously providing opportunities for new ones, and these changes in the organized-criminal economy could have long-term consequences.

The realignment of state resources – in particular police services in responding to the virus – and the role of criminal groups, may have important influences on how such state services and groups evolve in the months to come. Vulnerable groups, such as people who use drugs or victims of human trafficking, may be particularly hard hit by the impact of the virus.

This brief is a result of information garnered from our networks and civil-society partners in the field, and draws from a comprehensive review of reporting on the impact of the coronavirus on criminal groups and illicit markets.



## THE EMERGING CHALLENGE

In a few short weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the lives of communities around the world. People are having to adapt to the new restrictions placed on their work life and everyday freedoms, while governments and international organizations are facing the twin challenges of having to enforce public-health measures with reduced services and minimize the economic damage.

The first-order public-health imperatives are the primary preoccupation of policy-makers in this crisis. But the 'second order' social, economic and security implications of the pandemic are increasingly pressing. On the economic front, governments are ripping up the rulebook of public spending in order to support those who find themselves suddenly without work as swathes of the economy are shutting down.<sup>1</sup> UN Secretary General António Guterres warned the international community that a recession 'perhaps of record dimensions' is a near certainty.<sup>2</sup>

The implications for governance, policing and the evolution of criminal markets will be profound. The locking down of public movement and the sealing of borders have had an immediate impact on some criminal activities, which have slowed or stopped. But, equally, reports are already emerging of criminal groups who have exploited confusion and uncertainty to take advantage of new demand for illicit goods and services. Criminal opportunism will emerge further as the crisis unfolds. In particular, in countries where organized-crime groups have infiltrated health systems, life-saving resources are diverted and abused for criminal gain, weakening the response of states to the health emergency when it is most needed.

Controlling people's freedom of movement has become an essential priority for governments seeking to slow the spread of the virus. Security forces – police and the military – are being called upon to enforce communities' compliance with the new order and are therefore rapidly becoming the public face of states' response to the virus. The level of public legitimacy enjoyed by security institutions will determine their power to make or break this response. Lack of trust between police and communities is likely to make citizens less willing to abide by new lockdown measures. At the same time, criminal-justice systems are struggling to fulfil their usual mandates as social distancing measures and diminished resources take their toll. The orientation of state security apparatuses is shifting fundamentally. In places where state reach may be weak, agreements with criminal bosses and groups may be tempting to enforce social distancing measures and, eventually, public order itself.

Before the crisis, geopolitical and national security concerns included ongoing protracted conflicts (shaped by illicit flows of resources, money and weapons); cities plagued by serious levels of gang violence; and criminal capture of institutions and state bodies. Now the crisis is upon us, none of these issues have gone away: instead, it is likely that the global response to this crisis may in some ways be shaped, subverted or hindered by an infiltration of criminal interests.

The work of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) aims to place a spotlight on the criminal economy and show how it can derail the efforts of states and international organizations to work effectively, reduce global inequality, promote democracy and protect human rights. As the viral outbreak reached global proportions, the COVID-19 pandemic and its prospective long-term impacts have become a preoccupation for our network and the civil-society partners we work with on the ground, who are leading vital efforts to protect vulnerable populations at risk of exploitation by criminal groups

*In places where state reach may be weak, agreements with criminal bosses and groups may be tempting to enforce social distancing measures.*

and corrupted state actors. The virus is, already, changing the state of play for the way they operate and is having profound implications for criminal markets the world over.

This policy brief draws from information gathered across our local and global network, including press reporting to which we have been alerted. It provides an overview of what we consider to be the four major ways in which the pandemic will have implications for organized crime (and associated illicit market activity), and how this may affect states' ability to respond both to the virus itself and to long-term organized-crime policing. Two of these trends relate to overall changes within the wider illicit market environment, while two identify specific markets closely linked to changes in policy and behaviour related to the pandemic itself. They are:

- 1.** Some organized-crime activities have been constrained by social distancing measures and travel restrictions, and will take time to reconstitute themselves.
- 2.** As the attention of police forces and policy-makers is diverted elsewhere, some criminal groups have quickly used this opportunity to scale up their activities.
- 3.** Organized-crime groups, some long embedded in the health sector, have quickly identified opportunities to exploit the sector.
- 4.** Cybercrime has emerged rapidly as a risk area that could have long-term implications for the growth of criminal markets.

Each of these four trends is outlined in greater detail below. The second half of the brief considers the implications for the response.

## 1. Coronavirus is slowing and constraining organized criminal activities and they will take time to reconstitute

Constraints on travel and movement in public spaces and dramatic reductions in economic activity and in international trade have put the brakes on organized criminal activity. This is likely to be only a short-term impact, however, as illicit activities rapidly reconstitute themselves to meet both old and new market demand.

Social distancing measures and lockdowns, for example, have had an impact on violent street crime, often linked to organized criminal activity. In El Salvador, murder rates have dropped dramatically since the introduction of social distancing measures. Four days were recorded in March without a single reported homicide, which observers have connected directly to the new restrictions on people's movement.<sup>3</sup> Since the movement of cars is limited, the streets are empty of people and there is a greater presence of law-enforcement officers patrolling to control movement. As a result, the chances of a perpetrator getting away are dramatically reduced. Similarly, our networks in the Balkans report that in recent weeks there has been a reduction in homicides and robberies. In Bosnia, where vehicle theft is a major issue,<sup>4</sup> potential thieves report it to be more difficult to steal cars without detection where movement is limited and the streets are empty of people. Local civil-society activists report that fewer mafia-related murders are expected in the coming months in countries like Serbia and Montenegro, for the same reason.

While it may be too early to tell what the longer-term impact on rates of violence may be, in the immediate term, constraints on freedom of movement are also constraining criminal groups. In Italy, a long-hunted mafia boss – Cesare Cordi of the 'Ndrangheta – was arrested by police for having contravened lockdown restrictions.<sup>5</sup>

More broadly, a reduction in Chinese exports to the rest of the world is taking its toll on the revenues of criminal groups. China is the leading source of counterfeit and illicit trade goods globally,<sup>6</sup> and with Chinese factories on lockdown, criminal enterprises find themselves without alternative sources

of supply.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, production of methamphetamines and fentanyl by Mexican cartels is being impaired by difficulties in procuring imports of the precursor chemicals from China.<sup>8</sup> Mexican cartels are deeply implicated in the supply of opioids, such as fentanyl, to US markets, which with the advent of the opioid crisis has become a major source of income to the cartels.

While Chinese-sourced illegal goods have naturally been the first hit by the lockdowns, the prospective impact may hit illicit flows around the world. Europe is one of the most significant destination markets for a wide array of illicitly traded commodities, and significantly heightened border controls as a result of the outbreak have impacted cross-border trafficking and smuggling supply chains. The transportation of goods and people is being limited to far fewer official border posts, and which have higher levels of surveillance capacity, thereby increasing the risks for smugglers hoping to transport contraband goods.

Furthermore, extensive lockdowns and the closure of borders to human movement will make it much more difficult for human smugglers to ply their trade into and across Europe. They may nevertheless attempt to capitalize on the desperation of migrants who are stranded before reaching their final destinations, upping prices as transporting them becomes more challenging.

Our network in Libya, for example, report that restrictions designed to counter coronavirus infection are already impacting human-smuggling routes through the Sahel region, on several fronts. In the face of the pandemic, the already precarious future of the thousands of migrants and asylum-seekers crossing to Europe has become even more uncertain.

First, countries in the region have begun closing points of entry. In Niger, for example, smugglers travelling through Niger to Libya who departed with a military-escorted convoy on 17 March were sent back to Agadez upon arriving in Madama (a town on the northern frontier of Niger), as the border had been closed. This long weekly convoy is often used

by migrant smugglers to afford them safety from bandits who operate around Agadez.

Second, municipalities key to human smuggling, such as Kufra and Sebha in Libya, have taken measures to close their communities to smuggling. Access to Sebha has reportedly been restricted, including to migrants.<sup>9</sup>

Third, smugglers themselves are suspending their activities owing to concerns about the virus and infections in their communities. Despite weak border security, the social taboo of bringing irregular migrants into Libya and transporting them to the north is likely to effectively suspend people-smuggling activities, with smugglers respecting (and likely sharing) the fears of the communities they come from. Even if smugglers do try to continue operating, local communities, armed groups or even other smugglers will use force to prevent them. We have already received one unconfirmed case of Libyan people smugglers attacking Egyptian people smugglers trying to bring migrants across the border with Egypt, after they had said that no one was to cross due to COVID-19. There is a precedent for this kind of reaction, seen in responses to the more limited threat of the Ebola epidemic in 2014/15.<sup>10</sup>

However, this sentiment is not universal. Because of the considerable financial loss sustained by

suspending smuggling routes, many smugglers have reported to us that they will take more clandestine routes to bypass the travel restrictions enforced by the Nigerien government. More broadly, the economic shock of the pandemic leading to a fall in employment and living standards could push communities towards smuggling to make ends meet.

Initial reports from Europe suggest that, in countries under lockdown or social distancing policies, drug supply lines have been disrupted. Based on our research into street-level prices and consumption of heroin across East and Southern Africa,<sup>11</sup> early information suggests that heroin prices are increasing and purity decreasing as it becomes more difficult to smuggle drugs into the region.

Frontline dealers in all corners of the globe are seeing the effect of people being progressively moved off the streets, which is their major point of sale. Whether this will prompt a shift to online and dark-web markets remains to be seen, but it will certainly change the dynamics of local drug markets.

Other frontline criminal industries will also suffer. As local businesses shut down worldwide, their capacity to sell illicit goods will be reduced, and as commerce is hurt economically, the capacity for mafia groups to solicit protection taxes and other types of extortion will also be thwarted.

## **2. The disruption caused by coronavirus has been quickly exploited by some criminal groups as a 'window' to scale up their activities**

The pandemic is putting state institutions under unprecedented pressure, as the fallout of the virus shuts down swathes of the economy, places strains on healthcare systems and requires immediate political decision making. While the impacts of institutional overstretch have their own consequences for security, the fact that the attention of police and policymakers is currently focused elsewhere has cast a shadow that has allowed some criminal groups new scope to operate in the realm of illegal markets, such as drug production and trafficking. Our network in several regions have already reported developments to suggest that criminal networks are capitalizing on the disruption.

Guinea-Bissau is a good example. The country is currently reeling from a political crisis. Following disputed elections in December 2019, rival political parties swore in two presidents and two prime ministers, until one president, Cipriano Cassamá, resigned in early March 2020 after just one day in office, citing threats made to his life. In the mid-2000s, the country became a key waypoint for cocaine trafficked from South America en route to European markets. Major political and military figures were implicated. Following a period of hiatus, large-scale seizures of cocaine in 2018 and 2019 again raised the question of whether the country was still a 'narco-state'.



Criminal networks in Guinea-Bissau and corrupt elements of the police force have capitalized on the turmoil of the pandemic. After a plane was sighted landing at Osvaldo Vieira Airport on 18 March – after the airport had been presumably closed for flights as a measure to prevent infected passengers landing in the country – it raised strong suspicions that the closure was being used as a guise for landing planes carrying cocaine.<sup>3</sup> Interference by the National Guard in cases of drug trafficking under investigation by the Judicial Police, the sudden replacement of the judicial police director with a prosecutor previously linked to cocaine trafficking, and ongoing attacks on journalists and opposition political figures also suggest efforts to shift the balance of power towards those with an interest in the drug economy.

In Albania, the police force is currently overstretched, as officers are put in the frontline of monitoring the country's lockdown. March and April is the season for growers to plant cannabis.<sup>13</sup> As the police are occupied with tasks related to lockdown, criminal networks believe that the state has little capacity to prevent illegal cultivation of cannabis. This is expected to lead to a higher production of cannabis during the summer months.<sup>14</sup>

Closures of border posts in Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer, aim to prevent cross-border outbreaks of the virus, but several observers have warned that this could strengthen criminal

groups that hold sway in the country's borderlands. Hundreds of underground border crossings, already currently used to smuggle migrants, drugs, illegal gold and other illicit commodities, and which are controlled by criminal groups, will be exploited to subvert the quarantine measures.<sup>15</sup>

In South Africa, the National Reserve Bank has released a public warning against scammers who claim to be representatives of the bank 'collecting' banknotes they claim as 'contaminated' with the virus.<sup>16</sup> In Nairobi, police have raided shops allegedly selling fake coronavirus testing kits.<sup>17</sup> And in Switzerland, reports have emerged of criminal groups looking to loot properties; they claim to be from official state agencies and request access to properties with a view to disinfecting the areas of coronavirus.<sup>18</sup>

The illegal wildlife trade has also been implicated in coronavirus-related trends. Traders based in China and Laos have been marketing rhino horn products as 'cures' for coronavirus. Conservation groups have responded, reiterating that the demand for rhino horn in traditional medicine drives poaching and has no medical value.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, although violence and street crime may have been reduced in some places – even if only temporarily – the disruption caused by the coronavirus also appears to have seen an upsurge in assassinations. In Colombia, it is reported that death squads have exploited the opportunity to kill rural social activists, for example.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The health sector constitutes an important target for criminal groups, particularly those who have been long embedded there

As the pandemic sparks demand for medical supplies and misinformation spreads confusion, criminal groups are seizing the opportunity. Sales of counterfeit medical products have surged since the outbreak, as have incidents of smuggling and theft of medical supplies. In the online world, which – for those confined to their homes has become the major means of interacting with the outside world – scams have proliferated as criminals exploit fear and trust in institutions to defraud people. Where criminal groups are already integrated into pharmaceutical

supply systems and health sectors, essential funds intended to provide financial security against the pressing threat of coronavirus may be diverted from their intended destination, weakening the response and ultimately costing lives.

Authorities in Iran,<sup>21</sup> Ukraine<sup>22</sup> and Azerbaijan<sup>23</sup> have intercepted attempts to smuggle essential stocks of medical face masks and hand sanitizer. In Italy, police have seized counterfeit masks in several regions.<sup>24</sup> Adverts for masks have emerged on dark-web forums,<sup>25</sup> while hundreds of sites on the open web

market discounted masks that may not be legitimate, or even exist.<sup>26</sup>

In response to the new trend in counterfeit medical items sparked by the outbreak, the INTERPOL-coordinated Operation Pangea in March 2020 saw authorities from 90 countries take collective action against the illicit online sale of medicines and medical products, resulting in 121 arrests worldwide and the seizure of potentially dangerous pharmaceuticals worth more than US\$14 million. This can be taken as a first indication of the scale of online profiteering related to the pandemic, as the operation resulted in higher levels of, for example, counterfeit antiviral medication, than seen in similar operations before the outbreak.<sup>27</sup>

In some countries, however, organized crime has long infiltrated medical supply chains and health systems. Corruption is a major challenge, and one that will continue to impair states' ability to respond effectively to the pandemic.

In Italy – which at the time of writing has suffered the greatest number of COVID-19-related deaths in the world – organized-crime networks have been penetrating the healthcare system, both public and private, for years.<sup>28</sup> Such networks include the Cosa Nostra in Sicily,<sup>29</sup> the Camorra in Naples<sup>30</sup> and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria.<sup>31</sup> While mafia infiltration of healthcare appears to be concentrated in the country's south, there is evidence of criminal involvement in hospitals in other regions, including the epicentre of the outbreak in Italy, Lombardy.<sup>32</sup> By placing *mafiosi* in key positions within hospital management and health departments, these criminal networks are able to divert investments originally aimed at providing financial resources, equipment and essential supplies,<sup>33</sup> and influence procurement, commercial agreements and recruitment processes within the healthcare system.<sup>34</sup>

While the Italian healthcare system is often lauded for its quality of access and outcomes, the involvement of mafia groups in the provision of services has been chipping away at its resilience for years. An investigation in 2018 revealed that ambulances controlled by the 'Ndrangheta were riddled with inadequacies, including defective gearboxes, broken brakes and lights, and a lack of crucial equipment.<sup>35</sup>

During this time of crisis, the impact of long-term mafia infiltration may well be deeply felt. As mafia expert and Italian Deputy Minister of Health spokesperson, Sergio Nazzaro, told us during the preparation of this brief, '*la mafia è come la coronavirus – ti prenderà dovunque*' ('the mafia is like the coronavirus – it will get you wherever you are').<sup>36</sup>

Corruption and criminal exploitation are global public-health challenges: in procurement, in diversion of funds, allocation of resources, and individual-level corruption of bribes paid for preferential medical treatment and the ability to flout quarantine restrictions.<sup>37</sup> In Europe, 19% of patients have reported paying bribes for preferential health treatment on average in a 2018 EU study – a figure that rises as high as 41% for Slovakia and 38% for Slovenia.<sup>38</sup> The US healthcare system has long been a target for criminal groups, with a 2012 report by Thomson Reuters estimating that between 3% and 10% of the value of total healthcare spend is stolen every year – or an estimated US\$230 billion.<sup>39</sup> Corruption in containment work during the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak has been well documented and saw international organizations and recipient countries reporting millions in lost and reallocated funds.<sup>40</sup>

Chronic underfunding due to fraud, corruption and eroded capacity will make the struggles of the healthcare sector even more significant, including its ability to respond effectively to the current crisis. With the pandemic, rising demand and limited resources create the perfect conditions for corruption to worsen.

Counterfeit, substandard and illegally diverted pharmaceuticals are possibly among the world's most pressing illegal trade problems. A lucrative criminal industry – estimated to be worth as much as US\$431 billion annually<sup>41</sup> – it is also a massive public-health threat, which targets disproportionately the most vulnerable: those who are sick and poor. Substandard and ineffective drugs can worsen the condition of sick individuals, hinder accurate diagnoses, accelerate the spread of communicable diseases, increase drug resistance, reduce the confidence that people have in their health institutions, and ultimately kill people.

In some contexts, counterfeit pharmaceutical markets are controlled by powerful criminal organizations that may use their influence over institutions and threats of violence to flout regulation and bring counterfeit products to market. In Mexico, where as many as six in every ten medical products are falsified, expired or stolen, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of the most widespread and violent criminal organizations operating in the country, promotes the production of pirated drugs and forces many small and medium-sized pharmacies to sell

them, mainly in Guanajuato, Jalisco, Guerrero and Michoacán states.<sup>42</sup> As hospital resources become overburdened during the crisis, the vulnerability of health systems to criminal profiteering is likely to become ever-more pronounced.

As diverse as these challenges to the public-health sector may be, one common factor is that criminal interests are exploiting people's fear of the virus, and preying on the public's need for assurance and protection, and the faith they place in trusted institutions, to opportunistically profit from the chaos.<sup>43</sup>

#### **4. Cyber scams, fraud, disinformation and other cyber-enabled crimes will become a growth industry, as people on lockdown kill time online**

Lockdowns put in place to control the spread of coronavirus may create new demand for illicit businesses, particularly those that are cyber-enabled, as millions of people find themselves homebound, isolated, bored and economically constrained.

A series of coronavirus-related phishing scams have already emerged whereby cybercriminals have impersonated trusted sources of information, such as the World Health Organization, to spread malware or harvest personal information.<sup>44</sup> INTERPOL has issued a warning against frauds whereby people are tricked into buying non-existent medical supplies, making payments intended for medical care into accounts controlled by criminals.<sup>45</sup> It is estimated that millions of dollars have already been lost by victims of such scams.

Being unable to go to the shops – or mere boredom alleviated by some retail therapy online – will increase people's exposure to illicitly sourced, counterfeit and illicitly traded goods, which are highly prevalent on large e-commerce platforms, as well as independent sites. In a 2018 study, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) found an extraordinary prevalence of counterfeit goods online: 43% of the items purchased by the GAO in a random sample test of third-party sellers were counterfeit.<sup>46</sup>

A protracted lockdown may also prove a boon to online sex industries: website Pornhub has already

seen a huge lift in demand across the world, and is offering premium membership free to entice new clients.<sup>47</sup> While this site is legal, the demand for new content from viewers with more than the usual time on their hands may prompt criminal groups to coerce sex workers, drug users, or other vulnerable persons into live and recorded sexual exploitation.

Similarly, those with more deviant tastes may use the time to seek out sites offering live child sexual exploitation (CSE) online, where there is a ready supply developing as children are kept home from school, and both criminal groups and impoverished families look for new sources of income.<sup>48</sup> The FBI has issued a warning that children who homeschool, play games online and use social media during school closures may be targeted and groomed by sexual predators, as they spend extended time online.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, much of the content related to child sexual exploitation is shared between private user groups and forums. A long-term risk is that during the lockdown, those with CSE interests, but who had not acted upon them, may now make contact with these online communities and remain active members long after the urgency of the pandemic has passed.

Another online criminal industry likely to see its potential clientele increase are advanced fee-fraud schemes, including in particular romance scams, lottery and other 419 scams.<sup>50</sup> These target

middle-aged, middle-income and notably socially isolated individuals,<sup>51</sup> and the pool of people vulnerable to such attacks is likely to increase in line with lockdown and social distancing measures because of the isolation they create.

Business e-mail compromise (BEC)<sup>52</sup> scams are a form of low-tech financial fraud in which spoofed emails from CEOs, suppliers, or other trusted sources are sent to financial or administrative staff to request large money transfers. BECs are the business equivalent of 419 scams. Targeting individuals in their corporate roles, they often seek to elicit larger amounts of money over a shorter period of time because they target corporates. With most businesses instructing the majority of their workforce to telework remotely during lockdowns, there is greater space for BEC scams. For example, with physical contact between staff curtailed, administrative personnel might be less inclined to check with management whether an order to pay

a supplier, or a subsidiary of the company, is genuine. The potential for loss here is manifold. Such a scam is likely to take by surprise less cyber-aware and secure small and medium enterprises, who will most likely be the hardest hit economically by the shutdown.

Cybercrime and cyber-enabled crimes are going to offer enormous potential for criminal groups of all sizes and scales to replace income lost from their traditional criminal enterprises, constrained by the virus-control conditions discussed in the previous section. A recent article also suggested that this might extend as far as the cash-strapped states under sanctions, whose national economies relied on transnational crime and illicit financial flows to underpin their economies and evade controls. North Korea and Iran, both illicit-economy hubs and active agents in the global criminal economy, are reportedly looking for solutions to alleviate economic hardship, and may turn to cybercrime as an alternative.<sup>53</sup>



## VULNERABILITIES AND RESPONSES

**G**overnments are rapidly scaling up their responses to the coronavirus outbreak. As noted above, however, while public-health policies are critical, a number of second-order effects and vulnerabilities are also emerging as governments look the other way. Our networks report three in particular to be of note, in terms of their linkage to the growth and/or evolution of organized crime. These are:

- 1.** Heightened levels of risk to vulnerable groups who are reliant on organized criminal actors.
- 2.** The reorientation of policing, criminal justice and wider security institutions.
- 3.** The possibility of social disorder and the ability of organized-crime to position themselves as 'partners' to supply services and to support the state in maintaining order

## 1. Vulnerable groups, who are at risk of criminal exploitation or reliant on illegal goods and services, may be among those most at risk

Humane and humanitarian responses to the virus must take into account illicit economies, as, often, groups who are reliant on these economies for survival or at risk of criminal victimization do not have access to health systems and other protection mechanisms. Social marginalization and criminal economies are, especially in developing countries, often inextricable issues.

Some have warned that detention centres holding migrants in Libya are a ticking time bomb, as crowded and unsanitary conditions in the centres render migrants extremely vulnerable to the virus.<sup>54</sup> The implications for people who use drugs in the most vulnerable regions, in the absence of public-health support systems, may well be serious.

As is the case during all crises, the impact and risk fall hardest on the most vulnerable in society, and this often includes those who are implicated in criminal markets. In the context of a global health crisis, many of these groups stand to become even more marginalized, as health resources, social welfare and policy responses are targeted towards the immediate coronavirus threat. Safeguarding measures, both by state and civil-society groups, may become more difficult to implement as free movement is restricted.

Identifying victims and potential victims of human trafficking may similarly become more difficult. Keeping victims isolated, both physically and emotionally, is a key strategy for traffickers to control their victims.<sup>55</sup> This will be made significantly easier in lockdown situations, where victims may be unable to escape abusive circumstances, and behind closed doors may be exposed to more extreme forms of abuse. Victims of domestic servitude who are shut in with their employers, unable to access police or social services, may be further victimized by physical or sexual abuse. Compounding the problem, identifying victims of human trafficking for sexual or forced labour often relies on identification and reporting by the public, which is to become significantly less or fall away completely as social distancing comes into effect.

Patterns of victimization and human trafficking may change. According to the Blue Dragon project, which aims to reduce instances of human trafficking in

Vietnam, and which is supported by the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund, school closures may ultimately lead to an uptick in human-trafficking cases. In the absence of subsidized school meals and as the economic damage caused by the pandemic becomes more pronounced, the economic burden on families may become too much to bear. As a consequence, more children may be forced into child labour or early marriage.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in South East Asia, poor children, children who are working and children who are not at school have been shown to be at far greater risk of being used for child sexual exploitation online, including for live sex acts.<sup>57</sup> As families seek alternative forms of income, pushing their children into this growing online scourge may be one possibility.

In Haiti, camps of internally displaced people become a challenging setting for countering human trafficking and sexual exploitation. According to our partners working in Haiti, the chaos brought by the pandemic is expected to make the situations of vulnerable young people at risk of being trafficked even more precarious. Civil-society groups in the country fear that gangs operating in the camps could profit from the chaotic situation to take advantage of vulnerable young people during the outbreak.<sup>58</sup> Humanitarian organizations are grappling with the challenges that containment of the virus in settings such as refugee camps and in conflict zones presents to their work. Safeguarding vulnerable groups from criminal predation is one part of this vital work.

Youth groups in the UK have warned that the closure of schools and community centres might place young people on the peripheries of crime at greater risk of recruitment into criminal groups and gangs, as they fight boredom and the social constraints of lockdown.<sup>59</sup> Monitoring children and youth, and staging preventive interventions in vulnerable communities become increasingly difficult when teachers, community leaders, social workers and other points of outreach are also confined indoors.

People who use drugs are another community that risks greater vulnerabilities as a result of the pandemic and the response. As stated above, based on

our understanding of heroin markets in East and Southern Africa, we would expect disruption in heroin supply lines to lead to rising prices and lower availability of the drug in the longer term. Heroin users may turn to injecting drug use as a more economical means of using heroin. Illicit heroin use environments are often hidden, crowded and confined spaces, ideal for coronavirus transmission, as is the sharing of instruments such as needles. Many users are already immuno-compromised and therefore more vulnerable to the virus. Social distancing and self-isolation are not prevention techniques that

users can or will employ. Other experts have warned of similar impacts in other regions.<sup>60</sup>

The longer-term health implications for vulnerable populations of people who use drugs may be telling. Risk of fatal and non-fatal overdose will increase, as will risk of blood-borne transmission of other viruses such as HIV, and hepatitis B and C. Where health services are already overwhelmed by coronavirus cases, additional deaths and infections among the drug user population are likely to occur if there is no intervention.

## 2. Coronavirus is rapidly reshaping institutions, which raises issues of overstretch, legitimacy and effective oversight

The pandemic is placing a unique, considerable strain on all state institutions, and one that is likely to be protracted. Not only do the response requirements place new responsibilities on many different arms of the state, but they do so at a time when authorities' staff are having to address their own personal health and safety needs. Every emergency brings the actions of the state into sharp relief – how they perform in the eyes of their citizens can either heighten public trust or diminish it for the long term.

This includes criminal-justice systems. The coronavirus pandemic may be paving the way for the most radical reshaping of police mandates and criminal-justice systems seen in modern times. As governments are increasingly allocating themselves emergency powers in order to help social isolation measures, police forces and, in some countries, the military, are the main institutions that enforce these measures.

The European epicentres of the pandemic may be a model for what is to come elsewhere. In Italy, the police, Carabinieri and military have been drafted in to monitor streets and borders. Countrywide, citizens require signed authorization to leave their homes, and security agencies are required to enforce these measures.<sup>62</sup> France and Spain have implemented similar steps,<sup>62</sup> and across Europe border measures have been reinstated in countries within the free-movement Schengen area. Criminal sanctions in Italy include fines or three-month prison

sentences for breaking lockdown rules.<sup>63</sup> In areas where social distancing rules were originally enacted without criminal sanctions enforcing them, such as those in Switzerland where, currently, gatherings of more than five people are prohibited, governments are turning to the police as a means to force unwilling citizens to adhere to the new order.<sup>64</sup>

Several governments have deployed new surveillance tools developed for policing and counter-terror work to monitor populations in their drive to contain the virus. Chinese authorities have used monitoring of citizens' smartphones and obligatory reporting of medical conditions to both trace potential coronavirus carriers and track their movements so as to identify those who are in proximity to suspected patients. Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu also used an emergency decree to allow the security agency to deploy surveillance technology to track coronavirus patients. According to organizations monitoring digital rights during the pandemic, ten countries, including China, Iran and Germany, have begun to implement digital measures in a bid to track the spread of the virus.<sup>65</sup>

These changes are fundamental to the social contract between the citizen and the state. In some cases, observers have warned that new powers are being allocated without the appropriate checks and balances usually accorded to states' use of force against citizens and herald the arrival of a new,

authoritarian 'health surveillance state'.<sup>66</sup> Once enacted, it could be unclear exactly how governments will be compelled to relinquish new powers after the pandemic is over.<sup>67</sup>

In the immediate term, managing an extensive system of quarantines will put an enormous strain on security agencies. As many public institutions will increasingly be shut down or compelled to operate under conditions of social isolation, it will increasingly be the police with whom citizens will have to engage. Law enforcement will become the public face of government and the coronavirus response. At the same time as their mandates are being expanded into new and largely uncharted territories, criminal-justice systems will also bear the burden of containing the virus within their own staff and prison populations, meaning inevitably a reduced ability to carry out their usual responsibilities.

As police resources are allocated to the immediate crisis of the coronavirus, the resources available to community policing work, and investigating serious and organized crime become diminished. In the UK, for example, plans are in place for police forces to be stripped back to respond only to major incidents owing to the loss of infected and quarantined staff. Investigations into even serious crimes, including homicides, could be halted as the coronavirus outbreak accelerates.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, for border control and customs agencies, while the primary effort is focused on closing the borders to human movement, at the same time governments are doing all they can to ensure the reliable flow of essential goods and services. This is an imperative both to ensure that public confidence is not further knocked by the sight of empty shelves and shortages of basic necessities, and to try limit the already significant damage to global trade and the economy. The risk then is that border control officials become less vigilant to goods smuggling, and that trafficking and smuggling of a range of commodities might be veiled under the guise of shipments of medical supplies and food – a phenomenon we are already seeing at the borders between the Western Balkans and Europe.<sup>69</sup> Border control officials are reportedly also being bribed, both by citizens hoping to pass the closed borders, as well

as by criminal groups desperately trying to prevent their illicit supply chains being interrupted. The long-term damage to the integrity of customs and border officials once this crisis is over could be serious, especially in countries where these institutions are still maturing and their integrity was already weak.

Courts have been closed or limited to core staff and are hearing only essential cases in South Korea,<sup>70</sup> South Africa<sup>71</sup> and several US states, among others. The ability for citizens to attend court as witnesses, defendants and jurors will fundamentally be impossible to achieve in a context of social distancing. The right of defendants to a fair trial may only be ensured by finding alternative arrangements for courts to operate remotely using technology.<sup>72</sup> Already this seems to be the case. In Boston, a long-running MS-13 gang-related homicide trial, which was a mere day and a half from closing, was officially ended with a mistrial because the court was closing to allow social distancing.<sup>73</sup> In Slovakia, because of similar measures, a specialized court has postponed hearings into the 2018 murder of a journalist, which led to protests that brought down the government.<sup>74</sup>

Lack of access to medical care, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions make prison populations vulnerable to infections.<sup>75</sup> Already prisons have been a flashpoint for infections in several countries. In Wuhan, the Chinese city where the virus emerged three months ago, more than 800 prisoners were reportedly infected. Fear of the virus is also sparking unrest and violence. A riot that flared up in Bogotá, Colombia, left 23 dead and 83 injured as prisoners protested about a lack of sanitary conditions leaving them susceptible to the outbreak.<sup>76</sup>

States are taking measures to defend prisons from the infection. South Africa has restricted visits to prison inmates,<sup>77</sup> a measure that has also been adopted in several US states.<sup>78</sup> In an unprecedented step, Iran has temporarily released 85 000 prisoners (including many political prisoners) in a bid to limit infections inside prison facilities.<sup>79</sup> Spain and the US have also taken measures for early release.

The vital work that criminal-justice systems usually carry out in investigating serious and organized crime and corruption, the dismantling of criminal networks,



prosecuting suspects and rehabilitating offenders may grind to a halt as the immediate crisis overwhelms institutional capacity.

As the police become the public face of the state's coronavirus response, the legitimacy of and public trust in law enforcement becomes a central question. In places where corruption, police brutality and violence have long eroded trust in these institutions, and endemic issues of organized crime and marginalization have strained inhabitants' relationship with the authorities, granting police more powers, effectively a licence that has such a tangible impact on personal freedoms, may flare tensions still further.

Where government institutions are compromised by corruption and links to organized criminal groups, citizens may fear that emergency measures are being abused for criminal gain.

To take Italy as the pioneer example yet again, levels of trust in public institutions, particularly in the southern regions, where mafia influence is more pronounced, are historically low.<sup>80</sup> As a consequence, many were initially distrustful of government alarm over the virus and were reluctant to follow social distancing measures.<sup>81</sup> The same issue may recur as lockdown measures are extended around the world.

### 3. The possibility of social disorder, and the emergence of criminal groups as suppliers and 'partners' of the state in maintaining order

One of the major questions, as yet unanswered, is what effect the (reportedly inevitable) global recession will have on illegal markets. Drawing on our experience of researching organized-crime dynamics all over the world, we know that communities and individuals are driven into black-market economies when legitimate livelihoods and opportunities are scarcer or less lucrative. If this health crisis becomes an economic and social crisis, people may become desperate. This could increase the risk of looting and burglary in some contexts and, in turn, create markets for criminal groups providing protection.

Attempts to repress these economies by law enforcement, without addressing the ultimate drivers of poverty and need have often created vicious cycles of violence and marginalization, as seen in the vast human cost and suffering entailed in the 'war on drugs'.

Over the decades, there have been innumerable development initiatives aimed at creating alternative livelihoods in areas of illicit drug cultivation, for example. Historically, many have failed in their mission to create viable alternatives to drug production and have merely served to shift production to other areas, as drug crops continue to be the most profitable option for marginalized rural communities (although, more recently, there have been some steps forward in this approach). As global markets

suffer, many regions lapse once again into illegal crop cultivation.

Similarly, initiatives to create community-based responses to wildlife trafficking may face greater challenges in countering illegal trade as communities in the vicinity of national parks and reserves face a harsher economic climate. Tourism is decimated by travel restrictions, so more people who depend on it for a livelihood may be pushed towards poaching and wildlife trade as a means of making a living. The knock-on effects of COVID-19 may therefore take a toll on biodiversity and make endangered species even more precarious.

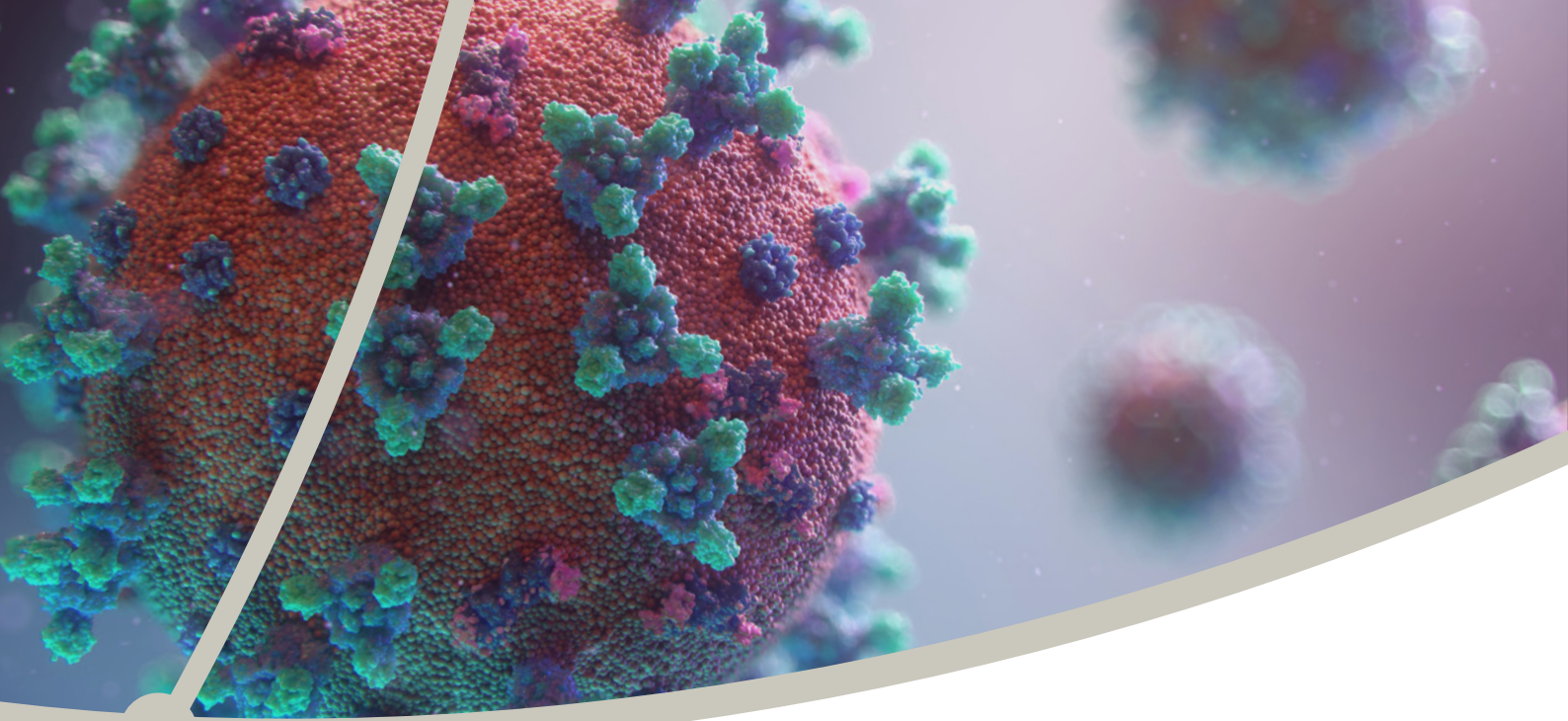
Police managers now express quiet concerns about the wider challenge of social disorder in the event of long-standing systems of quarantine in situations where supplies of food, medical stock and other necessities are running low. As noted above, this has important consequences for the legitimacy of public security institutions if mismanaged, or in the context where wider economic or social shocks make retaining order challenging.<sup>82</sup> The GI-TOC's work suggests that in such cases, governments may themselves seek out allies in the criminal world to assist. The dangers of this approach, while perhaps of utility to them in the short term, will have major longer-term consequences for the strength of organized crime.

Already, unverified social-media posts claim that in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, criminal groups have begun to enforce a lockdown at night. Their statement reads: 'If the government won't do the right thing, organized crime will.'<sup>83</sup> If such claims are true, it suggests that criminal groups will seek to use the pandemic as a way to build their own legitimacy, by implication inviting partnerships with the state, and the social legitimacy that this, in turn, may bring them.

In cities of the developing world where gangs exercise a great deal of influence and territorial control, authorities have to manage situations where they are not the sole arbiters of governance and power. Often, unstated or subtly stated arrangements between police and criminal networks allow certain criminal activity to continue unhindered as long as social order and peace are maintained. Police intelligence officers and gang leaders may communicate and cooperate with one another. In one of the most telling examples of this ongoing negotiation for space, territory and power with criminal groups, a truce was put in place between the Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gangs, two of El Salvador's largest and most violent criminal organizations, in March 2012.<sup>84</sup>

Criminal groups can also be influential local power brokers. In times of crisis, and in the face of disruption and major social disorder, governments will draw on whatever resources may achieve the immediate aim of maintaining calm. Some may well turn to criminal networks to achieve this in areas where state capacity is weak. There is a long history of states collaborating with criminal groups in times of crisis, a prime example being how the US government and mafia figures agreed to cooperate to counter union disruption at seaports during World War II.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, eagerness to enforce social distancing measures in gang-controlled areas may lead some states to cooperate with criminal groups. Gang leaders, who have an interest in maintaining their local legitimacy by protecting communities within their territory and being seen as the figureheads of power and stability in a crisis, may have a shared interest with government. The risk inherent in such strategies is that, in the long term, criminal figures become more entrenched in local governance and it becomes ever more difficult for the state to win back territory. The upshot is that the government and law enforcement are in a bind between the immediate need to contain the virus, no matter the cost, and the longer-term loss of legitimacy and state power.



## ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE VIRUS: POLICY RESPONSES

**C** OVID-19 will become a watershed moment in the changing face of criminal justice and the role of the state; the support provided by governments and international organizations to vulnerable communities; and the dynamics of the global criminal economy.

The world is moving into an uncertain future. The risks we have discussed here – authoritarian state responses threatening human rights and individual freedoms; vulnerable communities left out of state support structures; criminal opportunism infiltrating health systems and profiteering from overwhelmed institutions – are by no means academic and distant. Where criminal groups may have contributed to the cause of the outbreak (through the illicit wildlife trade), so too will they be one of many factors shaping the world’s response to coronavirus. More generally, criminal groups may exploit instability and reduced multilateral efforts to deal with organized crime and trafficking when there are other, more pressing, questions of public health.

This analysis suggests that a series of policy initiatives in the area of responding to organized crime and its intersection with the pandemic are required. These are as follows:

- 1.** Closely monitor the ‘second order’ security impact of the virus, in particular where criminal organizations are seeking to profit and try to anticipate opportunities for organized crime. These are likely to be of a different nature in places where security vulnerabilities already exist.

2. Drawing on active monitoring, pre-empt criminal involvement through both law enforcement and publicity initiatives. Act quickly when such information comes to light to preserve the legitimacy of the measures required and to prevent wider impacts, including on vulnerable groups, such as drug users, who are often the targets of criminal groups. Use the lockdown to weaken or break some criminal markets, most notably extortion.
3. Focus strongly now on organized criminal activity in the wider health sector, in particular in relation to procurement and the provision of counterfeit medical supplies. Publicly counter attempts by criminal entrepreneurs to develop new markets linked to the pandemic, such as the advertising of wildlife products and other cures. The media and civil-society groups have an important role to play here in raising awareness.
4. Partner with the media, e-commerce and entertainment platforms to promote cyber awareness and security, encouraging parents, teachers and professionals to be vigilant towards online scams, counterfeit goods, and to protect children and other vulnerable persons from grooming and outreach by predatory groups.
5. Support civil-society groups and the traditional frontline social-service providers (e.g. teachers, social workers and youth groups) in maintaining outreach to children and youth who are vulnerable to falling into criminal behaviour and being drawn into the activities of criminal groups looking to recruit new members.
6. Focus on vulnerable groups linked to criminal markets, such as drug users and sex workers, as they are now particularly marginalized by the pandemic and unable to access health services.
7. Ensure that policing responses in the context of lockdowns and quarantines adhere to the highest standards of professionalism, and seek wherever possible to build community support and deprive criminal groups of their legitimacy.
8. Promote integrity incentives for border control and customs officials who struggle with new and competing demands, so as to ensure good management and control of borders for the movement of people and goods.
9. Provide unified political responses to the crisis aimed at achieving wide legitimacy for the measures taken and avoid either public or under-the-table negotiations with criminal formations or groups to achieve local 'ordering'. Act against criminal groups claiming to enforce curfews or lockdowns.
10. A pandemic is a global issue and, hence, it will not be solved without international cooperation. Developing countries, and states where social order and governance are weakest, will be where the impact will be greatest for the most vulnerable. Countering this will require continuing development assistance, offering enhanced aid in countries where there are large pools of vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants and refugee populations) and criminally controlled urban areas, even while there are competing domestic priorities.

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# **GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

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The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with 500 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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