The Convergence of Terrorism and Organized Crime Explored Through Latin American Case Studies

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**Abstract**

Terrorism and organized crime have been explained as separate concepts due to their fundamentally different motivations, however this understanding no longer encompasses the threats these groups pose. The convergence of terrorism and organized crime is a concerning and little-understood trend in national security. Crossover of organizations is typically explained as the result of external pressures or as an internal evolution of groups. Though these schools of thought offer plausible and logical explanations, they don’t explain the role of institutionalization in groups’ shift, or of crossover as the result of both internal shifts and external pressures. I explore this phenomena through a small-n comparative case study of the Latin American groups The Sinaloa Cartel and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), which were chosen because they display different directions of terror-crime crossover and exist in similar cultures. This project illustrates the presence of both internal and external factors in terror-crime crossover, and shed further light on the shift towards institutionalization groups are exhibiting. It is crucial to build understanding on the crossover of terrorism and organized crime due to its serious implications for the economy, society, and security of the international community.

**Introduction**

The links between organized crime and terrorism are blurry and threatening to individuals, states and the global community, yet they have gone mostly unstudied and unexplained. Through this research, I seek to find what prompts crossover between terrorist groups and criminal organizations. To guide this research, I seek to answer the question “What explains the shifts terrorist groups, like Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, and criminal organizations, like the Sinaloa Cartel, make along the terror-crime spectrum?” Through an examination of possible factors that have been identified in causing this crossover, I will begin to explain the overlapping, and increasingly evolving relationship between organized crime and terrorism. I hope to highlight the significance of the link between terrorist organizations and criminal groups through an analysis of evolving threats to survival these groups may face around the world, but specifically throughout the Americas regions through these specific examples. As contemporary terrorism and modern organized crime progress, it has become imperative to evaluate not only their separate evolutions, but the increasing crossover groups are beginning to experience. This overlap has serious implications for the economy, society, and security of the international community.

Traditionally, politically motivated violent groups have been classified as terrorist or guerilla organizations. These groups are primarily founded on the basis of strict ideological principles.[[1]](#footnote-1) Terrorist groups like FARC, the IRA, and Hamas usually present a serious, political facade.[[2]](#footnote-2) Historically, there has been a clear separation of terrorist organizations from other violent groups like The Medellin Cartel, the Russian Mafia, and countless other organized criminal groups that operate across borders, trafficking drugs, people, and arms.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, the distinction between these groups has become progressively blurry. Even more of a departure from this traditionally deep separation between the criminal and the ideological is the increasingly common crossover between organized crime groups and terrorist or guerilla movements. In 2013, the Drug Enforcement Administration suggested that as many as 18 terrorist groups around the world had ties to the global drug trade, which includes heroin trafficking across Eurasia, as well as cocaine and marijuana trafficking in the Americas.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A common manifestation of this trend is illustrated when terrorist groups either mutate to act more like transnational criminal organizations, or vice versa. For example, organizations like FARC and the IRA have formed distinct, “in-house” networks for crime to fund their movements.[[5]](#footnote-5) The IRA itself has mutated so completely that, despite publicly maintaining its political motives, it displays far more traits commonly found in criminal organizations than anything else.[[6]](#footnote-6) Al-Qaeda offers another perspective in crossover between criminal and terrorist groups. Although, as an organization it has strongly religious aims, Al-Qaeda’s immediate short term objectives are grounded both politically and criminally.[[7]](#footnote-7) This shift from the political or ideological to the criminal does not only move in one direction. The reverse transformation from criminal activity to more political or terrorist-like activity has been seen in cartels across the Americas region such as with the Medellin Cartel and the Sinaloa cartel.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Considering the abnormality of this trend, we need to ask questions like, what explains the tightening nexus between criminal organizations and terrorist groups? Why are terrorist groups adopting criminal activities more frequently than criminal groups are adopting terrorist tactics? And, most importantly, what does this mean for U.S. security? This definitively emerging link, not only in tactics but in goals, between criminal organizations and terrorist groups would be not only foolish and short sighted to ignore, but potentially dangerous.

To begin answering my research question, I have chosen a neopositivist small-n route. I will be using a paired qualitative case study. I am choosing to use a case study because it allows for the level of complexity required for the context heavy nature of this question. Case studies will give me the tools to holistically evaluate a series of variables to help me uncover conjunctural causality. Aside from these logistical benefits to using in depth case studies, the qualitative method will simultaneously bring more meaning and definition to the concepts of terrorism and organized crime with an emphasis on the basic motivating ideology politically and economically. This paper will include a literature review of relevant sources, a methodology section to further explain each case study, as well as an analysis and conclusion.

**Literature Review**

In their analysis of crossover and individual group evolution, most scholars on terrorism and organized crime fall into one of two camps: Externalist or Internalist. The Externalist camp argues that crossover is prompted by external pressure. This camp posits that when the security of groups is threatened, be it by their host state, the international community, or other non-state actors, they will have to evolve in order to survive. This could manifest itself in a number of ways from a mere change in tactics to a complete shift in ideology. The Internalist group of scholars suggests that crossover is driven from within. This crossover could occur for a number of reasons, each of which can be tied to a change in group values and structure. Each group makes a valuable argument with strong support. This leads me to believe that crossover is prompted by a number of factors, both external and internal. Each group makes a valuable argument with strong support, leading me to believe that crossover is prompted by a number of factors, both external and internal, and this study aims to refine our understanding of the factors surrounding convergence.

This trend in terror-crime crossover is rooted in the distinct concepts of criminality and terrorism. Of course, the basic foundation of these groups, as well as the reasons they act the way they do - the targets they choose, the tactics they use, the audience they address - are not the same in every case.[[9]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, the evolving landscape of the world has further complicated the political landscape. Advancing technology, the spread of ideas, and the changing nature of communication have dramatically changed, even in the last three decades. A group of scholars have based an explanation for terror-crime convergence on these assumptions, thus making up the Externalist school of thought.

Externalists explain the trend of increased crossover of terrorist or guerilla groups and transnational criminal organizations by the decline of state sponsored terrorism in places like Eastern Europe and Cuba towards the end of the 20th century.[[10]](#footnote-10) Of course, when terrorism was primarily state sponsored, groups were less concerned with funding. As scholar David Rapoport explains, during the third wave of modern terrorism, in hopes of gaining some control over their destinies, states attempted to work with terrorist groups through sponsorship.[[11]](#footnote-11) As the third wave contracted and this practice grew increasingly costly to states, state sponsorship declined.[[12]](#footnote-12) With the loss of state support, terrorist groups found an inability to negotiate between “conflicting international demands” problematic. [[13]](#footnote-13) These demands have included anything from expanding operations to combatting outside attacks. Others argue that a lack of other options for funding through legal means is the key cause for such a drastic change in the way these groups interact. In efforts to combat organized transnational crime the United States and many other Western governments have focused resources on previously lucrative sources of income for terrorist organizations.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Although counterterrorism movements around the world have attempted to limit necessary resources for global terrorism, funding is not the only external pressure that forces organized crime and terrorism to converge. Globalization has drastically changed the way the international community interacts, specifically in terms of expectations of responsibility for security. In order to maintain relevance or even simply survival, ideological groups need consistent means to coexist with criminal organizations. Resources are limited, and though the goals and structures of transnational criminal organizations or terrorist groups may not be the same, they stand to gain from partnerships.[[15]](#footnote-15) Criminal organizations and terrorist groups can both benefit from business-like strategies that include standard structures, instituting incentives, and branding with a solid identity.

Another explanation for the increase in partnerships could be the heavy overlap in the general means these groups use to achieve different ends. Some scholars, like Louise Shelley and John Picarelli, explain through qualitative data on terror crime convergence, that it is the methods not the motives that explain the connection between criminal organizations and terrorist groups.[[16]](#footnote-16) These methods include but are not limited to: flexible networks that employ a variety of specialists to aid in money laundering, exploitation of information technology, corruption, and trafficking (of humans, narcotics, arms etc.).[[17]](#footnote-17) Steven Hutchinson, an expert on criminology, cites many connections and overlaps between different aspects of both organized crime and terrorism in his evaluation of this trend towards increased crossover.[[18]](#footnote-18) Namely, that the secondary characteristics like corruption and targeted violence, which characterize organized crime may manifest in crossover to terrorist activity.[[19]](#footnote-19) As such, the likelihood of crossover between organized criminal groups and terrorist organizations hinges on the degree of either group’s needs and the internal organization of each group.[[20]](#footnote-20) These types of groups may have different goals, but they both exploit vulnerable civil society in order to achieve them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Overall, these scholars posit that criminal organizations and terrorist groups will collaborate, but only as much and as often as is strictly necessary for survival. This school of thought argues that despite the deep-rooted ideological differences between terrorist groups and criminal organizations, they react to external pressure in similar ways. The similarity in these groups reaction to changing security concerns is a point highlighted by many of these scholars, and could be an explanation for this apparent terror-crime crossover.

Though the global stage for terrorism has certainly changed, other scholars take a far more focused stance on the blurring lines between organized crime and terrorism. Scholars that make up the Internalist school of thought suggest that this is not a conscious shift from ideology or a forced choice to partner, but rather an internal progression as terrorist groups and criminal organizations evolve. There are a number of possible explanations for this shift, but this camp emphasizes changing values and goals in its explanation of terror-crime crossover, rather than a forced shift for the sake of survival.

Terrorism scholars Thomas Badey and Mark Sedgwick fall into this school of thought with their explanations of the role ideology can play in terrorism, and constituency forming in particular. Badey shows that ideologies have three functions: the first is to polarize and mobilize populations to a shared goal, the second is to build a sense of security through established norms and systems towards this shared goal, and the last is to provide grounds for justification and rationalization of the group’s behavior.[[22]](#footnote-22) These mobilizing factors can be drawn parallel to mobilization in organized crime. This camp notes that the key differences between terrorist groups and criminal organizations lie in group motivation and goals, not necessarily structure or appearance. Sedgwick shows that religious terrorism often has secular goals characterized by an attachment to a larger campaign, the typical targeting of democracies and attacks directed at strategic objectives.[[23]](#footnote-23) This attachment of small attacks to achieve a larger goal is paralleled in organized crime, which illustrates some movement along the terror-crime continuum.

This shared use of crime is not the only overlap that exists between terrorist groups and criminal organizations. The very nature of religious terrorism is often global because ideological goals know no political boundaries.[[24]](#footnote-24) This alarming spread also exists in the realm of organized crime. Criminal syndicates like cartels have also grown substantially in both size and ambition.[[25]](#footnote-25) Transnational criminal organizations are showing themselves to be more flexible, more comprehensive, and more adaptable than ever.[[26]](#footnote-26) As the nature of these groups change, so to do their tactics, their targets, and their values, thus prompting this terror-crime crossover. In both cases of crime and terrorism, what this evolution comes down to is survival through group changes. This may include leadership changes, constituency changes, or even just general shifts in thought patterns. In the same way they must adapt to external threats, groups must be receptive to internal shifts in order to survive.

Chris Dishman, a scholar on the ties between terrorism and crime, employs several cases in Mexico, Russia, and Ireland that display varying degrees of this shift.[[27]](#footnote-27) Comparing the ways transnational criminal organizations and terrorist groups achieve their objectives, their typical targets, and their audience, he explains why historically they have not collaborated.[[28]](#footnote-28) Illustrating the growing overlap between terrorist groups and transnational criminal organizations, he explains the increased crossover of groups in some cases but not in others can be prompted by internal evolutions of ideas and needs.[[29]](#footnote-29) His analysis through changing tactics and group constituencies shows that this change in the interactions we see between terrorist groups and transnational criminal organizations is less the result of cooperation but rather a transformation of the goals and values of these groups as they pick up qualities outside their original realm of ideology (be it criminal or terrorist). Changes in a group’s constituency, or leadership are possible explanations for a change in goals or values. As the demographics of a group change, it is very possible for original goals or values to become distorted or change completely. Dishman has argued that there is a spectrum on which groups exist spanning from strictly political or financial to somewhere in between.[[30]](#footnote-30) Groups do not fall squarely and completely on either end of the spectrum. Criminal organizations can exhibit terrorist traits and vice versa. Because groups and organizations are not static, it is possible for one to move across the spectrum due to either internal or external pressures.

Both of these schools of thought offer valid explanations for the shift from more political to more financial or vice versa in terrorist organizations or criminal groups. Despite both being strong explanations, neither external pressures nor internal shifts seem to have enough power to explain the transformations these groups exhibit. I believe there is some level of push and pull between these driving factors that lead groups to change over time. Many groups that do not fall cleanly on the terror-crime spectrum experience both internal shifts and external pressure. Neither Externalists nor Internalists allow room for the other explanation, which leaves a significant gap for explanation. I also think there is another dimension of institutionalization in these shifts, be it political institutionalization, or criminal institutionalization, that has not been investigated in the existing literature. There are corresponding forms of institutionalization on either end of the terror-crime spectrum. Traditionally political and state-like institutions dominate the terrorist end of the spectrum, while criminal trafficking networks exist on the criminal end of the spectrum. The nuance this adds to terror-crime crossover and its implications for group legitimacy are still unexplored by the scholarly world.

**Methodology**

To answer my research question, I have chosen the neopositivist small-n route of a paired qualitative case study. The cases I have chosen represent crossover from opposite ends of the terror-crime spectrum. I have chosen to use a case study because it allows for the level of complexity required for the context-heavy nature of this question.[[31]](#footnote-31) A paired case study allows for the holistic evaluations of a series of variables so as to uncover conjunctural causality. A large-n study would be less effective for this project, as it would be unable to access the many contextual factors that cause movement on the terror-crime spectrum. Though a large-n study would allow for future prediction, it would not be able to identify the varying degrees to which different variables are important the same way a small-n case study would. Aside from these methodological benefits to using in-depth case studies, this paired case study qualitative method simultaneously brings more meaning and definition to the concepts of terrorism and organized crime. It will also offer a more nuanced explanation of shifting motivation along the terror-crime spectrum.

FARC and Sinaloa/CJNG have experienced relatively different degrees of internal and external pressure throughout the time they have shifted along the terror-crime spectrum. Though they have both experienced internal shifts and external pressures to some degree, the ratio of shifts to pressures is different in each case.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Sinaloa Cartel has experienced more internal shifts in the form of demographic changes, while FARC has experienced relatively more external pressures in the form of active negative domestic and international attention.

FARC encompasses the shift from more political to more economic. It emerged as a Marxist-Leninist guerilla movement in Colombia in the 1960s. FARC has been known to use military and terrorist tactics throughout its lifetime, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it built up an in-house crime network that focuses primarily on trafficking. This advanced trafficking network is worth an estimated $300 million. The original ideology of FARC still exists to some extent, but has been significantly distorted since the rise of its criminal endeavors. Sinaloa/CJNG, on the other hand, expands on the shift from more economic to more political. It originated in Mexico’s Sinaloa state in the late 1960’s and early 1970s. Today, the Sinaloa cartel operates in every Mexican State, and nearly every major city from New York to Buenos Aires. The Sinaloa cartel is characterized by violent turf wars and widespread trafficking networks, but it has also taken cues from other historically successful cartels by making inroads with Mexico’s political and economic elite. In 2010, CJNG split off of the larger organization after the death of its commander. CJNG is characterized by extreme violence and is responsible for a number of deadly attacks on federal police and security forces. These attacks on the state paired with use of idealistic propaganda targeted at citizenry display a transition from solely criminal to political and terrorist motivations.

All of that said, FARC and Sinaloa/CJNG have the same outcome in that they both have experienced high crossover between political interests and economic interests.[[33]](#footnote-33) This crossover is puzzling in that it has sprung from different contexts with different variables, but similar cultures. Sinaloa/CJNG began as a purely criminal organization, while FARC began as a guerilla movement with political motivations and terrorist characteristics. Sinaloa/CJNG has broad and intrusive international influence. Though FARC has international ties, it is primarily domestic. FARC is also willing to cooperate with the Colombian government in order to achieve its goals, but Sinaloa/CJNG has essentially waged war on the Mexican government with no clear motivation.

Because I am using cases of high crossover, my dependent variable is the existence of this high crossover in an organization, regardless of the direction of the shift, be it from more politically focused to more economically focused or vice versa.[[34]](#footnote-34) The indicators I use evaluate crossover are intended to show the results of my independent variables. One of my indicators for this crossover is ideological change between the two types of organization. I also use organizational change as an indicator of this shift. Additionally, to illustrate a change at all, I use adoption of tactics, and a shift in targets as other indicators. To determine the presence of these indicators, I look at the organizational (or structural) and the ideological changes within these two groups, by trying to understand: “Have these groups operated in states other than their home state?” “If they are operating outside of their home state, have their operations more in common now than a year ago?” Because these questions require yes or no answers, I measure the presence of these variables on a dichotomous scale because their mere presence is what is important, not necessarily the level of presence. I also look at the answers to these questions over the lifetimes of each groups (1960s to present). Most of my sources to evaluate the presence of these indicators are diplomatic communications or domestic and international news reports on these groups. I also use secondary literature sources that analyze the histories of these groups, as well as Insight Crime, an organization that offers unbiased and up-to-date news and profiles on Latin American criminal and terrorist groups.

I also have an independent variable that captures the explanation of external pressure and its possible impacts on terror-crime crossover.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indicators for this variable are decline in state sponsorship (be it financially or rhetorically), negative international attention, and negative domestic attention. These indicators were used as explanatory factors by the Externalist school of thought. I measure each of these variables on a three point scale. Three being lots of negative international attention, two being some negative international attention, one being minimal negative international attention, zero being no international attention. I use the same scale for domestic attention. To evaluate the presence of these indicators, I again use diplomatic communications and news reports, secondary historical accounts, and Insight Crime.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is important to note that “international” and “domestic attention” are not limited to governments or law enforcement themselves, but can include non-state actors like interest groups and other terrorist or criminal organizations, which could also pose a potential survival threat.

My second independent variable attempts to capture the explanation of internal shifts in impacting terror-crime crossover.[[37]](#footnote-37) Evidence of an ideological shift is far more elusive than external factors because it is extremely subtle. There are a number of obvious problems that come with trying to get inside the heads of criminal and terrorists. Primarily, the issue of what is ethically right, as well as safety concerns, and a general lack of data. Because these groups exist outside the realm of respectable society, they are not easily accessible, and do not exist under the same expectations. In order to pin down changes in ideology, I use indicators like claiming attacks, using propaganda, and a change in rhetoric through social media and publicized statements. These indicators were used by Internalist scholars to explain crossover. To evaluate these indicators, I also use series of questions that illustrate levels of attention and the presence of factors that could influence these variables. Examples of these questions are “If the group is originally terrorist, is it using criminal activity more than in the last year?” “If the group is originally criminal, is it using political activity more than it had in the last year?” This data is dichotomous as well, but I also use a similar scale to that described above to evaluate the level internal indicators. This scale has three points for each of these indicators, zero being no claimed attacks, propaganda, or rhetoric, and three being lots of claimed attacks, propaganda, or rhetoric. I use both a scale and dichotomous questions because it is important to recognize, not only the presence of these indicators, but also their level of influence. To evaluate these indicators, I use scholarly historical accounts of the evolution these groups have gone through.[[38]](#footnote-38) Insight crime also offers relevant information on the ways these groups interact with their local communities, which gives me some idea of the rhetoric and propaganda surrounding their actions.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Institutionalization cuts through both internal shifts and external pressures. Both FARC and Sinaloa/CJNG have gradually institutionalized to different degrees politically or criminally depending on their crossover in interests. This additional factor, and the legitimacy it can lead to, offers another independent variable to evaluate. Indicators of institutionalization vary depending on whether the institutionalization is political or criminal, but to note its presence, I use dichotomous questions like “Does the organization have standard operating procedures that reflect those of a political institution?” “Does the organization have structures or systems similar to those found in criminal organizations?” “Does the organization fulfill civil society needs that the government does not?” I use a similar scale to that mentioned above for international attention with zero representing no institutionalization and three denoting lots of institutionalization. I gather this data from news reports and government documents about each group as well as Insight Crime. It is important to use both a scale and dichotomous questions because I suspect not only the presence and extent of institutionalization has a role.

Using these variables, and their various indicators, I have come up with five hypotheses that could help me begin to identify different factors that could cause terror-crime crossover or vice versa. The hypotheses are as follows:

1. If there is negative international attention for a group, there is more likely to be crossover in an organization from more political to more economic or vice versa.
2. If there is negative domestic attention for a group, there is more likely to be crossover in an organization from more political to more economic or vice versa.
3. The older an organization is, the more likely it is to experience crossover from more political to more economic or vice versa.
4. If an organization experiences a change in constituency, it is more likely to experience crossover from more political to more economic or vice versa.
5. The more institutionalized the organization is, the more likely it is to hold legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the international community.

These variables may be necessary but not sufficient, which plays into the idea that these variables are conjuncturally causal. Each of these indicators (state sponsorship, negative international or domestic attention, age of movement, and change in constituency) may imply crossover from more economic to more political or vice versa, but this crossover does not necessarily imply the presence of each of these variables. These are competing hypotheses in that different combinations of these indicators may have a causal effect on crossover, but none of them are sufficiently responsible for complete causality.[[40]](#footnote-40) Instances of agreement between some of the variables could offer explanations to the high terror-crime crossover that is evident in FARC and Sinaloa and CJNG. It is also possible that all of these variables will have some importance in crossover. This does not necessarily mean that the significance of this project is limited, but that it offers a more encompassing understanding of the factors that can cause crossover, depending on the context.

**Analysis**

In my analysis of the data and sources I have collected on my cases of the Sinaloa Cartel and its militant offshoot Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and the former guerilla warfare group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), I describe my findings and discuss their implications. I then relate these findings back to my original puzzle and the literature surrounding this shift, showing that either internal or external shifts are more important in prompting terror-crime convergence depending on a group’s original orientation on the terror-crime spectrum. I conclude by discussing alternative interpretations of the data I have used.

My findings require a brief delineation of the cases and the structure of each crossover they exhibit. Sinaloa/CJNG represents a shift from more economic to more political in the outcome of both the internal and external pressures it has experienced in the timeframe of its existence. FARC has displayed the opposite shift, from more political to more economic as a result of both the internal and external pressures it has been subjected to since its conception. I contextualize these cases, as well as the qualitative scale I have created using three informal cases. Comparable to the Sinaloa Cartel/CJNG are the Gulf Cartel and its offshoot, Los Zetas. The Gulf Cartel was founded around the same time as the Sinaloa Cartel. In its heyday, it was widely regarded as the most powerful and sophisticated cartel in Mexico and the world.[[41]](#footnote-41) As it evolved, it formed an enforcement arm that consisted of well-trained defectors of the Mexican Army. This branch of the Gulf Cartel later eventually split off as a paramilitary group called Los Zetas in the early 2000s.[[42]](#footnote-42) Comparable to FARC is the guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). The ELN is also a former Marxist guerilla group in Colombia.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Based on my data, as well as a comparison through the use of my informal cases and scales, my interpretation is that both internal and external pressures play a role in creating crossover between terrorist group and criminal organizations, thus reflecting *both* sides of the literature previously reviewed. However, I explain this with the caveat that economic organizations usually experience relatively more internal pressure to force the shift, while originally political organizations are usually subject to relatively more external pressures to force this shift. Both of these cases are extreme cases in that they each exhibit my dependent variable of crossover in high levels. This variable has several indicators, including change in tactics, change in targets, change in goals, and change in organization or hierarchy - each of which is exhibited in high levels over the course of the lifespans of groups thus far.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Presence | |
| FARC | Sinaloa/CJNG |
| DV: Crossover | Yes | Yes |
| IV I: Changing Security or Survival Concerns | High | High |
| IV II: Shifting Ideology | Yes | Yes |
| IV III: Institutionalization (Political/Criminal) | No/Yes | Yes/Yes |

These findings are best illustrated through an outline of each of the case studies and the presence of each of the variables within it. FARC scored a “high” on the international attention scale, due to heavy attention from the United States. This data strongly supports my second hypothesis, “If there is negative international attention for a group, there is more likely to be crossover in an organization from more political to more economic or vice versa.” In the case of FARC, each of the variables was present to some degree, however the first independent variable, changing security or survival concerns, was the most heavily present. This variable encompasses the potential for external pressure to force crossover.[[44]](#footnote-44) In particular, there is a high evidence of negative international attention directed at FARC in displayed through the institution of Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia is the largest U.S.-Latin America aid package in the history of U.S.-Latin America relations.[[45]](#footnote-45) It exceeds $10 billion USD, and has been used to establish state presence and legitimacy in a highly decentralized and ongoing battle between FARC and the Colombian Government.[[46]](#footnote-46) This high-profile U.S. involvement and investment clearly exhibits extreme levels of international attention directed at FARC over time.

Negative domestic attention, from both the government and civil society groups, has also been a fixture in FARC’s past. FARC scored a “high” on the domestic attention scale. The heavy presence of domestic attention throughout the history of FARC supports my third hypothesis, “If there is negative domestic attention for a group, there is more likely to be crossover in an organization from more political to more economic or vice versa.” FARC was created originally as a self-defense group for rural liberals in its early days during La Violencia (1948-1963) when the country was torn apart by civil war on partisan lines, in this way, FARC is the very result of government and domestic attention.[[47]](#footnote-47) In the early 1980s, civilian paramilitary groups formed to counteract FARC and protect people from kidnappings one of these groups was called “Muerte a Secuestradores,” which translates to “Death to Kidnappers,” thus becoming one of the first in a long line of societal campaigns to end FARC.[[48]](#footnote-48) In 1984, the president Belisario Betancur Cuartas tried to change gears from military attacks on groups to encouraging more broad civil participation in government, this backfired when a FARC offshoot became Union Patriotica, Colombia political party.[[49]](#footnote-49) Later in FARC’s years, the government made an effort to combat the heads of cocaine syndicates. More recently, current president Juan Manuel Santos spent his first term in a process of land restitution and victim reparations partnered with military advances aimed at crushing the dramatically weakened FARC.[[50]](#footnote-50) Both the negative domestic and international attention FARC was subject to represent very serious security and survival concerns which certainly had the potential to cause its crossover from more politically oriented and focused to more financially oriented. The very survival of FARC has been threatened by different groups, including the Colombian government, people, and international community, throughout its lifespan.

Though there is much data supporting the external pressures FARC has experienced, there is also evidence of internal shifts in FARC’s legacy represented through Independent Variable number two, shifting group ideology.[[51]](#footnote-51) FARC originated in the 1960’s, making it relatively old as far as terrorist or guerilla groups go.[[52]](#footnote-52) Because of its age, the demographics of the group have changed. FARC’s constituency has also changed in size. At its peak, FARC was 30,000 members strong, while today it is a fraction of this size at a mere estimated 6,000-7,000 members.[[53]](#footnote-53) The changing demographics of the group, a combination of the aging out of constituency and the increasing rates of defection, imply a potential for changing values or goals, and thus a shift in ideology. As far as rhetoric goes, FARC still maintains some level of political rhetoric in that it engages in peace talks as a political institution might, however I question the depth of this rhetoric. FARC has maintained relevance through its rampant extortion and multi-million dollar drug trafficking.[[54]](#footnote-54) As such, it has become much more an economically focused organization than a politically focused one. The presence of internal shift factors display the potential for internal causes for FARC’s crossover from more politically oriented to more financially oriented.

In contrast to FARC, Sinaloa Cartel and its offshoot CJNG are more heavily tilted in favor of independent variable number 2, shifting group ideology. The extreme quality of this data offers support for my fifth hypothesis, “If an organization experiences a change in constituency, it is more likely to experience crossover from more political to more economic or vice versa.” Sinaloa Cartel is only slightly younger than FARC, as it emerged as a significant cartel in the early 1970s, however it has experienced constituency changes that are more dramatic.[[55]](#footnote-55) The similarity in age offers some tentative, though not sufficient, support to my fourth hypothesis “The older an organization is, the more likely it is to experience crossover from more political to more economic or vice versa.” In 2008, Sinaloa Cartel, led by “El Chapo” Guzman, split from La Federacion, a conglomerate of powerful cartels.[[56]](#footnote-56) In 2010, the number 3 leader, “El Nacho” Coronel, of the Sinaloa Cartel, and key player in the sicario (assassin) arm was killed prompting a bloody turf war that resulted in the creation of the CJNG led by “El Lobo.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

Aside from these influential constituency and leadership changes, Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have also made recent claims to high-profile attacks, an extremely political move, in 2011, when they claimed authorship of the massacre of 35 people in Veracruz, and again in 2015, when they, set up roadblocks through the Mexican state of Jalisco, shot down a military helicopter, and carried out the most deadly attack on Federal Police in decades.[[58]](#footnote-58) CJNG has also been known to use propaganda to promote its image as a savior of the people and a self-defense group in contrast to other groups in the region like Los Zetas or The Knights of Templar.[[59]](#footnote-59) This evidence, paired with the high presence of other internal shift factors is an interesting contrast to the relatively low presence of internal factors in the FARC case.

There is also evidence of external pressure in the case of crossover from more economically focused to more politically focused in the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG. These pressures include both negative international and domestic attention from the U.S. Government and the Mexican government. Similar in fashion to Plan Colombia, the Merida Initiative of 2008 (and ongoing) illustrates U.S. intervention and investment to the cartel conflict in Northern Mexico.[[60]](#footnote-60) As one of the most high-profile and sophisticated cartel in the world, attacking Sinaloa Cartel was one of the primary uses of this money. In terms of domestic attention, a bloody and intense War on Drugs was declared by the Mexican President Felipe Calderon in 2006.[[61]](#footnote-61) During this time, money was poured into police forces for training and militarization to combat cartels. This international and domestic attention exhibited in this case also supports my second and third hypotheses.

It is clear through the presence of both security or survival concerns and ideological or internal shifts in both the cases of FARC and Sinaloa/CJNG that both external and internal factors play a role in crossover. Though both factors are present, it is crucial to note that depending on the original orientation of the group, be it political or financial, external or internal factors hold relatively more importance. If the group begins as politically oriented, external factors will be more likely to prompt change, whereas if the group starts out more financially oriented, more internal factors must be present to prompt crossover.

Both groups exhibit evidence of independent variable number 3, institutionalization, which refers to the presence of criminal or political structures, the fulfillment of social needs or roles, and the usage of standard operating procedures. The presence and level of institutionalization in these cases offers some insight into my fifth hypothesis, “The more institutionalized the organization is, the more likely it is to hold legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the international community.” FARC has an in-house crime network, which is indicative of a criminal structure.[[62]](#footnote-62) As a criminal organization, so do both the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG. This is confusingly contrasted by Sinaloa Cartel’s highly political and hierarchical structure.[[63]](#footnote-63) Additionally, FARC shows the presence of only two indicators of institutionalization (be it criminal or political). One of these indicators is political in that FARC uses standard operating procedures to achieve its goals and through its current peace talks.[[64]](#footnote-64) The other indicator is FARC’s use of criminal institutions, which is clearly evident in its in-house crime network. FARC also relies on a multimillion dollar drug network for funding, and has been known to use kidnappings and hostages to achieve its objectives.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Sinaloa is much more institutionalized in that it exhibits all four of the indicators. The Sinaloa Cartel offers assistance to communities throughout the state and as such fulfills a social role.[[66]](#footnote-66) Also, CJNG portrays itself as a “protector” of sorts for citizens against other criminal groups, another position that is typically fulfilled by the government.[[67]](#footnote-67) The Sinaloa Cartel exhibits political institutionalization through its use of standard operating procedures and complex communication infrastructure.[[68]](#footnote-68) There is also a clear hierarchy within the organization with a head and other commanders. Additionally, the Sinaloa Cartel has strong inroad in the Mexican Government, and has been known to use this access to its benefit.[[69]](#footnote-69) The CJNG also reflects the use of a strong hierarchy and standard operating procedures - especially in terms of attack. Though there is a high level of political institutionalization, criminal structures are also present. The complex communication infrastructure is paralleled with a sophisticated smuggling and trafficking infrastructure, and the groups support themselves through criminal activities.[[70]](#footnote-70)

It is important to note that potential critiques of this analysis may arise from my interpretation of important concepts. The key concepts throughout my analysis were economic (in motivation, tactics, etc.), political (in motivation tactics, etc.), terrorism/guerilla warfare, organized crime, civil society, and institutionalization. My interpretation and operationalization of these concepts, which is explained above, informed not only the data I chose to use, but also my analysis. Additionally, because of the varying timeframes, and the relative newness of CJNG’s existence, these data could be interpreted as a new era in cartel tactics. My scaled system could also be subject to critique based on the similarity of cases and the subjectivity of qualitative data.

**Conclusion**

Institutionalization has serious implications for the perpetuation of violence caused by either criminal or terrorist organizations, across internal shifts or external pressures.[[71]](#footnote-71) When an organization is institutionalized, it can be replicated or even devolve into a norm. This means that regardless of group success or survival, the tactics and ideas may live on through other groups. This subversive approval may change the way the violence is viewed and reacted to both within groups and from the surrounding public and governments. It is foreseeable that a dangerous level of legitimacy in both the criminal and political realm is attributed to institutionalization, which is deeply concerning for the health of civil society and national security. The reality of the weight of both internal and external factors in forcing crossover or adaptation in groups also has policy implications for those trying to combat violence in the Americas. By recognizing the impacts internal shifts and external pressures may have on groups, policy makers can predict and prepare for adaptations in criminal or terrorist groups.

Neither the Internalists nor the Externalists have completely wrong explanations, but they are not completely right. As such, the policy recommendations or suggestions contained in their literature have much to offer. Additionally, with the knowledge that both external and internal factors can work together to make terrorist groups or criminal organizations more dangerous can help policy makers combat their adaption. This understanding means that we cannot just attack groups from the outside, but we must also exploit demographic changes that shift group ideology. This would mean focusing a bit more improving civil society in weak and disadvantaged groups - groups that are more likely to be a criminal group or terrorist groups targeted constituency. The importance of both external and internal factors in group adaptation prompts policy makers to look at both the short term and long term impacts they can make in regions where terrorism and organized crime are rampant.

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|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Indicator | Presence | |
| FARC | Sinaloa/CJNG |
| Dependent: *High crossover* | Change in tactics | Yes | No |
| Change in targets | No | Yes |
| Change in organization or hierarchy | Yes | Yes |
| Independent I: *Changing Security or Survival Concerns* | Negative international attention | High | High |
| Negative domestic attention | High | High |
| Independent II: *Shifting group ideology* | Age of group | Relatively Old | Relatively Old |
| Change of constituency | Yes | Yes |
| Change in leadership | Yes | Yes |
| Claiming of attacks | Yes (High) | Yes (Moderate) |
| Use of propaganda | Yes (Moderate) | Yes (High) |
| Independent III: *Institutionalization* | Fulfillment of social needs/roles | No | Yes |
| Use of political structures | No (Semi-structured) | Yes (Structured) |
| Use of criminal structures | Yes (Structured) | Yes (Structured) |
| Use of standard operating procedures | Yes (Semi-structured) | Yes (Structured) |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Variable applied to:** | **Scale description** |
| **Independent I: Attention** (International or Domestic) | **1 - Minimal**: International or domestic governments, NGOs, or other groups pay no attention to the functioning or activities of the organization. This would look like a total lack of funding, rhetorical discussion, or military intervention related to the organization.  **2 - Moderate**: International or domestic governments, NGOs, or other groups pay some attention to the functioning or activities of the organizations, but intervention is minimal or fails to hinder the functioning or activities of the organization greatly. This might look like indirect funding to combatting the group, statements speaking out against to organization, or a slight contribution of military forces to combat the group.  **3 - Extreme**: International or domestic governments, NGOs, or other groups are invested in the functioning or activities of the organization, and have intervened in the situation. This might look like funding specifically for combatting the organization, statements directly condemning the organization, or the contribution of military forces for the specific purpose of combatting the group. |
| **Independent II: Claims, Propaganda, Rhetoric** | **1 - Minimal**: The group rarely, if ever, claims  responsibility for an attack, or uses propaganda to promote its tactics or goals. The group has shown very little change in the rhetoric it uses over the course of its lifetime, as determined by its internal discourse.  **2 - Moderate**: The group is associated with attacks, or  occasionally claims responsibility. The group may use some slight propaganda to promote its tactics or goals. The group has shown some change in rhetoric over the course of its lifetime, but changes are minimal.  **3 - Extreme**: The group has claimed responsibility for  attacks or used extensive propaganda to promote its tactics or goals. The group has shown significant change in rhetoric over the course of its lifetime. |
| **Independent III: Level of Institutionalization** (criminal or political) | **1 - Unstructured**: The group has no political or criminal  structures in place. There are no standard operating procedures.  **2 - Semi-Structured**: The group may have some political  or criminal structures in place, but such structures do not extend through a significant amount of the organization. There may be some standard operating procedures.  **3 - Structured**: The group has significant political or  criminal structures in place at different levels throughout the group. There are standard operating procedures. |

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