Covid-19 is challenging state capacity and governance in Latin America as governments scramble to stem the rate of infection amid longstanding inequalities across and within countries in access to basic public goods and services. Dynamics of crime and violence are not immune to the pandemic. Latin America has the world’s highest per capita homicide rate and accounts for roughly one third of the world’s murders each year. As in other regions, the current pandemic initially seemed to depress crime in Latin America. As seen in Figures 1 – 3, the absolute number of thefts in Colombia and Mexico, as well as in the city of Rio de Janeiro, declined during the first quarter of 2020 when compared to that of 2019.

Figure 1. Individual Thefts in Colombia (January 2019 – March 2020)
What accounts for this decline? While no single factor explains crime, the quarantine orders that most Latin American countries have adopted are likely reducing opportunities for theft and other “street crimes” by curtailing the use of public space, shutting down businesses, and sending the police and military into the streets to enforce these orders. At the same time, quarantine measures are indirectly fueling other crimes, such as gender and domestic violence. Moreover, with a severe
economic contraction looming on the horizon, increased inequality in Latin America in the wake of the pandemic could fuel more opportunistic crime.

Early trends also suggested that lethal criminal violence linked to organized crime would decline under the pandemic. El Salvador, where criminal gangs drive much of the violence, notably experienced 48 hours without a single homicide in March, when the national government imposed one of the strictest quarantine orders in Central America. Yet, despite the pandemic and enforcement of quarantine policies in nearly every Latin American country, patterns of lethal violence under the pandemic continue to vary across space and time. Figures 4 – 6 show the homicide rates for Colombia, Mexico and Rio de Janeiro in 2019 and the first quarter of 2020. Whereas homicides declined in Colombia, they increased in both Rio and Mexico at varying points in time. In Mexico they climbed to 3,000 intentional homicides in March of 2020 – the highest monthly figure since Andrés Manuel López Obrador became President in December of 2018.


Figure 4. Homicides in Colombia (January 2019 – March 2020)
Yet, violence in Mexico during the month of March also varied subnationally, with states that have long histories of drug-related violence, like Guanajuato, Chihuahua, and Michoacán, accounting for a disproportionate share of the total homicides. And while persistent violence in these localities is an indication that drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are continuing to battle for territory despite the pandemic, comparatively lower levels violence in other places do not mean that
organized crime has ceased to wield power. Indeed, an additional question moving forward is how Covid-19 will impact pre-existing patterns of criminal governance in Latin America.

Criminal governance entails criminal actors regulating aspects of political, social and economic life within the territories that they control. Patterns of criminal governance can vary along a range of dimensions, including relations between criminals and state actors and between criminals and their victims. Differences in how criminals rule have implications for humanly important outcomes, including levels and patterns of violence, economic development, and political participation. We might therefore expect that differences in how criminals governed distinct territories across Latin America prior to Covid-19 are being impacted by and changing in response to the pandemic in contrasting ways. Testing this hypothesis will require collecting longitudinal data on criminal governance in the region – a difficult undertaking under normal circumstances, and one that will require creative approaches moving forward given the current uncertainty about conducting fieldwork during a global pandemic.

We do, however, have some suggestive evidence that Covid-19 is impacting one key aspect of criminal governance: the ability of criminal groups to extract revenue from territories. Despite allegations that most drugs are smuggled into the United States over remote stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border, the majority of illicit drugs actually enter the country through legal points of entry at border crossings, seaports and airports. The illicit drug economy, along with other clandestine markets, is deeply intertwined with legal flows of goods and people. With borders closed and the decline in both international travel and manufacturing, licit global trade flows are estimated to fall substantially in 2020. This is hampering DTOs’ access to precursor chemicals from China that are necessary to produce drugs, such as methamphetamines, and constraining their ability to smuggle drugs into consumer markets in the United States and Europe. But criminal groups have also diversified their illicit portfolios to include everything from illegal logging to trade in exotic wildlife. Among the key generators of illicit profits for both DTOs and criminal gangs is extortion of businesses and households. In Central America, the pandemic has disrupted extortion rackets run by the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs as both formal and informal businesses have shut down and states enforce quarantines. Criminals are responding to this situation in diverse ways, with some groups stopping criminal taxation, others postponing collection until things return to normal, and still others continuing to demand payment of tribute.

One factor that may help explain this variation is differences in the organizational capacity of different criminal groups. Larger criminal groups with ample financial capital may be able to forego collection of extortion rents in the short term in order to ensure that they will be able to resume collection in the long term. By contrast, smaller groups with more limited resources may face pressure to continue extracting criminal rents or face irreparable damage to their coercive capacity. Paradoxically then, the longer governments maintain quarantines to reduce the rate of infection and save lives, the greater the risk that criminals’ time horizons will shrink and more criminal groups will become more predatory toward the communities in their territories. For example, in Rio, paramilitary groups in parts of the city are reportedly forcing local businesses to stay open mid-quarantine in order to ensure payment of illicit rents.

At the same time, recent news stories have shown gangs and DTOs enforcing quarantine policies – at times with the use of violence – and providing communities with basic goods. One story that
has circulated around the world is of the daughter of Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, the former leader of the Sinaloa drug trafficking organization, filling boxes with food and other basic necessities for distribution in Guadalajara with the images of her father branded onto the boxes. In other places criminal groups are leveraging the economic fallout from Covid-19 to provide loans to community members. We should interpret such stories with caution. We do not know the scope and depth of these activities; indeed, how much does providing some boxes of food really cost a global drug cartel in terms of money, time and other resources? And the very fact that criminal groups are allowing these photographs and videos of them to be recorded, or in some cases are purposefully disseminating them, suggests that they may be trying to use the current crisis to strategically polish their public image as part of sustaining territorial control.

Indeed, these types of benevolent behaviors may help criminal groups to build some legitimacy in the eyes of the populations that work and live in the territories where they operate. At a minimum, obedience from civilians means that they will not denounce criminals to the state or to rival criminal groups. Additionally, the deep familial and social ties between criminal groups and the communities in which they operate may be driving criminal groups to provide some order by enforcing quarantines and providing goods and services.

Yet, images of the DTOs and gangs responsible for much of the bloodshed in the region acting like states may also be evidence of criminal actors attending to one of the basic tenets of politics: positive images can translate into political currency. In El Salvador, for example, there is speculation that those gangs that are enforcing quarantines and handing out basic goods are trying to show the national government that they hold territorial control and enjoy some social support in order to pressure the government to negotiate with them in the future.

How are Latin American governments responding to crime amid the pandemic? Across the region the heavy reliance on the armed forces to enforce quarantines adds to the recent militarization of politics and raises the specter of more militarized everyday policing. Loosening restrictions on the police and the armed forces in the name of public health may lead to greater human rights abuses by states, as evident in Honduras and Peru. In some contexts this serves political goals. For example, President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador has authorized state security forces to use lethal force against gangs during the lockdown in a country where police and the armed forces have in recent years been implicated in a number of extra-judicial actions. It is unlikely that this unconditional crackdown will reduce criminal violence, and more likely that it will instead spur more of it as gangs find themselves pushed into a corner and so opt to retaliate against the state. Yet, the high political salience of crime in the region and widespread demand for order among citizens fearful of victimization means that we may see more political leaders taking advantage of the current crisis to build political support by hardening their stances on crime.

In sum, Covid-19 is impacting crime and criminal governance in the region in different ways. Increased state presence through deployment of state security forces is temporarily constraining some forms of crime while having mixed effects on criminal competition for territorial control. At the same time, the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic may generate opportunities for criminal groups to reconfigure existing and establish new illicit markets as part of broader patterns of criminal governance in the region.