Department of Public Policy
CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

DYNAMICS OF ORGANISED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF PETTY CORRUPTION ON THE PROLIFERATION OF ORGANISED CRIME VIOLENCE

By
Luigi Francesco Iacurti Salcedo

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Supervisor: **Prof. Mihály Fazekas**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates the relationship between petty corruption and organised crime (OC) violence in Latin America. By employing a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, this study analyses panel data from 18 Latin American countries as well as court records, and newspaper articles related to Los Monos in Argentina and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) in Brazil to evaluate the relationship between the frequency of bribes to the police on Homicide rates and the mechanisms that drives it. In the quantitative strand, an ordinary least squares (OLS) model is used to evaluate how the relationship between police bribery and homicides presents itself in Latin America. In the qualitative strand, the findings of the quantitative analysis are further developed as a process tracing within case studies is employed to unpack the mechanisms that drive this relationship by focusing on the cases of Los Monos and PCC. This study found that contrary to the expectation, there is a negative relationship between petty corruption and OC violence, as criminal organisations use bribes to capture law enforcement agencies and create a monopolisation of violence.

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INTRODUCTION

What do Nayib Bukele, Xiomara Castro, Daniel Noboa and Felipe Calderón have in common? In the first instance, one may think that these are just Latin American politicians from different sides of the political spectrum. However, a deeper topic links them all as they have framed organised crime (OC) violence as the main problem of their administration. Latin America is the most dangerous region in the world by far, with headlines categorising it as 'a criminal ecosystem' and 'the most murderous continent on Earth' because of its high homicide rate (Watts 2015; Papaleo 2024). Despite only having 8% of the world's population, Latin America and the Caribbean accounted for 29% of total homicides in the world in 2021, which corroborates these statements (UNODC 2023). On top of it, countries such as Ecuador and Honduras were among the 10 most violent countries in 2023, with homicide rates ranging from 32 to 45 per 100.000 inhabitants (Igarapé Insitute 2025).

However, this is only one side of the story, as everyday life in the region is also characterised by corruption's wide and systematic spread. From grand to petty, Latin America also presents high levels of corruption as uncovering scandals and encountering requests for bribes from police officers, judges, and public officials has become a rite of passage. For example, it is estimated that approximately 56 million people in the region paid a bribe in 2019, with the majority going to the police (Pring and Vrushi 2019). This normalisation undermines the rule of law as it signposts to criminal actors that they can behave with impunity while weakening the state. In this sense, the systematic spread of corruption has severe consequences on OC violence in the region, as it weakens the law enforcement institutions and allows for impunity to flourish.

Although corruption and OC violence are two widely studied topics in academia, little attention has been paid to the relationship between both concepts. While some studies emphasise the effect of grand corruption on the weakening of the state, the development of criminal economies and the mitigation of political violence, the role of petty corruption, especially in OC violence, is mostly excluded (Croci 2023; Andreas 2019). In the case of Latin America, these micro-transactions signpost criminals that impunity exists not only at the elite level but also at the street level. Therefore, criminal organisations exploit these fractures in the system to secure the good functioning of their business, eliminate potential threats, and intimidate local communities without facing any consequences.

Despite having relatively similar levels of petty corruption, countries such as Argentina and Brazil, two of the biggest economies in the region, offer contrasting images of this relationship. On the one hand, homicide rates in Brazil are among the highest in the world, while in Argentina, they are relatively low (Insight Crime 2025). To understand this difference, further attention needs to be paid to how these transactions undermine law enforcement bodies and the criminal justice system's (CJS) deterrence, especially in the cases of the most prominent criminal organisations, such as Los Monos in Argentina and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) in Brazil. Only by addressing this can the behaviour of criminal organisations be further understood, and anticorruption reforms that tackle the system's weaknesses and disrupt the cycle of violence can be developed.

Therefore, this research will study the relationship between petty corruption and OC violence in Latin America. The exact research question is: How does petty corruption influence OC violence in Latin America? By using a mixed methods approach, the objectives of this research are: (1) to quantify the relationship between the paying bribes and homicide rates in Latin American countries, (2) to compare and have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of corruption and OC in Brazil and Argentina, and (3) to unpack the mechanisms through which petty corruption facilitates violence. The methods used in this paper are an ordinary least squares (OLS) model using panel data from 18 Latin American countries and a comparative case study approach combined with a within-case process tracing on Los Monos in Argentina and PCC in Brazil. This mixed methods approach reveals the relationship between paying bribes and violence, and helps undercover the mechanisms through which paying a bribe empowers criminal organisations in each national setting.

Based on the institutional weakness theory, this thesis hypothesises that petty corruption diminishes the trust and effectiveness of the CJS, thus allowing for violence to spread. Criminal organisations use violence to secure control over their territory and to signpost to rivals their power. Therefore, OC may corrupt law enforcement officials through bribes to ensure their business and reduce the state's capacity to enforce the law. When criminal networks manage to permeate police and judicial officers, the application of the law becomes unequal among citizens, thus reducing the effectiveness of the CJS. This prevalence of impunity entrenches the issue further as public trust in the system diminishes, thus reducing citizens' reports and collaboration against OC, which in turn gives a sense of impunity to criminal organisations to carry out killings without any consequence and further entrenching the never-ending cycle of violence.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter One explores the existing literature bridging corruption and OC violence. Chapter Two sets up the theoretical framework of this research. Chapter Three explains the data and methodology used. Then, Chapter Four presents and analyses the results. Chapter Five discusses the findings, limitations, and future studies. Finally, Chapter Six presents some concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Corruption and Organised Crime Violence

Across Latin America, corruption is presented in different forms and levels. While citizens may commonly encounter situations where law enforcement and public officials request them to pay a bribe, there are also high-level embezzlement schemes, nepotism, and abuses of power. Corruption is broadly understood as the abuse of public office for private gain; however, the concept varies across existing literature as some use more minimal and maximal definitions (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Lambert-Mogiliansky et al. 2007; Rose 2017). On the one hand, authors such as Klitgaard (1988) frame corruption from a principal-agent perspective, where the corrupt event occurs when the agent pursues their own interest rather than the principal's. In contrast, others, such as Brooks (1970), emphasise the degree of personal advantage corrupt agents may get. These discrepancies have led to misunderstandings and systematic exclusion of some methods as they constantly evolve due to their illegal nature. In this sense, corruption will be understood for the purpose of this thesis as the abuse of public office for private gain as it englobes the different forms that corruption can take regardless of the degree of advantage obtained (Rose-Ackerman 1999).

To understand the effects of petty corruption on violence, a clear differentiation must be made from grand corruption. Corruption can be divided depending on the form, scale, and people involved in petty and grand corruption. On the one hand, petty corruption englobes those small transactions where private citizens pay a low-level government official in exchange for routine services (Kochanek 1993; Lambert-Mogiliansky et al. 2007; Mashali 2012). In the case of OC and violence, these interactions can involve paying a police officer or a judge not

to investigate, prosecute or imprison a member of these organisations for their illegal activities, such as murder and trafficking. On the other hand, grand corruption refers to those transactions where top-level officials collude with public and private elites to embezzle themselves from major public sector projects, procurement and financial benefits (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Dávid-Barrett and Fazekas 2019). While this arrangement may allow criminal organisations to behave with impunity in some cases, it may not deter violence, as it is only possible for bigger organisations to sit and negotiate.

Unlike interpersonal violence, OC violence is most of the time premeditated, coordinated, and aims to achieve a strategic economic or political objective. OC violence can be understood as the use of lethal force to secure control directly or indirectly over illicit markets, territories, and the general population (Kotzé et al. 2022). Criminal organisations use violence strategically to co-opt or challenge state actors, intimidate communities, and eliminate rivals. Throughout the literature, there is no consensus on how to measure this as different proxy indicators such as cartel–style killings, mass graves or tightly clustered 'hot spots' along trafficking corridors have been used (Jaitman and Ajzenman 2016). Nevertheless, by challenging the state's ability to protect its citizens, these organisations trigger militarised security policies as well as erode public trust, thus creating a never-ending cycle of violence.

Corruption and Organised Crime in Latin America

Corruption and OC are two concepts that tend always to be intertwined. For instance, criminal networks actively attempt to corrupt public officials and institutions to secure their business and expand their territory. A study by Di Gennaro and La Spina (2016) found that

large criminal organisations use bribes and extortion to corrupt law enforcement, and border control officers to secure the cost of their operations and combat governmental attempts to suppress them. On the other hand, corruption networks within government institutions, especially in the CJS, weaken the state as it allows criminal organisations to expand their networks, thus leading to law manipulation and impunity (Buscaglia and van Dijk 2003; Johnston 2014). In this sense, corruption in the CJS creates a never-ending cycle in which corruption networks lead to impunity and more violence.

This relationship has been studied using different methods and scopes throughout the existing literature on Latin America. Despite there not being a direct quantitative analysis of the effects of petty corruption on homicides in the region, some have attempted to study this by either focusing on the national level or by using grand corruption or corruption control as the primary independent variable. Studies such as Arends (2021), Chainey et al. (2021), Lacerda et al. (2022), Aldana et al. (2022), and Guillén (2024) have analysed by using different regression models of the impacts of corruption and economic growth on violence, and the fear of crime. They have found that higher levels of corruption are associated with an increase in homicides. However, some of these papers present structural methodological issues. For instance, Lacerda et al. (2022), who found that a point drop in corruption is associated with an increase in homicide rates, use Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index as the primary measurement of corruption, which does not capture the reality of the phenomenon as it is a perception indicator instead of an experienced based.

Others have also attempted to study these effects by focusing on police corruption, specifically at the national level. Morris (2013) and Vilalta and Fondevilla (2020) found a

perception-reality gap between perceptions of corruption and crime in Mexico. Using data from Mexico's national ENVIPE survey, which ran from 2012 to 2017, Vilalta and Fondevilla (2020) analysed the effects of perceived police graft on fear of crime, finding that perceived police corruption is a key driver of fear of crime. This is further developed by Aldana et al. (2022), who created an agent-based simulation of police corruption to study its effects on violence. They found that perceived police corruption produces a sharp decrease in crime and that kingpin arrests on their own have a marginal impact on overall crime decrease. In this sense, there is a persistent gap in the literature of quantitative studies of corruption and OC about the effects of petty corruption on OC violence at the regional level, thus making this research suitable.

Moreover, others have also studied this relationship from a qualitative perspective. Researchers have found different conclusions about the link between corruption and OC violence in Latin America by mainly using case studies, historical analysis, and discourse analysis. Manrique (2006), Ungar (2013), Cruz (2016), Warf and Stewart (2016), Garzón-Vergara (2016), Barnes (2017), Müller (2018), Rosen and Kassab (2019), Vilalta (2020), Badillo and Mijares (2021), Sberna and Vannucci (2024) and Croci (2025) have studied how criminal organisation use corruption networks within the state to secure their business at the regional level. By focusing on the discursive politicisation of six OC groups, including the PCC, Badillo and Mijares (2021) found that when criminal organisations feel threatened by the state, they join the political discourse to secure their survival. Ungar (2013) and Cruz (2016) concluded that when government institutions are fragmented and weak, police-OC ties are strengthened, thus leading to an increase in violence. Similarly, others have studied this nationally by focusing on countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil. Morris (2013) and

Wolf (2016) concluded by analysing Mexico's war on drugs that criminal organisations implement a 'Plata o Plomo' strategy, in which bribes (Plata) are used to control law enforcement officers and terror (Plomo) to secure this control by killing individuals.

In the case of Brazil and Argentina, there are almost no studies on the effects of corruption on the behaviour of Los Monos and PCC simultaneously. While there is a vast amount of literature on OC in Brazil, especially on the PCC, almost none or little attention has been paid to OC in Argentina (Bailey and Taylor 2009; Adorno 2013; de Andrade Fiho 2008; Flom 2019; Badillo and Mijares 2021; Lemos Duarte 2021). This difference is given by the relevance of this topic in those countries as in the case of Argentina, OC and violence were not an issue until recent years when gang confrontations emerged in Rosario. In contrast, OC violence has been a persistent issue in Brazil since its democratisation. This gap in the existing literature makes this research suitable for conducting a comparative case study on the PCC and Los Monos. It will bring closer the existing theories on regional and national dynamics. Therefore, this research's mixed method approach provides a complete perspective on the effects of petty corruption on OC violence in Latin America. The next chapter will introduce the theoretical framework and the hypothesis.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As inferred from the literature review, petty corruption can undermine citizen security by reducing the deterrence power of the CJS and undermining trust in the institutions. Routine bribery erodes the state's capacity and law enforcement effectiveness by allowing criminal organisations to behave without consequences and making public officials part of their organisational structure (Cruz 2016; IDB 2020). Bribery weakens the state by creating a principal-agent problem for law enforcement officers. When accepting a bribe, law enforcement officials become part of OC's business structure, thus creating a principal-agent problem as a new principal enters the equation. Initially, these public officials are accountable to their superiors and the citizens; however, from the moment they receive the money, the role of the principal shifts towards the criminal organisations, who then tell the officers when and whether to enforce the law (Klitgaard 1988). This distortion reduces the capacity of the state to implement the law as the officials responsible for carrying out this task choose not to do it to maximise their economic advantage or preserve their own safety (Cruz 2016; Croci 2025). When this is seen from a broader perspective and considering that this transaction does not occur with only one agent but rather several, it can be observed that the effectiveness of law enforcement is almost diminished, thus allowing OC violence to reign.

Moreover, the effectiveness of the state against OC is also diminished by corruption in CJS, as it reduces public trust. When citizens perceive that the law applies unequally, they engage in extra-legal activities as they perceive that the institutions are corrupt and, therefore, cannot serve them (Croci 2025). This reduction of public trust reduces the effectiveness of the CJS in combating OC as it reduces reporting and collaboration. Roth (2012) and The Institute for Economics and Peace (2018) found that public trust is crucial in peaceful societies. This

was further developed by Bergman (2018), who found that police effectiveness against crime is negatively affected by low levels of trust, thus making citizens willing to report crime and collaborate. In this sense, by eroding public trust, petty corruption of police or judicial officers increases OC violence as it reduces the state's capacity to fight criminal organisations.

The strategy implemented by criminal groups to control law enforcement officers is called 'Plata o Plomo', in reference to its translation from Spanish. As previously explained, criminal organisations create a principal-agent problem by offering a bribe (Plata) and/or threatening violence (Plomo) to maximise control at a minimal cost. While some argue that bribes and violence are opposites (Morris 2013), the heterogeneity of criminal organisations proves the opposite. According to Bailey and Taylor (2009), the problem with a binary dichotomy between corruption and violence is the assumption that criminal organisations are unified and monopolising actors that only use one tactic at a particular time. In this sense, criminal organisations may use bribes and violence simultaneously to maximise influence while securing their business. This is corroborated by Dal Bó et al. (2006), who developed a model where groups attempt to influence policymaking using bribes and violence. The authors found that there is a coexistence between bribes and violence at the aggregate level, as societies suffering from high levels of violence also experience more corruption.

Moreover, local patronage networks also play a key role in translating bribe payments into the protection of criminal organisations. Sometimes, criminal networks may recruit through bribes mid-level police officers, local politicians or community leaders to lift their political campaigns in exchange for non-enforcement guarantees (Cruz 2016). Garay and Salcedo (2012) and Dulin (2019) have found that the most important actors in Latin American

criminal networks are those figures that connect illegal actors with legal institutions. These brokers may leverage their professional positions and clientelist relationships to ensure that investigations are redirected away from the criminal group or tied to rival organisations. In this sense, it becomes a two-way relationship as OC groups secure their business and impunity while these local brokers advance in their political or professional careers through the resources received (Chainey et al. 2021). This dynamic not only reduces the deterrence effect of the CJS but also integrates criminal networks into local government, thus reducing the state's capacity to counter these groups.

Drawing from state-weakening theory, high bribery rates among police and judicial officials create a de facto impunity zone, in which criminal organisations take advantage of the impunity to expand operations, settle disputes violently, and challenge rival networks without fear of retaliation from the state. The following hypothesis can be drawn for the empirical enquiry: "High levels of petty corruption among police and judicial officials are expected to increase OC violence by allowing criminal organisations to behave with impunity." This expectation is drawn from the causal mechanism that petty corruption undermines the state's capacity to enforce the law against OC, thus creating zones of impunity. The following section presents the data and methods used to test this hypothesis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This thesis studies the relationship between bribes and OC violence in Latin America, focusing on Los Monos and PCC. Given that violence is a persistent problem in Latin America that is affecting not only economic growth but also citizens' security, this study aims to analyse and understand how OC violence is affected by routine payoffs to street-level officers at the macro and micro levels. To capture both patterns and mechanisms behind it, this study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design in which an OLS model precedes and informs comparative qualitative case studies (QUAN – qual) (McBride et al. 2019; Fetters and Tajima 2023). First, we estimate the coefficients by which OC violence is affected by the frequency of bribes in all Latin American Countries via an OLS with dependent and independent variables in natural logs, thereby reducing skewness and multiplicative relationships (Manning and Mullahy 2001). The panel data used in this model spans from 2004 until 2023 and represents the following Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. These quantitative findings will establish whether bribe rates predict OC violence and give a solid foundation for analysing the causal mechanisms leading to the behaviour of Los Monos and PCC.

In the second part of this study, a process tracing is implemented within a most-similar systems design (MSSD) between Argentina (Los Monos) and Brazil (PCC) to unpack and analyse the processes revealed by the regression coefficients. By analysing court documents and newspaper articles, this thesis aims to reconstruct the sequence of key bribery events to demonstrate how petty corruption leads to a change in enforcement behaviour and the

persistence of violence. In this sense, this dual-level framework enhances the external validity of results while preserving contextual richness. Integrating the two phases at the point of the case selection and final interpretation provides a deeper analysis of the bribe-OC violence nexus.

Independent Variable: Bribery Rate

For this research, the independent variable is petty corruption. As previously mentioned, petty corruption can be understood as routine payments to street-level officials in exchange for routine services (Kochanek 1993; Lambert-Mogiliansky et al. 2007; Mashali 2012). Although corruption can be measured with perception-based or experience-based indicators, for this thesis, it would be measured by computing a bribery rate per country per wave based on the mean of answers to question EXC2 of the AmericasBarometer survey, which asks: "Has a police officer asked you for a bribe in the last twelve months?" (LAPOP Lab 2023). Although this question is a self-reported bribe indicator and does not ask directly whether the bribe was paid, which is a limitation of this research, it has been selected as it directly captures corruption in the CJS and the permeability of law enforcement officers. This question expands through all waves of the Americas Barometer from 2004 to 2023 and is asked in all countries in the sample. Responses are coded on a binary scale, where 0 is no and 1 is yes. Therefore, after computation of the bribery rate, the scale transforms into a continuous variable ranging between 0 and 1, where the percentage of respondents reporting police bribes per country per wave is measured. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the variable. It can be seen that it is slightly skewed to the left, which can cause interference in the regression model. Considering that skewness goes against the OLS assumption of normality and

homoskedasticity, it was decided to compute the log transformation of the variable based on extracting the natural logarithm.

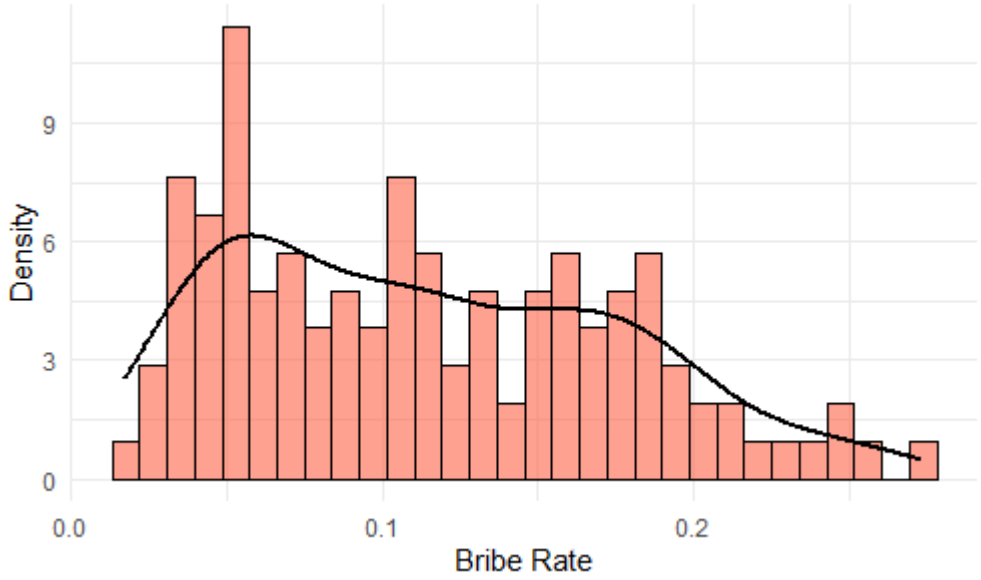

Figure 1: *Distribution of Bribe Rate.*

Dependent Variable: Organised Crime Violence

The dependent variable of this research is OC violence. As it was previously explained in the literature review, OC violence corresponds to the use of lethal force by criminal organisations to secure control directly or indirectly over territories, illicit markets, and local population (Kotzé et al. 2022). Despite there not being a direct indicator for OC violence, the concept will be operationalised by matching the intentional homicide rate per 100000 population of the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the mortality rate from homicide per 100000 population of the World Health Organisation (WHO), which define homicides as the unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury as it is established in the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) (UNODC 2025; WHO 2025). This statistical definition includes three main elements that correspond to the killing of a person as intentions: First, the killing is carried out

by another person; second, the perpetrator had the intent to kill or seriously injure the victim; third, the unlawfulness of the killing (UNODC 2025).

Although both databases record homicide rates from 1990 until 2024, the timeframe used in this research is every 2 years from 2004 until 2023, as these are the years in which the Americas Barometer survey (the data source of the independent variable) has run. Similarly, as they record homicides based on the data provided by national agencies and some years are missing or skipped, it was decided to match both databases based on the timeframe in which these were completed for all countries. Therefore, those observations between 2004 and 2019 come from the WHO, and the subsequent observations from 2020 until 2023 come from the UNODC. Admittedly, this is a limitation of this research as the data collection methodology differs between both. Moreover, it can be seen from Figure 2 that the distribution of the variable is prominently skewed to the left. Based on the same assumption that the high level of skewness goes against the OLS assumption of normality and homoskedasticity, the natural logarithm of the observations will be extracted as it linearises multiplicative relationships, thus improving both the validity and clarity of the estimation (Feng et al. 2014).

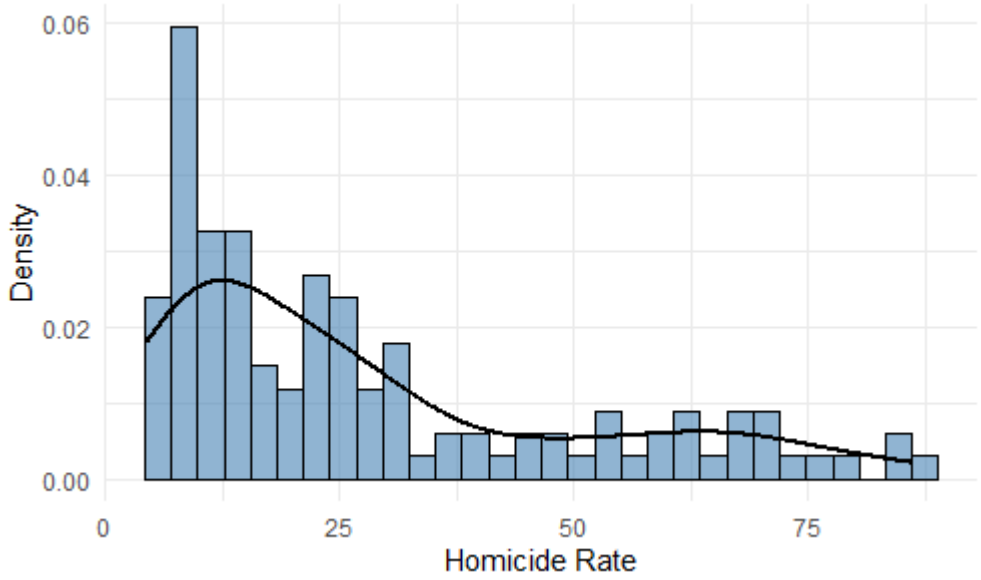

Figure 2: *Distribution of Homicide Rate*

Control Variables

As other studies have shown, socioeconomic factors and the effectiveness of the CJS can also affect the emergence of OC violence. Therefore, the regression test includes six controls to account for alternative drivers. First, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in current US$ accounts for the overall economic development of the observations and is drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank 2025a). This variable has been chosen as it is a standard control for the effects of economic growth on violence (LaFree and Kick 1986; Rosenfeld and Messner 1991; Neumayer 2003; Antonaccio and Tittle 2007). Second, the rule of law, which is retrieved from the World Bank Governance Indicator, is selected to control for confidence in the legal system, including the effectiveness of courts (World Bank 2024). Third, the Gini coefficient controls for the effects of inequality as it can drive homicide rates (Avison and Loring 1986; Blau and Blau 1982; Chamlin and Cochran 2006). It is sourced from the World Bank's Gini index series (World Bank 2025b). Fourth, police effectiveness controls the capacity of the state to counter violence. As there is no direct

indicator for this variable, it was decided to measure it through the number of police officers per 100000 population from UNODC (2024) and matching missing values with Hanson and Sigman (2021). The last control variable is the share of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET), which controls for potential recruitment pools for criminal networks as economic anxiety in young citizens can lead them to pursue illegal activities (Light and Miller 2018; Chainey et al. 2021; ILO 2025b).

Quantitative Analysis: Regression Model

In the quantitative part of this research, we estimate the elasticity of OC violence to reported bribe frequency using an unbalanced panel of 18 Latin American countries from 2004 to 2023, with observation being recorded every 2 years (n = 119 country-year observations). The core model is specified as:

$$\ln(Homicides_{it}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln(BribeRate_{it}) + \sum_{k=2}^{8} \beta_k X_{kit} + \epsilon_{it},$$

Where only the dependent variable (homicide rate per 100000 population) and the independent variable (percentage of reported police bribes) are in natural logs, all six control variables enter in levels: GDP per capita, rule of law index, police officers per 100000 population, Gini coefficient and share of NEET.

The regression model will be estimated using the statistical software R. Throughout the data processing and the subsequent statistical tests, the inbuilt statistical packages such as plm, dplyr, ggplot2, countrycode, car, effects and zoo are employed to analyse and visualise the data. Considering that the collected data is a structured, unbalanced panel, a Hausman test will

be conducted to determine whether the fixed or random effects model is optimal. Fixed effects regression models enable researchers to evaluate the variables' relationships while automatically controlling for all observable and unobservable within-unit variations (Allison 2009; Wooldridge 2010; Giesselmann and Schmidt-Catran 2022). Therefore, the function lm() for OLS and the plm package for panel estimators will be used to fit the proposed regression model.

Qualitative Analysis: Case Studies

	GDP per Capita (Current USD)	HDI	Urbanisation Rate	Gini Index	Bribe Rate	Homicide Rate
Argentina	$14,187.5	0.865	92.5	40.7	13%	4.49
Brazil	$10,294.9	0.786	87.8	52.0	11%	20.58

Table 1: *MSSD for Argentina and Brazil.*
Source: Authors compilation from World Bank (2025a), UNDP (2022), World Bank (2025b), Pring and Vrushi (2019) and UNODC (2025).

The qualitative strand of this thesis is composed of a comparative case study between Los Monos from Argentina and PCC from Brazil. Both countries were selected due to the many similarities in economy, institutions, culture and bribe rates. Table 1 presents the most similar system design (MSSD) for this research, showcasing the commonalities in GDP per capita, Human Development Index, urbanisation rate, inequality, bribe rate, and the divergence in terms of homicide rate. The table shows an interesting puzzle, which drives this thesis, because despite Argentina and Brazil having relatively similar levels of police bribery, 13% and 11%, respectively, there is a significant difference in terms of violence as Brazil has a homicide rate of five times higher than Argentina's. This main difference has driven us to analyse through a process tracing approach how mechanisms behind the relationship between petty corruption

and violence unfold in these countries. Process tracing is beneficial to trace the sequence of actions and understand how they unfold throughout a process (Collier 2011).

As many criminal organisations operate in these countries, it was decided to focus just on the main OC group. The PCC and Los Monos were selected as the focus of these case studies because of their high-violence operations and weakly regulated settings. The PCC is a criminal group whose origin can be traced back to São Paulo's prison system in the early 1990s (InSight Crime 2024). Since its formation, the group has grown through the use of violence and corruption as Brazil's most powerful gang, with operations expanding across South America (InSight Crime 2024). On the other hand, Los Monos' origin can be traced back to the suburban areas of Rosario, the third biggest city in Argentina and one of the most important ports of the country, in the late 1990s, where members of the Cantero Clan founded the group (InSight Crime 2022). Although its operations have remained relatively small and contained within the province of Santa Fe, the group has been acknowledged as the most important in Argentina as a result of the wave of violence that it has spread around Rosario in recent years in their fight against the Alvarado gang (InSight Cime 2022; UNSAM 2025).

This theory-driven within-case process tracing approach focuses on understanding the mechanisms that drive the relationship concluded from the quantitative strand. This will be done by analysing newspaper archives and court documents about cases related to Los Monos and PCC members while focusing on bribery to police and judicial officers. Considering the hidden nature of corruption and criminal organisation, this study aims to apply the four inferential tests, straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking-gun, and doubly decisive, to evaluate how bribery to the CJS led to a change in enforcement behaviour (Collier 2011).

CHAPTER 4: ANALYTICAL RESULTS

Quantitative Results: Regression Analysis

	Dependent Variable		
	Log Homicides		
	Model 1: OLS	Model 2: OLS	Model 3: Random Effects
Log Bribe Rate	-0.118	-0.366***	-0.243*
	(0.112)	(0.092)	(0.095)
Rule of Law		-0.882***	-0.772***
		(0.125)	(0.135)
GDP per Capita		0.00007***	0.00005**
		(0.000017)	(0.000017)
Police Effectiveness		-0.0002	-0.001*
		(0.0004)	(0.0006)
Inequality		0.044***	0.020
		(0.011)	(0.013)
Share of Youth NEET		0.092***	0.032*
		(0.011)	(0.015)
Observations	119	119	119
R^2	0.009	0.652	0.318
Adjusted R^2	0.001	0.633	0.282
Residual Std. Error	0.750 (df=117)	0.454 (df=112)	0.284 (idio σ)
F Statistic/X^2	1.09 (df= 1;117)	34.98 (df=6;112)***	$X^2(6) = 48.38$***
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2: *Regression Models*

We estimated three log-log regression models predicting the effects of bribes to the police on OC violence while controlling for the rule of law, GDP per capita, inequality, police effectiveness and share of NEET. Table 2 presents the three models employed to test the determinants of log-transformed homicide rates. Column 1 presents a simple OLS model where the effects of log-transformed bribe rate on the dependent variable are tested; however, the model is not statistically significant, and the goodness of fit is extremely low. On the other hand, model 2 introduces a multivariate regression model with control variables. This model establishes a negative relationship between bribes and homicide rates with a statistically

significant coefficient at the 0.001 level of –0.366, which means that for every 1% increase in bribes, there is a 0.37% decrease in the homicide rate. The rule of law was also determined to be a significant driver at the 0.001 level, as stronger legal institutions predict a 58.4% decrease in violence from OC. Inequality and share of youth NEET, on the other hand, present a positive statically significant relationship with violence, whereas police effectiveness was statistically insignificant. Model 2 explains around 65% of the variation in OC violence, making it a suitable model.

Moreover, random and fixed effects models were evaluated considering that the data is an unbalanced panel and the possible impacts of unobserved bias. A Hausman specification test of the null hypothesis was carried out to determine this, and it concluded that it is not possible to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% significance level by a marginal level ($p = 0.052$), which indicates that a random-effects estimator is both consistent and more efficient than a fixed effects estimator. Therefore, model 3 re-estimates the impact of the variables on log homicide rates using a random-effects panel model. The results remain relatively similar to model 2 as the bribe-homicide elasticity remains negative and significant, even though the regression coefficient decreased to –0.243 with a 5% significance level. Rule of law and police effectiveness remain negative, with police effectiveness now becoming significant at 0.05, thus showing that better governance and a functioning CJS reduce OC violence. The rest of the controls still predict higher homicides; however, inequality loses significance. The model presents moderate explanatory powers ($R^2 = 0.31$) with a strong significance (χ^2 (6) = 48.38, $p<0.001$).

Contrary to the expectation, these results reject the hypothesis that greater bribery in the CJS increases OC violence. The 'Plata o Plomo' and state capture theories may explain the negative relationship in the bribe-homicide elasticity. While petty corruption still leads to impunity, criminal organisations may not resort to violence unless it is extremely necessary. Under the 'Plata o Plomo' framework, criminal groups and police officers reach an informal agreement of non-interference, in which the law is not enforced as long as payments keep running up and they do not grab too much attention (Dal Bó et al. 2006; Morris 2013). In this sense, violence would remain unnecessary as long as bribes are still effective, especially considering that these groups behave under rational choice theory. As OC groups are enterprises which look to maximise profit, resorting to an open violence tactic goes against it as it would harm their businesses and grab unnecessary attention (Bailey and Taylor 2009; Morris 2013). Resorting to violence leads to the escalation of the situation to the hands of the state, which creates a confrontation that can disrupt routes and even end with these groups (Snyder and Duran-Martínez 2009).

Another theoretical explanation is the state capture theory, which deals with how OC groups infiltrate and capture parts of the state. In environments where corruption reigns, criminal organisations may leverage significant influence over police or judicial officers, thus making them part of these groups (Snyder and Duran-Martínez 2009). This situation creates a competitive edge over rival organisations as the police can function as a tool to damage or eliminate them. By penetrating the state and law enforcement agencies, OC monopolises violence to the point where they can reduce the bloodshed to the minimum necessary to continue their operations, as in any situation where violence is needed, the state would take care of it (Willis 2015; Albarracín and Barnes 2020). In this sense, the negative relationship

between bribery and OC violence in Latin America is explained by the control that these groups gain over law enforcement officers, as these bribes create an agreement which reduces the need for bloodshed. In the following subsections, this thesis will explore how this dynamic presents itself in the behaviour of Los Monos and the PCC.

Case Study: Los Monos in Rosario

Los Monos systematically bribed and infiltrated law enforcement agencies, ensuring that police would look the other way or actively assist the gang's criminal operation. Despite repeated waves of violence, Los Monos managed to maintain a de facto control of Rosario's south side due to the officers and precinct commanders on their payroll (Novaresio 2017). In the resolution of the Fantasma Paz case, a man who was killed in September 2012 because of using the gang's money to start his own businesses, it was found that several police officers accepted regular cash envelopes from the leadership of Los Monos in exchange for advance warning of raids and intimidation of rivals (Clarin 2014). This is further developed in the judicial transcripts from the case as the investigation found that payments of 500 pesos were handed over to police officers at Precinct 7 (Juzgado en lo Penal de Sentencia 1 de Rosario 2018). Following these exchanges, which occurred between 2012 and 2013, patrolling of the Los Monos' territory was reduced significantly, with police logs showing no stops in Barrio 7 between January and March 2013, despite an increase in tip-offs (Auyero and Sobering 2019).

The police also colluded with Los Monos not only to secure their business and impunity but also to reduce the need for bloodshed, as it was perceived as bad for business. The use of bribes to contain violence can clearly be seen in a wiretapped conversation between the gang

leader Ramón 'Monchi' Machuca and the sub-commissioner Ángel 'Chichito' Avaca on 17 May 2013, which was presented in the Fantasma Paz case. In this conversation, Monchi tells sub-commissioner Avaca about a rival organisation that he needs to be taken care of, "otherwise [he] will have them executed" (Clarin 2014; Juzgado en lo Penal de Sentencia 1 de Rosario 2018, p.156). By threatening a police officer with spreading violence against a rival criminal organisation unless he takes care of the matter, Los Monos present a Plata or Plomo decision to the police as it is either accepting the payoff and doing what he gets told or spreading violence. This situation clearly demonstrates how petty corruption diminishes violence in the first instance, as paying bribes to police officers can lead them to collude with law enforcement agencies to reduce unnecessary bloodshed while securing impunity.

Case Study: PCC in São Paulo

While historically associated with mass violence, the PCC consolidation of power in Brazil and subsequent reduction of violence would not have been possible without colluding with law enforcement officers. Although bribes to the police have been used by the group since its formation in 1993, after the 2006 confrontation with the state, the so-called "Crimes of May", the group has changed their strategy to a low-intensity conflict and quiet expansion (Kawaguti 2012; Phillips 2023). After the leader Marcos Williams Herbas Camacho signed a truce with the São Paulo government, the tactic of the PCC has been to infiltrate and capture the CJS by buying officials and judges (Cavallaro and Ferreira Dodge 2007; Feltran 2020; Buer and Villenave 2024). During Operação Ubirajara in 2017, it was uncovered that at least 53 members of the military police of São Paulo were paid between 2006 and 2016 up to R$50,000 to tip off about possible raids, leak information and alter reports (Ministério Público do Estado de São Paulo 2019). This economic exchange laid the groundwork for a wider strategy of

buying state officials rather than confronting them, which in turn led PCC to dominate São Paulo's underworld.

During the investigations of Operação Ubirajara, a clear pattern of collusion between the group and law-enforcement officers emerged. Apart from the 53 military police officers on the PCC payroll, several senior civil police officials, including a precinct chief, were also paid to leak details of investigations and protect PCC money laundering operations (Figueiredo and Duran 2024). By safeguarding their business from state intervention, the PCC neutralised rival gangs and independent criminals more quietly. With key law-enforcement officers on their payroll, the PCC managed to expand their territory while eliminating or absorbing smaller groups without being noticed, which ended up leading to a monopolisation of violence as now rival violence and state confrontation became unlikely (Franklin 2018). This change can be seen when analysing São Paulo's homicide rate, which since 2006 declined sharply, reaching historic lows in 2016 (G1 SP 2018). Despite some assigning this interesting change to improving policing tactics and socioeconomic factors, the collusion between the PCC and the state to monopolise violence had a key role in this process as it introduced stability that would not have been possible without it (Coutinho 2019). In this sense, the PCC's co-opting of law enforcement officers through bribes led them to become the most powerful group in the state of São Paulo while reducing the possibility of confrontation with rival organisations or the state, which led to an overall decrease in violence as now blood is spilt only when necessary.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

While the regression analysis rejected the hypothesis about bribery-based corruption and higher OC violence, the findings present a more nuanced dynamic where corruption is a conflict-management tool rather than a simple catalyser for violence. By restructuring the incentives facing both law enforcement officers and criminal actors, petty corruption allows criminal organisations to regulate violence internally and negotiate their interactions with the state on more favourable terms. In both case studies, petty corruption not only reduced the cost of violence but also changed the need for criminal organisations to recure to it. On the one hand, law enforcement officers who receive bribes reduce their enforcement activities and protect illegal operations, thus leading to an overall reduction in state-gang confrontations. On the other hand, the systematic use of bribes functions as a means of institutional capture, enabling criminal organisations to control and use the state to enforce a violent peace, in which the paying group monopolises violence. In this sense, despite the expectations being rejected, the negative relationship discovered through the analysis revealed that petty corruption reshapes the relationship between the state and OC, thus leading to a decrease in violence.

Both case studies demonstrate that bribery was not random or incidental but rather a strategic tool to secure the business of criminal organisations. In Argentina, Los Monos relied on their corruption networks in the police to leak information about ongoing investigations, shield its locations from possible raids and eliminate rivals without directly getting involved. In Brazil, the PCC's bribery to the police also aimed to protect its illicit businesses from investigations and possible confrontations with the state. However, the key differences here lie in the scale of institutional penetration and the overarching goal. For the former, Los Monos influenced only local officials within one law-enforcement institution, while the PCC

developed a systematised network across different government agencies. For the latter, the difference sits around monopolisation of violence as PCC's main goal was to reach an overall control of violence in its territory, while Los Monos allowed the state to retain this capacity and instead capture the institutions to collude with them. These patterns point towards a new interpretation of corruption as it is not just a symptom of weak institutions but rather a mode of criminal governance.

The findings refine the concept of impunity by demonstrating how bribery does not always lead to more violence but can enable a monopolisation of it. Even though petty corruption weakens the state and creates a selective enforcement situation, the change of incentives for OC and law enforcement officers reduces the need to maintain pre-bribe behaviour. By slowly enrolling police officers to their payroll, OC levies significant influence over law-enforcement agencies, thus making them function as an extension of these groups. This situation allows for a criminal organisation to expand its territory and eliminate or absorb rival groups without any constraint from the state, which in turn leads to a monopolisation of violence and the creation of criminal governance structures. For example, in areas where the PCC operates, there is a strict code set by the group about freelance robberies, rapes, and murders not authorised by the group, which had a direct effect on street crime and inter-gang turf wars (Ribeiro 2025). Therefore, petty corruption and the impunity that it generates not only lead to the weakening of the state but also allow for a state capture situation in which these groups weaponize impunity to achieve a monopolisation of violence, which reduces the need for bloodshed.

Admittedly, as with many others in corruption and OC research, this study presents some data limitations. The hidden nature of corruption and OC creates a strong barrier to accessing consistent and high-quality data. In the case of this thesis, the reliance on self-reported survey data for bribe frequency, which may underreport actual corruption due to fear or bias, and the use of intentional homicide rates rather than a direct indicator of deaths related to OC may understate the complexity of informal exchanges that shape the interactions between criminal organisations and the state. Similarly, focusing on dominant groups that primarily operate in urban areas may not capture the dynamics of decentralised regions. In light of this, the findings of this research should be interpreted with caution while not rejecting the overall contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of corruption and OC. Future research should aim to incorporate longitudinal data on bribery and violence to assess the durability of criminal peace. Another interesting research avenue involves comparing regional and national quantitative patterns, as the interaction between petty corruption and OC violence may differ between cultural settings. Besides, comparative research of low-corruption, low-violence countries in Latin America, such as Uruguay and Chile, could further clarify the role of enforcement capacity in controlling violence.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer how petty corruption, operationalised through bribes to the police, influences OC violence in Latin America. By using a mixed methods approach, the objectives of this research were (1) to quantify the relationship between bribes and homicides, (2) to compare and have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of corruption and OC in Brazil and Argentina, and (3) to unpack the mechanisms through which petty corruption facilitates violence. Contrary to the intuitive expectation, this research found evidence that bribery to law-enforcement officials decreases OC violence. The quantitative analysis found that there is a negative relationship between bribes to the police and homicide rates. The qualitative section further developed these findings as it uncovers that OC uses petty corruption to secure their illicit operations and reduce their confrontation with the state, which leads to the monopolisation of violence and the capture of state institutions.

This thesis refines corruption and OC literature by showing that petty corruption can function as a mechanism for conflict management rather than just a simple catalyser for violence. The comparison between two OC groups with different governance structures, such as structural for the PCC and fragmented for Los Monos, enriches the literature as it expands the understanding of how the effects of corruption vary at different scales and the type of institutional collusion. Moreover, focusing on how these mechanisms unpack themselves in under-researched countries such as Argentina enriches the literature on the topic and how this phenomenon presents itself there. Despite this thesis being limited by the availability of data on bribes in the region and the inability to attribute deaths to OC, it uncovers a valuable map of the mechanisms that link corruption and violence. It is imperative that future studies explore

these dynamics at the subnational level and how they develop in contexts with low corruption and low violence.

Understanding the link between bribery and violence highlights the need for policies that not only target OC groups but also their corrupt networks within the state. Policymakers should focus on strengthening security forces and judicial personnel from OC influence through institutional reforms, transparency measures and witness protection. One of the issues in the region is the low salaries that police and judicial officials receive, which makes them more susceptible to accepting bribes. Therefore, wages in the CJS should be secure so that the incentives to accept illicit money from OC are significantly reduced. Similarly, policymakers should consider transparency measures such as platforms for anonymous reporting and financial controls in police precincts to detect the flow of bribes and strengthen witness protection programs for police and judicial officials. Ultimately, dismantling the corrupt peace between the state and OC not only relates to countering the visible violence but also the destruction of the financial bridges that sustain them. After all, only with strong, transparent and accountable institutions would the cycle of impunity be broken, and real security would be constructed for our societies.

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