Aid Worker Security Report 2021

Crime risks and responses in humanitarian operations

Humanitarian **Outcomes**

Summary of key findings

▸ Violence against aid workers in 2020 claimed 484 individual victims, 117 of whom died, making 2020 the worst year on record for the second year in a row.

▸ Incidence of attacks remained at an all-time high despite constraints on humanitarian programming caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and took an even greater toll than usual on national aid workers.

▸ South Sudan, Syria and Democratic Republic of Congo had the highest numbers of attacks.

▸ Armed groups and militaries have committed most of the major attacks against aid workers over the years, but incidents of violent 'common crime' are rising in operational settings, and in 2020, criminality exceeded conflict-related violence in aid worker attacks for the first time.

▸ Political violence and crime coexist and frequently overlap in volatile environments, but humanitarians approach the two types of risk differently, and possess fewer risk management tools for dealing with crime, defaulting to purely protective or deterrent approaches.

▸ New approaches aimed at reducing the threat of violent crime (expanding on the acceptance model) are worthy of exploration, and humanitarian risk management should develop better analysis and understanding of criminal threat sources.

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics, 2011–2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of incidents	152	170	265	192	149	163	158	229	276	283
Total aid worker victims	309	277	474	332	289	295	313	409	481	484
Total killed	86	71	159	123	111	109	139	131	125	117
Total wounded	127	115	179	88	109	99	102	147	234	242
Total kidnapped*	96	91	136	121	69	87	72	131	122	125
International victims	29	49	60	32	29	43	28	29	27	25
National victims	280	228	414	300	260	252	285	380	454	459
UN staff	92	48	115	63	43	71	48	70	37	58
International NGO staff	135	97	142	152	173	161	109	186	260	228
National NGO staff	67	92	145	71	39	40	82	128	154	168
Red Cross/Crescent Movement**	15	27	58	43	31	21	74	25	16	28

* Survivors (or whereabouts unknown)
** Includes ICRC, IFRC and national society staff

Historically, the most dangerous operational settings for aid workers have been places where armed conflict is occurring. Most of the aid worker casualties (fatalities, serious injuries and abductions) result from attacks by non-state armed actors engaged in asymmetric conflict and advancing some sort of political, strategic or ideological objectives. But aid workers also face significant risks from violent 'common' criminals who attack for purely economic or opportunistic reasons. In many insecure operational settings today, economic criminality (as opposed to attacks by conflict actors) accounts for a third or more of serious incidents against aid workers and can involve extreme violence.

How aid workers and their organisations understand and mitigate these two types of risk is the subject of this edition of the Aid Worker Security Report. The research includes quantitative data on perpetrators and motives recorded in the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), augmented by global crime statistics and individual aid organisations' incident records. We also interviewed external experts on criminology along with humanitarian security professionals and programme managers from high-risk operational contexts.[1] The report examines the relationship between political violence and economic crime in humanitarian contexts, the challenges for humanitarians in analysing and addressing the crime threat, and ideas for new approaches from inside and outside the humanitarian sector.

[1]   As agreed with our information partners, we do not name individual interviewees or organisations in this report series.

Aid worker attacks: latest statistics

1.1 Global totals

Attacks against aid workers continued at an all-time high in 2020, with 484 aid workers affected by major violence in 283 separate attacks.[2] This came as a surprise to some who expected that the programming cessations and movement restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic would result in a smaller presence of humanitarian workers in the field and thus potentially fewer attacks.

Figure 1: Major security incidents affecting aid workers, 2011–2020
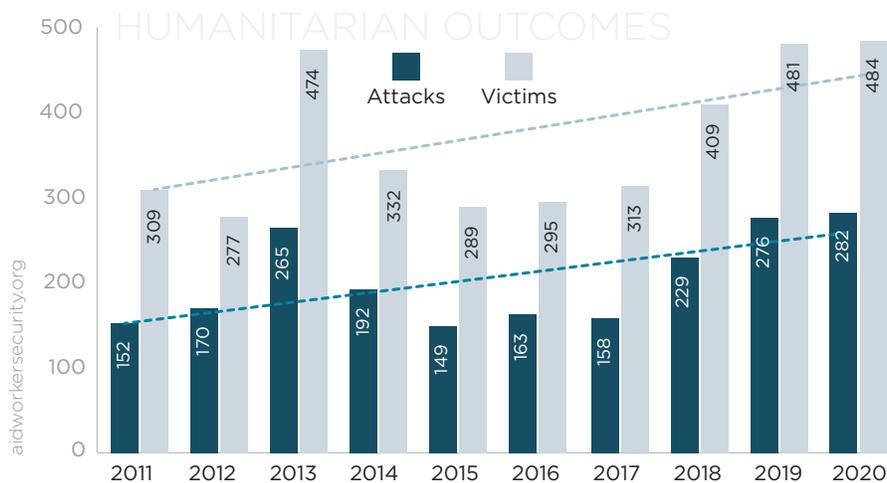
COVID-19 restrictions on international organisations and their staff is likely a factor in the even greater proportion of national aid worker victims in 2020 than usual (95%).

**Figure 2: National vs. international aid worker victims 2016–2020**

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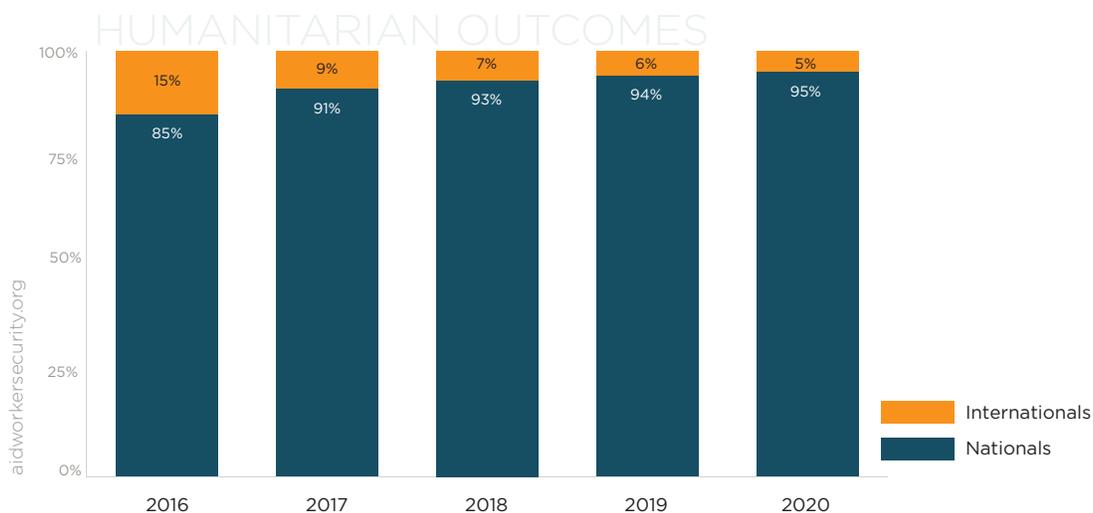
[2] These statistics include previously unreported attacks in Tigray, Ethiopia, and represent an update of the totals published in AWSD Figures at a Glance, July 2021.

1.2 Trends in contexts and types of attack

Major attacks affecting aid workers occurred in 41 countries, with most of the violence taking place in South Sudan, Syria, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Other high-incidence contexts included Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, where attacks have more than doubled since 2018.

Figure 3: Top ten most violent contexts, 2020
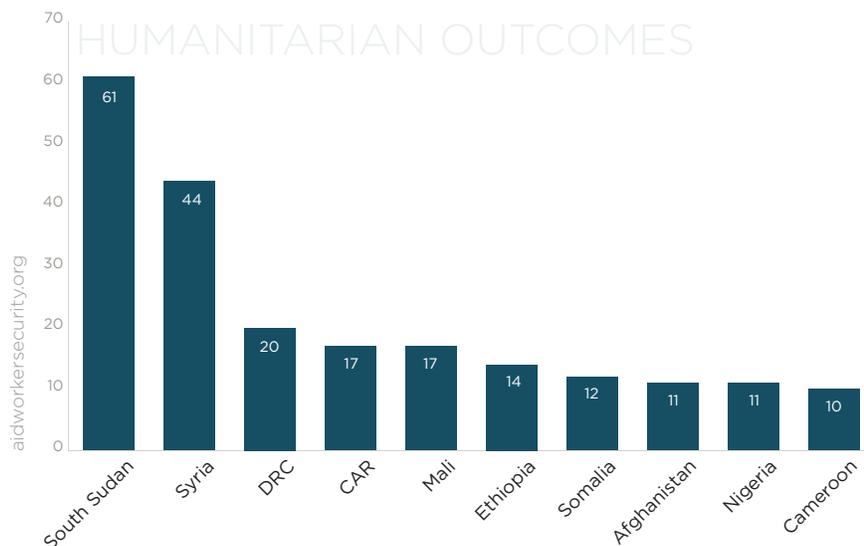
Last year also marked the first time since the start of its 20-year conflict that Afghanistan was not one of the top five most violent contexts for aid workers. This lull turned out to be short-lived, however, since the first six months of 2021 saw aid worker attacks in Afghanistan rise again as the Taliban began its military advance to recapture the country while US troops withdrew.
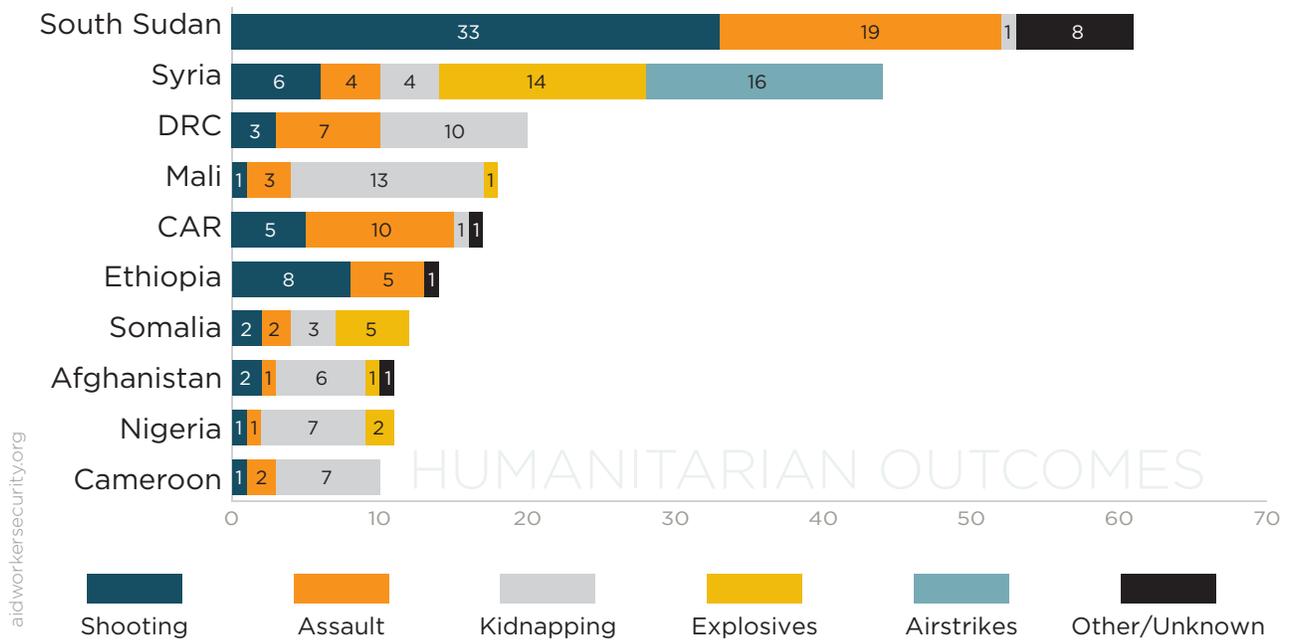
Armed conflict erupted in Ethiopia's Tigray region in late 2020, sparking a massive humanitarian emergency and a rise in targeted violence directed at humanitarian responders, pushing the county into the ranks of the more dangerous operational contexts.[3] The level of conflict and lack of secure access for humanitarians continued to worsen in 2021, with dire consequences for Tigrayans.

South Sudan experienced a new spike in aid worker attacks in 2020, despite the formal end to its civil war in September 2018.[4] Attacks with fatal outcomes increased most sharply, reaching a level not seen since the peak of the fighting in 2016/17. In all, 24 aid workers died in attacks in 2020 in South Sudan as compared to 6 in 2019. The surge in violence occurred as departing UN peacekeeping forces handed over to government authorities, and South Sudan experienced a rise in intergroup tensions, proliferating youth gangs, and cattle raiders armed with military grade weapons. Shooting as a means of violence in South Sudan rose dramatically, and violence against aid workers spread to areas outside of the original conflict areas in an atmosphere of increased lawlessness and opportunistic violent crime.

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[3]   Humanitarian Outcomes. (2021a). *Humanitarian access SCORE report: Tigray, Ethiopia. Survey on the coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness of humanitarian aid.*

[4]   Humanitarian Outcomes. (2021b). *Aid Worker Security Database. Signal alert.*

Figure 4: Highest incident contexts with types of attack, 2020

Legend: Shooting · Assault · Kidnapping · Explosives · Airstrikes · Other/Unknown

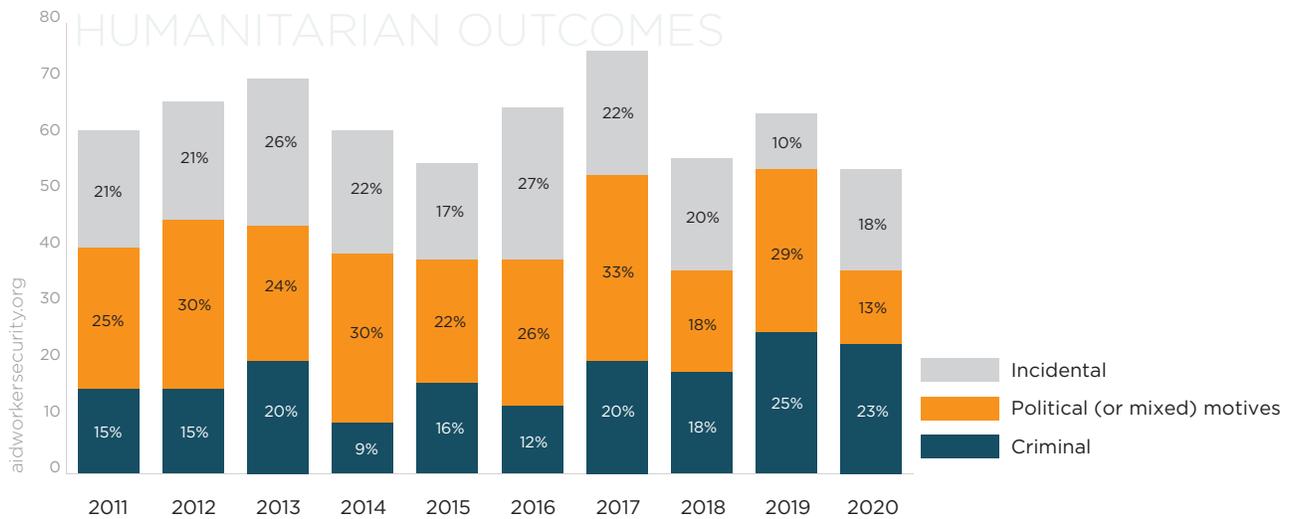| Context	Shooting	Assault	Kidnapping	Explosives	Airstrikes	Other/Unknown
South Sudan	33	19	1			8
Syria	6	4	4	14	16	
DRC	3	7	10			
Mali	1	3	13	1		
CAR	5	10		1		1
Ethiopia	8	5	1			
Somalia	2	2	3	5		
Afghanistan	2	1	6	1		1
Nigeria	1	1	7	2		
Cameroon	1	2	7			

As South Sudan illustrates, warfare and the presence of armed insurgencies are not the only major risks affecting humanitarian relief efforts. In some settings, the threat posed by intercommunal hostilities, criminal gangs, and individual criminals can be just as deadly, even if aid workers are not viewed as political targets. In places where local and national authorities lack the ability to enforce order and populations lack economic opportunities, criminal activity is bound to rise; and aid operations, with their supplies of cash, vehicles, and material aid resources, make an appealing economic target. After years or decades of war, the legacy of abundant firearms makes crime easier to commit and violent outcomes more likely.

Humanitarian security professionals express growing concern that they face rising violent crime in some contexts and would benefit from new thinking on how to contend with it. A group of the major UN and NGO humanitarian organisations consulted for this study provided evidence of this increase in their internal incident tracking data, which they shared with our research team. An October 2021 article by ICRC provided a breakdown of their security incidents, also showing that, in 2020, 'A large proportion of incidents are caused by civilians and criminal actors'.[5]

The global aid worker attack data bears out the anecdotal evidence. For incidents where motives can be determined, the AWSD records if: 1) the aid worker victims were deliberately targeted for purely **economic** reasons (i.e., common crime); 2) if there were **political**/ideological motives at play; 3) if being an aid worker was **incidental** and irrelevant to the violence. The data shows that economically motivated attacks have increased over the past four years, and beginning in 2019, violent crime outstripped political or conflict-related attacks for the first time on record (Figure 5).
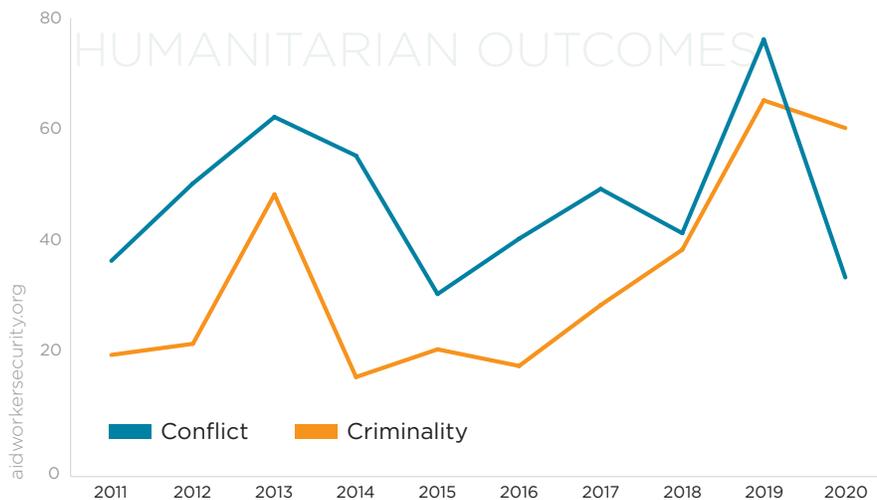
5   Terry, F., Kiehl, J., Whelan R. and Szenderák, T. (2021). Debunkerising acceptance: a view from the ICRC. *Achieving safe operations through acceptance: challenges and opportunities for security risk management.* The Global Interagency Security Forum.

Figure 5: Motives behind attacks (where possible to determine)

HUMANITARIAN OUTCOMES

Year	Criminal	Political (or mixed) motives	Incidental
2011	15%	25%	21%
2012	15%	30%	21%
2013	20%	24%	26%
2014	9%	30%	22%
2015	16%	22%	17%
2016	12%	26%	27%
2017	20%	33%	22%
2018	18%	18%	20%
2019	25%	29%	10%
2020	23%	13%	18%

Legend:
- Incidental
- Political (or mixed) motives
- Criminal

A look at the number of attacks that deliberately targeted humanitarian actors (not including incidental and collateral violence) shows the relative rise of criminality as opposed to conflict-related violence in aid worker attacks (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Conflict versus criminality in deliberate strikes on aid workers, 2011–2020

HUMANITARIAN OUTCOMES

Legend:
- Conflict
- Criminality

(Line graph showing years 2011–2020 on x-axis, values 0–80 on y-axis)

2 Scale and perceptions of the crime problem facing humanitarians

2.1 Defining and measuring criminal attacks

In fragile settings, no neat distinctions exist between conflict, crime and political violence. Criminal groups tend to occupy a 'gray zone between ordinary crime and political violence' and may directly involve themselves in politics through pressure, bribery, financing of campaigns and electoral violence.[6] Government actors who have been bought off or infiltrated by criminal groups will willingly overlook or actively facilitate criminal activity. In extreme cases, criminal groups like drug cartels can exert control over territories and populations, challenging the state's monopoly of force. In such cases, 'While intentions may not be political, the consequences are'.[7] Conversely, armed opposition groups advancing a political ideology often finance their operations through robbery, extortion and illicit trade, so criminal consequences can arise from political intentions as well.[8]

Despite this murkiness, most humanitarian organisations attempt to distinguish between crime and other types of security incidents for the purposes of risk analysis. The UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) defines a **crime** as an illegal act for economic or personal benefit that may or may not entail violence, and thus distinguishes it from acts of **armed conflict** (organised violence between armed groups), **terrorism** (violence by armed groups against civilians), and **civil unrest** (organised disruptions to public order, such as rioting). Implicit in these distinctions is underlying intent. Crime is the one threat category where there is no larger agenda for political or societal change. While it may be organised, its perpetrators possess no motive beyond economic or other personal gain.

In terms of outcomes, crime becomes a critical security concern to aid organisations when it affects their personnel, as opposed to just their assets. Petty theft and other acts of crime where no one is harmed may be the most commonplace risk encountered by humanitarian organisations; but when crime increasingly entails major violence (killing, serious injury or abduction) it signals a shift in the security environment that generally has more to do with weak or absent governance than with political conflict, whether or not that is also occurring.[9]

It is important for humanitarians to be aware of the crime dynamics within the broader risk environment—and to understand the way their own presence interacts with and affects these dynamics—so that they can identify appropriate risk management measures. Unfortunately, solid incident data and other empirical information on crime is hard to come by.

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[6] Kalyvas, S. (2015). How civil wars help explain organized crime—and how they do not. *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* volume 59, pp. 1517–1540.

[7] ACLED (n.d.). *Gang violence: concepts, benchmarks and coding rules.*

[8] See further research around the crime-conflict nexus in: Boer, J. and Bosetti, L. (2015). *The crime-conflict "nexus": State of the evidence.* United Nations University for Policy Research; Shaw, M. and Reitano, T. (2017). *Global illicit flows and local conflict dynamics: the case for pre-emptive analysis and experimental policy options.* United Nations University for Policy Research.

[9] White collar crime (fraud, corruption and digital risks such as ransomware) is also a deep concern that agencies are trying to better understand and mitigate. However, it typically falls under financial departments or audit and compliance rather than security risk management, and was not examined in this study, which focuses on violent crime.

2.2 Available data

To examine the intersecting role of crime and conflict in aid worker insecurity, we reviewed several datasets that track overall homicides, kidnappings, conflict deaths, or a combination of these variables, alongside our aid worker attack data. The obvious challenges to collecting crime statistics in fragile or conflict-affected states means that the places with the most incidents are frequently also the ones with the least accurate or complete data. In some cases, moreover, the data comes from national entities with vested interests in downplaying their crime statistics and are difficult to verify. Another challenge is the difficulty in determining the perpetrators and motives of the attacks in fluid situations, especially as the two are often not mutually exclusive.

For incidents of crime affecting general populations, this study primarily relied on data from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which provides the most comprehensive dataset available on general crime rates. Other relevant data sources include the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Uppsala Conflict Data Program, and the Small Arms Survey Global Violent Deaths database (see table of data sources in appendix). In some of the places where humanitarian actors are struggling the most with crime, such as DRC where they have faced increasing incidents of armed robbery and kidnapping, no official crime data is recorded, even for homicides.

While the missing data presents problems for detailed case comparisons, a previous Aid Worker Security Report (2012) compared aid worker fatality rates to overall murder rates in sample countries and found that attacks on aid workers appeared largely independent of local crime conditions and more closely related to conflict dynamics and state fragility.[10] This may explain why in Latin America, which according to the available data has the highest homicide rate of any region, shows relatively low numbers of aid worker fatalities compared to conflict-affected countries in Africa and the Middle East.

2.3 Contexts and causes

It is difficult to know where to begin to tackle a problem when you are still unsure of its contours, and the crime threat to humanitarian organisations is in some ways more complex and harder to define and deal with than the risks of armed conflict. In protracted and devolving conflicts for example, the line rapidly blurs between 'militia' and 'criminal gang', as the violence becomes more fragmented and chaotic. As one interviewee said regarding the situation in CAR, 'When do you draw the line between rebel and criminal? When they escape to the bush? It's not an easy distinction'.

One form of criminal threat arises from the fragmentation and dissolution of armed political conflict in fragile or failing states, where unpaid fighters, splintering into smaller groups, sustain their activities through crime, which ultimately becomes the ongoing objective. In such conditions, humanitarian operations can be a draw for criminals and crisis response contexts a potential breeding ground for organised crime—a situation many aid workers have observed outside the displaced people's camps in northeast Syria and Cox's Bazaar, where they and the people they serve deal with increasing incidents of armed robbery and extortion.

The uncertain situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover has prompted alarm over looming economic collapse and new shocks on an already vulnerable and food-insecure population. The humanitarian organisations struggling to continue or resume programming in Afghanistan are braced for a new type of insecurity should the worst economic forecasts come to pass. One NGO interviewed at this time described the feeling as like being in the eye of a

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[10]   Humanitarian Outcomes. (2012). *Aid worker security report 2012. Host states and their impact on security for humanitarian operations.*

hurricane. If an economic implosion cannot be averted, some believe criminality will replace the former armed opposition actors as the main threat, and one much more difficult to address with current approaches.

In parts of Latin America, it is the organised crime itself that has created or exacerbated humanitarian crises, as the extremely high levels of homicide and other violent crime have caused major population displacements.[11] Criminal gangs in Haiti contributed to already severe food insecurity by attacking food distribution warehouses, and similar gang attacks on health facilities prompted MSF to halt some medical programming earlier this year.[12] In these places crime bosses can act as gatekeepers to the affected populations humanitarians are trying to help, and NGOs working in Honduras have described having to navigate powerful criminal gangs that operate transnationally.

Globally, violent robberies, carjackings and kidnapping for ransom came up most often as the most concerning crime risks for aid agencies. Kidnapping is a particular worry in some contexts, such as Haiti and Nigeria, where it has emerged as a growth industry, threatening all manner of civilians, including aid workers.[13] Two large humanitarian entities consulted for this research estimated that crime incidents had risen to make up roughly a third of the major attacks (those resulting in killings, abductions, or serious injury to staff) they had experienced over the past few years.

Crime statistics and criminology literature show that crime rates are higher in cities than in rural areas. Within cities, violent crimes tends to be clustered in particular areas, and homicides are concentrated in lower income areas, and amongst lower-income families.[14] Rapid urbanisation, structural factors of weak governance, economic crisis and social inequality can lead to very high levels of urban violence.[15] As humanitarian aid agencies are increasingly working in urban areas, it is all the more important to analyse and mitigate the risk of criminal violence both from a safety of staff perspective and from a protection of civilians perspective, in situations where urban violence is itself creating humanitarian crises.[16]

An interviewee representing one of the world's largest international NGOs reported they had experienced as many incidents of crime in DRC as in all their other programmes combined, and the criminal gangs were keeping pace with their security adaptations. When they reduced the amount of cash on hand, capped programme size and limited staff movements to avoid robberies, they saw a subsequent increase in kidnappings for ransom. The international NGO, known for its expertise in negotiated access and forging acceptance, seemed caught off guard by the surge of economically motivated violence. 'In South Kivu we assumed acceptance and were caught by surprise with kidnapping', said the representative. 'Whatever we were doing in acceptance was not enough to protect us from professional kidnap-for-ransom gangs'.

[11] Honduras and El Salvador have an estimated 833,600 people displaced in large part by criminal violence. International Crisis Group (ICG). (2021). Breaking the cycle of violence in Mexico and Central America, *ecoi.net.*

[12] Charles, J. (2021). Haiti gang violence forces Doctors without Borders to close ER, hold off COVID-19 treatment. *Miami Herald,* 29 June.

[13] Bukarti, B. (2021). Opinion: Nigeria's school kidnapping crisis is even worse than you think. *The Washington Post,* 9 June.; Marsh, S. (2021). 'Descent into hell': Kidnapping explosion terrorizes Haiti. *Reuters,* 26 April.

[14] Glaeser, E. L. and Sacerdote, B. (1999). Why is there more crime in cities? *Journal of Political Economy,* vol. 107, no. S6, pp. S225–58, The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1086/250109; Muggah, R. (2012). *Researching the urban dilemma: urbanization, poverty and violence.* Igarapé Institute.

[15] Nogueira, J. (2014). *From fragile states to fragile cities: redefining spaces of humanitarian practices.* Humanitarian Action in Situations Other than War (HASOW) discussion paper 12.

[16] Sanderson, D. (2019). *Urban humanitarian response.* Good Practice Review 12, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Humanitarians also point to COVID-19 as among the factors causing a crime bulge in aid worker security incidents. The consequences of increased economic hardship and 'retreat of the state' in some areas unavoidably added to the incentives for—and reduced restraints on—criminal activity.

Figure 7: Major attacks by type of perpetrator (where known)

Addressing crime in humanitarian security risk management
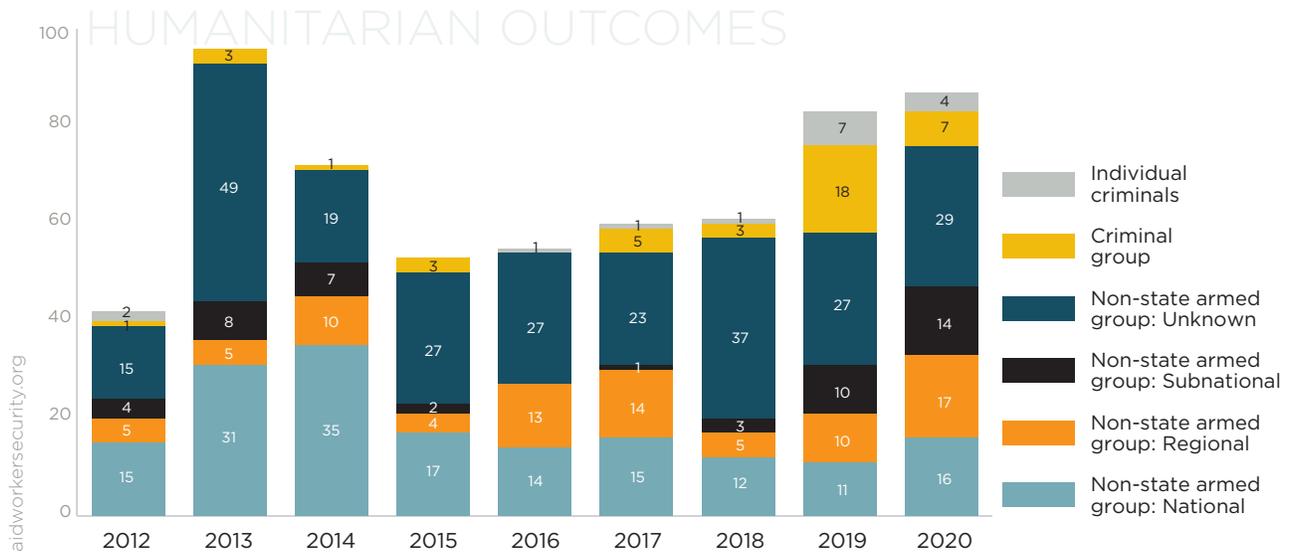
3.1 Current NGO security practices

The familiar 'triangle' concept in operational security refers to **protection**, **deterrence** and **acceptance**—the three basic approaches humanitarians can take to mitigate risk. With protection approaches, they can reduce their vulnerability to attack by implementing things like convoy procedures, high walls, window bars, blast setbacks and armoured vehicles. Some humanitarian organisations in a few places also find it necessary to use deterrence, which means posing a counterthreat to would-be perpetrators in the form of armed guards or military escorts. The acceptance approach attempts to neutralise the threat by gaining the good will of the local community and tolerance of armed actors that may otherwise cause them harm. It is this third side of the triangle that distinguishes the NGO security approach in particular, and it forms the basis of negotiated access with non-state armed groups.

Humanitarian actors for the most part have not attempted acceptance-type approaches with criminal actors however for a number of reasons including the following.

- **Lack of legal/ethical framework and incentives.** Unlike with armed actors, there is no codified basis such as the Geneva Conventions or similar for the protection of aid groups from crime, nor any guidance for advocacy with criminal actors to refrain from attacking humanitarians. Even where leaders of crime gangs can be identified, it is assumed they would have little incentive to provide humanitarian actors with secure access, as in most cases they are not seeking political legitimacy or to win over local populations. In this way, criminal groups are considered in some sense beyond the pale, and outside the scope of any sort of direct dialogue or moral appeal.

- **Weak threat assessment and analysis.** Humanitarian aid groups and their security personnel generally have a much weaker knowledge of the potential criminal actors and a looser grasp on the nature, scope or scale of the threat. While 'actor mapping' is commonly employed for non-state armed groups and other political or military entities and a first step in threat assessment and risk analysis, the organisations we consulted rarely undertake this exercise for criminal actors.

- **Legal and moral hazard.** Even more than with armed groups, arguably, aid actors run the risk of inadvertently doing harm in pursuing dialogue and deal-making with criminals, as this would be tantamount to, or at the least perceived as, abetting corruption or extortion. Apart from creating ethical dilemmas and reputational risk, this could leave the organisation open to charges of violating laws and international donor regulations.

- **Fear.** Not unreasonably, humanitarian actors may decide that the risk of interacting with criminals is too great. Particularly with smaller criminal groups, the perception is that the more unstructured the gang in terms of leadership, the more violent it is both internally and towards outsiders.

- **A labelling problem?** It is worth considering whether the term 'acceptance' itself creates a barrier for discussing ways to directly intervene with criminal groups to attempt to reduce the threat they pose. No humanitarian organisation aspires to win the 'acceptance' and approval of criminals. In simple terms, what humanitarians need for secure access is acceptance from communities, tolerance from armed political actors, and for criminals to

leave them alone. These are all different ways of describing an approach that aims at reducing or heading off potential threats, as opposed to mitigating the risks of encountering them. If the acceptance concept could be broadened to encompass the full range of threat reduction (and link better with approaches to civilian protection and security), it might help open new avenues for thinking about operational security with regard to criminal actors.

As things currently stand, the humanitarian security risk management (SRM) practices geared toward crime are mainly focused on protection and deterrence. One organisation mentioned that it attempts to advocate with local authorities and police for protection but as a relatively small NGO, it does not have much leverage, and in places where law enforcement capacity is lacking to begin with, these efforts are mostly unproductive.

Threat and risk assessment and analysis

Humanitarian actors consulted mostly agreed that their organisation's SRM analytical tools were less equipped to analyse criminality than risks related to armed groups and political violence. Country-specific risk assessment processes within aid agencies do routinely flag risks from criminality—as one interviewee noted, 'It tends to be front and centre of peoples' minds', because they are personally exposed to risks from crime both as staff and as civilians—but in terms of any detailed understanding of the actors and dynamics, crime too often appears as a black box.

The problem begins with the absence of empirical data as a stepping off point which, coming amid a slew of other challenges and gaps, creates a self-perpetuating inertia, at least at the level of central security management. As one international staffer said, 'Where we work the crime data is often very poor, with little analysis. There's a real gap there, but is it relevant enough to invest in building [capacity]?'

For most low-level crime (which comprises the bulk of incidents affecting aid groups), humanitarians report they are usually unable to determine whether the criminals were acting individually or as part of an organised network or group. But this may also be the result of the lower level of analysis that goes into understanding the local crime context as opposed to conflict actors. As a security professional said, 'You can liaise with the police, but it is incumbent on the teams to understand the [local crime dynamics] and do the context analysis, and that's what local level security teams are not so good at'. Instead, as described by one interviewee, what analysis takes place is largely episodic, 'If we go down this road, will my truck be safe?', and neglects the critical actor mapping and basic assessment of the criminal groups—who, what, where, when, and how.

The research also did not find much evidence that humanitarian organisations were carefully analysing organised crime groups and their intersections with state actors in political violence or their own roles in relation to these dynamics. While it is known and accepted that the humanitarian response can attract crime and corruption, little has been done to develop any analysis or strategy around a 'do no harm' approach to this reality. In Latin American contexts with extremely high levels of organised crime, some have suggested that humanitarians may be too sanguine about the effect of their presence. Some assume, for example, 'If we are not directly interfering in the specific interests of drug or human trafficking cartels, they should have no reason to strike at us'. Others may fail to consider that humanitarian and other international response actors have been shown in some past instances to be contributing to the demand for illicit markets in crisis contexts, notably prostitution.[17] A review of how crime affects USAID-funded programmes highlights the need for a crime-sensitive approach and to anticipate ways USAID programming can inadvertently strengthen criminal organisations. It highlights procurement of goods and services from businesses controlled by criminal actors as a particular risk.[18]

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[17]   Thomson Reuters Foundation News. (n.d.). *Sex abuse in the aid sector.*

[18]   Dininio, P. (2015). *Organized crime, conflict and fragility: assessing relationships through a review of USAID programs.* USAID.

As the above-mentioned international NGO learnt in DRC, when it comes to economic crime the simple equation of 'reducing exposure = reducing risk' does not always apply. Although much crime is 'opportunistic' and can be warded off by basic security procedures to reduce exposure, at times the targeting can be stickier, and the criminals find new ways to tap the same deep well. This is one reason some humanitarian security professionals cited extortion as being especially difficult to mitigate. 'Once you are a target once, it's hard to change that narrative.'

Mitigation measures

Protection

Standard operating procedures used in humanitarian SRM do not much distinguish between criminality and political violence. When asked about crime mitigation, organisations emphasised basic protection measures such as walls, locks, travel procedures and curfews.

The lack of in-depth analysis on crime means that security orientation and training for staff will necessarily be light on contextual understanding of crime conditions and mainly geared to standard precautions, which may or may not be relevant to the particular context. As one interviewee related, 'One of the examples I remember is that the training said not to carry valuables with you, while my Honduran colleagues told me you want to have cash on you to give in case you're targeted, otherwise things might get violent'.

Deterrence

Most humanitarian NGOs eschew armed protection wherever possible, and it is the rare conflict context where armed guards and escorts are the norm, such as Somalia. In high crime contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean, however, NGOs acknowledge that even though they do not employ armed guards directly, they tend to live and work in buildings, compounds, and gated communities that are under the armed protection of guards that the facilities employ. In some ways this surrender of the unarmed humanitarian ideal to a deterrence strategy is unavoidable. It would be highly unadvisable, for instance, to be the only house in town without armed protection as presenting a relatively soft target just invites targeting. But it also speaks to a mindset that treats crime and criminal actors as akin to something like the weather, over which aid groups could never have any influence and need not try to understand.

Threat reduction

As mentioned, the research found relatively few examples of humanitarian groups attempting something like access negotiations with criminal actors or any approach outside the realm of protection and deterrence measures. Traditional community-level acceptance strategies can only help so much, because local people, like the humanitarians, tend to have little leverage or influence over criminal groups. But if they value the humanitarian programming and presence, 'They can help warn you when and where not to go'. As with strikes by non-state armed groups, information and early warning can sometimes be obtained from community contacts, and this marker of acceptance can be critically valuable.

The anecdotal examples we did gather were mostly highly localised acceptance measures by NGOs dealing with crime risk, primarily in Latin America, but some in African contexts as well. In one case in Latin America, the SRM plan differentiated between men and women vis-à-vis the risk from criminal gangs, having determined that men were more likely to be fatally attacked by the gangs, whereas women were left alone. This resulted in female staff being sent to work in certain gang areas. Another NGO representative described how they had some limited success in one setting by reaching out to elders in the community whom they knew to be the parents of some of the youths engaged in criminal activity.

Training and orientation

Aid workers with deep experience at the local level underscore that contextual risk analysis is hugely important as which criminal groups are operating where has a significant impact on security and appropriate behaviour for aid workers. One recounted how the SRM training that the international NGO was rolling out globally was not appropriate for contexts like Honduras.

The same interviewee reported a sense at the headquarters level that places like El Salvador or Honduras were low risk compared to active conflict contexts in other regions, and so security training and orientations were not much emphasised for those postings.

3.2 Beyond protection and deterrence: prospects for new approaches

The research team looked to other disciplines like urban violence, peace mediation, focused deterrence, transitional justice, and social anthropological approaches for additional insights and potential lessons on dealing with violent crime. Talking to professionals in the humanitarian and development spheres, as well as experts from these other disciplines, we heard examples of alternative approaches to the crime risk that fall into two broad categories: direct negotiation; and community-level programmatic interventions aimed at reducing crime and violence. In some cases, the two approaches can be used in complement with each other, suggesting a way to address the particular difficulty of how humanitarians can forge a transactional agreement with a criminal actor without becoming complicit in crime themselves.

Dialogue and negotiation approaches

While humanitarian organisations have amassed a wealth of practice around negotiating with armed political actors, scarce research or guidance exists in the sector for negotiating with criminal groups. Judging from interviews, very few organisations made efforts to directly negotiate with criminal groups, beyond the occasional ad hoc attempt, after a robbery for instance, to 'call around' and see if any of the stolen items could be recovered.

The unifying thread among the external disciplines, and echoed throughout the literature and interviews, was that any negotiation that takes place with criminal groups needs to be preceded by thorough analysis to understand their interests, incentives and local ties. Understanding and relating to criminals as potential negotiation counterparts also requires recognising one's own biases and preconceptions. For instance, criminal groups are marginalised and often dehumanised in the media or presented in lazy ways that do not explain the reality of the group, its culture, beliefs, rituals or values—and that they too are stuck in a cycle of violence and victimisation. Misplaced assumptions and erroneous perceptions by international actors coming into the field can stop negotiation before it begins.

As noted by Felbab-Brown, negotiations often lean towards attaining short-term goals to obtain security assurances and access to places where criminal groups control territory. For one NGO in Haiti that focused on peacebuilding and social inclusion, that meant funding community leaders to provide handouts for every month that an attack did not occur.[19] It is easy to see the risks inherent in such a strategy and the uncomfortably fine line the NGO is walking between violence prevention programming and supporting a protection racket.

So how would a humanitarian organisation approach negotiations with a criminal group? With armed actors, aid groups have increasingly recognised that advocacy and moral appeals based on humanitarian principles are less effective than practical, transactional bargaining strategies. A transactional approach would be even more necessary for a criminal group interested mainly in economic gain. But how to satisfy their economic interests without abetting their crime? Just as with armed groups, the answer involves identifying an interest held by the group that aligns in some way with humanitarian objectives.

[19] Handouts included 'motorcycles, scholarships, food, clothes, and training slots': Felbab-Brown, V. (2020). *Bargaining with the devil to avoid hell? A discussion paper on negotiations with criminal groups in Latin American and the Caribbean.* Institute for Integrated Transitions, p. 22.

Programmatic approaches

Some NGOs working in Latin America and the Caribbean have added localised programmes to their portfolios, which works to improve local communities while contributing to security risk management goals. These sometimes small and independently-funded projects allow the NGO to gain community acceptance and more extensive information connections in the immediate area where they are based. Sometimes such programmes can be a direct response to the interests of local criminal groups, if they happen to have meaningful ties to the community. One example cited was an NGO project in Guatemala for violence reduction, working with the mothers of gang members who had been killed. The NGO reasoned that while gangs may not respect authority or other social norms, some do place value and respect on the mothers of their slain comrades.

In Latin America, ICRC has been testing new programmes to protect civilians through better access to basic services in cities affected by crisis levels of violence. MSF has also worked on violence prevention and mental health with at-risk youth in cities in Central America. Agencies have focused on highly localised interventions in partnership with civic authorities, strong community partnerships and a do-no-harm lens. Interventions have aimed to protect civilians and civilian assets, mitigate the effects of violence on urban populations and enable protective factors that limit exposure to violence. Examples of projects include early childhood programmes, school-based activities, initiatives for single female-headed households, projects targeting at-risk adolescents, psychosocial support services and urban improvement schemes.[20]

One NGO implemented an education programme aiming to provide children and young people with an alternative to being recruited into gangs or other criminal groups. A few projects outside of the humanitarian community implemented cultural programmes, which in some cases were beneficial because they facilitated cultural interactions between gangs and the local community. The latter can sometimes be a spoiler of change because of the perception of gangs and their stigmatisation and dehumanisation.[21] In one case, members of a gang were offered mediation training, which helped decrease violence between warring groups, but also had the benefit of being therapeutic for the participants, who are often victims of significant violence themselves.[22]

By changing social perceptions about gang involvement, seeing them as victims of their circumstances, support for further interventions increased because community resistance decreased.[23] This is important in contexts where it may be useful to leverage the community as potential facilitators of interactions and negotiations between criminal groups and humanitarian organisations.[24] Although it will not always work—if the criminal group comes from outside the community for instance and cannot be swayed by any local intermediary—experts stressed the necessity of engaging, including, and utilising the right community stakeholders, as they have the knowledge and experience to help navigate these interactions.[25] According to the experts interviewed, risk transfer is minimised because the right community partners will already have inroads and legitimacy in the eyes of the criminal group and will also be cognisant of the risks and how to mitigate them.

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[20] Muggah, R. (2017). A humanitarian response to Central America's fragile cities. *The humanitarian consequences of violence in Central America.* Humanitarian Exchange 69, Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)/ODI; Sanderson (2019).

[21] Feixa Pàmpols, C. (2019). *Transnational gangs as agents of mediation: experiences of conflict resolution in street youth organizations in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Americas.* TRANSGANG Working Papers 1.1.

[22] Interview, socio-anthropologist, gang expert (2021).

[23] Interview, socio-anthropologist, gang expert (2021).

[24] One interview emphasised that communities are not homogenous or uniform entities, and it is important—especially in the process of identifying potential partners to help support negotiations—not to conflate or presume a person's or a group's ability to navigate these conversations based on overall assumptions. For example, while faith-based groups may have inroads in countries or areas where their faith is shared, without good actor and context analysis, such an assumption could prove erroneous or dangerous.

[25] One international NGO tried unsuccessfully to use local intermediaries to intervene on its behalf when staff members were kidnapped by a criminal gang in Pakistan. 'We went through every contact we had within the community to get them out, but in the end, they were just really nasty criminals and the community couldn't turn it around for us, even though they really tried, because they knew the consequences of failing were that all the NGOs would leave.'

In one case, the opportunity came from a shift in the country's illicit economy. A collapse in opium prices in Mexico impacted local crime groups' hold over politicians and police as they could no longer afford the bribes, and this provided an opportunity to negotiate humanitarian access and provide opium growers and the crime groups with alternative livelihoods.[26] The key takeaway is that a careful assessment of the operational environment will help organisations determine if there are inroads to programming or negotiation approaches.

Another programming option is to directly engage in social inclusion and violence reduction efforts that aim to contribute to reducing criminal violence generally, rather than just evading it. In this regard, humanitarians may be able to learn from and draw on approaches to citizen security developed in Latin America, especially in contexts where criminal violence itself is creating humanitarian crises. Muggah and Tobon (2018), for instance, point to the success of citizen security approaches in reducing murder rates by between 70% and 90% in some Latin American cities.[27] Similarly, Stein and Walch (2017) discuss violence reduction programmes that do not fall neatly into either humanitarian or development labels, but that have had success at reducing violence at local levels.[28] There is, for instance, an important psychosocial component to violence reduction in places where violence is so common that it becomes normalised and children grow up internalising this as a way to respond. Again, highly localised strategies seem to be key, and it would behoove humanitarian organisations to focus on 'highly localized interventions in partnership with civic authorities and strong community partnerships' if they are to add value.[29]

These programming approaches are still new and few in the humanitarian sector, where there is also little evidence of any joined-up strategies between larger scale substantive programming (for instance on protection of civilians) and SRM. The two areas still tend to sit in separate parts of organisations, with limited interactions. Despite growing discussions about the role of humanitarian organisations in peacebuilding as a pillar of the 'nexus', it as yet appears to have limited expression in practice.

There is perhaps scope for humanitarian actors to coordinate more effectively with the broader spectrum of actors and interventions aimed at addressing criminal violence. Peacebuilding and human rights actors, media organisations and development efforts relating to security sector reform, rule of law and governance, and additional livelihood opportunities are all part of the broader landscape of efforts to tackle organised crime. Humanitarian agencies need to do more to understand where they are situated within this wider spectrum of efforts to address criminal violence.

Risks and challenges

Negotiations can prove challenging, as aid groups find they need to constantly renegotiate terms and rebuild trust. In one case in Haiti, an NGO found itself continually having to change the narrative being created by gangs, stating that the NGO was there at their discretion and benefited from their protection.[30] On that score, humanitarian organisations are cognisant that this potentially affords criminal groups legitimacy and a perception of power in the community. This is only one of the ethical challenges that humanitarians contend with, but it is not wholly unique in that similar considerations are made when negotiating with armed actors. And not unlike negotiations with armed groups, humanitarian organisations, especially in Latin America,

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26 Felbab-Brown (2020), p. 15.

27 Citizen security refers to a multi-disciplinary, whole of society approach to reducing crime and violence with interventions in justice sector reform and evidence-based policing as well as social and economic programming. Muggah, R. and Tobon, (2018). *Citizen security in Latin America: facts and figures.* Igarapé Insitute.

28 Stein and Walch (2017). *Non-conventional violence in Central America and Mexico: the case for an integrated humanitarian and development approach.* Humanitarian Practice Network, HPN/ODI.

29 Muggah (2017). *Humanitarian response to Central America's fragile cities.* Humanitarian Exchange 69, HPN/ODI.

30 Felbab-Brown (2020), p. 8 and p. 22.

have expressed concern regarding the legal ramifications and consequences of even just talking with criminal groups in situations other than war (criminal insurgency), which are not governed by international humanitarian laws, but have the same complexity and elements of traditional war.[31] With the criminalisation of humanitarian aid, NGOs fear losing donor funding in instances where violence prevention initiatives could inadvertently bolster or support (or be perceived to bolster or support) the illicit activities of criminal groups, which potentially could have an impact on negotiation and information-sharing about negotiations.[32]

Another challenge concerns the role of host states. Where state and criminal actors are intertwined, relying on state actors to combat criminality when they are complicit in carrying it out is unlikely to be effective. In Africa, ENACT finds that state-embedded actors at the higher levels of states working in conjunction with criminal networks are perceived as causing the greatest harm across the continent.

> 'Where state-embedded actors are seen as the leading vector in criminality on the continent, investments to reinforce the technical capacity of key state institutions are of limited value, or can even be counter-productive. They will not achieve results because such institutions are undermined, or are captured to protect and facilitate criminality rather than prevent it.'[33]

Finally, it bears remembering that the state or its representatives (local authorities, law enforcement and the security apparatus) can sometimes act as a spoiler to negotiation, especially if it colludes in criminal activity or is itself a perpetrator of violence and as such would not be a willing (or welcome) participant. As one expert noted in an interview for this study, 'It's never that absolute that they are not going to be part of the conversation. There is a typical presumption that you must have good institutions. No. You find particular people in relationships that get the work done. In a way, this is a way to create institutional change from the outside in'.

It can be reasonably argued that it is not realistic for humanitarians, who have their own specific objectives and resource and time constraints, to undertake peacebuilding or violence reduction interventions as part of their negotiation or acceptance strategy. But to the extent that violence reduction could be integrated and resourced within a security management framework, and initiatives undertaken in partnership, it could potentially yield significant benefits to the core humanitarian mission as well as operational security.[34]

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[31] Interview, negotiation expert, Latin America (2021).

[32] Felbab-Brown (2020), p. 40.

[33] Ibid, p. 20.

[34] An example is Action Asia's partnership with Concern, Oxfam and Yayasan Hak in East Timor in 2006, which provided a one-year peacebuilding course, and in reducing violence Freeman and Felbab-Brown (2021), p. 11.

Conclusion

By necessity, humanitarians approach the phenomenon of crime as they do war. It is treated as a given—something that both creates humanitarian need and an obstacle to meeting that need. Aid groups seek not to end crime or war but to alleviate their effects on populations while preventing their own personnel and programmes from falling victim to them.

But if they are to better accomplish this objective, part of their security strategy might be usefully focused on finding ways—even if transactional—of promoting the restraint of the would-be perpetrators, exactly as they have long done with national militaries and more recently and increasingly with non-state armed groups.

Discussions about how best to protect civilians and what the role of humanitarian organisations should be within the broader landscape of efforts to address high levels of criminal and urban violence have tended to be separate from discussion in the security management sphere about how best to protect staff from rising levels of criminal violence. These are, however, closely interlinked, if organisations can successfully work with communities to better protect civilians and enable safety from criminal violence that could also have positive impacts on the safety of staff.

As with negotiated access more broadly, efforts to better manage risks of criminal violence would have to begin with better empirical evidence (data), bringing in lessons and promising approaches from other fields, deeper contextual analysis and understanding of key actors and interests, and the willingness to seek out entry points and intermediaries to begin discussions and develop strategies.

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The following are additional resources for data, expert research, and tools, and provide additional recommended reading in their respective areas of expertise.

Crime and conflict databases

Conflict and political violence

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)	Collects the dates, actors, locations, fatalities and types of all reported political violence and protest events across Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe, and the United States.
Uppsala Conflict Data Program	Fatalities resulting from armed conflict, including civil war and unrest, state-based and non-state actor violence.
Small Arms Survey Global Violent Deaths	Direct conflict deaths, homicides, violent deaths by firearms—including the prevalence of firearms-related killings of women, as well as figures for women victims of lethal violence (2004 onwards).

Global crime data

Africa Organised Crime Index	The ENACT Organised Crime Index is based on an expert-led assessment of two main components—criminality and state resilience to organised crime.
Igarapé Institute Homicide Monitor	Dataset and visualisation of homicidal violence (also includes external consolidated sources).
UN Office of Drugs and Crime	Homicide, assaults, sexual violence, robbery, kidnapping, theft, motor vehicle theft and burglary (2015–2018).
World Bank	Crime and theft index (consolidated). Corruption and other indicators included.
World Health Organization Global Health Observatory	Global homicide data 2000–2019.
World Health Organization Violence Prevention Information System	Main types of interpersonal violence—homicide, intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, youth violence, sexual violence, and elder abuse.

Negotiations and meditation

- Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT)—https://ifit-transitions.org/our-model/
- Frontline Negotiations, Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN)—https://frontline-negotiations.org/
- CCHN Digital field manual on frontline humanitarian negotiation—https://frontline-negotiations.org/home/resources/field-manual/digital-field-manual/
- TRANSGANG project at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona—https://www.upf.edu/web/transgang/project
- Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue—https://www.hdcentre.org/
- Group Violence Intervention, National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College of Criminal Justice—https://nnscommunities.org/strategies/group-violence-intervention/
- Dialogue with Weapons Bearers Resource Centre—https://www.icrc.org/en/what-we-do/building-respect-ihl/dialogue-weapon-bearers

Databases and visualisations

See Robert Muggah and Instituto Igarapé for visualisations on fragile cities, homicide, and other crime-related visualisations:

- https://www.robertmuggah.org/visualizations/
- https://igarape.org.br/en/tech/

Crime research

- Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and the Global Organized Crime Index—https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/ocindex/
- The Humanitarian Action in Situations Other than War (HASOW) project—https://igarape.org.br/en/hasow/

Abby Stoddard, Paul Harvey, Monica Czwarno, and Meriah-Jo Breckenridge

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