



National Institute of Justice

Connecting International Organized Crime Research to Policy and Practice: The Strategic Context in the U.S. and the U.K.

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This page presents a summary of an NIJ-sponsored expert working group meeting held November 5, 2010.

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Introduction

In November 2010, NIJ hosted a small expert working group (EWG) that explored the role academic research could play in formulating more accurate or effective threat assessments and strategies for addressing international organized crime (IOC).¹ The meeting, held in conjunction with the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit of the United Kingdom, focused on three areas where the EWG felt that researchers could help to improve threat assessments and the strategic planning that follows from them. The first area focused on the role of measurement, particularly how to measure harms associated with IOC activities, and why. The second area focused on the role of history, specifically how historical analogy could improve everyone's understanding of contemporary IOC. The final area sought to identify the drivers of IOC and thus improve forecasts of IOC's evolution in the future.

These significant issues are important if governments are to strive to produce more accurate threat assessments that lead to strategic plans with measurable impacts on IOC. Threat assessments can provide an accurate picture of IOC only if analysts collect and analyze the data, using the measurement tools available to them and eschewing unfounded extrapolations and outright guesses. The use of anecdotal evidence and poorly grounded statistics are the easiest way for the public and other stakeholders to dismiss threat assessments and strategy documents addressing IOC. Forward-looking strategies are rooted in accurate representations of historical trends and rely on accurate measurements to set goals and interim benchmarks.

This EWG of researchers and practitioners engaged in a fruitful discussion at NIJ on these topics. Even though the focus was on how researchers could collaborate with practitioners in these three areas, their lessons are applicable to a much wider audience. In this way, the meeting continued NIJ's focus on bringing the research and practice communities together to improve the overall response to IOC. The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule; thus, in the meeting notes that follow, none of the speakers are identified.

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Background: The Role of Threat Assessments and Strategies

Both the U.S. and the U.K. have undertaken systematic assessments of the threat IOC poses to their respective countries. In the U.K., the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) has published the *United Kingdom Threat Assessment for Organised Crime* (UKTA) annually for over a decade. The goal of the UKTA is to support the strategic planning initiative in the U.K.; it also notes that the "public also need this information in order to protect themselves from becoming victims of serious

organised crime."² The publicly available threat assessment focuses on the threat from IOC but only for the U.K., although it does include information from sources located around the globe. The UKTA also includes a methodology for estimating harm from IOC in the U.K.

The U.S. threat assessment process is not rooted in an annual process but otherwise is quite similar to the U.K. model. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Justice published the *International Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (IOCTA). Unlike the UKTA, the IOCTA is not a public document and therefore focused exclusively on supporting the development of a new strategy to fight IOC. The IOCTA also focused more specifically on the law enforcement approach to IOC. For this reason, the U.S. commissioned a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on IOC in 2009. The NIE relies on both classified and unclassified information to produce an estimate of the nature and extent of IOC. The NIE undergoes a rigorous process to validate the conclusions it reaches, and occasionally an NIE will have an unclassified summary. To date, the NIE has not been released in an unclassified format.

As a result of these threat assessments, both governments have pledged to marshal various capabilities to respond to IOC. The U.K. process began in late 2008, when the Prime Minister commissioned a major review of the U.K.'s response to organized crime. The report, published in July 2009 and titled *Extending Our Reach: A Comprehensive Approach to Tackling Serious Organised Crime*, resulted in a draft strategy consisting of 25 recommendations in a number of categories, including organizational responses, root causes, law enforcement tools and public-private partnerships. Taken together, this action plan serves as the foundation upon which the U.K. has developed an intra-government strategy to fight IOC.

The U.S. strategy has taken a similar approach. After the publication of the IOCTA, the U.S. Department of Justice published the *United States Law Enforcement Strategy to Combat International Organized Crime*. This strategy focused on four key goals: (1) marshalling intelligence and information, (2) prioritizing and targeting the most significant IOC threats, (3) employing all available tools to dismantle IOC, and (4) developing aggressive strategies to dismantle entire criminal organizations. Recognizing that fighting IOC required a broad government approach, the U.S. government has also started an interagency strategy process to fight IOC.

The U.S. and the U.K. are not the only countries conducting threat assessments of IOC that then lead to strategic plans. Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and the Czech Republic produce threat assessments on a periodic or annual basis. Often referred to as Organized Crime Threat Assessments (OCTAs), these documents feed into the strategic planning for fighting IOC in these countries. The documents also support the European Union's OCTA and strategic planning process. After producing regional assessments of West Africa and Central Asia, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) produced a global threat assessment on IOC in 2010 that serves much the same function as the national threat assessments but also incorporates larger considerations for contributing factors such as economics, labor and migration conditions.

These and other threat assessments and strategy documents have three elements in common: their use of statistics to convey the magnitude of IOC, the use of historical analogy or trend analysis to improve understanding of the contemporary situation, and the use of current information to forecast the future growth of IOC. These elements are important tools for constructing threat assessments and therefore were logical places for the EWG to start their conversation.

Yet, these three approaches have drawn significant criticism from experts and researchers. Some note the lack of transparency in the methodology used to construct these assessments, including not identifying the sources of information for statistical or other measures. Others focus on the use of poorly crafted statistics portraying the proclivities of organized crime. One expert sums this up by saying that, like other hidden populations, "illicitness makes possible a politics of numbers that is particularly susceptible to speculation, distortion, and sometimes even outright fabrication that is

rarely questioned or challenged in policy debates and media reporting."³ Finally, a number of researchers have lamented the fact that they are often shut out of the process of developing threat assessments and thus are unable to contribute their wealth of knowledge to the process.

In sum, the time was ripe to bring together experts from both the research, policy, and practice communities to discuss how to bridge this gap. Without expectations of solving these problems in one meeting, the group focused on sharing tools and other resources that could improve the production of threat assessments and strategy documents. The discussion that followed is summarized below.

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Measurement and Data Requirements

Any effort to assess the threat that IOC poses is going to require data, and that data will often be quantitative in nature. As noted earlier, this is a task that has thus far proven difficult for the authors of threat assessments. Given the shadowy nature of IOC, it is difficult to produce measures of its activities. Nor has it proven easy to develop ways to extrapolate overarching measures of IOC from observable information, such as arrests or other case data.

The discussion opened with a short presentation on the nature of statistics on IOC. The discussant laid out an argument that IOC statistics were not as hard to produce, as many would assume. The discussant noted that there is plenty of information on IOC and that the technology exists to process this information and produce meaningful analyses. The problem is not so much the lack of information; rather, it is the failure to obtain access to the data so it can be interpreted.

What is needed, the discussant continued, is a better approach to information analysis. This should start with clear guidance from practitioners on the critical questions to ask.

The first step in this process was to establish the unit of analysis. An example of a unit of analysis is a particular group engaging in IOC, that is, the parts of the structure that conspire to commit specific forms of IOC. The selection of the unit of analysis is important to setting the bounds for responses to the next important question: What type of data should an agency collect and use? For example, if researchers were to decide to focus on the groups themselves, they would be wise to use law enforcement data on arrests of individual members; however, this data would be inappropriate for use in other types of analysis, such as one of criminal market activities.

Once the type of data has been selected, the next step is to ask important questions of the data itself. For example, how should an agency handle time-delayed data or data sets that are incomplete? Once those questions have been answered, final guidance from researchers would be on how to interpret the data. After postulating a theory about how IOC operates in a particular group, researchers can proceed with data analysis to determine whether the data support or refute the theory.

The discussant felt that the best way for an agency to measure IOC was by directly observing IOC activities; this would eliminate the need for those extrapolations that have come under fire from researchers. From that perspective, the best unit of analysis is the individual who is involved in IOC. Plenty of law enforcement, legal case, and even open-source information is available that focuses on individuals who are involved in IOC.

The discussant noted that agencies could use any information at their disposal to construct their analysis. For example, although data from criminal cases is useful, agencies should go beyond this information and consult the investigator notes “ these often contain additional details not presented in court. Moreover, investigator notes have higher levels of veracity, given that the ultimate interest of any investigator is to get the details of the case right.

Technology is also an important part of this equation. The discussant noted that agencies can use technology to analyze data in numerous ways. Software packages that were mentioned ranged from statistical packages to qualitative analysis tools. The discussion also focused for a time on link analysis tools. One example that was discussed was a study in Sweden that took anonymous law enforcement data and created a fairly sophisticated network analysis that provided new insights into the size and scope of organized crime in the country. The use of such tools can lead to the discovery of unseen patterns or new insights from the data that has already been collected.

Another discussant focused on the need for statistics. Clearly, statistics are needed that improve our understanding of the multifaceted challenges IOC poses for individuals, societal groups, the broader social order, national economic stability, the integrity of political institutions, and national and international security. Statistical measures would also enhance researchers' ability to argue that IOC is important in the broader political context of competing claims for attention and resources.

The discussant noted that transparency was the key to avoiding the charge that statistical measures are merely numbers arranged to make a particular argument persuasive. Stakeholders need to be more transparent about how researchers and practitioners prioritize harms, and why, and who benefits from this prioritization. Such discussions could also include a clear statement of how the agencies generated the statistics and which data agencies were consulted. Agencies would be wise to explain the role of the research community in the generation of any statistics to avoid any appearance of currying favor in the policymaking process by skewing results.

From this point, the discussion opened to the whole group, who focused largely on the ways researchers and practitioners could collaborate to improve measures of IOC. One participant also noted that even though strategies produce good models of IOC that can then generate hypotheses, without empirical data it is impossible to test these hypotheses. Researchers therefore need to coordinate with practitioners to ensure that IOC strategies include efforts to improve the scope and quality of empirical data.

Others noted that researchers are more experienced with data collection and can more easily suggest improvements in how agencies collect data on IOC activities. Participants cited a Canadian effort titled "Project Sleipnir" as an example; it rank-ordered organized crime groups according to various categories of threat and harm.⁴ Finally, a concrete suggestion was for law enforcement and other agencies to be more open to releasing their existing data for analysis. Participants noted that a number of police agencies around the globe have digitized their data collection. This shift would make it easier for police agencies to compile, anonymize and release data of use to researchers.

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Is International Organized Crime a New Problem?

Although threat assessments and strategy documents are largely forward-looking documents, the analysis that produces these documents relies heavily on historical analysis and context. Historical analogies, trend analysis and longitudinal case studies can help to explain the contemporary situation in an accessible way. Even so, the use of historical analysis in policymaking is often

incorrect or incomplete.⁵ Some practitioners who write threat assessments and follow-up strategies do not see value in engaging in historical comparisons or plumbing the depths of historical cases, which is also a problem because it reduces the universe of potential data.

The EWG felt that history, when analyzed and applied properly, is critical to understanding the IOC threat and to improving strategic planning. The discussant who opened this session noted that history is important, if for no other reason than organized crime is as old as organized society.⁶ The discussant posited that the more organized a society is, the more organized its criminality is. However, the discussant also noted the importance of history in understanding the cultural aspects of IOC. Feeling that threat assessments were often far too "politically correct," the discussant felt that such threat assessments needed to integrate the cultural markers and influences on the IOC groups operating in their countries. Integrating these cultural markers requires a historical analysis that explores their relationship with the expansion and growth of organized crime.

Of particular importance is the use of historical analysis to better understand the ways that culture can support the formation and growth of IOC. Bringing history back into the conversation allows for a deconstruction of the myths and enabling norms that foster support for IOC activities in society. Historical analysis can also demonstrate how societies have organized to resist the culture of IOC. An example of this is the century-old movement against the Mafia in Sicily.⁷ The discussant concluded that the insights gained from historical analysis offset the risks of overextending our historical analogies, yet the risks remained. A good way to mitigate these risks is to engage professional historians—they are concerned with identifying the most factual representations of past events.

History is important for reasons other than the cultural or normative roots of IOC. A discussant noted that one study is using hundreds of historical case studies of organized crime to try to identify the mechanisms through which crime becomes organized. Thus far, the study has found an evolutionary pattern in the formation of organized crime, suggesting that societal interventions are necessary to deter IOC. For example, the laws and customs of a society that prohibit activities also create a demand to break them. Individuals step into the structural holes that open up in this process; when individuals step out and acquire the capital needed to further leverage these opportunities, they form a social system. All of this amounts to what the anthropologist Alan Blok called *the social system of organized crime*—a system that connects the world of legitimate business and politics to the underworld of organized crime.⁸ Each of these steps creates opportunities for government intervention to deconstruct or prevent the organization of crime groups and their operations.

The discussant also noted that historical analysis can help to categorize IOC groups. The historical record supports a typology that places crime groups on a spectrum. At one end are enterprise-motivated syndicates that have purely economic motives. At the other end are power-motivated groups that are more likely to deploy violence to maintain or expand control. Policymakers could use this crime group typology to explore how various groups overlap with other social systems (e.g., banking institutions, terrorist organizations) and thus develop a more precise sense of the motivations that buttress connections between these social systems.

In the discussion that followed, one of the more important themes was how historical analysis could help improve estimates of the size and scope of IOC. Eliminating terms such as "new" and "emerging" is a good start; such terms are often overused in threat assessments and strategic-planning documents and give the impression that there is nothing to be learned from looking at the history of IOC. Likewise, to say that IOC is "growing" could be true, but it may also be possible that the growth is due to the global economy or the global population and not the result of local or regional circumstances. Examining IOC historically also raises the issue of complexity. Many

researchers state that contemporary crime groups appear to be more complex than their historical counterparts. However, this complexity could be due to the fact that societies are more complex today, with more transactions occurring outside the state than ever before. In summary, such assertions require the test of historical analysis before serving as conventional wisdom.

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The Drivers of IOC and Their Impact on Future Growth

The last discussion of the day explored the root causes and growth trends for IOC. Exploring the various facets of IOC might reveal helpful information about its future growth, and how this might improve both IOC threat assessments and strategic-planning documents. The discussants agreed that, first and foremost, this exercise required a great deal of care. It is difficult to pinpoint the specific drivers and other forces helping to propel IOC. Drivers and trends are rarely, if ever, universal; this fact requires analysts to conduct research on general trends and compare the data with observations of a specific group. Finally, some trends may prove not to be trends at all. Fine-tuning the measurement tools and collecting better data might reveal more of the big picture and unearth the more complex global patterns of IOC.

With these caveats in mind, the opening discussant on this panel identified a number of global patterns that can serve to drive the emergence and growth of IOC. The first and most often cited pattern is globalization. The reason lies in its ability to compress time and space through the use of technology, resulting in increases in global trade and financial flows, the proliferation of networks, and advancements in global mobility, migration and information technology. The result is a "force multiplier" for IOC, making it easier to operate globally with reduced costs and risks. The discussant noted other likely drivers of IOC, including:

- The global recession.
- The spread of diaspora communities worldwide.
- Demographics (especially the youth bulge).
- The long-term decline or retreat of the state.[9](#)
- Criminogenic asymmetries to find safe havens.[10](#)
- Armed groups and other actors adopting criminal activities.
- Availability of weapons and those with skills to use them.
- Urbanization and the creation of slums, especially large global slums.
- Climate change, especially in relation to food and water access.

Although these drivers are not applicable to all cases of IOC, they serve as mechanisms that, in one way or another, have an impact on the scale and scope of IOC.

The conversation that followed the discussant's remarks focused on how to explore these trends. One approach was to use comparative measures and cross-reference comparative studies of the relative impact of different drivers. This would effectively demonstrate how some drivers already well populated with data (e.g., the youth bulge) impacted IOC, such as through group memberships. By using this approach, researchers could also measure the impact of climate change. Another approach to identifying drivers of IOC in contemporary times would be by conducting simple hypothesis testing. One participant noted that the role of diasporas is well suited to this approach. One could also use a case study approach to explore these topics.

Other drivers were mentioned in the discussion that followed, such as the role of technology. How will the development of future technology impact the evolution of IOC? What role does the demand

for illicit goods and services play in the future development of IOC? Successful efforts to map the demand for illicit goods and services is an integral part of any forecasting of the growth or decline of IOC. Another important point was the need to foresee the criminogenic aspects of laws and regulations. By examining new laws and regulations before they are enacted, policymakers can anticipate potential impacts on illicit markets, and the creation of new markets, and potentially tweak the law to minimize any negative effects.

The next discussant shifted the focus to how researchers and practitioners can gauge the impact of government interventions on IOC. The discussant said this issue poses two simple questions. The first question has to do with implementing government actions, i.e., Is the government carrying out what it intends? Examples of policy areas where this can be asked include extradition, mutual legal assistance, criminalization and liability issues, confiscation and forfeiture provisions, the prosecution of significant IOC cases, public awareness and victim assistance. Gauging the impact of interventions in any of these areas requires a scientific process evaluation, often using techniques such as self-assessment, peer reviews or expert reviews of the programs.

The second question focuses on how to improve the outcomes of government interventions in IOC. Put another way, is the research, policy or practice having any impact on the problem? For example, is it possible to see changes in the level of specific IOC activities (e.g., extortion, trafficking, or fraud) in a city or region? Is it possible to identify marked changes in IOC groups, including the disruption of groups or a change in their involvement in criminal markets? Answering these questions requires an impact evaluation that can assess the effects of interventions on IOC activity. One example of such an assessment is to examine victimization surveys, especially in business settings, and to measure trends over time. Another example is to observe changes in the risks associated with specific IOC activities over time, including the periodic assessment of harms within selected IOC activities. Finally, one might approach this by looking at changes in the composition of IOC groups through interviews with IOC investigators, offenders or the public in affected areas.

The discussant concluded with good news and bad news. The good news is that the U.S. government is, on the whole, making good strides to document its activities through the use of process evaluations. Although there is always room for improvement, a baseline exists that explains how the U.S. government has been able to marshal its resources to fight IOC. The bad news is that the U.S. government has largely failed to demonstrate how these programs have impacted IOC. Although the European Union and foreign governments have invested in such evaluations, the U.S. has largely sidestepped them. To proceed with evaluations, the discussant concluded, the U.S. government would need to collect certain baseline data and make it available to researchers, including any case files, interviews and quantitative data collected on IOC activities.

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Conclusion

The primary conclusion from this meeting was that researchers and practitioners have much to offer one another in the process of developing better threat assessments and strategy documents for combating IOC. Some processes already solicit input and reviews from outside experts; for example, this is a routine practice in the development of NIEs. This meeting has demonstrated that researchers and practitioners in the field of IOC can collaborate on a deeper level to improve the usefulness of threat assessments and the impact of government strategies on IOC growth.

In the realm of measurement and statistics, a partnership between researchers and practitioners could improve threat assessments immensely. By working with the research community, those who draft threat assessments can tap a wider breadth of data and measurement tools. Collaborating with

researchers would preclude criticisms of politicizing the statistics. Finally, attempts to merge publicly held data with sensitive but unclassified information (at the discretion of government agencies) could yield breakthroughs in the measurement of IOC.

Historical analysis is another area where a researcher-practitioner team could help to improve threat analysis and strategic planning for IOC. Specifically, practitioners would do well to consult with historians of organized crime to ensure that analogies are correctly applied and to avoid inaccurate extrapolations when data are not available. It might prove useful for researchers to collaborate with practitioners in tracing the evolution of not only IOC but also the responses to it. Too often, today's great "new" idea is one that was tried in years past and was found wanting. Finally, practitioners would benefit from the suggestion of one discussant: Avoid being too "politically correct" in the assessments of IOC. Historical analysis is one way to avoid this trap.

Trend analysis and forecasting is probably the one area that already brings practitioners and researchers together in fruitful partnerships. The Global Futures Partnership of the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, brings together practitioners and outside experts from 25 countries to discuss the evolution of numerous transnational topics, including international organized crime. Such partnerships leverage the multidisciplinary and international perspectives of numerous experts, lending their views to a "wisdom of the crowd" prediction that often reduces the individual biases of the members. Trend analysis is also vetted and reviewed by a wide range of pertinent experts, improving the product and introducing numerous counterfactual arguments into the strategic-planning process.

In the end, this meeting did not solve the problems inherent in the study of IOC. However, this meeting pointed out the need to continue having such meetings, which promote fruitful collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Ultimately, the meeting revealed that the challenges facing the U.S. and the U.K. are the same as those facing other countries and international organizations: how to produce better threat assessments and strategy documents to combat the growth of international organized crime.

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Endnotes

[1](#) Representatives attended the meeting from San Diego State University, New York University, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Virginia Commonwealth University, Marquette University, the University of Pittsburgh, the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the Serious and Organised Crime Agency, the U.K. Crown Prosecution Service and the U.K. Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

[2](#) Serious Organised Crime Agency, [United Kingdom Threat Assessment for Organised Crime](#), 2009/10: 3.

[3](#) See Andreas, Peter, "The Politics of Measuring Illicit Flows and Policy Effectiveness," in *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*, ed. Andreas Greenhill and Kelly Greenhill, Cornell University Press, 2010: 23.

[4](#) For a description of the program, see Steven Strang, "Project Sleipnir: An Analytical Technique for Operational Priority Setting." For a more critical take on Project Sleipnir, see Sheptycki, James, "The Governance of Organised Crime in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 28 (3) (2003).

5 See, for example, Neustadt, Richard and May, Ernest, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, Free Press, 1988.

6 For a compilation of historical treatments of organized crime and international organized crime, see Part I of *Organized Crime in Europe: Concepts, Patterns and Control Policies in the European Union and Beyond*, ed. Cyrille Fijnaut and Letizia Paoli, Springer, 2004.

7 For more, see Alison Jamieson, *The Antimafia: Italy's Fight Against Organized Crime*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

8 For more, see Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village: 1860–1960*, Harper & Row, 1974.

9 For more, see Strange, Susan, *Retreat of the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1996. The book includes a chapter on IOC as a case study.

10 "The term 'criminogenic asymmetries' refers to structural discrepancies and inequalities in the realms of the economy, law, politics and culture. Such asymmetries are produced in the course of interactions between unequal actors (individual or organizational) or systems with distinctive features. All asymmetries contain some criminogenic potential." From Passas, Nikos, "[Global Anomie, Dysnomie, and Economic Crime](#)," *Social Justice* (Summer 2000). See <https://www.cia.gov/offices-of-cia/intelligence-analysis/organization-1/gfp.html> for more.

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