

# Partners in Crime: Comparative Advantage and Kidnapping Cooperation

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## Abstract

What explains cooperation between armed groups? Existing scholarship highlights how groups' similarities underwrite cooperation. But armed groups frequently cooperate without shared ideology or goals. This article shows that it is precisely groups' differences, not similarities, that open up avenues to cooperation. To do so, I focus on kidnapping, an underexplored but common form of non-state actor violence against civilians, to explain cooperation across armed groups. I apply the economics concepts of comparative advantage and outsourcing to demonstrate that rebels and criminal gangs—organizations that typically eschew collaboration—cooperate in producing violence. Drawing on more than 100 interviews, including former kidnapers from Colombia and hostage recovery personnel in the United States, I theorize the conditions under which rebels are likely to “outsource” violence to criminal gangs or produce kidnapping violence “in house.” This paper explains the organizational dynamics of armed group cooperation that perpetuate violence against civilians.

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“The only law in life you don’t break is the law of supply and demand.”  
– Former hostage, interview with author, February 7, 2023.

On May 10, 2019, the French military rescued four hostages in northern Burkina Faso. The captives—two Frenchmen, an American, and a South Korean—had been held for more than a week by unidentified armed actors since their abduction in the bordering country of Benin. The dangerous rescue mission led to the death of two French soldiers, but the timing was critical: according to the Chief of the French Defence Staff, the raid forestalled the hostages’ transfer from their original captors to the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), a militant Islamist organization in Mali, from whom a rescue would have been “absolutely impossible.”<sup>1</sup>

Such transfers of hostages among different armed groups are not unprecedented. In 2015, Colombian prosecutors dismantled a criminal gang that had kidnapped at least six people and sold them to the left-wing National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group, famous for kidnapping thousands of people during the Colombian civil war.<sup>2</sup> The gang, which included a local councillor, is reported to have received up to \$125,000 per hostage in payment from the ELN. In 2016, American Kevin King and Australian Timothy Weeks were abducted by unidentified gunmen, before they were transferred to captivity with the Taliban for three years (Perper, 2019). According to a senior U.S. hostage recovery official with knowledge of these cases, the two hostages were initially captured by “criminal groups operating in Kabul, and were most likely sold to the Haqqanis,” who have partnered with the Taliban on multiple kidnappings.<sup>3</sup> He listed places where “criminal groups, affiliates, bands, and tribes” frequently sell hostages to larger, more established armed organizations: West Africa, Mexico, and Afghanistan.

Despite a growing literature on armed group cooperation and the “conflict-crime nexus,”

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<sup>1</sup>Peltier, Eilan. “Two French Soldiers Are Killed in Raid That Frees Four Hostages in Burkina Faso,” *New York Times*, 10 May 2019. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/10/world/africa/hostages-burkina-faso.html>.

<sup>2</sup>“Colombian gang ‘sold kidnap victims to ELN guerrilla,’ ” *BBC News*, 23 Feb 2015. Online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31588781>.

<sup>3</sup>Interview USG-01, Washington, DC, March 6, 2020.

existing theories do not explain this surprising cooperation.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, some scholars focus on the shared traits and similarities that underwrite armed group cooperation, including shared ideology (Asal et al., 2016; Blair et al., 2022). But these explanations cannot help us understand why ideologically incongruent groups would work together. On the other hand, scholars of the “conflict-crime nexus” explore the dichotomy and intersection of “greed” and “grievance” (see, for instance Collier and Hoeffler, 1998; Felbab-Brown, 2010; Williams, 2012; Phillips, 2018; Asal et al., 2015). However, with limited exception (see Idler, 2020; Phillips and Schiele, 2023), literature on the “conflict-crime nexus” overlooks or rejects the possibility of explicit, mutually beneficial partnerships forged between armed groups on either side of the divide. What explains this apparent cooperation?<sup>5</sup>

This article offers an explanation for an unexplored and unexpected form of cooperation between armed groups. Challenging existing literature that either assumes groups must be similar or not cooperate at all, I argue that explicit differences can be key to understanding some cooperation. Specifically, I argue that differences in groups’ capabilities and costs of producing violence result in comparative advantage, which opens up benefits to trade. Facing what is known in business as a “make-or-buy” decision,<sup>6</sup> armed groups decide which skills to develop “in-house,” leaving other skills beyond their specialization or capacity. While they may decide to invest in acquiring such skills over time, it is often initially easier, and less costly, to “outsource” certain skills, purchasing them from others. This leads to what I call “black market white labeling”—when one armed group buys a good or service from another armed group and re-brands it as their own.<sup>7</sup>

Such white labeling can be mutually beneficial, even for competitors or groups with otherwise different priorities and contrasting ideology. To illustrate this phenomenon in

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<sup>4</sup>Following Idler (2020), I opt to use the phrase “conflict-crime nexus” to designate the connection between criminal and any political armed group, including rebels, terrorists, and paramilitaries.

<sup>5</sup>This article consciously uses “cooperation,” rather than “collaboration,” as the latter implies a shared goal among involved parties.

<sup>6</sup>The business literature alternately calls this a “make-or-buy” or a “build-or-buy” decision.

<sup>7</sup>This draws on the concept of “white labeling,” when one company buys a product from another company and re-brands it as their own. White labeling is a form of outsourcing—hiring a party outside of the company to perform a task traditionally performed in-house.

practice, I explore the example of hostage transfers between armed groups that trade on their comparative expertise to increase their returns from a kidnapping. In such “white label” kidnapping, the first armed group abducts the hostage on behalf of a second group; the latter subsequently holds the hostage and negotiates for concessions by “rebranding” the hostage as their own. Drawing on 111 interviews, including in-depth, semi-structured conversations with dozens of former kidnapers from Colombia and hostage recovery personnel from Colombia and the United States, I explore why armed groups cooperate—and the conditions under which they seek explicit, mutual benefits from trade.

In doing so, this article makes several empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on non-state armed groups. First, in unpacking kidnapping dynamics, it offers novel, primary evidence of an underexplored form of civilian victimization and conflict funding, central to international and civil conflicts. I explain where and when attractive targets, from wealthy locals to foreign nationals active in conflict zones, are at increased risk of kidnapping, sale, and possible death. Second, I detail a new application of comparative advantage from economics to analyzing political violence, demonstrating that kidnapping represents a classic “make-or-buy” decision for armed groups (Coase, 1937). Typically, scholars think that criminal gangs and rebel groups are both expert in producing violence. If true, then there should be no opportunity for cooperation. Instead, I highlight that—because of organizational and territorial differences—groups may have unique attributes and abilities that create opportunities for trade.

Third, and relatedly, I show that armed group cooperation does not only vary across group relationships, but also within them. Cooperation and contestation are not mutually exclusive, forging groups that are only ever allied or fighting. Instead, owing to this nuanced application of comparative advantage, armed groups may very well cooperate in one area while competing in another. Last, by demonstrating the existence of a common form of cooperation, I challenge the existing understanding of the “conflict-crime nexus,” which argues that sustained cooperation between rebels and gangs is theoretically and empirically

unlikely. Understanding these effects has important implications not only for illicit phenomena, but for conflict processes writ large: Scholars have argued that “insurgents’ involvement in crime may influence conflict onset, duration, and resolution, as well as post-conflict economic development” (Asal et al., 2019, 399), (see also Collier and Hoeffler, 1998; Grossman, 1999; Kupatadze, 2012; Cornell and Jonsson, 2014).

The article proceeds as follows. First, I review the existing literature on armed group cooperation and the “conflict-crime nexus,” neither of which explain kidnapping cooperation. While existing work in international relations anticipates cooperation between competitors and unrelated parties, I argue that it is the business strategy literature that offers the best analogy for understanding armed group partnerships. Next, I offer a theory of armed group cooperation, and outline the conditions under which black market white labeling is likely to occur. I then outline my research design: why Colombia is an appropriate place to explore this phenomenon and how I collected data. I offer evidence from interviews conducted with former kidnapers, hostage negotiators, civil society personnel, and government officials in Colombia and the United States that illustrate why—and the conditions under which—kidnapping cooperation occurs. Last, I discuss the theoretical and empirical contributions of this work, suggest avenues for future research, and offer policy implications for kidnapping by—and cooperation among—armed groups.

## **Armed Group Cooperation and the “Conflict-Crime” Nexus**

Why do armed groups cooperate? There are several benefits armed groups may seek in cooperating with each other. Partnerships can augment armed groups’ combat capacity. Cooperation may allow armed groups to diversify their repertoire of funding or violence, accessing markets and skills that were previously out of their reach. Partnerships may also help armed groups achieve plausible deniability for certain behaviors they may wish to appear innocent of committing.

Nevertheless, cooperating with others can be extremely costly to armed organizations (Idler, 2020; Blair et al., 2022; Phillips and Schiele, 2023). To begin, armed groups regularly compete with each other over the same territory, resources, or recruits. There are few reasons that armed groups should trust one another. Both rebel and criminal organizations operate outside of the law, so they cannot rely on legal or institutional means of enforcing agreements. They cannot call on the state to enforce breach of contract, so shirking and cheating may run rampant. Moreover, rebel and criminal organizations are regularly at risk of infiltration, counterinsurgency, and policing. They should be wary of trusting outsiders, avoiding circumstances in which their operational security could be compromised by the mistakes, weaknesses, or intelligence of another armed organization. Finally, they may fear the reputational consequences of being associated with violence or behaviors not their own.

Scholars have identified three shared factors that help armed groups overcome these barriers to trust, facilitating cooperation. First, network connections between individual members of armed groups can facilitate connections between them. Personal ties, shared history, and geographical proximity may provide pre-existing bonds, separate from organizational behavior (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008; Asal et al., 2015). Second, groups with shared ideology are more likely to cooperate. As Blair, Chenoweth, Horowitz, Perkoski, and Potter argue, shared ideology helps provide the “community monitoring, authority structures, trust, and trans-national networks” central to overcoming mistrust in the long-term (2022, 164). Finally, armed groups may cooperate not because they share ties or ideology, but because they share aspirations. Focusing on militant groups in Afghanistan and Bosnia, Christia shows that power imbalances between groups and within alliances striving for control in a multiparty conflict shape militants’ willingness to cooperate or compete (2012).

Still, armed group cooperation lacking these factors persists. Rebel groups and criminal gangs do not often share ideology, nor are they typically considered participants in the same multiparty conflict, vying to alter the balance of power. Networks may indeed explain initial connections between individual illicit actors, but they cannot explain why armed group

cooperation would vary over time. Thus, an alternative explanation is needed.

A likely explanation for cooperation between different armed actors might instead come from the literature on the “conflict-crime nexus,” which explores the intersection and overlap between illicit activities for profit and for political goals. This literature explores the territorial coincidence of conflict and crime—how civil wars and criminal activity overlap geographically (Felbab-Brown, 2010; UNODC, 2010; Asal et al., 2019) and tactical diffusion between groups—how terrorist and rebel groups adopt “criminal” approaches to funding (Williams, 2001; Mylonaki, 2002; Shelley and Picarelli, 2002; Labrousse, 2005; Hutchinson and O’Malley, 2007; Weinberg, 2015; Asal et al., 2012, 2015, 2019).

With limited exception, however (see Shelley, 2002; Sanderson, 2004; Wang, 2010; Idler, 2020; Phillips and Schiele, 2023), this scholarship either overlooks or denies cooperation across the “political”–“criminal” divide. Most scholars posit that criminal-insurgent partnerships cannot be sustainable or strategic, because the groups’ differing goals and their ability to achieve their objectives “in-house” would make cooperation unlikely (Dishman, 2001; Hutchinson and O’Malley, 2007; Sinno, 2008). If both rebels and criminals are talented at producing violence “in-house,” it should be especially surprising that they should seek to work together. Some have argued that such cooperation is especially unlikely in Colombia, where rebel and criminal groups espouse competing ideologies (Hutchinson and O’Malley, 2007).

And yet, the empirical record is rife with examples of “criminal” and “political” groups working together, despite conflicting long-term goals, including in the hard case of Colombia. Idler (2020) documents extensive criminal-insurgent partnerships in drug production and trafficking, while Aponte González, Hirschel-Burns, and Uribe detail “pacted control” between rebels and criminals across Colombian municipalities (2023). Such cooperation persists despite deep ideological differences and organizational distrust. For example, the Colombian April 19th Movement’s (M-19) deadly 1985 Palace of Justice Siege, in which the left-wing guerrillas took hostage the country’s entire Supreme Court, was allegedly orga-

nized with the support of Medellín cartel boss Pablo Escobar, accused of paying the group to destroy extradition records stored in the building.<sup>8</sup> It is indeed surprising that these two organizations would cooperate, given that they were deadly enemies: just four years prior, the M-19 kidnapped the sister of two Medellín cartel bosses, and the cartels formed the *Muerte a Secuestradores* (“Death to Kidnappers,” or MAS) paramilitary group in response (Abierta, 2011). However, such notorious enmity did not prohibit both groups from seeking benefits in working together: the cartel bosses, destruction of incriminating evidence; the rebels, funding for their attack. Yet, there is limited explanation of why or how this cooperation occurs.

I augment the “conflict-crime nexus” by theorizing the conditions under which groups often considered “criminal” and groups considered “political” work together to both parties’ benefit. Even if the conflict-crime nexus does not explain these partnerships, other scholarly analogies are legion. Fields as diverse as biology (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981), economics (Coase, 1937; Smith, 1776), and international relations (Keohane, 1986; Waltz, 2010) have long theorized why actors cooperate under anarchic conditions, from world politics to the free market. In the realm of international politics, for instance, Keohane suggests that states cooperate when “mutually beneficial cooperation seems possible” (1986, 24). As I argue, a productive analogy for such “mutually beneficial cooperation” between rebels and criminals comes from the literature on the firm.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Colombia Reports*, “1985 Palace of Justice Siege,” <https://colombiareports.com/palace-justice/>.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the differences between firms and armed groups, such organizations have several characteristics that render a comparison useful. Both organizations seek monopoly—whether of a market or legitimate use of force. For both armed groups and firms, coordinating under a decision-making authority helps overcome collective action problems and reduces the costs of acting alone (Coase, 1937). Drawing on these similarities, scholars have productively applied analogies of firm behavior to explaining terrorist organization structure, recruitment, and innovation (Zelinsky and Shubik, 2009; Clarke, 2019; Mironova, 2019). For instance, Clarke applies the consulting firm McKinsey’s “7S” framework to evaluating al-Qaeda, evaluating the seven elements that firms should align for success: strategy, structure, style, staff, skills, systems, and shared values (2019). Each of these features is variably present in armed groups, and the degree to which they are aligned can also shape group success.



## Business Partners in Crime

When considering whether to produce a good or service, a firm must consider: Should we make it? Could we make it? And how much will it cost? The first question, “Should we make it?” is a matter of *strategy*. Would producing the good or service support and further the firm’s principles and goals? The second question, “Could we make it?” is a matter of *capabilities*. Does the firm possess the tangible and intangible requirements—time, resources, personnel, skills—to produce the good or service? Third, “How much will it cost?” considers the various *costs* involved in production: fixed costs, marginal costs, and opportunity costs. Finally, if there are other firms in the marketplace, a fourth question arises: “How do our costs compare to the costs of others?” Can the firm produce the good or service more efficiently than others in the market? If not, what are the transaction costs of purchasing the good or service elsewhere?

These questions explain the conditions for specialization and trade. While firms might ideally be capable of producing everything they need at low cost, this is rarely the case. Instead, their strategy might require goods or services that they lack the capabilities or budget to produce themselves. Since Adam Smith (1776), the notion of a “division of labor” suggests that when workers specialize in a particular task and trade their labor or output with others who have specialized in other tasks, that both parties can focus on their “comparative advantage,” doing better than had they attempted to manage all tasks themselves.

Together, these dynamics form the basis of what is known as a “make-or-buy” decision: Should the organization make a product in-house or purchase it from an external supplier? The business management literature suggests that strategies, costs, and capabilities are the three crucial inputs to sourcing decisions (Serrano et al., 2018). If an activity is core to a firm’s strategy, the firm’s capabilities are high, and production costs are low, the firm should produce their goods and services in-house. Conversely, if production costs are high, and capabilities low, that firm would naturally seek to buy goods and services externally. Firms pursue trade when both sides can benefit: “for market transactions to occur, *both* parties must

find specialization advantageous, sufficiently so to outweigh any costs of trading” (Jacobides and Winter, 2005, 398).

At its simplest interpretation, the “make-or-buy” decision presents a clear and mutually exclusive choice: make something in-house or buy it elsewhere. But examination of real-world firms demonstrates that the “make-or-buy” decision is neither consistently straightforward nor mutually exclusive, in two key ways. First, firms will sometimes outsource production, *even when their capabilities are high*. As Jacobides and Winter put it, “Why would a firm want to abandon what might be a profitable operation, sourcing it outside? The answer is that expansion and profitable growth will have to focus on the areas where a firm has a comparative advantage when compared to the rest of the industry” (2005, 401). Even when a firm’s capabilities and strategy permit in-house production, outsourcing may still be less costly. Second, firms will sometimes simultaneously make *and* buy a similar good or service. This phenomenon, known alternately as “plural sourcing” (Parmigiani, 2007) and “concurrent sourcing,” occurs when a firm selects the “simultaneous use of insourcing and outsourcing” (Serrano et al., 2018, 137).<sup>10</sup> Research suggests that firms make, buy, or concurrently source based on variation in capabilities and costs over time and space, with inputs like rent, wages, and workforce skills, producing variable comparative advantage.<sup>11</sup>

I argue that the logic of comparative advantage can explain cooperation between dissimilar armed groups. Like firms, armed groups consider strategy, capabilities, and costs in their production of violence. Armed groups make strategic choices about production—of their repertoire of violence or governance—deciding whether and how much of any one output to produce (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2010; Krause, 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2017; Stewart, 2018; Qiu, 2022). They may even adopt certain types of violence as *policy*—when commanders promote an activity by ordering, authorizing, or institutionalizing it (Wood,

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<sup>10</sup>While “concurrent” and “plural” sourcing convey the same understanding in the economics literature, I opt to use “concurrent” sourcing to emphasize the simultaneous nature of the sourcing choice, rather than inadvertently convey that an organization simply chooses to buy from multiple outside sources (Anderson and Weitz, 1986; Klein, 2005; Parmigiani, 2007; Serrano et al., 2018).

<sup>11</sup>The management literature refers to this variation as “site specificity.”

2018, 522). In pursuit of their strategic goals, armed groups vary—and invest in—a range of specialized roles to buffer their capabilities (Sinno, 2008; Della Porta, 2013; Parkinson and Zaks, 2018). Armed resistance and rebel governance “require a complex set of skills (knowledge) that are acquired, developed, learned, and transmitted to others within the organization” (Sinno, 2008, 81); which skills an organization chooses to develop will “shape and constrain” the group’s behavior (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018, 274). Finally, armed groups face resource costs, security costs, and reputational costs from their activities. Groups must pay for the technology, personnel, and materiel for desired tasks. They must weigh the opportunity costs of various activities, as well as the security risks they will incur. Such decisions vis-à-vis strategy, capabilities, and costs produce crucial differences that lead to comparative advantage across armed organizations: It is precisely their differences, not similarities, that render mutually beneficial cooperation desirable.

This explains why two organizations, both considered expert in producing a similar form of violence, might partner: even when highly capable, an armed group’s high costs of production may privilege trade. Of course, armed groups must consider not only their own relative production costs, but also the costs incurred from cooperation, from the security risks involved to the cost of purchasing the goods and services of others. Communication with and proximity to other illicit actors can raise the possibility of security risks—either because communication is intercepted or partners cooperate with the military or police (Shapiro, 2013). Finally, armed groups may employ concurrent sourcing when their comparative advantage varies across time and space. In particular, they may outsource in territory beyond their base or when security costs are low, but keep operations in-house where production costs are low and risk of cooperating is high (Durán-Martínez, 2017, 16).

Table 1 illustrates the logic of sourcing decisions theorized above. When a group’s capabilities are high and the costs of production are low, the group should keep production in-house. Conversely, when the group’s capabilities and costs of trade are both low, the group would do best to outsource. The less obvious decisions are in the other two quadrants

of the table. When a group’s capabilities are high, but the costs of production are *also* high, they might resort to concurrent sourcing, making and buying as site specificity varies. Finally, when a group’s capabilities are low, but the cost of trade is higher than the cost of production, the group might consider investing in its in-house capabilities, in hopes that it can move to the bottom left quadrant.

Table 1: Make or Buy?

|              |            | Capabilities        |                        |
|--------------|------------|---------------------|------------------------|
|              |            | High                | Low                    |
| Higher Costs | Production | Concurrent sourcing | Buy (out-sourcing)     |
|              | Trade      | Make (in-sourcing)  | Invest to enter market |

Table 1 can also help us understand the effect of changing costs of trade. When production costs are higher than trade costs—regardless of capabilities—armed groups have incentives to partner with other armed groups in their production of violence. If, however, the costs of trade increase, armed groups should be less likely to outsource to others. Multiple dynamics may cause the expected value from trade to decrease: the partner might raise its sale price, or production profits might decline. But one transaction cost particularly relevant to armed groups is the security cost of cooperating with others. If the risk of partnering with another group tangibly increases—for endogenous or exogenous reasons—then armed groups should bring production back in house.

Before proceeding, I acknowledge two reasons that a reader might be skeptical of this argument. First, as it was developed inductively through an examination of kidnapping cooperation, it may be a phenomenon unique to kidnapping, and therefore not explain other forms of armed group cooperation. Second, as it was developed with a focus on Colombia, it may not travel to other empirical contexts. To the extent that it applies to forms of violence or funding beyond kidnapping, or to settings beyond Colombia, it can increase confidence that this dynamic helps explain broader patterns of armed group cooperation. We would want to know whether such cooperation happens at all in other settings, whether it occurs

in the absence of alternative explanations, and whether such dynamics might travel to other forms of cooperation and trade. I return to these questions below.

## Research Design

This article focuses on kidnapping in Colombia to offer an explanation for armed group cooperation. It explores a particular type of armed group cooperation with a focus on a single country context, offering evidence of an argument developed inductively. In interviews, former perpetrators, victims, security personnel, and civil society actors alike affirmed not only the occurrence but preponderance of *vende de secuestrada* (“selling the kidnapped person”), in which a criminal gang would initially abduct hostages and sell them to powerful rebel groups. This article thus explores the mechanisms, processes, and conditions under which Colombia’s kidnappers engaged in black market white labeling, as evidence of an alternative, unexplored cause of cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

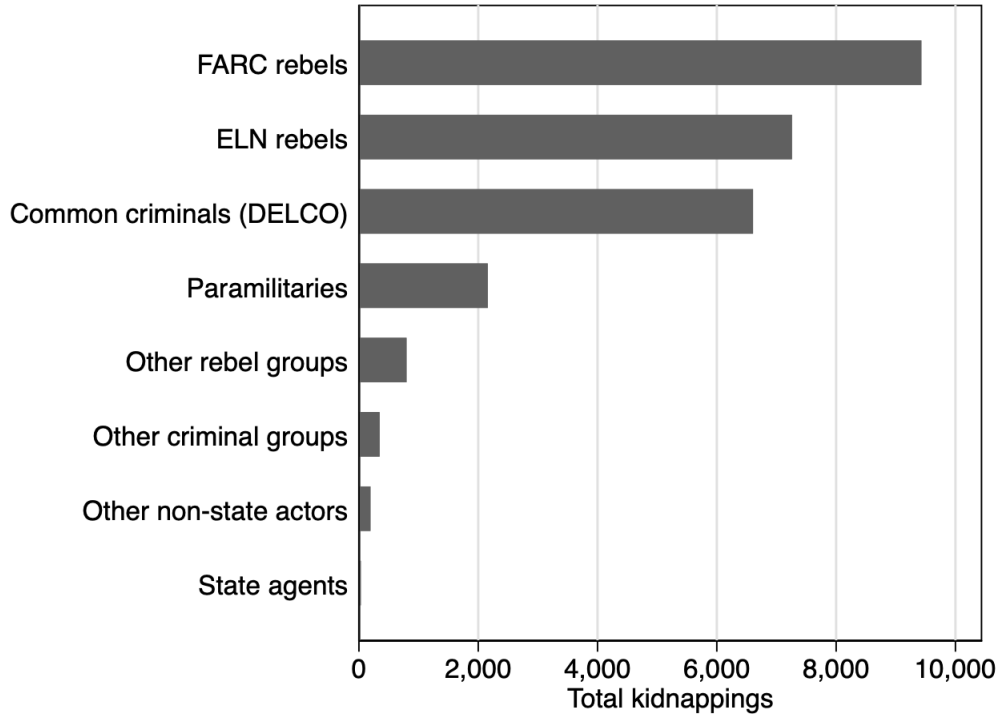
During more than five decades of multiparty civil war between the state, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitaries, tens of thousands of Colombians were taken hostage.<sup>13</sup> While the most prolific kidnappers were the country’s two largest, left-wing rebel groups—the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN)—they were closely followed by perpetrators known as *delincuencia común* (“common criminals,” or DELCO), responsible for nearly a third of Colombia’s kidnapping (CNMH, 2013). Most other armed actors in the Colombian conflict, including other rebel groups, paramilitaries, and organized criminal organizations like cartels, kidnapped far less often.

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<sup>12</sup>While I assume that cooperation requires both sides to acquiesce, this article primarily focuses on decisions from the rebels’ side. As I demonstrate below, criminal gangs would always do better by selling their hostages to rebels than by holding onto hostages and attempting to negotiate ransoms themselves: their production costs were always higher than the costs of trade, so there is less variation to explain.

<sup>13</sup>Throughout this article, I use “victim” and “hostage” interchangeably, but separately from “target,” following the distinction made by O’Neill (1991) and applied to kidnapping by Gilbert (2020). The “victim” is the person who is kidnapped, while “target” receives—and chooses whether to respond to—the kidnapper’s demands, and may be the hostage’s family, employer, or government.

Figure 1: Armed Group Kidnapping in Colombia, Perpetrator Presumed (1970–2010)



Note: Data from the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2013). FARC, ELN, and DELCO kidnapping totals attributed to particular perpetrator as designated by the CNMH. For presentation purposes, all other categories collapse multiple perpetrator groups. For example, “Other criminal groups” include perpetrators labeled as narcotraffickers, organized crime, and “criminal bands.”

Colombia represents an environment in which we should be especially surprised to see cooperation in kidnapping. First, existing work suggests that the FARC and ELN adopted kidnapping as a central and official strategy of their rebellion (Gilbert, 2022). Kidnappers invested significantly in developing the operational infrastructure to kidnap at scale; they used their thousands of hostages to derive significant amounts of funding and demand prisoner exchanges. Given that kidnapping was such an important part of their repertoire of violence (Wood, 2009), what the management literature would call a “core activity” (Serrano et al., 2018), it is surprising that either group would assume the risk of delegating work to outsiders. Second, Colombia’s rebels and criminals do not share the ideology that other scholars have argued helps facilitate inter-group cooperation. Instead, the left-wing FARC and ELN espoused a Marxist-Leninist commitment to socialism and redistribution, and they

sought to change the political order in Colombia. Conversely, criminal gangs in Colombia did not seek to change the nature of the state. Thus, even though both types of armed groups operated illicitly and relied on ransom kidnapping as a revenue source, it is counterintuitive that they should work together.

In the spirit of quantitative analyses of cooperation (such as [Blair et al., 2022](#); [Phillips and Schiele, 2023](#)), and the existence of Colombia’s event-level kidnapping datasets, one might suppose that Colombian kidnapping cooperation can be evaluated quantitatively; as of this writing, it cannot. While Colombian kidnapping datasets, such as that from the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH) reveal that both rebels and criminals engaged in frequent kidnapping, the data do not record that cooperation between perpetrators. That is because, according to a former director of the CNMH, the database codes kidnappings by the predominant *holder* of the hostage, with no separate information about who was responsible for the initial abduction. Thus, if a criminal gang kidnapped someone and sold her to the ELN, which then held her for six months and negotiated a ransom from her family, the CNMH data would record the ELN as the perpetrator of the kidnapping—in true white label fashion.<sup>14</sup> There is thus no existing quantitative record of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, there is substantial *qualitative* evidence that such cooperation occurred: Interview subjects from the FARC to the FBI regularly brought it up, unprompted, in our conversations. I therefore draw on evidence from interviews, which can both illuminate a phenomenon elided in datasets and illustrate the underlying mechanisms at stake. This article relies on evidence from 111 in-depth interviews conducted between 2017 and 2023.<sup>15</sup> To understand kidnapping cooperation in Colombia, I interviewed dozens of demobilized combatants from the FARC and ELN, ranging from young women only days out of the jungle,

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<sup>14</sup>Interview with Alvaro Villarraga, Bogotá, June 5, 2019.

<sup>15</sup>This study’s interview protocol was approved under [institution withheld] IRB# 061743 and [institution withheld] IRB#s 00032606 and 00032666. Over four trips to Colombia in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2023, I conducted extensive interviews in five Colombian departments: Atlántico, Bolívar, Cundinamarca, Santander, and Tolima. In 2023, I also traveled to Washington, D.C. and conducted subsequent interviews via Zoom. All aspects of the research protocol comply with the principles for ethical human subjects research as set forth in the “Principles and Guidance” issued in April 2020 by the American Political Science Association.

to men in their 70s who had demobilized decades earlier, to former rebel commanders now serving in Colombian government. In addition to ex-combatants, I also interviewed former hostages and their family members, officers from the Colombian police and military's anti-kidnapping and extortion units; senior officials from the justice department and independent truth commission; leadership from several peace and reconciliation NGOs; and hostage negotiators, insurance agents, risk management professionals, and former Colombian intelligence officers, currently serving as the chief security officers of major multinational corporations. To contextualize the phenomenon and explore generalizability, I interviewed current and former officials from the U.S. government agencies tasked with hostage recovery: the interagency Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell at the FBI, the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, and members of the Hostage Response Group at the National Security Council. A full list of subjects by alias or name and affiliation is available in a supplementary appendix.

## **Evidence from Kidnapping in Colombia**

In this section, I demonstrate that kidnapping cooperation can be understood as outsourcing in the production of violence. Armed groups' decision to sometimes kidnap on their own, and sometimes outsource aspects of kidnapping violence to partners, is akin to a firm's simultaneous decision to "make" and "buy" a product or service. Kidnappers consider their strategy, capabilities, and costs, which jointly explain the conditions under which they produce kidnapping violence in-house or outsource part of the kidnapping process. In what follows, I offer evidence that kidnapping was strategic, relied on specialized capabilities, and imposed unique costs to perpetrators. Then, I show how variation in capabilities and costs produce comparative advantage and create avenues for mutually beneficial trade. Last, I explore the conditions under which cooperation is and is not likely to occur.



## Strategy, capabilities, and costs

Kidnapping was “core activity” for both Colombia’s strongest rebels and its “common” criminal gangs. Rather than the exclusive purview of criminal organizations (and thus an unsurprising activity for *delincuencia común* (DELCO)), Colombia’s most powerful rebel organizations, the FARC and ELN, adopted kidnapping as official organizational policy. Specifically, the FARC and ELN imposed taxes on Colombia’s wealthy and used ransom kidnapping to enforce tax payments (Ley, 2000; Gilbert, 2022), an example of what Aponte González et al. call “governing violence” (2023). Not only was kidnapping strategic in general for these rebel groups; it was especially strategic for the FARC and ELN to kidnap in Colombian cities, far outside of their areas of territorial control, for two reasons.

First, the rebels believed that kidnapping from Colombia’s urban centers was central to their goal of tax enforcement. For example, the FARC’s Law 002 imposed rebel taxes on all “natural or juridical persons” throughout Colombia’s territory worth more than \$1 million USD (Ley, 2000). Kidnapping such targets wherever they may be was central to demonstrating the credible threat of violence necessary for enforcement: guarding against capital flight, rebels pressured wealthy targets to pay taxes inside rebel territory and in large cities alike. Second, pursuing urban wealth allowed rebels to limit kidnapping among their base, protecting their relationship with the *pueblo*. As security advisor for several multinational corporations stressed, targeting from within their areas of a control would cause rebels to “lose their political support from the *pueblo* with their violence.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, rebels would endeavor to “take someone from far away and bring them back, not someone from our internal base.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, for two strategic reasons—demonstrating their ability to enforce anywhere, and desire to avoid attacking the *pueblo*—rebels were especially interested in urban targets, far outside their territorial reach.

Having established that kidnapping was something they *should* do, armed groups required

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<sup>16</sup>Interview with Alvaro Gomez, February 26, 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with “Duane,” May 29, 2019.

specific capabilities to kidnap at scale. Evidence from all over the world suggests that a wide range of armed actors—including cartels, gangs, pirates, rebels, and terrorists—kidnap thousands of hostages every year (Shortland, 2019; Loertscher and Milton, 2018; Kim et al., 2021; Liu and Eisner, 2023). Contrary to existing depictions of kidnapping as a process that does “not require institutional infrastructure or specific skills” (Asal et al., 2019, 401), taking hostages is a complex activity, with multiple stages, elements, technologies, and responsibilities. As a former kidnapper told Gilbert (2022, 1236):

We were responsible for acquiring provisions, logistics, identifying people to kidnap, and gathering intelligence on the police. Once we got the information about our target to the commanders, they make decisions about everything, and the process followed accordingly. Every single person had their separate role, which was almost always the same: there’s someone good at driving, someone good at talking on the phone, someone to help with wounds. My specialty was logistics, and how to move the person. It was my job to guard the ‘take.’ Everyone has their function.

Kidnappings—regardless of perpetrator—rely on three distinct phases: surveillance, abduction, and captivity. The first phase of kidnapping—surveillance—requires intense monitoring and preparation. Contrary to popular portrayal of kidnapping as a crime of opportunity, armed group kidnapping is often exquisitely premeditated. As a former ELN combatant told me, “It’s about 10 to 15 days to plan to kidnap an important person. . . We find out their routine, what time they leave the house, where they live, who they live with, what they eat, how many people live in their house, how many people travel in their car. On the day of the strike, we don’t leave anything to chance.”<sup>18</sup> Another ex-combatant described the process of researching potential victims as taking up to a year: “There’s an intelligence group, which. . . specialized in this process. They know all the specifics: where to go and the tasks of each person, until they capture [the hostage]; then someone else takes [the hostage] for

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<sup>18</sup>Interview with “Hernán,” May 30, 2019.

the next part.”<sup>19</sup>

Once the surveillance phase is completed, the would-be kidnappers abduct their victim. Security personnel and kidnappers alike refer to this phase as the “take,” when kidnappers abduct the victim and bring them to a new, hidden location. To do so requires confronting the victim in a vulnerable time and place, avoiding or neutralizing any existing security, and absconding undetected. The “take” requires muscle, situational awareness, getaway plans, and readiness to act. Describing potential hostages, a former ELN combatant explained, “If one day you don’t leave the house, or go out late, we put a hood on you, and take you to the mountain.”<sup>20</sup>

After the “take,” the kidnapping enters the captivity or holding phase, which may last days, months, or years. During this phase, kidnappers must hide, guard, and care for their hostage while they attempt to negotiate concessions that condition the hostage’s release. As a former ELN combatant explained to me, “You stand guard, like a rancher and think about the kidnapped person—if he has needs, like water.”<sup>21</sup> A former FARC combatant echoed: “We bring you food, clothing, medical attention. It’s one person’s job to speak to the family and negotiate. . . we were all given a special role, with only one person making the decisions.”<sup>22</sup>

Former kidnappers delineated concrete, specialized roles over each phase of a kidnapping. An ELN ex-combatant summarized the small groups with discrete roles at the heart of the kidnapping process: “There are 3 or 4 working in intelligence to get the person, 3 or 4 in the car to get them, one person to call the family, and one person to stay with the hostage, to talk and entertain them. Everyone is part of it.”<sup>23</sup> Over these phases, “different groups do each part. One person takes the hostage and delivers him to the next person, who delivers him to the next.”<sup>24</sup> It is not only the role division, but the role specialization, that is crucial

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with “Jonatan,” May 30, 2019.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with “Ernesto,” May 30, 2019.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with “Jeni,” February 28, 2018.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with “Barba,” May 29, 2019.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.

to pulling off a kidnapping.<sup>25</sup> The security director for a multinational said that “being a kidnapper or a hitman—that requires expertise.”<sup>26</sup> Every step of the attack was delegated to those with specific training and skill sets, reflecting a type of violence that is selective, intentional, and planned.

Further, each stage of a kidnapping introduces distinct costs related to labor, resources, and operational security. For example, to choose a valuable target and research their behavior, kidnappers must have—or purchase—information. They must be able to monitor their victims undetected and abduct them unscathed. Doing so requires knowledge of, and freedom of movement in, the victim’s territory. Such proximity can be risky, however, if the perpetrator lacks influence in the area, and particularly so if the area is populated with the military, police, or watchful eyes. Monitoring and abduction are costly and dangerous for combatants without monopoly of force.

Once kidnappers have taken their hostage, the captivity phase introduces a new set of costs—real and potential. Kidnapping comes with “complicated” resource costs for perpetrators, who must provide food and shelter to hostages to keep them alive until negotiations are concluded.<sup>27</sup> Captivity requires sustained resources to clothe, feed, and keep the hostage alive over time. It requires perpetrators’ time and labor as they stand guard, forgoing other tasks that the group may require. Kidnapping thus introduces high opportunity costs: the time spent finding, taking, and especially guarding a hostage is time spent away from other profits or the frontlines of rebellion.

Moreover, holding onto a hostage is risky to an organization’s security. Kidnappers must secure a special hiding place, or “zones,” to hold onto the hostage securely.<sup>28</sup> Kidnappers consider it crucial to identify and secure protected zones for their operational security; without them, they feared “persecution and operations against us,” because offensives “happen more

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<sup>25</sup>Interview with “Joanna,” February 28, 2018.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Martin Burye, February 7, 2018.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Christoph Harnisch, Bogotá, July 27, 2017.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with “Jeni,” February 28, 2018; Interview with Gustavo Camargo, March 5, 2018.

when we have a hostage.”<sup>29</sup> Hostage recovery personnel confirmed that kidnappers’ fear was well-founded: U.S. Special Forces launch raids on groups holding Americans hostage that the United States would otherwise ignore.<sup>30</sup> Kidnappers lived in fear of “being surrounded by the army and operatives [who come to] liberate the person.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, kidnappers must maintain adept operational security and safe territory for hiding a hostage.

Kidnappers’ ability to hold onto hostages for an extended period of time was crucial for coercing concessions: If they are able to safely hold the captive for a long time, they can wait patiently for the target to make them an offer they’re willing to accept. As the brother of a former hostage described, “The negotiation wasn’t about money; it was about time.”<sup>32</sup> The longer that kidnappers hold the hostage, the more they bolster their credible threat to continue holding the hostage, a costly signal of their patience and power. As the former executive director of an anti-kidnapping NGO said of kidnappers, “You sit with them in the jungle for months or years. The more time you have a hostage, the more powerful you seem, with more control.”<sup>33</sup> In sum, kidnappers and security personnel shared voluminous, consistent testimony that kidnapping was strategic; required distinct, specialized capabilities; and imposed high and variable costs.

## Comparative advantage

These distinct phases—with their concomitant capabilities and costs—open up clear avenues for comparative advantage across armed organizations. The two extended phases of a kidnapping—surveillance and captivity—present diametrically opposed requirements. Proximity to valuable targets and information about their behavior patterns requires monitoring and a constant flow of intelligence. To identify and case a potential hostage, kidnappers need people to talk. Holding onto a hostage, however, requires that the talking cease. Kidnappers

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<sup>29</sup>Interview with “Jonathan,” May 30, 2019.

<sup>30</sup>Interview USG-01, December 13, 2018.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with “Duane,” May 29, 2019.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with “Andres,” July 21, 2023.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Olga Lucia Gomez, August 3, 2017.

need to maintain the utmost secrecy for as long as possible. The very thing that provides access to targets is the thing that makes holding onto hostages costly.

Kidnappings perpetrated by urban-based criminal gangs differ substantially from kidnappings perpetrated by rural-based rebels. When it came to urban hostages, Colombia's criminal gangs had the advantage in the "take." They could operate under the radar in urban environments, with easy, clandestine access to would-be hostages. However, it was there the advantages ceased, especially with regard to the duration of captivity. Urban kidnappers cannot hold hostages for a long time, because the security risks of urban captivity are prohibitively high. Urban kidnappings are thus much shorter: kidnappers must get rid of their hostage quickly, either coercing a ransom or killing the victim. They therefore accept much lower ransom payments, lest the costs of holding the hostage become too high. As a kidnap and ransom insurance executive explained, "a demand in about 72 hours is what the real professionals [the rebels] do; a demand within two hours is less professional."<sup>34</sup> In line with rapid demands, criminal kidnappings tend to be much shorter, with faster turnover of hostages in captivity.<sup>35</sup>

For the rebels, however, urban abductions were much more challenging. As a global security advisor for several multinational corporations summarized: "To get someone in the city is very difficult; to get someone in the jungle or country is much easier."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, rebels lacked good hiding places in cities. At one point, rebel kidnappers tried to hold their urban hostages in urban hideouts, but eventually started transferring hostages to new locations. As a scholar explained:

In the 80s and 90s, there were huge numbers recorded, when [rebels] would take

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<sup>34</sup>Interview with "Alice," May 17, 2017.

<sup>35</sup>Though Colombia's *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Center for Historical Memory, or CNMH) has made public data about the time, location, and perpetrator behind nearly 40,000 individual kidnappings in Colombia from 1970–2010, they have not publicly released information about the duration of captivity (or resolution date of the kidnappings) (CNMH, 2013). As such, I cannot provide comparative descriptive statistics from Colombia regarding the length of kidnappings perpetrated by criminal versus political groups. However, data from Gilbert (2023) on international kidnappings of Americans suggests that criminal kidnappings are significantly shorter than kidnappings by rebel or terrorist groups.

<sup>36</sup>Interview with Alvaro Gomez, February 26, 2018.

someone from the city and bring them to the country—from Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Bucaramanga. It's risky to take someone in the city. At first they used to hold those people in the cities, in protected places, where if someone yelled, you wouldn't be able to hear. But then ultimately they moved everyone out to the country. It's better conditions if you take someone in the city and bring them to the country.<sup>37</sup>

Rebels had all the advantages in the countryside and for extended captivity. While the resource costs of holding a hostage remain high, there was far less worry about the security risks of hiding a hostage in remote terrain. They could afford to keep hostages for months or years, marching them through remote paths of *paramo* or rainforest, awaiting maximum concessions.

These differences result in obvious comparative advantage. Both groups can do better by cooperating: urban kidnapers can sell a hostage to rural kidnapers for more money than they might coerce from the target, without incurring the security costs of captivity. Rural kidnapers can hold high-value hostages they might not otherwise be able to access, without the security costs of coming to the city. As a security officer explained, “the smaller groups realize their limitations. instead of holding hostages, they pass them on.”<sup>38</sup> A colonel with the anti-kidnapping unit in the police explained:

The thing is that the criminal groups are very good at taking someone, but they don't have the capacity to hold onto [hostages] in the city. They don't have the space or the resources to hold someone for more than some hours or days. So they sell them to a group that has such capacity. The guerrilla might pay [the criminals] \$200,000, and then [the guerrillas] ransom that same person for \$2,000,000.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Interview with Lucho Celis, May 13, 2019.

<sup>38</sup>Interview with Luis Mozas, February 13, 2018.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with Franklin Hernandez, February 17, 2023.

Accessing this comparative advantage, Colombia's armed groups cooperated across the kidnapping process: "it was win-win for them."<sup>40</sup> Criminal gangs researched wealthy victims, abducted them in cities, and then transported them to rebel groups in rural areas. The rebel groups then treated these white label hostages as their own, holding them and negotiating concessions for their release.

Of course, perpetrators on either side of the equation had to consider not only their relative advantages, but also the transaction costs of engaging in trade. One concrete transaction cost is the purchase price of the hostage. The rebels paid the criminals a "finder's fee," a monetary percentage of the ultimate ransom payment or its equivalent in drugs, which varied based on the extent of their work. A judge from Colombia's transitional justice court emphasized that it would be wrong to think of it as a sale. "They would just become business partners," in which the abductors "would get any amount between 5 and 20% of the profits. . . it's always established as a percentage of the ransom, and not as money out right. So it wasn't really selling and buying; it was more of a business deal."<sup>41</sup> A security officer said that the criminal gangs were usually paid in drugs, because they would then "make more money for reselling drugs than they would for a kidnapping. It was a way to obtain drugs at a lower rate."<sup>42</sup> Expending that cost can only be worthwhile to armed groups if their expected value from kidnapping—the concessions coerced or signals transmitted—exceeds what they expect to pay their partners in crime.

For criminal gangs, the costs of production were uniformly higher than the costs of trade: because of the risks of holding hostages in urban environments, they struggled to hold captives long enough to coerce a substantial ransom. Partnering with rebels and selling the hostage was a much more lucrative proposition: they could reliably make more money from selling a hostage to a larger and more capable rebel group than from ransoming the hostage themselves. For rebels, conversely, the relative costs of production and trade varied

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<sup>40</sup>Interview with Julieta Lemaitre, February 23, 2023.

<sup>41</sup>Interview with Julieta Lemaitre, February 23, 2023.

<sup>42</sup>Interview with Luis Mozas, February 13, 2018.



across the urban/rural divide.

Former perpetrators, security personnel, and civil society actors alike affirmed not only the occurrence but preponderance of *vende de secuestrada*. An official with the military's official anti-kidnapping unit said that “[Rebels] used DELCO to kidnap. The abductions were perpetrated by DELCO in [the large cities of] Bogotá, Medellín, Cali—committed by bands, and negotiated by the guerrillas.”<sup>43</sup> A scholar explained:

There were partnerships. In the 1980s and 90s, the guerrillas would buy hostages. They didn't have urban experience, and the criminal bands did. Those bands took hostages, sold them to guerrillas. It could be 10-20 months of negotiations. . . Everyone was a part of the industry. The non-political groups kidnap for the political groups!<sup>44</sup>

While large-scale datasets and crime statistics obscure kidnapping partnerships, the outsourcing was obvious to hostages themselves, who were transferred between groups.<sup>45</sup> As a former hostage explained:

Once it was known that the FARC was interested in holding and negotiating ransoms for people, the supply of victims could come from all sorts of criminal gangs who would do it for a fee, which certainly happened in my case. They formed a small group of people, and one of them got a job as a hall porter in my block of flats. . . to get an inside source of information. As I was coming back one evening, they were all waiting for me downstairs, and they gave me some drugs, chloroform in my mouth, put me in the back of my car, and they drove away into the hills.<sup>46</sup>

This former hostage's experience reflected a widespread, systematic phenomenon of rebel-criminal cooperation.

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<sup>43</sup>Interview with Gustavo Camargo, March 5, 2018.

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Lucho Celis, Bogotá, May 13, 2019.

<sup>45</sup>Interview with “Jorge,” July 21, 2023.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with “Arturo,” February 8, 2023.

## Changing costs of cooperation

Having established why armed groups would find mutual benefit in cooperation, this final subsection explores the conditions under which the costs of cooperation shift the calculus of trade. Specifically, decisions to make, buy, or concurrently source are not static; as trade or production costs shift, kidnappers should update their sourcing accordingly. While rebels' costs of production and trade vary across space, they also varied meaningfully over time, as increasing counterinsurgency and policing increase the costs of cooperation.

In response to the relentless and growing kidnapping by armed groups, the Colombian government increased its efforts to solve, deter, and punish armed group kidnapping. They developed a vast anti-kidnapping infrastructure in the military and police. The late 1990s saw the introduction of the *Grupos de Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal* (“GAULA”), special anti-kidnapping and anti-extortion units in both Colombia's police and military), tasked explicitly with combatting the growing kidnapping threat. In 2002, Alvaro Uribe was elected President on a platform of increased counterinsurgency against the FARC. While the increased counterinsurgency and policing would affect any hostage-taking organization, it would make cooperation across groups especially tenuous: cooperating and communicating with others multiplies the possibility of any weak link that could be exploited.

In fact, Colombia's military and police targeted connections between groups for their anti-kidnapping efforts. As the National Director of the Colombia's military GAULA told me, their work focused on the connections between cells: “Start with the link and work your way up—not the other way around.”<sup>47</sup> Connections between groups necessitate communication with group outsiders, generating vulnerable links in operational security that counterinsurgents might use to capture and punish kidnappers.

In a highly insecure environment, rebels deemed their criminal partners too high a risk. Thus, faced with the dual imperatives to continue kidnapping in cities but limit threats to security, the FARC and ELN invested to enter the local kidnapping market themselves. Fully

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<sup>47</sup>Interview with Colonel Samuel Salinas Valencia, July 25, 2017.

aware of the risks of operating outside their rural zones, they instead recruited and dispatched urban militias—plainclothes, city-dwelling members of their organizations to support the rebellion from population centers.<sup>48</sup> The militias took on the responsibility for identifying and monitoring potential urban targets, as well as carrying out other support and surveillance tasks.<sup>49</sup> In this manner, Colombia’s rebels shifted from outsourcing to in-house production as transaction costs increased. In doing so, the groups developed a new, in-house specialization that allowed them to expand their market access beyond their territorial control.

## Discussion

I now return to two possible questions posed above regarding the generalizability of my explanation for cooperation. First, is kidnapping cooperation unique to Colombia? No; on the contrary, preliminary evidence suggests that kidnapping cooperation is a global phenomenon. Evidence from expert interviews and news stories suggest that armed groups cooperate to kidnap in, at the very least, Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, the Philippines, and Yemen. Ironically, multiple interview participants have described this phenomenon as particular to the participant’s own, specific geographical context. For instance, a senior official involved in U.S. hostage recovery referred to it as “the Africa model.” He explained:

It happens in Africa quite a bit with street groups. We know [the hostage] has been transferred quite a bit. People are taking hostages to bank them—hostages they don’t need. They’re being sold and moved, because at some point it gets expensive. Like, *look, I want some money now. This other group will give it to me.* These groups might be assisting. They have some sort of truce. . . you know, that kind of symbiotic relationship. If they know they’re going to get money, it doesn’t matter matter from who [*sic*].<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Interview with “Barba,” May 29, 2019; Interview with “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.

<sup>49</sup>Interview with Sergio Guzman, February 21, 2018.

<sup>50</sup>Interview USG-11, January 30, 2023.

In Afghanistan, Taliban and Haqqani kidnapers were assisted by “street gangs”; in Yemen, criminal gangs sold hostages to the Houthis.<sup>51</sup> In the Philippines, “spotters” are individuals whom Abu Sayyaf tasks with “monitor[ing] all possible targets for kidnapping” in a specific location.<sup>52</sup> Powerful insurgent groups, including *Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) in Mali and ISIS in Iraq and Syria will “put the word out that they’re looking for Westerners or Americans” where they find that “there are a lot of criminals who are sympathetic or who work with them if there’s an opportunity to grab an American or a Canadian or a Belgian.”<sup>53</sup> In Colombia, interview participants always described *vende de secuestrada* as a uniquely Colombian phenomenon, but it unambiguously travels.

That kidnapping cooperation transpires across country contexts has important implications for hostage recovery and counterinsurgency operations. Specifically, this phenomenon suggests that armed groups exert influence—and facilitate violence—in territory putatively beyond their reach. This can affect travel safety and business operations in areas near, but outside of, armed group control, posing unexpected threats to civilian safety. As suggested above, however, links between armed groups provide additional in-roads to infiltrate the organizations.

As a senior U.S. official once responsible for hostage recovery told me, the disparity in capabilities makes it easier to recover hostages from criminal groups than from their rebel partners. The “more sophisticated actors” like Hezbollah, Hamas, JNIM, and ISIS take extraordinary care to limit communications: “they don’t use cell phones when they were on the move... They understand our capabilities and have effective countermeasures. Those groups use messengers and paper and notepads and that sort of thing.”<sup>54</sup> Conversely, the actors he referred to as “the B-team” and “junior varsity... don’t have the OPSEC and capabilities... Those kidnapers will have an electronic signature and it’s sometimes a little

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<sup>51</sup>Interview USG-11, January 30, 2023.

<sup>52</sup>Teofilo Garcia, Jr., “Cops arrest Abu Sayyaf ‘spotter’ in Zamboanga. *Philippine News Agency*, 12 May 2018. Online at <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1035085>. I’m grateful to Rosalie Arcala Hall for discussing this phenomenon with me.

<sup>53</sup>Interview USG-21, July 11, 2023.

<sup>54</sup>Interview USG-21, July 11, 2023.

easier to pick up the trail of the hostage... They'll use a cell phone or satellite phone" that security personnel can use to track and recover the hostage.<sup>55</sup>

These partnerships and disparities in operational security also highlight the importance of recovering hostages as early as possible. If kidnapers sell hostages to other groups precisely because of the latter's increased patience and tolerance for counterinsurgency, then security personnel stand the best chance of bringing someone home before a trade. A former official noted that the U.S. government was able to rescue an American in Nigeria "within 72 hours," whereas "if he'd been sold to JNIM in Mali, it would've been like other cases, four years in."<sup>56</sup>

While kidnapping cooperation travels beyond Colombia, a second question remains: is black market white labeling unique to kidnapping? Evidence from a wide range of activities in Colombia suggest the contrary. From the Palace of Justice siege, to complex drug trafficking networks (Idler, 2020), to territorial governance (Aponte González et al., 2023), dissimilar armed groups find mutually beneficial reasons to work together. While I see my argument as complementary to these existing accounts of cooperation, future work should explore whether and how comparative advantage plays a role in other black market white labeling, in drugs, mining, agriculture, and trafficking.

## Conclusion

This paper develops a theory for the conditions under which rebels cooperate with criminal groups to produce a particular form of violence. Why, given both groups' ability to take hostages—and the substantial risks of cooperating—do groups ever work together? Divergent strategies, capabilities, and costs lead to comparative advantage across organizations, leading to potential gains from trade. Still, though criminal and political armed groups cooperate in kidnappings, they also frequently manage kidnappings on their own. How do they decide which is the better strategy—whether to outsource, or produce violence in-house?

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<sup>55</sup>Interview USG-21, July 11, 2023.

<sup>56</sup>Interview USG-21, July 11, 2023.

The economics and management literature provides for this dynamic: Firms may be successful at producing a good in house, but still choose to outsource on occasion, resulting in a concurrent sourcing model (Jacobides and Winter, 2005; Serrano et al., 2018). When faced with a “make-or-buy” decision, conditions where rebels lack market access but can trade at low cost make cooperation attractive.

This argument is not static, however. As costs change, so should the calculus for producing violence in-house or outsourcing it to others. If the expected value of outsourcing decreases while strategy and capabilities favor in-house production, an organization should transition away from concurrent sourcing. As I demonstrate above, that is precisely what happened with *vende de secuestrada*—as the operational security costs of cooperation increased, rebels moved to develop their own in-house specialization in urban kidnappings. Targeting city-dwellers remained strategic, while rebels’ costs and capabilities for abducting them changed.

Future work would build on these insights in at least two ways. First, scholars should explore the extensions introduced above: whether armed groups cooperate in kidnapping outside of Colombia, and whether these dynamics apply to other forms of cooperation. Second, future work should continue to examine the causes and consequences of partnerships between armed groups, especially those across the criminal/political divide. Research on cooperation in drug production and trafficking (Idler, 2020) and territorial control (Aponte González et al., 2023) demonstrate the crucial implications of armed group cooperation for civilian victimization. The literature on the “conflict-crime nexus” ought to explicitly explore the dynamics of these different types of actors’ working together, as the limited work in this area suggests cooperation affects illicit markets, governance, and variation in the spread of political violence. Understanding where, when, and why different types of illicit actors cooperate would contribute to our broader understanding of conflict dynamics.

In the meantime, this paper suggests two important implications for policy regarding kidnapping prevention, negotiation, and recovery. First, it suggests that there are risks of

kidnapping violence in areas far outside of rebel-held territory. This is important for NGOs, corporations, journalists, scholars, and even tourists traveling to dangerous places, as well as wealthy locals: Potential targets may be at risk of rebel violence even if they never travel near rebel-held territory.

Second, these findings have significant implications for the timing and policies of hostage recovery efforts. Hostage recovery missions are significantly easier to conduct against criminal, rather than political, groups. Governments should focus on recovering hostages from criminal partners before or during a hostage transfer, either through military rescue or negotiated concessions. Paying criminal kidnappers might be unsavory, but it undermines insurgent strategy and can be accomplished at a lower price. For a country like the United States that prohibits paying ransoms to terrorist groups but not criminals, kidnapping partnerships might also provide an opportunity to bring more hostages home.

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