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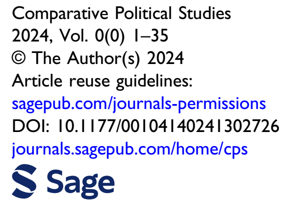
Comparative Political Studies
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–35
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Partners in Crime: Comparative Advantage and Kidnapping Cooperation

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Abstract

What explains cooperation between armed groups? Challenging existing literature that assumes armed groups must be similar or not cooperate at all, I argue that explicit differences are key to some cooperation. Comparative advantage explains why rebels and criminals—organizations that typically eschew collaboration—cooperate to produce violence. This article introduces "black market white labeling"—cooperation that emerges when one actor buys an illicit good or service from another and re-brands it as their own. To demonstrate this phenomenon and the conditions under which it occurs, I focus on kidnapping, an underexplored but common form of armed group violence. Drawing on 113 interviews with Colombian kidnappers and hostage recovery personnel from Colombia and the United States, I theorize the conditions under which rebels "outsource" violence to criminal gangs or produce it "in house." This article explains the organizational dynamics of rebel-criminal cooperation that perpetuate violence against civilians.

Keywords

kidnapping, cooperation, civil war, crime, Colombia

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

"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" (Peltier, 2019).

Such transfers of hostages between 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. The gang reportedly received up to $125,000 per hostage in payment from the ELN (BBC, 2015). A year later, 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, King and Weeks were first captured by Kabul-based criminals and then sold to the Haqqani Network, who have partnered with the Taliban on multiple kidnappings.[1] In conflicts in West Africa, Mexico, and Afghanistan, the official told me, "criminal groups, affiliates, bands, and tribes" frequently sell hostages to larger, more powerful armed organizations.

Existing theories of armed group cooperation and the "conflict-crime nexus" do not explain this surprising cooperation.[2] On the one hand, some scholars argue that shared ideology or other similarities underwrite armed group cooperation (Asal et al., 2016; Blair et al., 2022a). But these explanations cannot help us understand why ideologically incongruent or wholly different types of groups would work together. On the other hand, scholars of the "conflict-crime nexus" explore the dichotomy and intersection of "greed" and "grievance" (Asal et al., 2015; Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Felbab-Brown, 2010; Phillips, 2018; Williams, 2012). However, with limited exception (Idler, 2019, 2020; Phillips & Schiele, 2023), the "conflict-crime nexus" literature overlooks or rejects the possibility of explicit, mutually beneficial partnerships forged across the criminal/political divide.[3] What explains this apparent cooperation?

This article offers an explanation for an unexplored and unexpected form of armed group cooperation. Challenging existing literature that assumes groups must either be similar or not cooperate at all, I argue that explicit differences can be key to understanding 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, 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 an illicit good or service from another armed group and re-brands it as their own. Such cooperation can be mutually beneficial, even for competitors or groups with contrasting priorities and ideology.

To illustrate this phenomenon in practice, I focus on hostage transfers between criminal gangs and rebel groups that trade on their comparative expertise to increase their returns. In such "white-label" kidnapping, criminals abduct hostages on behalf of rebel groups; the rebels subsequently market the hostages as their own, holding them and negotiating for concessions. Drawing on 113 interviews, including in-depth, semi-structured conversations with dozens of former kidnappers 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.[4]

In doing so, this article makes several empirical and theoretical contributions to the violence and security literature. First, in unpacking kidnapping dynamics, it offers novel, primary evidence of an underexplored form of civilian victimization and conflict funding in international and civil conflicts (Kim et al., 2021; Loertscher & Milton, 2018; Shortland, 2019). 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). Criminals and rebels are both considered expert in producing violence, which could render trade surprising. Instead, I highlight that—because of organizational and territorial differences—groups possess unique attributes and abilities that create opportunities for cooperation.

Third, 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 always either allied or fighting. Instead, this nuanced application of comparative advantage shows that 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 assumes that cooperation between rebels and criminals 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, p. 399).

The article proceeds as follows. First, I define and conceptualize "black market white labeling," the phenomenon at the core of this study. Second, I review existing theories of armed group cooperation and the "conflict-crime nexus," none of which explain kidnapping cooperation. Drawing on the business strategy literature, I then offer a theory of armed group cooperation, and outline the conditions under which black market white labeling is likely to occur. Next, I 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 kidnappers, 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. After discussing other instances of black market white labeling, I conclude, suggesting avenues for future research and policy implications for kidnapping by—and cooperation among—armed groups.

Black Market White Labeling

Most kidnappings operate as a bilateral monopoly: a market in which there is one willing buyer and one seller (Nash, 1950); the "buyer" is the hostage's family, government, or employer, while the "seller" is the kidnapper. As the stories above suggest, however, sometimes kidnappers sell hostages not back to their families, but instead, to other willing buyers. In Colombia, perpetrators and security personnel call this phenomenon *vende de secuestrada* ("selling the kidnapped person"), in which criminals abduct hostages and sell them to powerful rebels.

Such hostage sales exemplify what I call *black market white labeling*, which I define as "cooperation that emerges when one actor buys an illicit good or service from another actor and re-brands it as their own." This concept builds on the business 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 an external party to perform a task traditionally performed in-house. The black-market variety entails outsourcing in the production of violence or other illicit goods, or outsourcing between any combination of illicit actors, such that the sale constitutes a crime.

Black market white labeling is a type of *cooperation*: when actors "adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others" (Keohane, 2005).[5] In relinquishing control over the entire chain of production—the seller, trusting he will be paid; the buyer, trusting that the merchandise is valuable—both parties adjust their preferences. Like other forms of

cooperation, black market white labeling is mutually beneficial: Both actors improve upon the outcomes they might have achieved acting alone.

Armed group cooperation manifests in myriad ways. It may be public, like the rhetorical support pledged between groups (Berlin, 2024; Blair et al., 2022a; Jadoon, 2018). It may require the alignment of a wide range of activities and combatants (Onder, 2024). Cooperation may also manifest as the *absence* of violence between competitors (Aponte González et al., 2024; Blume, 2022). Black market white labeling is distinguishable from these other forms of cooperation in three central ways (Table 1).

First, black market white labeling is *private* cooperation: The nature and existence of cooperation—the sponsorship or provenance of the good or service exchanged—is not publicly revealed. In marketing the white-labeled product as their own, illicit actors effectively deny credit to their partner. Second, black market white labeling is *limited in scope and connection*. White labeling does not require cooperation in other realms and may even transpire between actors that otherwise compete. White labeling may also operate through a single nexus; broad coordination across memberships is unnecessary. Finally, black market white labeling is observable by an *explicit exchange* between parties. It may manifest as the sale of an illicit product (like drugs, weapons, wildlife, or persons) or service (like contract killing).

For decades, *vende de secuestrada* represented a widespread form of black market white labeling in Colombia. Criminal gangs abducted individuals in the large cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali, and then sold those individuals to the left-wing *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC) and the *Ejercito de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN) rebel groups. The rebels would then negotiate with victims' families for exorbitant ransoms.[6]

The partnerships were obvious to hostages themselves, aware that they were transferred between groups.[7] As a former hostage, abducted by criminals but held by the FARC, 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 building, providing an inside source of information. As I was coming back one

Table 1. Black Market White Labeling as Cooperation.

1. Cooperation that is *private*
2. Cooperation that is *limited in scope and connection*
3. Cooperation observed by an *explicit exchange*

> 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.[8]

Conflict observers said that there were "huge numbers recorded" of these "partnerships," in which "non-political groups kidnap for the political groups."[9] Though such cooperation is familiar to conflict actors, it is all but absent from the conflict literature.[10]

Armed Group Cooperation and the "Conflict-Crime" Nexus

Why do armed groups cooperate? Cooperation can benefit armed groups in several ways. Partnerships can augment armed groups' combat capacity (Asal et al., 2016; Bacon, 2018; Blair et al., 2022b; Byman, 2014; Moghadam, 2017) or bolster their ideological bona fides (Blair & Potter, 2023). Through partners, armed groups may seek plausible deniability for behaviors they wish to appear innocent of committing.

Nevertheless, cooperating with others can be extremely costly to armed organizations (Mendelsohn, 2015; Moghadam, 2017; Bacon, 2017, 2018; Idler, 2020; Blair et al., 2022a, 2022b; Phillips & Schiele, 2023). Armed groups regularly compete with each other over the same territory, resources, or recruits (Castillo & Kronick, 2020; Coutinho et al., 2020; Kronick, 2020). Illicit actors face substantial barriers to trust (Gambetta, 2009; Von Lampe & Ole Johansen, 2004). Both rebels and criminals operate beyond the law, so they cannot rely on legal institutions to enforce agreements, and shirking and cheating may run rampant (Friman, 2009). Cooperating with other illicit actors is risky when communication is intercepted or partners serve as military or police informants (Blair et al., 2022b; Shapiro, 2013). Armed groups are wary of trusting outsiders, whose mistakes, weaknesses, or espionage could undermine operational security. Finally, groups may fear the reputational consequences of associating 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 their organizations. Personal ties, shared history, and geographical proximity provide pre-existing bonds (Asal et al., 2015; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Jones, 2008). Second, groups with shared ideology are more likely to cooperate. As Blair et al. argue, shared ideology provides the "community monitoring, authority structures, trust, and trans-national networks" central to overcoming mistrust over time (2022a, p. 164). Finally, armed groups may cooperate not because they share ties or ideology, but because they share aspirations (Bapat & Bond, 2012; Blair et al., 2022b). For

example, in Afghanistan and Bosnia, the power imbalances between groups and within alliances in a multiparty conflict shape militants' willingness to cooperate or compete (Christia, 2012).

Still, armed group cooperation lacking these factors persists. Criminal gangs motivated by profit and rebel groups pursuing political change share neither ideology nor broader strategic goals. Networks may indeed explain initial connections between individual illicit actors, but they cannot explain why groups would want to work together, nor cooperation that varies over time.

An explanation for rebel/criminal cooperation might instead come from the "conflict-crime nexus" literature, which explores the relationship between illicit activities for profit and politics. Scholars explore the territorial coincidence of conflict and crime—how civil wars and criminal activity overlap geographically (Asal et al., 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2010; Rettberg & Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2004; UNODC, 2010), and tactical diffusion between groups—how terrorist and rebel groups adopt "criminal" funding methods (Asal et al., 2015, 2019; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017; Hutchinson & O'Malley, 2007; Labrousse, 2005; Mylonaki, 2002; Shelley & Picarelli, 2002; Weinberg, 2015; Williams, 2001).

With limited exception, however (Idler, 2020; Phillips & Schiele, 2023; Sanderson, 2004; Shelley, 2002; Wang, 2010), this scholarship either overlooks or denies cooperation across the criminal/political divide. Most scholars posit that criminal-insurgent partnerships cannot be sustainable or strategic, because groups' differing goals and their ability to achieve objectives "in-house" render cooperation unlikely (Dishman, 2001; Hutchinson & 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, they note, rebels and criminals espouse competing ideologies (Hutchinson & 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 (2019; 2020) documents extensive partnerships in drug production and trafficking, while Aponte González et al. (2024) detail "pacted control" between rebels and criminals across Colombian municipalities. Such cooperation persists despite 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 the country's Supreme Court hostage, was allegedly organized with support from Medellín cartel boss Pablo Escobar, accused of paying the group to destroy extradition records stored in the building (Colombia Reports, 2016). It is indeed surprising that these two organizations would cooperate, as 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") paramilitary group in response (Verdad Abierta, 2011). However, such notorious enmity did not prohibit both groups from seeking benefits in working together: the cartel, 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 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 & 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 this article, I apply the literature on the firm to explain mutually beneficial cooperation between rebels and criminals.[11]

Business Partners in Crime

When contemplating producing 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 production 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—for production? Third, "How much will it cost?" concerns the fixed, marginal, and opportunity *costs* involved in production. 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? If not, what are the transaction costs of purchasing the good or service elsewhere?

Answers to these questions create the conditions for specialization and trade. Rarely can firms produce everything they need at low cost. 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 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 *buy* 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 keep production 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 & Winter, 2005, p. 398).

At its simplest interpretation, the "make-or-buy" decision presents a clear, mutually exclusive choice: make something in-house or buy it elsewhere. But examination of real-world firms demonstrates that "make-or-buy" decisions are neither consistently straightforward nor mutually exclusive, in two key ways. First, firms 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, p. 401). Even when a firm's capabilities and strategy permit in-house production, outsourcing may still be preferable. Second, firms sometimes simultaneously make *and* buy similar goods or services: "concurrent sourcing" occurs when a firm selects the "simultaneous use of insourcing and outsourcing" (Serrano et al., 2018, p. 137).[12] Research suggests that firms make, buy, or concurrently source based on the "site specificity" of capabilities and costs over time and space, with inputs like rent, wages, and workforce skills, producing variable comparative advantage.

I argue that this logic of comparative advantage can explain black market white labeling. Like firms, armed groups consider strategy, capabilities, and costs in their production of violence or governance. Armed groups make strategic choices, deciding whether and how much of any one output to produce (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006; Krause, 2013; Qiu, 2022; Stewart, 2018; Wood, 2010). Armed groups may adopt certain types of violence as *policy*—when leaders promote an activity by ordering, authorizing, or institutionalizing it (Wood, 2018, p. 522). In pursuit of their goals, armed groups vary—and invest in—a range of specialized roles to bolster their capabilities. Violence and governance require complex skills that are "acquired, developed, learned, and transmitted to others within the organization" (Sinno, 2008, p. 81); which skills an organization develops "shape and constrain" the group's behavior (Parkinson & Zaks, 2018, p. 274). Finally, armed groups face resource, transaction, and opportunity 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-á-vis strategy, capabilities, and costs yield crucial differences, generating comparative advantage across armed organizations: It is precisely groups' differences, not similarities, that render black market white labeling desirable.

This dynamic explains why two organizations, both considered expert in producing similar violence, might partner: Even when highly capable, an armed group's higher costs of production may privilege trade.[13] Of course, armed groups must consider not only their own relative production costs, but also the transaction costs of cooperation: both the security risks and commission paid in trading with others. Finally, armed groups may employ concurrent sourcing when their comparative advantage varies across time and space. In particular, they may outsource in an effort to expand their market share or when security costs are low, but keep operations in-house where production costs are low and transaction costs are high (Durán-Martínez, 2017, p. 16).

Applied to kidnapping, white labeling can be understood as outsourcing in the production of violence. Armed groups' decision to sometimes kidnap on their own, and sometimes outsource tasks 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 to others.

Table 2 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 of shifting to the bottom left quadrant.

Table 2 can also help us understand the effect of changing costs of cooperation. When production costs are higher than trade costs—regardless of capabilities—armed groups have incentives to cooperate in the production of violence. If, however, the costs of trade increase, armed groups

Table 2. Make or Buy?

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

should be less likely to partner. Multiple dynamics may affect the expected value from trade: Partners could demand a higher commission, or sales prices could decline. But one transaction cost particularly relevant to armed groups is the security cost of cooperating with others (Blair et al., 2022b). If the risk of cooperation tangibly increases—for endogenous or exogenous reasons—then armed groups should bring production back in house.

Before proceeding, I acknowledge two reasons that readers might be skeptical of this argument. First, as my argument was developed inductively through examining kidnapping cooperation, black market white labeling may be 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 my argument applies to forms of violence or funding beyond kidnapping, or to settings beyond Colombia, it increases confidence that this dynamic explains an under-theorized form 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 explain other forms of cooperation and trade. I return to these questions below.

Research Design

This article focuses on Colombia to explain the causes and conditions for an unexplored type of cooperation between two types of armed groups: rebels and criminal gangs. By *rebels*, I mean "armed factions that use violence to challenge the state" (Mampilly, 2017, p. 7). For the purpose of this article, "criminal gangs" refer to informal groups of individuals engaging in illicit activities for profit.[14]

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 (Gallego, 2019; Rubio, 2004).[15] 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 *Ejercito de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army, or ELN)—they were closely followed by perpetrators collectively known as *delincuencia común* ("common criminals," or DELCO), responsible for nearly a third of Colombia's kidnapping (CNMH, 2013). As Figure 1 shows, other armed actors in the Colombian conflict, including other rebels, paramilitaries, and organized criminal organizations like cartels, kidnapped far less often.

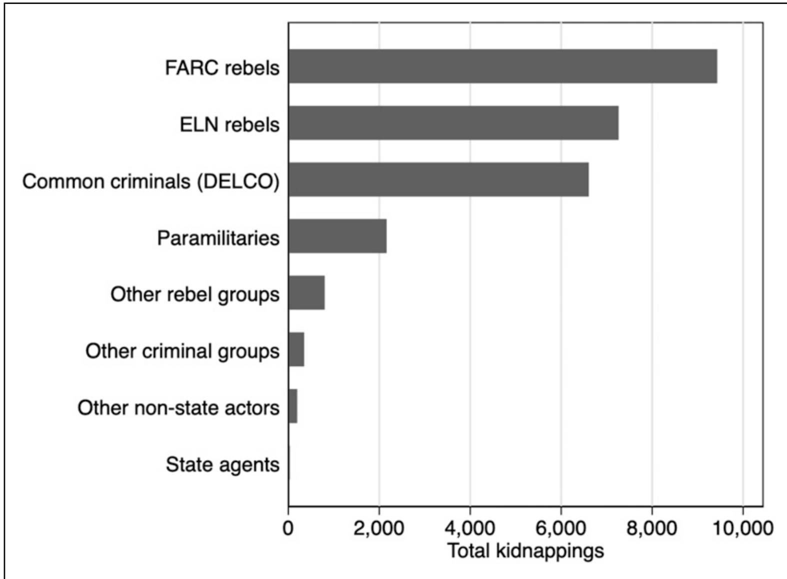

Figure 1. Armed group kidnapping in Colombia, perpetrator Presumed (1970–2010).
Note: Data from the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (2013). FARC, ELN, and DELCO kidnapping totals attributed to particular perpetrator as designated by the CNMH. For presentation purposes, all other categories collapse multiple perpetrator groups. For example, "Other criminal groups" include a wide range of more- and less-organized criminal perpetrators, including those labeled as narcotraffickers, organized crime, and "criminal bands."

In the spirit of quantitative analyses of cooperation (Blair et al., 2022a; Phillips & Schiele, 2023), and Colombia's event-level kidnapping datasets, one might suppose that the preponderance of kidnapping cooperation could be evaluated quantitatively; as of this writing, it cannot. While data from the *Centro Nacional de Memória Histórica* (CNMH) reveals that both rebels and criminals kidnapped often, they do not record cooperation between perpetrators: The database attributes kidnappings to the predominant *holder* of the hostage, regardless of who committed the initial abduction.[16] If criminals kidnapped someone and sold her to the ELN, which then held her for six months and coerced ransom from her family, the CNMH data would attribute the kidnapping to the ELN—in true white label fashion. There is thus no existing quantitative record of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, there is substantial *qualitative* evidence that kidnappers cooperated: Interview subjects from the FARC to the FBI regularly described *vende de secuestrada*, introducing it unprompted in our conversations. I therefore draw on interviews, which can both illuminate a phenomenon elided

in datasets and illustrate the underlying process of cooperation. This article relies on evidence from 113 in-depth interviews conducted between 2017 and 2024.[17] To understand kidnapping cooperation in Colombia, I interviewed dozens of FARC and ELN ex-combatants, ranging from young women only days out of the jungle, to men in their 70s who had demobilized decades earlier, to former commanders now active in electoral politics. I also interviewed former hostages and their families, officers from Colombia's police and military anti-kidnapping units; senior officials from the justice department and transitional justice court; leadership from peace and reconciliation NGOs; and hostage negotiators, insurance agents, and the chief security officers of major multinational corporations. To contextualize the phenomenon and explore generalizability, I interviewed current and former U.S. hostage recovery officials from the FBI's Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, the State Department's Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, and the National Security Council's Hostage Response Group. A full list of subjects by alias or name and affiliation is available in a supplemental appendix.

Evidence from Kidnapping in Colombia

If alternative explanations are right, we should be surprised to see kidnapping cooperation in Colombia. First, both rebels and criminals in Colombia are expert, prolific kidnappers. Both rebel and criminal kidnappers used their thousands of hostages to derive significant amounts of funding and demand prisoner exchanges. Colombia's criminal gangs have been kidnapping since at least the 1970s, while the FARC and ELN adopted kidnapping as a central and official strategy of their rebellion (Gilbert, 2022). Given that kidnapping was such an important part of their repertoire of violence, 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 to outsiders. Second, Colombia's rebels and criminals do not share the ideology that scholars have argued facilitates 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, Colombia's criminal gangs did not espouse any particular political platform, nor did they seek to change the nature of the state.[18] Thus, it is counterintuitive that Colombia's rebels and gangs should work together.

In this section, I demonstrate how rebels' and criminals' comparative advantage led to black market white labeling. Kidnapping was strategic for rebels' and criminals' goals; relied on specialized capabilities; and imposed unique costs to perpetrators. Variation in capabilities and costs over time and space produced comparative advantage and created avenues for mutually beneficial trade.

Strategy

Both Colombia's strongest rebels and its "common" criminal gangs decided that kidnapping was something they *should* do—a "core activity" for both types of armed organization. Since the 1970s, criminal gangs used kidnapping as a substantial source of funding. They could kidnap a "very wealthy, important target and then use the funds to pay the group for a whole year."[19] Far from the exclusive purview of criminals, Colombia's most powerful rebel organizations also adopted kidnapping as official organizational policy. Like DELCO, rebels used kidnapping to make money. But they also adopted kidnapping as an official part of their governance strategy. Specifically, the FARC and ELN imposed "taxes" on Colombia's wealthy and used kidnapping to enforce extraction (FARC-EP, 2000; Gilbert, 2022), an example of what Aponte González et al. call "governing violence" (2024).

The FARC and ELN believed it was particularly strategic to kidnap in Colombia's cities, far outside of their areas of territorial control, for two reasons. First, the rebels believed that urban kidnapping was crucial to enforce taxation. In 2000, the FARC announced they were imposing taxes on all "natural or legal persons" throughout Colombia's territory worth more than $1 million USD (FARC-EP, 2000). Kidnapping tax shirkers, wherever they may be, credibly demonstrated the 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 rural base, protecting their relationship with the *pueblo*. As a corporate security advisor stressed, targeting from within their areas of control would cause rebels to "lose their political support from the *pueblo* with their violence."[20] Accordingly, rebels would endeavor to "take someone from far away and bring them back, not someone from our internal base."[21] Rebels were thus especially interested in urban abductions in order to strategically showcase their ability to enforce anywhere while avoiding attacking the *pueblo*.

Capabilities

Having established that kidnapping was something they *should* do, armed groups required specific capabilities to kidnap at scale. Contrary to existing depictions of kidnapping as violence that does "not require institutional infrastructure or specific skills" (Asal et al., 2019, p. 401), taking hostages is a complex activity that "requires expertise."[22] Kidnappers developed an enforcement infrastructure, in which individuals are "responsible for acquiring provisions, logistics, identifying people to kidnap, and gathering intelligence" (Gilbert, 2022, p. 1236).

Kidnappings—regardless of perpetrator—rely on three distinct phases: surveillance, abduction, and captivity. Across each phase, kidnappers must develop concrete, specialized roles. According to a former kidnapper, "There are 3 or 4 [combatants] 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."[23] 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."[24] Every step of the attack was delegated to those with specific training and skills.

The first phase of kidnapping—surveillance—requires intense monitoring and preparation. Far from its popular portrayal as a crime of opportunity, armed group kidnapping is premeditated and planned. As a former ELN combatant said, "It's about 10–15 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."[25] Another ex-combatant said that researching potential victims might take 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 the next part."[26]

Once surveillance is complete, the would-be kidnappers abduct their victim and bring them to a new, hidden location, in what security personnel and kidnappers alike call the "take." When the timing is right, a former kidnapper explained, "we put a hood on you, and take you to the mountain."[27] The "take" requires confronting the victim in a vulnerable time and place, avoiding or neutralizing any security, and absconding undetected. It requires muscle, situational awareness, and adaptability.

After the "take," the kidnapping enters the captivity or holding phase, which may last days, months, or years. Throughout captivity, kidnappers must hide, guard, and care for their hostage while they attempt to negotiate concessions for the hostage's release. As a former kidnapper explained, "You stand guard, like a rancher, and think about the kidnapped person—if he has needs, like water."[28] Another 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."[29]

Costs

In addition to requiring distinct capabilities, each stage of a kidnapping introduces distinct costs related to labor, resources, and security. For example, to select and monitor valuable targets, kidnappers must have—or purchase—information. They must follow their victims undetected and abduct them

unscathed. Doing so requires knowledge of, and freedom of movement in, the victim's territory. 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 potential enemy informants. Monitoring and abduction are costly and dangerous for combatants without monopoly of force.

After the "take," the captivity phase introduces a new set of costs—both real and potential. Kidnapping comes with "complicated" costs for perpetrators, who must provide resources to feed, clothe, and shelter the hostage, keeping them alive until negotiations are concluded.[30] Kidnapping also comes with opportunity costs. During extended captivity, perpetrators must stand guard around the clock to ensure that captives cannot escape. As a former FARC hostage recalled, guards rotated in shifts to watch him at all times: "Half would be asleep, half working, in three-hour shifts between 6 [am] and 6 [pm], and in two-hour shifts over night."[31] The time spent finding, taking, and especially guarding a hostage is time spent away from other pursuits and the frontlines of fighting.

Moreover, holding hostages is risky to an organization's security. Kidnappers must secure special "zones" where they can hide captives.[32] They feared "persecution and operations against us" and "being surrounded by the army,"[33] because offensives "happen more when we have a hostage."[34] 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 might otherwise ignore.[35] The risk of recovery also added labor costs to kidnapping groups, who had to retain sufficient guards and spread hostages out, lest a single rescue mission decimate their leverage.

Captivity thus served as a costly signal, crucial for coercing concessions. The longer kidnappers could keep hostages hidden, the more patiently they could wait for a lucrative deal. As the brother of a former hostage described, "The negotiation wasn't about money; it was about time."[36] The former executive director of an anti-kidnapping NGO said that kidnappers "sit with [hostages] in the jungle for months or years. The more time you have a hostage, the more powerful you seem, with more control."[37]

Make or Buy?

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

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. Rebels had easy access to identify and abduct hostages in the countryside. A former kidnapper summarized: "You can get all the information for power in the place where you're staying."[38] However, capturing hostages in cities was much more challenging for rebels. As a global security advisor for several multinational corporations summarized: "For rebels to get someone in the city is very difficult; to get someone in the jungle or country is much easier."[39]

The advantages shifted when it came to captivity. In the 80s and 90s, rebels tried holding urban hostages in "protected places" cities, "where if someone yelled, you wouldn't be able to hear." But rebels quickly realized the advantages of transferring captives elsewhere: "It's better conditions if you take someone in the city and bring them to the country."[40] Though resource costs of holding a hostage remain high, rebels encountered far lower security costs in remote, rural terrain. They could afford to keep hostages for months or years, marching them through remote *paramo* or rainforest, awaiting maximum concessions.

Operating in cities, criminals couldn't afford such patience with captivity. Strong state presence in Colombia's population centers rendered the costs of urban captivity very high. Gang timelines were much shorter; 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 2 hours is less professional."[41] In line with their rapid demands, criminal captivity tended to be

Table 3. Kidnapping Outcomes by Perpetrator.

Perpetrator	"Success"	"Failure"	Duration (mean)	Demand (mean)
FARC	5486 (69.84%)	2368 (30.15%)	333 days	$1.08B COP
ELN	4362 (70.42%)	1832 (29.58%)	180 days	$957M COP
DELCO	3388 (53.2%)	2986 (46.8%)	87 days	$925M COP

Note: For the purposes of this table, "Success" and "Failure" are evaluated from the kidnappers' perspective. "Success" means that the perpetrator was able to coerce a concession in exchange for releasing the hostage alive, and includes cases when the victim was released for payment or for concessions other than a monetary ransom. "Failure," conversely, includes outcomes in which the perpetrator was not able to coerce a concession for the hostage. Failures include cases in which the hostage was rescued, released without payment, or escaped; as well as cases in which a hostage died, either during a rescue attempt, through assassination, or for other reasons in captivity. One billion COP is the equivalent of approximately $244,000 in 2024 U.S. dollars. For a further breakdown of kidnapping outcomes, see the Appendix.

much shorter and less remunerative: Criminal kidnappers had to get rid of their hostages quickly, either accepting the first ransom offer, or killing the victim.[42]

Data from Colombia portray rebels' advantages in captivity (Table 3).[43] The average captivity for FARC hostages (333 days) and ELN hostages (180 days) far outlast the average captivity for hostages held by *delincuencia común* (87 days). FARC and ELN kidnappers were also far likelier to achieve outcomes that were, from their perspective, "successful"—coercing ransom payment or other concessions in exchange for releasing hostages. Conversely, DELCO kidnappers were far likelier to "fail," as when hostages were rescued, escaped, or died in captivity. Finally, rebels demanded higher ransoms.[44]

These differences result in obvious comparative advantage and a lucrative proposition. Both groups can do better by cooperating: Urban criminals can sell hostages to rural rebels for more money than they might coerce from the target, without incurring the security costs of captivity. Rural rebels can hold high-value hostages whose urban capture would have been costly. "The smaller groups realize their limitations," the security director of a major multinational corporation told me. "Instead of holding hostages, [criminals] pass them on."[45] A police colonel likewise 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.[46]

Assessing this comparative advantage, Colombia's armed groups cooperated across the kidnapping "industry"[47]: "it was win-win for them."[48] 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.

Transaction Costs

Of course, perpetrators on either side of the equation considered 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, which manifested as a commission or "finder's fee." Cooperating as "business partners," criminal abductors "would get any amount between 5 and 20% of the profits," because the payment was "established as a percentage of the ransom, and not as money out right."[49] Sometimes, rebel kidnappers would pay for hostages

with drugs; gang members could then "make more money for reselling drugs than they would for a kidnapping."[50] Such transaction costs are only worthwhile to rebels if their expected value from kidnapping exceeds what they expect to pay their partners in crime.

Beyond commission, white-label kidnapping introduced other transaction costs to rebels and their criminal suppliers. White-label kidnapping often represents an incomplete contract: Neither the final "sale price" (ransom) nor commission are necessarily known before the resolution of captivity. Twin risks thus emerge. On the one hand, the criminal supplier has to trust that they will get paid. On the other hand, the rebel buyer has to trust that the "merchandise" is valuable—that the hostage will generate a substantial ransom payment and not cause the group undue trouble.

Indeed, both criminals and rebels worried about getting bad deals. Speaking of his criminal partners, a former guerrilla confessed: "They wouldn't know if I was a commander and needed [their help] for a task; I would never know if they were associated with the police." But with the promise of larger profits, both sides simply "took it into account" and proceeded with caution.[51] Criminals sometimes sold rebels the "wrong" hostages. As a former member of the FARC Secretariat told me, they had "lots of imperfections in verification" when they bought captives from gangs.[52] In transitional justice hearings, former hostages and their family members confronted the FARC Secretariat about these mistakes. "Why don't you verify your suppliers?! [The FARC] automatically took over the kidnapping and left the suppliers alone." The FARC was "stupid for buying merchandise from someone without knowing where it comes from."[53]

To mitigate these risks, some former kidnappers described finding trusted partners. As prior work has shown, personal relationships and brokers can help facilitate cooperation and overcome barriers to trust (Asal et al., 2015; Bacon, 2018; Blair et al., 2022b; Braun, 2016; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Jones, 2008; Idler, 2019, 2020; McCarthy-Jones et al., 2020). Evidence from Colombia suggests that some relationships helped smooth white-label kidnapping connections, lowering transaction costs. Some were facilitated by personal relationships that pre-dated any illicit activity: "A *guerrillero* and a criminal could be friends or neighbors from childhood, or cousins…that made it very easy to facilitate the trade and make connections."[54] For others, cooperation was facilitated by demobilized ex-combatants who retained their illicit contacts and skills. As the chief author of the CNMH kidnapping report explained, "once they left [the FARC], well, they needed work, so they ended up joining criminal groups. And they are the ones that began to make contact with the FARC to sell hostages. It happened because they knew each other. It wasn't like they had a kidnapped person and put in an announcement. You had to have some sort of contact."[55]

Still others described an effortful recruitment process. Urban guerrillas used their environments to foster connections with criminal actors and suppliers. One of the FARC's original urban guerrillas explained:

> We would tell criminals, "I need a van like this," and they would say "*Listo*, I will bring it to you by this weekend." The same happened with kidnapping. I would meet a criminal, and he would say, "Put me in contact with a commander, and I will do them favors." And it happened like that. Sometimes, we wouldn't accept the offer. But then the commander would say, "Bring him and tell me who he is. Bring him so we can negotiate, and let's see."[56]

As the former commander of the Colombian armed forces explained, rebels "hire gangs to do the kidnapping for them, [forging] networks between the groups."[57] These relationships, whether pre-existing or formed through co-operation, helped mitigate transaction costs.

Changing Costs of Cooperation

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 attacks, the Colombian government increased its efforts to solve, punish, and deter hostage taking, developing 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 units in both Colombia's police and military, tasked explicitly with combatting the kidnapping threat. In 2002, Alvaro Uribe was elected president on a platform of increasing 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 exacerbates the risks of leaks.

Indeed, in their anti-kidnapping efforts, Colombian security targeted connections between groups. As the National Director of Colombia's military GAULA told me, his unit's work focused on the connections between cells: "Start with the link and work your way up—not the other way around."[58] Rather than employ a leadership decapitation strategy to disrupt cooperation (Blair et al., 2022b), Colombia's anti-kidnapping forces infiltrated from the weakest links, exploiting the most vulnerable, low-level perpetrators 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 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.[59] The militias took on the responsibility for identifying and monitoring potential urban targets, as well as carrying out other support and surveillance tasks.[60]

In their years-long investigation of FARC kidnapping, Colombia's transitional justice court uncovered evidence that the group both partnered with external criminals *and* trained their own urban militia members. As the lead magistrate explained, "There are parts of the country where the third party is either a gang or a person, a criminal whose business is to sell information to the FARC…They say—*Here, I give you so-and-so, you give me a percentage*. But it is also true," she continued, "that [the FARC has] militias, that is, people who are part of the guerrilla organization but who are clandestine. Nobody knows…and in reality, they are a guerrilla who is in civilian clothes."[61] The FARC, in other words, engaged in concurrent sourcing *and* varied their sourcing over time. By training their own urban abduction units, rebels could access valuable markets while avoiding the costs of cooperation.

Markets for Cooperation

I now return to the two questions posed above regarding the generalizability of my argument. First, is kidnapping cooperation unique to Colombia? No; on the contrary, preliminary evidence suggests that white-label kidnapping is a global phenomenon. Both expert interviews and news investigations show that armed groups cooperate to kidnap in, at the very least, Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, the Philippines, and Yemen. Ironically, multiple interview participants described white-label kidnapping as unique to different geographical contexts. For instance, a senior U.S. hostage recovery official referred to this phenomenon as "the Africa model." He explained:

> It happens in Africa quite a bit with street groups. We know [the hostage] has been transferred. 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 from who [*sic*].[62]

In Afghanistan, "street gangs" assist the Taliban; in Yemen, criminal gangs sell hostages to the Houthis.[63] In the Philippines, Abu Sayyaf tasks "spotters" with "monitor[ing] all possible targets for kidnapping" in a specific location (Garcia, 2018).[64] 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" and 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."[65] In Colombia, interview participants always described *vende de secuestrada* as a uniquely Colombian phenomenon, but it unambiguously travels.

The global incidence of white-label kidnapping suggests variation in how comparative advantage emerges. In Colombia, the territorial discrepancy between urban criminals and rural rebels produces gains from trade. However, territory safe for captivity need not be mountainous terrain. Afghanistan's Taliban and Haqqani kidnappers, for instance, safely held hostages across the border, in Pakistan. As former Taliban hostage, journalist David Rohde, told me:

> There's no question that control of territory was vital to the entire kidnapping enterprise. I think our kidnappers could have held us for quite some time in Afghanistan, but it was far, far easier for them to move us into their safe haven in Pakistan. I was astonished at the freedom of movement—the confidence—that they had in Pakistan. When we arrived in Pakistan, it was one of the worst moments, unquestionably, because now you're in their safe haven, and no one is going to save you.[66]

Remote, rural territory is not a requirement for captivity: Indeed, Iraqi and Palestinian militants have held hostages in dense, urban environments, assisted by barriers to urban counterinsurgency (Brathwaite & Konaev, 2022; Desch, 2001; Graham, 2011). Nevertheless, security is crucial for extended captivity: Kidnappers must avoid spies and prying eyes.[67] Future work should explore the territorial variation in kidnapping risk and how the costs of captivity vary across territory.

For other partners in crime, comparative advantage arises from capabilities unrelated to territorial control. As a senior U.S. hostage recovery official told me, criminal gangs' simpler tactics make them easier targets for hostage recovery operations. The "more sophisticated actors" like Hezbollah, Hamas, JNIM, and ISIS take extraordinary care to limit communications: "They don't use cell phones when they're on the move…They understand our capabilities and have effective countermeasures. Those groups use messengers and paper and notepads and that sort of thing." Conversely, the kidnappers he referred to as "the B-team" or "junior varsity…don't have the OPSEC and capabilities…Those kidnappers will have an electronic signature and it's

sometimes a little easier to pick up the trail of the hostage." Security personnel could track kidnappers' cell phones or satellite phones to find and recover hostages.[68]

While kidnapping cooperation travels beyond Colombia, a second question remains: Is black market white labeling unique to kidnapping? Evidence from a wide range of illicit cooperation suggests it is not. From the Palace of Justice siege, to complex drug trafficking networks, to territorial governance, dissimilar armed groups in Colombia attained mutual benefit by trading their goods and services (Aponte González et al., 2024; Idler, 2019, 2020). Elsewhere, evidence of cross-group sales in illicit markets—from drugs, to weapons, to wildlife—suggest that black market white labeling may be at play (Blume, 2021; Wyatt et al., 2020).

One puzzle that remains is how the very different illicit actors overcome problems of trust in their co-production of violence. The actors at the heart of this study—Colombia's most powerful left-wing rebel groups and its smallest criminal gangs—share none of the qualities typically identified as crucial for bolstering trust, like shared ideology (Blair et al., 2022a; Braun, 2016) or the intervention of the state or state sponsor (Bapat & Bond, 2012; Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016). Pre-existing connections between actors seem to play a role in facilitating partnerships. Following Idler (2019; 2020) and McCarthy-Jones et al. (2020), future work should continue to explore how brokers facilitate armed group cooperation.

Conclusion

This article conceptualizes one form of armed group cooperation and theorizes the conditions under which rebels and criminals cooperate in the production of violence. Why, given both groups' kidnapping expertise—and the substantial risks of cooperating—do groups ever work together? Divergent strategies, capabilities, and costs lead to comparative advantage across organizations, generating potential gains from trade. Criminal and rebel groups both kidnap on their own *and* cooperate with others. How do they decide whether to outsource or produce violence in-house? The economics and management literatures provide an answer: Firms successful at in-house production may still choose to outsource on occasion, resulting in concurrent sourcing (Jacobides & Winter, 2005; Serrano et al., 2018). When faced with a "make-or-buy" decision, site-specific capabilities and costs can make cooperation attractive.

This argument is not static, however. As costs change, so too 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 should build on these insights in at least two ways. First, scholars should explore the extensions of black market white labeling introduced above: the extent to which armed groups cooperate in kidnapping outside of Colombia and in other illicit markets. 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, 2019, 2020) and territorial control (Aponte González et al., 2024) demonstrate the crucial implications of armed group cooperation for civilian victimization. Future work ought to explicitly explore the dynamics of 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 illicit actors cooperate would contribute to our broader understanding of conflict dynamics.

In the meantime, this article suggests two important implications for policy regarding kidnapping prevention and hostage recovery. First, it suggests that there are risks of kidnapping violence in areas far outside of rebel-held territory. The Colombian and Afghan examples suggest 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. Civilians may face more violence where multiple, competing armed groups operate and at times, cooperate (Idler, 2019). This finding 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 without traveling to 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. If criminals 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 hostage is transferred from one group to another. Governments should focus on recovering hostages from criminal partners before or during a hostage transfer, either through military rescue or negotiations. Paying criminal kidnappers might be unsavory, but it undermines insurgent strategy and can be accomplished at a lower price. Doing so would also prevent the fatal outcomes that emerge when

criminal kidnappers cannot find a buyer for their captive. For a country like the United States that prohibits paying ransoms to terrorist groups but not criminals, targeting these partnerships might also provide an opportunity to bring more hostages home.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Elizabeth Acorn, Viviana Arias, Reynell Badillo, César Caballero, Lucho Celis, Bailee Donahue, Alex Downes, Fiona Cunningham, Elizabeth Grasmeder, Meg Guliford, Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, Michael Joseph, Oliver Kaplan, Melissa Lee, Jason Lyall, Hilary Matfess, Theo Milonopoulos, Eduardo Moncada, Daniel Pike, Jonathan Pike, Angelika Rettberg, Adam Saxton, J. Seawright, Michael Weintraub, Rachel Whitlark, Elisabeth Wood, Sherry Zaks, three anonymous reviewers, and the exceptional editors of Comparative Political Studies for their invaluable comments, as well as interview participants in Colombia and Washington, D.C. for their time and insights. Earlier drafts of this manuscript benefited enormously from feedback during presentations at the University of Wisconsin-Madison International Relations Colloquium, the Perry World House Seminar Series at the University of Pennsylvania, the 2022 and 2023 International Studies Association conference, the Workshop on International Politics at the University of Chicago, and the "Political Violence in Comparative Perspective: Beyond Regionalism" workshop at Yale University. Research for this project was conducted with the support from the United States Institute of Peace and Minerva Research Initiative, the World Politics and Statecraft Fellowship from the Smith Richardson Foundation, the George Washington University, and the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Smith Richardson Foundation and United States Institute of Peace.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

The author declares that the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the George Washington University and Dartmouth College; certificate numbers are provided in the appendix. The author affirms that this article adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidelines on Human Subject Research.

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Data Availability Statement

Replication data and research documentation of this study are openly available at the Comparative Political Studies Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/M98QSM (Gilbert, 2024).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Interview USG-02, March 6, 2020.
2. 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.
3. In this article, *criminal* groups refer to those engaged in illicit activity for "overriding purpose the accumulation of money"—and *political* groups as those whose engagement in violence serves broader aspirations related to ideology or power (Hutchinson & O'Malley, 2007, p. 1098).
4. "Replication material," including research documentation and data that support the findings of this study, can be found at Gilbert (2024).
5. Crucially, cooperation is distinguishable from both collaboration and harmony. *Collaboration* implies a shared goal among the parties, unnecessary to the partnerships I explore (Staniland, 2012). *Harmony* implies that "actors' policies…*automatically* facilitate the attainment of others' goals" (Keohane, 2005, p. 51, emphasis in original). In other words, to *cooperate*, actors must adjust their behavior, but need not align their goals.
6. Interview with Gustavo Camargo, March 5, 2018.
7. Interview with "Jorge," July 21, 2023.
8. Interview with "Arturo," February 8, 2023.
9. Interview with Lucho Celis, May 13, 2019.
10. It thus serves as a "familiar" and "differentiated" concept (Gerring, 1999).
11. Despite the differences between firms and armed groups, such organizations share characteristics that render a comparison useful. Both organizations seek monopoly—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 (Clarke, 2019; Mironova, 2019; Zelinsky & Shubik, 2009). For instance, Clarke applies

McKinsey's "7S" framework to al-Qaeda, evaluating the seven elements that firms should align for success: strategy, structure, style, staff, skills, systems, and shared values (Clarke, 2019). Each of these features is variably present in armed groups, and the degree to which they align can shape group success.

12. Economics research alternately refers to this phenomenon as "concurrent" and "plural" sourcing (see Anderson & Weitz, 1986; Klein, 2005; Parmigiani, 2007; Serrano et al., 2018).
13. That both groups may be "expert" in violence serves as one key point of departure from Bapat and Bond (2012). While I similarly explain armed group cooperation in terms of comparative advantage, I do not assume that groups only trade when they lack capabilities. Similarly, Blair and Potter (2023) adopt the logic of comparative advantage to explain armed group cooperation, though they explain groups' varying *ideological* and material deficits. I also differ from both sets of authors in that the groups they consider share broader conflict objectives, not shared by the rebels and criminals I study.
14. While I assume that cooperation requires two willing partners, this article primarily focuses on decisions from the rebels' side. As I demonstrate below, criminal gangs typically did better by selling hostages to rebels than by negotiating ransoms themselves: their production costs were higher than the costs of trade, so there is less variation to explain.
15. 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; 2022). The "victim" is the person who is kidnapped, while the "target," the hostage's family, employer, or government, receives—and chooses whether to respond to—the kidnapper's demands. This article examines selective kidnappings, perpetrated against individuals. It does not explore the phenomenon known as *pesca milagrosa* ("miracle fishing"): when Colombian rebels set roadblocks and took hostages indiscriminately from stopped cars (Rubio, 2003, 2004).
16. Interview with Alvaro Villarraga, June 5, 2019.
17. This study's interview protocol was approved under George Washington University IRB# 061743 and Dartmouth 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 conducted interviews in Washington, D.C. and 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. For a detailed description of the data generation and data analysis in this study, see Gilbert (2024).
18. Some of Colombia's more formal criminal actors, including organized crime groups like the Medellín Cartel, did employ violent lobbying (Lessing, 2017).
19. Interview with Gustavo Camargo, March 5, 2018.
20. Interview with Alvaro Gomez, February 26, 2018.

21. Interview with “Duane,” May 29, 2019.
22. Interview with Martin Burye, February 7, 2018.
23. Interview with “Barba,” May 29, 2019.
24. Interview with “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.
25. Interview with “Hernán,” May 30, 2019.
26. Interview with “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.
27. Interview with “Jonatan,” May 30, 2019.
28. Interview with “Ernesto,” May 30, 2019.
29. Interview with “Jeni,” February 28, 2018.
30. Interview with Christoph Harnisch, July 27, 2017.
31. Interview with “Emiliano,” July 13, 2017.
32. Interviews with “Jeni,” February 28, 2018; Gustavo Camargo, March 5, 2018.
33. Interview with “Duane,” May 29, 2019.
34. Interview with “Jonathan,” May 30, 2019.
35. Interview USG-01, December 13, 2018.
36. Interview with “Andres,” July 21, 2023.
37. Interview with Olga Lucia Gomez, August 3, 2017.
38. Interview with “Erika,” May 29, 2019.
39. Interview with Alvaro Gomez, February 26, 2018.
40. Interview with Lucho Celis, May 13, 2019.
41. Interview with “Alice,” May 17, 2017.
42. Original data from Gilbert (2023) on international kidnappings of Americans also suggests that criminal kidnappings are significantly shorter than kidnappings by rebel or terrorist groups.
43. I am grateful to César Caballero, Viviana Arias, and Andrea Mateus from *Cifras y Conceptos* for sharing the CNMH duration and ransom demand data with me.
44. While the available data include only the original ransom *demand* (an amount inevitably higher than what targets paid), they still suggest that different kidnappers had different expectations for the ransoms they might coerce.
45. Interview with Luis Mozas, February 13, 2018.
46. Interview with Franklin Hernandez, February 17, 2023.
47. Interview with Lucho Celis, May 13, 2019.
48. Interview with Julieta Lemaitre, February 23, 2023.
49. Interview with Julieta Lemaitre, February 23, 2023.
50. Interview with Luis Mozas, February 13, 2018.
51. Interview with “Mathias,” February 16, 2023.
52. Interview with “Emmanuel,” February 22, 2023.
53. Remarks by Héctor Angulo, “Día 2, Audiencia de Reconocimiento - secuestros económicos perpetrados por las Farc-EP,” June 22, 2022.
54. Interview with Lucho Celis, May 13, 2019.
55. Interview with César Caballero, February 27, 2023.
56. Interview with “Mathias,” February 16, 2023.
57. Interview with General Alberto Mejía, July 18, 2017.

58. Interview with Colonel Samuel Salinas Valencia, July 25, 2017.
59. Interviews with “Barba” and “Kevin,” May 29, 2019.
60. Interview with Sergio Guzman, February 21, 2018.
61. Remarks by Julieta Lemaitre Ripoll, magistrada de la Sala de Reconocimiento, Jurisdicción Especial Para la Paz. Recording from “Audiencia de observaciones a versiones del antiguo Comando Conjunto Central–Farc-EP,” March 8, 2022.
62. Interview USG-12, January 30, 2023.
63. Interview USG-12, January 30, 2023.
64. I’m grateful to Rosalie Arcala Hall for this insight.
65. Interview USG-22, July 11, 2023.
66. Interview with David Rohde, April 6, 2024.
67. Interview with “David,” February 5, 2018.
68. Interview USG-22, July 11, 2023.

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