



## We Find the Organized Crime We're Looking For

Jay Albanese, Ph.D.

A global pandemic has resulted in a deluge of cases and even a few scientific studies of how the situation has been exploited by organized crime. These include a predictable array of schemes involving [fake virus cures](#), [counterfeit medicines](#), [cyberfrauds](#), re-organization of the drug [smuggling trade](#), new forms of [labor exploitation](#), and [wildlife](#) trafficking, among others.

What is missing from the current debate is the fact that organized crime can be found in nearly every sector of public and private life, if we look for it. If we focus on specific illicit products (e.g., drugs, stolen and banned property), it is difficult to find a product-market that has not been exploited by organized crime in some way. If you focus on specific illicit services (e.g., sex, medicines over the Internet, moving money), it is similarly impossible to find a market that does not face challenges posed by organized crime.

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but never the conduct we choose to overlook.*

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The problem is that we always find the organized crime we're looking for, but never the conduct we choose to overlook. Most commonly overlooked in our search for organized crime is the extent to which legitimate businesspersons and citizens engage, solicit, or organize themselves to exploit the existing demand for products and services---aggravated by the asymmetries of a pandemic. Consider the following questions:

- If you were interested in a drug that was illegal, or can be provided only by prescription (which you do not have), how difficult is it for you to obtain?
- If you were interested in illicit sex, labor, or money laundering of criminal proceeds, where would you go?

It is very likely you could find these illicit goods or services rather quickly either in-person or online. So who is providing these services?

In most cases, it is small-time providers, [groups](#) or [networks](#) looking to make fast cash illegally. Some providers [are connected](#) to larger organized crime enterprises, which handle the supply, transit, or delivery of these goods and services.

The conduct we choose to overlook in all this is the how these criminal groups (large and small) survive and make a profit. (This is in addition, of course, to our direct contribution to the organized crime problem itself by [creating the demand](#) for its goods and services.) These illicit activities are carried out by people who [seek corrupt advantage](#). There is a double standard often applied to corruption. We condemn public officials who engage in self-serving conduct in office, but somehow overlook the same conduct by private citizens. Both public and private corruption are major problems, but these are too often overlooked in our search for organized crime.

No matter what the criminal scheme, the operator(s) need to obtain a supply of the product or service, have the capability of delivering it to those who demand it, do it competitively in a way that does not produce attention-getting harm or costs, and also avoid detection by authorities. Most of these organized crime schemes are carried out at the local level, but ongoing schemes require protection from authorities through corruption at borders, of police, local inspectors, public officials, money handlers, and others who could otherwise disrupt the criminal scheme.

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We seek the organized crime we're looking for when we look only for criminal schemes and their operators, rather than those who make them part of organized crime by *protecting or facilitating their ongoing activity over time*. Without the [protection of legitimate actors](#), such as public officials and unscrupulous businesses, the bribes, extortion payments, and questionable money transfers that facilitate and protect illicit enterprises cannot continue. The figure below illustrates the relationship among the demand we create for illicit goods and services, how organized crime caters to that demand, and how public and private sector actors allow those criminal schemes to continue, grow, and escape detection.



The organized crime we're looking for is NOT the activity that perpetuates it. What makes organized crime a threat is its *continuing* nature, which is made possible only by the corruptible public and private sector individuals who allow that to occur. The organized crime we should be looking for, therefore, is the activity that permits criminal schemes to continue and enlarge into major criminal enterprises. The growth of organized crime lies at the feet of corrupt public officials and private sector actors who let it happen.

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[Jay Albanese](#), PhD, is a Professor and Criminologist at Virginia Commonwealth University's Wilder School of Government & Public Affairs. Recent books include [\*My Search for Meaning: A Professor, His Students, and 12 Great Conversations\*](#) and [\*Critical Thinking about Criminal Justice\*](#).



May 2020  
<http://criminologists-without-borders.org/commentary>