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GLOBAL

Crime and Justice in a Changing World

A GLOBAL ANALYSIS FROM UNICRI'S CRIME AND JUSTICE TRENDS STUDY

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About this Analysis

This Global Analysis forms part of UNICRI's Crime and Justice Trends Study, a research initiative launched in 2025 to provide a comparative, evidence-based assessment of how crime and criminal justice are evolving, across and within regions. The Study comprises nine regional studies, structured using the United Nations M49 geographic standard: Eastern and Southern Africa; Western and Middle Africa; Northern Africa and Western Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Northern America; Central and Southern Asia; Oceania; Europe; and Eastern and South-eastern Asia. The Study sought to identify trends that have emerged or accelerated over roughly the past decade, and that are significantly impactful or have the potential to become so.

Drawing on the findings of these nine regional studies, this Global Analysis provides a global assessment of major trends in crime and criminal justice, identifying commonalities and differences across regions as well as significant transregional and cross-cutting developments. It examines how broader shifts – including technological transformation, evolving forms of organized and transnational crime, environmental changes, urbanization, conflict and competing approaches to criminal justice – are reshaping the global crime and justice landscape.

"Increasingly blurred lines between licit and illicit markets

Executive Summary

As an integral part of UNICRI's Crime and Justice Trends Study, this Global Analysis Report aims to identify regional and transregional trends in crime and justice, as well as cross-cutting themes, emerging from the nine regional studies. At the global level, this report identifies momentous shifts in the commission of crime and corresponding responses by criminal justice systems. Changes in technological sophistication, wider availability of advanced cyber capabilities employed by criminals and justice sector actors, and increasingly blurred lines between licit and illicit markets coincide with challenges posed by environmental changes, urbanization dynamics, and the intersection of conflict, crime, and terrorism. Organized criminality is on the rise in many regions as criminal networks engage in poly-criminal activities leading to increases in drug trafficking, natural resource exploitation, migrant smuggling, and trafficking in persons. This stands in contrast to global decreases in forms of crime not associated with organized criminal activity, including homicide. Crime convergence dynamics have, however, led some parts of the globe to experience increases in violent crime at a time when post-COVID financial retrenchment and reductions in global assistance to criminal justice agencies have created increasing challenges to justice systems' ability to address transnational and domestic criminality.

Some forms of criminality, empowered by these broader dynamics, such as cybercrime and technology-enabled scams and frauds, have led to an explosion of global victimization – from those forced to engage in criminal activities to the billions of victims targeted by scams globally. These dynamics pose a challenge to a global community increasingly characterized by both multipolar approaches to criminal justice reform and more transactional approaches to counter-crime coordination. Concurrently, states are responding to increases in crime, real or perceived, with draconian measures that employ securitized tactics in policing, corrections management, and juvenile justice.

1. Methodology

In 2025, UNICRI launched its Crime and Justice Trends Study, an endeavour aimed at providing a comparative, evidence-based analysis of how crime and justice are evolving globally, region by region and across regions. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining interviews with a review of qualitative and quantitative secondary-source materials. The reports focused on trends in crime and criminal justice as well as five cross-cutting themes: conflict, crime and terrorism; environment and crime; urbanization; gender-based violence; and youth.

The Study sought to identify trends that have emerged or accelerated over roughly the past decade and that are significantly impactful or have the potential to become so. This horizon was applied flexibly, since timelines vary considerably by region and issue: some developments are recent and fast-moving, such as the spread of online scam centres to new regions, while others unfold over a decade or longer yet are especially consequential now, as with the interaction between illegal logging, deforestation and climate change.

A total of nine regional reports were developed to inform this global analysis, with countries and areas assigned to regional groupings according to the UN M49 standard for statistical convenience, namely: Eastern and Southern Africa; Western and Middle Africa; Northern Africa and Western Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Northern America; Central and Southern Asia; Oceania; Europe; and Eastern and South-eastern Asia. The M49 standard divides the globe into regions based on continental regions and then further divides them into sub-regions.[1]

The core structure of the research framework sought input from the Institutes of the United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme Network (hereafter PNIs). This approach ensured that regional organizations were foregrounded as sources of expertise on key crime, justice, and cross-cutting trends in their respective regions. UNICRI requested interviews (through verbal or written communication) with each of the 18 PNIs. Nine PNIs participated, representing a 50% response rate: staff from seven PNIs were interviewed, while representatives of two additional PNIs provided written responses to the interview questions. UNICRI staff conducted further interviews with regional experts, especially to incorporate expertise from regions without PNI representation, such as Southern Asia, for a total of 26 interviews and two written submissions received between October 2025 and February 2026. A full list of the organizations consulted is provided in Annex 1.

To identify written sources, UNICRI staff conducted searches using academic and general search engines and refined search terms according to relevance across the seven core research framework themes. UNICRI staff then used qualitative coding software (Atlas.ti) to code quotations in over 300 written sources using 428 individual codes (ranging from 1028 coded references to “crime trends” to one single reference for codes such as “mimetic spread,” which refers to the *modus operandi* of online scam centers spreading beyond the main region of focus, South-eastern Asia, to new areas such as Southern Africa). In addition to academic and grey literature, which formed the bulk of the coded sources, general media reporting was also consulted and incorporated. Such reporting was used particularly where evidence-based analysis was unavailable, in relation to recent incidents reported by the media or public affairs units of investigative agencies.

1 **United Nations Statistics Division,** Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use (M49). The assignment of countries or areas to specific groupings is for statistical convenience and does not imply any assumption by the United Nations regarding the political or other affiliation of countries or territories.

1.1 Limitations

Consultations were unevenly distributed across regions due to respondents' availability, as shown in the table below.

Regional or thematic lens	Interviews conducted/ Written submissions	Institutions
Africa	3	Institute for Security Studies (ISS)
Asia	5	Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice (KICJ); College for Criminal Law Science (CCLS) – written submission; United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI) – written submission; South Asian Institute of Crime and Justice Studies; Center for Governance Research
Latin America and the Caribbean	1	United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD)
Northern America	3	Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC); Center for Evidence-Based Policing (CEBCP); Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ)
Oceania	1	Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC)
Thematic and multi-regional	15	UNICRI – 6; Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) – 4; Basel Institute on Governance – 3; International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy (ICCLR) – 2

Two key limitations follow from the above, which should be considered when reading the report's findings. First, coverage reflects institutional availability rather than the distribution of the phenomena studied. The level of PNI engagement therefore varied across regions, with some regions, such as Europe; Northern Africa and Western Asia; and Southern and Central Asia, being less represented than others. Second, there are some structural gaps linked to PNI network membership, as no member institute covers Southern or Central Asia – a region comprising over a quarter of the world's population. To mitigate this limitation, consultations for Southern Asia were sought outside the network.

2. Key Findings

2.1 Crime Trends

Poly-criminality

Across the world, criminal networks, corrupt actors, and organized criminal groups are increasingly diversifying their activities as opportunities to exploit licit industries, take advantage of regulatory arbitrage to obtain illicit funds, and target victims across regions. These have expanded with globalization, the growing adoption of technologies and the digitalization of services. In regions across the world, this trend manifests in different ways depending on the resources (physical, human, and economic) available for exploitation and the regulatory arbitrage opportunities that networks exploit. In Eastern and Southern Africa, non-state armed actors are engaged in a variety of criminal illicit markets, while illicit arms facilitate transregional trafficking and smuggling in wildlife, drugs, people, minerals, and other goods. Cartels in Latin America, while often initially deriving profits from trafficking in cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, have become poly-criminal networks engaging in a wide range of criminal enterprises and activities, becoming closely intertwined with licit economies and using violence to sustain control of illicit and licit markets.[2] These activities extend beyond drug trafficking to a variety of illicit and licit markets, including agriculture, mining, alcohol and cigarette retail, wildlife and other natural resources.[3] Poly-criminality has also led to increased infiltration of licit businesses and industries, such as the fishing industry, where cartel knowledge of supply chains, relationships with licit industries, and linkages with corrupt actors have enabled the creation of profitable enterprises.[4] In other regions, such as Oceania, local and regional criminal actors, for example, outlaw motorcycle gangs, engage in activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, illegal gambling, arms smuggling, and trafficking in persons.[5] In Europe, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) has assessed that nearly one fifth (18%) of all criminal networks are poly-criminal.[6] The opportunities afforded by globalization create conditions in which increasingly connected networks, through diaspora relationships, digital communications and international travel, are able to identify opportunities arising from differences across markets and jurisdictions, expand their criminal enterprises, and leverage existing skill sets, such as supply chain exploitation, to conduct a myriad of criminal activities.

While some forms of transnational criminality, such as cybercrime, drug trafficking, and environmental crime have increased significantly in recent years, non-transnational crime, generally involving property and violent crime, has decreased in many regions around the world. Homicides, for example, which provide the best-measured global indicator of violence, have decreased from 5.9 per 100,000 people in 2015 to 5.2 in 2023, and under current trends are projected to decrease overall by 25% between 2015 and 2030. In some regions, however, homicide rates remain high, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, where, despite the local dimensions of such crime, these rates are frequently driven by the presence of organized crime, gangs, and transnational criminal groups.[7] These two regions alone account for roughly two-thirds of all global homicide victims.[8]

Crime convergence

In certain regions of the world, physical and geographical spaces have become convergence zones for criminality, where the macro-presence of criminal opportunities, weak or absent regulatory and enforcement oversight, and criminal networks or organized criminal groups capable and willing to exploit such opportunities combine to create conditions conducive to increased criminality. In South-eastern Asia, for example, recent years have seen cybercrime, such as cyber-enabled fraud, and financial crimes including illicit gambling and money laundering, converge on a mass scale in certain areas of the region, specifically parts of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar – creating hubs for some of the world's most complex criminal schemes. Criminal groups, often operating from Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or otherwise controlled territory, traffic thousands of individuals and engage in a range of cyberfraud schemes, including romance-investment fraud (so-called pig butchering) and crypto scams.[9] The convergence of such criminality in economic spaces with lax governance, such as SEZs or Free Trade Zones (FTZs), is a core element of the increasing exploitation of

2 **Institute for Economics & Peace,** Mexico Peace Index 2025, May 2025.

3 **V. Felbab-Brown (Brookings Institution),** China-linked Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking in Mexico, March 2022.

4 **Zeta Tijuana,** La pesca en manos del narco, February 2022.

5 **Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC),** A Crowded Space: Foreign Organized Crime Groups in the Pacific Islands, May 2024.

6 **Europol,** Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks, April 2024.

7 **S. Davies et al.,** Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups, Journal of Peace Research, 2024.

8 **United Nations,** The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025: Goal 16, 2025.

9 **CCLS, Beijing,** written submission, December 2025.

trade and governance frameworks in which regulatory controls may be deliberately weak to encourage business. Such environments can attract both licit and illicit industries, increasingly blurring the lines between them.

Even regions and countries with more advanced and resilient criminal justice systems are increasingly subject to infiltration and exploitation by criminal networks. The complexity of criminal activity, the pervasiveness of criminal intrusion, and the porosity of criminal justice systems considered to have higher levels of resiliency are alarming.[10] Some examples include the infiltration of supply chains, including seaports and other supply chain nodes, by transnational criminal networks in countries and regions less accustomed to such threats, such as in Europe,[11] as well as the exploitation of licit economic sectors, such as real estate, construction, and gambling, in Oceania and North America.

Trade exploitation

Criminals, separatists, and terrorists exploit weak border controls, corrupt supply chains, maritime transportation networks, SEZs, and FTZs through regulatory and jurisdictional arbitrage and the illicit taxation of trafficked commodities. In regions all over the world, criminal groups exploit licit trade by imposing taxes on the movement of products and people. In the Sahel, for example, terrorist groups control illicit trafficking routes for motorbikes, fuel, gold, and drugs rather than engaging directly in trafficking.[12] In Haiti, where gangs now control large parts of the capital and increasingly the countryside, targeting licit trade zones through which commodities transit is a critical mechanism for generating profits.[13] In many other countries, seaports are targeted by criminal networks to place operatives and control activities, often primarily to enable highly profitable cocaine trafficking, in places as disparate as Antwerp,[14]

10 **Basel Institute on Governance,** interview, November 2025.

11 **GI-TOC,** Why Is Drug-Related Violence Spilling Over into Germany?, September 2024; **European Union Drugs Agency and WCO RILO Western Europe,** Seaports: Monitoring the EU's Floodgates for Illicit Drugs, June 2025; **S. Davies et al.,** Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups, Journal of Peace Research, 2024; **El País,** Drug Traffickers Defy the French State, November 2025; **GI-TOC,** France in the Crossfire, June 2024.

12 **UNICRI,** The Nexus Between Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime, May 2023; **UNODC,** Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment – Sahel: Drug Trafficking, 2024.

13 **Bertelsmann Stiftung**, BTI 2026 Country Report — Haiti, 2026; **UNODC**, Explainer: Organized Crime and Gang Violence in Haiti, January 2026; **International Crisis Group,** Undoing Haiti's Deadly Gang Alliance, Latin America and Caribbean Report No. 110, December 2025.

14 **European Union Drugs Agency and WCO RILO Western Europe,** Seaports: Monitoring the EU's Floodgates for Illicit Drugs, June 2025.

smaller regional maritime ports in the Cape Town region,[15] and Guayaquil.[16] In fact, the licit trade function of the physical zone and its utility for illicit trafficking operations are key indicators when determining whether criminal exploitation is taking place. Where such a focus on trade control coincides with territorial and governance aspirations, control of licit and essential commodities enables these groups to build legitimacy that, in turn, strengthens their broader illicit governance structures.[17]

As criminal networks identify less frequently used trade routes, including seaports that have been underutilized by criminal groups, often in countries with lower levels of resilience to organized crime, transit zones are increasingly becoming destinations for drugs, resulting in significant public health impacts on local populations. In regions as disparate as Oceania,[18] West Africa,[19] and Southern Africa,[20] urban areas are seeing increasing levels of drug use and addiction as transnational criminal networks move larger quantities of drugs through these regions. One of the consequences of such a shift in illicit trade is that less frequently used transit zones are often located in countries and regions with fewer resources to manage the rise in addiction and the associated public health impacts on local populations. Attributing this rerouting of drug flows to specific actors is not always possible, but where evidence exists, it points to transnational criminal organizations based in Latin America as key drivers. Cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) have adopted what analysts describe as a "foreign policy" approach, namely deliberately cultivating relationships with local criminal groups, brokers, and corrupt officials in transit and destination countries (much as states cultivate diplomatic and commercial ties), in order to open new markets and establish new supply chain and trade routes.[21]

Criminal networks can adapt faster than many regulatory and enforcement systems, including those that require transnational or private sector coordination. The use of financial mechanisms operating outside of the formal global financial system, such as virtual and digital currencies,[22] along with more widespread shifts in trading relationships, is creating increasing opportunities for organized crime groups to exploit gaps between jurisdictions, trade systems, and regulatory regimes to move illicit goods, launder money, and evade enforcement.[23] Where cooperation between jurisdictions is slow, partial, or politically constrained, such limitations become exploitable opportunities for criminal networks, which route their activities accordingly.

Hybrid governance

In those regions where criminal groups have also sought territorial control, such as in parts of Latin America, the Sahel, South-eastern Asia, and Eastern and Southern Africa, control of licit trade routes is a mechanism to gain legitimacy among local populations, even as these same populations are exploited by the groups for financial gain or as a source of labour. When these activities empower groups to engage in transregional criminal activity, the implications have a global reach.

15 **GI-TOC,** Western Cape Gang Monitor No. 9, June 2026.

16 **InSight Crime,** How a New Port Created Ecuador's Latest Criminal Epicenter, November 2025.

17 **Institute for Security Studies,** Links between Violent Extremism and Illicit Activities in Côte d'Ivoire, August 2023.

18 **GI-TOC,** interview, November 2025; **The Telegraph,** Why a Tropical Paradise Has the World's Fastest-Growing HIV Epidemic, August 2025.

19 **G.O. Emmanuel, F.T. Akinsolu, O.R. Abodunrin and O.C. Ezechi,** Prevalence and Patterns of Substance Use in West Africa: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, PLOS Global Public Health, December 2024.

20 **A. Scheibe (ESACD),** Prevention and Treatment of Drug Dependence in Eastern and Southern Africa, May 2022; **S. Haysom (ENACT),** From the Maskani to the Mayor: The Political Economy of Heroin Markets in East and Southern Africa, February 2020.

21 **V. Felbab-Brown (Brookings Institution),** The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa, August 2022; **V. Felbab-Brown (Brookings Institution),** The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part IV: Europe's Cocaine and Meth Markets, September 2022.

22 **TRM Labs,** 2026 Crypto Crime Report, January 2026.

23 **AML-CFT.net,** Tariffs: How Rising Duties Fuel Trade-Based Money Laundering, February 2026; **IISS,** Organised Crime Will Benefit from the Global Trade War, June 2025.

Criminal groups involved in cybercrime at scale in South-eastern Asia and operating from poorly governed and unregulated SEZs have led to a proliferation of cyber victimization.[24] Illicit economies such as these are having a distortionary impact on broader economic and governance systems and, in some cases, have begun to dwarf licit economic sectors. In Cambodia, for example, formal estimates of illicit proceeds from cybercrime, including scam centers involving forced criminality, and illegal gambling operations range from US$12.5 billion to US$19 billion per year, or as much as 60% of gross domestic product (GDP).[25] The mimetic spread of the technologies and operational model is leading to the expansion of criminal activity with global impacts where there is a confluence of language-proficient labour, often involving trafficked persons; poor governance and regulatory oversight; and capable and willing criminal actors. In Latin America, Mexico-based cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG, along with criminal groups such as the Comando Vermelho and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) control parts of urban centers and territory in rural and exurban areas. Drug production and trafficking are key sources of income, while profits from illicit transnational trade enable the diversification of criminal portfolios into natural resource exploitation, illicit mining and trafficking of high-value commodities, and expansion into agricultural commodities.[26]

Emerging threats from technology

Criminal and non-state armed groups are adopting new tools and methods that mirror those used by licit security actors, often drawing on lessons from local yet globally

24 **CCLS, Beijing,** written submission, December 2025; **GI-TOC,** Compound Crime: Cyber Scam Operations in Southeast Asia, May 2025.

25 **J. Sims (Humanity Research Consultancy),** Policies and Patterns: State-Abetted Transnational Crime in Cambodia as a Global Security Threat, May 2025.

26 **Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública,** Cartografias da Violência na Amazônia 2025, November 2025; **Igarapé Institute,** The Ecosystem of Environmental Crime in the Amazon, April 2022.

informed conflicts. The growing accessibility of commercial technologies, such as drones,[27] and the wider diffusion of the capabilities to develop, produce and distribute them across a wide range of countries may reduce the effectiveness of export controls, as these capabilities are no longer concentrated in a small number of technologically advanced countries.[28] The increasing of open-source AI, coding services available for hire, and the ease with which online platforms can be developed and used to commit crimes have broadening access to and adoption of technology among criminal groups, enabling victimization on a global scale. Crime-as-a-service is amplified through cyber and digital platforms, including encrypted communications and payment methods operating largely outside conventional financial oversight, such as digital assets, which facilitate crime in the physical domain as well as cybercrime, money laundering, and other services supporting transnational and localized criminal activity.[29]

The initial barriers to entry for criminal networks have decreased exponentially due to technological advances, including the use of generative AI and cybercrime-as-a-service models, as well a ready supply of digitally literate, and often English-speaking, jobseekers from all over the world. Technological advances, both employed and developed by these groups, include criminal innovations, such as bespoke software that enables cybercriminals to remain flexible and adapt to enforcement schemes.

The cost of such criminality is increasing as victimization is amplified by the global

27 **Institute for Security Studies,** interview, October 2025; **B. Figueiredo (UNIDIR),** The Use of Uncrewed Aerial Systems by Non-State Armed Groups: Exploring Trends in Africa, January 2024.

28 **Al Jazeera,** Can Nigeria's Drone Industry Deliver Africa's Defence Sovereignty?, July 2026.

29 **E. Mauko, S.D. Johnson, E. Mariconti**, Cybercrime as a Service: A Scoping Review, 2026; **Europol**, The Evolving Threat Landscape. How Encryption, Proxies And Ai Are Expanding Cybercrime – Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) 2026, April 2026.

adoption of these *modi operandi*. While estimates vary drastically depending on the methodologies used (from US$172 billion in 2017 to US$8 trillion in 2021, with estimates as high as US$10.5 trillion in 2025),[30] the impact on societies is understudied as direct costs associated with such cybercrime may not account for numerous indirect costs, ranging from the impact on the families of trafficked persons and those subjected to forced labour to broader effects on society and economies as risks are introduced into affected economic sectors. Just one subset of cyber-criminality, online scams and fraud, has had a massive global impact on victimization. In 2025, the Global Anti-Scam Alliance reported that, based on surveys conducted in 42 countries, 57% of adults worldwide had experienced a scam and 23% had lost money in the previous 12 months.[31] Estimates of victims' losses reached as high as US$1 trillion from scams in 2024.

Cost of crime

In some regions and countries, an important trend is the growing cost of crime, including the effects of criminal infiltration on societies, the impact on victims, and the costs incurred by justice systems in responding to increasingly complex criminality, which place a significant burden on many societies. In Latin America, for example, the cost of crime was 3.44% of GDP in 2022, or US$192 billion, equivalent to 78% of the region's education expenditure, and twice its expenditure on social-assistance programs.[32] In North America, specifically the United States, the cost of violence alone is estimated at US$2.6 trillion, or 3% of GDP.[33] In other countries where high-quality estimates exist, such as South Africa, the costs are also significant, amounting to 10% of GDP.[34] Such losses are heavily attributed to violent crime, but the costs of cybercrime and other forms of emerging crime driven by technology adoption are also increasing. As a further sign of growing pressure on societies, the economic impact of violence, of which crime is one component, is increasing as conflicts in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East place additional strain on societies and contribute to criminogenic conditions both within and beyond affected countries. In 2025, the economic impact of violence on the global economy was US$21.8 trillion, or 10.5% of global GDP, an increase of 3.2% over 2024.[35] Violent conflict also intersects with domestic crime dynamics in ways that increase the costs to societies, as illustrated by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.[36] For example, in Russia, following the 2022 escalation of conflict with Ukraine, significant increases in homicide and violence, attributed to returning war veterans, contributed to high violent crime rates in 2024 and 2025.[37] Likewise, in Ukraine, the increase of domestic violence following the start of the full-scale conflict was attributed to veterans.[38] In other regions, conflict and violence have increasingly severe impacts on vulnerable populations, such as women and young girls (see 2.3.4 Gender-based violence section).

30 **World Bank**, A Review of the Economic Costs of Cyber Incidents, 2024.

31 **Global Anti-Scam Alliance (GASA)**, Global State of Scams 2025 Report, 2025.

32 **S.M. Perez-Vincent et al. (Inter-American Development Bank),** The Costs of Crime and Violence: Expanding and Updating Estimates for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2024.

33 **T.R. Miller, M.A. Cohen, D.I. Swedler, B. Ali and D.V. Hendrie,** Incidence and Costs of Personal and Property Crimes in the USA, 2017, Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis, February 2021.

34 **World Bank,** Safety First: The Economic Cost of Crime in South Africa, 2023.

35 **Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP),** Global Peace Index 2026, June 2026.

36 **A. Kupatadze and E. Marat (SOC ACE, University of Birmingham),** Criminal Geographies: How the Russia-Ukraine War Has Reshaped Global Crime Networks, SOC ACE Research Paper No. 40, March 2026.

37 **Vot Tak,** Территория беззакония: преступления российских военных [in Russian], March 2026; **United24 Media,** Serious Crime Hits 15-Year High in Russia Following Mass Return of Ex-Convicts from the Frontlines, July 2025; **A. Kupatadze and E. Marat,** The Boomerang Effect, March 2026.

38 **Gwara Media,** Учотиричі зросла кількість випадків домашнього насильства в Україні [in Ukrainian], July 2026.

2.2 Criminal Justice Trends

Securitized criminal justice systems

Across regions, criminal justice systems are increasingly framed through security, stability, and state control rather than the rule of law or human rights. In the post-Cold War period, a broad consensus emerged at the multilateral level and among many post-Soviet and post-colonial nations around rights-based and accountable policing,[39] the introduction and institutionalization of the rule of law, and a move away from authoritarian approaches to justice. In many regions, this consensus is fraying. Police are increasingly employing militarized tactics and equipment in regions as disparate as Southern Africa, North America, Europe, and elsewhere.[40] Such policing tactics are further empowered by the deployment of military and paramilitary forces in counter-crime operations. The consensus around the rule of law has increasingly frayed when confronted with the security challenges posed by criminal groups committing high levels of violence, pushing many populations to support more militarized and punitive approaches to criminal justice system operations, from the use of military tactics to increasingly harsh sentences.[41] In some regions, transnational criminal activity, including illicit drug trafficking and migrant smuggling, has had real impacts on human security. At the same time, broader migration flows – which are distinct from migrant smuggling and largely unrelated to criminal activity – have reached record levels in recent years, including into North America and Europe.[42] Although research consistently finds little empirical support for a link between migration and crime, public perceptions associating the two have hardened,[43] contributing to increasingly securitized approaches to migration management,[44] both within domestic enforcement regimes and through the export of securitized approaches to third countries, where similar measures are increasingly being adopted.[45]

In corrections, the exploitation of weak systems, notably by organized criminal groups, has led to decreased state control over correctional institutions,[46] particularly in Latin America and Southern Africa, although not exclusively. Correctional systems are responding with more punitive approaches to incarceration, in contrast to longstanding trends towards rehabilitation. This shift is occurring alongside increasing rates of pre-trial detention and incarceration in Latin America, Oceania, and

39 **National Institute of Justice,** Democratizing the Police Abroad: What to Do and How to Do It, June 2001; **D.H. Bayley,** Changing the Guard: Developing Democratic Police Abroad, November 2005; **OSCE,** Guidebook on Democratic Policing, May 2008; **OHCHR,** Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, 1979; **United Nations,** Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations ("Brahimi Report"), August 2000; **United Nations,** The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2004/616, August 2004; **United Nations,** Securing Peace and Development: The Role of the United Nations in Supporting Security Sector Reform: Report of the Secretary-General, January 2008; **United Nations,** A New Partnership Agenda: Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping, July 2009.

40 **DefenceWeb,** SANDF Crime-Fighting Deployment to Include the Eastern Cape, February 2026; **Foreign Affairs,** The Perils of Militarizing Law Enforcement, February 2026; **G. Lamb,** Police Militarisation and the 'War on Crime' in South Africa, Journal of Southern African Studies 44(5), September 2018; **Al Jazeera,** At Least 31 Dead, 532 Arrested in Kenya's Anti-Government Protests, July 2025; **CSIS,** Taking Charge: Gen Z Leads Historic Protests in Kenya, June 2024

41 **J.D. Rosen and S. Cutrona,** Understanding Support for Mano Dura Strategies: Lessons from Brazil and Colombia, September 2021; **J. Corrales and W. Freeman,** How Organized Crime Threatens Latin America, Journal of Democracy 35(4), October 2024; **S. Cutrona, L. Dammert and J.D. Rosen,** Conceptualizing Mano Dura in Latin America, Latin American Politics and Society 67(2), October 2024.

42 **OECD,** International Migration Outlook 2025, November 2025; **OECD,** International Migration Outlook 2024, November 2024.

43 **K. Benier and A. Higginson,** The Myth of Australia's Migrant Youth Gang: Examining the Perceived Association Between Ethnicity and Gangs, Journal of Youth Studies 28(7), February 2024; **M. Sydes,** Revitalized or Disorganized? Unpacking the Immigration-Crime Link in a Multiethnic Setting, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 54(5), March 2017; **M. Sydes,** Immigration, Ethnicity, and Neighborhood Violence: Considering Both Concentration and Diversity Effects, Race and Justice 12, September 2019; **C. Kubrin and G. Ousey,** Immigration and Crime in Comparative Perspective: An Emerging Framework for Research, Crime and Justice, August 2025.

44 **Niskanen Center**, The Impact of Reassigning 6,700 Federal Workers to Immigration, August 2025.

45 **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung North Africa,** Ruthless and Illegal: Algeria Tightens Expulsion Practices, March 2023; **Migration Policy Institute,** Tense Neighbors, Algeria and Morocco Have Divergent Migration Histories, May 2023; **Business Insider Africa,** Illegal Migrants Face Stricter Rules as Africa's Key Transit Hub Plans 60,000 Monthly Deportations, December 2025; **Al Jazeera,** In Tunisia, Refugees and Migrants Are Expelled to the Desert, Left Helpless, September 2024.

46 **GI-TOC,** Illicit Frontiers: Criminal Governance in the Amazon's Tri-Border Region, November 2024.

sub-Saharan Africa.[47] Finally, security concerns and public perceptions of crime have also led to increasingly punitive approaches to juvenile justice. Although crime rates in many countries have declined over the long term, temporary increases during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified public concern, and perceptions of rising crime have outlasted the spikes themselves, contributing to measures such as the lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility in countries across Oceania,[48] East Asia,[49] and Latin America.[50]

Technology and surveillance are reshaping justice systems

Just as criminal actors are adopting new technological tools, law enforcement agencies and other criminal justice institutions are also increasingly using advanced technologies to reshape how states conduct criminal justice system operations and judicial processes. This encompasses the expanded deployment of policing hardware and surveillance technologies, such as automated licence plate readers, and AI-enabled camera systems used to identify and track individuals through facial recognition and other means, as well as more conventional technologies leveraged through integrated technology platforms such as real-time crime centres, watch centres, or other criminal justice technology spaces. The increasing use of technology by enforcement agencies is both a response to perceived and real security and crime challenges, and in some states in adaptation to increasingly strict measures aimed at maintaining government control. Other advances include the use of integrated case-management systems, a development that may enable more effective use of criminal justice system capabilities across traditionally siloed sectors. In some states, the use of AI to alleviate the burden of many

47 **Penal Reform International,** Global Prison Trends 2025, May 2025.

48 **Australian Institute of Family Studies,** Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility in Australia, July 2025.

49 **People's Daily,** Teenager's killing puts juvenile crime back in the spotlight**,** April 2024.

50 **E. Delmage et al.,** The Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility Internationally – History, Systems and the Future, Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health 36(1), February 2026.

routine tasks performed by criminal justice system practitioners has also introduced new ways of working across many sectors, from pre-trial detention tools to judicial reasoning and the identification of relevant case-law precedents. However, even as technologies are being adopted by enforcement agencies, agency capacity is lagging behind the criminal use of emerging technologies, especially in countries with sizeable digital populations but under-resourced agencies.

While numerous pioneering advanced systems are increasing the technological sophistication of many agencies, often at sub-national levels, the regulatory, oversight, and governance frameworks required to address the new ability to gather, make sense of, and analyze evidence have not kept pace. In the United States, for example, many states are adopting advanced capabilities, often integrating existing data in novel ways alongside new technologies. However, the automation of policing activities such as police report writing may create significant risks if AI hallucinations lead to evidentiary errors, particularly in the absence of commensurate regulatory oversight at the federal or state level.[51] Furthermore, the emphasis on the introduction of emerging technologies and practices, such as predictive policing,[52] may come at the expense of community-focused policing built on trust and long-standing principles of community policing and evidence-based approaches.

Paradigm competition in criminal justice reform

The principles of rights-based and accountable policing and the rule of law, which have undergirded many countries' criminal justice systems, are shifting as criminal justice agencies around the world are subject to an emerging trend of multipolar approaches to externally assisted criminal justice reform. For much of the period since the end of the Cold War, international support in this field, while diverse in its delivery, converged around a common set of reference points grounded in the United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice, among them the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials,[53] the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms,[54] and the Nelson Mandela Rules,[55] and more recently the commitments set out in Sustainable Development Goal 16.[56] These shifts towards more multipolar approaches are taking place against a broader backdrop of changing governance dynamics across regions, although the scale and characterization of these shifts remain contested.[57]

That convergence around a common set of reference points is now becoming less cohesive, as the number and variety of actors providing training, equipment, technology transfer, and institutional support to criminal justice agencies have expanded considerably at the bilateral, regional, and international levels. These actors also differ not only in the resources they bring, but also in the models of policing and justice administration that their assistance embeds. Where providers work from different assumptions, criminal justice institutions are presented not with a single

51 **Stateline,** Police Use of Artificial Intelligence Grows as Rules Lag Behind, June 2026.

52 **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine,** Law Enforcement Use of Predictive Policing Approaches: Proceedings of a Workshop, 2025.

53 **United Nations,** Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, General Assembly resolution 34/169, annex, December 1979.

54 **United Nations,** Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, August–September 1990.

55 **United Nations,** Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), General Assembly resolution 70/175, annex, December 2015.

56 **United Nations,** Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, General Assembly resolution 70/1, September 2015.

57 **A.T. Little and A. Meng,** Measuring Democratic Backsliding, PS: Political Science & Politics 57(2), January 2024.

model but with several, and the coherence of the shared framework weakens accordingly.

The consequences of this shift are not uniformly negative, since recipient governments now have more partners to choose from and can weigh the benefits of engaging with specific interlocutors; and the leverage any single provider can exercise is correspondingly reduced. Recipient countries are increasingly attuned to these dynamics and able to draw on capabilities and capacities from different partners to meet their needs, often matching sources of support to specific requirements rather than accepting comprehensive reform packages. Whether this strengthens locally grounded reform or fragments the normative baseline against which reform is assessed is likely to vary by context. The effectiveness of bilateral, regional, and multilateral support now depends more closely on how potential partners engage with local political conditions, conflict dynamics, and the institutional capacity of recipient countries to ensure that the support provided aligns with their needs.

A parallel shift is visible in operational cooperation. Across regions, coordination among states and agencies, including intraregional coordination, is increasingly uneven and shaped by geopolitical tensions.[58] Even as organized criminal groups grow in sophistication and the threats they pose increase, the mechanisms, partnerships, and relationships that could address these threats are in flux. In some regions, increasingly militarized approaches to counter-crime efforts have contributed to a shift in relations between countries, from close partnerships to increasingly transactional forms of cooperation, often shaped by national interests, such as economic or trade interests, with only a tangential relationship to counter-crime efforts. While many countries recognize that transnational crime is a shared threat, cooperation is often hindered by distrust, political rivalries, and competing strategic interests.

This is not to suggest that global cooperation has stalled: international instruments, capacity-building programmes, and coordinated cross-border operations continue to support criminal justice cooperation, including on emerging technologies across policing, judicial, and correctional systems. Nevertheless, where broader multilateral momentum and bilateral support have waned, regional institutions and policing networks have absorbed some of the strain. Regional bodies can help bridge legal, linguistic, and political divides to address organized crime in ways that may be more effective than external efforts developed without regional needs at the forefront. Examples of such regional efforts include initiatives in East Africa to establish Common Standards for Policing across East African Community Member States.[59] While in West Africa, the Network of Central Authorities and Prosecutors facilitated more than 1,000 mutual legal assistance requests between 2013 and 2023, though the conclusion of resulting cases remains challenging.[60] In Central Asia, organizations such as the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre support regional counternarcotics coordination and information sharing among Central Asian states, Russia, and Azerbaijan.[61]

58 **Y. Dandurand,** Rebooting International Criminal Justice Cooperation Against Illicit Trade and Financial Crime, Journal of Illicit Trade, Financial Crime, and Compliance, 2025.

59 **African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum,** Common Standards for Policing in Eastern Africa: Kenya, 2022.

60 **UNODC,** West African Network of Central Authorities and Prosecutors (WACAP): Overview; **ENACT,** Measuring the treatment: The UNTOC in Africa— Research Paper 38, June 2023; **UNODC,** Digest of Cases of International Cooperation in Criminal Matters Involving the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime as a Legal Basis, 2021.

61 **CARICC,** Bulletin No. 250 [in Russian], 2025.

2.3 Cross-cutting Themes

2.3.1 Conflict, crime and terrorism

Terrorist and insurgent groups often rely on illicit economies for financing, territorial control, and recruitment rather than operating separately from criminal markets. In regions such as the Sahel, extremist groups benefit from arms trafficking, kidnapping, and illegal gold markets, while in Southern Africa, extremists finance their operations through the trafficking of natural resources, such as illicit rosewood exports and precious gemstones. In other regions, such as South-eastern Asia, armed non-state actors and armed militias support themselves through methamphetamine production, illegal mining, and timber trafficking. Across many of these regions, a unifying trend is the importance of arms trafficking, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is a deeply entrenched illicit market and underpins many of the conflict trends in the Sahel and Eastern Africa in particular. Arms trafficking is a key driver of instability and the most significant illicit market in regions with high levels of mortality, conflict, and instability.[62]

Conflict zones are increasingly transnational crime zones, especially in an interconnected world where illicit trafficking relies on supply chain routes through underregulated or poorly governed spaces, which are often also sites of internal conflict, terrorist activity, or separatist movements. Cartels and organized criminal groups in Latin America have adopted "foreign policy" style dimensions, seeking to establish connections with groups along critical supply chain routes, in West Africa and the Sahel in particular, but also in Oceania, Asia, and Europe. Transnational criminal groups and terrorist actors are also increasingly interlinked, not necessarily through joint activity, but through overlapping illicit economies and the adoption of one another's tactics, techniques, and procedures. Research on the nexus between organized crime and terrorism characterizes these interactions as a continuum, ranging from coexistence and opportunistic cooperation to competition and, in some contexts, deeper convergence.[63] Cartels based in Mexico, for example, the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG, have adopted terrorist-style tactics of extreme violence as they seek to control territory and contest the power of the Mexican state.

The interactions between transnational criminal groups and non-State armed groups in conflict settings can also take different forms, including involvement in or cooperation around activities such as drug trafficking, illicit trade, and money laundering across multiple regions. For instance, Hezbollah has long been associated with international criminal networks, involved in stolen vehicle trafficking, drug trafficking, and trade-based money laundering across North America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.[64]

In addressing the intersections between conflict, crime, and terrorism, purely militarized or securitized responses have often proved insufficient to effectively tackle the underlying dynamics in affected regions. Criminal economies are often embedded in local livelihoods and governance structures, meaning that force-based responses alone may fail to reduce instability. In North Africa and the Sahel, for example, migrant smuggling has become a significant source of income and employment for communities along key routes, making control over these routes lucrative and complicating efforts to reduce the impact of this illicit market through securitized approaches.[65] In other regions, such as Southern Asia, separatist groups often sustain themselves through the taxation of illicit trade, while local economies may also

62 **GI-TOC,** West Africa Illicit Hub Mapping, 2025; **UNODC,** Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment – TOCTA Sahel, 2022.

63 **UNICRI,** Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus Between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa, May 2026.

64 **UNICRI,** The Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America, June 2024.

65 **GI-TOC**, The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: Assessing the Collapse of the Human-Smuggling Industry in Libya and the Central Sahel, April 2019; **Clingendael Institute,** Niger's Repeal of the 2015-36 Anti-Smuggling Law, July 2024.

depend heavily on informal cross-border markets; impeding these flows through securitized approaches may have an adverse economic impact on local populations.[66] States often seek to modulate their enforcement priorities in these circumstances, focusing on particular illicit markets, such as illicit drug trafficking, while adapting enforcement approaches to other illicit activities that may be closely embedded in local economies and livelihoods, including, in some contexts, migrant smuggling.[67]

2.3.2 Environment and crime

The intersections between environmental change and crime are manifold. One of the key dynamics observed globally is that environmental shifts due to climate change do not lead directly to criminal activity. Rather, climate-related pressure on populations may create conditions, such as poverty, displacement, and resource scarcity, which criminal and extremist groups can exploit. In regions where livelihoods have been disrupted by climate-related impacts, especially where farming and herding are in decline, such as the Sahel and Eastern Africa, extremist groups exploit these pressures to identify and recruit disaffected and displaced individuals and compound existing hardship by controlling increasingly scarce water and other natural resources.[68] Environmental changes may also be exacerbated by state mismanagement of resources intersecting with climate change, leading to conflict dynamics. In Syria, for example, prolonged drought combined with poorly managed resources contributed to displacement and unrest in the period preceding the Syrian Civil War.[69]

Alongside the conflict dynamics exacerbated by environmental changes, organized criminal groups also increasingly exploit vulnerable populations facing significant internal and cross-border displacement. Migrant smuggling is a key criminal market that has benefited from the economic, agricultural, and labour impacts associated with climate change. For example, changes in fisheries, including declining stocks due to overfishing and changes in sea temperatures shifting traditional fishing grounds into new areas in Latin America, North Africa, and Oceania, have led fishers to engage in various illicit trafficking activities, from drug trafficking to migrant smuggling.[70]

Alongside exploiting vulnerabilities created by environmental change, criminal and terrorist groups also turn to natural resource markets as a source of revenue. Growing resource scarcity, high commodity prices, and regulatory arbitrage can make these illicit markets particularly attractive, offering lower risks and higher returns. Illicit economies tied to timber, wildlife, mining, drugs, and waste trafficking have all become major drivers of corruption, violence, and environmental degradation and impact worldwide. The resulting harm on flora and fauna may have significant consequences extending far beyond the regions in which species and resources are targeted. For example, deforestation in the Amazon, Central Africa, and Oceania has been linked to broader climatic changes, including in rainfall patterns and increased wildfires,[71] as reduced forest cover leads to more severe drought conditions. These effects, in turn, can have profound impacts for communities at the local, regional and global levels.

66 **GI-TOC,** Crossing the Line: Geopolitics and Criminality at the India–Myanmar Border, November 2020.

67 **Clingendael Institute,** Niger's Repeal of the 2015-36 Anti-Smuggling Law, July 2024.

68 **RUSI,** Crime, Terror and Insecurity in Mozambique A Bottom-Up Analysis of Local Perceptions, June 2025.

69 **J. Selby,** Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War, Part II: The Jazira's Agrarian Crisis, Geoforum, vol. 101, 2019.

70 **InSight Crime,** The Ecuador Fishermen Snatched Away by US Drug Warriors, December 2019; **The New Humanitarian**, 'The sea is dead': How fishing and migration collide on Tunisia's shores, September 2020.

71 **T.-H. Lee et al.,** The Potential Influence of Maritime Continent Deforestation on El Niño-Southern Oscillation: Insights from Idealized Modeling Experiments, Geophysical Research Letters 50, October 2023; **A. Shapiro et al.,** Small Scale Agriculture Continues to Drive Deforestation and Degradation in Fragmented Forests in the Congo Basin (2015–2020), Land Use Policy 134, November 2023; **UNODC,** Global Analysis on Crimes that Affect the Environment – Part 2a: Forest Crimes: Illegal Deforestation and Logging, April 2025.

2.3.3 Urbanization

Rapid and unregulated urbanization creates opportunities for organized crime and facilitates the expansion of illicit economies. Fast-growing cities, especially where governance is weak and infrastructure is inadequate, have the potential to become hubs for criminal markets, corruption, and illicit finance. Such urban areas present myriad opportunities for criminal networks, ranging from investments in construction and real estate to the exploitation of local services and resources through waste-management contracts, control of dump sites, or access to water resources. Real estate, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where urbanization is driving demand for housing, is a market that has been targeted by various types of organized criminal groups, including those with close ties to state officials.[72] The real estate market, for example, is a significant site for laundering proceeds from drug trafficking and corruption in different parts of the world, including Oceania, West and Southern Africa, and Latin America. In some regions, the growth of urban centres is a direct result of their geographic location and other dynamics that make them more important for illicit markets, such as the city of Sarmada on the Syrian-Turkish border,[73] which grew nearly tenfold in population, or the city of Kufra in Eastern Libya, where the smuggling economy is now an important driver of urban development.[74] However, urbanization in and of itself is not an underlying dynamic that has led to increases in crime. Urban crime dynamics differ significantly across regions and are shaped by local political, economic, and social conditions. The impact of urbanization on crime depends heavily on governance, patterns of inequality, demographic change, and local criminal structures. Some countries, including those that have experienced internal displacement leading to rural-urban migration, have seen decreases in certain types of crime, sometimes associated with the protective effect of community solidarity as internally displaced communities re-establish themselves in urban areas.[75] However, where urbanization coincides with the presence of gangs or organized crime groups seeking to control territory and key supply chain nodes, particularly in port cities playing an important role in international drug trafficking, violence has increased sharply, especially in some Latin American countries that had previously experienced comparatively low levels of violence associated with drug trafficking.[76]

Nonetheless, even in urban areas affected by high levels of violence, municipalities often display some of the most innovative approaches to crime reduction in the world, with prominent examples found across Latin American cities. In Mexico City, the Alto al Fuego programme has adapted focused deterrence: pairing direct engagement with those at highest risk of gun violence with credible enforcement and access to social support at the neighbourhood level. Similarly, São Paulo's sustained homicide decline from the early 2000s has been linked to a combination of data-driven policing, firearms restrictions, and municipal prevention measures.[77]

72 **UNODC,** Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment – Sahel: Drug Trafficking, 2023; **UNICRI,** The Nexus Between Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime: North Africa and the Sahel, and Latin America: A Brief Introduction, Freedom From Fear Magazine, May 2023; **Institute for Security Studies,** Drugs, Real Estate and Money Laundering in Senegal, ISS Today, January 2022; **Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (Nigeria),** The Assessment of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Risks in Nigeria's Real Estate Sector, 2024.

73 **GI-TOC,** Urbanization and Organized Crime: The Challenge to Global Peace, Security and Human Rights in the Urban Century, August 2024.

74 **A. Lndi (Danish Institute for International Studies),** Governing Routes Across the Contested Sahara: Checkpoints and the Political Economy of Trans-Saharan Trade Around Kufrah, June 2026.

75 **N. Exbrayat and V. Stephane,** Does Urbanization Cause Crime? Evidence from Rural-Urban Migration in South Africa, January 2024.

76 **ILANUD,** interview, November 2025.

77 **R. Muggah and J. de Boer (DCAF),** Security Sector Reform and Citizen Security: Experiences from Urban Latin America in Global Perspective, 2019; **Crime and Justice Policy Lab (University of Pennsylvania),** Ceasefire Mexico City (Alto al Fuego); **M.I. Risso,** Intentional Homicides in São Paulo City: A New Perspective, Stability: International Journal of Security & Development 3(1), May 2014.

“Rapid and unregulated urbanization creates opportunities for organized crime and facilitates the expansion of illicit economies

2.3.4 Gender-based violence

Across the world, gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls, in different conflict or crime convergence zones is a significant threat to human security. GBV is especially linked to conflict, insecurity, displacement, climate stress, migration dynamics and social disruption which heighten the vulnerability of women and girls to violence and exploitation by organized criminal groups. In conflict zones such as the region of Tigray, Ethiopia, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war to intimidate and fracture communities has been documented.[78] In the Sahel, reports of rape have increased significantly, with extremist groups using sexual violence as an intimidation tactic.[79] In parts of East Africa and other drought-affected regions, longer distances travelled by women and girls to access water have increased their exposure to violence.[80] Underreporting remains a significant concern: stigma, fear of reprisal, economic dependence on perpetrators, and limited trust in justice institutions mean that official statistics capture only a fraction of actual incidence, and cross-regional comparisons often reflect differences in reporting practices and survey coverage as much as differences in prevalence. Where dedicated prevalence surveys have been conducted, as in parts of Oceania and Latin America,[81] documented levels of GBV are among the highest recorded. On the other hand, regions such as Europe display mixed patterns, with some subregions, such as Scandinavia, reporting very high rates, while Southeast Europe reports low rates, despite indications that women are subject to high levels of GBV.[82]

Organized criminal groups, including trafficking networks, disproportionately target women and girls, as these groups exploit migration routes, economic vulnerability, and weak legal protections for profit. Migrant women, especially those travelling from sub-Saharan Africa to the Gulf and Europe, are reportedly subjected to significant levels of sexual exploitation and forced domestic labour at their destinations, and experience sexual violence and abuse during the risky migration journeys that they are often compelled to undertake.[83]

In other regions, where physical abuse and violence are less prevalent, women and girls are now subject to increasing levels of online harassment and bullying. Online harassment, cyberstalking, and deepfake pornography often lead to severe psychological, reputational, and professional consequences. In East Asia, particularly South Korea and China, authorities are grappling with an "epidemic" of deepfake sexual abuse targeting women online. In South Korea, for example, arrests for deepfake-related sex crimes increased dramatically between 2021 and 2024, with most offenders being youths or people in their twenties.[84] These countries have also introduced some of the earliest legal and regulatory approaches to addressing the misuse of deepfakes. China introduced some of the world's earliest laws criminalizing deepfake pornography and synthetic media abuse, reflecting growing recognition that legal systems must adapt to AI-enabled forms of exploitation.[85]

78 **UNICRI,** information provided by UNICRI programme staff, January 2026; **Physicians for Human Rights and The Organization for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa,** "You Will Never Be Able to Give Birth": Conflict-Related Sexual and Reproductive Violence in Ethiopia, July 2025.

79 **Alliance Magazine,** Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict: How Structural Inequalities Fuel Impunity, November 2025.

80 **Global Women's Institute (George Washington University),** Violence Against Adolescent Girls: Trends and Lessons for East Africa – Policy Brief, n.d..

81 **UN Women,** Solomon Islands Evidence Brief: Costing the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence and the Resources Required to Address It, February 2023; **UNICEF,** Situation Analysis of Children in the Pacific Island Countries, December 2017.

82 **Eurostat,** Gender-Based Violence Statistics; **World Bank,** Reducing the Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in Europe and Central Asia Requires Changing the Norms that Support It, December 2022.

83 **OHCHR,** Special Procedures Communication, October 2022; **Save the Children,** Girls on the Move in North Africa, 2023; **UN Women,** From Evidence to Action: Tackling GBV Against Migrant Women and Girls, 2021.

84 **The Chosun Daily,** Deepfake Sex Crime Suspects Surge, 60% in Their Teens**,** October 2025.

85 **Caixin Global,** Analysis: China Grapples With Its Own Epidemic of Deepfake Porn and Fraud, January 2026; **The China Project,** Hong Kong Outlaws Upskirt Photos and Deepfake Pornography, October 2021; **The Diplomat,** China's New Legislation on Deepfakes: Should the Rest of Asia Follow Suit?, March 2023.

Other countries have increasingly adopted legal and technological responses to address GBV, but enforcement and accountability gaps remain significant. There is growing recognition of GBV as a major security and governance issue, although implementation remains uneven. In Latin America, many countries have incorporated femicide or feminicide into their criminal law frameworks.[86] In other regions, such as South Asia, countries have introduced innovative measures to enhance the protection of women and facilitate the reporting of crimes, including women's police stations and online reporting mechanisms.[87] However, conviction rates for crimes against women remain far below overall criminal conviction rates in the region.[88]

2.3.5 Youth

Young people around the world are increasingly facing adverse security and crime conditions. Youth are more frequently targeted by organized criminal enterprises, extremist groups, and actors involved in illicit economies as unemployment, income inequality, and social marginalization, coupled with growing youth populations, create fertile recruitment conditions for gangs, traffickers, and armed groups. In West Africa, criminal gangs such as the Black Axe Syndicate in Nigeria recruit vulnerable young men from universities and schools into networks involved in fuel theft and gang violence.[89] In Latin America, armed groups continue to forcibly recruit children to support armed and criminal activities: in Colombia, the United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 371 children in 2025, primarily by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) dissident groups and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), while in Haiti nearly 900 children were verified as recruited and used by armed gangs in the same year.[90] More broadly, the recruitment of children by non-State armed groups continues in contexts where such groups are able to target them, with 2025 marking the highest number of children affected by grave violations since United Nations monitoring began.[91] In other regions, such as South Asia, street children are recruited into organized criminal groups where they essentially function as "illicit child labourers".[92]

Violence dynamics among youth are also shifting, leading to increasingly punitive approaches by countries to juvenile justice. Youth violence and victimization are rising in several regions, though trends vary significantly across countries. Young people are both perpetrators and victims of violence, especially in areas affected by gang activity, drug trafficking, and urban insecurity. Across the world, consistent with criminological theories on the relationship between age and crime, young men are more likely to experience and perpetrate violence. Moreover, in countries where organized crime has expanded rapidly, leaving countries and societies with less time to adapt, homicide and violence rates have increased at exponential levels. In Latin America, Ecuador, for example, recorded a 640% increase in the homicide rate among children and adolescents between 2019 and 2023, amid escalating organized crime violence.[93] In regions with generally lower levels of violence, such as Europe, countries like Sweden are also experiencing

86 **ECLAC,** Femicidal Violence in Figures: Latin America and the Caribbean**,** November 2025.

87 **S. Amaral, S. Bhalotra, and N. Prakash,** Gender, Crime and Punishment: Evidence from Women Police Stations in India, April 2019; **Punjab Safe Cities Authority,** Virtual Women Police Station.

88 **Reach Alliance,** Why Women's Police Stations in India Fail to Mitigate Violence Against Women, March 2021.

89 **Africa Center for Strategic Studies,** Black Axe—Nigeria's Most Notorious Transnational Criminal Organization**,** October 2024; **Leadership News,** Oil Theft Triggered $10.7M Daily Loss from 2009 to 2020 – NEITI, 2026.

90 **United Nations,** Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/80/723–S/2026/357, June 2026, **UNICEF,** Roadmap to Address Armed and Urban Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean (Working Paper) – Advocacy Summary, February 2023.

91 **United Nations,** Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/80/723–S/2026/357, June 2026.

92 **S. Atkinson-Sheppard,** Developing a Global South Perspective: Street Children's Involvement in Organized Crime, January 2018; **S. Atkinson-Sheppard,** A 'Lens of Labor': Re-Conceptualizing Young People's Involvement in Organized Crime, Critical Criminology 31, November 2022.

93 **UNICEF,** Ecuador: Homicide Rate Among Children and Adolescents Soars 640 Per Cent in Four Years, January 2024.

significant increases in violence, especially as youth gang violence and firearm-related murders have increased sharply.[94] This is consistent with trends observed in Europe, and elsewhere, where gangs recruit minors to reduce legal exposure.[95]

Rising levels of violence committed by young people, and the perceptions of such increases, have prompted governments to debate tougher juvenile justice responses, even when research and evidence favour prevention and diversion approaches.[96] This tension between punitive "tough-on-crime" policies and evidence-based juvenile justice reforms focused on rehabilitation is evident in divergent approaches worldwide. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, efforts are increasing to introduce diversion programmes aimed at keeping children out of formal criminal justice systems at early stages of police contact.[97] However, other countries, including several higher-income countries, are adopting harsher penalties for young people convicted of violent offences and lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility, following high-profile violent incidents involving young offenders.[98]

94 **International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany (IJAB),** Alarming Rise in Youth Crime in Sweden, January 2025.

95 **GI-TOC,** interview, December 2025; **Europol,** The Recruitment of Young Perpetrators for Criminal Networks, November 2024.

96 **A.P. Damm, B.Ø. Larsen, H.S. Nielsen et al.,** Lowering the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility: Consequences for Juvenile Crime, Journal of Quantitative Criminology 41, April 2025; **Aarhus University,** Lowering the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility Has No Deterrent Effects, October 2017.

97 **UNICEF,** Diversion Programmes in Eastern and Southern Africa, October 2023.

98 **E. Delmage et al.,** The Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility Internationally – History, Systems and the Future, Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health 36(1), February 2026; **People's Daily**, Teenager's Killing Puts Juvenile Crime Back in the Spotlight, April 2024; **Buenos Aires Times,** Argentina's Congress Votes to Lower Age of Criminal Responsibility to 14, February 2026; **Yonhap News Agency,** Gov't Weighs Lowering Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility, July 2026.

3. Conclusion and Reflections on Future Directions

This UNICRI Crime and Justice Trends Study, and specifically this Global Analysis, sets out to identify and better understand regional and transregional trends in crime and justice. Taken together, the regional analyses point to a world undergoing significant shifts in the commission of crime and in the responses of criminal justice systems. These shifts are not uniform, and in many parts of the world they are divergent: organized criminality is increasing across many regions as criminal networks engage in poly-criminal activities, even as other forms of crime, such as homicide, continue their longer-term global decline. The two movements are not contradictory. They reflect a shift in where criminal profit is generated, away from localized predation and towards transnational markets, digital victimization, and the exploitation of licit trade, supply chains, and under-governed economic spaces.

Several recurring dynamics are evident across the regions examined. Criminal actors are converging, both geographically, in zones where weak regulatory and enforcement oversight coincides with criminal networks capable of exploiting these conditions, and operationally, as groups blend trafficking, fraud, natural resource exploitation, and territorial control within single enterprises. Advances in technology and the wider availability of advanced cyber capabilities have lowered the barriers to entry to such a degree that criminal capability no longer necessarily corresponds to organizational sophistication. This has contributed to a significant expansion in global victimization across a broad spectrum of criminal activity, from forced criminality at the point of crime commission to billions of scam victims globally. And in several regions, the lines between licit and illicit markets have become increasingly blurred, to the point that illicit economies are having a distortionary impact on broader economic and governance structures.

Criminal justice systems are responding to these dynamics under considerable strain. Across regions, justice systems are increasingly shaped by concerns around security, stability, and state control rather than the rule of law and human rights, as reflected in militarized policing, more punitive approaches to corrections, and the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility, often in tension with the evidence base on what reduces crime. States are adopting surveillance and analytical technologies more rapidly than the regulatory, oversight, and governance frameworks required to govern their use. Furthermore, the landscape of international criminal justice reform is increasingly multipolar, presenting national authorities with a wider choice of partners, while challenging the post-Cold War consensus around rights-based policing and the rule of law. The five cross-cutting themes examined here are not separate domains but the conditions through which these dynamics are transmitted and, in several cases, amplified.

In the process of conducting this global and regional overview of crime, justice, and cross-cutting trends, methodological lessons emerged about how knowledge is generated globally and regionally in the fields of criminal justice, transnational organized crime, and related cross-cutting trends. The diversity of the PNI network, spanning governmental, intergovernmental, and academic institutions, helped situate regional developments within broader transregional patterns and brought complementary vantage points from which to examine what are ultimately shared challenges. At the same time, the Study's regional coverage was shaped by the geography of the network itself: where no institute covers a region, most notably Southern and Central Asia, the analysis relied on secondary sources, and other organizations sitting outside the PNI network. Comparing trends across regions was further complicated by divergent definitions, reporting practices, and data availability, limiting the consistency and comparability of the evidence base. Truly understanding the crime and justice trends – regionally, transregionally, and globally – requires an even wider range of perspectives and expertise. These lessons point to the value of an expanded and more coordinated PNI network, incorporating not just the existing organizations, but also new and emerging centres of expertise on crime and justice – particularly in the regions that currently have no institutional representation within the PNI network, promoting broader participation across all regions and working toward greater methodological consistency in how trends are assessed and compared. Increased engagement and closer coordination with non-governmental research and practitioner communities could further strengthen the knowledge base, bringing additional perspectives to bear on increasingly complex and transnational crime and justice challenges.

Finally, the trends identified through the analysis point to several areas where further research, engagement, and transregional coordination will be critical, particularly as the challenges highlighted in this report continue to evolve. While numerous questions emerged, several stand out for their transregional nature and potential ramifications, meriting greater attention and discussion within the criminal justice community. In particular, greater understanding is needed of how emerging criminal models spread across and beyond regions; the conditions under which crime convergence zones form and whether they can be disrupted before they consolidate; the longer-term effects of securitized approaches on crime outcomes and institutional legitimacy; the effects of increasingly transactional cooperation on transnational case outcomes; and the ways in which the multipolar landscape of criminal justice reform is reshaping institutional practice in recipient countries.

Annex 1. Organizations Consulted

PNI Organization	Location	Interviews conducted
AIC – Australian Institute of Criminology	Canberra, Australia	1
Basel Institute on Governance (International Centre for Asset Recovery)	Basel, Switzerland	3
CCLS – College for Criminal Law Science	Beijing, China	1
ICCLR & CJP – International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy	Vancouver, Canada	2
ILANUD – United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders	San José, Costa Rica	1
ISS – Institute for Security Studies	Pretoria, South Africa	3
KICJ – Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice	Seoul, Republic of Korea	1
UNAFEI – United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders	Tokyo, Japan	1
UNICRI – United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute	Turin, Italy	6

Non-PNI Organization	Location	Interviews conducted
CEBCP – Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University	Fairfax, Virginia, United States	1
Center for Governance Research	Islamabad, Pakistan	1
Council on Criminal Justice	Washington, D.C., United States	1
GI-TOC – Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime	Geneva, Switzerland	4
South Asian Institute of Crime and Justice Studies	Noida, India	1
TraCCC – Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, George Mason University	Arlington, Virginia, United States	1

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