

When mafia threatens democracy: Research shows ordinary people are less honest in countries hit by organized crime

July 25 2023, by Giovanni A. Travaglino, Alberto Mirisola and Pascal Burgmer



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Organized crime casts a [long shadow](#), driving violence and an illicit economy. But our research, published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, has uncovered some more subtle dimensions to

its influence, too. We've found that organized crime can undermine the civic honesty of ordinary, law abiding people.

Civic honesty means adhering to shared moral norms that characterize actions such as tax evasion, bribery or welfare fraud as unacceptable. Civic honesty is a cornerstone for a robust and thriving democracy. It creates a society where people follow rules not out of fear of reprisal but due to their moral convictions. That, in turn, lessens the need for intensive surveillance and costly punitive measures.

Typically, civic honesty is driven by trust in public bodies such as the government and police. This trust represents citizens' stake in a tacit [social contract](#) according to which they perform their civic duties in exchange for the competency, fairness and reliability of their government.

However, the link between political trust and civic honesty varies substantially from country to country. We wanted to explore if the presence of organized crime was a factor in this variability.

83 countries

To test this, we used an [index](#) of global organized crime to rate the influence of criminal groups in different countries and regions on a scale of 1 to 10. We included mafia-style groups with a clear structure and a recognizable name like the Cosa Nostra in Italy or the Yakuza in Japan, and looser criminal associations without a clear structure or name.

We also looked at state-embedded groups—organized criminals that operate by infiltrating the state apparatus—and foreign criminal groups operating outside their home country, such as the Italian mafia operating in the U.S.

We paired this index with [survey data](#) from more than 128,000 people in 83 countries from two [large-scale research studies](#) investigating beliefs, opinions and values. From these studies, we obtained two measures of individual differences: political trust and civic honesty.

The political trust measure was based on how much confidence people had in key legal and [political institutions](#)—the police, civil service, government, political parties and the justice system.

The civic honesty index was based on how justifiable respondents thought four illegal actions were—accepting a bribe, cheating on taxes, fare dodging on public transport and benefit fraud.

Data for these two measures were available from eight African countries, 13 countries in the Americas, 26 Asian nations, 34 European nations and two in Oceania.

Corruption undermines civic honesty

We found that citizens tended to be less inclined towards civic honesty in countries where organized criminal groups were more widespread. In these places, corruption is more commonly justified.

We also expected that people who report higher political trust would be [more civically honest](#). If you believe in the integrity and reliability of the government, the police and the courts, you are more likely to abide by the rules they impose.

Political trust is a reflection of the legitimacy of institutions because when people see institutions as legitimate, they are more likely to internalize the norms and values they promote as their own.

People tend to follow the directives of legitimate institutions out of a

conviction that such directives constitute the proper, moral way to act. Therefore, how much people trust institutions should be linked to their civic honesty.

That was indeed the case in countries that had fewer problems with organized crime, such as Denmark, Finland and Singapore. However, the picture was quite different in countries where there was more organized crime, exposing an interesting dynamic.

In countries such as Italy, Mexico and Russia, the association between civic honesty and political trust was weaker or even non-existent. Knowing how much trust a person has in institutions therefore tells you little or nothing about what they think about civic honesty.

We interpret this as an indication that in countries more strongly influenced by organized crime, institutions lose their role as moral referents. People's judgements about the justifiability of illegal actions are not predicted by how much they trust political and legal institutions.

When our understanding of the appropriateness of [tax evasion](#) becomes disconnected from our confidence in institutions, for example, it shows that our norms are out of step with those of the [institution](#). We don't yet know what drives people's judgements in these situations but it is likely that the perceived [probability of being caught](#) or personal values become more central.

Total takeover

Remarkably, however, in countries experiencing the most extreme criminal influence, the correlation between trust and honesty actually inverted. If people had a greater trust in public institutions, they were more likely to show a lower level of civic honesty.

In countries such as Colombia, Iraq and Venezuela, people's [trust](#) in institutions is associated with higher justification of illegal actions like bribery and fare dodging.

In these countries, not only do institutions lose their role as moral referents, but people's confidence in what presumably are corrupted institutions is linked to them finding it easier to justify illegality.

This seemingly paradoxical outcome could be attributed to criminal groups successfully co-opting the state, thereby subverting the nature and moral responsibilities of institutions.

Institutions may be perceived as being manipulated to serve illegal interests, which leads to a situation where the citizens who have confidence in corrupted institutions are also the ones with a higher tendency towards immorality and crime.

Crime as a democratic issue

The implications of these findings for democratic systems are profound. Organized criminal groups can play a part in altering societal norms by undermining the moral authority of public bodies. An insidious erosion of the social contract can follow, shifting norms away from the principles of civic [honesty](#).

The unchecked growth of [organized crime](#) doesn't merely lead to more illegal activities and lower public security, it threatens the very fabric of our democracies. It can lead to a broader acceptance of illegal behaviors by subtly limiting, or even sabotaging, political and legal authorities' capacity to promote a culture of legality and cooperation.

More information: Giovanni A. Travaglini et al, Alternative Systems: The Interplay Between Criminal Groups' Influence and Political Trust on

Civic Honesty in the Global Context, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506231176615](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506231176615)

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