Does Membership Matter? How Armed Group Composition Influences Public Support

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Abstract
Does the composition of violent groups—including the backgrounds and gender of members—matter for public perceptions of the group’s legitimacy and preferences over policy interventions to counter violence? Existing research suggests that violent groups recruit “non-traditional” members, including women, girls and older men, into their ranks as part of a strategy for increasing public support and legitimacy of the group. We use a survey experiment in Haiti to investigate how the composition of support cadre—lookouts, informants, and mules—affects public support for violent groups and preferences over types of counter-violence policies. We do not find evidence that support cadre composition influences public support for the group; however, it does affect attitudes about how to combat violence. Respondents primed on ordinary people and women in support cadre are more likely to support negotiations and report a greater willingness to share information with the police. Taken together, we find recruitment of non-traditional members, including women, into support cadre roles may be strategically valuable—not because it increases broad public support for the group, but because it may shift preferences for more favorable counter-gang policy.
How does ordinary people’s participation in violent groups—particularly that of “non-traditional” recruits, such as young boys, older men, women, and girls—affect public perceptions of these groups? Does participation by non-traditional recruits shift preferences over counter-violence policies? Scholars have puzzled over why the rural poor sometimes take extraordinary personal risks to provide covert support to rebel groups (Wood 2003), and why some violent groups actively recruit women while others never do (Wood and Thomas 2017). Despite these advances in understanding both the supply of and demand for supporters and recruits, we know far less about how non-traditional recruits’ involvement in armed organizations affects perceptions of those organizations and the policies to counter them. Scholars have argued women’s involvement in armed groups signals that a group’s goals are widely shared and that the grassroots support for the group runs deep (Loken 2018, Thomas and Bond 2015, Viterna 2013, Wood 2018).

However, apart from a number of case studies and cross-national associations, how the public responds to group composition has not been tested directly. Is it the case, for instance, that women’s involvement means that the violent “organization becomes especially righteous” (Viterna 2014, 192) in the eyes of the public, and “adds an aura of legitimacy” (Viterna 2013, 208)? Does the evidence show that women’s participation in violent groups makes “civilians more receptive to [the group’s] grievances” (Loken 2018, 2)?

We examine how the composition of the supporters of violent groups affects perceptions of the necessity of violence wielded by the group and the public’s attitudes about solutions to violence. We draw on several strands of research. First, scholars have argued that public perceptions of legitimacy are essential to the survival of violent groups. We build on the notion of the “ideological legitimacy” (Loken 2018, 9) of violent groups, or “perceptions that something is right, proper, or appropriate within the bounds of a system of norms, values, or beliefs.” Second, we extend research about the micro-dynamics of violent organizations, as well as literature on how these groups function within a broader society; for example, scholars have analyzed violent groups’ decisions to engage the civilian population in the areas in which they operate, including providing services to civilians, and paying benefits to families of fighters (Johnston et al. 2016).

To investigate these effects, we conducted a survey experiment in gang-affected

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1There are compelling reasons for this lacuna; high quality experimental data from conflict zones are difficult to collect. Loken and Wood both examine the consequences of the inclusion of women into rebel groups using observational data; this study is the first, to the authors’ knowledge, to examine this question experimentally.

2This is in contrast to “political legitimacy,” which is the belief that the group is a viable political entity. We argue that gangs are deeply concerned with ideological legitimacy, but rarely concerned with political legitimacy.
Port-au-Prince, a context we discuss in more detail below. Extending the previous literature on popular support and public perceptions of rebel groups, we focus on the composition of group supporters as a signal of broader operational support for violent organizations. Most research on recruitment strategies has focused on attracting armed fighters to join a group. However, as Viterna (2014) argues, groups must also make similar strategic choices about who they recruit to serve in support roles. In the experiment, we randomized delivery of information about gangs’ lookouts, informants, and mules, sometimes called “auxiliaries” (Loken 2018) (hereafter, “support cadre”). After a brief description of those roles, we cue respondents on ordinary people, or men, or women, versus a no-prime control.

We see several striking patterns in how the composition of support cadre affects respondents’ attitudes. Counter to some of the previous arguments in the literature, we find support cadre composition does not affect responses about whether gang violence is sometimes necessary, a key measure of the public support of gangs. However, there is significant divergence in opinion about how best to combat gang violence, depending on support cadre characteristics. Respondents are more likely to support a negotiated resolution to police intervention when primed about “ordinary people” or women serving as support cadre. This finding suggests reminding respondents about the grassroots support these groups enjoy—implicitly, a reminder that support cadre extends beyond stereotypical perceptions of violent young men—may serve to humanize and legitimate violent groups, leading to a preference for a more diplomatic resolution. Additionally, and also counter to expectations based on the previous research, respondents who received primes about support cadre including ordinary people and women were more likely to report willingness to share information about gangs in their neighborhoods with the police. This result was particularly pronounced for those primed on women’s support. One plausible explanation is that recruitment of women may be a double-edged sword: violent groups with women may not be as feared as all-male groups, a finding that is supported by experimental results in other contexts (Appiah and White 2017). As a result, respondents feel more empowered to share intelligence with the police. Our findings have implications for scholarship on social movements and high-risk support for armed groups, civil war, and counterinsurgency.

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3 This study joins other new survey research focused on Haiti (Gordon and Young 2017), an important case that has largely been overlooked by scholars of political violence. See the Appendix for more on the case.

4 Wood (2003, 17) is an important exception; she focuses her study on “supporters” of the insurgency in El Salvador, defined as those who provided insurgents with information and supplies.

5 Although children may also serve in support roles, we exclude them from the present study.
1 Public Support and Group Composition: Theoretical background and expectations

Public support for violent non-state actors is crucial to the success of such groups, as well as policies to counter them. Non-state organizations are often dependent on civilians for many types of resources, ranging from offering basic food, shelter, and supplies to providing intelligence about opponents and impending attacks (Wickham-Crowley 1993, 52). These systems of “foraging,” in which armed groups make “use of monetary payments, forced requisition, and simple looting to acquire provisions from populations,” (Lyall and Wilson 2009, 73) can only work if there is at least tacit support for or approval of the group, even if such support is essentially coerced. When such groups are not dependent on civilians, such as when rebel groups have access to material resources, they lack accountability to civilians and are far more likely to be abusive (Cohen 2016, Weinstein 2006). As a result, the struggle for public approval and cooperation is a central project for violent non-state organizations. One means for garnering public approval is through making a convincing case that the group’s goals are legitimate and broadly shared—and one means for doing that is through recruiting members who defy stereotypes of the military-aged men who commonly serve as violent fighters, including women, girls, older men and young boys.

The literature suggests two ways in which these “non-traditional” members may provide benefits to violent groups: strategic value and public approval. First, there may be a strategic advantage to recruiting non-traditional members into violent groups. For instance, scholars of female suicide terrorism argue that women are more successful—and more lethal—because women are less likely to draw suspicion from authorities and are better able to conceal weapons (Bloom 2012, O’Rourke 2009). Thomas and Bond (2015) summarize scholarship from a wide range of wartime contexts that finds that non-traditional recruits can serve as decoys, mules, and liaisons between fighters and citizens. A similar logic may be at work when non-traditional members are recruited to serve as support cadre of gangs—they are less likely to attract attention and are better able to operate covertly as mules and traffickers of drugs and weapons (e.g., Travis (2016) on women and young people in gangs in England).

Second, non-traditional recruits may generate increased empathy from the public. Many scholars have argued that violent groups strategically recruit women in order to precipitate warmer feelings toward the group. Thomas and Bond (2015) maintain that the inclusion of women is a strategic choice for violent groups seeking to increase their public appeal, especially those who face difficulty attracting popular support.

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6 Although Lyall and Wilson are primarily concerned with historical cases of state forces, contemporary non-state groups use similar methods for garnering supplies and intelligence from civilians/ordinary people.
such as separatist groups. Loken (2018) argues that rebel groups recruit women and then feature them in propaganda in order to increase legitimacy and popular support among the civilian population, and to legitimize the violence they wield. Loken finds evidence that rebel groups with women in their ranks are more likely to engage in peace negotiations and are more likely to result in an outright victory, which she argues are a result of increased popular legitimacy. Similarly, Wood (2018, 32) argues that a key reason rebel groups recruit female fighters is to “enhanc[e] the perceived legitimacy of the groups goals, . . . , garner sympathy from observers, and demonstrat[e] the base community’s commitment to achieving their goals.”

We extend these arguments from rebel groups to gangs, and expand the scope from only women to the broader category of “non-traditional” members, who should have similar effects on public perceptions. We argue that, like rebel groups, gangs may seek to recruit a wide range of sympathetic members in order to increase positive associations with their organizations, and to generate public support for the violence the group performs.

Despite the near-consensus about how heterogeneity in violent group composition affects public opinion, there has yet to be a rigorous test of these expectations. To fill this gap in the literature, we explore two sets of outcomes that follow from existing scholarship. First, we look at whether priming on the composition of support cadre affects views on the necessity of gang violence. Second, we examine how composition of support cadre affects attitudes about policy solutions to gang violence.

Before turning to the hypotheses, we note two issues pertaining to the wording of the questions. First, we ask respondents about support cadre instead of asking about women and men as core members of gangs. This is due to the fact that women do not serve as core members of gangs in contemporary Port-au-Prince, and we sought to use an experimental prime that was factual. Although some research documents female members of gangs in earlier time periods (Faedi Duramy 2014)—even including some reports of all-women’s gangs (Loutis 2006)—it became clear during fieldwork in 2017 that such gangs do not currently operate in Port-au-Prince. Many of our interviewees—including representatives of NGOs that work directly with gangs—expressed surprise at the idea of women in gangs. Although we could have used a hypothetical scenario, we did not want to inform people that women are core members of gangs in their community if, in reality, there is no evidence that they are. As a result, we opted for primes that mirror the current situation and reflect experts’ best understanding of the membership of contemporary gangs.

The influence of female recruits can also be observed in some media coverage of women’s political violence. A study comparing media coverage of a female terrorist to male terrorists involved in the same plot revealed that the woman received far greater media attention and her motivations were described in more sympathetic terms, emphasizing her emotional state and troubled past (Conway and McInerney 2012).
In addition, we ask respondents about “ordinary people” in order to analyze the effects of “non-traditional” recruits—those who are non-specialists in violence and who are not military-age men.\(^8\) People in this category—older men, younger boys, women and girls—are rarely core members in violent groups; instead, they comprise the majority of crucial covert networks that provide vital support for the core armed fighters, including offering food and medicines, repairing and replacing clothing, and passing messages to and from the core fighters. For example, Viterna (2013) writes that in the early years of the El Salvador civil war, entire families, called gente de masa, or “people of the masses,” traveled alongside the fighters of FMLN, providing medical services and other logistical support. Loken (2018, 5) cites numerous examples of women serving in essential auxiliary roles, ranging from anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, where women smuggled supplies to mujahedeen on the frontlines, to women sharing intelligence with fighters in the conflict in East Timor. Further, evidence shows that most women who are formal members of armed groups serve in support roles rather than as armed fighters. Wood (2003, 130) notes that even in the leftist FMLN guerrillas, with its strong official ideology of gender equality, women largely served as cooks and radio operators. More broadly, in a sample of 72 rebel groups, Henshaw (2016) found 58% of the groups had women participating in non-combat roles (defined, in part, as “contributing labor, supplies and assistance”) while only 32% used women in combat roles. Finally, Thomas and Bond (2015) similarly find in their sample of violent political organizations that women rarely serve in fighting roles that directly wield violence.

**Grassroots Support Hypothesis: does the public increase its support for violent groups based on the composition of its support cadre?**

Building on previous research on the puzzle of “insurgent collective action” (Wood 2003) and about the supply and demand for female recruits (Wood and Thomas 2017), we focus our attention on the effects of different support cadre. An implication of the prior literature is that high-risk support from non-traditional recruits—whether as combatants or as part of the support cadre—should increase public esteem for the group as well as the perception that the violence the group wields is more “justified.” Because women are viewed as inherently less violent than men, women’s support of violent groups may serve to increase the public perception that the group’s goals and means are legitimate (Viterna 2013).\(^9\) Indeed, women’s aversion to political violence is a consistent finding in the public opinion literature on the use of force, which shows that, nearly universally, men are far more supportive of violence than women (Eichenberg and Read 2016). Comparatively little work explores if, or how, this can be extended.

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\(^8\)We do not define “ordinary people” for respondents, but survey results show similar patterns for women and ordinary people, suggesting that they are measuring similar categories.

\(^9\)Viterna (2014, 191) argues “gender is one of the strongest tools mobilized by political leaders to mitigate the radicalness with which the public perceives of their organization’s violent acts.”
to understanding support for violence by non-state organizations. We first examine if broader support cadre composition (both ordinary people and women in particular) increases the public’s support for violence wielded by gangs.

Due to ethical concerns, we are unable to inquire explicitly about respondents’ support for gangs. Instead, we ask about support for gang violence, because the provision of security is the primary function of gangs in Port-au-Prince. It is not a perfect measure, given that gangs perform a variety of tasks beyond providing security through the use and threat of violence. However, it is the best alternative given that a direct question about gang support is unlikely to yield valid data, and it offers a measure of how justified the respondent believes gang violence to be, a key sentiment that previous work theorizes should be affected by the presence of women fighters (Loken 2018).

**H1:** Civilians are more likely to agree violence by armed groups is necessary when these groups have non-traditional members in their support cadre (ordinary people/women).

**Counter-Gang Policy Hypotheses: does the composition of support cadre affect attitudes about counter-gang policy?**

In addition to variation in beliefs about the necessity of gang violence, we also explore two areas of counter-gang policy that are also relevant for ending subnational conflicts. First, we examine how information about the characteristics of gang supporters alters respondents’ attitudes about policy: whether they prefer a mediated or police solution. Building on prior work in the civil war realm (e.g., Loken (2018)), we expect that when respondents are reminded that support cadres include people like themselves, this may increase perceptions of the legitimacy of the group and thus increase public support for a negotiated resolution. Peace negotiations—which enable the extraction of concessions—are a major achievement for any non-state actor, but perhaps even more so for a gang. Understanding how support cadre might make negotiation with non-state armed groups more or less difficult is a central concern of rationalist explanations for conflict termination.

**H2:** Civilians are more likely to prefer mediation to a police solution when violent armed groups have non-traditional members (ordinary people/women) in their support cadre.

The second policy is how support cadre composition affects willingness to share information about gangs with the police. Sharing information on gang activity with police is analogous to sharing human intelligence in a counterinsurgency context (Bertetto 2013). Most scholars of counterinsurgency agree that human intelligence is essential to resolving the “identification problem,” or distinguishing combatants (in this case, gang members) from civilians (Lyall and Wilson 2009). Additionally, Kilcullen (2009) argues that a goal of a “hearts and minds” counterinsurgency campaign is to deplete the organization of the more “reconcilable” members of the organization, serving to
isolate hardline, “irreconcilable” members. In this case, ordinary people and women as members of support cadres are proxies for these reconcilable members. 

**H3:** Citizens will be less willing to share information about violent armed groups with police when these groups have non-traditional members (ordinary people/women) in their support cadre.

Using original experimental evidence, we next examine these theoretical expectations to understand better the scope and magnitude of these effects.

## 2 Context and Research Design

We follow other recent scholarship that argues there are important similarities between gangs and rebel, insurgent, and terrorist groups. Indeed, some scholars have rejected distinctions between these groups entirely, instead studying the broader category of “violent political organizations,” (Thomas and Bond 2015) which includes rebels, terrorists, paramilitaries and self-defense groups. While gangs’ goals are not to establish an alternative state or to take control of the central government, gangs most obviously provide security in local communities, and in some cases, provide other basic services to the communities they control.

Turning to the context of Port-au-Prince, contemporary gangs are embedded in complex local politics, in which some members of the political and economic elite serve as patrons of gangs, employing them to further their goals and interests (Berg 2010, Kolbe and Muggah 2013). These patrons provide material resources, including weapons, to further elite political goals (Dziedzic and Perito 2008). In this sense, gangs in Haiti are more analogous to militias and paramilitary groups in conflict-affected contexts than to street gangs in the US, for example, making them an ideal case for the present study. Additionally, similar to some rebel groups, gangs in Port-au-Prince perform a wide range of secondary “governance” activities in the areas they occupy (e.g., paying for school, repairing and maintaining roads, organizing garbage collection), and they do so in the shadow of a weak—and sometimes completely absent—Haitian state, or what Hoelscher and Norheim-Martinsen (2014) call “ungoverned spaces, where people live their lives with almost no state interference or engagement.”

Individuals’ motivations for joining a gang, at least in this context, are indistinguishable from why people join rebel groups. A study comparing members in rural

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10 Rodgers and Muggah (2009) define gangs as “definite social organizations that display an institutional continuity independent of their membership... with fixed conventions and rules, which can include initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage, and rules of conduct.”

11 See also INURED (2017) on the role of gangs in service provision; the report notes that gangs “play a role in providing services traditionally offered by the State such as security, access to electricity.” We discuss the role of gangs in Haiti in greater detail in the Appendix.
insurgent groups and urban gangs in Haiti found remarkably similar motivations for joining their respective groups (Kolbe 2013, 5). More broadly, states often view and react to gangs and rebel groups in a similar fashion. As Rodgers and Muggah (2009, 312) argue, gangs often lead “to a violent state reaction, which effectively treats them as an enemy ‘other’ in a manner very similar to its treatment of more conventional rebels or insurgent organizations.” Indeed, there is evidence that states engage in negotiations with gangs—reminiscent of wartime peace talks—that produce truces (Kalyvas 2015).12

While there is no ongoing insurgency in Port-au-Prince, levels of lethal violence perpetrated by gangs are high in some areas, due to a relatively weak state security sector and powerful gangs that control neighborhoods.13 Because violent street gangs go by a variety of (sometimes interchangeable) terms in common parlance, we asked respondents about three types of groups: baz, bandits, and brigades. In Haitian Creole, baz means “base,” and roughly translates to gang, bandit refers to a violent criminal group, and brigade is a local vigilante/self-defense group that may also use violence against ordinary people. All three terms are used to describe illicit, local, armed organizations that operate on the neighborhood level in Port-au-Prince, and in the proceeding analyses, we pool across these three sub-types.14 While gang leadership and core membership are almost exclusively young men, other men, women, and children in the community are recruited as supporters to assist in daily gang operations.

Studying street gangs in Port-au-Prince offers two distinct advantages. First, while there is widespread exposure to gang violence over time, the city is not an active conflict zone, making it much safer to field a study. Second, the neighborhoods where gangs operate are relatively homogeneous on many dimensions that might complicate causal inference in other settings (e.g., ethnicity, religion, language, economic status).

However, studying street gangs in Port-au-Prince is also challenging, as is evidenced

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12 Whether gangs are analogous to rebel groups is contested (see Kalyvas (2015) for a summary of the debate), but the precise applicability of the comparison is not crucial for our argument. Rather, we maintain that challenges of recruitment and public perceptions—and indeed, the structure and functions of the groups themselves—are similar enough, especially in this context to warrant an extension of civil wars literature to Haitian gangs, even if their goals and ideologies are distinct. We discuss how these differences may affect our results in the limitations section below.

13 Based on deaths data compiled from a local NGO, homicides due to gang violence reached the equivalent of a low-intensity conflict (at least 25 deaths) on an annual basis between 2002-2016. In fact, deaths exceed 100 in all years, and 1,000 in several years.

14 Our interviews and focus groups revealed significant neighborhood-level disagreement about which groups were the most analogous to “gang.” However, the survey data show there is little difference in how these groups are perceived; see Table A-5 in the Appendix, which displays remarkably similar responses to the importance of sharing information about each group type with police.
by the fact that there are very few recent studies of these groups.  

To test how the composition of violent gangs affects public support of gang violence and counter-gang policy, we fielded a survey experiment in July 2017. Prior to questions about support of gang violence and types of counter-gang policy, the 1,066 respondents were randomly selected to receive one of four primes: either a control with no informational prime, or one of three informational primes, where the only words that varied are in brackets, as follows:

As you may know, in some areas in Port-au-Prince, some [ordinary people/women/men] support gangs, by serving as lookouts to alert the community if they see someone suspicious, passing information, or transporting and hiding illegal materials for their members.

We analyze how these primes affect three dependent variables measuring attitudes about the necessity of gang violence, resolutions to gang violence and sharing intelligence:

- **Gang Support**: Respondent agrees or strongly agrees with: “Under some conditions, gang violence is necessary to obtain justice.”
- **Gang Solution**: Respondent agrees or strongly agrees with: “Do you believe gang violence can be resolved through talking and compromise, or is a police solution required?”
- **Sharing Information**: Respondents believe it is important or very important “for citizens to share information about gang activity with the justice authorities.”

### 3 Results and Discussion

**Gang Support.** We first investigate if there is a difference in support for gang violence by prime on support cadre composition. Results from difference in means tests (t-test) are displayed in Figure 1. Across all four treatment states, about only 30% of

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15 INURED (2017), which contains evidence from recent focus groups with people in gang-affected areas, is an exception.

16 For details about the sample and enumeration, see the Appendix.

17 The first two dependent variables are modeled on standard survey questions to gauge hawkishness in foreign policy attitudes about support for war and support for military versus diplomatic solutions.

18 Respondents who agreed or sometimes agreed that baz, bandit or brigade violence was sometimes necessary were coded as 1; those reporting somewhat disagree or totally disagree were coded as 0. The distribution is presented in Table A-4.

19 Responses were coded such that respondents who favored “talking and compromise” with baz, bandit or brigades were coded 1, those favoring a police solution 0.

20 Responses were coded 1 for those supporting sharing information, 0 for those who did not. Table A-5 displays the distribution of responses across all gang sub-type and response combinations. Note that this is the only question of the three DVs for which we asked separate questions about each group type.
respondents agreed gang violence is necessary. Overall, there is no statistical difference across any of the four treatment states, leaving us unable to reject the null for H1, that there is no difference in gang support by support cadre composition.\footnote{While we find no overall differences, disaggregating these results by respondent sex shifts by prime; relative to the control, women experience larger swings than men in response to both primes when asked if gang violence is sometimes necessary. This might suggest that the presence of non-traditional support cadre increases ideological legitimacy—but only for women (see Appendix Figure A-1).} At least in this context where public support for the gangs is low, we do not find evidence that the recruitment of ordinary people shifts public perceptions of the group, or increases beliefs in the justice of the violence.

![Figure 1: Mean gang support, by support cadre composition](image)

**Gang Solution.** The second set of findings centers around how popular support alters respondents’ attitudes regarding a mediated solution versus a police solution to gang violence. We hypothesized that priming respondents on ordinary community members or women serving as support cadre would increase support for a mediated solution relative to the control. Table 1 reports the effect sizes from a linear probability model. The dependent variable in all specifications is whether the respondent preferred a mediated solution to police response. As predicted, priming respondents on either the involvement of ordinary people (Models 1-3) or women (Models 4-6) in support roles increases preferences for a mediated solution relative to both the no-prime control (Models 1-2, 4-5) and relative to cuing explicitly on only male involvement (Models 3 and 6, which exclude the controls from the sample).\footnote{We take the similarity of the comparison categories (control vs. male) to illustrate that the no-prime} The increase is substantively meaningful relative to the control, moving from 15.5% to 22.8%. The results are all in the expected direction, providing support for Hypothesis 2.\footnote{Next, we examine if composition affects willingness to}

**Sharing Information.** Next, we examine if composition affects willingness to
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Table 1: Effect of primes on support for mediated solution

|                      | 0.0597*          | 0.0597*          | 0.0607*          |                  |                  |                  |
|                      | (0.0331)         | (0.0331)         | (0.0318)         |                  |                  |                  |

Table 1: Effect of primes on support for mediated solution

share information about gangs with the police. The Police Nationale d’Haïti, or Haitian National Police (HNP) is relatively small and young: the HNP was created after the military was disbanded in 1995, and as of 2014, was comprised of only about 11,000 police officers. The HNP are widely acknowledged to have been successful in helping to secure Haiti after recent destabilizing episodes (including political instability and natural disasters), but its members are themselves sometimes implicated in gang activity (INURED 2017). Table 2 reports the changes in likelihood a respondent reports being somewhat or very willing to share information about gang activity with the authorities (as opposed to not willing or not at all willing) by treatment, relative to the no-prime control (Models 1-2, 4-5) and relative to men (Models 3 and 6). Two interesting findings emerge. First, there is no difference between the control and male prime, again suggesting male-only involvement in gangs is the status quo conception of gang composition. Second, priming respondents on the involvement of ordinary people or women increases the likelihood of a respondent being willing to share information about gangs with the police (by 6.5 to 8% change relative to the control), counter to our expectation in Hypothesis 3.  

In these specifications, the result is slightly stronger for women, consistent with Viterna (2014) and Loken (2018).  

Linear probability model, errors clustered at PSU. Size of coefficient indicates the size of the marginal effect relative to the control state. Controls: respondent sex, active gang area. Willingness to share information with the police is consistent across all gang sub-types.  

This is also apparent in Table 1, comparing columns 3 and 6 to the others. The results are robust to using only those reporting “very willing” to share information.  

This result is slightly more pronounced for respondents primed on female involvement.
Table 2: Change in willingness to share information with the police, by prime

The positive and significant effects of these two primes are consistent with a number of mechanisms that could be explored in future research. For instance, respondents may find groups with non-traditional support cadre less fearsome, creating an opportunity to report gang activities to the police. This echoes the results from previous research. Viterna (2014) argues that the FMLN used women as recruiters because women were perceived as much less threatening than men. Similarly, (Appiah and White 2017) find in a survey experiment of US adults that respondents were more likely to feel sympathy with and express positive feelings toward a female criminal versus a male criminal, even when the crime was lethal.

Alternatively, women and ordinary people may be more likely to be viewed as reconcilable, or persuadable to leave the group (Kilcullen 2009). Another mechanism might be that respondents may believe these support cadre will be treated better by the police and the (notoriously cruel) justice system than male gang members. Finally, it could be argued that respondents’ increased willingness to share intelligence indicates decreased support for the group. We do not find this last alternative persuasive, in part because (as described above) we do not find any changes in support for gang violence across different support cadres compositions.

Taken together, our results show that the public’s preferences about policy interventions are affected by the composition of violent groups. Diversity and breadth of support in the membership of violent organizations appears to have substantial effects on these two dimensions of counter-gang policy, both echoing the intuition of existing

---

27This is also consistent with research that finds female ex-offenders are perceived as more likely to be rehabilitated (Rade, Desmarais and Mitchell 2016).

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Share Information</th>
<th>(2) Share Information</th>
<th>(3) Share Information</th>
<th>(4) Share Information</th>
<th>(5) Share Information</th>
<th>(6) Share Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary</td>
<td>0.0568* (0.0319)</td>
<td>0.0488 (0.0322)</td>
<td>0.0553* (0.0300)</td>
<td>0.0552* (0.0318)</td>
<td>0.0571* (0.0308)</td>
<td>0.0580* (0.0299)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>0.780*** (0.0224)</td>
<td>0.798*** (0.0338)</td>
<td>0.901*** (0.0358)</td>
<td>0.779*** (0.0223)</td>
<td>0.867*** (0.0336)</td>
<td>0.845*** (0.0332)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.289</td>
<td>0.290</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>0.334</td>
<td>0.381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
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<td>Pure</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Pure</td>
<td>Pure</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors clustered by PSU in parentheses

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1
research and highlighting new topics of study for the future. These findings also suggest that armed groups may find the recruitment of women and other non-traditional members into support cadre strategically valuable—but not necessarily because they increase public support for the group. Rather, their involvement appears to be associated with negotiated resolutions, which often result in armed groups gaining at least some concessions, a valuable outcome for the group.

Finally, we note some limitations to our study. While violent street gangs and rebel, insurgent and militia groups are analogous in many ways, particularly in this context, they are quite different in others. We highlight here two keys differences. First, many gangs explicitly operate for profit, while many rebel groups at least claim to be working for an improved political order. These differences are likely to influence the public’s attitudes about how they view supporters of these groups. A majority of respondents in our sample had a negative opinion of gangs, and reported that the presence of police makes them feel safer. Second, the primary gains achieved by gangs are largely exclusive to their members—even if such groups sometimes provide public services. Conversely, rebel groups’ goals are frequently diffuse, such as increased democracy—even if some members of rebel groups engage in civilian victimization. Taken together, these differences may affect perceptions of the legitimacy of these two types of groups. Supporters of rebel organizations may be more likely to be perceived as selfless heroes, while supporters of gangs may be more likely to be viewed as quasi-criminals. Thus our conclusion that the composition of support cadre is irrelevant for public perceptions may be different in other contexts; perhaps especially so under conditions where popular rebel groups are facing highly repressive states, as was the case with the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador. Future research could also explore the scope of these results, including the level of democracy and development in the state where the violent groups operate.

4 Conclusion

To return to the initial question, we find that the composition of support cadre for violent organizations matters. In particular, for the population in general, we find no difference in support for gang violence by cadre composition. But we find striking differences in opinions about counter-gang policy. In particular, we find opinions about how best to combat gang violence depend on support cadre characteristics. Respondents are more supportive of a negotiated resolution when primed about “ordinary people” or women serving as support cadre, suggesting an increase in perceptions of...
the ideological legitimacy of gangs.

We also find that respondents who received primes about female support cadre were especially likely to report willingness to share information about gangs the police. We suggest that recruitment of women may thus be a double-edged sword: violent groups with women members may not be as feared as all-male groups. As a result of this humanizing effect, respondents may feel less frightened and more empowered to share intelligence with the police.

While the results cannot speak directly to heterogeneity in support cadre for violent groups on dimensions other than gender and “ordinary” people, the findings and potential mechanisms suggest fruitful avenues for research on micro-dynamics between violent groups and their publics that should be explored in other settings. We study Haitian gangs; however, given the similarities to non-violent governance activities conducted by other groups, our results could extend to understanding diversity in participation in a variety of violent political organizations.

In addition, we join other recent scholarship in drawing theoretical and empirical linkages between rebel and terrorist organizations and other violent, illicit non-state organizations, such as organized crime (Kenney 2007, Phillips 2015). Broadly, our study sheds light on a key question for policymakers: do women and ordinary people affiliated with gangs make it more challenging for counter-insurgency efforts to win “heart and minds”? Our results suggest that the answer is no.
References


Travis, Alan. 2016. “Fears Grow Over Gangs’ Exploitation of Women and Young People.”.


Appendices

A  Case, Sampling and Treatment Assignment

A.1  Case

We selected Port-au-Prince because it is an urban area beset by violence from street gangs, analogous in many ways to low-intensity civil war or insurgency. Haiti is an ideal case to analyze questions of gender and security in the developing world. As the site of the first and only successful slave revolt in history, the utility of violence for accomplishing the noble goals of independence and freedom is embedded in Haitian culture. As such, Haiti is an especially important location to study opinions and beliefs about the justifications for political violence. Although the period of civil war in Haiti (1991-1995) ended over a decade ago (Fearon 2013), the slums in contemporary Port-au-Prince are regularly mired in gang violence.

Haitian gangs are unquestionably illicit enterprises, with profit as one of their central goals. However, like many terrorist, rebel, and insurgent organizations (and unlike many street gangs in the US context), they often operate as the defacto “government” in the areas in which they operate, where the formal state is almost entirely absent. Beyond providing security for the neighborhood, gangs in Port-au-Prince provide a host of services, ranging from education to sanitation to development projects. A focus group participant described gangs’ governance activities, beyond neighborhood security, as “seeking money to do projects in the neighborhood, providing for welfare for the poor, helping the population build houses, roads, paying for school for kids.”

Gangs also plan parties for youth, and decorate public spaces for the holiday season. As such, Haitian street gangs are an important type of organization that “bridge” to other violent organizations more frequently studied by political scientists (i.e., terrorist and nationalist insurgent and rebel groups). These types of extralegal service providers expand our empirical and theoretical understanding of non-state groups.

While most of the gangs are comprised of mainly of men, research has found that in the past, women joined armed groups and gangs and “actively participate[d] in ...kidnapping, extortion...narco-trafficking...and violent attacks against the local population or rival groups” (Faedi Duramy 2014, 61). Thus the local population does not necessarily view violence as a male-only domain, making Haiti an important environment to learn about attitudes and beliefs about gender and violence. In terms of broader gender issues, Haiti is characterized by marked gender inequality, including low high school graduation rates for girls, poor female literacy and high maternal mortality. On the other hand, women are viewed as the pillars of society—nearly two-thirds of households are headed by single women—and Haiti has had three female prime ministers, suggesting acceptance (or at least visibility) of women in important leadership roles.

In sum, as the poorest and least developed country in the Western hemisphere, with a history of revolution, civil war and local unrest due to contemporary gang violence, Haiti presents a critical—and understudied—case to explore central questions of political violence and international security.

29Focus Group 1, Port-au-Prince, May 15, 2017
A.2 Sampling

We faced a number of challenges in sampling. First, because of the lack of a recent census—the most recent census data is from 2006, prior to the 2010 earthquake that caused massive displacement—or other reliable existing data to use as a sampling frame, we had no method to assess accurately the representativeness of the data.\textsuperscript{30} Second, we prioritized sampling on areas with exposure to violence rather than on representativeness in order to be able control for relative exposure to violence for the present study.\textsuperscript{31} Third, by sampling on prior exposure to violence at the commune level (our best measure of violence exposure), we ensure that there are sufficient respondents in the communes with high exposure to violence. Even in communes with relatively high levels of violence, there is significant diversity of actual exposure—meaning there are many relatively “safe” areas even in the communes that otherwise appear quite violent.

We contracted Socio Dig, a local Haitian survey firm with experience doing social science studies, to administer our survey instrument to a sample of adult residents of Port-au-Prince during the summer of 2017. We sampled 1,066 adult respondents from Port-au-Prince, in 6 of the 8 communes in the Port-au-Prince arrondissement.\textsuperscript{32} We apportioned clusters of 12 respondents to communes according to exposure to recent episodes of lethal violence; specifically, the probability proportional to violent death exposure in the previous two years (2015-2016). Collection of these data is described below.

Within communes, we identified the universe of potential clusters by laying a 250m by 250m grid over a commune map, and removing obviously inaccessible clusters (e.g., in a ravine, on a mountain or in the ocean), as well as those that the implementing partner deemed logistically infeasible (e.g., too sparsely populated or populated only with businesses, not households).\textsuperscript{33} From that universe of “eligible” clusters, the number of clusters apportioned to each commune were randomly selected.

Within each cluster, households were selected based on a random walk by each enumerator. Within each household, the enumerator selected the adult of the same sex who had the most recent birthday. Enumerator teams were comprised of equal numbers of men and women, ensuring gender balance within the sample. Within each cluster, we administered each of the treatment primes described below, varying the sex of the enumerator-interviewer pair by cluster. Pairing based on sex was important for both ethical, non-response, and social desirability considerations—particularly because (for a different paper that is not relevant for the present study) we were asking about

\textsuperscript{30}See also Gordon and Young (2017), who faced similar sampling challenges in their survey study in metropolitan Port-au-Prince. Slough and Fariss (2017) are the only other large-N survey in political science, but because their sample was the prison population, they did not face analogous sampling issues.

\textsuperscript{31}We also collected data for several other projects that rely on measuring exposure to violence.

\textsuperscript{32}The sample includes all major population areas in the capital city. We excluded two communes (Kenscoff and Gressier) that are sparsely populated and far outside the city center, or had very little exposure to violence for both budgetary and logistical reasons. The sampled areas are the sites of most of the reported lethal violence in Haiti, much of which is perpetrated by gangs. For instance, a March 2016 MINUSTAH report concluded that over 80% of reported homicides in Haiti during a recent reporting period (September 1, 2015 to March 1, 2016) occurred in Port-au-Prince, and half of these were gang-related.

\textsuperscript{33}Our implementing partner preferred to work from “crosshairs” rather than within grid-squares, restricting distance from the starting point to approximately 125m to ensure no overlap with another cluster even should the neighboring “crosshair” be selected.
rape and attitudes about gender and gender roles.\textsuperscript{34}

The method of assignment to treatment should ensure randomization within and across clusters, and we show that randomization was successful across observed and measured covariates in Table A-3. We note there is no difference in response rates in the most violent areas, so the sampling designed for other studies does not affect the present study’s results.

B Violence Data

The data on exposure to lethal violence are from an original dataset we complied from quarterly narrative reports of lethal violence issued by a local Haitian NGO, JILAP (\textit{Jistis ak Lap Achidyosz Potoprens}, or the Justice and Peace Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince).\textsuperscript{35} We merged the JILAP data at the commune level with data from official UN crime statistics. Here we provide more detail on these data sources and their biases—which we argue are minimized because we merged the two datasets.

Crime data were necessary to construct a sampling strategy—and reliable crime data in Haiti are hard to come by. Official crime statistics are collected by the Haitian National Police (HNP) and brief qualitative paragraph-long descriptions of patterns of homicide, rape and kidnapping are periodically released in MINUSTAH reports to the UN Secretary General. A disaggregated and numerical version of these crime statistics would be useful, but the official crime statistics \textit{are not public} and, despite over a year of repeated requests, both formal and informal, the HNP were unwilling to share them with us. However, a subset of the UN crime data was privately shared with us by an anonymous source, and these data raised concerns about reporting bias. Namely, in the data shared with us, the slum area known as Cite Soleil, widely recognized to be among the most dangerous parts of the city, has relatively few reported events of violence. This reporting bias may mean that people are not using the police to report crime—or that these data are not shared by the HNP with the UN for use in the UN crime data.

We located an alternative data source from the aforementioned local NGO called JILAP. JILAP has collected remarkable data on individual incidents of lethal violence—including the date, sex of the victim, and cause of death—directly from local communities in Port-au-Prince since 2002. The data are released in quarterly reports, four times per year, but have never been aggregated into a quantitative dataset. We created a quantitative dataset from JILAP’s reports, using information from all 15 years of the reports (2002-2016). We then used the JILAP data from 2015-2016 in the present analysis. One issue is that the JILAP data report where a body was discovered, or the hospital where the body was dropped, but not where the crime took place. As a result, we must assume the location of a body is tied to violence exposure in a particular geographic area—but this assumption is arguably less heroic than assumptions we would need to make to use the official HNP/UN crime data (to which we were unable to gain access, in any case).

\textsuperscript{34}Assuming geographic covariates account for 0.4 of variation, a treatment effect size of 0.27 sd, $P= 0.8$ power to detect a treatment effect, with $\alpha = 0.05$.

\textsuperscript{35}We plan to release these JILAP lethal violence data separately, in the hope that more scholars of political violence will be drawn to study the Haitian case.
## C Additional Tables and Figures

### C.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table A-1: Summary statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>8.971</td>
<td>4.695</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35.127</td>
<td>12.934</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>1026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local News Consumption</td>
<td>0.551</td>
<td>0.498</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>0.979</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HH goods</td>
<td>3.461</td>
<td>1.759</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune</td>
<td>Education (ordinal)</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>News Consumption (local)</td>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>HH goods (count)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrefour</td>
<td>8.338583</td>
<td>36.980263</td>
<td>.6513158</td>
<td>.9144737</td>
<td>3.888158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cite Soleil</td>
<td>8.944445</td>
<td>31.184616</td>
<td>.2954545</td>
<td>.4015152</td>
<td>2.893939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delmas</td>
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<td>35.58371</td>
<td>.5263158</td>
<td>1.484305</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Petionville</td>
<td>8.551282</td>
<td>35.614456</td>
<td>.6091954</td>
<td>1.357143</td>
<td>2.850575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
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<td>35.75</td>
<td>.6218274</td>
<td>.9033079</td>
<td>3.916244</td>
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<td>Tabarre</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>31.895834</td>
<td>.4285714</td>
<td>.877551 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A-2: Mean demographics by Commune.
Figure A-1 highlights that while aggregate difference across primes are identical, the composition by gender varies significantly. In particular, women are more likely to support gang violence when primed on “women” or “ordinary people.” While investigating these subgroup effects falls outside the scope of this paper, these results suggest avenues for future theory-building and hypothesis testing.

![Figure A-1: Attitudes about necessity of gang violence, by treatment state and respondent gender](image)

D Balance

Table A-3 reports balance on relevant covariates.
Table A-3: Balance Verification: p-values from equality tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>women=m=ordinary</th>
<th>women=m</th>
<th>costs=m=ordinary</th>
<th>women=m=ordinary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>education ordinal (a)</td>
<td>0.7731</td>
<td>0.7837</td>
<td>0.4775</td>
<td>0.6631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>0.4825</td>
<td>0.2846</td>
<td>0.9598</td>
<td>0.3074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political knowledge (b)</td>
<td>0.2386</td>
<td>0.1794</td>
<td>0.1180</td>
<td>0.8295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news consumption daily (c)</td>
<td>0.7325</td>
<td>0.4337</td>
<td>0.6340</td>
<td>0.7551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any children</td>
<td>0.3733</td>
<td>0.2751</td>
<td>0.1906</td>
<td>0.8317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hh goods (d)</td>
<td>0.6072</td>
<td>0.3600</td>
<td>0.4213</td>
<td>0.9061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>married</td>
<td>0.8839</td>
<td>0.9362</td>
<td>0.6422</td>
<td>0.7016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attend church (e)</td>
<td>0.8068</td>
<td>0.5791</td>
<td>0.5623</td>
<td>0.9837</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a): Ordinal scale of highest level of education achieved
(b): Able to name correctly one of their local representatives
(c): Reported daily news consumption
(d): Number of goods respondent reports having in their household from a standard census
(e): Reported church attendance
Table A-4: Distribution of “gang violence is sometimes necessary” responses, by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gang violence is sometimes necessary</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A-5: Distribution of “share information with the police” responses, by category and gang sub-type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gang sub-type</th>
<th>Not Important at all</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baz</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandit</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigade</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>665</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>