

Criminal governance and social order in Nottingham, England

A mixed-methods study of crime in the English city of Nottingham shows that the presence of a governance-type organized criminal group helped to reduce ordinary crime in the immediate area.

The project

Organized criminal groups (OCGs) exist in cities worldwide, eroding societal functioning through illicit activities such as the production and trade of illegal goods and generating violence. In addition to these activities, governance-type OCGs, such as mafia groups¹, exercise a degree of social governance over communities and even punish perceived wrongdoers and social deviants in their territories. Most previous studies on the wider effects of governance-type OCGs in cities, such as imposing restrictions on citizen's behavior, enforcing agreements between businesses, and solving civil disputes between individuals, have focused on the Global South in fragile states², or the Global North in traditional mafia territories like southern Italy or immigrant communities³. To address this bias, we therefore turned our focus to a largely non-immigrant community in the city of Nottingham, UK. As part of our research, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews and field trips, analysis of written documents, as well as analysis of big data.

The discovery

Existing information from local police, researchers, and news media indicate that a governance-type OCG is rooted in the ward of Bestwood in Nottingham, previously led by an infamous boss called Colin Gunn and subsequently by his successors⁴. Gunn, along with his 'Bestwood Cartel' gang, is linked to fourteen murders, police corruption, and large-scale drug trafficking in the city area. The 'Bestwood Cartel' gang has been linked to 14 murders, police corruption and large-scale drug trafficking in the city area and has been active in Bestwood since the 1980s.

In this work, we used a mixed-methods study, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, to assess how this governance-type OCG impacted social order in the context of crime. With the assistance of the Nottingham Police Department, we collected and analyzed an anonymized public phone call dataset from 2012 to 2019, which included details on call time, crime location, and crime type as labelled by the police. We first selected eight common crime types from the dataset and then mapped their geographic patterns across twenty wards in Nottingham. Additionally, we used UK official census and deprivation index data to identify a ward similar to Bestwood in terms of societal composition, including demographic and poverty metrics, but lacking the presence of a known governance-type OCG. We also interviewed thirteen senior

police officers who patrol different areas of the city, asking them questions about local crime. From the interviews, we learned that Gunn was viewed as "God-like" in Bestwood and how his OCG controlled social orders, for example, by policing local car thefts.

Our analysis identified the Bulwell area of Nottingham as that most similar to Bestwood, and we confirmed the lack of a known governance-type OCG presence in that area with police and a previous study⁴. Notably, the average rates of eight types of crime were significantly lower in Bestwood than in Bulwell when accounting for population density (Fig.1). We compared Bestwood with other similar wards and found that certain types of crime were also lower in these areas. The wards we compared were also free of any known governance-style OCGs. These findings suggest that the presence of the Gunn OCG reduced local crime.

Future directions

Our work calls for a revision of traditional theories, such as the weak state explanation², regarding the emergence of criminal governance in cities. The findings reveal a governance-type OCG that exists in a city in the Global North, is not a traditional mafia organisation, is made up of non-immigrant members and is in a society where the state is not weak. Although the group committed crimes, including drugs-related crimes, and was violent with other groups, they somehow acted as a "hidden sheriff", reducing certain crimes in the local community.

During the study, we interviewed police officers to understand the crime landscape in Nottingham, including the activities of the Bestwood gang. While we gained insights into how the Bestwood gang policed local crime, our understanding of the group's growth and functioning could be further enhanced if we could obtain direct information from its members or local residents.

In 2018, the Nottingham Police Department launched Operation Reacher to tackle criminal activities in the city⁵. In future research, we plan to investigate how this operation and other developments from the local authority have affected crime in Bestwood and other areas of the city.

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FIGURE

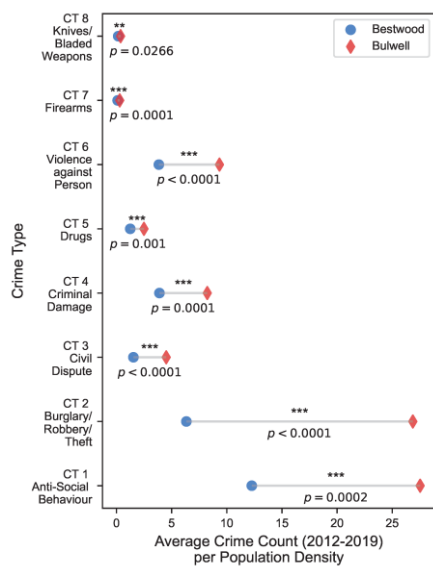


Fig.1 | Bestwood had lower crime rates than its matched pair, Bulwell, over the period 2012–2019. We identified that Bulwell, which has no known governance-type OCG presence, is the ward most similar to Bestwood in Nottingham regarding socioeconomic and demographic features. Using data on public phone calls to police, we compared average crime rates between 2012 and 2019 for eight crime types (CTs) per population density (number of persons per hectare). Our analysis shows that Bestwood had significantly lower rates for all eight CTs, as determined using Welch's t-tests. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

BEHIND THE PAPER

Due to the popularity of crime films on OCGs such as 'The Godfather', many people have glimpsed the social governance of the mafia through an artistic lens. As social scientists, before starting this project, we were aware of studies describing the prevalence of criminal governance in cities in the Global South, as well as in some cities in the Global North with traditional mafia connections or large immigrant populations. Our study describes a new location with a mafia-type OCG, which did not fit with the demographics, or weak state contexts, covered in these previous studies. During the study, we conducted several field trips to different neighborhoods in Nottingham to observe the built environment and the daily lives of citizens. Generally, conditions were similar to other places in the UK. These observations, which challenge existing theories of the emergence of criminal governance in cities, led us to consider that further research is needed to unravel the puzzle of the emergence of Gunn OCG. **F.Z. & F.V.**

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