

Disguised Vigilantes: Civilian Uprisings and Strategic Fragmentation in Organized Crime

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Abstract

Civilian uprisings against criminal organizations through vigilante movements are widespread, yet we know little about how criminal actors respond to such collective resistance. Through a formal model, we argue that opportunistic criminal subleaders seeking autonomy from their superiors may have the incentives to exploit civilian uprisings. Intuitively, civilian uprisings can create incentives for subleaders to defect as new criminal groups by weakening criminal leadership. Counterintuitively, vigilante groups can create opportunities for inconspicuous criminal subleaders to fragment as disguised vigilantes and forego vigilante and government enforcement. We evaluate these predictions through the 2013 *autodefensas* uprising in Michoacán, Mexico against the *Caballeros Templarios* cartel. Leveraging an original dataset of criminal actors in Michoacán between 2010-2018, we show that some well-known *Caballeros Templarios* subleaders responded to the *autodefensas* by defecting as new criminal groups while relatively unknown subleaders expended additional effort to defect as disguised *autodefensas*. Both strategies allowed subleaders to endure the civilian uprising and control illicit economies in the aftermath. Our findings illustrate how civilian resistance can unintentionally enable criminal subleaders to consolidate power.

Keywords: vigilantism; self-defense groups; organized crime; fragmentation; Mexico

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1 Introduction

How do armed non-state actors respond when civilians collectively challenge their authority? Around the world, millions live under criminal governance (Uribe et al. 2025) and communities increasingly organize resistance movements to combat organized crime where states fail to provide security (Tapscott 2023), from *autodefensas* in Mexico, to *cooperativas de vigilancia* in Colombia, to the *Bakassi Boys* in Nigeria, to the *Addiopizzo* anti-mafia movement in Italy, to *barangay*-based anti-drug campaigns in the Philippines. Social responses to criminal violence remain understudied (Arias 2019), yet civilian uprisings through vigilante groups have attracted growing attention as scholars seek to understand their emergence (Anderson 2002; Jung and Cohen 2020; Angell 2025; Dow et al. 2024; Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub 2021; Phillips 2017) and violent consequences (Del Rio 2023; Herrera 2021; Guerra Manzo 2015; Erickson and Owen 2025). Although their emergence reflects a broader transformation in contemporary global politics in which governance and security are increasingly contested among states, armed groups, and civilian actors, far less attention has been paid to how criminal actors respond to these uprisings. This article fills this gap by examining how organized criminal groups strategically adapt to civilian challenges and, more broadly, how illicit armed organizations respond to bottom-up threats to their authority.

This article proposes a novel explanation for how and why some organized criminal groups survive even when civilian uprisings successfully weaken local criminal actors or topple criminal leadership. Our explanation is built on three key insights. First, we extend recent studies conceptualizing rebel leaders as opportunistic actors (Uribe and Schouela 2025; Wyr 2024) to argue that criminal leaders strategically adapt to changing political and social environments by pursuing their own organizational and personal interests. Second, we note that low and mid-level criminal subleaders – who often control local operations and may want more power and autonomy – may be especially likely to act opportunistically when shifts in the environment create opportunities to pursue their self-interests at the expense of organizational or leadership interests through fragmentation. Third, we highlight

that criminal actors often disguise themselves as civilian actors to gain operational cover, avoid government enforcement, and consolidate illicit activities, particularly during vigilante movements – a widespread phenomenon that remains largely overlooked by existing research.

With these building blocks, we develop a decision-theoretic formal model to argue that opportunistic mid- and low-ranking criminal subleaders seeking autonomy from their superiors, who are suddenly in the crosshair of vigilante groups, may strategically exploit civilian uprisings. Mid- and low-level criminal subleaders, suddenly facing a civilian uprising, face a choice set: remain in the criminal organization being targeted; exploit the moment to gain autonomy by defecting as a new criminal organization; or, counterintuitively, exploit the moment to gain autonomy by defecting while disguised as a vigilante group and selling themselves as part of the civilian uprising. Defecting openly as criminal is less costly but more risky, while a vigilante disguise requires higher costs and is not guaranteed to work, but when it does, provides cover from civilian and government enforcement. Yet, some criminal subleaders are infamous, making it unlikely that they can pose as civilian vigilante groups, while others are inconspicuous, increasing the probability that they can successfully pass as a vigilante group. Civilian uprisings can thus paradoxically fragment criminal organizations rather than eliminate them, reshaping local orders of governance by generating a more fragmented and opaque landscape of armed actors.

We demonstrate the empirical plausibility of our model and its implications through a case study of the 2013 *autodefensas* vigilante uprising against the *Caballeros Templarios*, the dominant cartel in Michoacán, Mexico at that time. We first present the strategic environment in Michoacán prior to the vigilante movement, with a particular focus on the *Caballeros Templarios*, and discuss the emergence of the civilian uprising and how it suddenly shifted the status quo. To provide evidence supporting the implications of the model, we draw on original data on the population of criminal organizations and their leaders in Michoacán between January 2010 to December 2018. We use this data to show that the criminal actors that came to dominate illicit markets in Michoacán after the civilian uprising were *all* mid- and low-level

Templario subleaders that defected during the vigilante movement. After identifying these criminal leaders and backward tracing their trajectories, we show that some highly visible subleaders defected amid the citizen uprising as new criminal actors, while some lesser known subleaders defected by selling themselves as part of the *autodefensa* movement, using the legitimacy of the movement to exert control over the territories they operated in. To discuss how the parameters from the model help explain these patterns, we subsequently present detailed qualitative evidence on each defecting subleader by mode of defection.

Our results demonstrate that civilian uprisings can paradoxically create opportunities that criminal subleaders can exploit to gain autonomy and consolidate control over illicit markets and territory. Importantly, these dynamics are not unique to Mexico as we see it play out cross-nationally: in Italy, mafia members in several Sicilian towns in the 1980s to 1990s organized citizen patrols when the anti-Mafia movement arose; in Russia, the Solntsevskaya Bratva has reportedly posed as state-sanctioned Cossack patrol organizations (community-defense groups) in certain regions; in Peru, some of the *rondas campesinas* (communal defense groups) have been accused of being disguised criminal actors. Understanding these dynamics is important because civilian self-defense movements are increasingly employed to confront criminal organizations, insurgents, and other armed non-state actors across diverse regions of the world; if such mobilization unintentionally generates organizational fragmentation rather than organizational collapse, then civilian resistance may reshape rather than eliminate violent orders.

These results and their consequences contribute to the fields of both international relations and comparative politics. In terms of international relations, it speaks to two strains of literature. First, organizational theory helps explain strategies of organizational adaption and innovation among criminal groups (see [Horowitz and Pindyck \(2023\)](#) for a review on military adaptation and innovation). Adaptation and innovation is a core component of success across organizations such as militaries, international organizations, businesses, corporations, and, as argued here, organized criminal groups ([Moeller and Hunter 2026](#)). In regarding organized

criminal groups as organizations just like any other, we can better understand how they adapt to changing incentives to withstand pressures from above and below. Second, the bargaining model of war, specifically its underlying assumption of uncertainty, helps explain the consequences of how criminal groups adapt and innovate ([Fearon 1995](#)). As argued here, a primary outcome of adaptation is organizational fragmentation. The resulting proliferation of groups creates an environment of uncertainty that could lead to more violence as the state, non-state groups, and civilians alike are uncertain about the identity and intent of the actors that emerge from organizational fragmentation ([Schelling 1960](#); [Jervis 1976](#); [Waltz 1959](#)).

In terms of comparative politics, it makes three contributions. First, we contribute to research on vigilantism by shifting the attention away from the behavior of vigilante groups themselves and instead examine how criminals behave when confronted with such external pressures. Second, we also contribute to the study of criminal organizations and their fragmentation by assessing how criminals behave in the face of resistance. Our findings highlight how criminal organizations are not monolithic entities where all actors pursue the goals of the overall organization and instead model how subleaders within the organization behave. When faced with external pressures from the government and vigilante groups, subleaders may behave in opportunistic and self-interested ways that challenge overall organizational goals. Lastly, we contribute to the interdisciplinary literature on the *autodefensas* in Mexico by modeling how criminal actors behave in the face of civilian uprisings. Common accounts of the *autodefensas* take the groups to be distinct from criminal entities. However, this article provides a novel account of the *autodefensas* as we illuminate how subleaders themselves may opportunistically take advantage of the movement by defecting from the umbrella criminal organization to then pose as a vigilante group themselves.

2 Civilian Uprisings and Criminal Fragmentation

This article proposes that civilian uprisings in the form of vigilante movements are an overlooked factor that can shift incentives and lead criminal armed actors to react opportunistically¹ and defect from their organization to pursue their self-interest. [Cohen, Jung and Weintraub \(2023, 243\)](#) and [Moncada \(2017, 408\)](#) generally define vigilantism as the collective use or threat of extra-legal violence to punish alleged criminal acts against the community. In this article, we specifically focus on vigilantism through semi-permanent organized vigilante groups, which are also frequently referred to as self-defense forces or civilian defense forces, rather than spontaneous vigilantism, such as community lynchings.

An expanding literature examines what [Bateson \(2021\)](#) and [Cohen, Jung and Weintraub \(2023\)](#) call vigilantism as the *dependent variable*, where researchers explore the emergence of civilian defense forces. Institutional explanations emphasize state capacity ([Anderson 2002](#); [Jung and Cohen 2020](#); [Angell 2025](#); [Dow et al. 2024](#); [Tapscott 2023](#)), institutional instability ([Obert and Mattiacci 2018](#)), criminal justice reforms ([Hanson and Kronick 2026](#)), and local state autonomy and civil society ([Chriswell 2026](#)). Social explanations highlight community norms and organizational capacity for collective action ([Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub 2021](#); [Pérez-Armendáriz and Duquette-Rury 2021](#)) and civil identity under ethno-nationalist fragmentation ([Obert and Mattiacci 2018](#)). Economic explanations focus on inequality, external resources, and the structure of local political economies ([Phillips 2017](#); [Ley, Ibarra Olivo and Meseguer 2021](#); [Moncada 2021](#)).

Much less work, however, examines vigilantism as an *independent variable*, with existing research asking whether civilian resistance movements reduce violence. Under rare conditions, vigilantism has been found to reduce violence when groups possess sufficient organizational capacity to successfully challenge criminal incursions ([Erickson and Owen 2025](#); [Cruz and Vorobyeva 2022](#)). More commonly, however, vigilantism appears to perpetuate violence as

¹This complements research on rebel groups that finds that peace processes, illicit markets, and shocks to state capacity are factors that can create situations for opportunistic behavior ([Uribe and Schouela 2025](#); [Wyer 2024](#)).

new armed actors displace existing ones, generating enduring cycles of conflict (Del Rio 2023; Herrera 2021).

This article contributes to the emerging literature on vigilantism as the *independent variable* by arguing that civilian uprisings through vigilante groups can shift incentives in a way that allows criminal subleaders to act opportunistically and advance their own interests. More concretely, we focus on one strategic response: the decision to remain a subleader within a larger criminal organization or fragment by defecting from their criminal organization and forming an independent organization.

Existing research notes two key factors that create opportunities for criminal leaders to fragment: profit opportunities and leadership decapitation. With respect to profit opportunities, while some studies find that shocks to the value of illicit market in specific territories does not correlate with fragmentation (Esberg 2025), others argue that the structure of illicit markets and their geography do shape fragmentation by allowing weaker criminal subleaders to defect far from their organization (Alcocer and Hesles Toscana 2025). With respect to leadership decapitation, scholars largely agree that kingpin strategies may create temporary power vacuums that ambitious criminal leaders seek to exploit in pursuit of greater power, profits, or autonomy, triggering violent episodes (Esberg 2025; Calderón et al. 2015; Jones 2013; Phillips 2015). Recent research suggests that beyond high-level leaders fighting over succession, mid- and lower-level subleaders who cannot fight over the leadership position following leadership decapitation can nevertheless also use moments of organizational uncertainty to pursue independence through market, geographic, and alliance opportunities (Alcocer and Hesles Toscana 2025).

We see similar dynamics of this fragmentation process extensively theorized in the political violence literature (Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour 2012; Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour 2012; Cunningham 2013; Seymour, Bakke and Gallagher Cunningham 2016; Gade, Hafez and Gabbay 2019; Schubiger 2023). For example, external pressures against an armed group increases the likelihood of fragmentation by disrupting intra-organizational coordination

and unity (Schubiger 2023). The balance between a subgroup’s self-interested rationality versus organizational rationality highly influences the probability and severity of group fragmentation (Olson 1965); in other words, fragmentation occurs when an individual or subgroup’s opportunistic self-interest overrides the collective sense of profitability for the overall organization (Seymour, Bakke and Gallagher Cunningham 2016; Wyer 2024).

These studies suggest that fragmentation often occurs when shifts in the internal or external incentives prompt criminal leaders and subleaders to act opportunistically to advance their own interests by deciding to fragment and gain autonomy. While existing research on criminal fragmentation focuses on illicit markets and leadership decapitation as catalysts for opportunistic behavior, we contend that civilian uprisings can also create incentives for opportunistic defection.

3 Theoretical Framework

We develop a formal model to examine the decision of criminal subleaders to defect amidst a civilian armed uprising. We define *subleaders* as individuals within a criminal organization that have some type of leadership role but report to a higher-level leader, including anyone with high-level down to lower-level leadership roles. We consider leaders with subordinates and the defection of this faction rather than individual defection. We model criminal subleaders as strategic individuals and characterize their choice between (1) remaining in their criminal organization under their bosses or defecting and operating independently with their own subordinates, either by (2) defecting openly as a new criminal organization or (3) defecting and posing as a vigilante group to attempt to evade civilian and governmental detection and enforcement. Which of the three option is taken is based both on personal preferences and inducements by their superiors, civilian vigilante groups, and government actions.

We refer to the criminal actors pursuing the third strategy as *disguised vigilantes*: criminal subleaders who strategically present themselves as members of the civilian uprising to reduce

the likelihood of detection and enforcement. We see this as a survival strategy that exploits the informational uncertainty created by rapidly emerging civilian mobilization. Criminal subleaders adopting this strategy may participate in genuine vigilante operations against rival criminal organizations, but they do so to advance their own criminal interests rather than the objectives of the civilian movement.

Governments are modeled as strategic actors that respond to the emergence of civilian uprisings and the armed groups operating within them. Conditional on identifying an actor as criminal, the government optimally allocates enforcement against that actor. However, when criminal subleaders disguise themselves as vigilante groups, governments cannot always correctly identify them as criminal organizations. Finally, we treat civilian uprisings as exogenous to each individual criminal subleader since our objective is to explain how criminal actors strategically respond to civilian uprisings rather than why these movements emerge.

3.1 Model

Consider subleaders S_i within a criminal organization, where i denotes each subleader. We assume that individuals have heterogeneous preferences over being independent, indexed by the parameter $x_i \in (-\infty, \infty)$. We normalize the personal gain from *not* being independent and being a subleader in a larger criminal organization to 0. We also assume that each subleader differs in their observability by the government, with $\theta_i \in [0, 1]$ denoting each individual subleader's visibility and $\theta \sim U[0, 1]$, which is exogenous to the game. This parameter captures the notoriety of a criminal subleader and thus impacts the ease through which they can pass as vigilante groups in the government's eyes. This means subleaders differ not only in their preference for independence but also in their public observability.

We begin by considering the choice to remain a subleader within their criminal organization. We assume that each individual makes profits from operating in the territories they oversee whether they are subleaders or independent actors, which we normalize to zero for simplicity. When part of a larger criminal organization, subleaders pay rents, $r > 0$, to higher-ups in

the organization, but get some degree of protection, $\delta \in [0, 1]$, from being part of this larger organization, with lower δ denoting higher protection. As members of a criminal organization, the government G observes the subleaders and imposes a cost of enforcement, $p \geq 0$, which can include operations, interdiction, seizures, and arrests. Lastly, if civilian vigilante groups are present, they impose cost $v > 0$ on criminals. This can represent attacks, territorial loss, disruption of illicit activities, seizure of assets, or loss of personnel, among others. The expected utility for subleaders staying in their criminal organization therefore follows:

$$EU_{\text{stay}} = -r - \delta(p + v) \quad (1)$$

In our setup, subleaders have three options: stay as a subleader in their criminal organization, defect as criminals *without* adopting measures to disguise themselves as vigilante groups, and defecting while incurring the costs of posing as community vigilante groups. If the subleaders decide to defect, they get the personal benefit of operating independently x_i and do not pay rent r , but they stop receiving organizational protection and they pay a cost of defecting.

If subleaders defect without the effort of disguising themselves as a vigilante group, the government G observes them as a new criminal organization and imposes the cost of enforcement, p . Defecting as a criminal has cost $\kappa_c > 0$. We assume that subleaders who defect can get support, $s \geq 0$, from outside criminal organizations seeking to weaken the organization they defect from. This can entail receiving financial benefits, armed men, weapons, logistical support, or some other form of benefit. The expected utility for subleaders defecting openly as criminals is therefore:

$$EU_{\text{defect crim}} = x_i - p - v - \kappa_c + s \quad (2)$$

Alternatively, if a subleader decides to defect, they can defect while making an additional effort to pose as a civilian vigilante group to gain operational cover and avoid government

repression. The key feature of vigilante groups in our model is not their true intent, but that they are perceived as civilian actors by the government and other civilians, creating incentives for criminal actors to strategically mimic them. We assume the cost of defecting *and* attempting to pass as a vigilante group, $\kappa_v > 0$, is greater than the cost of defecting as a criminal organization, so that $\kappa_v > \kappa_c$. If a subleader chooses this option, there is some probability, $q_i \in [0, 1]$, that the government G identifies them as a disguised vigilante group and imposes the enforcement cost, p . The detection probability for each subleader is $q_i = \theta_i q$, where $q \in [0, 1]$ is the government detection effort and $\theta_i \in [0, 1]$ denotes each individual subleader's observability, which is exogenous to the game. With probability $1 - q_i$ subleaders successfully disguise themselves as a citizen vigilante group, bypass government enforcement, and instead gain some operational cover, $\ell \geq 0$. This operational cover provides benefits arising from civilians and authorities perceiving the group as protecting the community rather than engaging in criminal activity precisely when vigilante groups may have increased legitimacy in the eyes of the communities they seek to protect. We can express the expected utility of subleaders defecting and posing as a vigilante group as:

$$EU_{\text{defect vig}} = x_i + (1 - q_i)\ell - q_i(p + v) - \kappa_v + s \quad (3)$$

We then consider the government's response. Given the decision of the subleader, the government G faces either a subleader operating for a larger criminal organization, a new criminal group, or a vigilante group that could be legitimate or criminals in disguise. Following a subleader's actions, the government optimizes their enforcement efforts. In this framework, governments are reactive rather than proactive, with them reacting to the emergence of vigilante groups and criminal fragments *ex post* rather than preemptively in anticipation, which is consistent with central governments being taken by surprise by mass civilian uprisings against criminal organizations.

If the government observes the subleader as a criminal, the government selects the

enforcement level, $p \geq 0$, at cost $\frac{\varphi}{2}p^2$, where $\varphi > 0$ is a parameter capturing the institutional and technological factors affecting the costs of enforcement. The government receives a benefit per unit of enforcement from cracking down on criminals, $B > 0$. If the subleader defects and chooses to pose as a vigilante group, the government must invest in probabilistically detecting the group as a disguised vigilante group, $q \in [0, 1]$, at cost $\frac{\alpha}{2}q^2$, where α is an exogenous parameter that captures the costs of detection given the number of civilian-led vigilante groups. We model the detection cost given the existence or absence of civilian vigilante groups as $\alpha = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1$, where $\alpha_0 > 0$ is a parameter capturing the baseline verification costs of detecting a criminal posing as a vigilante group faced by the government even in the absence of civilian vigilante groups and $\alpha_1 > 0$ captures the additional costs of detection when civilian vigilante groups exist. This characterization means that identifying a disguised vigilante group as criminal is more difficult the more civilian vigilante groups there are. Moreover, we assume the government observes θ_i for each self-labeled group, allowing tailored detection effort q per group. With probability $q_i(\theta_i, q) = q\theta_i$, the government rightly detects the disguised vigilante group as a criminal organization and cracks down on them. This means the probability of detection is increasing in a subleader's visibility. However, with probability $1 - q_i$ they fail to rightly identify them and thus do not crack down on them, which results in cost C of letting a criminal organization operate freely.

When the subleader does not pose as a vigilante group, the government observes a criminal actor and does not have to expend detection effort, so the expected utility of the government per observed criminal actor is:

$$EU_{\text{gov crim}}(p) = Bp - \frac{\varphi}{2}p^2 \quad (4)$$

Alternatively, the if the government observes a self-labeled vigilante group, the expected utility of the government per observed group is the following:

$$EU_{\text{gov vig}}(p, q) = q_i \left(Bp - \frac{\varphi}{2}p^2 \right) - (1 - q_i)C - \frac{\alpha}{2}q^2 \quad (5)$$

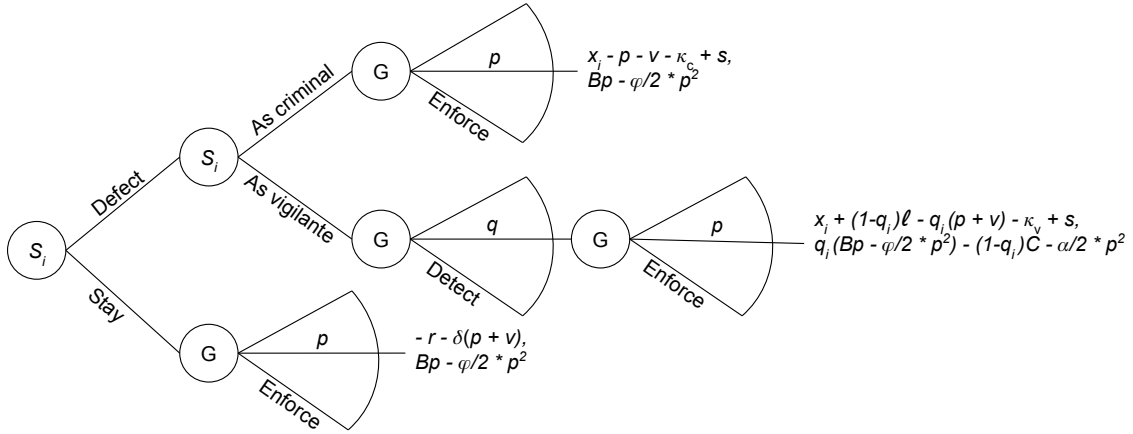


Figure 1: Game tree for subleader's defection decision and government reaction. S_i : Subleader i ; G: Government.

The timing of the game is as follows:

1. Subleader i decides whether to remain as a subleader in their organization or defect and lead their own criminal organization.
2. A defecting subleader decides whether to defect as criminals or attempt to disguise themselves as vigilante forces.
3. The government observes a criminal organization or a vigilante group.
4. If the government observes a criminal organization, it decides the level of enforcement against the group. If the government observes a vigilante group, they invest in identifying whether it is a civilian vigilante group or a criminal organization posing as a vigilante group, and if it correctly identifies it as a disguised criminal then decides the level of enforcement against the criminal organization.

Figure 1 presents the game in extended form. For each outcome, the payoffs for S_i followed by G are presented.

3.2 Government Enforcement

The subgame-perfect equilibrium is obtained by backward induction. We thus begin by analyzing the government's actions. The government, anticipating the subleader's action, chooses its enforcement effort p and detection effort q to maximize its expected payoff. Regardless of whether the observed group is criminal or a self-labeled vigilante group, the first-order condition with respect to p yields the optimal crackdown intensity whenever a criminal organization is identified:

$$p^* = \frac{B}{\varphi}. \quad (6)$$

When the government observes a self-labeled vigilante group, it also maximizes q . Maximizing with respect to detection effort q gives the interior solution (after substituting p^*):

$$q^* = \min \left\{ \frac{\theta_i}{\alpha} \left(\frac{B^2}{2\varphi} + C \right), 1 \right\}. \quad (7)$$

This gives:

$$q_i^* = q_i(q^*, \theta_i) \quad (8)$$

We denote with p^* the quantity maximizing $EU_{\text{gov crim}}(p)$ and $EU_{\text{gov vigilante}}(p, q)$ for the government, regardless of who the government observes, and p^* and q^* the quantities maximizing $EU_{\text{gov vigilante}}(p, q)$ when the government observes a vigilante group, with q_i^* denoting the individual detection probability given q^* and θ_i .

We note that while the government chooses enforcement and detection effort optimally, detection depends on the visibility of individual subleaders. Hence, highly visible actors remain more likely to be detected even under identical government effort.

3.3 Defecting Equilibria

Anticipating q_i^* and p^* , subleader i chooses the action that maximizes expected utility among the three alternatives: staying in the dominant organization, defecting as a criminal leader

leading their own criminal organization, or defecting as an independent criminal organization while posing as a civilian vigilante group.

We begin with the baseline decision of choosing between staying as a subleader or defecting to lead an independent group without incurring the additional costs of attempting to pass as a civilian vigilante group. Solving the inequality $EU_{\text{defectCrim}} > EU_{\text{stay}}$ establishes the conditions under which a subleader will prefer to defect as a criminal rather than remain within the criminal organization:

Open criminal defection dominates staying if and only if

$$x_i > (1 - \delta)(p^* + v) + \kappa_c - r - s \equiv \underline{x}_{\text{crim}} \quad (9)$$

Having examined the standard manner of defection, we turn to the decision to defect as a disguised civilian vigilante group. Solving $EU_{\text{defect vig}} > EU_{\text{stay}}$ gives the following inequality establishing the condition under which a subleader will prefer to defect as a vigilante group rather than remain within the criminal organization:

Defecting while posing as a vigilante group dominates staying if and only if

$$x_i > (q_i^* - \delta)(p^* + v) - (1 - q_i^*)\ell + \kappa_v - s - r \equiv \underline{x}_v \quad (10)$$

This condition gives us the threshold, $\underline{x}_v$, under which subleaders prefer to defect and pose as vigilante groups rather than stay subordinates as subleaders. Only subleaders with sufficiently strong independence preferences find this option attractive.

Having derived the conditions under which subleaders prefer to defect openly as criminals or posing as vigilante groups, a central question is what determines *which* option they choose. Indeed, the crucial decision for criminal subleaders choosing to defect is between defecting as criminals or as vigilante groups. Given the payoffs, posing as a vigilante group dominates

open criminal defection if and only if

$$\kappa_v - \kappa_c < (1 - q_i^*)(\ell + p^* + v) \quad (11)$$

This condition establishes that the decision of each subleader to defect openly as a criminal or as a vigilante group does not depend on x_i , but does depend on θ_i since $q_i^*(q^*, \theta_i)$. Defining this cutoff gives:

$$\bar{\theta} \equiv \frac{1}{q^*} \left(1 - \frac{\kappa_v - \kappa_c}{\ell + p^* + v} \right) \quad (12)$$

Lemma 1. *Conditional on defecting, there exists a cutoff $\bar{\theta} \in (0, 1)$ such that subleaders with $\theta_i < \bar{\theta}$ defect while posing as vigilante groups, whereas subleaders with $\theta_i > \bar{\theta}$ defect openly as criminal organizations.*

These conditions clarify that there are two dimensions of sorting: A subleader’s independence preference x_i determines whether a subleader defects, while their visibility θ_i determines *how* they defect conditional on defecting. In other words, x_i governs the extensive margin of defection, while θ_i governs the intensive margin. Panel (A) in Figure 2 illustrates the model’s sorting logic.

3.4 The Role of Vigilante Groups

We now examine how the emergence and presence of citizen vigilante groups reshapes criminal subleaders’ incentives to defect. Vigilante groups affect equilibrium behavior through two distinct channels: (i) by increasing the cost of government screening when criminal actors pose as vigilante groups q through α , and (ii) by imposing direct enforcement costs on criminal actors, captured by v .

The absence of vigilante groups corresponds to the benchmark case where $\alpha = 0$ and $v = 0$. Criminal organizations invest heavily in creating internal governance mechanisms to maintain organizational cohesion (Skarbek 2010; Lessing and Denyer Willis 2019; Lessing 2021; Pereda 2021, 2024), including specific “mechanisms to promote loyalty and discourage defection”

(Kostelnik and Skarbek 2013, 101). These mechanisms allow organizations to recruit and retain subleaders with independence preferences below a threshold. In the benchmark status quo case where there are no vigilante groups, this threshold is given by $\bar{x}_{\text{crim}}(v = 0)$ for open defection and $\bar{x}_v(v = 0, \alpha_1 = 0)$ for disguised defection. The emergence of vigilante groups alters both thresholds in systematic ways.

Panel (A) in Figure 2 illustrates the sorting logic of the model in the benchmark case, while Panel (B) shows the impacts of vigilante groups, which we explain below.

Indirect Effects Through Government Detection Costs

We begin by examining the effect of vigilante groups on defection through government screening. vigilante groups *indirectly* impact both the incidence of defection and the manner by increasing detection costs.

First, since $\partial \underline{x}_v / \partial q^* = \ell + p^* + v > 0$ and q^* is decreasing in α , an increase in α lowers the defection threshold, expanding the set of subleaders for whom defection is optimal. This means that the emergence of vigilante groups increases the government's screening costs because $\bar{x}_v(\alpha_1 = 0) > \underline{x}_v(\alpha_1 > 0)$. This indirect effect lowers the threshold $\underline{x}_v$ for all subleaders by reducing the probability of detection when posing as a vigilante group.

Proposition 1 (Vigilante groups and disguised defection). *An increase in α_1 weakly decreases the threshold $\underline{x}_v$ for defection while posing as a vigilante group, increasing the incidence of disguised defection.*

Intuitively, as the number of civilian vigilante groups increases, it becomes more costly for the government to distinguish disguised vigilante groups from civilian-led ones, reducing the probability that a defecting subleader posing as a vigilante group is detected. A greater prevalence of civilian vigilante groups weakens government screening, making disguised defection safer. As a result, even subleaders with moderate preferences for independence find defection attractive, increasing the overall incidence of fragmentation.

Second, civilian vigilante groups not only shape which subleaders defect but also shape

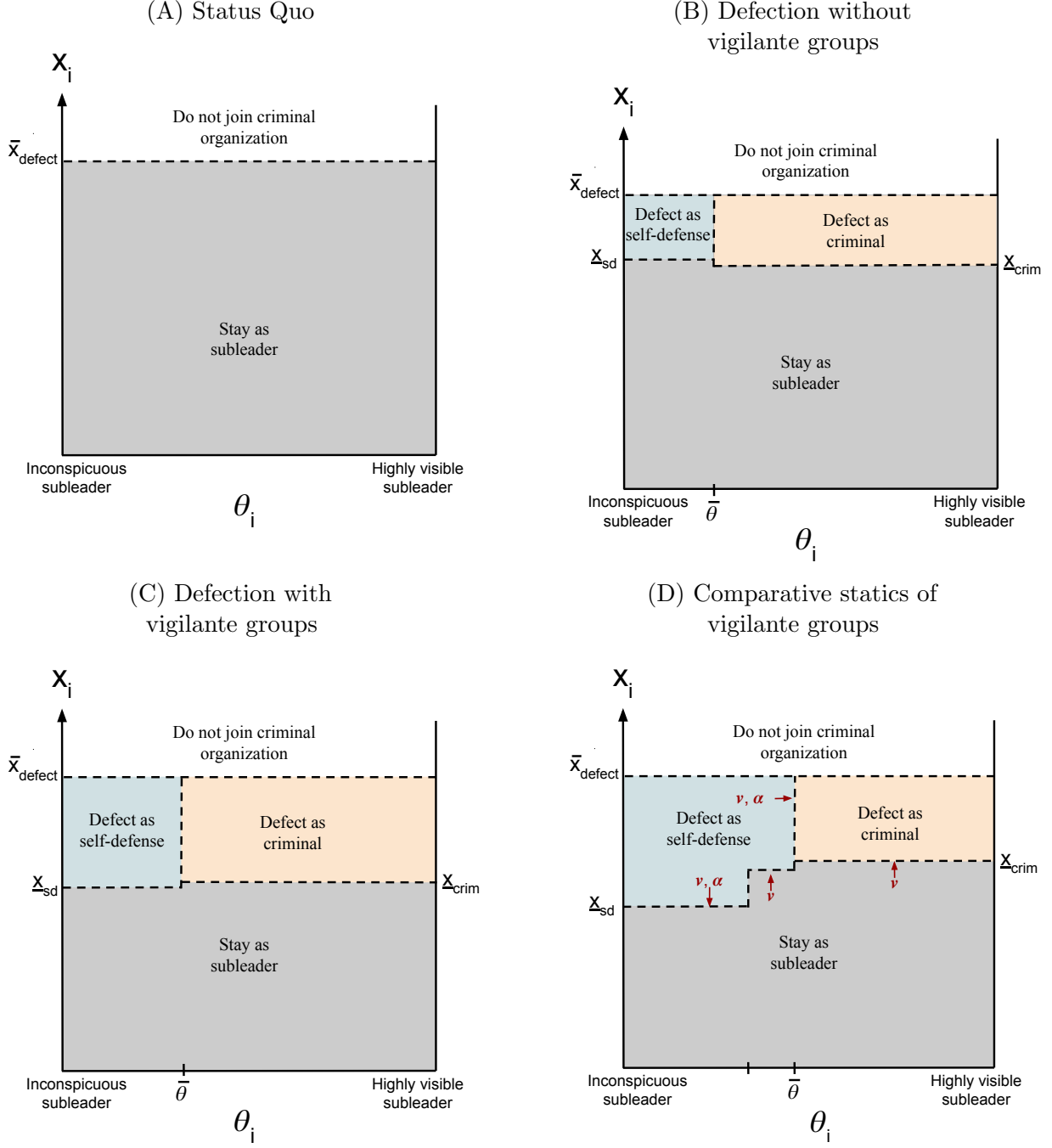


Figure 2: Illustration of criminal subleader defection by preference for independence (x_i) and visibility (θ_i), with $\bar{x}_{\text{defect}} = \min\{\bar{x}_v, \bar{x}_{\text{crim}}\}$, $\bar{\theta}$ denoting the observability threshold, v denoting vigilante group enforcement, and α the number of vigilante groups.

how they defect. Criminal subleaders compare defecting openly as criminals to defecting while posing as vigilante groups. Conditional on defection, posing as a vigilante group dominates open criminal defection for subleaders with visibility $\theta_i < \bar{\theta}$, where $\bar{\theta}$ is increasing

in α through its effect on the government's optimal detection probability. Since $\partial \bar{\theta} / \partial q^*$ is decreasing in q^* , and q^* is decreasing in α , higher values of α expand the set of parameters under which disguised defection is optimal. This implies that the emergence of vigilante groups increases the proportion of defectors that disguise themselves as vigilante groups since $\bar{\theta}(\alpha_1 = 0) < \bar{\theta}(\alpha_1 > 0)$, and an increase in vigilante groups further increases this proportion.

Proposition 2 (Vigilante groups and disguised defection). *An increase in α weakly increases the proportion of defectors who pose as vigilante groups rather than defecting openly as criminal organizations.*

In sum, as civilian vigilante groups become more prevalent, government screening weakens and the set of subleaders for whom disguise is viable expands. This does not merely increase defection; it shifts the *mode* of defection toward criminal actors blending into civilian armed movements rather than openly splintering as new criminal organizations. Counterintuitively, civilian groups raise government screening costs, creating a protective umbrella for impostors. This both encourages defection overall and shifts its form toward infiltration of civilian movements.

Direct Effect Through Enforcement Against Criminals

Vigilante groups also affect subleaders *directly* through their enforcement activity, captured by v . Like government enforcement, punishment by vigilante groups applies to all criminal actors, including subleaders who remain within a larger organization and those who defect openly. However, subleaders who defect while posing as vigilante groups only incur this punishment conditional on detection. As a result, increases in v differentially affect the relative attractiveness of defection strategies. Thus, unlike government actions, vigilante group enforcement impacts both the thresholds of defection and the mode of defection for criminal subleaders.

First, the presence of citizen vigilante groups impacts the decision to defect, though the effects are heterogeneous. The direct effect of v raises the defection threshold for highly

visible subleaders ($q_i^* > \delta$), but lowers it for less visible subleaders ($q_i^* < \delta$).

On the one hand, v increases the costs faced by criminal defectors. Since $\partial \underline{x}_{\text{crim}} / \partial v = 1 - \delta > 0$, the defection cutoff for open defection is increasing in v . This also implies that the emergence of vigilante groups raises the threshold, $\bar{x}_{\text{crim}}(v = 0) < \underline{x}_{\text{crim}}(v > 0)$. As a result, the rise of vigilante groups strengthens organizational cohesion by reducing the set of subleaders for whom open defection is attractive.

On the other hand, since $\partial \underline{x}_v / \partial v = q_i^* - \delta$, then vigilante enforcement can increase or decrease the threshold depending on q_i^* and δ . If $q_i^* < \delta$, then increasing v lowers the threshold and encourages disguised defection. Alternatively, if $q_i^* > \delta$, then increasing v increases the threshold and discourages disguised defection.

Proposition 3 (Vigilante presence and open defection). *An increase in vigilante enforcement v raises $\underline{x}_{\text{crim}}$, reducing open criminal defection. The effect of vigilante enforcement v on $\underline{x}_v$ is heterogeneous: An increase in vigilante enforcement v weakly increases defection as vigilante groups among subleaders with sufficiently low detectability ($q_i^* < \delta$), and weakly decreases it among highly detectable subleaders ($q_i^* > \delta$).*

Intuitively, this means that low-visibility subleaders can defect by posing as vigilante groups and avoid punishment by civilian vigilante groups by blending in, but high-visibility actors cannot avoid this punishment and are thus discouraged from defecting. Visible subleaders are more likely to be detected even when disguising themselves, making defection less attractive, whereas low-visibility subleaders can evade both government and civilian enforcement. Because increases in vigilante enforcement raise the costs of open criminal activity while only affecting disguised defectors conditional on detection, more intense vigilante enforcement always increases the relative attractiveness of disguised defection. Thus, stronger vigilante activity can paradoxically push less-known criminals to defect under the guise of vigilante.

Lastly, vigilante group enforcement against criminal actors also directly affects the decision of defectors between the two modes of defection, conditional on defection. Since

$\frac{\partial}{\partial v} [(1 - q_i^*)(\ell + p^* + v)] = 1 - q_i^* > 0$, increasing v always favors disguised defection relative to open defection.

Proposition 4 (Vigilante enforcement and mode of defection). *An increase in vigilante enforcement v weakly increases the set of subleaders for whom defecting while posing as a vigilante group dominates open criminal defection.*

Taken together, these mechanisms imply that while vigilante groups can strengthen organizational cohesion by deterring open criminal defection, they simultaneously create incentives for low-visibility subleaders to defect under the guise of community protection. The implications are counterintuitive and clearly illustrate how vigilante movements can sometimes prove counterproductive, as it means that greater enforcement by civilian vigilante groups against criminal actors can inadvertently lead low-visibility subleaders to defect and pose as vigilante groups themselves, which the government sometimes fails to identify as criminal. This means more criminal vigilante groups operating freely. Thus, in regions where vigilante enforcement is intense but screening capacity is weak, lower-profile subleaders defect under the guise of vigilante groups, while more visible leaders either remain loyal or defect openly. These results highlight a counterintuitive policy dilemma: while civilian vigilante groups directly deter open criminal activity, they simultaneously create opportunities for criminal infiltration by weakening government screening and enabling low-profile defectors to exploit the legitimacy of the vigilante movement to cover their criminal operations.

3.5 Comparative Statics

We now derive comparative statics for the effect of increasing each parameter on the number of subleaders who defect and how they defect. The model yields sharp comparative statics on three key cut-points: the open defection threshold $\underline{x}_{\text{crim}}$, the disguised defection threshold $\underline{x}_v$, and the observability cutoff $\bar{\theta}$ that sorts defectors between open and disguised strategies. Formal analysis in the Online Appendix yields the predictions presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Statics: Expected Impact of Parameter Changes on Defection and Defection Mode.

Parameter Change	Effect on		
	Criminal Defection	Disguised Defection	Mode of Defection
Higher rents to superiors (r)	Increases	Increases	-
Lower protection by superiors (δ)	Increases	Increases	-
Support from ally (s)	Increases	Increases	-
Lower open defection costs (κ_c)	Increases	-	More open
Lower disguised defection costs (κ_v)	-	Increases	More disguised
Operational cover from passing as vigilante (ℓ)	-	Increases	More disguised
Higher vigilante enforcement (v)	Decreases	Decreases for $q_i^* > \delta$ Increases for $q_i^* < \delta$	More disguised
More vigilante groups (α)	-	Increases	More disguised
Higher government enforcement (p)	Decreases	Decreases for $q_i^* > \delta$ Increases for $q_i^* < \delta$	More disguised
Higher government detection (q)	-	Decreases	More open

4 Case Study

To demonstrate the empirical plausibility of our model, we use a case study of the civilian uprising in the Mexican state of Michoacán that began in 2013. This movement saw the rise and organization of local citizen-led vigilante groups called *autodefensas* (self-defense groups) that engaged in both defensive and offensive campaigns against the dominant *Caballeros Templarios* cartel. We study the case of the *autodefensas* in Michoacán because it has received significant scholarly attention and it illustrates a major vigilante movement against a powerful criminal actor. Yet, most existing studies on the Michoacán *autodefensas* focus

on explaining their emergence (Phillips 2017; Trevizo 2022; Paleta Pérez and Fuentes Díaz 2013; Álvarez-Rodríguez, Román-Burgos and Jespersen 2020; Fuentes Díaz and Paleta Pérez 2015; Fuentes-Díaz 2015; Maldonado Aranda 2018; Herrera 2023) or violent consequences (Erickson and Owen 2025; Trevizo 2025; Trevizo and Wolff 2025; Herrera 2021; Del Rio 2023), with little attention given to how criminal actors responded to their emergence. We therefore fill a gap by turning the analytical focus from the vigilante groups themselves and onto the criminal actors under fire.

Nevertheless, despite existing research not focusing on the behavior of criminal actors, some accounts still indirectly or implicitly advance a main alternative explanation that we consider: the *autodefensas* successfully dismantled the *Caballeros Templarios*, which created a vacuum of power and opened the door to *new* criminal actors, including emergent organizations and existing criminal actors from neighboring states (Le Cour Grandmaison and Maldonado 2019; Herrera 2021). At the same time, it is argued that some *autodefensas*, while emerging as genuine vigilante groups, began to take on criminal undertones in their behavior (Guerra Manzo 2015) after integrating or being infiltrated by former *Caballeros Templarios* members (Maldonado Aranda 2018; Le Cour Grandmaison and Maldonado 2019; Herrera 2021). After the vigilante movement, this led to a new and fragmented criminal landscape in Michoacán, where the dismantled *Caballeros Templarios* were displaced and replaced with newly formed criminal organizations, criminal organizations entering from neighboring states, and criminalized *autodefensas*.

Given these considerations, we believe the case of Michoacán presents a hard case for our argument. First, our explanation differs from the leading existing explanations about who came to dominate the criminal landscape as a result of the *autodefensas*. Second, the *Caballeros Templarios* were a powerful and notorious criminal organization, making it difficult for leaders and subleaders to pass as civilian vigilante groups. Third, the *autodefensa* movement was extensive and government attention was focused on Michoacán, making it difficult for leaders and subleaders to pass as civilian vigilante groups.

We analyze the observable implications of the theoretical model leveraging original data. Criminal actors are notoriously difficult to observe and measure, hence the lack of systematic data on criminal actors in Michoacán. We overcome existing data constraints by creating an original dataset on the population of criminal groups in Michoacán spanning January 2010 to December 2018. The data tracks each criminal organization and main actors within them, allowing us to track individual leaders and subleaders across time and space within Michoacán before, during, and after the *autodefensa* movement. Data collection details as well as sources are included in the Appendix.

Our empirical strategy is designed to assess whether the factors highlighted by the model help explain the realized pattern of subleader defections during the vigilante mobilization. In the following subsections, we first present the strategic environment in Michoacán prior to the vigilante movement, focusing on its criminal dynamics. We then discuss the emergence of the *autodefensas* and present how the government acted in response, focusing on how these altered the strategic environment facing leaders and subleaders within the *Caballeros Templarios*. We then trace the distinct defection paths that followed, showing that that all new criminal actors following the *autodefensa* movement were subleaders who defected from the *Caballeros Templarios*, with some subleaders defecting under the cover of vigilante identities while others defecting openly as criminal actors. Finally, we leverage fine-grained qualitative evidence on each defector to assess whether the model’s parameters helps explain differences in the timing, form, and strategic logic of observed defections.

Importantly, this is not a counterfactual exercise aimed at comparing defectors to an observed population of non-defectors. Because we do not observe the full population of *Caballeros Templarios* subleaders, our goal is not to estimate the causal effect of particular attributes on defection. Instead, the case study serves as a theory-guided congruence test: we examine whether the model’s observable implications align with the empirical sequence of who defected, when defections occurred, and why particular modes of defection emerged.

4.1 Status Quo Before Civilian Uprising

Michoacán is a largely rural and underdeveloped region, and has been important for illicit drug cultivation and production since at least the 1960s. Key to this sector is the coastal region where precursor chemicals enter ports and illicit drugs are shipped out and the Tierra Caliente lowland region in the interior of the state where drug cultivation and production concentrate. Through the decades, drug trafficking evolved from small cultivators, to numerous local but powerful illicit networks through the 1980s, to two dominant modern drug cartels by the 1990s – *La Empresa* and *Los Valencia*. Following a deadly war in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Los Valencia*, later known as the *Cartel del Milenio*, was expelled from Michoacán and displaced into the neighboring state of Jalisco. *La Empresa*, in alliance with the *Cartel del Golfo*, came to dominate the criminal underworld in the state. Following the arrest of its longtime leader Carlos Rosales Mendoza in 2004, Nazario Moreno González (“El Chayo”) and José de Jesús Mendez Vargas (“El Chango”) took leadership. In 2006, *La Empresa* broke its ties with the *Cartel del Golfo*, expelled *Cartel del Golfo* operators, and renamed itself *La Familia Michoacana*, becoming the dominant cartel in the state.

In March 2011, an internal rift between Moreno González and Mendez Vargas led to the splintering of the organization, with Moreno González maintaining most of the cartel’s structure and renaming themselves the *Caballeros Templarios*, and Mendez Vargas keeping operations in some western areas of Tierra Caliente and retaining the name *La Familia Michoacana*. Just three months later, Mendez Vargas was apprehended and *La Familia Michoacana* largely ceased operating in Michoacán, leading to the *Caballeros Templarios* consolidating themselves as the dominant criminal organization in the state.

Using information from Olmos (2015), we map the municipal presence of the *Caballeros Templarios* before the *autodefensa* movement. Panel A in Figure 3 shows the municipal presence of the *Caballeros Templarios* in Michoacán prior to 2013, and highlights that they maintained control over the vast majority of the territory.

The structure of the *Caballeros Templarios* resembled that of a hierarchical corporation,

with Moreno González at the top, an advising board of high-level leaders, specialized councils,² and regional and local subleaders. This hierarchical organizational structure combined a degree of localized autonomy for the subleaders but under centralized control. Within this structure, each regional and local subleader functioned as a territorial unit for the cartel, maintaining control of one or multiple municipalities while giving a percentage of their profits to the central leadership, captured by the rents (r) parameter.

At the top of this hierarchy was a council, composed of senior leaders who led the organization. This council included Moreno González, Servando Gómez Martínez, Enrique Plancarte Solís, Ignacio Andrade Renteria, Jorge Luis Valencia Alzate, Miguel Angel Gallegos Godoy, Dionisio Loya Plancarte, Arturo Gallardo Serrato, José Semper Servín Juárez, Rodolfo Maldonado Bustos, and Tito Emigdio Fernandez Torres (Olmos 2015). Several figures, most notably Gómez Martínez, maintained a highly public profile through frequent media appearances, becoming a focal point of attention. The concentration of power at the top along with the public profile of some high-level leaders increased the visibility of top leaders and some higher level subleaders (high θ_i) while reducing exposure for lower level subleaders (low θ_i).

The *Caballeros Templarios* operated under extensive collusion with local and state-level authorities, which meant high levels of organizational protection (δ) leading to low likelihood of government enforcement (p) against protected individuals. An illustrative example was exposed in a leaked video from a private meeting between Gómez Martínez and Rodrigo Vallejo Mora, son of then-Michoacán governor Fausto Vallejo, which showed them engaging in candid and detailed discussions about political and security matters. Likewise, Jesús Reyna García, Michoacán's Secretary of the Interior (*Secretario de Gobernación*) from 2012 to 2013 and interim governor from 2013 to 2014, was arrested in April 2014 and convicted for protecting the *Caballeros Templarios*. Under these arrangements, the top leaders also provided subleaders with economic, logistical, and material support that shaped their incentives to

²For example, a council responsible for relations with the media and government officials.

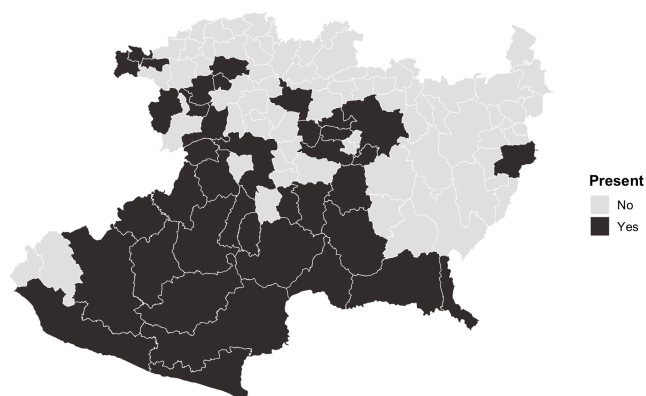
remain in the organization.

Finally, the absence of organized community resistance ($\alpha = 0$) meant that there was no independent actor capable of imposing costs or providing alternative sources of legitimacy for defection. Extortion and predatory practices by the *Caballeros Templarios* actually reinforced the status quo as long as citizens complied. Farmers, merchants and ordinary citizens were forced to pay fees for everyday economic activities, from selling avocados and lemons to purchasing food and gasoline (Olmos 2015).

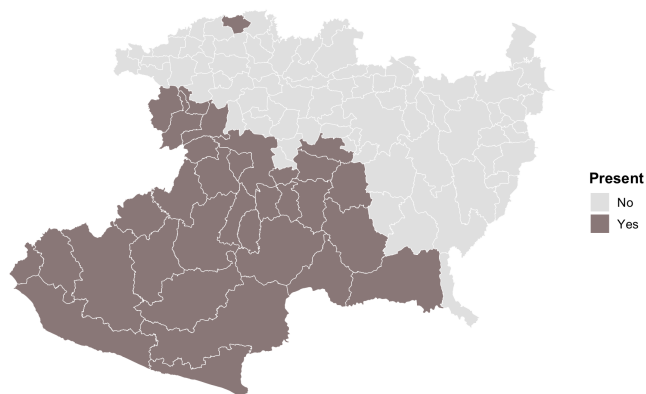
4.2 The Civilian Uprising

The first public mobilization of *autodefensas* took place on February 24, 2013 in the municipality of La Ruana (also named Felipe Carrillo Puerto), led by local lime grower Hipólito Mora. However, the groundwork for coordinated resistance had already been laid in towns like Tepalcatepec, Coalcomán, and Buenavista. Local business owners, ranchers, and agricultural association leaders provided funding and mobilized their workers. Figures like Dr. José Manuel Mireles, who became the face of the movement, emerged alongside less visible but highly influential financiers and power brokers. Panel B in Figure 3 shows the geographic presence of the *autodefensas* in 2013 to 2014, illustrating how they expanded into areas previously dominated by *Caballeros Templarios*.

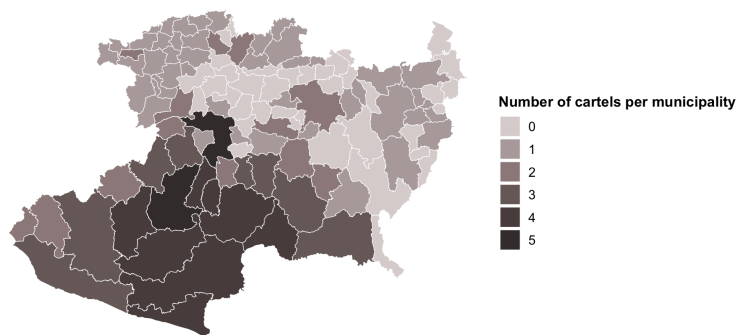
While some existing literature on the emergence of the *autodefensas* highlights structural factors like inequality and state capacity, others also point to the changing behavior of the *Caballeros Templarios* who were becoming increasingly violent (Paleta Pérez and Fuentes Díaz 2013; Álvarez-Rodríguez, Román-Burgos and Jespersen 2020) and predatory (Fuentes Díaz and Paleta Pérez 2015; Fuentes-Díaz 2015; Herrera 2023). The latter factors necessitate further discussion given that our model takes vigilante groups as exogenous. We contend that while the rise of the vigilante movement was endogenous to the behavior of the *Caballeros Templarios* as an organization and its top leadership, it is plausibly exogenous to any specific individual subleader – our unit of observation. First, when the vigilante movement began,



(A) *Caballeros Templarios*, 2010–2012



(B) *Autodefensas*, 2013–2014



(C) Number of cartels, 2015 (post-*autodefensas*)

Figure 3: Municipal presence of (A) *Caballeros Templarios* 2010–2012, (2) *autodefensas* 2013–2014, and (C) number of cartels in 2015 after *autodefensa* movement. Sources: (A) Olmos (2015); (B) CNDH (2015); (C) Sánchez Valdés (2025).

the *Caballeros Templarios* was a hierarchical organization with a clear and visible leadership structure who had a near monopoly hold on illicit activities in Michoacán. Second, some scholars contend that the vigilante movement was triggered by a break in the equilibrium between the *Caballeros Templarios* and the communities throughout Michoacán (Fuentes-Díaz 2015; Fuentes Díaz and Paleta Pérez 2015; Herrera 2023), rather than to the behavior of specific subleaders. This is corroborated by a list made public by the coordinators of the vigilante movement in 2013 that identified their main targets – the top leaders of the *Caballeros Templarios*, not the subleaders that are subordinate to the top leadership. Finally, all accounts point to the emergence of the *autodefensa* movement being spontaneous and its mass spread unexpected, catching not only the *Caballeros Templarios* by surprise, but also the government.

As the *autodefensa* movement gained visibility and social support it fundamentally altered the strategic environment faced by criminal subleaders. First, the *autodefensas* quickly gained mass local support, dramatically increasing the legitimacy of these vigilante groups and thus the operational cover for potential disguised vigilantes (*l*). In parallel, the rise of *autodefensas* also imposed new costs on criminal actors (*v*), as these groups spread and began directly challenging the *Caballeros Templarios*.

At the same time, the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG), composed of *Los Valencia* members, were looking to reenter their home state of Michoacán after being expelled a decade earlier. With the rise of the *autodefensas*, CJNG saw an opportunity to provide strategic support (*s*) to actors willing to defect from the *Caballeros Templarios* in return for future support.

4.3 Government Reaction

The civilian uprising took authorities, particularly federal authorities, by surprise. Once it became clear that the *autodefensas* were not a momentary movement and it began taking political tolls, the federal government sent a representative to Michoacán to spearhead efforts.

Alfredo Castillo Cervantes, a government attorney, was appointed as the Commissioner for Security and Integral Development in Michoacán in January of 2014.

To combat the *Caballeros Templarios* and help deal with the *autodefensas*, the federal government quickly deployed armed forces to Michoacán and began targeting the top leadership of the *Caballeros Templarios*, reducing the protection they could offer subleaders (increasing δ). Yet, the *autodefensas* impacted the government's screening problem: the unexpected and quick emergence of vigilante groups throughout Michoacán left the government scrambling to figure out who these actors were, thereby reducing the effectiveness of detection (q) for lesser known subleaders (low θ_i).

Simultaneously, Castillo Cervantes pursued a strategy of *autodefensa* institutionalization. Through a series of agreements between January and April of 2014, *autodefensa* groups were offered formalization into newly created *Cuerpos de Defensa Rurales* (Rural Defense Bodies), later renamed the *Fuerza Rural Estatal* (State Rural Force), a state police force operating under federal oversight. This process split the *autodefensa* movement: leaders such as Estanislao Beltrán accepted legalization, while leaders like Dr. Manuel Mireles rejected incorporation arguing that it legitimized criminal infiltration and undermined the original community mandate.

Quickly after the formalization of some *autodefensas* into *Fuerzas Rurales*, Castillo Cervantes organized a special unit within the *Fuerzas Rurales* called G-250, tasked with tracking down high-priority criminals including Servando Gómez Martínez, then leader of the *Caballeros Templarios*. The G-250 was created as an elite unit composed of Federal Police and selectively chosen *autodefensas*. G-250 was notable for operating covertly, wearing plainclothes and carrying high-powered weapons. This further weakened the *Caballeros Templarios* leadership, reducing the protection they could offer subleaders (increasing δ).

The government set May 10, 2014, as the deadline for the disappearance of *autodefensas* as autonomous armed groups and criminalized any armed groups operating outside the *Fuerza Rural* framework. *Autodefensa* leaders who refused incorporation were arrested, and by July

2014, Castillo Cervantes publicly asserted that the *autodefensa* movement had been fully dissolved.

Taken together, the *autodefensa* movement and the government’s response jointly lowered the effective threshold for defection (both $\underline{x}_{crim}$ and $\underline{x}_v$), making it an attractive strategy even for subleaders with relatively lower baseline preferences for independence. In accordance with Proposition 1 and 3, an increase in v (for low visibility subleaders) and α weakly lower the threshold for disguised defection ($\underline{x}_v$) and the former for open defection ($\underline{x}_{crim}$), making defection an overall more attractive decision for a broader subset of subleaders.

4.4 The Strategic Defection of Criminal Subleaders

The shifts caused by the rise of the *autodefensas* had important implications not just for the likelihood of defection (Propositions 1 and 3), but also for the mode of defection (Propositions 2 and 4). In accordance with Proposition 2 and 4, increases in α and v raise the observability cutoff ($\bar{\theta}$), meaning that, conditional on choosing to defect, a broader set of less visible subleaders prefer to defect while disguised as civilian vigilantes than openly as criminal.

Crucially, early in the vigilante movement, the *autodefensas* publicly released a list identifying the seven *Caballero Templario* leaders and high ranking subleaders they demanded that the government capture: Nazario Moreno (“El Chayo”), Servando Gómez (“La Tuta”), Enrique Plancarte (“El Kike”), Dionisio Loya Plancarte (“El Tío”), Fernando Cruz Mendoza (“El Tena”), Jesús Vázquez Macías, (“El Toro”) and Isidro Virrueta Montejano (“El Chicano”). Dr. Mireles, the spokesperson for the *autodefensas*, went as far as to tell the government publicly, “there will be no disarmament [of the *autodefensas*] until all the *Templario* leaders [in the list] are apprehended” (Sánchez de Tagle 2014). The list also noted that the *Caballeros Templarios* were composed of 100 subleaders throughout the state, most subleaders in charge of small communities, though these were not identified.

This public naming had direct implications for the strategic calculations of the *Caballeros Templarios* subleaders considering defection. By publicly identifying these seven figures as

primary targets, the *autodefensas* reshaped the visibility landscape, concentrating attention on the upper hierarchy while leaving many subleaders comparatively less exposed. Lower-visibility actors, facing fewer risks of detection, were thus better positioned to exploit the ambiguity created by the vigilante movement and defect under the guise of *autodefensas* (Lemma 1).

Using our original data, we find that the criminal actors that came to dominate illicit markets in Michoacán after the civilian uprising were *all* mid- and low-level *Caballero Templario* subleaders that defected during the vigilante movement – *not* new or external criminal actors. Figure 4 illustrates the trajectories of the main leaders and subleaders of the *Caballeros Templarios* from 2010 until 2018. Given the lack of identification of most subleaders and informational constraints, this figure does not capture the universe of *Caballero Templario* subleaders, but does identify all top leaders and all subleaders who defected and all criminal organizations.

We find that all top-tier leaders were progressively arrested or killed, with the last, Gómez Martínez, being captured in February 2015, two years after the start of the *autodefensa* movement and over eight months after its zenith.

We further find that, with only one exception, subleaders followed distinct trajectories that involved either open criminal defection or the formation of groups operating under the guise of *autodefensas*. Even more, as we discuss below in detail, we find that those who defected openly were notorious *Templario* subleaders (higher θ_i), while those that defected under the guise of *autodefensas* were lesser-known inconspicuous subleaders (lower θ_i).

4.4.1 Defecting Openly as Criminals

We first examine the subleaders who defected openly as criminals by focusing on the threshold for the mode of defection (Lemma 1) and its comparative statics (see Table 1). We find two types of subleaders who exploited the *autodefensa* movement to defect openly: subleaders identified publicly by the *autodefensas* as *Caballeros Templarios* (high θ_i), and one lesser

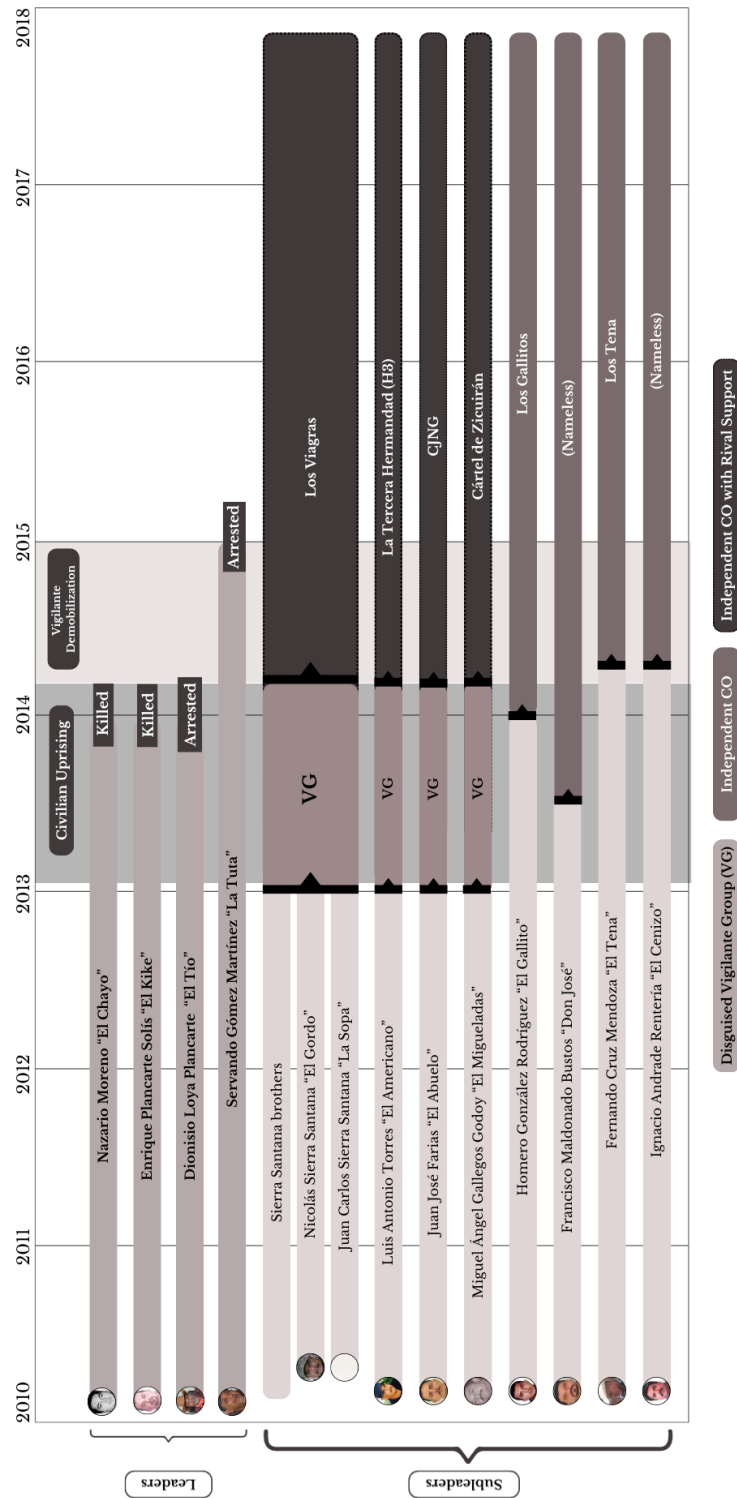


Figure 4: Trajectory of leaders and subleaders of *Caballeros Templarios* 2010-2018.

known subleader (moderate θ_i) operating where there was limited presence of *autodefensas* (low v and α , leading to a higher q_i^*).

Centrally, with one exception, the subleaders that defected openly as criminal during the *autodefensa* movement were all highly visible (high θ_i). These were subleaders explicitly identified in the public list released by the *autodefensa* movement as primary *Templario* targets. Because these individuals were already highly visible to both the public and state authorities, disguised defection was unlikely to be credible. Instead their high visibility ($\theta_i > \bar{\theta}$) constrained their strategic options, making open criminal defection the more viable path.

Homero González Rodríguez (“El Gallito”) was the nephew of Nazario Moreno González, leader and founder of the *Caballeros Templarios*, and operated under his command, making González Rodríguez a highly visible subleader ($\theta_i > \bar{\theta}$) that federal authorities had already identified (high q_i). After Moreno Gonzalez’s death in March 2014, leaked declarations by Gómez Martínez, the new *Caballeros Templarios* leader, claim that González Rodríguez was seeking to gain autonomy and establish independent operations, causing a rift between the two. It was soon clear that González Rodríguez had defected and was operating independently. Not long after, public warnings by *autodefensa* leader Estanislao Beltrán that the *Caballeros Templarios* were reorganizing under the command of González Rodriguez further signaled his visibility and that the *autodefensas* knew he was an important *Caballeros Templarios* subleader.

A similar pattern can be observed in the case of Fernando Cruz Mendoza (“El Tena”). Cruz Mendoza was the right hand man of Moreno González and one of his most trusted men. Following the death of Moreno González, Cruz Mendoza became part of the inner circle of his successor, Gómez Martínez. For this reason, Cruz Mendoza was included in the *autodefensa* list of main *Templario* targets, making him a high-visibility subleader ($\theta_i > \bar{\theta}$). Moreover, by early 2014, authorities had already identified him as a highly violent criminal that operated in the *Tierra Caliente* region, meaning he would not have feasibly passed as

an *autodefensa* to government authorities (high q_i). In mid to late-2014, Cruz Mendoza split from the *Caballeros Templarios* and began operating independently.

Likewise, Ignacio Andrade Rentería (“El Cenizo”) was a high-ranking subleader who had started his career in drug trafficking in the late 1990s in *La Empresa*, the predecessor of *La Familia Michoacana*, and had joined the *Caballeros Templarios* following its split with *La Familia* supervising operations in Uruapan and Apatzingan, two key cities for drug trafficking in the state. Andrade Rentería was a highly visible subleader leading up to the *autodefensa* uprising ($\theta_i > \bar{\theta}$). For instance, in 2009 the US government accused various leaders of *La Familia Michoacana* of drug trafficking, including Andrade Rentería. In December of 2010, public banners in key cities identified him as a leader of the *Caballeros Templarios*; in 2012 federal authorities publicly identified him as an important subleader with the *Caballeros Templarios*; and up to 2013, news articles and journalists reported him as a second tier leader of the *Caballeros Templarios*. Despite his name not being explicitly included in the list of *Templario* leaders made public by the *autodefensas*, his notoriety made him a key target and he was already well-known to federal authorities (high q_i). With the fall of various *Caballeros Templarios* leaders in 2014, Andrade Rentería allegedly became one of Gómez Martínez’s potential successors for the leadership of the *Caballeros Templarios*. However, with Gómez Martínez under fire, available information suggests that Andrade Rentería began operating independently, choosing to call himself and his group *Caballeros Templarios*, which created confusion in media outlets.

The exception to open defection by highly visible subleaders was Rodolfo Maldonado Bustos³ (“Don José”), a lesser known regional subleader of the *Caballeros Templarios*. Despite not being publicly identified as a primary target by the *autodefensas*, Maldonado Bustos still chose to defect while remaining openly criminal. Yet, given his close links with a high ranking member, Gregorio Abeja Linares (“Güero Abeja”), who had close ties with Gómez Martínez, Maldonado Bustos had been identified by government authorities as a *Templario*

³He also uses the names Francisco Maldonado Bustos, José Pineda Pineda, and José González Pineda

subleader in 2012, before the *autodefensa* uprising (moderate θ_i). Nevertheless, while a vigilante disguise may have been possible though costly for Maldonado Bustos (high κ_c), the feasibility of disguised defection also depends on the local presence of vigilante groups (α) and their enforcement (v) and operational cover stemming from disguising as vigilante (ℓ). In the areas where Maldonado Bustos operated, along the Michoacán–Guerrero border, available evidence points to a very limited presence of *autodefensas*. This suggests that the operational cover parameter (ℓ) may have been weak or absent in his area of operation, the vigilante enforcement costs imposed on criminal actors (v) and the and government screening costs (α) were likely both low. Together, these conditions reduce the expected benefits and probability of disguising as a vigilante group and make open criminal defection more attractive strategy for Maldonado Bustos.

4.4.2 Defecting as Disguised *Autodefensas*

We now turn to the subleaders who defected as a disguised vigilante groups. We find that these defectors were all lesser known subleaders (low θ_i) and, counterintuitively, that they operated in territories where the *autodefensa* movement was particularly visible and consolidated. In these contexts, both the operational cover parameter (ℓ) and the costs imposed by vigilante groups (v) were higher, making disguised defection for low visibility subleaders a more viable and attractive option. Moreover, the high *autodefensa* presence increased the screening costs for the government, reducing effective detection (higher α lowers q^*), and increasing the probability of successfully posing as a civilian vigilante group.

First, the Sierra Santana brothers is clan of seven siblings: Rodolfo (“El Tronado”), Nicolás (“El Sopa” or “El Gordo”), Valentín, Severino, Beatriz, Bernabé, Mariano, and Carlos (“El Viagra”). More recent investigations have revealed that the brothers were reportedly collaborators of Jesús Méndez Vargas (“El Chango”) under *La Familia Michoacana*, later becoming a faction of the *Caballeros Templarios* in 2011. The faction reportedly served as an armed wing, working under the command of Gómez Martínez, a high level *Templario*

subleader at the time.

In October 2013, a public message appeared where the *Caballeros Templarios* accused “*Los Viagras*” of carrying out an attack against the *Comisión Federal de Electricidad* (Mexico’s state-owned electricity company) in Sahuayo, Michoacan. This marks the first public identification of *Los Viagras* as an independent group and a clear rupture with the *Caballeros Templarios*. While we now know that *Los Viagras* are a criminal organization established and led by the Santana brothers, at the time of their emergence there was uncertainty about their origin and identity. *Los Viagras* quickly became part of the *autodefensa* movement and built close ties with the *autodefensa* leader Estanislao Beltrán and his vigilante group. In early 2014, government reports identified some of the Santana siblings but recognized them as part of the *autodefensas*. Their cover as disguised vigilantes was such that in early 2014, the agreement with federal authorities to create the *Fuerzas Rurales* was signed by Estanislao Beltrán and the Sierra Santana siblings. *Los Viagras* were soon thereafter integrated into the G-250 special unit tasked with capturing Servando Gómez, then leader of the *Caballeros Templarios*. This institutionalization provided the group with access to weapons, intelligence, and operational freedom while simultaneously granting them a legal cover. This government-backed institutionalization granted them operational cover (ℓ) and security from government and vigilante repression (low p and v).

Second, Luis Antonio Torres González (“El Americano”), who was originally a municipal police officer in Buenavista Tomatlán, Michoacán, maintained close ties with the *Caballeros Templarios* before the *autodefensas*. To this day there is limited information on Torres González: it is unclear whether Torres González was an active subleader within the *Caballeros Templarios* prior to the *autodefensa* uprising, or whether he simply had close social and business ties with the cartel (low θ_i). In 2013, soon after the *autodefensa* movement began, Torres González emerged as an *autodefensa* leader heading the *autodefensa* group called “H3”. He became well-known due to his *autodefensa* caravans of multiple vehicles and armed men patrolling communities and targeting the *Caballeros Templarios* (high ℓ). His leadership was

marked by conflicts and scandals. Allegations of his ties with the *Caballeros Templarios* were constant, notably following a video leak in mid-2014 in which he appeared to be part of a conversation with Gómez Martínez and the Santana brothers. Gómez Martínez also publicly accused Torres González in July 2014 of owing the *Caballeros Templarios* drug payments and cash loans. At the same time, Torres González allegedly formed an alliance with CJNG and received financial support from them after defecting from the *Caballeros Templarios* (s). The state security agencies of Michoacán began accusing Torres González of receiving financial support from CJNG in 2014 and being a criminal actor. Despite these local allegations, Torres González was inducted by the federal authorities into the *Fuerzas Rurales* in May 2014 he was appointed as a special commander of the G-250 elite group. Only after the capture of Gómez Martínez did federal authorities finally identify Torres González as a criminal actor in 2015.

Third, José José Farías Álvarez (“El Abuelo”), a native of the town of Tepalcatepec, Michoacán, was identified by a journalistic investigation as a local subleader for the Milenio Cartel in 2008. He was then arrested by the federal government and accused of being a local subleader for the Milenio Cartel in 2009, but was subsequently absolved of the accusations after nearly a nearly three-year long legal process (low θ_i). In February 2013, Farías Álvarez formed the *autodefensas* of Tepalcatepec and gained local notoriety for his leadership (high ℓ), even sitting for interviews with reporters. Yet, allegations soon began to bring his person into disrepute. In a video leaked in April 2013, Gómez Martínez, leader of the *Caballeros Templarios*, accused Farías Álvarez of being a drug trafficker for their rivals – allegations he said resembled the “fake” accusation of 2009. Some reporting in 2014 began alleging his ties with the *Caballeros Templarios* and CJNG. Still, Farías Álvarez and his *autodefensa* group were incorporated in the *Fuerzas Rurales* in May 2014 as federal authorities saw him as an *autodefensa*. In August 2014, however, authorities began labeling Farías Álvarez as a criminal actor supported by CJNG (s) given his alleged close ties to Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, leader of CJNG, and leaked video of him in conversation with Gómez Martínez,

Templario leader. Farías Álvarez was consequently removed from the *Fuerzas Rurales*. Years later, all governmental and journalistic information points to Farías Álvarez being a criminal subleader actively involved in drug trafficking who disguised his operations through the vigilante movement. While seeking to maintain a vigilante facade even after the *autodefensa* movement, he is now widely recognized as a criminal actor and has active apprehension orders by the Mexican and US governments.

Lastly, Miguel Ángel Gallegos Godoy (“El Migueladas”) is a wealthy businessman from Huetamo with heavy involvement in agricultural production and drug production and trafficking. Gallegos Godoy was reportedly a close friend of Enrique Plancarte, a leader within the *Caballeros Templarios*, through whom he became involved in the production of synthetic drugs. Gallegos Godoy was an important local subleader within the *Caballeros Templarios*, having alleged links with various top leaders and tight control over the Huacana municipality – a key drug trafficking corridor. However, rifts between Gallegos Godoy and the *Caballeros Templarios* arose in 2012 due to the cartel extorting Gallegos Godoy’s legal agricultural businesses. This interference on his economic activities reflects how increasing rent extraction (r) undermined the incentives of subleaders to remain within the organization. Gallegos Godoy, alongside Farías Álvarez and Torres González, were among the first subleaders to defect from the *Caballeros Templarios* and disguise themselves as *autodefensas*. Gallegos Godoy had allegedly formed business relationships with CJNG since 2011, which he used to receive support once he defected from the *Caballeros Templarios* (s). Nevertheless, in 2014, a document attributed to military intelligence, establishes that the rise of *autodefensas* in February of 2013 led Gallegos Godoy, who they identify as a lemon grower and hotel owner, to take advantage of the *Caballeros Templarios*’ weakness to take control of Tierra Caliente (low θ_i). These conditions meant he was able to pass as an *autodefensa*. It was not until 2015 that authorities identified him as a criminal actor, with state and federal sources making public statements about seeking his apprehension. While his group went by *Los Gallegos* during the *autodefensa* movement to signal civilian status, it now often goes by *Cartel de*

Zicuirán, indicating its criminal nature.

4.5 Criminal Resilience Amid Civilian Uprisings

Following the rise of the *autodefensa* movement, the defection of subleaders, and the government's formalization process of *autodefensas*, Castillo Cervantes publicly asserted that the *autodefensa* movement had been fully dissolved in July 2014. In practice, some legalized units persisted as rural police, others demobilized, and still others continued to operate illegally as more localized *autodefensas*. By 2015, the original movement had ceased to exist in any coherent manner, and was replaced by a mix of state police units, criminalized armed groups, and sporadic community resistance.

Rather than creating a vacuum of power in the criminal underworld that new and external criminal organizations took over as existing accounts have suggested, we show that the *autodefensa* movement instead fragmented the criminal landscape as can be seen in Panel (C) of Figure 3. *Templario* subleaders opportunistically exploited the civilian uprising to weaken their superiors, exert control over their own territories, and entrench their criminal enclaves. While the *Caballeros Templarios* ceased operating as a coherent group, criminal subleaders proved to be incredibly resilient in continuing their hold on criminal economies in the state. With a more fragmented criminal landscape, violence increased in the state following the *autodefensa* movement as the newly independent criminal organizations fought over control of illicit markets (Trevizo 2022, 2025; Herrera 2021; Del Rio 2023). Even more, while some subleaders used support from CJNG to defect from the *Caballeros Templarios*, most turned against CJNG soon after the *autodefensa* movement and many joined an alliance called *Carteles Unidos*⁴ to resist their entry into the state.

⁴Sometimes the alliance is also referred to as *La Nueva Familia Michoacana*.

5 Conclusion

Providing security for local communities by dismantling criminal organizations, or at the very least neutralizing their violent and predatory behavior, is ostensibly the *raison d'être* of many vigilante movements around the world. The case of the *autodefensa* movement against the *Caballeros Templarios* in Michoacán provides a telling example of how external pressures on criminal organizations can result in a murky and fragmented criminal landscape. Consequently, criminal actors can survive in areas where civilian uprisings are seemingly successful at toppling criminal leadership and dismantling a powerful criminal organization. Our findings show that civilian uprisings can paradoxically create opportunities that criminal subleaders can exploit to gain autonomy and consolidate their control over territories and markets by defecting and posing as disguised vigilantes.

These findings have implications that extend well beyond criminal organizations in Mexico. Most broadly, this article speaks to the underlying condition of the bargaining model of war (Fearon 1995), that uncertainty about the capabilities, intent, or resolve of an actor contributes to conflict (Schelling 1960; Jervis 1976; Waltz 1959). More specifically, this article contributes to the literature on how external pressures on groups lead to fragmentation and, consequently, uncertainty of actor identity in the so-called “fog of war.” For example, actor ambiguity among rebel groups, criminal actors, paramilitaries, and government forces plagues conflicts in Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and others around the world.

The incoherence of actor identity thus has clear policy, legal, and normative consequences. For example, governments fighting insurgencies often describe their opponents as criminal; similarly, governments dealing with large-scale organized crime may be tempted to describe violence as a form of terrorism. As in the case of Mexico, a murky and fragmented environment may lead to predatory groups being legitimized by the government or legitimate local defense groups being sidelined and disbanded, leading to the continuation of violence. As the government legitimizes those under the guise of benevolent actors, it inadvertently puts citizens under control of the very groups they organized to fight against.

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