Committee: UNESCO
Topic: The influence of media and music on the normalization of organized crime culture among young people, while preserving freedom of expression.
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Overview of the Problem

The reach of media and music has been increasing every day since the mid-20th century. 5.8 billion people are actively using social media (Shewale, 2026), and 83% of the population is engaged with music in some form (CLRN, 2025). Some content creators began producing material that explicitly glorifies criminal activity. This content goes from lyrics to visual material. Governments and public institutions are responding with prohibitions, but banning collides with expression and artistic freedom. UNESCO stands precisely at this intersection. Meanwhile, the glorification of organized crime in media and music may lead some young people to idealize and to see illicit acts as acceptable or desirable to do.

Latin America has been one of the places that has been most affected by this situation. Criminal groups have learned how to expand through social media such as Instagram, Tiktok, and Facebook, using encoded symbols such as emojis, hashtags, and even musical references, contributing to the normalization of organized crime culture. A large share of young people, about 94.4% (Shewale, 2026), use social media, and what they hear and see in their daily lives can shape their views. Some may even view crime as admirable. In this background paper, delegates will discuss the influence of media and music on the expansion of normalized organized crime culture among young people, while preserving freedom of expression.

Introduction

Organized Crime is defined in international law by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), known as the Palermo Convention, which was adopted in 2000 and entered into force in 2003 (United Nations, 2000). Article 2(a) defines an “organized criminal group” as a structured group of three or more persons that exists for a period of time and acts to commit one or more serious crimes, or offences established under the Convention, to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. Article 2(b) sets the “serious crime” threshold at offences punishable by at least four years' deprivation of liberty, and Article 2(c) adds that a “structured group” does not need formally defined roles or developed structure (United Nations, 2000). The convention applies to offences that are transnational in nature and involve such a group (Art. 5), money laundering (Art. 6), corruption (Art. 8), and obstruction of justice (Art. 23). UNODC´s educational materials describe a typology of organized crime that includes the provision of illicit goods and services and the infiltration of legitimate business and government (UNODC, n.d.-a).

The Convention does not mention music or media. Its definition focuses on structure, duration, and profit, so a song glorifying a cartel is not in itself an organized crime offence. Online recruitment, however, may fall under Article 5(1)(b), which covers organizing, aiding, or facilitating serious crime involving an organized criminal group (United Nations, 2000). Organized crime activity varies across countries, regions, crime types, and the nature of its organization.

Narcocultura, or narco-culture, refers to the symbols, fashion, and music that portray criminal groups as a source of money, status, fame, or protection. It appears in Mexican narcocorridos, Brazilian *proibidão* funk, UK drill and Chilean urban music, Colombian narconovelas, and mafia-themed videos on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. The concern is the normalization of the ideas and the culture of organized crime. The repetition and stylization of the image of a criminal group can make joining one seem like a normal career or life path, and criminal organizations may use it as a form of propaganda or even recruitment.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. The United Nations has worked to promote and protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression since it was established in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). This right ensures media freedom and other rights of journalists and media workers. Media freedom is under pressure in many places because of its essential role in ensuring transparency and holding public authorities responsible.

Since UNESCO is a UN agency directed to freedom of expression and opinion, access to information, media literacy, and cultural diversity, it can set norms and guidelines, fund educational programmes, promote cultural diversity, and promote data collection. However, UNESCO may not ban an artist, prohibit a song, or restrict a site or platform.

The influence of media and music on the normalization of organized crime culture among young people does not involve only one country. It affects countries across Latin America, North America, Europe, and beyond. This topic raises questions and concerns, especially because modern society is strongly influenced by and attached to media through many ways, such as music, videogames, social media, and messaging apps.

Historical Background

Links between organized crime and the music industry have been present from the jazz and blues era until modern music. They have been constant but often hidden. Jazz, which grew rapidly in popularity in the early 20th century, became a target of organized crime because of that exact popularity. On some occasions, musicians were obliged to perform in places controlled by criminal organizations. While some artists were rewarded, in most cases the cost was the exploitation of their talent. One example is Duke Ellington from the USA, who performed at the Cotton Club in Harlem (1927-1931),

a nightclub owned by the gangster Owney Madden (Haskins, 1977). The influence of organized crime extended in the 1950s to the newest genre of music, rock and roll, as well as other genres (Dannen, 1990).

In the 1970s, organized crime gained influence over parts of the record industry: it imposed conditions in contracts, controlled record distribution, and profited from artists´ work (Dannen, 1990). During the same decade, music on drugs and illicit substances began to gain popularity in Mexico, with narcocorridos such as Los Tigres del Norte´s “Contrabando y traición” (1974) (Wald, 2021).

Also in the 1970s, country artists were frustrated by the studios´ control and formulaic production. As a result, a musical movement called Outlaw Country emerged, through which country artists gained creative freedom and produced music that was authentic rather than commercial (Streissguth, 2013). It was led by figures such as Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Cash, and Tompall Glaser. The movement took its name from Waylon Jennings´ album *Ladies Love Outlaws* (1972), and it reached its peak with *Wanted! The Outlaws* (1976) (Malone, 2002) . Afterwards, the Urban Cowboy period arrived with a style of country closer to pop. Throughout the 1980s, this group of artists showed that it was possible to succeed without abandoning freedom of expression or identity (Streissguth, 2013). This historical event shows how important freedom of expression is in artistic communities

The Parental Advisory label was introduced in the United States in 1985 (Martin & Segrave, 1988) . Although it helps customers make informed choices about explicit content, it does not prevent teenagers from accessing explicit music or media.

In 2015, the UK introduced age ratings for online videos, which help users recognize content that is inappropriate for young people; however, they do not reduce exposure.

Sinaloa´s first documented censorship of narcocorridos occurred in 1987 (Wald, 2001). Although this measure limited radio broadcasts, it sparked debate about freedom of expression.

The Situation Today

In modern society, technology and social media spread content faster and easier than ever before. Content apps such as TikTok, Instagram, and X, among others, reward surprising and dramatic content. An article posted by Culture Stack (2025) explains how YouTube tested the models of monetizing emotion through watch duration. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X work under the same algorithm-based principle: maximizing user attention and retention. The more engagement a post receives, through comments, shares, or likes, the more widely it is promoted and, in many cases, monetized. This algorithmic pattern is linked to content that normalizes organized crime, because the media often portray characters involved in illegal activity with backstories, relatable motivations, or even justifications for their actions.

At the same time, music streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music give independent creators national and international reach without the gatekeeping of record labels. Lower barriers to entry mean millions of artists can publish their own music globally. As a result, songs celebrating cartel figures and gang life circulate among young listeners who may not understand the actual violence behind them. On the other hand, this increase in posted content also makes gaining audience attention significantly harder.

Corridos tumbados, which often talk about drugs and street violence, are among Mexico's biggest genres. Corridos tumbados star Natanael Cano drew more than 310,000 people in a single show at the Feria Nacional Potosina in 2024, breaking a national attendance record.

Additionally, recommendation systems such as TikTok's "For You" page extend this reach: platforms recommend content to users based on their interaction with similar posts. TikTok alone has an estimated 75 million users in Mexico.

Social media is also used as an advertising platform. A 2025 study by the Seminar on Violence and Peace at El Colegio de México, in collaboration with Northeastern University, found over one hundred TikTok recruitment and propaganda accounts. Half of them were used for direct recruitment, and researchers found that the videos showed off luxury cars, exotic pets, large amounts of money, and weapons to promote crime as a path to high status (Seminar on Violence and Peace, 2025).

This pattern is not exclusive to Latin America. In Naples, researchers report that crime bosses act as managers for low-income singers, attracting them with false promises and then controlling their voices and actions. Italian lawmaker Stefania Ascari has stated that the Camorra (a historic and powerful Italian mafia-type crime organization and secret society) has sent coded messages through neomelodic songs, a popular music genre that originated in Naples and Southern Italy (Ghiglione, 2023).

Governments have reacted in different ways. In 2019, the Punjab and Haryana High Court in India ordered police to ensure that songs glorifying alcohol, drugs, and violence were not performed, and in 2022, after the killing of singer Sidhu Moose Wala, Punjab officially banned songs promoting firearms and violence. In Italy, members of the League (Lega) party proposed a bill to penalize singers who glorify mafia culture (Irish Legal News, 2025). In France, after the 2005 riots, around two hundred Members of Parliament demanded legal action against rappers, accusing them of provoking and inciting violence; in response, artists argued that their music simply reflected their communities´ social reality (Poggioli, 2005). Years later, French President Emmanuel Macron blamed Snapchat and TikTok for intensifying violence during the 2023 riots.

The central question is whether such measures are effective. A study by UCL researchers Kleinberg and McFarlane (2020) found no significant link between drill

music and recorded violence in London, although police claimed that rap videos may have fueled some specific incidents.

Some critics state that bans could backfire. According to Italian commentator Marcello Ravveduto, bans could be misused by young people who claim that the government is preventing them from expressing themselves (Ghiglione, 2022).

Monitoring is also difficult: official and independent counts of criminal recruitment accounts differ widely (see Challenges and Complications), and the actual amount of criminal propaganda in many countries remains uncertain.

Delegates must consider whether restrictions on music and media reduce the influence of organized crime and, if so, how they can be aligned with civil liberties.

Key Stakeholders and Their Positions

Different organizations and governments are involved in the influence of media and music on the normalization of organized crime culture among young people. Each has different perspectives and concerns about organized crime and freedom of expression.

Colombia faces the involvement of organized crime in the music industry. The AGC (Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) has reportedly used music and concert production to launder money. Sergio Reyes Dias, the director of Infolaft Academy, an organization that trains anti-money laundering professionals in Latin America, remarked that the music industry moves large amounts of money, which makes it vulnerable to criminal organizations seeking to take advantage of it. Colombia seeks to protect its music industry from criminal infiltration while addressing organized crime and its influence.

Mexico is concerned about how music such as narcocorridos represents criminal lifestyles. On April 14, 2025, President Claudia Sheinbaum stated during a press

conference that the government wants to raise awareness about songs and media content that talk about organized crime, violence, and drugs, so that young people do not believe a criminal lifestyle is normal.

The US is concerned about how harmful media content can affect minors. According to the Congressional Research Service, U.S. lawmakers have debated how to protect young users while respecting freedom of expression.

The UK focuses on drill videos because police link some content to gang intelligence, and many referred videos were removed (Metropolitan Police, 2024, 2025). Research, however, questions whether drill causes violence and warns of discriminatory criminalization (Schwarze & Fatsis, 2022). The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act, which became law in October 2023, places legal duties on platforms to protect children from harmful content (UK Government, 2023).

India, especially Punjab, is more restrictive: in 2019, a court barred live performances of songs glorifying violence, drugs, and weapons, citing child protection (Punjab and Haryana High Court, 2019). This raises concerns about proportionality and free expression.

In August 2015, China's Ministry of Culture blacklisted 120 songs it considered to promote obscenity, violence, or crime, and ordered websites to remove them (CNN, 2015). In January 2018, China's media regulator also banned hip-hop culture and performers with tattoos from television (Radio Free Asia, 2018).

In France, some lawmakers called for legal action against rappers after the 2005 riots, while artists said they were describing social realities (Poggioli, 2005).

Brazil's funk proibidão has faced censorship for referencing criminal factions, but scholars warn this can become cultural criminalization of working-class and Black communities (Mayr, 2023).

Finland integrates media education across its national curriculum, from early childhood to upper secondary school (European Commission, n.d.). It has ranked first in the

European Media Literacy Index since the index was first published in 2017 (Finland Toolbox, n.d.).

The EU regulates platforms instead of banning music. The Digital Services Act requires large platforms to assess systemic risks and protect minors (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022, Arts. 28, 34).

Article 20(4) of the Spanish Constitution protects freedom of expression but sets limits to respect other rights and to protect youth and children.

Italy has set rules to protect young audiences. Under Legislative Decree No.50 of 2024, platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram must adopt measures to protect minors. Italy recognizes that both freedom of expression and the protection of minors are important.

All of these countries recognize the importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of young people, as well as freedom of expression.

Several international organizations are also involved in this topic:

- UNESCO promotes freedom of expression and supports media and information literacy, helping people think critically about the information they consume, because minors need to understand how media works today.
- UNICEF protects children's rights and well-being and promotes safer digital environments for minors.
- UNODC focuses on organized crime prevention and has educational programs that help young people understand organized crime.

Freemuse, a non-profit organization, defends artistic freedom and investigates how organized crime affects artists, since violence linked to organized crime can threaten freedom of expression.

Companies that produce and distribute music and media, such as YouTube and Spotify, may also be affected, since these platforms reach massive audiences and must balance safety with freedom of expression. Record labels and concert promoters are also

vulnerable, as criminal groups may use music production and live events to launder money.

Finally, young people themselves are key stakeholders: music and social media are part of their daily lives, and any policy affects both their protection and their right to expression.

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks

International law protects and supports freedom of expression, yet allows limits on it. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), protects the right to seek, receive, and share ideas (United Nations, 1948). Article 19(3) of the ICCPR permits restrictions only if they are provided by law and are necessary to respect the rights or reputations of others or to protect national security, public order, public health, or morals (United Nations, 1966). The UN Human Rights Committee highlights that a direct and immediate connection between the expression and the threat must be shown before a restriction can be justified (UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 35). Article 20(2) requires states to prohibit by law any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Most songs glorifying crime do not fall within this definition, so most restrictions must be justified under Article 19(3).

The Rabat Plan of Action (OHCHR, 2012) offers a six-part document test to determine when expression reaches the level of incitement: the context, the speaker, the intent, the content and form, the extent of the expression, and the likelihood of harm, including its imminence.

Identifying where free artistic storytelling ends and direct provocation begins is the main challenge of this matter.

UNESCO's global framework advocates protecting artistic freedom through media literacy education rather than bans. The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions recognized freedom of expression as essential to cultural diversity, while stating that no one may invoke it to infringe human rights (UNESCO, 2005, Art. 2.1). UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy curriculum, *Think Critically, Click Wisely!,* teaches young people to question what they see on social media (UNESCO, 2021). These initiatives work together to defend creators' rights while encouraging young audiences to thoughtfully analyze the lifestyle portrayed in organized crime- or gang- associated music.

In contrast, national bans and censorship face legal debates. In Mexico, many states restrict or fine narcocorrido performances and artists such as Los Tucanes de Tijuana, who were fined over $36,000 in 2025 (CBS News, 2025). However, critics note that these bans have been accompanied by increases in views and streams, as with Los Alegres del Barranco, who gained over two million streams after the US revoked their visas (Saltiman & Valdés, 2025). In the UK, police requests to remove drill music videos (hip-hop songs that often describe the harsh reality of the streets) have been criticized and have sparked debate about racial inequality. Between 2020 and 2022, police in the United Kingdom requested the removal of 635 rap videos from YouTube (Kanegoni, 2023), and the ACLU and Stanford's Daphne Keller warn that such practices disproportionately affect Black artists (ACLU & Keller, 2022). In the United States, prosecutors frequently use song lyrics as evidence in court, leading several states to pass expression-protective laws. California (2022), Louisiana (2023), and Maryland (2026) have limited the practice, and the federal RAP Act (*Restored Artistic Protection,* a bill designed to prevent lyrics and other forms of artistic expression from being used as evidence against artists in criminal courts) has been introduced several times, though it has not become law.

Challenges and Complications

Solving this issue is difficult because the core problem is not any single song but the systems that distribute it. Algorithmic systems rank and promote content by predicted engagement. The European Union´s Digital Services Act (DSA) now requires very large

platforms to analyze risks from the design of their recommendation systems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022, Art. 34), but this regional law and global monetization models remain largely governed by private terms of service. UNESCO's 2023 Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms ask media to manage human rights attentively and be transparent about content classification, yet they are voluntary to participate (UNESCO, 2023).

Jurisdiction is a second obstacle. A video uploaded in one state is streamed in another, but the Palermo Convention states that nothing in it gives a State Party the legal power or authority to enforce a law for another state's authorities (United Nations, 2000, Art. 4). Legal standards also differ; the United Kingdom treats drill videos as gang intelligence and evidence (Kanegoni, 2023), while some US states now restrict the use of lyrics in court (Perez, 2026).

Evidence is a third problem. Mexico's security ministry identified 39 recruitment accounts across platforms, while researchers found over 100 on TikTok alone (La silla Rota, 2026; Seminar on Violence and Peace, 2025), and a study of London drill found no meaningful link between drill music and recorded violence (Kleinberg & McFarlane, 2020). Finally, protecting minors must be balanced with their own right to expression: the Convention of Human Rights of the Child protects children's freedom of expression (Art. 13) but only calls on states to "encourage" guidelines protecting them from harmful material (Art. 17(e)) (United Nations, 1989). Enforcement can also be uneven, since bans often lack transparent reasoning and place unknown artists at a disadvantage (Kanegoni, 2023).

The Committee's Role and Powers

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is the UN specialized agency for education, science, culture and communication. Its Constitution was adopted in London on 16 November 1945 and entered into force on 4 November 1946 after ratification by twenty countries (UNESCO, 1945). The organization emerged from the Second World War: its Constitution holds that, because wars begin in people´s minds, the defenses of peace must also be built there, and Article I defines its purpose as contributing to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, and cultural programs, including the instruments discussed in this paper: the 2005 Convention on cultural expressions, the Media and Information Literacy Curriculum, and the 2023 Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (UNESCO, 2005, 2021, 2023).

In practice, this committee can recommend, encourage, fund, and monitor. It can draft resolutions that urge Member States to integrate UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Curriculum (UNESCO, 2021), apply the Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (UNESCO, 2023), and support artistic freedom under the 2005 Convention, which states that no one may invoke it to infringe upon human rights (UNESCO, 2005). It can also build on the work of the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, who has stressed that artistic expressions remain protected under freedom of expression (Shaheed, 2013), and cooperate with UNODC, whose Education for Justice initiative develops materials to prevent crime among youth (UNODC, n.d.-b).

The committee cannot ban an artist, song, or platform, nor can it impose sanctions or override national law. Article 1 (3) of its Constitution also prohibits UNESCO from intervening in matters that are within the domestic jurisdiction of Member States (UNESCO, 1945). Recommendations are not enforceable, and conventions include only the states that ratify them. Prosecuting organized crime is the responsibility of states under the Palermo Convention, not of UNESCO.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. How should delegates distinguish artistic depiction of crime from glorification or incitement, and which standard (ICCPR Article 19(3), Article 20(2), the Rabat Plan of Action, or national law) should guide UNESCO's recommendations?
2. What evidence should a state have to show before restricting a song or video, given the Human Rights Committee's requirement of a "direct and immediate connection" between expression and threat?
3. To what extent can UNESCO encourage regulation of recommender systems and monetization without transgressing ICCPR Article 19 or its own constitutional limit on intervening in domestic matters?
4. What responsibilities should platforms carry under the 2023 Guidelines, and how can moderation reflect local languages and cultural contexts?
5. How can Media and Information Literacy programs reach youth in regions where criminal groups recruit online, and who should deliver them: schools, platforms, artists, or civil society?
6. How should states balance children's right to expression and information against protection from harmful material under Articles 13 and 17(e) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child?
7. Should content produced by criminal groups to recruit be treated differently from artists describing social realities, and how can a resolution tell them apart?
8. How can the committee protect artists pressured by criminal groups without stigmatizing whole genres and communities?
9. What data-sharing mechanisms among UNESCO, UNODC, UNICEF, and platforms are needed so that policy rests on evidence and not assumptions?
10. Which alternatives to bans (counter-narratives, funded peace-themed music, age labeling) merit recommendation, and how should their success be measured?

Conclusion and Call to Action

The central dilemma is that the same music that may normalize organized crime for some young people is, for others, a record of lived experience and protected form of expression. Evidence on both sides remains incomplete: bans have often been questioned, criminal groups have adapted platform rules, and research has not shown that lyrics alone cause violence. Delegates should therefore draft resolutions that prioritize education and international cooperation over outright prohibition. Strong proposals will address media and information literacy, platform transparency, support for artists, better data, and partnership with UNODC, UNICEF and human rights bodies. By grounding their work in ICCPR Article 19 and the Palermo Convention, delegates can establish frameworks that encourage youth to think critically while safeguarding artistic freedom.

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