

Effect of sanctions on nature and scale of violence and atrocities

Sanctions overall has harmful effects on the nature and scale of violence and atrocities, and these effects are moderated by sanction type and implementation.

Geographic region: Sub Saharan Africa, East Asia and Pacific, South Asia, Middle East and North Africa

Effect size: Harmful effect ($g=-0.13$)

Confidence in study findings: Medium (24 studies with 68 effect sizes)

Short summary

Sanctions, implemented by governments and international organizations like the UN, EU, and U.S., target states, entities, or individuals responsible for violence, repression, or rights abuses. They include economic, arms, and targeted sanctions, often affecting entire economies or specific actors. Sanctions aim to reduce violence and atrocities by weakening financial and operational capacity while restricting access to weapons. However, comprehensive sanctions can inadvertently harm civilians and exacerbate grievances, leading to unrest, terrorism, or repression resulting in harmful effect. Evidence from 27 evaluations highlights mixed effects, with outcomes influenced by sanction type, regime adaptability, and implementation context. Short-term, targeted measures showed greater success in specific contexts.

Long summary

The intervention

Sanctions are coercive tools implemented by governments or international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and the United States, to influence the behavior of target states, entities, or individuals. They include economic sanctions (trade restrictions, asset freezes), arms embargoes (bans on weapons transfers), targeted sanctions (focused on specific individuals or entities), comprehensive sanctions (affecting entire economies), and dual-use sanctions (restricting items with civilian and military applications). Sanctions often target governments, ruling elites, or institutions responsible for rights abuses, terrorism, or conflict but can indirectly harm civilians, especially under comprehensive measures. Their duration ranges from short-term to decades, as seen in sanctions against Iran or Cuba, and their design aims to balance economic pressure with minimizing harm to non-targeted populations. Multilateral sanctions, such as UN arms embargoes, focus on international peace and security, while unilateral sanctions, such as U.S. measures, often address national security and human rights concerns.

How the intervention is expected to affect this outcome

Sanctions are expected to affect the nature and scale of violence and atrocities through economic, political, and social mechanisms. Economic sanctions, such as trade restrictions and asset freezes, aim to weaken the financial and operational capacity of regimes or groups, reducing their ability to fund violence or atrocities. However, these sanctions can exacerbate

economic hardship, fueling grievances and increasing domestic unrest, which may escalate violence, terrorism, or repression. Arms embargoes specifically restrict access to weapons, aiming to reduce conflict intensity and prevent large-scale atrocities, such as genocides or mass killings. Targeted sanctions, like travel bans or asset freezes on specific individuals, seek to disrupt networks of perpetrators without harming broader populations. Nevertheless, they can inadvertently strengthen authoritarian regimes by rallying domestic support against perceived external threats.

Sanctions can also influence violence indirectly by disrupting local economies and social structures. Comprehensive sanctions, which broadly target an entire economy, may heighten intergroup tensions by creating resource scarcity and competition, leading to increased violence or repression against marginalized groups. Conversely, arms embargoes and sanctions with humanitarian exemptions may mitigate such risks by limiting conflict resources while maintaining civilian protections. While sanctions are generally intended to deter violence and atrocities by imposing economic and logistical constraints, their success depends on the type of sanction, the context in which they are implemented, and the capacity of targeted actors to adapt to external pressures.

The evidence base

This cell includes 24 impact evaluations and 1 qualitative study. Most of the studies are rated with medium confidence.

All the impact evaluation studies utilized secondary data, with some analyzing global datasets and later narrowing their focus to economies subjected to sanctions (18). Two (2) studies concentrated on Africa, while others examined the broader implications of U.S. sanctions (1) or their effects on specific economies (2), including China, Iran, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Additionally, one study analyzed the impact of sanctions on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (1), while another focused specifically on Iran (1).

The qualitative study utilized a global dataset and included case studies from Haiti and North Korea.

Evidence findings

The evidence reveals mixed effects of economic sanctions on nature and scale of violence and atrocities, with significant heterogeneity in outcomes depending on the context, type of sanctions, and local mediators. In some cases, sanctions intensified terrorism, repression, and violence, as economic hardship and weakened state capacity created conditions for dissent, grievances, and increased operational capacity for violent actors. For instance, sanctions often led to increased domestic terrorism and human rights abuses, particularly in authoritarian regimes, as leaders relied on coercion to maintain control under economic strain. Conflict dynamics were also affected, with sanctions prolonging civil wars in certain cases.

However, the effects were not uniformly negative. Sanctions that were short-lived, incentivized compliance, or targeted specific actors showed some success in improving human rights or reducing violence. Regime type and local conditions played critical roles in shaping outcomes. Personalist regimes tended to increase repression under sanctions, while single-party systems displayed more resilience. Sanctions coupled with international pressure or alternative measures, such as arms embargoes, showed moderate success in curbing violence but often failed to address root causes.

Included studies

Altmann & Giersch (2021) examines the unintended consequences of economic sanctions, specifically focusing on their impact on terrorism in target states. It explores whether economic sanctions lead to an increase in the lethality of terrorism, using Iran as a contextual example where sanctions have led to significant economic contraction and social turmoil. The study utilizes country-year panel data from 1970 to 2009, covering 46 countries that experienced sanctions during this period. The dependent variables are the total number of fatalities from terrorist attacks and the average success rate of these attacks, sourced from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The analysis employs various regression models, including negative binomial regression and Tobit regression, to assess the relationship between sanctions and terrorism. The results indicate that economic sanctions are positively associated with an increase in the number of fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks, suggesting that sanctions may enhance the operational capacity of terrorist organizations. However, the study finds no significant relationship between sanctions and the success rate of terrorist attacks. The study is rated as medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study with only partial description of the intervention. The study focuses primarily on the consequences of economic sanctions rather than detailing the specific mechanisms or processes of the sanctions themselves

Amodio et al. (2021) examine the impact of security-motivated trade restrictions, specifically the dual-use list imposed by Israel, on political violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), which include the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The dual-use list restricts the import of goods that can be used for both civilian and military purposes, affecting sectors that rely heavily on these inputs. The context is the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the West Bank being subject to these restrictions since 2008. The research employs a difference-in-differences strategy to compare economic and political outcomes across sectors and localities based on their intensity in dual-use inputs. The study uses data from a repeated cross-section of approximately 33,000 Palestinian manufacturing establishments surveyed from 1999 to 2012. It also incorporates data on political violence from the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) dataset, covering events from 1999 to 2012. The analysis focuses on the West Bank, with the Gaza Strip serving as a placebo due to its complete blockade during the study period. The study finds that the policy accounted for 15.7% of all political violence events in the West Bank during the same period. The increase in political violence was more pronounced in localities with higher employment concentration in dual-use input intensive sectors. The study is rated as medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Choi (2013) and Choi (2014) examines the impact of economic sanctions on international terrorism, highlighting how sanctions, often used by major powers to influence the policies of target economies, can unintentionally harm vulnerable groups within those countries. Economic sanctions are described as a foreign policy tool used by governments to pressure target countries into political or behavioral changes, such as promoting democracy or human rights. The study uses cross-sectional, time-series data, drawing on information about economic sanctions from Hufbauer et al. (2008) and terrorism incidents from the ITERATE and GTD databases. The analysis begins with a negative binomial regression model to evaluate the relationship between sanctions and terrorism. To address endogeneity, a two-step model is introduced: economic sanctions are first examined as a cause of poverty, and then predicted poverty levels are used to assess their impact on domestic terrorism. The results indicate a significant increase in domestic terrorism associated with economic sanctions. Specifically, the study finds that sanctions function as a "violence trigger structure,"

creating conditions that disproportionately impact impoverished populations, who, under heightened economic distress, are more prone to engage in terrorism. The analysis reveals a statistically significant 149% increase in domestic terrorist incidents in countries under sanctions, suggesting that sanctions lead to an intensified likelihood of terrorism by fostering economic grievances among disadvantaged groups who feel targeted by these external economic pressures. This study is rated medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Clay (2018) evaluates the effect of economic sanctions on global human rights practices. It utilized data on 159 countries from 1981-2005. The independent variable of interest are human rights sanction events (i.e., fields on “improve human rights” and “issue”); sanction data come from the Threat and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) dataset. From here, six dichotomous variables were created. Spatial weights were developed to consider state similarities relevant to the sanction event of interest. The outcome variable of interest is government respect for physical integrity rights, as embodied in the Physical Integrity Rights Index of the CIRI Human Rights Data Project. The spatio-temporal autoregressive model is applied in some of the regressions reported in the study. The study finds that human rights sanctions impact both target states and similar neighboring countries. A threat of sanctions improves respect for physical integrity rights if it starts and ends within the same year without actual imposition. However, when sanctions are imposed, respect for these rights declines, though this effect typically fades by the following year. Nearby countries with strong human rights practices positively influence respect for these rights in the targeted state. The study is rated medium confidence as it is non-experimental study.

Carneiro and Apolinário (2014) investigate the human rights consequences of targeted economic sanctions, particularly focusing on whether these sanctions, aimed at specific groups within leadership rather than the general population, offer any human rights protections over conventional sanctions. The study examines cases of UN-imposed targeted sanctions on African countries between 1992 and 2008, using data from the Targeted Sanctions Consortium to analyze effects on physical integrity rights, including the right to life and the prohibition of torture. An ordered logit model on cross-sectional, time-series data, covering 22 UN targeted sanctions regimes in Africa and 918 country-year observations is employed. The standard errors were clustered at the country level. The Political Terror Scale is used to measure human rights violations, while controls include variables such as economic growth, armed conflict, and regime type. The findings reveal that targeted sanctions do not significantly protect human rights compared to conventional sanctions. Instead, they often worsen conditions for physical integrity rights (the right to life and prohibition of torture) in the targeted countries. The study shows a 1.74 times higher likelihood of worsening human rights protections in countries under targeted sanctions compared to those without sanctions. This escalation of violence is attributed to internal political dynamics; sanctions weaken targeted leaders, prompting opposition groups to increase demands, which are met with repression. The study is rated as medium confidence as it is non-experimental study design.

Drury and Li (2006) analyse the effectiveness of U.S. economic sanction threats against China from 1989 to 1995, particularly regarding human rights improvements. Following the Tiananmen Square incident, the U.S. threatened to revoke China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status unless human rights conditions improved. This period marked a strategic attempt to leverage economic pressure to influence China's domestic policies on human rights. The study uses a case analysis of U.S. threats to China's MFN status, examining both Congressional records and public statements as sources of sanction threats. Data on China's human rights practices, including political repression and releases of dissidents, were gathered from Xinhua News Agency and weighted event data on political accommodations and repression from Drury and Olson (2001). The study employs a time-series analysis, with

a seemingly unrelated regression model to capture the reciprocal nature of U.S.-China interactions over sanction threats and China's corresponding actions. The findings reveal that contrary to U.S. intentions, increased sanction threats led to a decrease in Chinese accommodations, such as the release of political prisoners or relaxation of restrictions. This study is rated **medium** confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Escribà-Folch (2011) investigates how economic sanctions affect authoritarian regimes' strategies regarding repression and public spending, focusing on how different regime types respond to external pressure. The study suggests that the impact of sanctions on a regime's stability and policy choices is closely tied to its type, with sanctions influencing authoritarian leaders' reliance on repression or loyalty through public expenditures. The analysis covers 1970 to 2000, using data on regime types, public expenditures, and repression levels across authoritarian states. The study categorizes regimes into personalist, single-party, and military types, each with different support structures and governing strategies. To analyze the impact of sanctions, the study employs fixed-effects panel regression, instrumental variable Generalized Method of Moments estimator, and an ordered logistic regression. The results reveal that sanctions lead to a significant increase in repression in personalist regimes, as limited fiscal options force these regimes to rely heavily on coercion. Military regimes also show a significant, but more moderate, increase in repression, balancing it with loyalty efforts within the military. Single-party regimes, however, show no significant increase in repression. The study is rated low confidence due to the absence of detailed information on power calculation. The description of the intervention was also rather little.

Gutmann (2019) investigates the effects of U.S. economic sanctions on human rights, specifically examining whether sanctions are "precision-guided" or "blunt" in their impact across various human rights categories. The study applied an endogenous treatment-regression model. The dataset spans U.S. sanctions from 1976 to 2012 and includes multiple control variables for economic, political, and international alignment factors. The model recognizes that sanctions are not randomly assigned; rather, they are likely to be imposed on countries already exhibiting certain characteristics (e.g., human rights abuses), creating potential bias in the estimates. Instruments such as distance from the U.S. and alignment in UN General Assembly voting are therefore used to address endogeneity. Similarly, U.S. sanctions do not have a statistically significant impact on basic human rights, such as freedom from torture, unlawful imprisonment, or arbitrary detention. When putting into account the different forms of sanctions, the results show that U.S. economic sanctions, regardless of type or duration, do not significantly impact basic human rights. This study is rated medium confidence as it is a non-experimental study.

Harris (2019) explores the humanitarian value of economic sanctions, particularly their effectiveness and unintended consequences. The study examines specific case studies, such as sanctions imposed on Iran, and evaluates their outcomes through historical and empirical analysis. It also investigates the evolution of "smart sanctions" designed to minimize harm to civilian populations while targeting specific actors or sectors. The analysis relies on a literature review of economic sanctions and their historical application from the early 20th century to modern-day cases. It uses data from key sources, including the Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott dataset on sanctions episodes. Empirical evaluations focus on success rates for different humanitarian objectives, drawing from secondary data and case-specific studies like sanctions on Iran. The study reports that sanctions intended to end civil wars were moderately successful (53–71% success rate), but their impact on other humanitarian goals—such as improving human rights or curbing terrorism—was generally limited, with success rates often below 25%. Sanctions frequently led to unintended consequences, such as intensifying human rights abuses. While theoretically less harmful, smart sanctions remain inconclusive in

their effectiveness. Some evidence suggests they are less destabilizing than comprehensive sanctions but still fail to achieve humanitarian objectives consistently. This study is rated medium confidence as it is non-experimental and due to its partial description of the intervention, outcomes, and evaluation questions.

Hasan (2016) assesses the impact of natural resources on conflict intensity, with a focus on how international policies, particularly economic sanctions, influence both civil and inter-state conflicts. The context emphasizes conflicts in regions with abundant natural resources, where revenues from these resources often fuel prolonged conflicts. Cox proportional hazards models were used to assess the impact of sanctions on conflict duration. The dataset includes various types of sanctions, such as trade embargoes, arms sanctions, and aid suspensions, applied to countries experiencing civil conflicts. Control variables account for economic resilience, conflict severity, and resource dependency, isolating the effect of each sanction type on the likelihood of conflict resolution. The study finds that comprehensive embargoes and arms sanctions are the most effective at reducing conflict duration, as they restrict access to essential resources and military supplies, directly limiting the capacity of warring groups. Arms sanctions, in particular, are shown to have a statistically significant effect in shortening conflicts by curtailing the ability of groups to sustain prolonged military engagements. However, other types of sanctions, such as trade sanctions and aid suspensions, show limited impact on conflict duration. Trade sanctions, which primarily affect non-military goods, often fail to restrict the flow of necessary resources to warring parties, particularly in cases where resources are locally sourced. Aid suspensions also have a minimal impact, as they tend to reduce the humanitarian assistance available to civilians rather than constraining combatants' access to resources. The study is rated **low confidence** due to lack of power calculation.

Heffington (2017) assesses the impact of economic sanctions on domestic terrorism within target states, focusing on how sanctions create economic hardship that can lead to increased recruitment and activity by terrorist groups. Using data from 158 countries from 1977 to 2009, the study employs negative binomial regression models to analyze the relationship between costly sanctions (those with significant economic impact) and the frequency of domestic terrorist attacks. The dependent variable is derived from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), limited to incidents classified as domestic terrorism. The study finds that the imposition of costly economic sanctions significantly increases the frequency of domestic terrorist incidents within targeted states. Specifically, following the imposition of sanctions (and varying the sanctions from 0 to 1), the predicted number of terrorist attacks rises by 115%, from an expected baseline of approximately 2 incidents to around 4.3. The data also show that this increase in terrorism is most pronounced shortly after sanctions are imposed. Over time, however, the effect gradually diminishes. The study is rated **low confidence** due to the absence of detailed information on the intervention.

Hogendoorn (2009) evaluates the humanitarian impact of UN arms embargoes, focusing on their role in ending or limiting violent conflict. The quantitative component (using regression models) analyzed a dataset of all civil wars from 1945 onward, incorporating variables related to conflict duration, intensity, and humanitarian consequences, such as death tolls, displacement, and life expectancy changes. The primary independent variable is the imposition of arms embargoes, categorized as impartial (targeting all combatants) or partial (favoring specific parties). The dependent variables proxy humanitarian suffering, capturing the death and destruction associated with the conflict. The statistical analysis reveals that Impartial arms embargoes were statistically associated with prolonged conflicts. Meanwhile, there is no significant evidence that arms embargoes reduce death tolls, displacement, or other measures of humanitarian suffering. Instead, findings suggest that embargoes may

inadvertently increase devastation, though these results are less robust statistically. The study is rated low confidence due to its little description of the evaluation questions.

Hultman (2015) examines how international sanctions, specifically economic sanctions and arms embargoes, influence the intensity of violence in civil conflicts. The analysis combines monthly data on conflict violence (measured by battle-related fatalities) in African civil conflicts from 1989 to 2005 with data on sanctions. The sanctions data are drawn from international sources documenting both economic sanctions and arms embargoes, providing granular information on the timing, type, and scope of each sanction. Using negative binomial regression, the study assesses the relationship between both threatened and imposed sanctions on conflict intensity, while accounting for various factors such as regime type, population, and GDP. The study finds that both threatened and imposed economic sanctions significantly increase conflict intensity in civil conflicts, as measured by battle-related fatalities. By contrast, arms embargoes have a significant negative effect on conflict intensity, meaning they are associated with a reduction in battle-related violence. The study also examines the impact of threatened sanctions and finds that even the threat of economic sanctions significantly increases violence, similar to imposed sanctions. The study is rated low confidence due to limited description of the intervention.

Krain (2016) examines the impact of economic sanctions on the severity of ongoing genocides or politicides. Economic sanctions are often implemented to deter regimes from violating international norms. However, their effectiveness in cases of systematic mass killings has been debated. This study seeks to clarify whether sanctions serve as a tool to reduce the severity of these atrocities or remain ineffective. This empirical study included country years from 1976 to 2008 when genocides or politicides were already occurring to assess the relationship between economic sanctions and atrocity severity in cases of genocide or politicide. Results indicated that sanctions neither exacerbate atrocities nor alleviate them. This result holds regardless of the number of sanctions imposed, cost, comprehensiveness, or duration. Mere threats of sanctions, even when coupled with other interventions (e.g., military action or naming and shaming), show no significant impact on reducing atrocity severity. Sanctions implemented by international organizations are not more effective than unilateral sanctions in reducing the magnitude of killings. The combination of sanctions with military interventions, impartial actions, or international naming and shaming campaigns does not alter their ineffectiveness. This study is rated low confidence due to its little description of the evaluation questions.

Liou, Murdie, and Peksen (2020) examines how economic sanctions affect human rights conditions in target countries, focusing on the pathways through which sanctions may lead to increased repression. The study analyzes both direct effects of sanctions on repression and two indirect mechanisms: increased domestic dissent and reduced government capacity. Using a time-series, cross-national dataset covering 152 countries from 1990 to 2005, the study applies causal mediation analysis to identify whether and how dissent and government capacity mediate the impact of sanctions on human rights abuses. The analysis relies on measures from the Physical Integrity Rights Index, sanctions data from the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset, and additional variables capturing dissent intensity and government capacity. The study finds that economic sanctions lead to a significant decrease in physical integrity rights in sanctioned countries. One major pathway through which sanctions affect physical integrity rights is by intensifying domestic dissent. The study finds that the increase in dissent significantly mediates the relationship between sanctions and human rights violations. Notably, the impact is stronger when dissent turns violent. The analysis also shows that sanctions weaken government fiscal and administrative capacity, which indirectly leads to increased human rights violations. While less significant

than dissent and capacity, the study notes that corruption also plays a role in mediating the effects of sanctions on human rights. Although this effect is weaker than other mediating factors, it still contributes to the overall increase in repression within sanctioned states. The study is rated low confidence due to little description of the intervention.

Confidence assessment

Overall medium: There are 25 studies included in this cell, however, the study findings tend to be inconsistent.

Other outcome categories

Community and state governance / Government performance

Human security / Economic security

Human security / Political security