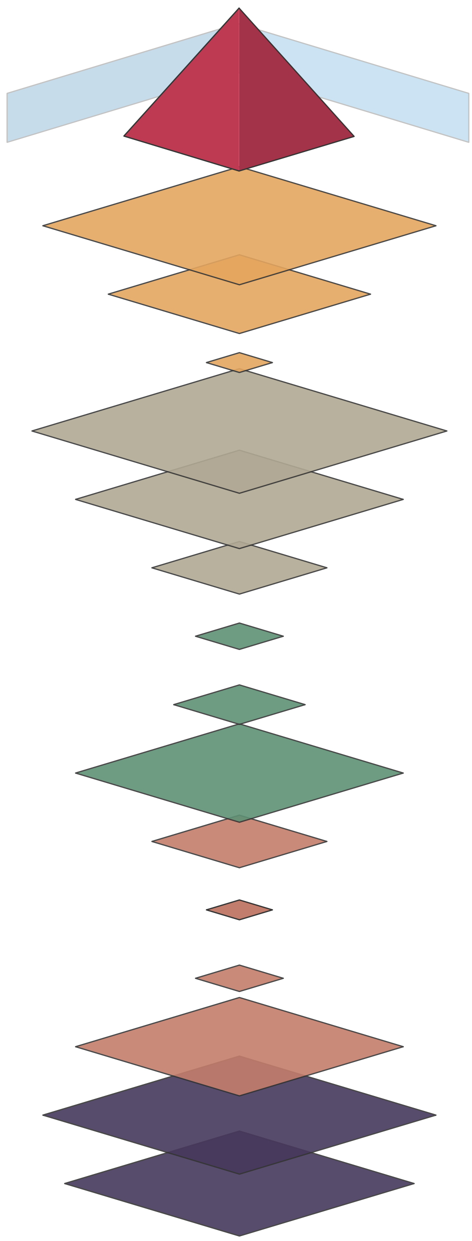
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

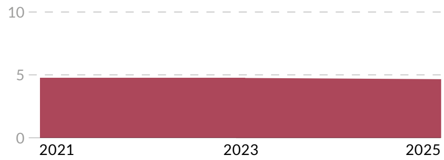
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

KOREA, DPR



4.68 ↘0.13
CRIMINALITY SCORE

121st of 193 countries ↘10
33rd of 46 Asian countries ↘1
2nd of 5 Eastern Asian countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	5.47	↘0.27
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	9.00	↗0.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.00	↘0.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	1.50	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	9.50	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	7.50	0.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	4.00	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	2.00	↘1.00
FAUNA CRIMES	3.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	7.50	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	4.00	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	1.50	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	2.00	↘3.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	7.50	↘0.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	9.00	0.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	3.90	0.00
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	3.00	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	10.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	4.50	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	1.00	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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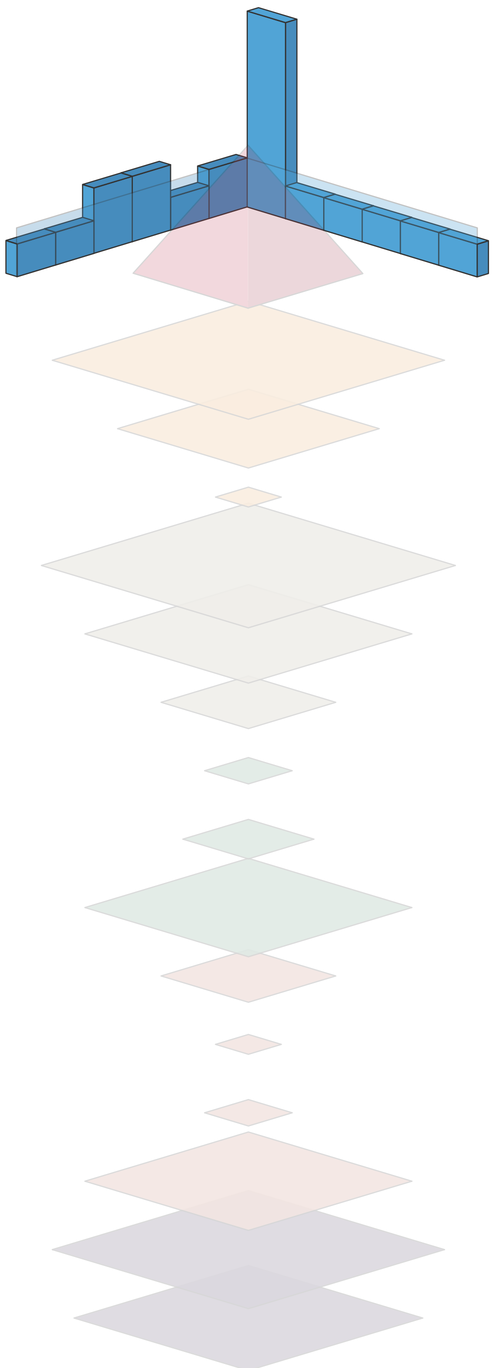
Funded by the European Union

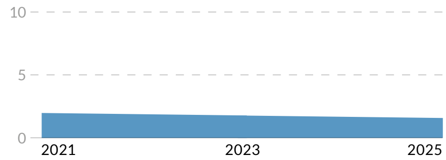
ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

KOREA, DPR



1.63 ↘0.17
RESILIENCE SCORE

191st of 193 countries ↘4
44th of 46 Asian countries ↘1
5th of 5 Eastern Asian countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**1.00**	↘2.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**1.00**	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**2.00**	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**2.00**	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**1.00**	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**1.50**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**6.00**	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**1.00**	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**1.00**	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**1.00**	0.00
PREVENTION	**1.00**	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	**1.00**	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) is deeply entrenched and institutionalized, permeating both domestic and transnational contexts. The state is not only complicit but also a direct perpetrator of trafficking activities, organizing and profiting from forced labour and sexual exploitation. These practices are embedded within the country's political and economic frameworks. The government deploys citizens to labour camps, factories, military facilities and overseas assignments in countries such as China, Russia and several African and Eastern European nations. The majority of these individuals are subject to coercion, with quotas imposed for unpaid labour in agriculture, construction and resource extraction sectors. State companies, the military and affiliated unions are primary actors in these activities. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, with many trafficked to China as brides or for sexual exploitation. The DPRK denies the existence of this market, provides no victim protection measures and punishes victims for crimes committed while being trafficked. The boundaries between state and criminal actors are indistinguishable, creating a comprehensive, state-run trafficking apparatus.

Human smuggling is also prevalent, primarily driven by individuals seeking to escape the country's harsh economic and political conditions. Most smuggling routes traverse the Yalu/Amnok and Tumen rivers into China, followed by passage through South East Asia en route to the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Despite heightened border security and severe punishments, the smuggling market persists due to its profitability. Brokers within the DPRK collaborate with counterparts abroad, using encrypted communication and bribing border officials. Smuggling is intrinsically linked with trafficking, particularly of women and girls, and is often accompanied by the illicit movement of goods and remittance transfers. Extortion and protection racketeering in the country appear to be limited and sporadic, primarily involving state-affiliated actors rather than organized crime groups. Due to a lack of reliable data, it is difficult to accurately assess the scale or societal impact of these activities. However, existing information suggests that organized crime groups have a minimal presence in this market, with corrupt state officials likely to serve as the main perpetrators.

TRADE

Arms trafficking is a major state-run enterprise in the DPRK, used to secure hard currency and geopolitical influence. Despite a decline in global competitiveness, recent events – particularly Russia's war with Ukraine – have revitalized the market. North Korean arms, including refurbished Soviet-era systems, have been documented in multiple conflict zones, with confirmed transfers to Russia, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. These transactions involve complex laundering and logistics networks, often facilitated by diplomatic missions and overseas workers. Arms sales reportedly provided a financial lifeline to the regime in recent years, especially the artillery exports to Russia.

The counterfeit goods market in the DPRK is similarly centralized, with the country serving as a production hub for counterfeit luxury items and pharmaceuticals. These items are distributed domestically to the elite or sold to tourists, particularly Russian visitors. For the general population, shortages of genuine medicine have created a black market for counterfeits, many of which are sourced from China. Despite occasional crackdowns, the state benefits from the market while punishing small-scale actors harshly. The counterfeit trade is both a revenue generator and a tool of state control, with Pyongyang as its hub.

The illicit trade in excise goods, primarily alcohol and tobacco, is facilitated by DPRK diplomats and military-owned companies. Its minimally funded foreign embassies have reportedly turned to this trade to sustain operations. Raw materials such as tobacco leaves and filters are sourced from foreign criminal networks, including Chinese triads. These are then processed and packaged domestically, yielding high profit margins. The trade is transnational, aided by front companies and intermediaries that facilitate transactions despite sanctions.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes are limited in scope, with illegal logging mainly driven by subsistence needs. Widespread deforestation in earlier decades has rendered wood a scarce resource, prompting illegal collection by citizens for heating and cooking. Chinese timber demand has driven market activity, potentially posing a threat to regulatory control and governance structure. There is no significant evidence of the DPRK's involvement in transnational flora crimes. Some small-scale trade with China and Russia exists, but its extent remains unclear.

North Korea's government is directly implicated in illegal wildlife trafficking, particularly involving rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks and tiger bones. It reportedly exploits diplomatic channels, uses front companies and collaborates with foreign criminal networks to conduct these operations. DPRK diplomatic missions, especially in Southern Africa, are frequently linked to coordinating these illicit flows. It was expected that these flows would decline when the DPRK shut down a dozen of its embassies in 2024, but reports suggest the market remains active, with China and other Asian countries serving as key destinations for wildlife products.

Non-renewable resource crimes form another core element of the DPRK's state-run criminal economy. Despite possessing significant deposits of minerals such as coal, gold and rare earth elements, the country exploits these resources through illicit channels. The state uses shell companies and collaborates with foreign criminal networks to ship resources via clandestine routes, such as ship-to-ship transfers and underground pipelines. These commodities are traded in violation of United Nations sanctions, with countries like China, Russia, Vietnam and Japan implicated as destinations. Oil imports and coal exports continue unabated despite restrictions. Smuggling tactics to bypass sanctions range from document forgery to tampering with ship tracking systems. A key method involves disguising North Korean coal and minerals, primarily anthracite, as waste and offloading them on a small island near the Yalu River. Chinese smugglers collect the goods and transport them into China, where payment is made in yuan or dollars.

DRUGS

The North Korean heroin trade is centrally managed by the government, which oversees production, distribution and the laundering of profits. Poppy cultivation and heroin processing occur in the northern provinces, often using the forced labour of prisoners and students. While there is insufficient recent data on heroin production to assess, historical patterns and external reporting indicate ongoing state involvement. The regime employs foreign mafia-style groups, particularly Chinese triads, for distribution. Worsening food shortages and shrinking disposable incomes have reportedly led more North Koreans to cultivate opium as a means of survival. Heroin is smuggled to countries like Japan, Australia, China and Thailand. Domestically, use is limited and harshly penalized.

Cocaine does not constitute a major market in the DPRK. Its high cost restricts consumption to elite circles, and the country's stringent drug laws, including capital punishment for trafficking, serve as a deterrent. There is no evidence of local production or significant distribution networks. Cannabis cultivation exists on a small scale, mostly among farmers. Conflicting reports make it difficult to ascertain the legal status or the extent of state involvement. The criminal market for cannabis remains poorly defined and under-documented.

Synthetic drug trafficking, particularly methamphetamine, is a significant market. Despite official bans, economic hardship has sustained widespread drug use, particularly among workers and students. While the state's current involvement is unclear, past reports have linked it to meth production and distribution. Meth is produced in small labs, often run by independent actors who bribe officials to operate. The product is sold domestically and to foreign buyers, particularly in China. However, long-standing border restrictions with China, imposed since the COVID-19 pandemic and not yet fully removed, have reportedly hindered the trafficking of chemical precursors into North Korea. As access to Chinese precursors has declined, domestic opium cultivation has surged, with many farmers shifting from food crops to poppies. In contrast, the methamphetamine market appears to have weakened, reflecting its heavy dependence on now-scarce imported chemicals.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

The DPRK has emerged as one of the world's leading state-sponsored cybercriminal actors. Its cyber-dependent crimes are orchestrated through government bodies. These actors engage in malware development, ransomware, cryptocurrency theft and supply chain attacks. The objective is twofold: to gather intelligence and to fund state operations. A dedicated cybercrime unit, believed to operate primarily from China, is reportedly involved in large-scale hacks, ransomware attacks and cryptocurrency thefts. North Korea launders stolen cryptocurrency through complex schemes that use stolen identities and global exchanges. Recently, several attacks targeted financial institutions in neighbouring countries. The international community widely condemns the DPRK's cyber operations, citing them as significant threats to global security.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in the DPRK are primarily perpetrated by the state, targeting foreign governments and institutions through cyber-enabled fraud. These include phishing as well as identity theft and data breaches to access financial data. North Korea has adapted to the evolving landscape of illegal online gambling and cyber scams, strategically leveraging money laundering networks and technologies tailored to transnational criminal operations. Profits from these crimes are laundered through global banking systems using sophisticated techniques. Embezzlement within the DPRK appears limited to high-ranking officials. Without transparency, it is difficult to make an accurate valuation, but financial crimes are understood to constitute a major revenue stream for the regime. There is no evidence that independent criminal networks play a substantial role, and the market operates in close coordination with North Korea's cyber-dependent crime apparatus.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

There are no independent mafia-style groups operating within the DPRK. The state exercises extensive control over all organized criminal activities, rendering the existence of autonomous hierarchical criminal organizations virtually impossible. Criminal networks, on the other hand, operate within a framework that is inextricably tied to the state. These networks frequently intersect with government officials and military personnel, creating a blurred distinction between criminal and state actors. The integration of these networks into both the formal and illicit economies is a defining feature of the country's criminal landscape. These groups are involved in a wide range of transnational crimes, including human and drug trafficking, smuggling, counterfeit production, cybercrime and environmental crimes such as illegal fishing. Many operate in northern border regions and coordinate with Chinese brokers to facilitate cross-border trafficking and smuggling. Despite their extensive operations, these networks exhibit relatively low levels of violence, with a primary focus on logistical and financial facilitation. The state's pervasive influence and control mechanisms prevent the emergence of independent criminal syndicates, reinforcing a system where illicit activities are effectively state-sanctioned or tolerated.

State-embedded actors are the dominant force behind organized crime in the DPRK. The state does not merely enable criminal markets: it structures and manages them at all levels of society. From low-ranking officials to elite government figures, state actors play direct roles in orchestrating a wide spectrum of illicit activities. Corruption is widespread and participation in criminal operations often provides both financial incentives and institutional protection. Despite formal anti-drug laws and increased penalties, drug abuse and trafficking continue, even among high-ranking officials, highlighting the inefficacy of internal enforcement.

Foreign actors play a critical, though subordinate, role in supporting the DPRK's criminal economy. The government actively collaborates with foreign state and non-state entities to sustain illicit operations across multiple sectors. Actors in countries such as China, Russia and various South East Asian and African nations are engaged in trade and logistical support, while mafia-style groups like the triads and the Yakuza assist in arms trafficking, oil smuggling and counterfeit operations. Chinese brokers are particularly influential in human trafficking and smuggling, especially across North Korea's northern border. Foreign criminal actors are also essential for executing ship-to-ship transfers and managing the shell companies used in resource crimes. These actors facilitate significant segments of the DPRK's transnational criminal activity and are crucial for circumventing sanctions, yet their influence on strategic decision-making is minimal.

The 'private sector' in the country is shaped by the country's hybrid economic system. Because the regulatory environment in the DPRK does not permit genuine autonomy, independent private sector participation in criminal markets is essentially non-existent. Private actors involved in organized crime operate under the de facto governance of the state, rather than independently.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea operates under a totalitarian one-party regime with virtually no democratic processes or political freedoms. The ruling Kim dynasty and its Workers' Party of Korea maintain absolute control over governance structures and state affairs. The government is widely reported to be involved in a range of criminal activities, including arms and drug trafficking, human trafficking, cybercrime and money laundering, which appear to be integrated into its broader political and economic strategies. While laws theoretically prohibit organized crime, their selective enforcement is often used to reinforce party control. Citizens face harsh penalties, including imprisonment, forced labour and execution. Simultaneously, crimes committed in service of the regime are tolerated or legitimized. Despite formal legal structures, actual governance is dictated by the ruling party, with widespread surveillance and political repression shaping state–society relations.

Government transparency and accountability are severely lacking. North Korea is deemed among the world's most corrupt countries, with allegations of institutionalized corruption throughout all levels of government. There is no functional oversight mechanism to check state corruption, and selective prosecution appears to serve elite or political interests rather than the public good. State-controlled propaganda and the suppression of independent information inhibit access to verifiable public data, impeding transparency. Despite global awareness of pervasive corruption, the regime has demonstrated no serious intent to improve accountability or transparency measures.

The DPRK is not significantly engaged in international cooperation. While it has acceded to a number of key international treaties, including the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and certain human rights instruments, implementation is minimal. North Korea's participation in international frameworks is widely seen as performative, with ongoing violations of the very norms these treaties uphold. Its international partnerships are limited, with China and Russia being the only notable law enforcement collaborators, primarily concerning the repatriation of smuggled individuals. There are no clear signals from the DPRK indicating a commitment to combat transnational organized crime, particularly in areas such as cybercrime and trafficking. North Korea is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

The country's legal and policy frameworks are centrally dictated by the ruling party. Although a penal code exists, it lacks specific provisions targeting organized crime. Instead, organized crime is subsumed under broad and arbitrarily enforced provisions in the general criminal law. Constitutional articles and national principles justify labour exploitation as a duty to the state, entrenching forced labour and trafficking within the legal order. Domestic legislation often serves the interests of elite preservation, further undermining its credibility as a tool for justice.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

North Korea lacks an independent judiciary. Legal proceedings, where they exist, are largely performative. Citizens are routinely detained without due process and subjected to inhumane prison conditions, including torture and forced labour. Entire families may be imprisoned under the 'three generations' rule. Labour camps are expansive and tightly controlled, often serving as punishment for political dissent or perceived defection. Judicial institutions do not provide remedies for victims of crime and are instead tools of repression. There is no evidence of specialized courts or legal structures that address organized crime independently of political imperatives.

Law enforcement in the DPRK is structured to uphold regime control rather than the rule of law. There is no dedicated law enforcement unit or agency tasked with combating organized crime. Two principal agencies, the ministry of social security and the ministry of state security, manage surveillance and population control. These bodies are focused on suppressing threats to the regime and maintaining political stability, not organized crime. Intelligence sharing, beyond some exchanges with Chinese and Russian authorities, is minimal. The effectiveness of law enforcement is largely contingent on political priorities, and its operational scope reflects a security state model rather than a public service one.

Territorial integrity in the DPRK is compromised by porous borders and under-resourced border enforcement. The northern border with China is a focal point for human and goods smuggling. Customs officials are often implicated in facilitating illicit flows due to low wages and poor oversight. The country also engages in state-sponsored trafficking across the Russian border, including weapons shipments via rail. The demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea is tightly guarded, with few documented crossings. The DPRK has a well-developed cyber infrastructure, enabling it to resist external surveillance while conducting extensive cyber operations globally.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

With its reliance on criminal proceeds, North Korea remains highly vulnerable to money laundering, including funds generated through cybercrime, drug trafficking and sanctions evasion. Although the DPRK has laws that nominally prohibit money laundering, these are ineffective in practice. It is designated as a high-risk jurisdiction by international bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force and has not conducted a mutual evaluation of its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing frameworks. North Korean entities routinely exploit third-party companies, designated non-financial businesses and cryptocurrency platforms to bypass sanctions and obscure the origin of illicit funds. This sophisticated laundering infrastructure utilizes layered transactions and false identities to move funds internationally.

The DPRK's economic regulatory environment is characterized by near-total state control. All property is owned by the government and central planning dictates all production. The lack of a functioning judiciary, an absence of taxation mechanisms and high levels of military expenditure further undermine economic resilience. Regulatory frameworks are designed to enforce political control rather than ensure transparency or economic efficiency. While a small informal market exists, it is heavily monitored, and those operating outside sanctioned channels risk severe punishment. Foreign investment is negligible and economic activity is stifled by sanctions and self-imposed isolation. This regulatory rigidity limits any possibility of private sector-led economic resilience or reforms.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support systems in North Korea are virtually non-existent. The government's long-standing narrative that such crime does not exist has suppressed the development of protection mechanisms. Victims of trafficking and other crimes are often treated as criminals themselves and subjected to harsh penalties, including imprisonment and forced labour. People who fled to China and have been forcibly repatriated by Beijing are regularly categorized as traitors or political dissidents and face persecution upon return. There are no civil society organizations known to operate in support of victims of organized crime within the country, and there is no evidence of any government-led victim assistance programmes. Moreover, the stigmatization of victims and the state's punitive approach further discourage any attempts to seek protection or support.

There is no evidence of meaningful strategies in place to prevent organized crime. The climate of fear created by state surveillance ensures that individuals remain silent about criminal activity, especially when state actors are involved.

The role of non-state actors in countering organized crime in the DPRK is virtually non-existent. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed. All media and communication channels are state controlled and access to the global internet is prohibited. Citizens caught consuming foreign media are subject to harsh punishment. There is no space for independent civil society or investigative journalism, and the international media has no presence within the country.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.