

Sanctions – row summary

Sanctions have an adverse effect on violence and are consistently associated with worsening of rights, social cohesion, and economic wellbeing. Effects vary markedly by sanction design, regime type, and context.

Sanctions are any reaction adopted unilaterally or collectively by states against a perpetrator of an internationally unlawful act in order to ensure respect for and performance of a right or obligation, in order to prevent a conflict or atrocity from starting or escalating. Sanctions could be of an economic (e.g. trade embargo between one or more states, or the seizure of assets held by individuals or states), diplomatic (e.g. national or international travel bans, banning organisations through the use of proscriptions), or militaristic (e.g. restricted movement or no fly zones, regulation of arms sales, or nuclear controls) nature. The evidence in the included studies includes comprehensive economic sanctions, targeted or smart sanctions intended to affect key individuals rather than the population as a whole (for example asset freezes, travel bans, and sectoral financial restrictions), trade restrictions and embargoes, arms embargoes, and sanction threats as well as imposed measures. Several studies also examined sanction-like restrictions on specific goods or economic activities, such as dual-use import controls and conflict-mineral trade regulations, and a small number evaluate the easing of restrictions on movement as a contrast case.

Sanctions are intended to change the behaviour of governments or armed actors by raising the economic and political costs of repression, conflict, or rights abuses, limiting access to finance, trade, and weapons, and signalling international disapproval. In principle, reduced resources and isolation could constrain the capacity to sustain violence or support abusive security forces and could incentivise negotiation, compliance, or institutional reform. In practice, sanctions can also trigger adaptation and evasion, shift rents and patronage networks, and prompt leaders to tighten control over media and civic space. Comprehensive measures can reduce household incomes and public revenues, worsen access to food and health services, and intensify grievances that may be mobilised either by the sanctioned regimes or opposition groups.

Evidence of effects is mixed across outcomes and frequently depends on sanction type and context. On the nature and scale of violence and atrocities, the meta-analytic estimate suggests a moderate harmful association ($g = -0.13$), with many studies linking economic sanctions to higher repression especially in authoritarian regimes and domestic terrorism, though there is also some evidence that arms embargoes are associated with lower conflict intensity in some settings. Short-term targeted interventions may improve human rights and reduce violence. Political security shows little or no overall average effect ($g = 0.027$), but this masks divergence: comprehensive and multilateral sanctions are often associated with worse civil liberties, discrimination, and physical integrity rights, while some evidence links democratic sanctions or selected United States sanctions to small improvements in democracy scores or women's emancipatory rights. Government performance shows a large average effect ($g = 0.288$), yet findings differ by regime type and policy objective, with studies describing weakened fiscal and administrative capacity in general, but regimes may shift in spending to protect politically important groups. Economic security and food

and health security have effect sizes close to zero ($g = -0.001$ and $g = -0.005$), but the included studies frequently report harms such as increased poverty and inequality, reduced trade and investment, lower immunisation and health spending, and worse infant mortality in conflict-affected areas, suggesting heterogeneous effects that may cancel in pooled estimates. For civic participation ($g = -0.104$), threats of sanctions appear more likely to coincide with increased anti-government protest, whereas imposed sanctions are often associated with pro-government mobilisation and reduced opposition activity, especially where media censorship is high. Access to justice, rights, and public services are adversely affected ($g = -0.114$), driven by reduced press freedom and weaker private property rights, with larger harms under more comprehensive sanctions. Social cohesion outcomes are similarly adverse on average: trust and acceptance of diversity decreases ($g = -0.111$), and case evidence from the West Bank links easing of movement restrictions to shifts away from support for violence and toward political engagement, but these findings come from a single setting.

Confidence in findings ranges from low to medium across outcomes. Many results come from observational, cross-national analyses using secondary datasets, where sanctions are not randomly assigned and confounding is difficult to eliminate. Several outcomes rely on small numbers of studies, including single-study evidence for some social cohesion measures, and pooled estimates sometimes sit near zero despite consistent qualitative reports of harm, indicating substantial heterogeneity by sanction severity, duration, enforcement, and local political economy. Overall, the evidence provides consistent indications of adverse social and economic consequences. The evidence does not support sanctions resulting in reductions in violence or improvements in rights and governance, and there is limited high-confidence evidence to guide which sanction designs avoid these harms in low- and middle-income contexts.

Effect sizes for sanctions by outcome (Hedge’s g).

Outcome	Effect size (g)	Magnitude	Number of studies	Number of effect sizes
Government performance	0.288	Large	5	9
Social cohesion: Willingness to participate or help	-0.218	Large	1	1
Civic participation	-0.104	Moderate	2	11
Human security: Access to justice, rights, and public services	-0.114	Moderate	2	17
Political security	0.027	Little or no	6	19

Food security and nutrition and health security	-0.005	Little or no	2	13
Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity	-0.111	Moderate	2	3
Social norms regarding violence and atrocities	-0.053	Small	1	5
Economic security	-0.001	Little or no	21	71
Nature and scale of violence and atrocities	-0.13	Moderate	24	68

Notes: Magnitude categories are based on the absolute value of g . Less than 0.05 indicates little or no effect; 0.05 to less than 0.1 indicates a small effect; 0.1 to 0.2 indicates a moderate effect; greater than 0.2 indicates a large effect. The direction of g follows the coding used in the underlying studies and outcome measures, so the sign does not always map neatly onto desirable or undesirable change.