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Drug Trafficking: Ecuador's Coastal Crisis

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n 9 January 2024, members of the Ecuadoran criminal group Los Lobos stormed the studios of "TC Television" in Guayaquil as part of a criminal offensive. This motivated President Daniel Noboa's issuance of Decree 111 on the same day, wherein he declared a state of emergency due to the existence of an internal armed conflict. For the first time in the recent history of Ecuador, 22 organized crime groups are being treated as terrorists.¹

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Even as world focus has been upon the American counternarcotics actions to the north, particularly in Venezuela and the Caribbean, Ecuador has entered a fight for its national existence.² Previously, Ecuador was considered a safe country. It had even been safe enough to serve the filming of *Proof of Life* (2000), the saga focused upon the kidnapping and rescue of Tom Hargrove by FARC of Colombia.³ With the rise in drug trafficking and the increase in related criminal activities, however, the Ecuadoran security situation deteriorated. From 2020 onward, violence, especially in coastal provinces of Esmeraldas, Manabí, Santa Elena, Guayas, El Oro, and Los Ríos (see Figure 1), began to escalate to levels never before seen in the country, passing from 1,372 homicides in 2020 to 7,062 in 2024.⁴ The current article outlines the different ways in which this crisis has affected the Ecuadorian populace.

Context of Crisis

Since 2020, drug trafficking has produced a multidimensional crisis in Ecuador's coastal communities characterized by explosive violence, profound institutional erosion, and comprehensive socio-economic transformation, interconnected dimensions that reinforce one another and resist current policy responses. Organized crime groups are a threat to the security of Ecuador and are replacing the state, especially in the coastal communities of the country. Consequently, state legitimacy is under assault.

To tackle this security threat, Ecuador's government has implemented, mainly since 2020, militarization of public security and other hardline policies. Best analysis finds that these approaches have failed to reduce violence, making evidence-based analysis of this recent period essential for future policy development. Additionally, immediate humanitarian concerns are in play, as Ecuador's coastal communities are facing an active and evolving crisis with multidimensional repercussions.



Figure 1. Provinces of Ecuador. Source: Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/maps/ecuador-political-map/>

The increase in drug trafficking activities in Ecuador is a reflection of various aspects of globalization, particularly the criminal, with the country's location and weak security architecture positioning it as a transportation and service center for transnational criminal groups. This has been exacerbated by Ecuador's political and social weaknesses.⁵ Ecuador cannot tackle this threat alone and requires international cooperation, a situation that, for many realists, implies a renunciation of state sovereignty, while for others, it is a pragmatic option for maintaining peace and order in the country.⁶ The pragmatic option is the more adequate vision, because the liberalist view of a global law enforcement system is not feasible in the short term due to the lack of agreements and compromises.

Although drug trafficking is not new to Ecuador, until recently, the country served primarily as a location for money laundering, due to its dollarized economy and the supply of chemical precursors. Despite this fact, the nation remained relatively stable, and there were generally few significant conflicts in society. The levels of violence remained low, and the

government had the capacity to attend to the population's needs, thereby maintaining its legitimacy. This changed with the FARC demobilization agreement in 2016, and an intensified struggle for the areas of illicit activity, especially drug production, abandoned as reintegration proceeded.

Splinters from the original major insurgent and criminal groups continued their illicit activities and began to extend their presence in Ecuador, which in turn led to disputes over territorial control.⁷ This situation strengthened the position of Ecuadorian criminal groups, primarily Los Choneros, which extended their control over the Ecuadorian prison system and became providers of logistical and security services for the operations of Mexican cartels, especially for the Sinaloa Cartel and the European mafia.⁸ The lead position of this criminal group contributed to an apparent calm in the country, despite its activities intensifying in provinces such as Manabí and Guayas.

As this crisis developed in 2020, Ecuador was also dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled the government to focus its resources on meeting the needs of the populace rather than security

concerns. This resulted in the disruption of social services to the community, economic contraction reducing licit opportunities, and a weakened capacity of the government, creating an ideal scenario for criminal recruitment and increase of illegal activities.⁹ The 28 December 2020 assassination of José Luis Zambrano, leader of Los Choneros, initiated the weakening of this criminal organization and led to its fragmentation into several criminal groups, including Los Lobos. These forged alliances with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and began to contest territories with the former in order to control drug trafficking routes through ports and fishing coves along the Ecuadorian coast. Consequently, homicides increased.¹⁰ Since then, criminal activity in Ecuador has become increasingly globalized, and strong transnational criminal groups with significant financial resources have also gained greater influence (see Figure 2).

In the regional context, Colombia saw a 43% increase in coca leaf cultivation and an expected 14% increase in cocaine manufacturing between 2020 and 2021.¹¹ This situation increased the competition between criminal groups in Ecuador due to the increase in the use of fishing vessels and container ships for drug trafficking from the ports and coves along the coastline to North America and Europe.

Growth of Violence

As displayed at Table 1, the indicators related to violence before 2020, such as

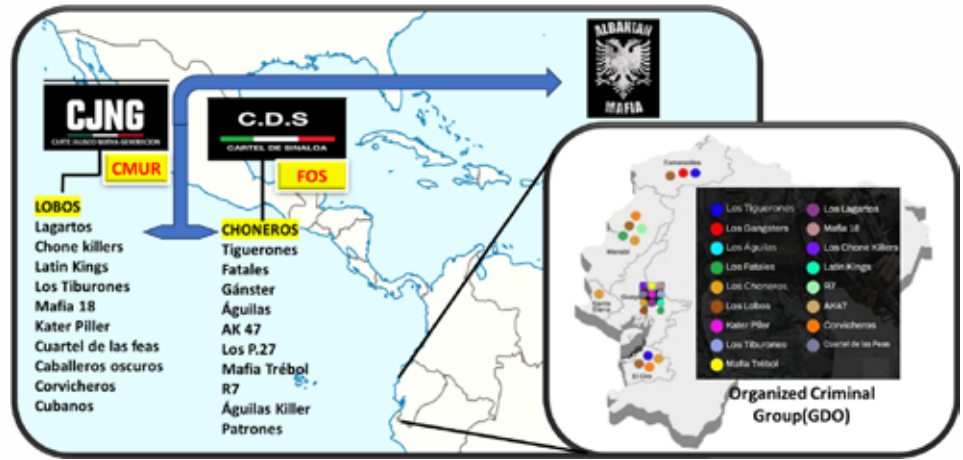


Figure 2: Presence of Organized Criminal Groups in Ecuador's Provinces (Source: Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador)

homicides and weapons seized, were at a low level. Actions of organized criminal groups were not much in public view. Since 2020, the violence has gradually spread throughout the country as a consequence of territorial disputes between criminal gangs, especially in coastal provinces such as Guayas and Manabí. The homicide rate, from 7.83 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020, has risen to 46.25 in 2023, making it the most violent country in Latin America.¹² By comparison, the rate in neighboring Colombia, despite all its challenges with cartels and insurgents, is 25.4 per 100,000 (2024).

In Ecuador in 2024, as reflected in Table 1, homicides dropped as a consequence of President Daniel Noboa's declaration of a state of emergency in January of that year. This led to increased police and military activities. Nonetheless, the number of homicides compared to 2019 has increased

592% at the national level. In the coastal provinces level, the number is higher, Guayas 790%, El Oro 678%, giving evidence of the critical security conditions of the country. According to recorded data, 76% of homicides take place in urban areas, and 88% occur in the coastal provinces, as displayed at Figure 3.

In the first half of 2025, homicides were the highest six-month total in Ecuador's recent history and increased 47% over the same period in 2024.¹³ A plausible reason is that this is a result of the state's failure to address the underlying conditions that enable criminal groups to operate. The high number of homicides and weapons seized in Guayas is founded on the fact that the majority of organized crime gangs are based in that province, where the main port terminals are located (e.g., Guayaquil and Posorja), which enables us to link the high homicide rate to conflicts over drug

	2019		2020		2024	
	HOMICIDES	WEAPONS SEIZED	HOMICIDES	WEAPONS SEIZED	HOMICIDES	WEAPONS SEIZED
NATIONAL	1187	5608	1372	6176	7033	21122
EL ORO	87	437	95	428	590	1946
ESMERALDAS	67	446	80	510	306	1676
GUAYAS	409	1910	528	2072	3234	6568
LOS RIOS	111	523	110	712	808	2362
MANABI	113	554	119	529	864	2392
SANTA ELENA	8	56	18	60	189	414

Table 1: Homicides and Weapons Seized. (Source: Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime)

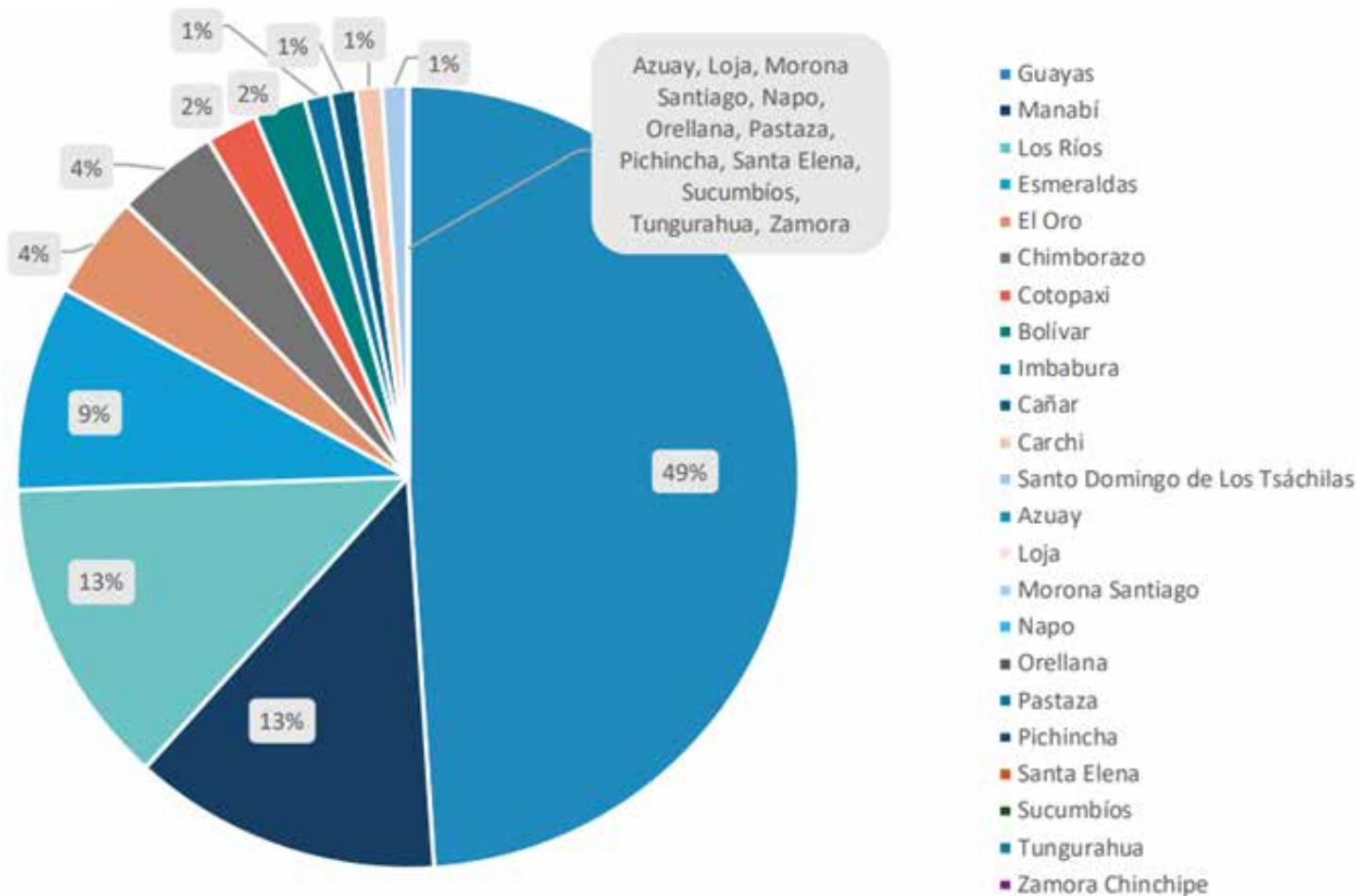


Figure 3. Homicides per Province 2024 (Source and Draft: Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime. 2024)¹⁴

trafficking routes. Additionally, Manabí's significant fishing activity makes it attractive to organized criminal groups.

Another relevant point is that while 64% of violent deaths are in the 20–39 age range for victims, many fatalities in the 15–19 age range have been reported since 2021, with assassination being the main cause of death for young people and children.¹⁵ This further illustrates the involvement of juveniles in the activities and conflicts of organized criminal groups, which has an impact on socio-economic conditions that will be described later in this document.

The criminal organizations employ violence not merely to eliminate rivals but to intimidate communities and establish territorial control in the absence of state authority, and they use more violent methods than in former years, regardless of the victims' sex or age. As mentioned

by Rothenberger, "Inability to maintain control in areas, such as cities, which have an increased level of organized violence, often results in these organized, violent groups gaining more legitimacy, ultimately increasing their material success."¹⁶ This contributes to the fact that a significant sector of the Ecuadorian population feels insecure, which in turn increases public mistrust in the government's capacity to handle the situation. Consequently, this causes a decrease in the legitimacy and credibility of the authorities at both national and local levels.

The aforementioned sense of insecurity has had detrimental effects on Ecuador's coastal communities, including: (1) the normalization of violence in those communities; (2) changes in residents' pace of life, with nighttime activities curtailed out of fear of violence; and (3) business closures due to decreased customers and sales, which undermines the communities'

development prospects and results in job losses. Thus, the acts of organized crime groups are both a cause and an effect of Ecuador's institutional and societal degradation.

Institutional Capacity: Governance Erosion

Like many Latin American nations, Ecuador has experienced (and continues to experience) high levels of political instability, which has weakened institutions, eroded the state's authority, increased corruption, and diminished public trust in all levels of government. Organized crime groups have gradually taken advantage of these conditions to expand their presence and seize territories, particularly in the poorest areas of the country, which also happen to be important drug trafficking routes. Criminal groups have gained influence among the population by financing political

	2019	2020	2024
Cocaine Seized (Ton)	30	88.83	252
Corruption Perception Index (Points/100)	38	39	32
Corruption Perception Index (Position/180)	93	92	121

Table 2: Ecuador's Cocaine Seizures and Corruption Perception Index. (Sources: Ministry of Interior and Transparency International.)¹⁷

campaigns, so that once elected, those authorities will act favorably toward the groups' operations.

In Table 2 is displayed the reality that despite the fact that Ecuador has increased the seizures of cocaine to a significant degree, the level of corruption in the country has also increased. The general feeling is that although a legal framework exists that penalizes corruption, it has not been sufficiently implemented, resulting in a sense of impunity that erodes public trust in the authorities and affects the effectiveness of any plan, regardless of the level of resources or coordination applied.¹⁸ Due to the public's mistrust of politicians, law enforcement, and judicial authorities, organized crime groups find it easier to establish territorial control over various parts of the nation and garner support from the local populace. They establish themselves as the legitimate authority, provide basic services, enforce coexistence laws, exert more control than the state, and retaliate violently against anyone who does not fit their standards.¹⁹ The population accepts them either out of fear or because they are seen as the only option for a better future.

Other countries of the region have suffered the same situation, as in the case of Mexico, where, according to Nieto, narcotrafficking "has been developed hand in hand with corruption. Together, they have perverted not only the political regime, the national security, the social peace, but also they have perverted the democratic process and the development of the country."²⁰ This evidence shows the close relationship between narcotics activity and corruption, and the serious effects on the country's security and democracy.

Ecuador's government has adopted "tough-on-crime" policies in an attempt to combat and stop the growth of organized crime groups, whose membership numbers are estimated at around 50,000, with a larger number of indirect collaborators.²¹ Since 9 January 2024, as noted early on above, 22 organized crime groups have been classified as terrorist organizations and the mobilization of the Armed Forces and the National Police has been ordered to protect national sovereignty against transnational organized crime, terrorist organizations, and belligerent non-state actors. The military and police have been

extensively deployed to restore the state's credibility and hence legitimacy amongst the populace, boosting the sense of security and allowing everyday activities to be carried out in a safe environment.

Some authors contend that although short-term exceptions can lessen violence in some regions, they have no long-term impact if laws and initiatives are not put in place to address the factors that encourage criminal organizations to operate.²² This is what has happened in Ecuador; according to the country's violence statistics. There was a decrease in homicides in 2024 compared to 2023, but there was a spike in violent fatalities in 2025, proving the short-term efficacy of *states of emergency*. An ongoing state presence is required, especially in coastal communities beyond the reach of law enforcement, if the government aims to restore the country's condition to what it was before 2020.

As per the information analyzed, it can be argued that a state with poor governance, corruption, limited institutional capacity, and a lack of presence, particularly in marginalized areas, leaves an institutional vacuum that organized crime groups take advantage of to challenge the legitimacy and credibility of the state in the eyes of its citizens. This further erodes the state's sovereignty and stability by displacing the state as the source of authority. Therefore, the first step in addressing this situation is to implement policies that reduce impunity and corruption, thereby rebuilding the state's reputation.

	2019		2020		2024	
	SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT	UNEEMPLOYMENT	SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT	UNEEMPLOYMENT	SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT	UNEEMPLOYMENT
NATIONAL	38.8	4.2	30.4	5.2	33	3.7
EL ORO	47.2	4.9	37.2	6.9	43.1	4.8
ESMERALDAS	24	10.4	21.7	10.0	22.3	8.6
GUAYAS	45	3.1	37.4	3.9	40.8	2.8
LOS RIOS	31.9	2.8	28.6	2.8	36.3	1.9
MANABI	30.1	2.3	26.9	2.6	31.5	2.4
SANTA ELENA	33.9	2.8	30.3	3.6	28.7	2.8

Table 3: Employment Index of Ecuador. (Source: Ecuador's National Institute of Statistics and Census.)

Socioeconomic Changes

The growth of criminal organized groups in Ecuador can be related to the socioeconomic conditions of the country, where the coastal provinces present poor conditions in issues such as poverty and employment. Table 3 presents the conditions of suitable employment and unemployment at the national and provincial levels, including those in the coastal provinces.

Provinces such as Esmeraldas, Manabí, and Santa Elena have suitable employment rates below the national level, and in the case of Esmeraldas, this is further complicated by an unemployment index more than twice the national level. This reflects a lack of opportunities for stable incomes and for the development of a formal economy in these areas.

A critical group affected from these provinces is the artisanal fishing industry, which has limited access to better living conditions. The drug trafficking groups recruit fishermen and their vessels for drug transportation, offering large sums for every voyage. Many fishermen join this illegal activity, and in many cases, they are detained and imprisoned in foreign countries. The actual estimated number is around 2,000 fishermen incarcerated in Central and North America.²³ This leads to increased economic and social instability, resulting in a loss of income for their families or the disruption of their family structure when they are arrested or disappear.

The other threat to fishermen is the extortion collected by the criminal groups for “protection.” Those who refuse to pay risk becoming victims of theft or even murder. The same situation occurs with other sectors of the economy, such as small commerce and restaurants, which creates a parallel economy that facilitates money laundering, thereby undermining the country’s overall development by around \$3 billion per year.²⁴ Furthermore, since 2018, the activities of criminal organizations have cost Ecuador almost

	2019 %	2020 %	2024 %
NATIONAL	1.73	1.77	1.75
EL ORO	1.69	2.17	1.87
ESMERALDAS	2.56	3.81	3.06
GUAYAS	1.87	1.98	1.39
LOS RIOS	2.19	2.15	2.43
MANABI	1.79	1.84	1.49
SANTA ELENA	0.95	0.69	0.94

Table 4: Ecuador’s School Dropout Index (Source: Ministry of Education of Ecuador)

6% of its GDP, taking into account both the direct costs of security expenditures and the indirect costs of missed investment and productivity.²⁵ Without a doubt, the cost of criminal organizations has a direct impact on the government’s capacity to attend to the population’s needs, and consequently, on its legitimacy.

There is evidence of a correlation between poverty levels and violence, as well as between the unemployment rate and the homicide rate. It could be claimed that when options are limited, an unofficial economic system develops that may contribute to a rise in criminal activity, such as drug trafficking, and ultimately to an increase in violence.²⁶ This tendency is not exclusive to Ecuador. It is also applicable to neighboring countries, such as Brazil, where Oliveira²⁷ demonstrated a correlation between homicides, poverty, and drug trafficking. Each factor strengthens the other. Disruption then, especially progress against poverty, can lead to a decrease in violence – a relevant factor that should be considered as part of the plans for tackling this threat.

Another important social consequence of drug trafficking is recruitment of children and adolescents by organized crime groups. A variety of tactics are used, from financial incentives to social pressure, always exploiting situations of poverty, domestic violence, lack of positive role models, and the normalization of illegal activity.²⁸ Minors can receive up to \$4,000 per quarter, plus food and housing, which fosters loyalty and a sense of identity, as well as belonging, to criminal groups, conditions that the state cannot match.²⁹

Family breakdown and isolation from enlisting children and teens worsens social degradation. Many families are compelled to migrate or send their children to another city to live with relatives or friends, thereby disrupting the family and hindering community development.

The latter is verified using data on internal migration. In 2024, more than 92,000 people were internally displaced from their home communities due to violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups.³⁰ The main routes of internal migration are from coastal cities (which have the highest levels of violence) to cities located in the country’s interior. Internal displacement strains basic service infrastructure in receiving communities, making integration harder for the displaced. If local authorities fail to fulfill the needs of the population, it can exacerbate living circumstances and lead to disagreements that risk individuals’ safety.

In Table 4, another social impact of drug trafficking and its related activities is displayed, the school dropout index. In this case, provinces such as Esmeraldas, Los Ríos, and El Oro present levels above the national percentage. As was analyzed previously, these provinces suffer a high level of violence and criminal activities, so the level of school dropout can be attributed to fear among those who do not join criminal groups or a lack of interest in learning, since pupils view illegal activity as more lucrative and usual. Another cause is that the youth are exposed to drug consumption, which in turn makes them susceptible to criminal groups, as well as creating a public health problem that puts

even more pressure on the state to address the issue. All of which not only leads us to view the situation as a current problem but also as one that, if not addressed, could be chaotic for the country in the short and medium term.

Therefore, it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between drug trafficking and the socioeconomic environment. This is because drug trafficking is bolstered in an atmosphere of poverty and social vulnerability, which exacerbates the social crisis and endangers the growth of the country's present and future generations.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, it can be discerned that drug trafficking has a reciprocal relationship with the dimensions evaluated, not one of cause-and-effect.³¹

This leads to an important conclusion for counter. Drug trafficking grows in an environment of violence, corruption, institutional weakness, poverty, and lack of opportunities, creating a cycle that can lead to a failed state that loses its capacity and legitimacy and creates a situation that harms the majority of the population. This is seen in Ecuador.

Less than 1% of Ecuadorians are involved in drug trafficking, but if it goes unchecked, more people, especially young people, will join organized criminal gangs, putting Ecuador in an uncontrollable scenario. This has already become clear. Certainly, direct response to violence and criminality is necessary. Yet, in addition to force, the state must restore institutional, social, and economic conditions that enable the inhabitants, particularly those

in coastal communities, to gradually return to their licit lives in safe settings. This is what fostering legitimacy is all about.

About the Author

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