



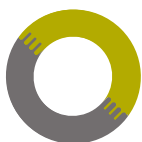
**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



EXTORTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Gender, micro-trafficking
and Panama



COALITIONS FOR
RESILIENCE

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Cover photo: Family of two gang members killed by police.

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SUMMARY

Gangs and criminal organizations in Central America continue to seek means of adapting to COVID-19 while communities look to build resilience to its effects. The aim of this report is to contribute to the understanding of extortion in an evolving context as pandemic-related mobility restrictions are enforced and lifted in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama.

The report identifies the evolving role of women in gang schemes and dynamics; explores criminal structures in Panama and their relationship with extortion; and highlights trends among extortion practices as they shift to other criminal activities such as large-scale and local trafficking of cannabis and cocaine.

Key points

- Although women have traditionally been only peripherally involved in extortion (as romantic partners and payment collectors), their role has now become more prominent (ringleaders and hired assassins). Public policies are required to prevent and prosecute this involvement.
- Extortion in Panama tends to involve a form of loan sharking, known in the region as *gota a gota* loans. However, the existence of more than 150 gangs and criminal organizations in the country has led to a rapid growth in territorial extortion.
- In northern Central American countries, drug dealing and trafficking appear to be the gangs' alternative strategy given the drop in extortion revenues due to the pandemic.
- The monitoring and analysis of information on drug trafficking and extortion by security institutions, as well as gangs' flexibility to adapt to mobility restrictions, have uncovered new opportunities for illicit income.



INTRODUCTION

Exortion is a criminal practice that affects the economic and social development of communities in Central America. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in particular, it is closely linked to other criminal activities such as gender-based violence, the drug trade and forced displacement. However, in Costa Rica and Panama, it is more akin to loan sharking – known as *gota a gota* loans – and sextortion.

This distinction is the result of research conducted by the Coalitions for resilience against extortion in Central America project, developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) and implemented since 2018. The aim of the project is to develop analysis, foster dialogue between stakeholders and strengthen capacities to support community resilience against extortion.

The project has helped clarify the different types of extortion in the region and foster dialogue – with a local network of more than 100 experts – to understand how this practice works. And, in mid-2020, the project created a Central American Observatory, seeking to document and disseminate programmes and initiatives to prevent and control extortion in the region.

The Observatory also seeks to publish periodic analyses of the development and impact of extortion in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama. Our first analysis, 'Extortion and the pandemic in Central America', was published in December 2020, and it explored how various criminal groups and authorities are adapting in order to continue or contain extortion amid the COVID-19 mobility restrictions.

As a result of dialogues with members of the GI-TOC's Network of Experts and the analysis of various criminal practices and violence in the region, this second brief analyzes the evolution of the role of women in extortion and the criminal situation in Panama, including its relationship with extortion, changes in the trafficking and micro-trafficking of illegal drugs, and possible links to the pandemic's impact on extortion.

Gender-based violence in Central America – especially by gangs – is a constant scourge exacerbated in criminal environments. However, the role that women play in the structure of these groups has changed – voluntarily or involuntarily – from victim to victimizer who actively engages in the various extortion processes.

Panama has much lower levels of violence and extortion than Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. However, it has shown exponential growth in the rate of extortion per 100 000 inhabitants in the last five years. As well as being the largest trade and transport hub in the region, it also sees significant criminal activity, generated by more than 150 gangs and criminal groups.

On the other hand, mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 seem to have brought about changes in the illegal drug trafficking and micro-trafficking dynamics in the region. These adjustments vary by country but fewer extortion opportunities have opened up the possibility of substituting and/or strengthening these criminal activities as a means of supplementing revenue.

Finally, this brief details a set of challenges and recommendations for local authorities and actors that could contribute to the conversation and search for new ways to prevent and contain the growth of this crime in the region.



WOMEN AND EXTORTION

Keeping vigilant in a gang-ridden neighbourhood in Tegucigapla, Honduras.

© Getty Images/Spencer Platt

Gangs are predominantly male criminal structures that use violence to control territories. Women are subjected to psychological, physical, sexual and lethal violence for being involved with gang members.

These women, known in the region as *jainas* or *chavalas*, have often taken on a voluntary or involuntary peripheral role in extortion activities by collecting payments. However, over the last decade, they have become more actively involved in leading these activities and even using violence for the organization.

The role of women in gang extortion schemes and dynamics requires some understanding of gender-based violence in the region. Many women in these countries suffer various forms of violence that affect their lives, their independence and their security. Mobility restrictions and curfews imposed due to the public health crisis did not reduce women's vulnerability to violence: during lockdown, from March to June 2020, 57 femicides were recorded in Guatemala, 86 in Honduras and 26 in El Salvador.¹

The main challenges in addressing this issue are the countries' failure to prosecute gender-based violence complaints, the suspension of administrative processes due to the state of emergency and under-reporting rates resulting from low levels of trust in institutions.²

Women have become perpetrators of violence in Central American gangs.

In 2010, the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, a Salvadoran research centre, found that women's involvement in gangs in El Salvador 'was due to interpersonal and community factors, which are linked to violence at various levels'.³

With regards to extortion, this is the crime that has the most impact on women in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.⁴ In 2018, Guatemalan civil society organizations identified a practice whereby women lend their bank accounts to receive extortion funds, involving them consciously or unconsciously in the crime.

The emotional aspect plays such an important role in women's involvement in gangs that it even leads them to become directly involved in criminal activities. For this reason, Andrea Barrios, director of Colectivo Artesana, a Guatemalan organization that works on behalf of women deprived of their freedom, says that it is important for women to 'generate emotional detachment towards the gang members' as, in many cases, even when imprisoned, 'they remain attached, which makes them reoffend once they are released'.⁵

But the role of women in gangs, specifically in extortion, has shifted from being peripheral (for example, being responsible of extortion collection) to being more central. This change is largely due to their more discrete profile in comparison with male gang members, allowing them to escape victims and authorities more easily.⁶

Women gang members are no longer seen only as the men's partners or subordinates. Rather, they are starting to understand their ability to play a more active role in the perpetration of violence, as was the case in 2019 when a member of the Barrio 18 gang set off a grenade on a public bus in Guatemala City.⁷

In Guatemala, in late 2020, 11 people from the so-called Crazy Rich group, a gang associated with Barrio 18, were arrested, nine of whom were women.⁸ This incident is significant not only because a gang made up primarily of women was dismantled, but also because of the court's hard-line approach towards the convicted, with sentences ranging from six to 81 years for crimes such as covering up or actively participating in extortion and at least three murders.

According to Honduras' anti-gang unit, the FNAMP, women have gone from being the romantic partners of gang members to actively participating in the killing. In late 2020, a woman was identified as the person responsible for the murder of a passenger bus driver over an extortion payment.⁹ Women even play central roles, such as ringleaders. In early 2021, a female MS-13 gang member was arrested – she had been a ringleader for the criminal organization for three years.¹⁰

In El Salvador, gang structures have followed a rigid model for many years with no apparent changes in hierarchy. Indeed, men continue to occupy the highest ranking positions within the organization. It was unthinkable that women could aspire to key positions that have historically gone to men.



An alleged Barrio 18 gang member says goodbye to his wife after being arrested in El Salvador.

© Getty Images/Jan Sochor

However, in May 2020, the Salvadoran general prosecutor's office arrested a woman who had been with MS-13 for 20 years; she was one of the gang's leaders, and ordered extortions and other crimes. According to the prosecutor's office, this woman's role is 'relatively strange' because 'within the structure of [this gang], women do not hold commanding positions'.¹¹

The role of women in Central American gangs is changing and now goes beyond that of romantic partner and/or victim of violence. In some cases, women have also become ringleaders and perpetrators of violence for which they actively use their status as women to undertake gang activities.



EXTORTION AND GANGS IN PANAMA

Panama's geographical location and the Panama Canal make the country a global hub for trade — both intercontinental and across the Americas — in all types of licit and illicit goods. By late 2020, 475 million tonnes of cargo had moved through the country, including almost 85 tonnes of Colombian cocaine, slightly less than the 90 tonnes seized in 2019.¹²

**The Panama Canal.
Its geographical location
makes the country a global
trade hub.**

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Furthermore, the illicit trade and counterfeiting of products such as face masks, hand sanitizer, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages increased during the pandemic.¹³ This occurred as a result of government authorities prioritizing the containment of the virus, which allowed criminal organizations to operate more freely. In addition, the drop in sales due to the shutdown of economic activities led to an increase in online sales of products by criminal organizations. Illegal goods also entered the country through more than 160 blind spots along Panama's borders.

The criminal dynamics of gangs in Panama differ substantially from other countries in northern Central America. Ministry of security records show 159 gangs operating in the country: 90 in Panama City, 33 in Colón, 19 in Chiriquí, 7 in Coclé, 4 in Panamá Oeste, 4 in Veraguas and 2 in Bocas del Toro.¹⁴ According to local press reports, the criminal organizations responsible for the most crime and violence are Calor Calor, Bagdad, Kill The Nastys, Pentágono and Martineisis.¹⁵

These gangs began to dominate the country's criminal landscape just over a decade ago. In the 1980s and 1990s, small gangs were absorbed into larger groups such as Pentágono and Matar o Morir, operating mainly in the provinces of Panamá and San Miguelito. These alliances between different gangs led to a series of conflicts between gang leaders, which marked the beginning of different forms of extortion. These gangs operated from prisons, ordering the execution of rival gang members and extorting people outside prisons through express and virtual kidnapping.¹⁶

In addition, they developed a series of income-generating activities, such as business robberies, local drug dealing, drug consignment robberies, beatings, arms sales, kidnappings and payment for executions or contract killings. Women's involvement with these groups is often as an accessory.¹⁷

More recently, in 2015, the first records of *gota a gota* lending emerged in Panama with a series of violent acts and deaths linked to this illicit activity.¹⁸ In 2019, the first arrest of Colombian nationals for extorting money in this manner from Nicaraguan and Colombian illegal immigrants was reported. In May of the same year, a network of illegal money lenders using the same system was dismantled in the Brisas del Golf sector in San Miguelito.¹⁹ In this operation, 10 Colombian nationals were arrested and 18 motorbikes, cash and computers were seized.

This type of loan is now the main form of extortion in the country, where cash is loaned out quickly in return for periodic payments with high interest rates.²⁰ Payments become very difficult to cover and non-payment leads to threats of violence or even involvement in illicit activities (drug trafficking) to cover the debt.

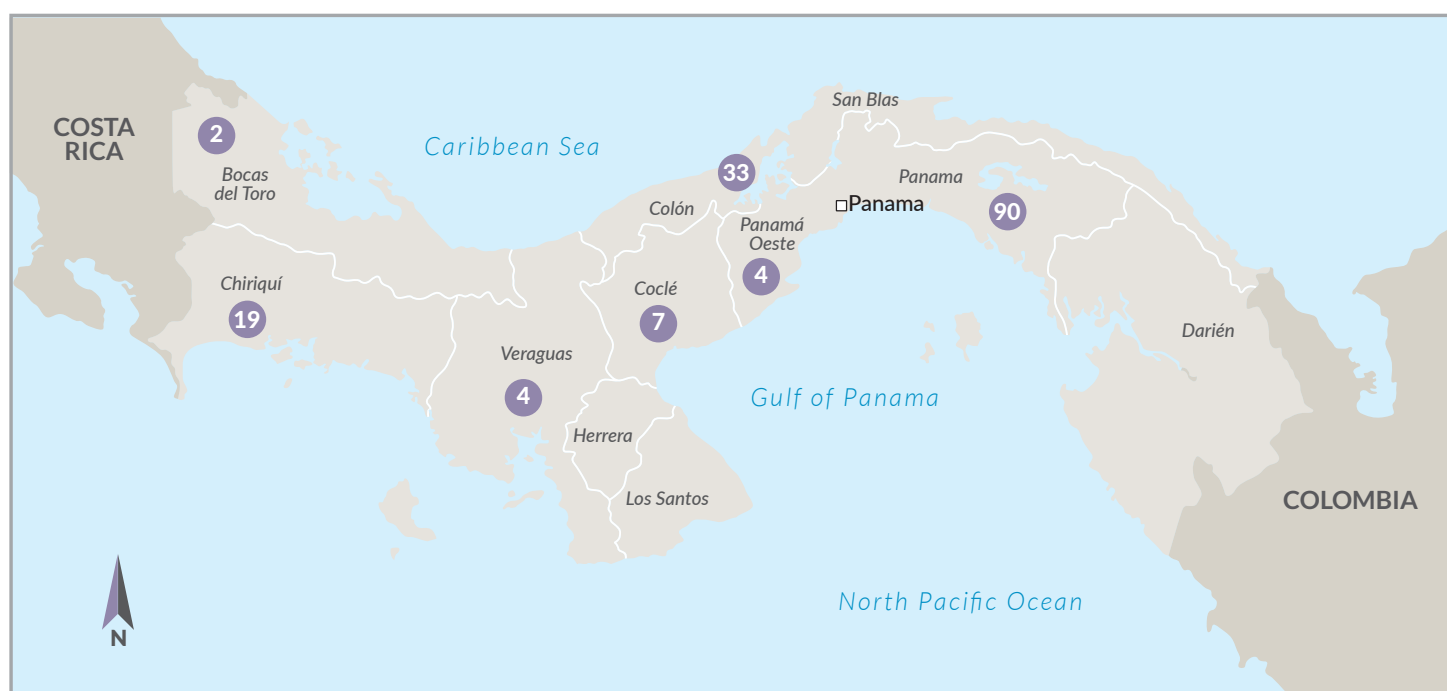


FIGURE 1 Number of gangs in Panama by geographical distribution, 2019.

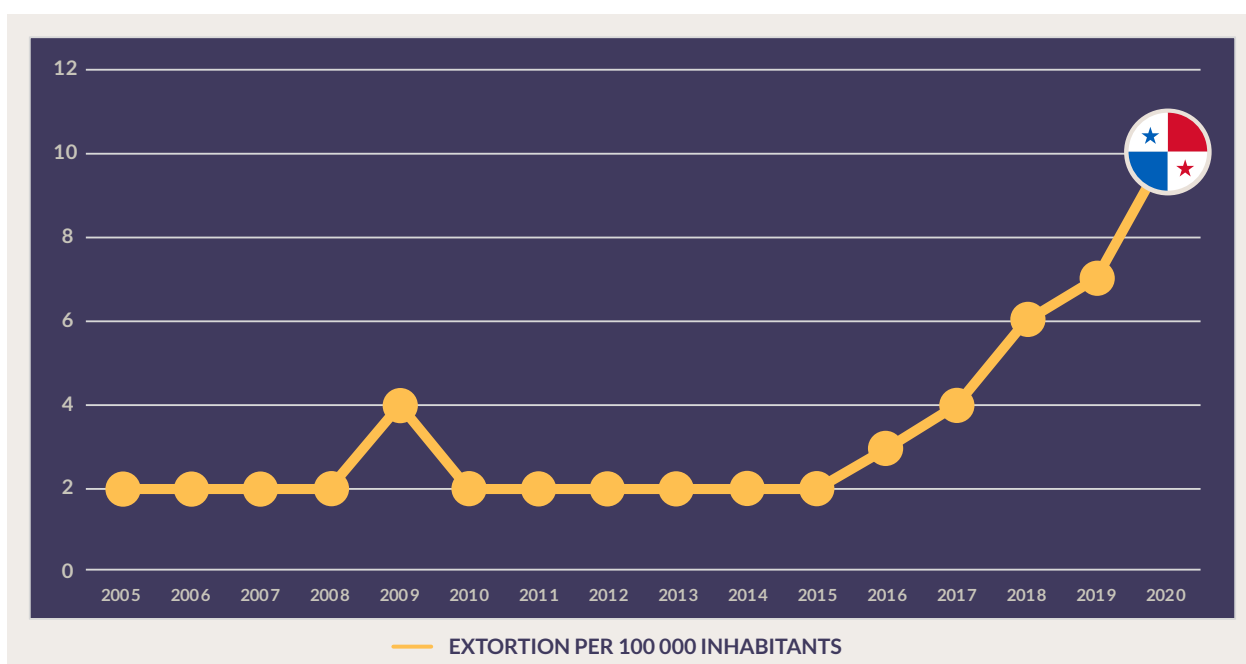


FIGURE 2 Extortion rate in Panama per 100 000 inhabitants, 2005–2020.

SOURCE: Citizen Security Observatory of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Panama.

This extortive method is used in communities without existing credit institutions and where programmes to combat and prevent extortion have failed.²¹ Although various programmes have been implemented to combat and prevent gang criminal activity, they have seen little success. For example, the Barrios Seguros con Más Oportunidades and Mano Firme programme targeted both youth gangs and offenders who were not necessarily part of these groups. In return for voluntarily surrendering weapons, undergoing a psychosocial diagnosis and taking part in workshops and training sessions, beneficiaries received US\$50 per week to cover their expenses.

The programme was implemented from 2014 to 2019. However, one of its main weaknesses was that ‘the approach to social reintegration was inadequate, as the follow-up and continuity of the programme’s various components were not guaranteed and there were a limited number of jobs available for [participants’] reintegration.’²²

Furthermore, although territorial and protection extortion in Panama is still well below the rates in other countries, such as Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, cases have increased recently. Between 2019 and 2020, the rate of extortion per 100 000 inhabitants increased from 7 to 10. This criminal practice is centred in Panama City, Panamá Oeste, Colón and Chiriquí.²³

Panama has a reputation as one of the Americas’ great trading hubs. Although far from the levels of violence and crime found in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, it is starting to show signs of a significant increase in *gota a gota* loans and territorial extortion, highlighting the need for preventive action to counteract this.

Further analysis of this practice will be needed in Panama to determine whether this significant increase is related to the economic effects of COVID-19 and to generate preventive action, given that extortion levels are starting to resemble those of northern Central American countries.



PANDEMIC, EXTORTION AND DRUGS

Fewer opportunities for extortion due to the pandemic have led criminal groups to rely on the drug trade for income.

© Getty Images/Robert Nickelsberg

The COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota, which affected more than 5 million people,²⁴ have complicated the socio-economic situation in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In Guatemala, an estimated 700 000 jobs have been lost;²⁵ shipments to Honduras may have slowed by 7% compared to 2019;²⁶ and, in El Salvador, 525 000 people may fall into relative poverty.²⁷

Another practice negatively affecting the socio-economic development of these countries is extortion,²⁸ which was also affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. The rate and intensity of extortion cases remained high in the first quarter of 2020 and, despite a decline in the second half of the year as a result of enforced mobility restrictions and the shutdown of economic activities, a recovery was seen towards the end of the year as restrictions were lifted in these countries.

However, extortion schemes and dynamics were affected differently in each country. Although drug retailing and trafficking was already a source of income for the gangs (the Honduran government estimated that around 90 per cent of cocaine heading to the US passed through the country),²⁹ fewer extortion opportunities have paved the way for substituting and/or strengthening these criminal activities as a means of supplementing income. Thus, the gangs capitalized on their territorial control to extort and to sell and transport drugs at the retail level.³⁰ This was aided by the security forces' focus on enforcing pandemic-related health and safety measures, providing fertile ground for the development of illegal activities.³¹



Guatemala

In Guatemala, the impact of COVID-19 and the resulting mobility restrictions have influenced drug production and trafficking. However, drug trafficking has been less affected thanks to blind spots at land and air borders. Furthermore, drug transportation dynamics have changed with air transport becoming more important as its use increases (from 44 per cent in 2019 to 84 per cent in 2020).³² By November 2020, Guatemalan authorities had seized 9 497 kilogrammes of cocaine, down by 50 per cent on the amount seized in 2019. In addition, the rate of extortion per 100 000 inhabitants decreased by almost 20 per cent between 2019 and 2020. The municipalities with the highest rate were Jocotenango and San Antonio Aguas Calientes.³³

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the socio-economic situation in the Northern Triangle countries.



Honduras

In Honduras, although extortion appears to be the main criminal activity among gangs, it is not consistent across all criminal groups and the pandemic has significantly affected it. However, despite the FNAMP's efforts to take advantage of mobility restrictions to tackle extortion, the impact on this criminal market is still unclear as consolidated extortion figures for 2020 have not been publicly available.

The FNAMP indicates that, during 2020, 'the increase in police operations, the gangs' fear of contracting COVID-19 and the faster prosecution of extortion compared to other crimes may have deterred gangs from committing this crime and putting their leaders at risk'.³⁴

The shortfall in extortion revenues due to mobility restrictions has intensified retail sales of cannabis, methamphetamine and fentanyl, as well as other crimes such as armed robbery and smuggling. In Honduras, drug trafficking and transport is centred in the areas of Colón, Yoro, Copán, Olancho and Mosquitia. This is not a growing phenomenon but it seems to have intensified due to the pandemic: 4.5 tonnes of cannabis were seized in 2020 alone.³⁵

So far in 2021, Honduran security authorities have increased cannabis seizures in urban centres. In mid-February, almost 100 kilogrammes of the drug were seized³⁶ days before an MS-13 drug-processing centre was dismantled,³⁷ along with an assassin training and cannabis distribution centre, also belonging to this criminal group.³⁸

El Salvador

By October of 2020, El Salvador had seen 1 263 cases of extortion, down by 42 per cent compared to 2019.³⁹ Nevertheless, the criminal market remains a very productive source of income for gangs. According to local press reports, MS-13 makes US\$2 million dollars a month from this criminal activity.⁴⁰

Furthermore, due to the closure of bars, brothels, motels and public transport – places where gangs usually carried out drug sales – gangs have transitioned to other methods, such as home deliveries and couriers.⁴¹ Most retail sales traditionally take place through gang associates in the cantons of El Volcán, Las Pampas, Jalacatal, from the municipality of San Miguel, Lolotique, Chinameca and Moncagua.⁴²

The territorial control exercised by gangs in these countries allows them to monopolize both the collection of extortion payments and all legal and illegal activities, including drug trafficking and sales. According to analysts, gangs have gone from extorting money from vendors working in their territory to selling drugs and even collaborating with drug trafficking organizations.⁴³

The ability to substitute extortion with the trafficking and sale of illegal drugs appears to have a differential impact. Although this process appears clearer in El Salvador and Honduras with efforts to strengthen the domestic drug market, publicly available information is less clear in Guatemala.

This observed trend requires further analysis. The transformation of the illegal drug market in northern Central American countries could further increase the pressure on security institutions in these countries, as this would imply closer collaboration between gangs and regional and international drug trafficking organizations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Women have adapted and evolved within the gang structure and now play an increasingly active role in the patterns of violence and leadership. For this reason:

- More gender-sensitive security and justice policies are needed. Both police and law enforcement institutions must have mechanisms in place that allow them to treat men and women differently.
- The promotion of gender-sensitive community resilience interventions and programmes is needed to facilitate personal, family and community development alternatives for women.

In Panama, authorities, civil society and business groups must work together to:

- Generate spaces for fluid dialogue to exchange information in order to contain the exponential growth in the extortion rate per 100 000 inhabitants in recent years.
- Promote tertiary programmes that prevent young people from seeing gangs and criminal groups as an alternative for personal and economic development.
- Consider extortion experiences and circumstances in northern Central American countries to prevent Panama from reaching the same levels of criminal penetration.

Combating and preventing the sale and trafficking of drugs in Central America faces a number of major institutional challenges. This is why:

- In Guatemala, a better understanding of the amount of illegal drugs transiting the country northwards and that which remains for domestic consumption is needed. Restrictions on mobility and the shutdown of certain economic activities do not seem to have affected drug trafficking as negatively as extortion. However, limits of the available data makes it difficult to confirm this trend.
- In Honduras, security and justice institutions should step up their efforts to improve records and differentiate between people detained for extortion and those detained for micro-trafficking. This would allow quantitative confirmation of the apparent substitution of micro-trafficking for extortion by gangs.
- In El Salvador, security and justice institutions should strengthen coordination efforts and work more closely with international cooperation partners able to bolster extortion and drug trafficking prevention and control processes. Political polarization could exacerbate the growing challenges for security and justice institutions and present a major obstacle to achieving this.

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