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Trends in Latin America

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CJNG	Jalisco New Generation Cartel
CV	Comando Vermelho
EGC	Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
EMBF	Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frente
EMC	Estado Mayor Central
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IFFs	Illicit financial flows
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
PCC	Primeiro Comando da Capital
SEZs	Special economic zones
SM	Segunda Marquetalia
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VRAEM	Valley of the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro rivers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines key regional dynamics shaping organized crime across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), drawing on the main trends identified in the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Global Organized Crime Index (2023).[1] The report looks at the political and socio-economic context of LAC, highlighting structural weaknesses that have been exacerbated by political volatility, limited state control over borders,[2] high levels of violence[3] and ineffective law enforcement.[4]

These conditions have enabled criminal actors to consolidate power, infiltrate state institutions and diversify their operational scope. Economically, high levels of labour informality and socio-economic inequality have pushed vulnerable populations to participate in illicit economies, further entrenching criminal markets. Meanwhile, widespread crises in prison systems throughout the region have turned penitentiaries into hubs of criminal governance. The convergence of these factors, along with an expanding network of transnational crime alliances, underscores the growing complexity of organized crime in the region.

These structural drivers and criminal dynamics help explain certain trends in criminality and resilience observed across the region. As Figure 1 illustrates, there are distinct regional patterns. Caribbean countries generally fall within the quadrant of low criminality and medium-to-high resilience, reflecting relatively stable environments and stronger institutional responses to organized crime.

By contrast, much of South America – such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela – is located in the quadrant of high criminality and medium or low resilience, revealing both the consolidation of illicit markets and limited state capacity to contain them. Central American countries like El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, meanwhile, are concentrated in the quadrant of high criminality and low resilience, making the subregion particularly vulnerable.

An alert should be raised for the Southern Cone.[5] While the indicators are generally favourable, with Uruguay standing out for its high resilience and low levels of criminality, both Chile and Argentina are approaching the threshold for high criminality, despite showing intermediate values. This trend raises concerns about their potential future deterioration. The worst-case scenario is illustrated by the lower-right quadrant, which includes countries with high criminality and low resilience, such as Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela. These countries are characterized by weak institutional structures and severely limited state capacity to respond to organized crime.

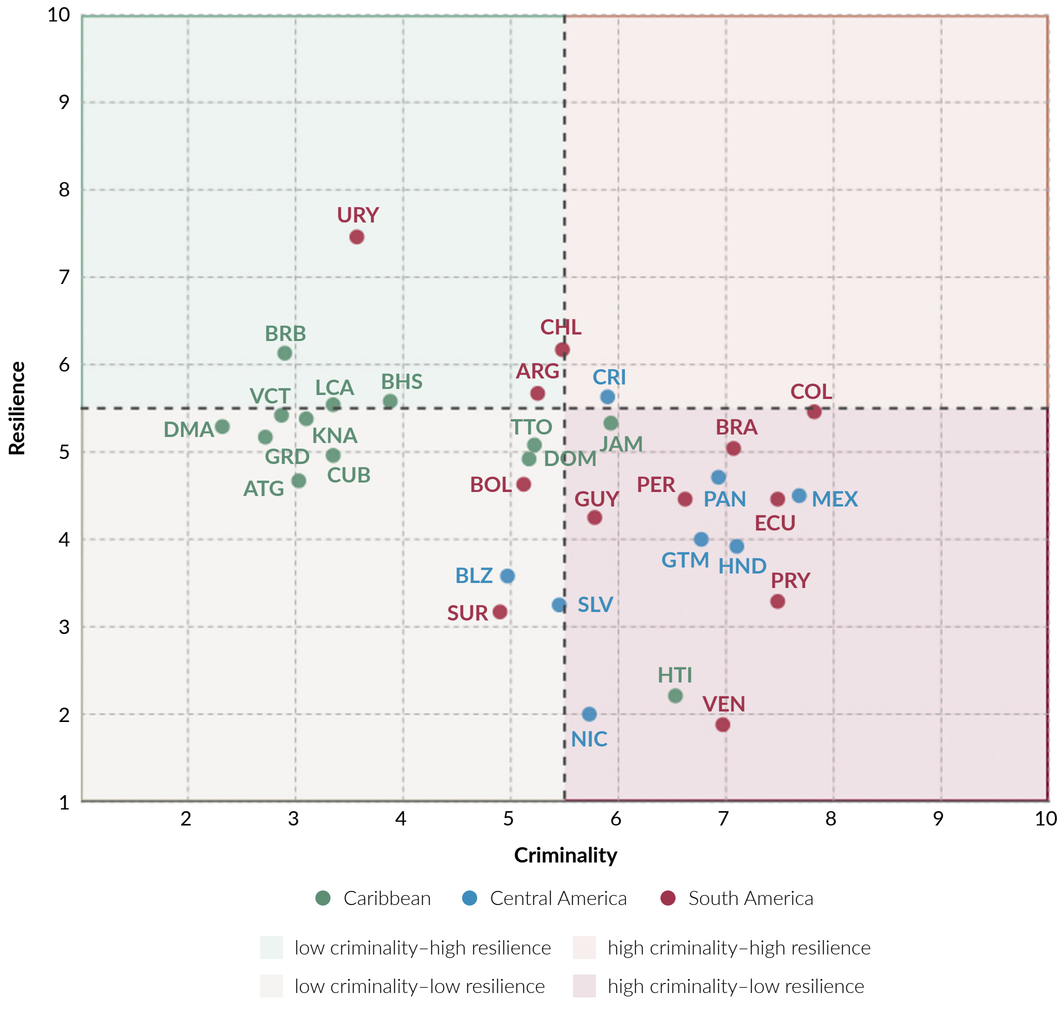

FIGURE 1 Vulnerability classifications of Latin American and Caribbean countries.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2023, ocindex.net

Key points

Organized crime groups in the LAC region have increased in connectivity and operational sophistication at the local, regional and transnational levels. This has enabled them to expand their influence across multiple illicit economies and consolidate governance structures to regulate them. Under the Organized Crime Index, the LAC region had the second-highest average global score for criminal actors (5.51), behind only Asia. State-embedded actors had the highest average (5.89), placing them third globally, after Africa (7.12) and Asia (6.63). Paraguay, Venezuela and Nicaragua stood out with near-maximum scores of 9.0 each, highlighting a concerning level of criminal influence within their state institutions. This suggests that transnational efforts to combat organized crime in these countries may be severely limited or even obstructed by decisions aligned with criminal interests.

At the same time, the region played a central role in global organized crime. Colombia, Mexico and Peru ranked among the top five countries worldwide for criminal networks. Colombia in particular had the highest score (9.50) in this category, alongside an equally high score for mafia-style groups. Venezuela mirrored that score for mafia-style groups (9.50), while Mexico (9.0), Honduras (8.50), Haiti (8.50) and El Salvador (8.50) also scored alarmingly high.

These results help explain the deep entrenchment of LAC actors in transnational criminal economies. A key finding in this regard is the strong connection between Latin American criminal groups and international actors, including those from the Balkans, China and Russia. According to the Organized Crime Index, LAC registered an average score of 5.82 for criminal networks, underscoring not only these groups' regional dominance but also their integration into transnational networks.[6] These transnational alliances provide logistical expertise, alternative trafficking routes and access to financial infrastructures, facilitating the movement of illicit goods across complex global supply chains. Organized crime in LAC is no longer an isolated continental phenomenon but rather part of a highly adaptive and interconnected global system. In the Caribbean, this is particularly evident in countries like Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, which have become key transit and consolidation hubs where criminal gangs collaborate with international partners to facilitate drug trafficking, arms smuggling and illicit financial flows.

Regarding drugs, coca and cocaine continue to play a dominant role in regional criminal markets, with the LAC region registering a high average score of 7.58. The Organized Crime Index confirms the region's central role in the global cocaine trade – not only as the primary source market, with coca cultivation concentrated mainly in the northern and western parts of South America, but also as a key transit corridor via Central America and the Caribbean.[7] The Americas recorded the world's highest regional average score for the cocaine market at 7.44 (+0.30).[8]

Beyond cocaine, three other illicit economies have grown in recent years across the LAC region: illegal mining (4.59), extortion and protection racketeering (4.68), and human smuggling (5.0). The expansion of illegal mining has been driven by high international prices for gold and other commodities, as well as the widespread informality of mining operations, enabling armed and criminal groups to control production and participate in the mining directly. Illegal mining has also become a way for criminal groups to launder their profits from the coca economy.

Human trafficking is not a new phenomenon in the region, having traditionally been linked to criminal markets often controlled by criminal actors and mafia-type groups in certain countries. According to the Organized Crime Index, the countries most exposed to this crime, with notably high scores, include Colombia (8.0), Mexico (8.0), Venezuela (7.5), Paraguay (7.5), Panama (7.5) and Haiti (7.5). However, this illicit trade has evolved over the past decade, mainly due to Venezuela's ongoing social and economic crises and the resulting migration crisis along the Darién Gap that stretches between Colombia and Panama. The shifting patterns of migration have created an opportunity for local criminal groups, transnational organizations and armed actors to build an entire criminal economy around human trafficking.

Extortion and protection racketeering have long been a punishing presence in cities across the region. However, two notable changes have emerged in recent years. First, these practices have expanded into countries' border areas, following the mass movement of Venezuelans that began in 2016. Second, both local and transnational criminal organizations have become highly specialized and sophisticated in their methods of extortion, increasingly leveraging technology and targeting legal businesses. In some Caribbean states – particularly Haiti, with a score of 7.5, or Jamaica with a score of 5.0, per the Index – extortion has become intertwined with political patronage, with criminal gangs maintaining territorial control while forging ties with local elites.

A major challenge in the LAC region's fight against organized crime is the failure to address the interconnected nature of illicit economies. Traditional approaches have mainly focused on drug trafficking while ignoring how it intersects with other criminal economies, such as illegal mining, extortion, smuggling and arms trafficking. The result is a multi-crime ecosystem in which criminal groups strategically reallocate assets, commodities and financial flows across sectors to minimize risk and maximize profits. This dynamic is particularly evident in border zones, where institutional vulnerabilities, legal asymmetries between countries and illicit trade routes offer criminal groups operational flexibility. However, these multi-crime dynamics are not evenly spread across the region, but rather concentrated in key hotspots where strategic geography, limited state presence and transnational criminal networks converge to sustain highly resilient illicit economies. Caribbean ports and island territories also play a critical role, functioning as logistical nodes and trans-shipment points within broader regional illicit trade networks.

The report concludes with early warnings to the international community about the expansion and consolidation of both local and transnational organized crime groups in the region. Key trends to watch include

- the emergence and/or reconfiguration of illicit flows due to new infrastructure across the region;
- increased criminal activity in border zones due to state fragility and weakness, and its link to environmental crimes;
- deepening cooperation between organized crime groups and local armed groups or criminal gangs;
- the effect of Venezuela's geopolitical repositioning on regional criminal economies, particularly the cocaine trade; and
- the rise of synthetic drug production in the region.

Methodology

The report draws on a methodological strategy that combined different sources and levels of analysis. The starting point was the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index, which helped identify the main dynamics, actors and structural factors linked to organized crime and poly-criminal dynamics in the region.

Building on this foundation, reports, assessments and studies produced by think tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were incorporated to shed light on shifts in the nature of criminal actors and multi-crime dynamics. Where these sources were not sufficient to explain specific phenomena, the information was supplemented through a systematic review of press coverage. To further illustrate key trends and processes, the findings were triangulated with databases from NGOs, United Nations agencies and state institutions of the countries analyzed.

On this basis, the main trends and characteristics of organized crime in the region were identified, as well as how they connect to broader poly-criminal dynamics. Geo-referenced maps were also produced to integrate the processed information and pinpoint the presence of the actors and dynamics described.

This methodological approach allowed for a multi-scalar and multi-actor analysis that captures the complexity of organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, highlighting its local and regional expressions as well as its transnational connections.

POLITICAL INSTABILITY, VIOLENCE AND POLICY FAILURES

The LAC region continues to grapple with significant institutional fragility, characterized by political instability, pervasive corruption and a profound lack of trust in state institutions – factors that exacerbate organized crime, as highlighted by the Organized Crime Index for several countries in the region. A clear example of political instability is Peru, which has experienced severe governmental turmoil, having cycled through six presidents in just four years.[9] Haiti faces similar chronic unrest, sparked by the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, which has further destabilized the country.[10] In Bolivia, tensions between current President Luis Arce and former president Evo Morales have led to political fragmentation and weakened institutions, marked by public confrontations and accusations between the two leaders.[11] Likewise, Panama has been marred by corruption scandals – most notably involving former president Ricardo Martinelli, who sought refuge in the Nicaraguan Embassy in Panama City to avoid jail time – further eroding public trust and contributing to institutional fragility.[12]

Institutional fragility is closely linked to the rise of authoritarian tendencies in countries such as Venezuela,[13] El Salvador[14] and Nicaragua, where political leaders exploit weak institutions to consolidate power and undermine democratic checks and balances. In Argentina, President Javier Milei's administration has implemented stringent security measures, including deploying the armed forces for domestic security tasks. This move has raised concerns about potential human rights violations.[15]

In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa has adopted a hardline approach to security, designating drug trafficking organizations as 'terrorists' and declaring an 'internal armed conflict'. This has led to the militarization of prisons and seaports, as well as the elimination of autonomous agencies responsible for prison policy and surveillance, triggering allegations of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings.[16]

Similarly, in Venezuela, President Nicolás Maduro's administration has faced criticism for repressing political opposition, further weakening democratic norms. In Mexico, the government under President Claudia Sheinbaum has also deployed the military to cities and, more recently, along the border with the United States. These cases illustrate how state actors, under the pretext of maintaining order, often compromise civil liberties and democratic norms, thereby exacerbating the challenges they face rather than overcoming them.

In the Caribbean, Haiti is an extreme case of institutional fragility. Gangs now control approximately 85% of the capital, Port-au-Prince.[17] The justice system is critically impaired and unable to function effectively, resulting in a state of near-total lawlessness. The Haitian National Police, in particular, is severely under-resourced and overpowered.[18] Officers are underpaid, poorly equipped and frequently outgunned by gangs that operate with near impunity, openly displaying their firepower and territorial control. The police lack even basic equipment such as firearms, rendering them incapable of maintaining order or addressing everyday public safety concerns.[19]

Another key trend in LAC is the entrenchment of structural corruption, which facilitates criminal co-optation of the state.[20] In many Latin American countries, weak governance and porous borders – in addition to limited state capacity and widespread corruption – allow transnational criminal networks to operate with relative impunity.[21] For instance, the Colombia–Ecuador border, which stretches approximately 586 kilometres, is known for its permeability due to the presence of more than 70 irregular border crossings. These crossings enable criminal gangs and illegal armed groups to engage in various illicit activities.[22] In these areas, organized crime groups supplant or complement the state, controlling illicit economies and governing local communities.[23]

Several hotspots exemplify this phenomenon. The tri-border area in South America's Amazon, known as the triple frontier – where Brazil, Colombia and Peru converge – has become a notorious hub for drug trafficking and other illicit activities.[24] Similarly, Bolivia's borders with neighbouring Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina are marked by minimal state presence, facilitating smuggling and drug and arms trafficking. Mexico's southern and northern borders also face chronic illicit crossings, exacerbating the country's security challenges.[25]

In these border zones, criminal governance allows organized crime groups to diversify their operations across various illicit trades, strengthening their ability to control territory and govern large populations. Consequently, border management in Latin America is not merely a logistical challenge but a reflection of broader institutional decay. There is a pressing need for enhanced governance and international coordination to reclaim state control from criminal actors.

The erosion of state control over the use of force and security institutions has contributed to high levels of violence across the region. In 2023, LAC recorded an estimated 117 492 homicides – an average rate of 20 per 100 000 inhabitants – more than three times the global average of 5.8.[26] Some of the highest national homicide rates were in Ecuador (46.2), Honduras (31), Venezuela (27), Colombia (25.7) and Mexico (23.3).[27]

The Caribbean, in particular, has seen an alarming surge in violent crime, driven in part by the firearms trade from the United States and other sources.[28] Some Caribbean nations now rank among the most dangerous globally: Jamaica reported a homicide rate of 60.9 per 100 000 inhabitants, Trinidad and Tobago a rate of 26[29] and Haiti a rate of 40.9 – more than double the previous year.[30]

Pervasive violence in the LAC region is directly connected to a worsening prison crisis, which highlights severe institutional fragility. With the exception of Suriname, every country in the region operates prisons that exceed their intended capacity.[31] The most affected are Haiti (454.4% occupancy), Guatemala (367.2%), Bolivia (269.9%), Grenada (233.8%), Peru (223.6%) and Honduras (204.5%).[32] This crisis is not merely a penitentiary issue but rather a reflection of a failing criminal justice system. More than 40% of inmates in South America are held without a sentence,[33] a clear indicator of judicial inefficiency, prolonged legal proceedings and an overreliance on pre-trial detention. The rapid rise in incarceration rates is largely driven by drug-related offences, with punitive drug policies that disproportionately target low-level offenders rather than large trafficking networks.

Inmates and armed forces at a prison in Portoviejo, Ecuador. President Daniel Noboa has designated drug trafficking organizations as 'terrorists', leading to the militarization of the penitentiary system. *© Gerardo Menoscal/AFP via Getty Images*

Additionally, prisons in Latin America have shifted from being institutions of incapacitation, deterrence and rehabilitation to breeding grounds for criminality.[34] Inmates are often recruited by gangs that wield significant control within prison walls, leading to frequent violent clashes.[35] Some of the region's largest criminal groups – such as Venezuela's Tren de Aragua, Brazil's Comando Vermelho (CV) and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), as well as Ecuador's Los Choneros and Los Lobos – were either founded or strengthened within the prison system, and the bulk of their drug trafficking businesses are managed from behind bars. This is evidenced by large-scale prison massacres in Ecuador[36] and Brazil,[37] as well as recurring riots in Peru and Venezuela.

Labour informality is a key feature of sociopolitical dynamics in LAC, and contributes to the region's high levels of criminality and violence. According to the International Labour Organization, approximately 55% of workers in LAC are employed informally, without formal contracts or social security coverage.[38] This widespread informality fosters economic instability and incentivizes the involvement of informal workers in organized crime activities, as they often lack both legal protections and access to legitimate economic opportunities. The absence of formal employment not only perpetuates poverty and social inequality,[39] but also weakens state authority, creating environments where criminal organizations can thrive.[40]

Policy initiatives aimed at combating organized crime have proven largely ineffective. Criminal networks have evolved beyond traditional illicit markets such as drug trafficking or racketeering, embedding themselves in both legal and illegal economies. This makes them increasingly difficult to dismantle. When corruption fails to facilitate their operations, these groups resort to direct confrontation with state authorities, challenging the rule of law through acts of extreme violence.

In an increasingly interconnected world, transnational criminal networks leverage sophisticated logistical, financial and human resources to expand their reach and influence. Ecuador exemplifies this dynamic. Balkan mafias, Colombian armed groups and Mexican cartels – particularly the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) – have formed alliances with local gangs, contributing to the country's high homicide rate and deepening institutional fragility.[41] Similarly, Brazilian criminal organizations such as the PCC and the CV have extended their influence into Peru and Bolivia, opening new frontiers for coca cultivation in the Amazon rainforest and expanding drug trafficking routes.

In the Caribbean, organized crime groups have infiltrated legal economies, using corruption to operate with impunity and further entrench their influence within state structures.[42] In Jamaica, for example, organized crime groups have embedded themselves in informal settlements, leveraging irregular land tenure, political patronage and access to state contracts to exert territorial control and extract revenue from residents and businesses – thereby blurring the line between criminal governance and state authority.[43] Beyond financial gains, these groups also exchange operational expertise, tactics and organizational structures, enhancing their adaptability.[44]

The convergence of these factors indicates that LAC institutional fragility has not merely enabled organized crime to thrive, but to fundamentally reshape the region's security and governance landscape. As political volatility, corruption and judicial inefficiency continue to erode the rule of law, organized crime groups have expanded their influence beyond traditional illicit markets, integrating their operations into legitimate financial and political systems. The inability of states to dismantle transnational criminal networks, coupled with the pervasive presence of criminal governance in border regions, has facilitated the emergence of multi-crime dynamics that reinforce the resilience of illicit economies. Meanwhile, militarized security policies, punitive incarceration practices and reactive law enforcement strategies have failed to contain organized crime, often exacerbating violence and social unrest. This systemic fragility has allowed criminal organizations to exploit state weaknesses, infiltrate legal institutions and co-opt public officials, creating an environment in which illicit economies intersect, diversify and adapt with minimal resistance.

Criminal actors, including state-embedded actors, criminal networks and mafia-style groups, have influence and presence across the LAC region (see Figure 2), where they cooperate and confront each other for control of both legal and illegal economies. As these groups have diversified and expanded, they have given rise to highly complex multi-crime dynamics with increasingly strong intersections between the legal and illegal worlds. This marks a departure from previous decades, when organized crime was more contained within a particular country and less connected.

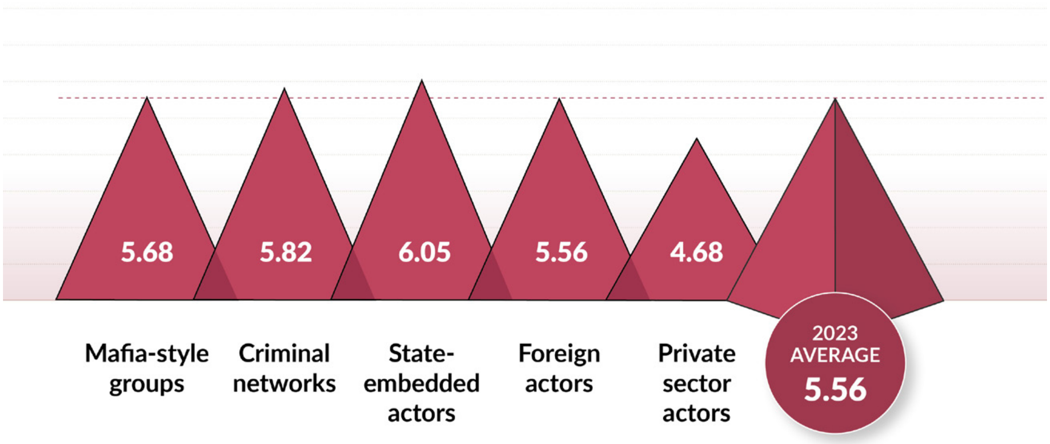

FIGURE 2 Criminal actor scores in Latin America and the Caribbean.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2023, ocindex.net

In the LAC region, the predominant organizational structure among criminal groups consists of state-embedded actors. According to the Organized Crime Index, LAC registers an average score of 6.05 in this category; however, this is not the only structure shaping organized crime in the region.[45] Criminal networks, mafia-style groups and armed groups also exploit state vulnerabilities and have deployed strategies that diversify their criminal portfolios.[46] These strategies have been accompanied by increasingly close ties to transnational organizations and regional criminal networks.

This latter trend is crucial to understanding the current landscape. The agreements and cooperative links established among criminal organizations of different scales represent a confirmed pattern that is currently creating significant changes and challenges across the region. While such connections are not entirely new – for instance, during the 1980s and 1990s, members of Balkan, Italian and Brazilian mafias developed ties with Colombian cartels, paramilitary forces and guerrilla groups[47] – this phenomenon is more widespread across the continent today. As a result, criminal groups have improved and expanded their capacity to control legal, informal and illegal economic activities from which they derive resources, as well as to deploy violence to challenge the state, its authorities and populations within their areas of influence.[48]

One of the most striking cases is that of Ecuador, where local criminal groups such as Los Choneros and Los Lobos have forged strong alliances with the Sinaloa Cartel, the CJNG and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).[49] Through shared objectives, resources and acquired knowledge, Los Lobos and Los Choneros have clashed with the police, military and judiciary, and have subjugated both urban and rural communities – particularly in gold-mining areas.[50]

A similar pattern is evident between Peruvian local mafias, FARC dissidents and the PCC in the tri-border Amazon region. There, coca cultivation, illegal gold mining and deforestation sustain a multi-crime economy that affects both Amazonian populations and the authorities in Peru, Colombia and Brazil.[51] The presence of the PCC in the southern tri-border area (where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil converge) is also significant, particularly given the group's involvement in drug trafficking, smuggling and arms trafficking.[52] Another notable example involves Mexican cartels and their links with armed and criminal groups in Colombia (the Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, EGC), Panama and Costa Rica, where they form transnational networks engaged in money laundering, cocaine and arms trafficking and human smuggling.[53]

A key element across these cases is the transfer of knowledge and technologies for the exercise of violence, resource extraction and territorial control. This has affected the region on multiple fronts, including citizen security, economic stability, political life and the environment. The phrase 'transfer of knowledge and technologies' refers to the dissemination of practices among criminal organizations for extracting resources – many of which are accompanied by violence or coercion. Examples include loansharking and protection racketeering,[54] the increasingly widespread use of dredgers and suction dredgers for illegal gold extraction in Amazonian rivers,[55] extortion targeting agricultural practices[56] and businesses providing essential services such as electricity and internet.[57] These criminal practices are frequently enforced through violence, including assassinations and the use of explosive devices.

Regarding the use of violence, two points must be noted. First, criminal organizations exhibit high levels of lethality as a means to evade justice and impose their own authority. Common methods include assassinations, threats and forced displacements; however, the impacts and lethality of such violence can increase depending on the context. In Colombia, for example, violence frequently takes the form of massacres, confinements, sexual violence and terror techniques such as dismemberments, decapitations and torture.[58]

Such practices are perhaps most pervasive in Haiti, where the political crisis triggered by the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse and the direct challenge of the gang coalition G9 Family and Allies to Prime Minister Ariel Henry's government have intensified violence.[59] Mexico is also affected by practices such as enforced disappearances, public executions and other methods of brutality[60] – similar to those observed in Ecuador, where additional forms of violence include prison massacres and targeted killings.[61]

Second, there is a growing use of violence as a tool for asserting governance and control by criminal actors – whether to confront state authorities or discipline civilian populations. Violence against state officials such as the police, military personnel, judges or politicians has been used to silence whistle-blowers or halt legal proceedings targeting criminal dynamics and the corrupt influence of these organizations. In Ecuador, local politicians, a presidential candidate and several judges have been assassinated,[62] while in Haiti, violence against the police is a daily occurrence.[63]

However, the relationship between organized crime and state actors is not governed solely by violence. Corruption is also a significant factor, varying in scope and intensity and sometimes reaching endemic levels. In some cases, such as Venezuela, the state itself can be described as a hybrid criminal state.[64] Corruption and collaboration with state actors enable criminal organizations to distort state functions at the local, regional or even national levels, granting them impunity and rendering them effectively invisible in their illicit activities.[65]

With regard to civil society, some criminal groups direct violence towards specific sectors to suppress exposure of their activities and corrupt networks. Environmental leaders are frequently murdered in Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia and Central America,[66] while journalists face killings, imprisonment and censorship in Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia.[67] These patterns illustrate a shrinking civic space, particularly for NGOs and human rights defenders seeking to expose or counter these dynamics.

A distinctive feature of the Latin American context is the increasing tendency of criminal groups to assume territorial control and governance functions, especially in border areas where the state lacks

Gang members patrol the streets in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Gangs now control approximately 85% of the capital and have effectively supplanted state institutions, resulting in a state of near-total lawlessness. *© Giles Clarke/ Getty Images* legitimacy, capability and resources, and where communities live in poverty and lack access to essential services. This is evident in Colombia and the tri-border Amazon region between Peru, Colombia and Brazil.[68] This phenomenon is exacerbated in regions where communities depend on informal or illegal economies for survival.

Latin America's socio-economic conditions contribute to the high vulnerability of certain segments of the population, particularly young men, to recruitment by organized crime. This susceptibility is acute in areas where criminal organizations have a strong presence within the prison system. Notable examples include the PCC in Brazil, Tren de Aragua in Venezuela, the maras in Central America and Los Choneros in Ecuador.[69]

Moreover, organized criminal activity is no longer confined to urban areas. Many of the economies that these groups regulate and exploit are located in rural or border regions, giving rise to multi-criminal dynamics rooted in extractive enclaves. Beyond drug trafficking, these groups are involved in various illegal (e.g., deforestation, mining, human trafficking and arms smuggling), legal (e.g., cattle ranching) and informal (e.g., loansharking) economic activities. These enclaves become criminal hotspots across the continent, where systems of regulation and governance are established based on territorial control, illicit market dominance and cooperative agreements among criminal actors.

The diversification of these markets illustrates how criminal organizations adapt to demand and aim to maximize profits to ensure their long-term survival. Rather than abandoning one market for another, these groups create synergies across multiple illicit markets, optimizing their operations.[70]

In this context, the emergence of criminal hotspots underscores the intersection of poverty, inequality and institutional fragility, which collectively enable the expansion of illicit markets and the consolidation of criminal governance.[71] Rather than confronting the state directly, criminal organizations seek to distort state operations to serve their own interests and reinforce the criminal ecosystems they aim to consolidate.[72] This dynamic represents one of the most pressing security challenges facing LAC countries today.

Based on the nature of organized crime, its areas of regulation, resource-extractive economic activities, violent tactics and relationships with both the state and populations, this report defines a criminal organization as a group of people operating within a fluid and flexible structure. These groups are dedicated to criminal activities that rely on violence to maintain control and uphold a set of informal rules governing their operations.

These activities encompass a wide array of illicit enterprises that can be considered manifestations of organized crime.[73] They occur in urban, rural and border zones where institutional weaknesses are exploited to impose an alternative set of rules and order, thereby establishing criminal governance. With this form of governance, relationships with state authorities and civil society can vary, ranging from coercion to negotiated arrangements mediated by corruption, enabling a variety of criminal activities to flourish.

According to the Organized Crime Index, the most prevalent criminal activities in the LAC region include human trafficking (average score: 5.56), smuggling (5.00), extortion (4.68), arms trafficking (5.86) and drug trafficking – with particularly high scores for cocaine (7.58) and cannabis (6.08). Other prominent activities are the illegal exploitation of non-renewable natural resources, including crimes against flora and fauna, and financial crimes.

DOMINANT CRIMINAL GROUPS

Organized crime groups in the LAC region have become more interconnected and sophisticated, coordinating operations not just locally but across borders and even continents. This web of alliances allows them to dominate multiple illicit markets while also consolidating governance structures. Understanding who these groups are and how they operate is essential to address the challenges facing the region. This section examines the criminal groups that have shown the most significant growth and extensive involvement in both legal and illegal economic activities in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years.

COUNTRY	MAIN CRIMINAL GROUPS	COUNTRY	MAIN CRIMINAL GROUPS
Argentina	▪ Los Monos ▪ Los Ungaro ▪ Los Funes ▪ Los Pillines	Guyana/ Suriname	▪ Mafia style-groups and state-embedded actors (Suriname Vice President Ronnie Brunswijk)
Brazil	▪ Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) ▪ Comando Vermelho (CV) ▪ Terceiro Comando Puro (TCP) ▪ Bonde do Zinho	Haiti	▪ Viv Ansanm (gang coalition)
Bolivia	▪ Lima Lobo clan	Jamaica	▪ One Order Gang
Chile	▪ Los Gallegos	Mexico	▪ Sinaloa Cartel ▪ Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) ▪ Cártel del Noreste ▪ Nueva Familia Michoacana
Colombia	▪ Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) ▪ Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC) ▪ FARC dissidents – Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and Segunda Marquetalia (SM)	Panama	▪ Bagdad ▪ CalorCalor ▪ RG4L
Costa Rica	▪ Los Moreco	Paraguay	▪ Clan Rotela
Dominican Republic	▪ Los Latin Kings ▪ Los Trinitarios ▪ Los Bloods ▪ Los 42	Peru	▪ Los Profes ▪ Militarized Communist Party of Peru (MCPP)
Ecuador	▪ Los Chone Killers ▪ Los Choneros ▪ Los Lobos ▪ Los Tiguerones	Venezuela	▪ Tren de Aragua ▪ Cartel de los Soles ▪ Los PRAN

FIGURE 3 Main criminal groups in Latin America and the Caribbean.

NOTE: This is not an exhaustive list of all criminal groups in the region but is intended to illustrate the most prominent ones.

Venezuela

Cartel de los Soles

Cartel de los Soles is composed of high-ranking Venezuelan regime officials and military personnel who leverage their positions to facilitate and protect criminal enterprises, particularly drug trafficking.[74] The cartel has forged alliances with Colombian armed groups, including FARC dissidents and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), which are the primary suppliers of drugs entering Venezuela.[75] The group's influence is strongest in border states such as Apure, Zulia and Táchira.[76]

Tren de Aragua

Tren de Aragua is Venezuela's most powerful criminal organization and the only locally based group to establish a significant presence abroad. Originating as a prison gang in Aragua state, it has evolved into a transnational criminal network with operations spanning Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia and, more recently, the United States. With an estimated membership of between 2 500 and 5 000, Tren de Aragua has expanded its reach across Latin America and beyond, with human smuggling emerging as a primary driver of its growth and revenue.

In Aragua state, the group imposes strict local rules, including dress codes, curfews and control over public schools. Throughout the country, its influence is characterized by surveillance, checkpoints and territorial dominance, as well as suppression of the police and rival groups. Internationally, it operates primarily in border regions of major cities, where it engages in various illicit activities, including mass migration, human smuggling, extortion, protection racketeering, small-scale drug trafficking, kidnapping and cybercrime.

Other

Organized criminal groups known as *sindicatos* have consolidated control over the Orinoco Mining Arc in Bolívar state.[77] These groups are supported by corrupt state officials and maintain alliances with the ELN and FARC dissidents. They regulate access to the area, impose rules and enforce severe punishments for violations. They also profit substantially from illegal mining activities and protection racketeering.[78] The widespread availability of cheap labour has contributed to an unprecedented surge in illegal gold mining, reshaping the social, cultural and economic landscape of southern Venezuela.[79]

Colombia

Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia

The EGC, formerly known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, is the largest and most powerful criminal organization in Colombia, with a presence in 24 of the country's 32 departments. Operating using a franchise model, the group collaborates with urban criminal gangs in several regions. Along the Venezuelan border, it is involved in human smuggling and cocaine and arms trafficking. To the west, in the Darién Gap along the Panama border, the group leverages its connections with criminal networks in Panama and Costa Rica to facilitate human and drug trafficking, as well as other smuggling operations. Additionally, the EGC controls maritime cocaine routes originating from Colombia's Caribbean port cities.

Ejército de Liberación Nacional

The ELN is Colombia's last remaining insurgent guerrilla group. Its presence is concentrated in border areas such as Chocó, Catatumbo and Nariño, where coca-growing clusters are found, as well as in resource-rich regions like southern Bolívar and Arauca, where gold and oil extraction are prevalent. In recent years, the ELN has been considered a binational guerrilla group due to its expansion into Venezuela – particularly the Orinoco Mining Arc and Apure state – where it performs governance functions, maintaining order and establishing rules of coexistence.

This strategic spread allows the ELN to engage in a variety of illicit activities, including cocaine trafficking, illegal charcoal and gold mining, human smuggling, extortion and protection racketeering – all while exploiting the state's limited presence. So-called fronts, the structures that make up the ELN, operate with a fair degree of autonomy, allowing them to regulate criminal economies such as gold extraction and cocaine production. This approach has facilitated the ELN's continued expansion in these environments.

FARC dissidents

The dissident groups of the FARC are organized into two federated factions, which emerged at different historical junctures – before and after the signing of the 2016 peace agreement.[80] The first major dissident faction developed before the peace accord, when certain FARC fronts refused to demobilize and instead continued their armed operations. The most prominent among them was the First Front, led by Iván Mordisco, who rejected the peace process. This faction was later consolidated into the dissident group known as the Estado Mayor Central (EMC).

Over time, the EMC has evolved into a federation of multiple armed groups, which recently fractured into two factions: the Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frente (EMBF) and the dissidents led by Mordisco. These factions maintain a presence in several departments, including Cauca, Nariño, Arauca, Catatumbo, Putumayo, Guaviare, Meta, Caquetá, Vaupés and Guainía. Their operations are deeply embedded in illicit economies, particularly coca cultivation, drug trafficking and illegal gold mining.

The Segunda Marquetalia (SM), led by Iván Márquez, emerged after the 2016 peace accord. This dissident group broke away from the peace process after the agreement was signed and has since attempted to establish itself in various regions of the country. Like the EMC, the SM is fragmented, and its strongest influence is in Nariño, Putumayo, Arauca and along the Colombia–Venezuela border, where it reportedly receives logistical support and operational sanctuary. The SM, again like the EMC, is heavily involved in cocaine production and illegal resource extraction, leveraging its territorial control to finance operations.

Mexico

Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel's extensive international presence and influence have been well documented. According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration's 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment, it operates in at least 47 countries worldwide.[81] The group engages in drug trafficking (notably cocaine and synthetic drugs), human smuggling, arms trafficking, illegal mining and public corruption, often with high levels of violence.[82]

In Latin America, the Sinaloa Cartel has built significant operations in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, ensuring a steady production and flow of cocaine.[83] The group is structured around several power blocs, including those led by Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada, the sons of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán and

Aureliano 'El Guano' Guzmán Loera. Domestically, the Sinaloa Cartel maintains influence in Mexico's so-called Golden Triangle region, which encompasses Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua.

Jalisco New Generation Cartel

The CJNG is one of the most formidable and rapidly expanding criminal organizations in the Western Hemisphere. Emerging in 2009 from the fragmentation of the Milenio Cartel, CJNG has since established a dominant presence across at least 27 Mexican states, including Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, Veracruz and Guanajuato. It has also expanded its operations internationally, reaching the United States, Colombia, Peru and various countries across Asia and Europe.[84] The group primarily engages in large-scale drug trafficking, with a particular focus on the production and distribution of methamphetamine and cocaine.[85] Additionally, it has diversified its criminal portfolio to include money laundering, arms trafficking, extortion and kidnapping.

Brazil

Primeiro Comando da Capital

The PCC, or First Capital Command, is Brazil's most powerful and structured criminal organization.[86] Founded in São Paulo during the 1990s, the group has evolved from a prison-based gang into a transnational criminal enterprise with extensive reach.[87] As of 2023, estimates suggest that the PCC comprises approximately 40 000 core members, with an additional 60 000 associates or 'contractors' who support its operations.[88]

The PCC's criminal portfolio is diverse, encompassing drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, extortion, kidnapping and bank robberies.[89] Internationally, the group has expanded its influence beyond South America, with a presence in Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina, and extended as far as Europe and Africa.[90] Its global reach is marked by collaborations with other criminal networks, enhancing its capacity in drug distribution and money laundering activities.

Comando Vermelho

The CV, or Red Command, is Brazil's oldest criminal organization, originating in the 1970s as a self-protection group for inmates in a Rio de Janeiro prison.[91] CV engages in a wide array of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, extortion, kidnapping and bank robberies.[92] In the last decade, the organization has diversified into illegal mining, logging and fishing, using these activities to launder proceeds from drugs trafficking.[93] As of 2024, CV is estimated to have approximately 30 000 members across Brazil, making it the country's second-largest criminal organization after the PCC.[94] CV has also extended its operations beyond Brazil, most notably in Bolivia, which serves as a conduit for cocaine trafficking. Furthermore, the organization has penetrated the tri-border Amazon area, encompassing parts of Colombia and Peru.[95]

Haiti

Viv Ansanm

In 2024, Haiti's gang landscape underwent a transformation with the formation of a criminal coalition known as Viv Ansanm (Living Together, in Haiti Creole). The creation of this alliance enabled gangs to consolidate their capacity for criminal governance, which they have enforced through extortion and the imposition of strict rules over Haitians' daily lives.

Operating as a de facto paramilitary entity, the coalition exerts territorial, economic and political control over 85% of the capital, Port-au-Prince.[96] Viv Ansanm has embedded itself deep within the urban fabric of the city, effectively supplanting state institutions in key areas and establishing parallel systems of governance through violence and coercion. The group's activities include drug and arms trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and targeted assassinations, while its close ties to political actors and certain church networks raise serious concerns about state complicity, the erosion of democratic authority and religious legitimization.[97]

Viv Ansanm has also weaponized control over essential goods, including fuel and humanitarian aid, often selling resources at inflated prices – a move that further undermines state legitimacy. Although precise figures are unavailable, gang membership is estimated to be in the thousands, significantly outnumbering that of Haiti's security forces. In 2024, recruitment efforts escalated, with a particularly alarming 70% annual increase in the number of child recruits, many of whom were forcibly conscripted.

Jamaica

One Order Gang

The One Order Gang is one of Jamaica's most powerful and politically influential criminal organizations. Operating primarily in Spanish Town, St Catherine Parish, the group has long-standing ties to the Jamaica Labour Party and exercises control over several urban communities through a combination of violence, extortion and political patronage.[98] Its activities include contract killings, arms trafficking, drug distribution and protection racketeering, often enforced through brutal acts of violence that contribute to the area's persistently high homicide rates.

Foreign actors

Balkan mafias

Balkan criminal networks comprise groups from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.[99] Over the past two decades, these groups have evolved from small-time crooks and couriers into major drug distributors in networks that span Latin America, Western Europe and South Africa. Today, they are estimated to be responsible for 50% of the cocaine that enters Europe.

Since 2008, these groups have increased their presence in Latin America due to the high demand for cocaine in Europe and Australia. The 2016 peace agreement with Colombia's FARC disrupted coca production in some areas, giving criminal groups from the Western Balkans an opportunity to establish ties with new suppliers. Additionally, corruption, legal loopholes and instability in countries like Venezuela have lowered the risks of trafficking, encouraging criminal actors from Albania, Montenegro and Serbia to get involved in cocaine distribution at the source.

In Latin America, Balkan mafias have been documented in Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Peru and Brazil, where they are primarily involved in cocaine trafficking, alongside related criminal activities such as arms trafficking, smuggling and human trafficking.

‘Ndrangheta

The ‘Ndrangheta, originally from Calabria, Italy, has become one of the most influential transnational criminal organizations, particularly in Latin America, where it has established a complex and highly profitable operational network. The group has infiltrated the region’s primary cocaine-producing countries of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, where it works with local traffickers – such as the EGC – to secure large-scale cocaine shipments destined for Europe.

However, the ‘Ndrangheta’s reach extends beyond production zones, to Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico, where it has forged alliances with major criminal organizations such as the PCC and the Sinaloa Cartel. These collaborations allow the ‘Ndrangheta to coordinate logistics, transport and distribution through critical infrastructure, notably major Brazilian seaports such as Santos, Fortaleza, Itajaí and Paranaguá.

Chinese criminal networks

Chinese criminal networks have established an increasingly visible presence in the LAC region, where they are involved in a wide range of transnational illicit activities. Initially focused on human smuggling, wildlife trafficking and extortion, these groups have evolved into complex, multi-criminal enterprises that link local economies to transnational illicit markets such as drugs and precursor chemicals, contraband and money laundering.[100]

These networks are heavily involved in money laundering, using casinos, real estate and offshore shell companies, particularly in jurisdictions such as the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands. In recent years, human smuggling networks have grown stronger, driven by the irregular migration of Chinese nationals to the United States and Canada, often using LAC countries as transit corridors.[101]

Several countries in the region have been directly affected by these networks. In Argentina, the Fujian mafia has been active since the 1990s and is notorious for using violence and extortion against Chinese shopkeepers in cities such as Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata, Bahía Blanca, Lomas de Zamora and Mendoza.[102] In Peru, home to one of the region’s largest Chinese communities, Chinese criminal groups have targeted hotels, saunas, restaurants and nightclubs for extortion, and have also been implicated in illegal gold-mining operations in Madre de Dios. Additionally, some reports have shown that the Fuk Ching, Flying Dragons and Tai Chen groups have been involved in money laundering schemes in Ecuador, Panama, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname and Bolivia.[103]

Russian criminal networks

During the 1990s, the Russian mafia shifted its focus from Asia to the Western Hemisphere, particularly Latin America and the Caribbean, seeking opportunities in drug trafficking, arms trading and money laundering. The LAC region offered open markets for Russian and former Soviet bloc weapons in exchange for drugs that were then smuggled back to Europe and Russia, as well as easy access to global financial networks for money laundering purposes.

Russian criminal groups have primarily been involved in activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering and arms trafficking.[104] They have established connections with criminal groups in Ecuador, using banana shipments as a cover to smuggle cocaine, and forged alliances with Colombian organizations to export drugs.[105] In Nicaragua, a joint operation uncovered a trafficking network linked to Russia, Central America and the Mexican Zetas cartel.[106]

PERVASIVE ILLICIT MARKETS

Illicit economies in Latin America and the Caribbean are not confined to a single trade or commodity – they form a web of interconnected markets that fuel and sustain organized crime across the region. Although drug trafficking, especially cocaine, has long captured the spotlight, it is only one strand of a much larger criminal ecosystem. Other illicit economies, namely illegal gold mining, human smuggling, extortion rackets and illicit financial flows, all overlap and interact, allowing criminal groups to shift resources and strategies fluidly between sectors.

Cocaine

Cocaine trafficking remains the largest criminal market in the LAC region. According to the Organized Crime Index, Colombia registers the highest global score (9.5), reaffirming its position as the epicentre of cocaine production. Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela and Peru follow closely, each scoring 9.0, reflecting their simultaneous roles as producers, consumer markets and key transit hubs. A second tier of countries – Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Suriname and Panama – score 8.5 each, indicating their deep involvement in cultivation, refining or trafficking. In Central America, Guatemala and Honduras also score 8.5 each, underscoring their importance as vital trafficking corridors towards North America. While Caribbean nations generally score lower, the Dominican Republic (8.0), Haiti (8.0) and Trinidad and Tobago (8.0) still stand out as pivotal trans-shipment nodes.[107]

Cocaine production is concentrated in a few key countries. In 2023, Colombia registered 243 000 hectares of coca cultivation,[108] followed by Peru with 93 000 hectares[109] and Bolivia with 29 900 hectares.[110] Recently, there have also been reports of Venezuela,[111] Ecuador[112] and Honduras[113] growing and producing the illicit substance.

The Caribbean region has long played a strategic role in cocaine trafficking, serving as a bridge between the major cocaine-producing countries of the Andean region (Colombia, Peru and Bolivia) and key consumer markets.[114] Traffickers exploit both maritime and aerial routes across the region to move cocaine via northern South America, particularly Venezuela, to island trans-shipment points – capitalizing on the Caribbean's archipelagic geography and generally limited interdiction capacity.[115]

Despite the expansion of trafficking routes through Central America and the northern rim of South America over the past few years, the Caribbean corridor remains integral to regional cocaine dynamics. It has recently regained prominence as a major trafficking route, reflecting the adaptability of criminal networks to respond to intensified law enforcement efforts across Central America and the Pacific.

FIGURE 4 Cocaine flows in Latin America.

This renewed use of Caribbean routes is further fuelled by the growing profitability of the European cocaine market relative to the United States, with West and southern Africa emerging as critical trans-shipment zones.[116]

In 2023, Colombia saw a 10% increase in coca crop production compared to 2022, while Peru experienced a 14% rise. These expansions were accompanied by a surge in cocaine production across the region. In Peru, production jumped from an estimated 495 tonnes in 2022 to 800 tonnes in 2023, a 61.6% increase. As a result of this spike, the United States listed Peru as a major drug transit or major illicit drug-producing country in 2024. Colombia experienced a similar situation, with production rising from 1 738 tonnes in 2022 to 2 664 tonnes in 2023, a 53% increase.

Although there are no official figures for Bolivia, other data points provide an indication of productive capacity. In 2022, Bolivian authorities seized a historic 690 tonnes of chemical precursors across 41 containers. Experts estimated these chemicals could have been used to produce between 50 and 60 tonnes of cocaine hydrochloride. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), this single seizure accounted for 80% of all such confiscations worldwide that year.[117]

COUNTRY	COCA CROPS (HECTARES)		% CHANGE	COCAINE PRODUCTION (METRIC TONNES)		% CHANGE
Years	**2022**	**2023**		**2022**	**2003**	
Colombia	230 000	243 000	+10%	1 738	2 664	+53%
Peru	80 681	99 000	+14%	495	800	+61.6%
Bolivia	29 900	29 900	0%	No data	No data	No data

FIGURE 5 **Coca crops and cocaine production in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia.**

SOURCES: Colombia justice ministry,[118] Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas Perú[119] and UNODC Bolivia.[120]

Most coca cultivation occurs within protected areas, including national parks, indigenous and Afro-descendant territories, and colonization zones, where they are regulated and controlled by different criminal and armed groups. In Colombia, the main clusters are located in Catatumbo, Nariño, Cauca, Bajo Cauca and parts of the Amazon. In Peru, coca is concentrated in the departments of Loreto and Ucayali, the Valley of the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro rivers (VRAEM), and more recently, Madre de Dios. In Bolivia, the primary cultivation zone is Chapare province in the Cochabamba department. These are often hotspots where the agricultural frontier meets areas that have not been touched by human activity, underscoring the exploitation of protected and ethnic lands in the Amazon.

Colombia

In Colombia, the processing, transformation and commercialization of coca paste are monopolized by groups such as the ELN, FARC dissidents (the SM and the EMBF) and the EGC. Northern trafficking routes, almost all of which are controlled by the EGC, connect with international markets via Panama, Costa Rica and, reportedly, the Caribbean.[121] To the east, the ELN manages two key corridors: one passes through Arauca and leads to European ports, connecting to routes that cross into the Venezuelan Orinoco Mining Arc; the other runs through Catatumbo and exits to the Caribbean Sea, leading to both the United States and Europe.

To the south, routes controlled by the SM and other FARC dissident groups connect with Central American routes to reach Mexico and the United States. Other routes connect with Ecuadorian ports via Nariño, passing through Esmeraldas to reach Manabí and Guayas. This expansion is particularly alarming given that between 2012 and 2022, more than US$930 million in international aid was allocated to global drug control efforts, over US$550 million of which was from the United States and US$282 million from the European Union.[122] However, these investments are overshadowed by the estimated US$20 billion in wholesale value generated from Colombian cocaine during the 600-tonne production surge between 2018 and 2022.[123]

The scale of the cocaine trade in Colombia underscores the difficulty of countering organized crime networks that have embedded themselves within Ecuador's economy and governance structures. One important trend is the trafficking of liquid cocaine, which is created by dissolving cocaine in solvents, which are then concealed in charcoal, or in shampoo or wine bottles.[124] Shipments destined for major markets in Spain highlight the viability of this method for transnational trafficking.

Peru

The coca clusters in Peru are controlled by the Militarized Communist Party of Peru in the VRAEM and by Los Profes in the Amazon. The latter have established alliances and cooperation agreements with the CV in Brazil. Peru's borders with Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia are highly porous and poorly monitored, creating favourable conditions for cocaine trafficking via three main routes.

The first route leads to Brazil, where cocaine is transported by local mafia groups and the CV, either via clandestine airstrips or waterways such as the Putumayo, Napo and Amazon rivers, ultimately reaching Tabatinga. Once in Brazil, South America's largest domestic drug market, the cocaine is either consumed locally or exported. Export-bound shipments move east along the Amazon River from Tabatinga and Manaus to the international ports of Belém and Santana.[125] Alternatively, they move towards the more distant Brazilian ports of Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and Fortaleza. From there, the drugs are shipped to European ports such as Antwerp and Rotterdam, passing through African transit points including Mali, Guinea-Bissau and Tanzania.[126]

The second route heads towards Ecuador, where cocaine from Colombia and the Peruvian Amazon integrates with domestic trafficking routes in Sucumbíos. From there, it is routed to ports in the Guayas region, which link to international markets in Europe – particularly Antwerp – as well as Turkey and the United States. This route through the border areas of the Amazon is particularly critical due to weak controls, a lack of monitoring and surveillance infrastructure and endemic corruption among state authorities. This is the primary corridor, accounting for 40% of all drug trafficking in the country.

The third route is located in the VRAEM corridor, and splits in two directions. The first leads to the Peruvian ports of Callao and Paita, where cocaine is concealed in cargo containers transporting export goods such as coffee, coal and wood.[127] These shipments are either transported domestically to ports or loaded onto small vessels that transfer the cocaine to cargo ships bound for Europe – particularly Antwerp and Rotterdam – or the United States. The second direction leads to Brazil, involving the CV, via both land and water routes. Some pathways pass through Bolivia, involving domestic tribal mafia groups, while others are more direct, using the Abujao and Ucayali rivers to access the Amazon, or reaching Acre, Brazil, by land.

Bolivia

In Bolivia, mafia-style groups control coca cultivation and commercialize cocaine through cooperation agreements with the PCC and the CV in Brazil; Los Choneros, Los Tiguerones and Los Lobos in

Ecuador; and the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico. The major trafficking route connects to Brazilian and Paraguayan markets, primarily involving Brazilian gangs.[128] It originates in Peru's VRAEM region and passes through northern Bolivia, including Pando, Beni, northern La Paz and Lake Titicaca. Traffickers use small aircraft or overland transport along this route.

Another route begins in Bolivian border areas such as San Matías, Guayaramerín, San Germán and Yapacaní, crossing into Brazil through the Amazon. A southern route starts in Tarija and Potosí, passing through Santiago del Estero in Argentina before heading to Europe or other international destinations. This area is strategically important for drug trafficking due to its extensive borders, connecting Bolivia to Argentina via the Salta province. Traffickers along this route rely on small aircraft and human couriers ('mules') to transport cocaine.[129]

Venezuela

The movement of cocaine through Venezuela follows several distinct routes, all ultimately targeting markets in Europe, Asia and North America. These routes originate in Colombia, involving Colombian criminal actors and the Cartel de los Soles, and branch into four primary pathways:[130]

- From the states of Apure, Táchira and Zulia, shipments are transported by air to Caribbean islands and then onward to Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador or Mexico.
- From Apure, Amazonas or Venezuela's coastal regions, cocaine is shipped by sea or air to Caribbean islands such as the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, before continuing to the United States and Europe.[131]
- From ports like Puerto Cabello, shipments travel through Suriname and Guyana to West African countries including Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Togo and Cape Verde. From there, the drugs are transported overland to Senegal and Morocco, eventually crossing into Spain and spreading across the Iberian Peninsula and into the rest of Europe.[132]
- From Apure, Amazonas and Táchira, shipments move towards Suriname or Brazil, with West Africa serving as a key transit point en route to the Middle East or Europe.[133]

Illegal gold mining

Illegal gold mining has gained increasing importance and strength in the LAC region for several reasons. First, the rise in international gold prices over the past decade has enabled criminal and armed actors to use illegal mining as a substitute for coca-based economies during periods of instability in Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela.[134] Second, regimes such as that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela have used illegal mining as a way to address economic crises.[135] Additionally, it has become a common mechanism for criminal groups to launder profits from the cocaine trade,[136] creating new multi-crime dynamics across Latin America. Today, illegal gold mining is a major concern in the region, with organized criminal groups heavily involved in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Peru, where they exploit high global gold prices and weak regulatory oversight to consolidate illicit economies.[137]

In the countries under study (see Figure 6), there is a clear link between illegal gold mining and deforestation, as well as other severe environmental effects, including landscape transformation, erosion and soil and water source contamination through the use of cyanide. Ultimately, illegal gold mining often takes place within natural parks or forest reserves, often inhabited by indigenous or Afro-descendant communities.[138]

A common feature across the region's gold-producing countries – Brazil, Suriname, Guyana, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru – is the high level of informality in mining operations. This informality allows armed and criminal groups to control production and even fully engage in mining,[139] making it the second-largest illicit economy in the region after coca cultivation.[140] The underdevelopment of mining regulations in these countries, combined with corruption among local authorities, help explain how informality and criminality prevail.[141]

COUNTRY	EXTENSIONS OF MINING DISTRICTS (HECTARES)	ANNUAL PRODUCTION IN 2023 (TONNES)
Bolivia	281 564	46.6
Brazil	No data	60
Colombia	1 128 241	72
Ecuador	7 495	27.4
Peru	25 000 000	77
Venezuela	1 118 437	75

FIGURE 6 Mining districts and annual production in 2023, by country.
SOURCE: Multiple government sources and reports.[142]

Illegal gold mining in Latin America has evolved into a transnational system characterized by cross-border smuggling, the laundering of unverified gold and collusion between criminal networks and formal actors. Gold extracted illegally in one country is often trafficked into neighbouring states and exported under false documentation, with global markets – particularly in China, the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland[143] – serving as primary destinations. These illicit flows are facilitated by networks of front companies and brokers who exploit regulatory gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms, embedding illegal gold into legitimate commercial supply chains.

State oversight in key mining areas remains either limited or compromised, with local authorities often colluding with criminal actors or turning a blind eye to their activities. In areas such as the Yungas, the Orinoco Mining Arc and Brazil's *garimpo* (mining) regions, cooperatives and informal miners operate under conditions of violence, intimidation or patronage. Recent regulatory reforms, such as Brazil's 2023 gold certification system, have exposed the extent of prior fraud and underscored how entrenched illicit practices are within formal systems. Addressing these dynamics requires integrated strategies that go beyond environmental enforcement to disrupt the financial and political structures that sustain criminal gold economies.

Human smuggling

Human smuggling is not a new phenomenon in the LAC region and has traditionally been linked to criminal markets, typically regulated by criminal actors and mafia-style groups. Historically, the so-called Northern Triangle countries of Central America – Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador – have been the primary sources of migration to the US.[144]

However, over the past decade, this dynamic has evolved, mainly due to the ongoing social and economic crisis in Venezuela,[145] which has forced more than 7 million people to flee the country in what is likely the largest single migration event in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Today, Venezuelans represent the second-largest nationality on the move globally, after Ukrainians.[146] This mass migration has created an opportunity for local criminal groups, transnational organizations and armed actors to build an entire criminal economy around the crisis. For migrants seeking a better future far from home, this has had significant consequences, including sexual violence, murder and exploitation.[147]

According to the Organized Crime Index, Mexico ranks highest in the region for both human trafficking (8.0) and human smuggling (9.0), underscoring its role as the principal gateway between Central America and the United States.[148] Colombia follows closely, with scores of 8.0 for trafficking and 7.5 for smuggling.[149] The Index also highlights the Darién Gap as one of the world's most dangerous migration corridors, where Venezuelans and other South American migrants face extreme physical hardship as well as the predatory control of criminal networks such as Colombia's EGC.[150] These findings demonstrate how local and transnational groups exploit migration flows across the continent, perpetuating violence and exploitation.

Venezuela

Many migrants rely on human smuggling networks to reach destinations such as the United States via the Darién Gap or neighbouring countries like Brazil and Colombia.[151] In 2023, Venezuelans were the second-largest nationality attempting to cross the US–Mexico border.[152] Human smuggling operations are primarily controlled by criminal networks and mafia-style groups, with organizations such as Tren de Aragua and the EGC overseeing several smuggling routes originating in Venezuela. These routes converge in the Darién Gap, where the EGC imposes taxes on smuggling activities, controls access to maritime and land routes and minimizes violence against migrants on the Colombian side.[153]

The Darién Gap is a critical point. This treacherous jungle between Panama and Colombia serves as a transit point for migrants seeking to reach the United States or Canada. Here, Panamanian gangs, criminal groups inside the Panamanian border police and the EGC are deeply involved in human and drug trafficking.[154]

Migrants heading to the United States through the Darién Gap – one of the world's most dangerous migration corridors – often face extortion from criminal groups. *© John Moore/Getty Images*

Venezuela has also become a regional hub for human trafficking, which is closely linked to human smuggling, manifesting in two forms.[155] The first involves the exploitation of migrants, who are often targeted by drug trafficking groups and forced into criminal activities such as drug trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced labour on coca crop plantations.[156] The second concerns internal trafficking, in which victims are coerced into sectors such as illegal mining, domestic work and child sex tourism.[157] Key players in this criminal economy include transnational networks, local and foreign criminal groups and state actors. Notable organizations involved are Tren de Aragua, the ELN and FARC dissident factions.[158]

In addition to overland and jungle-based smuggling routes, the Caribbean has become a critical, yet often overlooked, corridor for human smuggling operations originating in Venezuela. Maritime routes across the Caribbean Sea – particularly via Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, Aruba and the Dominican Republic – offer alternative pathways for northbound migration, often used to circumvent militarized land borders or the perils of the Darién Gap.[159] Smuggling networks exploit the region's porous maritime borders, using small boats to transport migrants across short but dangerous sea crossings.[160] These Caribbean routes not only facilitate mobility towards the United States and other destinations but also fuel regional trafficking economies, reinforcing Venezuela's role as a hub in a broader transnational criminal infrastructure.

Mexico

Further north, Mexico's southern and northern borders accumulate people coming from South America, Central America and other parts of the world, all aiming to reach North American soil. During their journey through Mexico, migrants are at risk of being attacked by organized crime groups due to the limited capacity of Mexican migration authorities to process asylum claims for migrants in transit.[161] Human smugglers employ a range of skills, including logistical coordination, to manage transportation and border crossings while evading authorities. They also use psychological manipulation and coercive tactics to exploit migrants' vulnerabilities.[162]

Migrant smuggling in Mexico is transnational and involves organized criminal networks. These networks operate across land and air routes and facilitate the movement of migrants from the Northern Triangle, South America, East Africa, China, India and other regions.[163] It is important to highlight the growing scale of migration by Chinese nationals to Mexico, a trend that has increased notably since 2021 and involves Chinese criminal networks. According to US Customs and Border Protection, there has been a rise in encounters of Chinese nationals at the US–Mexico border of over 7 000% in four years, from 342 people in 2021 to 24 048 in 2024.[164]

Migrant smuggling has had a significant effect on violence in Mexico. Between 2018 and 2023, the National Migration Institute rescued and assisted 160 migrants from sexual and labour exploitation.[165] Numerous cases of disappearance, kidnapping and murder of migrants in transit have also been recorded.[166] The human smuggling market generates substantial profits, with fees sometimes reaching as high as US$15 000 per person.[167]

Dominican Republic

In the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic is the most significant hub for human smuggling. The country's geographic location makes it a key transit point for Haitians and Venezuelans attempting to reach Puerto Rico, the United States and other countries in the region.[168] Smugglers often use unsafe methods, such as overcrowded boats, forged documents and deceptive practices (including human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, abuses such as withholding of identity documents, and deliberate family separation), that put migrants at risk. Corruption among migration officials and weak border controls – particularly along the border with Haiti – further enable this market, making it one of the most persistent challenges to the Dominican Republic's efforts to combat organized crime through international cooperation and stricter policies.[169]

Bolivia

In Bolivia, human smuggling has gained momentum in recent years as the country has become a transit point for Venezuelan migrants. Many have returned home or headed towards the Darién Gap or Brazil following changes in migration policies in Southern Cone countries such as Argentina and Chile.[170] As in other parts of the region, human smuggling in Bolivia is often controlled by local criminal actors or transnational groups like Tren de Aragua.[171]

Extortion and protection racketeering

Although extortion and protection racketeering is a criminal economy that has long been present in many cities across Latin America, two significant shifts have occurred in recent years. First, these practices have expanded into border regions, following the continent-wide migration trends that began with the mass displacement of Venezuelan nationals in 2016. This phenomenon has been documented and scored by the Organized Crime Index, with notable ratings in Venezuela (7.5), Colombia (8.5), Peru (4.5), Ecuador (8), Chile, (4.5) Panama (6.5), Costa Rica (6), the Dominican Republic (4), Brazil (7) and Mexico (9). Groups such as Tren de Aragua, the EGC, the ELN and some Mexican cartels are among the primary actors, extracting the most resources from migrants in exchange for protection during their journey.

Second, both transnational and local criminal organizations have become highly specialized and sophisticated in their methods of extortion, increasingly targeting legal activities. Beyond trade, these now include agriculture, informal mining, the private sector and predatory lending schemes, commonly known as '*gota a gota*' loans (loansharking).

Mexico

This criminal phenomenon is most prevalent in Mexico, where major groups such as the CJNG, the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas have integrated extortion into their criminal operations. They target sectors including mining, agriculture and cattle ranching, as well as labour unions and public officials.[172] With the recent surge in human mobility, these groups have also started extracting resources from migrants at both Mexico's southern and northern borders.[173]

Although they operate at the local level, extortion networks are sophisticated and pose serious threats to public safety. They employ local people familiar with vulnerable targets and often collaborate with corrupt police officers and smaller criminal groups to maximize their profits.[174] The economic toll is significant, costing the Mexican economy 226 billion pesos annually, equivalent to 1.25% of the country's gross domestic product.[175]

Colombia

In Colombia, the EGC has incorporated human trafficking, migrant smuggling, extortion and protection racketeering into its operations, partly fuelled by the migration crisis in the Darién Gap.[176] The group also extracts significant resources from the country's gold-mining regions, where it imposes fees on artisanal miners.[177] There are also criminal gangs in the Medellín metropolitan area that charge a protection fee for providing security in zones under their control.[178] The ELN does the same on the Venezuelan border, extorting all commercial activities in urban centres across the Arauca municipalities, as well as farmers and even oil companies.[179]

Ecuador

In Ecuador, most of the violent disputes between criminal gangs revolve around extortion and control over drug trafficking routes.[180] Dominance over certain areas allows groups to extort and extract protection fees from private-sector companies, particularly those involved in transportation and mining.[181] Extortion is now the most reported crime nationwide, with 21 811 cases registered in 2023, according to data from the Attorney General's Office. Between 2021 and 2022, there was a 193.8% increase in extortion cases, and a 364% rise from 2022 to 2023.[182] During that period, extortion cases increased in 18 of the country's 24 provinces, mainly in the mining regions of the Amazon.[183]

Panama

Migrants heading towards the United States face extortion while crossing the Darién Gap, often from Panamanian criminal groups that also engage in protection racketeering against commercial establishments. Although gangs such as Calor Calor and Bagdad have reportedly been weakened following the capture of prominent leaders, *gota a gota* lending schemes remain a major criminal enterprise in Panama. These schemes, which provide illegal short-term loans at exorbitant interest rates, are widespread across various provinces, particularly Panamá, Colón and Chiriquí.[184]

Brazil

In Brazil, extortion and protection racketeering are specialties of police-backed criminal groups known as militias. Composed mostly of off-duty or retired police officers, militias now rival large drug trafficking organizations like the CV and the PCC with regard to controlling illicit markets and exercising criminal governance in the margins of many major cities, including Rio de Janeiro, Boa Vista and Belém.[185] The bulk of militias' revenue comes from weekly protection fees imposed on residents and local businesses within their territories. In Rio – Brazil's second-largest city – more than 2 million people, or roughly one-third of the population, currently live in militia-controlled neighbourhoods.[186]

Police-backed militias now dominate many of Brazil's major cities, including Rio de Janeiro, where they control a third of the population. *© Dado Galdieri/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

Venezuela

In Venezuela, extortion is carried out not only by Tren de Aragua – particularly against those attempting to leave the country[187] – but also by the *colectivos* operating in cities like Caracas.[188] These *colectivos* are armed groups that originally formed as grassroots organizations supporting Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. They remain among the most central criminal actors in the country.

Illicit financial flows

Illicit financial flows (IFFs) refer to the movement of values that are illegal in origin, transfer or use; they often cross borders and are facilitated by weaknesses in governance, regulation and enforcement. Due to definitional ambiguities and limited comparative data, no single metric captures the full scope of IFFs. To address this, the GI-TOC proposes a systems-based approach using the 'IFFs pyramid',[189] which identifies three interlinked layers through which illicit value is generated, moved and retained: financial flows, trade flows and informality. These layers are vertically integrated, meaning that illicit gains extracted at the street level often benefit elites embedded within state and economic structures.

This model offers a more comprehensive understanding of IFFs and is particularly useful in analyzing the complex reality of Latin America and the Caribbean, where illicit funds flow through banking channels, offshore jurisdictions and informal financial systems.

Financial flows

At the apex of the IFFs pyramid are financial flows – capital that moves through formal banking channels, offshore jurisdictions and other financial institutions. In the LAC region, these flows are driven by systemic corruption and institutional capture. The Lava Jato (Car Wash) operation in Brazil illustrated this dynamic, exposing how high-level corruption can be structurally embedded within state enterprises such as Petrobras and facilitated through centres including Switzerland, Panama and Andorra.[190]

Offshore hubs serve as crucial nodes in this financial architecture. According to the Tax Justice Network, people from Latin America hold more than US$212 billion in offshore assets, often channelled through secrecy jurisdictions like Panama, Uruguay and Delaware.[191] The Panama Papers scandal illuminated how intermediaries such as Mossack Fonseca enabled the creation of hundreds of thousands of shell companies to obscure asset ownership.[192]

The role of cryptocurrencies and fintech in IFFs is also rising. Criminal organizations, such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), are increasingly using Bitcoin to avoid cash storage risks and facilitate cross-border transactions.[193] State-run platforms like Chivo Wallet in El Salvador have allegedly been exploited to defraud users and launder illicit proceeds. Weak regulatory environments across the region make these technologies attractive for IFF operations.[194]

Beyond cryptocurrency, IFFs exploit a wide range of financial conduits, including real estate, casinos and sports betting. Criminal organizations invest illicit proceeds in luxury properties, sometimes using front companies – as seen with Western Balkan criminal groups in Ecuador.[195] Similarly, casinos like the Golden MGM in Guatemala and sports betting operations in Brazil are increasingly used to stage fake winnings and co-mingle funds.[196]

Chinese laundering networks have also become key actors in Latin America's IFF landscape. Underground banks and brokers linked to China facilitate the movement of illicit proceeds for regional trafficking groups, including fentanyl producers in Mexico. These networks use encrypted messaging apps, bulk-cash couriers and mirror transfers to evade detection.[197] In Ecuador and Brazil, authorities have uncovered shell-company structures tied to Chinese intermediaries working with organizations like the PCC.[198] These operations often rely on informal, trust-based networks, making them difficult to dismantle through traditional law enforcement approaches.

Trade flows

Trade-based IFFs are widespread across Latin America, driven by the manipulation of invoice values to disguise or relocate wealth. The strategic role of trade infrastructure – particularly maritime ports – is central to this dynamic. Key nodes like Colón (Panama), Iquique (Chile) and the tri-border area are exploited to facilitate both licit and illicit commerce. These zones suffer from high levels of corruption in customs and infrastructure agencies, which weaken regulatory enforcement and foster rent-seeking behaviour.[199]

The proliferation of special economic zones (SEZs) further complicates enforcement. SEZs offer tax and regulatory exemptions but have also become hotspots for trade misinvoicing, counterfeiting and trade-based money laundering.[200] According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the creation of each new SEZ correlates with a significant increase in counterfeit exports, particularly from Latin America.[201] Many SEZs, such as those in Paraguay and Panama, are also directly linked to the laundering of black-market gold, a critical commodity in the regional IFF landscape.[202]

Environmental commodities are increasingly central to trade-based IFFs. Gold from Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador is systematically laundered through falsified origin declarations and exported to global markets, often through Chinese-linked intermediaries.[203] In Brazil, cattle and soy linked to illegal deforestation are laundered into global supply chains through asset fabrication schemes, such as falsified land titles and animal transport documentation.[204]

A weapons cache seized in Colón, Panama. Maritime ports in Latin America suffer from high levels of corruption and play a central role in enabling illicit financial flows. *© The Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images*

Maritime trade vulnerabilities, particularly in the Caribbean, further facilitate IFFs. The region's archipelagic geography and lack of coordinated maritime oversight allow illicit goods – including drugs, counterfeit products and undeclared gold – to move freely across jurisdictions. These illicit flows are intertwined with legal trade, creating a grey zone where value is obscured and enforcement efforts are undermined.[205]

Informality

The base of the IFFs pyramid – informality – represents a vast and often unregulated economic sphere. In Latin America, informal and mixed-income households account for nearly two-thirds of the population, enabling financial transactions to occur outside the scope of tax systems and regulatory oversight.[206] This widespread informality facilitates illicit flows, weakens enforcement and allows criminal economies to operate in parallel with formal structures.[207]

One major way is through the remittance economy. With billions of dollars sent to Latin America annually, remittances are increasingly routed through unregulated fintech platforms and, in some cases, cryptocurrencies. While not inherently illicit, these systems are vulnerable to abuse and are used to conceal the origin and destination of illicit wealth.[208] The overlap between remittances, irregular migration and smuggling networks adds another layer of complexity.[209]

In Brazil, informal *doleiros* (underground currency brokers) mask the origin of millions of dollars in illicit proceeds and route them through shell companies and offshore accounts.[210] Similarly, in urban areas, criminal groups launder extortion revenues by investing in informal real estate, building and renting illegal housing in peripheral neighbourhoods.[211]

Other informal transfer mechanisms, such as bulk cash smuggling and barter exchanges, are becoming increasingly digitized and transnational. Criminal networks collaborate with Chinese underground banking systems to layer and transfer illicit funds through casinos, shell companies and even seafood exports.[212] Despite advances in digital payment infrastructure, cash remains central to many illicit economies, further obscuring financial flows and reinforcing structural informality across the region.[213]

MULTI-CRIME DYNAMICS

Historically, Latin American governments have responded to multi-crime dynamics by focusing their efforts on combating drug trafficking, widely believed to be the primary driver behind other illicit activities such as arms trafficking and money laundering. However, this approach has unintentionally facilitated the development of other multi-crime dynamics.[214]

As the previous analysis demonstrates, criminal economies in Latin America do not operate in isolation. Instead, they intersect and reinforce one another, creating a fluid, multi-layered illicit economy that adapts to law enforcement pressure (see Figure 7). Criminal actors systematically leverage territorial control, illicit supply chains and financial networks to sustain and expand their operations. The exploitation of natural resources has become central to this model,[215] with illegal gold mining increasingly replacing cocaine trafficking as a key financial pillar, allowing criminal groups to launder profits, expand territorial influence and inflict severe environmental damage.[216]

The arms-for-gold nexus exemplifies how transactional exchanges between criminal actors enable the fluid movement of assets across illicit markets, consolidating their operational autonomy.[217] The result is a multi-crime ecosystem sustained by fluid interactions between various illicit activities, where assets, commodities and financial flows are strategically reallocated across sectors to minimize risk and maximize revenue. This transformation is particularly evident in border zones, where institutional vulnerabilities, legal asymmetries and illicit trade routes give criminal groups operational flexibility.

The structural resilience of these illicit economies is reinforced by three fundamental dynamics. First, the state's inability to effectively dismantle transnational criminal networks has resulted in law enforcement strategies that focus on isolated interventions over systemic disruption. Second, the integration of criminal enterprises into local economies and governance structures – enabled by high levels of political and institutional corruption – allows these networks to operate within legal and financial systems, using front companies, real estate and cryptocurrencies to launder assets. Third, the strategic use of violence allows criminal groups to regulate illicit markets, enforce territorial control and facilitate cross-sector transactions.

The expansion of criminal markets that do not involve drugs illustrates the adaptive capacity of transnational crime. In parallel, markets for contraband and counterfeit goods – including illegal cigarettes, pharmaceuticals and textiles – have been integrated into broader money laundering structures, exploiting informal financial systems to obscure the origin of illicit funds. Additionally, human trafficking and forced labour networks are now deeply embedded in criminal supply chains, particularly in mining regions, where trafficked individuals are exploited in illicit extractive industries. These interlinked illicit economic activities highlight how criminal groups systematically exploit unregulated economic spaces.

Hotspots of crime

These multi-crime dynamics are not evenly distributed across Latin America but rather concentrated in key hotspots, where strategic geography, weak state presence and transnational criminal networks converge to create highly resilient illicit economies. These areas serve as critical nodes in the global criminal supply chain, facilitating the fluid movement of illicit commodities, financial transactions and armed actors across borders. Within these hotspots, the interconnected nature of illicit markets ensures that disruption in one sector leads to adaptive shifts in another, reinforcing the structural resilience of transnational crime.

As the following case studies show, these regions epitomize the evolution of Latin America's illicit economies, demonstrating how criminal networks leverage territorial control, violence and corruption to sustain their operations, expand into new markets and embed themselves within formal economic systems.

Amazonian triple border (Peru, Brazil and Colombia)

The tri-border region where Brazil, Colombia and Peru converge has become a critical hub for transnational organized crime, enabling the convergence of illicit economies that fuel both regional instability and environmental degradation. This vast, densely forested area – characterized by limited state control and highly porous borders – serves as an operational stronghold for Brazilian criminal groups such as the PCC and the CV, as well as local armed actors, FARC dissidents in Colombia and mafia-style groups in Peru.

While cocaine production remains central to the region's illicit economy, criminal actors have diversified their operations to include illegal gold mining, timber trafficking, counterfeit goods and unregulated fishing. These groups have effectively consolidated their influence over key drug corridors, controlling not only cocaine production but also the complex logistics of its trans-shipment. Meanwhile, illegal logging networks exploit legal loopholes, laundering timber harvested in Peru by introducing it into legal supply chains in Brazil and Colombia using fraudulent documentation.

Manaus (Brazil)

The Amazonian city of Manaus, with a population of more than 2 million people, is a major hub for environmental crimes, transnational drug trafficking and criminal governance. It is strategically located at the intersection of the Amazon and Negro rivers, the rainforest's two largest waterways. The city has a large tax-free industrial park and boasts a harbour that is large enough to sustain ocean-going vessels.

Manaus plays a central role in both the Amazon drug route and environmental crimes. Cocaine and cannabis flow downriver from Peru and Colombia, while gold, wildlife and timber from nearby regions of the Brazilian Amazon are trans-shipped through Manaus for international export or local distribution.[218] The city's expansive financial and trading infrastructure also allows criminal groups to launder their assets and engage in certification fraud of timber and gold.

Additionally, the CV is a major governance actor in Manaus. The group is the primary political authority across the densely populated neighbourhoods of Manaus's urban margins. The CV has established electoral alliances in Manaus, allowing candidates to campaign in CV-held territory in exchange for the delivery of infrastructure projects and housing developments.[219]

FIGURE 7 Multi-crime hotspots in Latin America.

Iguazú triple border (Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina)

This area in the vicinity of Iguazú Falls has been a stronghold of organized crime in South America for decades. Paraguay has historically served as the region's primary hub for counterfeit goods, including cigarettes, clothing and electronic products imported from China and elsewhere. These goods are then sold in the tri-border area shared by Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. High-level Paraguayan politicians own companies that thrive on the contraband trade in the triple border area, including Horacio Cartes, former president of Paraguay from 2013 to 2018. Paraguay's lax gun control laws also facilitate a large weapons trafficking market in the area.

Money-changers (*doleiros*, in Portuguese) operate widely across the tri-border area and local banks have established links to organized crime groups. Local law enforcement sources also claim that the Lebanon-based militant group Hezbollah engages in contraband smuggling and money laundering in the area, which has a significant Lebanese immigrant population.[220]

Drug trafficking groups have also taken advantage of the region's ample transport infrastructure and corrupt police forces to move cocaine and cannabis into Brazil and Argentina. The PCC currently dominates the drug trafficking flows through the tri-border zone.[221] Recent local police operations led by INTERPOL have revealed that the area has become a strategic hub for timber trafficking, with criminal groups engaging in large-scale illegal logging of native trees.[222]

Colombia and Ecuador border

In this border zone, Colombian armed groups, notably FARC dissidents, and Ecuadorian criminal gangs have established agreements for cocaine and arms trafficking, illegal mining and the regulation of human mobility and smuggling.[223] Organizations such as Tren de Aragua and Ecuadorian criminal gangs extort and charge Venezuelan nationals seeking either to return to their country of origin or to attempt to reach US soil through the Darién Gap.[224]

Cocaine flows in this zone have strengthened in recent years, with Ecuador serving as a gateway for cocaine trafficking due to its ports and infrastructure.[225] Various gangs are competing for territorial control, with no single group dominating. The 2017 demobilization of the FARC left a regulatory vacuum, leading different local and transnational actors to make deals around coca crops, laboratories and cocaine commercialization.[226]

The cocaine economy in this zone is influenced by multiple foreign actors. Balkan organizations coordinate shipments to Europe,[227] former FARC dissidents from Colombia are active in production near the border and Mexican cartels use Ecuador as a transit point to the United States, as it benefits from a relatively lower law enforcement presence compared to Mexico and Colombia.[228]

Cocaine from Colombia enters Ecuador through Esmeraldas, Carchi and Sucumbíos, where armed groups use the border area for shelter and the storage of weapons, drugs and the raw materials needed for drug production. From there, cocaine moves through the subzones of Manabí, Guayas and Santa Elena, where it is prepared for maritime shipment via ports and boats, or air transport using couriers and small planes to reach international markets.[229] In strategic ports on the Pacific and along porous borders with Colombia, criminal gangs have established new international cocaine trade routes enabled by corruption within security forces.[230] Routes to the United States are both maritime and aerial, crossing the Pacific Ocean and passing through Central American countries. Another route goes through Panama via the Caribbean Sea to Europe.[231]

Hot border (Colombia, Venezuela)

The Colombia–Venezuela border region epitomizes a complex nexus of illicit activity orchestrated by an array of criminal actors. Prominent among these include Colombian armed groups (the ELN, FARC dissidents and the EGC), members of the Venezuelan armed forces and criminal syndicates. The ELN and FARC dissidents exploit the region's strategic geography to oversee cocaine production and distribution networks. They funnel vast quantities through Venezuelan territory, where weak state oversight facilitates large-scale trafficking, to international markets.[232]

These groups have also diversified into illegal mining, particularly of gold and coltan, where they exert territorial control through coercion and extortion. The extracted minerals, laundered through Venezuelan supply chains, enter global markets, generating illicit revenues comparable to those from drug trafficking.[233]

In tandem with these illicit economies, human trafficking and smuggling networks flourish, capitalizing on Venezuela's socio-economic instability. Organized groups such as Tren de Aragua exploit migration flows to run highly structured trafficking operations that ensnare vulnerable individuals in forced labour and sexual exploitation.[234] The interconnected nature of these criminal economies underscores the role of the Colombia–Venezuela border as a complex hub for organized crime, where illicit actors leverage state fragility, corruption and geographic permeability to sustain multi-billion-dollar operations.

Darién Gap (Colombia, Panama)

The Darién Gap has long been a hub for illicit economies. On the Colombian side, cocaine trafficking dates back to the 1970s, while on the Panamanian side, there has historically been arms trafficking and trade in contraband and counterfeit goods. Guerrilla groups, cartels, paramilitaries and criminal gangs from Panama have been involved in these activities. Currently, the dominant actor is the EGC in Colombia, which, in agreement with Panamanian criminal gangs, regulates and controls human trafficking, cocaine trafficking, arms trafficking, extortion and smuggling.[235]

Increased migration through the Darién Gap, a key transit route to the United States and Canada, has allowed these groups to combine human smuggling with both human and drug trafficking.[236] Many migrants have been exploited on their journey north and used as drug couriers. Panama's ports are also used by arms traffickers to supply illegal groups, primarily in Colombia and Central America. In 2023, local authorities seized a significant number of illegal firearms and ammunition, underscoring the persistent challenge of arms proliferation despite government enforcement efforts.[237]

Southern and northern Mexico

Mexican cartels have established human trafficking routes across the country and control internal routes to traffic cocaine and synthetic drugs such as fentanyl, with the United States the ultimate destination.[238]

Mexico's southern border with Central America is a national security priority due to issues such as drug and human trafficking, migration, violence, arms trafficking and the smuggling of goods.[239] The porous nature of this border, along with corruption among Mexican authorities, facilitates the development of these criminal activities.[240] This region is home to the Central American drug corridor, one of the main routes for drug trafficking into Mexico, through which cocaine from South America is transported overland via Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. However, the corridor no longer functions just as a drug transit route. Cocaine production has surged in Guatemala and Honduras,[241] as has human

A security guard inspects trailers on the US–Mexico border, a major convergence point for drug trafficking routes and irregular migration. *© Mauricio Palos/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

trafficking, due to increased migration flows starting in the Darién Gap and compounded by migrants from the Northern Triangle and other parts of the world, such as China, India and Pakistan.[242]

On the northern side, the US–Mexico border faces surveillance and security problems due to the high volume of trade, the large number of border crossings, the difficulty of controlling all traffic and the infiltration of Mexican criminal groups.[243] This area is a key convergence point for multiple drug trafficking routes. Mexico is a major transit country for fentanyl, other synthetic opioids, South American cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine destined for the United States. It is also a destination for precursor chemicals from China, India and other countries.[244] Furthermore, the border is a focal point for migration as people attempt to reach US soil.[245] This movement is exploited by Mexican criminal groups as a source of revenue.

The multi-crime dynamics in these two areas of Mexico helped generate US$12.84 billion in annual inflows from drug trafficking – heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine – between 2015 and 2018. Meanwhile, migrant trafficking generated US$1.12 billion in annual inflows and US$13.8 million in outflows annually between 2016 and 2018.[246]

Essequibo Triangle (Venezuela, Guyana, Brazil)

The Essequibo Triangle, a disputed territory at the intersection of Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil, has evolved into a strategic hub of transnational organized crime, where state and criminal actors converge to exploit the region's vast natural resources and geopolitical vulnerabilities.[247] This lawless frontier is populated by mafia-style groups, transnational syndicates and apparent factions of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces, who facilitate and profit from a network of illicit economies, including illegal gold mining, human trafficking, cocaine trafficking and arms smuggling.[248] The region's dense jungle terrain, lack of effective governance and porous borders enable these activities.

Illegal gold mining has become one of the most lucrative illicit economies in the Essequibo Triangle, while human trafficking has also proliferated.[249] Criminal networks transport vulnerable people – primarily women and minors – across borders for forced labour, sexual exploitation and debt bondage in illegal mining camps.[250] These operations are linked to broader smuggling networks that traffic migrants from Venezuela into Brazil and Guyana, exacerbating the region's humanitarian crisis.

The convergence of these illicit economies underscores the Essequibo Triangle's transformation into a complex, self-sustaining criminal ecosystem. The symbiotic relationship between state-affiliated actors and transnational crime networks has rendered conventional law enforcement strategies largely ineffective. Addressing this challenge necessitates a multilateral response that integrates intelligence-sharing, financial sanctions and targeted counter-criminal operations.

CONCLUSIONS: LOOKING AHEAD

Criminal actors in the LAC region operate across interconnected networks that span regional, national and local scales. Their activities shape multi-crime dynamics that link them together, enabling them to take advantage of the political, social and economic processes unfolding globally, hemispherically and within individual states. Structural conditions and specific contexts shape and facilitate criminal actors' operations, influencing the legal, illegal and informal economic activities they control and the ways in which they extract resources in particular geographic areas. Within this framework, borderlands stand out as spaces of increasing significance.

Structural conditions and state fragility

Organized crime does not operate in a vacuum – it systematically exploits state weaknesses and limitations to consolidate influence, exert control and extract resources. The complex criminal ecosystems that operate across the region feed on the structural fragilities within states. In the LAC region, key drivers include persistent economic inequality, high levels of labour informality and ineffective social programmes, all of which have created a population of urban and rural youth vulnerable to recruitment by criminal organizations.

Impunity and weak judicial systems create perverse incentives that make crime a profitable endeavour. In many cases, criminal groups operate in or construct environments that allow them to expand their activities. A particularly critical space is the prison system, which – rather than functioning as a site of rehabilitation – has become an epicentre for criminal governance. Here, violent acts are planned, criminal networks are formed and operations are executed.

These socio-economic factors are compounded by the gradual erosion of democracy and the rule of law. Endemic corruption and weak oversight systems enable criminal actors to co-opt officials and penetrate institutions, distorting the functioning of justice and oversight bodies. Where corruption proves insufficient, violence has become the mechanism for coercing or deterring state representatives, with severe humanitarian consequences. This combination of corruption and violence helps explain why organized crime has shown such a high degree of adaptability and has successfully consolidated its presence in countries that are ill-prepared to confront such threats.

Expansion, consolidation and diversification of organized crime networks

Organized crime in the LAC region has evolved from a predominantly local phenomenon into a complex and transnational multi-level system. Within this system, organizations of different natures (gangs, mafias, cartels and armed groups) and scales (local, regional, national and transnational) cooperate, forge alliances or clash for control. Their transnational connections with Balkan, Italian, Chinese and Russian mafias demonstrate the sophistication and global integration of the region's criminal economy.

A distinctive feature of these groups is their high adaptability. They innovate constantly, both in their methods of violence and in the technologies they employ to control populations and extract resources. This adaptability is also evident in their recruitment strategies, particularly targeting vulnerable youth across urban and rural settings.

This multi-level coordination has enabled organized crime groups to access greater material and human resources, diversify their income streams, expand their territorial reach, access a broader range of trafficking routes and strengthen their operational capacity. Consequently, they have challenged state authority, and where corruption has not sufficed, they have established forms of criminal governance over territories and communities, imposing rules, dispensing justice and providing services that the state fails to deliver.

Consolidation of multi-crime dynamics and hybrid economies

Criminal organizations' portfolios extend far beyond drugs; their activities encompass a wide array of illicit economies. Through learning, knowledge transfer and adaptation to local, regional or national economic contexts – which are often poorly regulated – these organizations have found opportunities to regulate, control and profit from both legal and illegal activities. Flexibility is central: resources, violence and alliances shift swiftly from one market to another in response to changing circumstances.

Peripheral and border regions are the epicentres of these multi-crime dynamics. These areas, marked by limited state presence and entrenched corruption, are particularly vulnerable to the infiltration of local institutions and the imposition of territorial control. Perhaps the most emblematic example is the Orinoco Mining Arc in Venezuela, where abundant natural wealth, state absence and weak regulation have enabled the consolidation of a criminal system.

The coexistence and growing convergence of multiple illicit economies – such as illegal mining, human trafficking, extortion, arms trafficking, deforestation and money laundering – have given rise to criminal ecosystems. These dynamics reinforce one another and generate hybrid economies where the boundaries between legal, illegal and informal spheres are increasingly blurred and difficult to distinguish.

Intersection of criminal ecosystems and IFFs

The ability of organized crime to embed illicit gains within the legal economy through money laundering has been fundamental to its sustainability. Activities such as illegal gold mining, smuggling, remittances, real estate investment, SEZs and fintech platforms have served as financial vehicles to legitimize profits. These mechanisms form part of a broader architecture of IFFs, allowing criminal capital to circulate across commercial, informal and financial channels, further eroding the boundary between legal and illegal economies. By operating at these intersections, criminal groups obscure the illicit origins of their resources and harness global trade and financial infrastructure to expand their power.

This has profound impacts on governance and formal economies. It exacerbates impunity by lowering transaction costs and diversifying concealment strategies; it creates regulatory and fiscal vulnerabilities, as oversight systems are overwhelmed by the technical and political complexity of detecting increasingly sophisticated operations; and it intensifies the penetration of organized crime into strategic sectors of the legal economy, generating structural dependencies that restrict state action.

In this way, IFFs not only sustain the economic architecture of organized crime but also weave it into the very fabric of development and governance across the region. The integration of criminal capital into sectors such as infrastructure, real estate, energy and agriculture transforms organized crime from an external threat into an internalized force that co-shapes economic trajectories and political decision-making. As a result, states are not merely confronting criminal networks operating in parallel to the legal order; they are compelled to contend with a hybrid system in which IFFs actively redefine the incentives, constraints and power relations of governance itself.

The following section was developed through the analysis of structural conditions, the configuration of criminal actors and the identification of critical territories in the region. Its purpose is to project future scenarios that highlight key dynamics of organized crime, providing insights that can guide domestic security and development policies, as well as strengthen interstate cooperation in response to a phenomenon that is increasingly transnational and adaptive.

Early warnings

Recent shifts in global geopolitics and policy are reshaping Latin America's criminal landscape. The retreat of multilateralism, rising protectionism and the emergence of competing spheres of influence have opened new political and economic alignments across the region. China, in particular, has expanded its regional footprint through its Belt and Road Initiative, often surpassing the United States in foreign aid contributions. Chinese state-owned firms are major investors in the region's energy, infrastructure and space industries, and the country has overtaken the United States as South America's largest trading partner. Beijing has also extended its cultural, diplomatic and military influence throughout the region. In May 2025, China hosted LAC leaders at a summit in Beijing, where President Xi Jinping announced a US$9 billion investment credit line for the region.[251]

China has become a key player in Latin America's raw materials and infrastructure sectors. State-owned enterprises such as PowerChina and China Harbour Engineering Company have invested heavily in the development of energy infrastructure, including refineries, processing plants and power projects, in countries rich in coal, copper, natural gas, oil and uranium.[252] This also includes investments in large-scale transport infrastructure such as airports, highways, railways and ports.[253] A notable example is the Chancay megaport in Peru. US President Donald Trump has strongly criticized China's growing influence in LAC, particularly its involvement in infrastructure projects and control over strategic assets such as the Panama Canal. In response, his administration has wielded tariffs – imposing a baseline 10% on most LAC countries – as part of a broader effort to counter China's expanding presence and reassert US dominance in the region.[254]

Simultaneously, major policy reversals by the United States – including sharp cuts to foreign aid, reduced humanitarian and environmental assistance, and open political support for authoritarian regimes in countries such as El Salvador and Brazil (under former president Jair Bolsonaro) – are weakening civil society resilience and eroding democratic governance. These shifts are not only altering formal institutional landscapes but are also creating strategic openings for organized crime, illicit economies and hybrid governance structures to flourish. This evolving geopolitical backdrop must be considered foundational to the early warnings and emerging dynamics discussed below.

During President Trump's first year in office, a dual strategy of engagement with Latin America emerged. On the one hand, there are countries that are considered allies, such as Ecuador, El Salvador and Argentina. Here, cooperation has been fostered on issues considered priorities on the United

States' domestic agenda, chiefly national security. This security is understood in a broad sense and encompasses phenomena that affect both the region and the US, such as illicit economies, drug trafficking, migration and the presence of armed organizations. Governments that have aligned with this position have cultivated fluid and favourable relationships with Washington.[255]

By contrast, the cases of Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil are notable. In Colombia, for example, there has been a shift away from decades of close alliance. Previously, this relationship had been unaffected by changes in government in either country. Since Trump's arrival in office, however, there has been constant friction. Currently, the decertification of Colombia is being used as a political tool to discredit President Gustavo Petro's government. At the centre of this decision lies Petro's 'total peace' policy, as well as criticism of his overall performance on security and drugs. This marks a rupture with a historic bilateral alliance.[256]

In the case of Venezuela, the Trump administration has adopted a tougher stance, due to the lack of progress in negotiations with the regime, the handling of Nicolás Maduro's controversial presidential elections and the repressive persecution of opposition groups. Among the measures taken was the deployment of a US naval force in international waters in the Caribbean. The intention was to create tensions and contradictions within Maduro's government and the armed forces, with the aim of encouraging a political transition. Additionally, US armed attacks on vessels near the Venezuelan coast have revealed a new approach to the war on drugs, whereby militarization is reinforced and international human rights standards are disregarded. This decision, which has the 1980s intervention in Panama against Manuel Noriega as its precedent, is justified by the claim that the Venezuelan leader is heading a 'criminal narco-trafficking alliance' that poses a direct threat to the United States and is also tied to the migration issue.[257]

Finally, in the case of Brazil, economic pressure and sanctions have been linked to Bolsonaro's prosecution.[258] The Trump administration has intervened in defence of its political ally, thereby undermining Brazil's judicial and political sovereignty, and calling into question the legitimacy of the judicial process and due legal procedure.[259]

Below are a series of early warnings identified from the report's analysis, pointing to potential shifts in criminal dynamics, emerging illicit routes and structural transformations that may shape the security landscape across Latin America and beyond. These evolving threats – some already in motion – could affect regional stability, governance and transnational crime prevention efforts. However, their long-term consequences and the extent of their influence remain subject to further observation.

Broader socio-economic and geopolitical consequences

Impacts of US policy changes

Recent shifts in US foreign policy represent a structural inflection point for Latin America. The designation of drug trafficking organizations as foreign terrorist entities reframes organized crime as a national security threat – expanding the scope for militarized interventions while limiting avenues for diplomacy and transitional justice. This securitized approach risks conflating political, criminal and social actors, undermining nuanced responses to violence and exacerbating instability in fragile contexts where illicit actors often fill governance vacuums.

Another consequence of these shifts is the decline of US soft power, which, through organizations like the US Agency for International Development (USAID), aimed to mitigate socio-economic vulnerability and other factors contributing to criminal recruitment in certain countries.[260] Under the Trump administration, there has also been a significant reduction in economic and humanitarian assistance, with deep federal cuts – particularly affecting agencies such as USAID, which has traditionally managed vital social and economic programmes across Latin America. There is also no longer a focus on regional development or on building equitable trade partnerships. Instead, what now prevails is a strategy that, paradoxically, may directly benefit China – the very outcome the Trump administration ostensibly seeks to prevent.[261]

Meanwhile, sweeping cuts to US funding for development, humanitarian assistance and environmental protection are weakening the region's institutional resilience. Local governments and civil society organizations, especially those operating in peripheral or conflict-affected areas, are losing critical financial and technical support. The withdrawal of environmental aid is particularly damaging in regions affected by illegal mining, deforestation and land grabbing, where organized crime thrives in the absence of state oversight.

The political consequences are equally profound. US alignment with authoritarian-leaning regimes in Latin America – such as El Salvador, Argentina and Brazil under Bolsonaro – signals a reduced emphasis on democratic conditionality and human rights. This tacit endorsement emboldens illiberal leaders to centralize power, dismantle accountability mechanisms and co-opt or tolerate organized crime as a means of territorial and social control.

In Brazil, US pressure has intensified. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio revoked visas for several Brazilian Supreme Court justices, including Alexandre de Moraes,[262] in response to the ongoing prosecution of Bolsonaro. The Trump administration also imposed punitive tariffs of up to 50% on Brazilian exports, an action widely criticized as politically motivated interference in Brazil's judicial sovereignty.[263] Meanwhile, Rubio, other US officials and Republican representatives vocally condemned the guilty verdict against former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe, denouncing it as a dangerous 'weaponization of the judiciary'[264] and echoing the opposition's accusations of judicial overreach, despite the independence of Colombia's courts and lack of evidence of political coercion.[265]

Collectively, these actions signal an escalated pattern of extraterritorial engagement, where trade, diplomatic coercion and commentary on domestic trials converge to undermine regional institutional autonomy and normalize a political economy where a state–criminal overlap may flourish. These trends lower the barriers to illicit expansion across the region. As formal institutions are weakened and international norms lose traction, transnational criminal networks face fewer deterrents and more permissive environments in which to operate. This strategic shift in US engagement not only reshapes national governance, but also directly alters the conditions in which the criminal underworld adapts, embeds and thrives.

Mass deportations could create new criminal environments

In the United States, irregular migration has been increasingly criminalized by a discourse that associates it with insecurity and rising crime rates in certain US cities. This has led to a policy of mass deportation targeting Latin American citizens. In particular, the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua gang was brought to national attention after a video showed armed members raiding an apartment complex in Aurora, Colorado.[266] The group has been linked to a series of high-profile crimes in the United States, including murder, sexual abuse and human trafficking.[267]

The use of this deportation policy risks establishing new criminal environments in the countries where deportees are sent. Some have ties to criminal organizations with the knowledge and technology to regulate informal and formal economies through violence – which they can use to replicate these systems. This phenomenon already has an important precedent in the region, particularly in the

Northern Triangle where, in the 1990s and 2000s, mass deportations of people linked to MS-13 allowed the gang to rapidly expand in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.[268]

This situation could be further exacerbated by Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's offer to detain foreign criminals from across Latin America in El Salvador's prisons – an offer he made during Rubio's visit in February 2025 and one that the Trump administration welcomed.[269] The Centre for the Confinement of Terrorism, the largest prison in the Americas with a capacity of 40 000 inmates, began receiving US deportees in March. These deportees are suspected of belonging to Tren de Aragua and MS-13.[270] So far, records indicate approximately 300 people have been transferred.[271]

Emerging economic trends expose private sector vulnerabilities

China's growing influence in Latin America – through trade, infrastructure investment and financial flows – continues to create new criminal opportunities, particularly around ports, mining and natural resources. Similarly, the expansion of fintech solutions across the region, coupled with weak regulatory frameworks, opens new avenues for money laundering, fraud and IFFs. The increased involvement of the private sector in critical sectors including ports, logistics, construction and extractive industries, without strong oversight, heightens the risk of corporate complicity in criminal activities – exacerbating governance vulnerabilities. These risks are likely to intensify as the United States continues to scale back its development assistance and institutional engagement in the region, reducing oversight mechanisms and weakening deterrents against illicit financial practices.

Certain ports or terminals and operational areas along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts function as crime attractors, drawing transnational criminal networks due to their reputational vulnerabilities, weak security and presence of compromised actors. These locations become preferred nodes for criminal infiltration because of their perceived permissiveness and operational opacity. Ports also serve as crime facilitators, where systemic corruption, inadequate oversight, fragmented reporting systems and limited inter-agency coordination enable the logistical and financial architecture of illicit trade to operate with relative impunity. The intersection of maritime, customs and land transport networks within port environments creates strategic access points that organized crime groups exploit to circumvent state controls.

Ports may also generate criminal activity intrinsically tied to their operational context. For example, labour racketeering, document fraud or coercion can arise from the interaction between specific governance practices and opportunistic offender strategies. While not always transnational in nature, these localized dynamics can still directly support broader illicit economies.

Governments in Latin America increasingly enforce iron-fist policies to tackle organized crime

This is especially the case in Ecuador, El Salvador and Honduras. Measures such as mass incarcerations, military crackdowns and emergency powers are politically popular but fuel violence and criminal adaptation. As a result, gangs evolve, expanding their illicit markets and strengthening their transnational ties. Overcrowded prisons become criminal training grounds, worsening security in the long term. State repression erodes human rights and weakens institutions, fostering corruption. In the coming years, criminal networks will diversify, relocate and further embed themselves in fragile governance structures.

Armed and criminal groups expand and consolidate control in border areas

Colombian, Brazilian, Venezuelan and Mexican criminal groups have been expanding and entrenching their presence across Latin America, driven by territorial disputes, illicit economies and weak state enforcement. FARC dissidents and the ELN are strengthening their operations in Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama. Meanwhile, Brazil's PCC and CV are consolidating control in Paraguay, Argentina and Bolivia, as well as participating in the cocaine trade in Peru and Colombia. Mexican cartels are also increasing their number of partnerships in the region, collaborating with criminal groups in Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia.[272]

Shifts in trafficking routes and criminal flows

New transnational flows towards Asia (Peru)

Peru's newly developed Port of Chancay is quickly becoming a strategic point for transnational criminal networks operating across Latin America. Positioned as a key gateway for trade between South America and China, Chancay has also attracted illicit actors seeking to exploit its growing logistical capacity for drug trafficking, contraband smuggling and financial crime.

Chancay has been integrated into global shipping routes, offering an alternative to traditional ports like Callao. However, its increased connectivity has heightened its appeal to criminal organizations. Intelligence reports indicate that Peruvian and Brazilian drug cartels, including the PCC and the CV, are already using Chancay as a departure point for large cocaine shipments destined for European and Asian markets.[273]

The port's opening has also spurred further large-scale infrastructure projects in the region, which could boost organized crime. Chief among these is the Brazilian government's ongoing effort to improve navigability along the Amazon River so more Brazilian exports can reach Asian markets via the Chancay port. This development presents an opportunity for criminal actors operating along the Amazon River route. Improved navigability and greater integration with the Chancay port will create a new and potentially lucrative illicit route for organized crime.

The implications of this route extend beyond Peru and Brazil. Transnational networks in the wider Southern Cone – including Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina – are likely to capitalize on this emerging corridor to diversify export points for drugs, gold and timber, especially given recent investments in rail and road connectivity between inland production zones and Pacific-facing ports.

Chancay is also becoming a hub for money laundering activities linked to illicit mining and environmental crimes.[274] Gold extracted illegally from the Amazon, particularly from Brazil and Peru, is laundered through trade misinvoicing schemes, allowing criminal groups to integrate illicit proceeds into formal financial systems. The port's rapid development has outpaced the Peruvian government's ability to implement robust oversight mechanisms, raising concerns that it may become a major node in Latin America's broader illicit economies.[275]

Rising crime trends in the Southern Cone

The Southern Cone has seen an increase in crime, though the extent varies by country. While it is the region in Latin America with the greatest resilience and the lowest overall crime rates, certain warning signs are emerging.

Uruguay, for example, is widely recognized for its strong rule of law and its status as the least corrupt country in Latin America. However, it faces mounting security challenges. In 2022, the homicide rate rose by 25%, reversing the previous decline seen in 2021. This surge was driven primarily by an escalation in drug trafficking and the expansion of associated criminal networks.[276]

In Chile, two major criminal markets are cause for concern: drug trafficking and human trafficking. Chile ranks first in the Americas for drug consumption relative to its population, with a cocaine use prevalence of 0.8%[277] and a cannabis use prevalence of 12%.[278] As a result, drug trafficking has become one of the country's most pressing issues. Chile functions as both a transit point and a key consumption market in South America because of its proximity to major coca-producing countries such as Peru and Bolivia. The profitability of this market has attracted domestic and international criminal organizations, resulting in increased competition and violence – particularly in the northern regions.

Human trafficking and smuggling have also become prominent criminal markets in Chile. The country has seen a sharp increase in such activities, particularly in 2024, involving both sexual and labour exploitation. Criminal organizations such as Tren de Aragua have established a significant presence in the country, exploiting vulnerable migrant populations from Venezuela, Haiti and Colombia.[279]

Argentina faces two primary challenges. First, it has the second-highest prevalence of cocaine consumption in South America (1.67%),[280] making it an attractive market for drug traffickers. Local gangs operating in cities such as Rosario and Buenos Aires play a major role in distribution networks, often sparking violent territorial disputes.[281] Second, in line with the growing trend of international criminal groups operating in non-traditional areas to avoid detection, Argentina is increasingly at risk of becoming a key transit route for drugs originating in Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru, and destined for Europe, Africa and other global markets.[282]

Paraguay, particularly the border areas with Argentina and Brazil, has a long-standing history of organized crime. However, with the transnationalization of criminal activities, this phenomenon has taken on new dimensions. Notably, the rise of the PCC has triggered conflict with local mafia-style groups such as the Clan Rotela over control of urban infrastructure used to transport and sell illicit goods, including firearms, contraband and drugs.[283] Currently, this area is a transit zone for large volumes of cocaine produced in Bolivia and Peru and routed to international markets.[284]

Criminal organizations increasingly develop new routes in the Caribbean

In 2024, cocaine seizures in the Caribbean reached record levels. Authorities seized more than 30 tonnes of cocaine in the Dominican Republic, more than 15 tonnes in the French West Indies[285] and 10 tonnes in Jamaica.[286] Although final figures are still pending, destination countries including the Netherlands, the United Kingdom,[287] France and the United States have all seized record quantities. This highlights the expansion of the Caribbean route to Europe, a trend observed in recent years that has not yet led to concrete changes in public policy.

The Caribbean region faces many challenges. These include the multiplicity of national jurisdictions; the fragmented geography of the archipelago; corruption networks between South America, Central America and the Caribbean; and a lack of cooperation between European and Caribbean countries. Traffickers use multiple methods, such as containers, yachts and drug couriers ('mules'), that are difficult to intercept. These same routes are also used for human smuggling and arms trafficking, which are linked to rising homicide rates in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and, most dramatically, Haiti.

The development of port infrastructure in Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and the French West Indies has made the region especially attractive to traffickers. Of particular concern is a new port in the French West Indies, as cocaine entering this area is technically arriving in the EU.

Tax havens exacerbate the situation, as corruption, money laundering and IFFs are observed without any real action being taken. Both Caribbean and European countries often prefer to preserve their local networks rather than implement far-reaching measures.

In Central America, rising migration pressure through the Darién Gap – linked to worsening economic crises, sanctions and US extraterritorial migration policies – may lead to increased human rights violations and shifting migration flows. These migratory changes are likely to be exploited by criminal groups in South and Central America, particularly by fuelling human smuggling along Pacific and Caribbean routes. The US military presence in border zones in the Darién Gap, combined with differing country responses aimed at blocking migration and smuggling in Central America, could prompt drug traffickers to reroute drug flows controlled by South American cartels, increasing inter-cartel violence within both South America and the Central American drug corridor.

The expansion of Mexican and Colombian cartels into ports like Limón on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast is expected to increase violence and enhance logistical capabilities for northbound and transatlantic drug flows, particularly as Panama implements stricter border controls.

Alliances between Ecuadorian, Venezuelan and Colombian criminal groups and Central American mafia-style groups could facilitate arms trafficking and joint control over transnational smuggling corridors. These connections support expanding operations aimed at accessing European markets via the Caribbean.

Market expansions and criminal economy trends

Consolidation of the synthetic drug market

The synthetic drug trade in Latin America is expanding rapidly, driven by high demand, low production costs and adaptable trafficking networks. Mexican cartels are diversifying production and distribution, with fentanyl, methamphetamine and synthetic opioids dominating emerging markets. Increased domestic consumption in Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay suggests a shift from traditional export-focused operations to local supply chains, deepening criminal entrenchment. Over the next five years, synthetic drugs will play an increasingly dominant role in regional criminal economies, coexisting with traditional plant-based drugs in key markets.

Relevance and expansion of environmental crimes

In recent years, the constant demand for gold has placed immense pressure on the Amazon and other strategic biomes such as the Chocó biogeographic region, where illegal mining has destroyed millions of hectares. This gold rush, along with the resulting deforestation and land grabbing, has led to the invasion of indigenous, Afro-descendant territories and protected areas. The situation could intensify in the coming years if global markets become unstable, as gold may increase in value. It could further worsen if resources and efforts to protect these areas decline, creating a favourable environment for criminal organizations, which have found illegal mining to be one of their most lucrative activities. Attention should also be given to other vulnerable sectors, including illegal cattle ranching, monoculture plantations (such as soya, sorghum or maize) and illegal and irregular large-scale fishing. Environmental crime is also escalating in the Darién Gap region and Costa Rica. Organized crime networks are increasingly co-opting activities such as Cocobolo logging in Panama and timber trafficking from Costa Rica to Asia, creating hybrid criminal economies that force local actors to cooperate or face reprisal. Similarly, criminal networks are co-opting the increased illegal gold mining in Costa Rica – and its smuggling through Panama or Nicaragua – and the expanding illegal logging and timber export trade to Asia to create hybrid criminal economies. These trends signal the consolidation of environmental crime as a parallel income stream for criminal groups, especially when tied to trade-based money laundering.

Consolidation of transnational criminal networks

What is most frequently and prominently observed is the consolidation of cooperation networks between transnational criminal organizations and local armed groups and criminal gangs. These alliances involve not only the transfer of know-how for regulating illegal, informal and legal economies, but also the transmission of material resources – such as money and weapons – and violent tactics. The latter include techniques for killing with the objective of gaining territorial control, as well as challenging the state and its representatives. This poses new security challenges that demand innovative approaches and strategies.

Violence dynamics and state responses

Consolidation of a hybrid criminal state (Venezuela)

Venezuela's presidential election results in July 2024 and President Maduro's continued grip on power could influence the dynamics of certain illicit markets, as seen in previous years. Economic sanctions and their effects on the national economy have pushed the regime to seek new allies, such as China, Qatar and Iran – countries that have shown little concern for how Venezuela's mineral resources are exploited. This shift could enable greater involvement of armed groups like the ELN in illegal activities.

The ELN's control of regions such as Catatumbo could reshape cocaine trafficking routes – especially those heading towards Europe – complicating efforts by international authorities to counter drug trafficking. Meanwhile, weakening incentives to combat money laundering are contributing to the consolidation of a criminal network in which state agents, criminal organizations and armed groups position Venezuela as a regional hub for IFFs. This convergence would establish a multi-crime dynamic that exploits the country's geopolitical isolation from the West.

Expansion and consolidation of armed and criminal actors in border areas

Colombian, Brazilian, Venezuelan and Mexican criminal groups have been expanding and entrenching their presence across Latin America, driven by territorial disputes, illicit economies and weak state enforcement. FARC dissidents and the ELN are strengthening their operations in Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, while Brazil's PCC and CV are consolidating control in Paraguay, Argentina and Bolivia, as well as participating in the cocaine sectors in Peru and Colombia. Simultaneously, Mexican cartels are increasing their partnerships in the region. In Central America, they are in contact with criminal groups in Nicaragua and Honduras, and in Latin America, with criminal groups from Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia.

Prison overcrowding and the expansion of organized crime

Severe overcrowding of prisons across Latin America is a clear indicator of countries' diminishing resilience to crime, with penitentiaries transforming into hubs for criminal socialization ('schools of crime') and expansion. In some countries, occupancy rates exceed 400%, creating conditions that allow criminal organizations to consolidate power, recruit members and coordinate illicit economies – such as drug trafficking, extortion and money laundering – from within prison walls. Rather than serving as deterrents, prisons have become operational centres for groups like Tren de Aragua (Venezuela), the PCC and the CV (Brazil), and Los Choneros (Ecuador), enabling their regional and transnational growth.

Overcrowding and poor prison conditions have also sparked violent clashes and large-scale riots, making these facilities flashpoints for further instability. Meanwhile, the expansion of illicit economies controlled from inside prisons ensures a steady flow of financial resources, allowing these groups to adapt, grow and maintain their influence beyond state control.

NOTES

1 The Global Organized Crime Index allows users to analyze, compare and contrast a range of indicators by country, region and continent. In this context, two key dimensions are scored: criminality and resilience, each measured on a scale from 1 to 10. The criminality scale reflects the extent of criminal activity; in contrast, the resilience scale reflects the opposite. A score of 1 indicates very low resilience, while a score of 10 indicates a strong and effective framework capable not only of addressing current organized crime risks, but also of adapting to emerging threats.

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