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**CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN
ECUADOR'S PRISON SYSTEM**

RENATO RIVERA RHON
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renato Rivera Rhon is a researcher and professor specializing in organized crime in Ecuador. He holds a PhD in rule of law and global governance from the University of Salamanca, and has led multiple research projects on organized crime in Ecuador and the wider Latin American region. His work combines ethnographic field research in ports and border areas with judicial analysis of organized crime cases, allowing him to offer a unique perspective on local dynamics and institutional responses. He currently serves as senior analyst for the Andean region at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland

www.globalinitiative.net

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2018 and 2024, Ecuador faced an unprecedented prison crisis, with 717 inmates killed inside correctional facilities and a national homicide rate that rose from 5.9 to 39.1 per 100 000 inhabitants.¹ This surge in violence is closely tied to the emergence of several forms of criminal governance within prisons and to the influence that criminal groups exert over illicit markets such as cocaine trafficking, arms smuggling and extortion.

The crisis stems from two converging dynamics: the fragmentation of Los Choneros, a powerful Ecuadorian criminal group, which triggered violent competition for control of prison blocks and illicit markets, and the erosion of state authority resulting from mismanagement, corruption and institutional weakening. As a result, Ecuador's penitentiary system reflects a broader regional pattern observed in several Latin American countries, including Brazil and Venezuela, where prisons operate as hubs of organized crime rather than institutions of punishment and rehabilitation.

Ecuador ranks among the countries with the highest levels of criminality and one of the lowest capacities to respond to organized crime. The country scored 4.46 out of 10 for resilience in the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, reflecting systemic weaknesses such as a fragile judicial and detention system, limited law enforcement capacity, overcrowding and pervasive prison violence.²

This brief examines forms of criminal governance within the Ecuadorian penitentiary system, analyzing power dynamics among criminal groups and their interactions with state institutions. It employs qualitative methods, including interviews with former government officials, police and intelligence personnel, journalists and litigators, as well as the review of press reports, academic publications and regional organization reports, such as those of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

Findings indicate that criminal governance is strengthened through interaction with state institutions, enabling groups to control internal criminal economies, regulate social order and influence external criminal activity. The entrenchment of this authority within prisons has intensified violence, reinforced local and transnational networks, and exposed serious institutional vulnerabilities in Ecuador's security and justice systems.



CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN ECUADOR'S PRISONS

In the past decade, disputes among criminal groups, combined with the gradual weakening of the governance once exercised by Los Choneros, have given rise to some of the most violent episodes recorded in Ecuador's penitentiary system. This violence is also the result of the sustained deterioration of state authority within detention centres, which has allowed criminal actors to assume internal control and management functions.

The institutional reforms implemented from 2018 to 2024 unfolded within a context shaped by the power vacuum that was created through the collapse of prison-based criminal governance. This vacuum was initially contested by two groups operating within the largest prison complex in Ecuador, the Guayas penitentiary complex³ in Guayaquil city: Los Choneros and Los Cubanos.⁴ Over time, the fragmentation of Los Choneros – the most powerful criminal organization in the country – inaugurated a new phase of structural violence in Ecuador's prisons.

In June 2019, just days after a riot led by a third group, Los Gorras, at the Guayas penitentiary complex left more than six inmates dead, members of the National Police's Intervention and Rescue Group were kidnapped during a prison mutiny.⁵ During this episode, seven inmates murdered a fellow prisoner and broadcast the act on social media; two of them reportedly played football with the victim's head.⁶

The victim was later identified as William Humberto Poveda Salazar (alias Cubano), who had been sentenced for murder. His own murder, which occurred despite prior alerts sent to the Penitentiary Intelligence Unit (UIP), revealed the struggle between Los Choneros, Los Gorras and Los Cubanos for control of prisons and small-scale drug trafficking in Guayaquil.⁷

Los Choneros's efforts to consolidate their hegemony ultimately led to their decline. In June 2020, their leader, Jorge Luis Zambrano (alias Rasquiña), was released under a controversial semi-open regime.⁸ Six months later, he was assassinated in a shopping centre in Manta, sparking violent competition among criminal groups nationwide.

Rasquiña's downfall was followed by the killing of Telmo Castro, a former army captain and logistical liaison for the Sinaloa Cartel.⁹ These killings triggered the fragmentation of Los Choneros and the formation of new alliances among at least six criminal groups. This included the Nueva Generación alliance, financed by drug trafficker Leandro Norero, who allegedly maintained links with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. This alliance brought together Los Lobos, Los Chone Killers (formerly Los Ñetas), Los Lagartos (formerly Los Gorras and Los Cubanos), Los Tiguerones and a faction of Los Latin Kings – all united in their aim to eliminate Los Choneros and regain control of Ecuador's prison system.

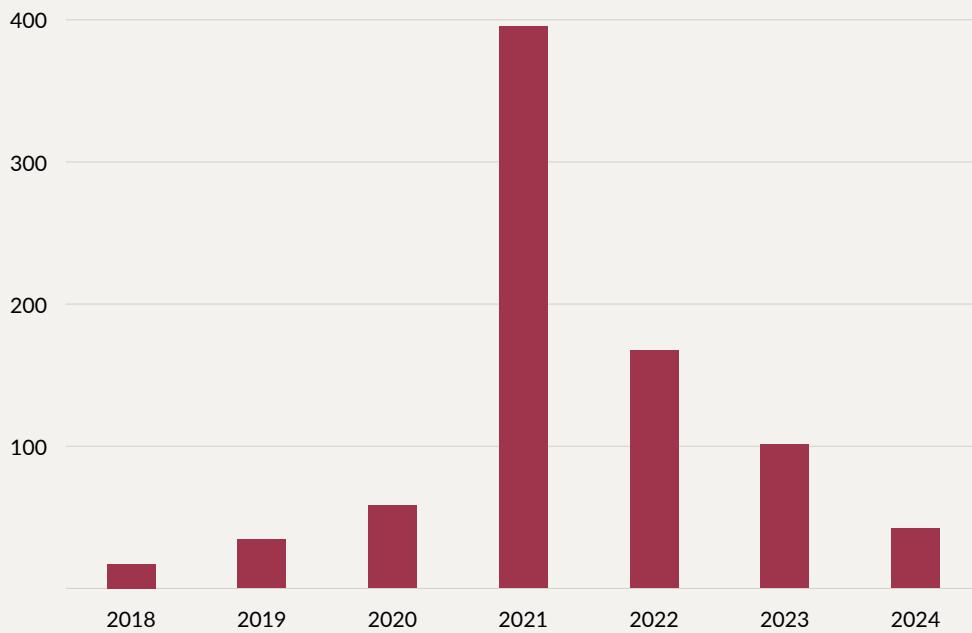


FIGURE 1 Inmates killed in prison in Ecuador, 2018–2024.

SOURCE: Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (2024),¹⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2025)¹¹

In response, Los Choneros, still associated with the Sinaloa Cartel and Colombian groups, formed a coalition divided into two factions: Los Fatales, led by Junior Roldán (alias JR), and Las Águilas, headed by José Adolfo Macías Villamar (alias Fito), Rasquiña's right-hand man.¹² Both factions maintained links with Los Gángster and R7 groups from Santo Domingo.

The war between these alliances began in February 2021, when the attempted assassination of Fito at the Guayas penitentiary complex triggered the massacre of 79 inmates across four prisons.¹³ Between 2021 and 2023, more than 400 prisoners were killed in episodes of extreme violence, including mutilations, incinerations and castrations.¹⁴ In total, 717 people were killed between 2018 and 2024.

This violence was not limited to the penitentiary sphere. The battle for criminal hegemony following the fragmentation of Los Choneros fuelled an escalation of external violence, including kidnappings of gang leaders' family members, bodies hung from bridges and explosive attacks on homes and public buildings.

The most notable example of this violence occurred at the end of 2021, when Fito's daughter was kidnapped in Manta. The leader himself stated that 'there were codes, but these were broken', referring to the collapse of traditional criminal norms.¹⁵

Amid this crisis, the state had lost institutional control of the prisons. A lawyer for the Association of Penitentiary Guards of Ecuador reported that inmates held the keys to the cellblocks and controlled the facilities by order of the directors.¹⁶

In May 2022, the transfer of leaders and the allocation of cellblocks according to criminal affiliation coincided with a peace attempt promoted by the Nueva Generación alliance, primarily involving Los

Lobos, Los Chone Killers, Los Tiguerones and Los Latin Kings. Although a 'general pacification' was proclaimed, it did not include Los Choneros, leading to further massacres.¹⁷

In recordings from the peace process, the groups expressed their rejection of any ties with corrupt authorities, citing potential links between Los Choneros and state officials: 'We want no relationship with any police or political member who works for the opposing group.'¹⁸ As part of this process of distancing themselves from political connections, the leader of Los Latin Kings, Manuel Zúñiga (alias King Majestic), was killed days later in Quito. He had promoted the pacification agreement with Rafael Correa's government and the group's official recognition in 2007, a security and social coexistence policy aimed at reducing urban violence through social inclusion.

The state recognized Los Latin Kings as a cultural and social organization, which enabled their gradual demobilization, the regularization of their members, and their incorporation into education, employment and community participation programmes, in exchange for an explicit commitment to abandon criminal practices and the use of violence.¹⁹ King Majestic, who had served as the group's spokesperson and president, was reluctant to join the Nueva Generación alliance. As a result, his murder solidified the organization's alignment with Los Lobos.²⁰

Following King Majestic's assassination and the consolidation of the Nueva Generación alliance, prison violence was reduced by half in 2023. However, the assassination of Junior Roldán (alias JR) in May 2023 in Colombia, who, together with Fito, served as one of the two leaders of Los Choneros following the murder of Rasquiña in 2020, strengthened Fito's leadership of Los Choneros and triggered an internal reorganization. The group's new leader announced a peace agreement in July 2023 with Los Tiguerones, Los Fatales, Los Latin Kings, M-18 and Los Chone Killers, which entailed a reconfiguration of alliances, incorporating these groups into a pact with Los Choneros, and also resulted in a reduction in prison violence in Ecuador.²¹

CRIMINAL FRAGMENTATION AND ALLIANCES IN PRISONS



In January 2024, President Daniel Noboa's administration faced a severe security crisis after Los Tiguerones took over a television station and penitentiary guards in several prisons were kidnapped. In response, the president declared a non-international armed conflict, designated 22 organizations as terrorist groups and authorized military intervention in 19 prisons.²²

These measures temporarily reshaped the relationship between the state and organized crime. Under military control, and in a context where criminal organizations appeared to adopt a pacification strategy, prison violence fell to 37 incidents during 2024.

Illicit markets and social control

Criminal governance and the rise of violence in Ecuador are sustained by the power that criminal groups have acquired within prisons. As one source noted, the penitentiary crisis has demonstrated that prison violence 'is a business', enabled by the authority that gangs exercise to regulate economic transactions and social order within these spaces. These activities are organized through an informal financial system known as 'bazaars', through which commissions of around 10% of the total value are charged for each transaction between inmates and their families.

The absence of state authority has allowed prisons to become spaces of economic accumulation for criminal organizations. Penitentiary centres handle substantial sums of money, the magnitude of which varies depending on the size and level of internal control in each prison. These economies also disproportionately burden women – mothers, partners or sisters – who bear the financial costs of men deprived of liberty.

The criminal economy permeates every aspect of prison life. From the moment of entry, inmates, particularly those in pretrial detention, must pay to access cellblocks considered less violent – a function that, in theory, should fall under the National Service for Integral Attention to Adults Deprived of Liberty and Juvenile Offenders (SNAI). For this placement, fees hover around US\$1 500.²³ Subsequently, the so-called 'owners' or administrators of cellblocks charge between US\$200 and US\$300 per bed space, plus US\$10 per week for occupancy,²⁴ and approximately US\$13 extra for cleaning.²⁵

The prison store (*economato*) has also become an important source of illicit income. In women's prisons, for example, a litre of cooking oil, a bag of flour or a can of soda could cost up to US\$20, compared to between US\$0.60 and US\$3 outside. In men's prisons, charges of US\$200 for a mattress,²⁶ US\$5 for a can of soda and up to US\$10 for a loaf of bread have been reported.²⁷

Access to food, despite being a guaranteed right, is also regulated by criminal groups. In some facilities, daily food costs range between US\$5 and US\$10, paid either by families or the inmates themselves through forced labour or sexual exploitation.²⁸ In certain cases, cellblock leaders distribute food or donations from foundations in exchange for loyalty.

Criminal control also extends to access to basic services such as healthcare. In women's prisons, a sanitary pad can cost up to US\$20,²⁹ and a visit to the healthcare unit may require an additional US\$10,³⁰ with no guarantee of receiving medication. Pharmaceuticals are administered by cellblock leaders, who resell them at inflated prices: for example, a paracetamol tablet costs between US\$3 and US\$5, compared to its market value of US\$0.30.³¹

The use of mobile phones constitutes another major illicit economy. Prices vary depending on the type of device and the level of state control: US\$500 to US\$700 per phone in standard prisons and up to

US\$1 500 in those under military control. Additional payments of between US\$20 and US\$40 are often required for permission to use the device or for its protection.³² Following military interventions, sales were replaced by weekly rentals, with rates ranging from US\$7 to US\$17, including top-ups.³³

Telephone calls are also linked to extortion schemes, or *vacunas*. In many cases, leaders lend phones to inmates to communicate with their families, then later use those numbers to extort them – sometimes sending videos of assaults to demand payment, according to an intelligence officer consulted for this research.

Payments in exchange for protection are one of the main sources of income for criminal groups both inside and outside penitentiary centres. Before the prison massacres, families paid around US\$150 for protection; afterwards, rates rose to US\$400 and, by 2025, they reached up to US\$1 500 in the Guayas prison complex.³⁴

The acquisition of weapons and ammunition is another critical component for maintaining coercive power. According to a former official, the cost of bringing a revolver into a prison is approximately US\$4 000, a rifle US\$15 000 and each cartridge around US\$5.

Finally, the illicit drug market is one of the most profitable prison economies. The main substances traded are cocaine base paste, marijuana and cocaine hydrochloride, along with 'H', a mixture of heroin and other toxic substances such as ketamine, which is prevalent in Guayaquil.³⁵ Prices vary according to the sources consulted: a dose of base paste costs between US\$5 and US\$10, 'H' between US\$5 and US\$8, marijuana between US\$10 and US\$20 and cocaine between US\$40 and US\$60, primarily intended for leaders and inmates with higher purchasing power. Each transaction is recorded and reported hierarchically to the prison leaders and, in turn, to the external criminal structures supplying the drugs.

The operation of these illicit markets would not be possible without the complicity of state agents. Sources consulted estimate that between 20% and 30% of the value of illicit transactions is captured by prison guards, police officers, military personnel and prison directors, who participate out of self-interest, coercion or threats, thereby integrating themselves into the value chain of prison-based criminal economies (see section 'Corruption in the prison system').

An Ecuadorian soldier checks a cell for weapons at the Penitenciaría del Litoral. Corruption in the country's prison system extends to the sale of firearms, basic goods, appliances and even mattresses. © John Moore/Getty Images



Placement during prison time	
Access to less violent cellblocks	US\$1 500
Access for bedspace provided by 'owners' or 'administrators' of prison blocks. Usually governed by a criminal group.	US\$200 to US\$300 per week, plus US\$10 per week for occupancy.
Mattress renting	US\$200
Cleaning	US\$13 per week
Daily access to food	US\$5 to US\$10
Visit to healthcare unit	US\$10
Paracetamol tablet	US\$3 to US\$5
Economato (Inmate commissary)	
Cooking oil (litre)	US\$20 each
Bag of flour	
Can of soda	US\$3 in women's prison and US\$5 in men's prison
Loaf of bread	US\$10
Sanitary towels	US\$20
Communications	
Phones	US\$500 to US\$700
Phone weekly rentals	US\$7 to US\$17, including top-ups
Protection and firearms	
Protection inside prisons	US\$150 before prison massacres and US\$400 to US\$1 500 after prison massacres
Revolver	US\$4 000
Rifle	US\$15 000
Cartridge	US\$5 each
Illicit drug market (doses)	
Base paste	US\$5 to US\$10
'H' (heroin mix)	US\$5 to US\$8
Marijuana	US\$10 to US\$20
Cocaine	US\$40 to US\$60
Indirect financial costs	
Payments to prison guards, military personnel, police officers or prison directors.	20% to 30% of the value of the item.
Bazares: A fee-based system that charges for each transaction between prisoners and their families.	10% of the interest on the transferred amount.

FIGURE 2 Approximate cost of services and illicit merchandise provided by criminal groups in Ecuadorian prisons.

SOURCE: Media sources and interviews with former state officers, intelligence personnel and litigators.

Criminal groups have established an internal regulation system that effectively replaces the disciplinary functions of the state. Those who fail to comply with the rules or do not pay the required fees are punished by being transferred to cells known as 'quarantine', where they remain until their families settle the debts.³⁶ In more severe cases, they are sent to the 'matchbox', a cell without ventilation or natural light, where they can remain for days or weeks under inhumane conditions.³⁷

In short, the absence of state control and the consolidation of self-governing structures have transformed prisons into centres of criminal power and extreme dehumanization. The imposed debts, threats and violence deter many inmates – even those serving short sentences – from seeking release from prison for fear of retaliation or an inability to pay the extortion demands.

As a result, the Ecuadorian penitentiary system has become a space where disputes converge between criminal groups. These dynamics, arising from internal fragmentation and the economic benefits of crime, reveal a profound erosion of state authority over prisons and a serious setback in meeting the objectives of social rehabilitation.



PRISON GOVERNANCE: THE CORE OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN ECUADOR

Since 2010, the Ecuadorian government has promoted a punitive state based on ‘tough-on-crime’ policies, including legal reforms, the publication of ‘most wanted’ lists, mass incarceration strategies and the construction of mega-prisons with highly restrictive regimes. While these measures contributed to a reduction in intentional homicides, they also led to a steady increase in the country’s prison population.³⁸

As part of the restructuring of the penitentiary model, the Correa administration, beginning in 2013, sought to strengthen state authority within detention centres through the construction of new centres in Cotopaxi, Azuay and Guayas. These new facilities, inaugurated between May and December of that year, were presented as a ‘historic’ solution to overcrowding, with a projected capacity for 15 000 inmates.³⁹ The model was complemented with distance education programmes and the promise to transform prison management.



Ecuadorian soldiers enter the Penitenciaría del Litoral. Amid the prison security crisis in January 2024, President Daniel Noboa declared a non-international armed conflict and authorized military intervention.
© John Moore/Getty Images

In parallel, the Ministry of Justice initiated the reconstruction of the Penitenciaría del Litoral, intending to turn it into the country's fourth mega-prison. The project, completed in 2015, was designed to house approximately 5 000 inmates, reinforcing the state's commitment to infrastructure modernization and a centralized control model.⁴⁰

However, the results were limited and short-lived. Despite the expansion of prison capacity, the creation of the Penitentiary Guards Training School in 2015 and the establishment of a UIP within the National Police, the overcrowding issue resurfaced within a few years. This revealed that the problem did not lie solely in infrastructure but in structural factors: the hardening of penal policy, the insufficiency of rehabilitation programmes and institutional corruption.

By 2018 – the year intramural violence began – the prison population had nearly tripled in eight years, rising from 14 550 inmates in 2010 to 37 802. Consequently, although overcrowding appeared to decline from 44% to 36% during this period, the prison population rate continued to increase steadily, from 157 per 100 000 inhabitants in 2010 to 275 in 2018.⁴¹ Beyond the structural factors previously noted, the absence of effective strategies to contain prison violence reflects the state's inability to manage the problem, largely a consequence of the mass incarceration policies implemented in Ecuador during those years.

Institutional dismantling and the rise of criminal governance (2017–2020)

Starting in 2017, Ecuador's prison policy began a process of deinstitutionalization that facilitated the consolidation of criminal power within prisons. Former president Lenín Moreno's government ordered the closure of the Prison Guards Training School and adopted an 'express' recruitment system that incorporated former military and police officers with no penitentiary training.⁴² This decision reinforced a military–police model of control rather than a technical and rehabilitative management approach.⁴³

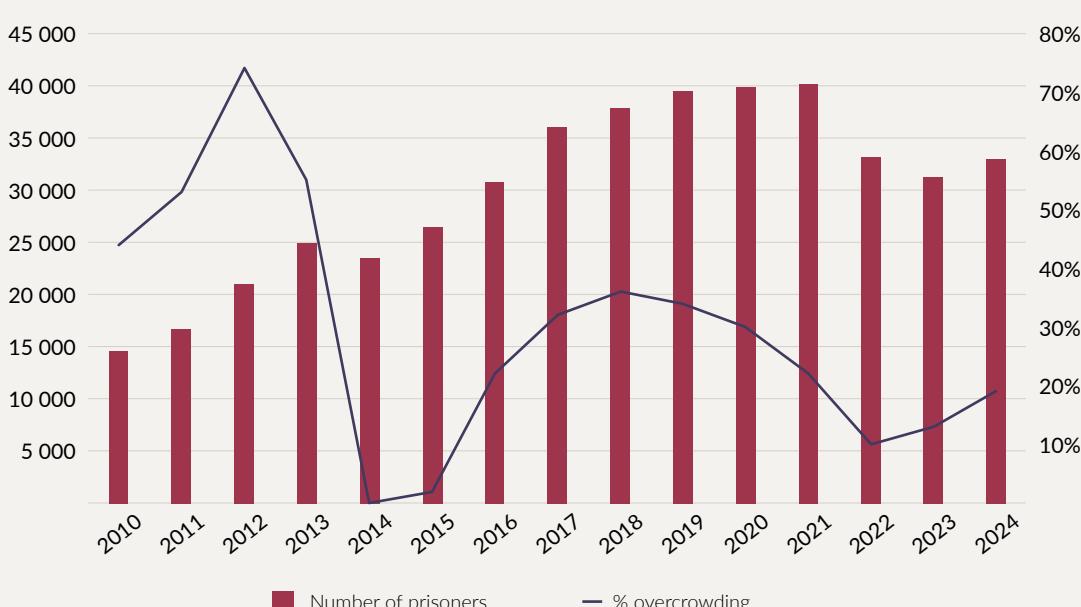


FIGURE 3 Prison population and overcrowding in Ecuador, 2010–2024.

SOURCE: National Service for Comprehensive Care of Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders (2025)

In 2018, the government dismantled the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights as part of a policy aimed at optimizing spending and downsizing. Under Executive Decree 560, it was replaced by SNAI, an entity with limited autonomy and weak capacity for policy design. At the same time, SNAI's budget was cut by 64%, affecting staff hiring, infrastructure maintenance, technological systems used for admissions control and the construction of new prison facilities.⁴⁴

In 2020, following the first prison riots, the Constitutional Court ordered a prison rehabilitation plan. The proposal included the construction of 10 new prisons, the purchase of 9 000 electronic anklets and the hiring of 300 guards annually.⁴⁵ During SNAI's first two years, six directors were appointed to lead the organization. All of them came from police or military backgrounds, either in active service or retired, and had to confront the crisis in a context of budget cuts that significantly constrained the implementation of public policies.⁴⁶

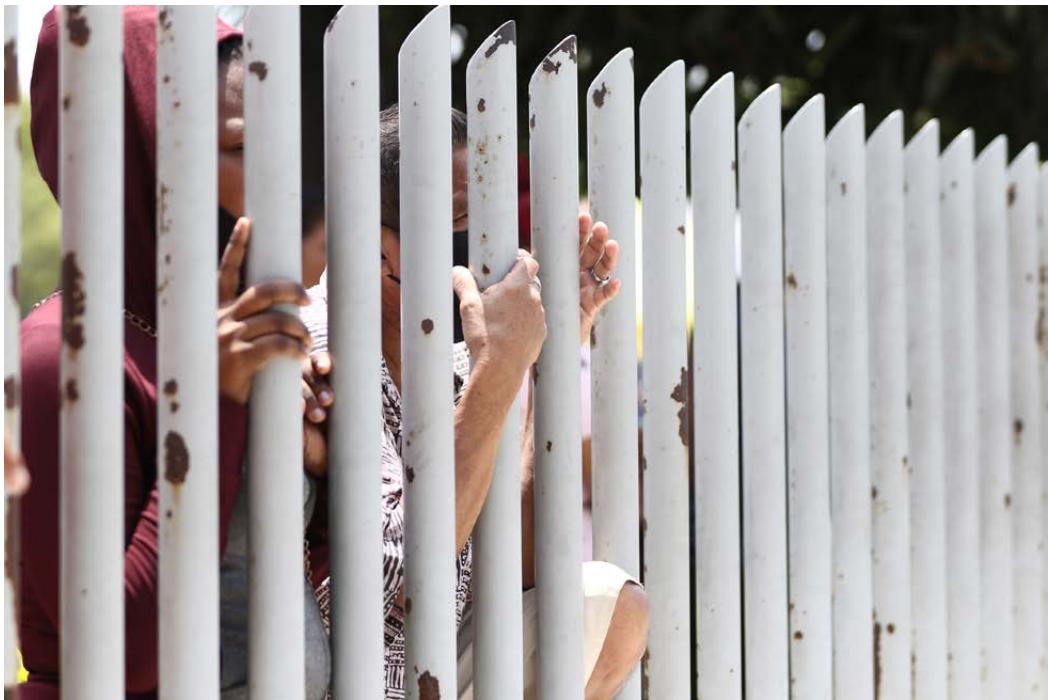
Violent crisis and government responses (2021–2023)

In 2021, former president Guillermo Lasso confronted the most severe prison massacres during his first months in office. Although his administration introduced a new rehabilitation policy based on pardons, education and work programmes,⁴⁷ the government discourse attributed prison violence primarily to drug trafficking activities in Ecuador, without acknowledging the power that criminal groups had acquired inside prisons.

The same year, the Commission for Prison Dialogue and Pacification was created by governmental decision, composed of representatives, religious leaders and national and international civil society experts. Its goal was to establish a road map for improving the prison system and promoting agreements among criminal leaders. However, the process was criticized by a former public official for the 'lack of transparency in the selection of members' and the alleged links of some participants to criminal groups, which undermined its legitimacy.⁴⁸

Between 2021 and 2022, two government decisions further exacerbated prison violence. First, cellblocks were assigned according to gang affiliation, a decision that institutionalized criminal control over the prisons.⁴⁹ Second, the transfer of ringleaders who exercised control over the cellblocks⁵⁰ of one of the country's largest prisons, the Turi Social Rehabilitation Centre, such as Marcelo Anchundia, a member of the R7, and Alexander Quesada, alias Ariel, of Los Lobos, triggered a massacre that left 44 incarcerated individuals dead at Bellavista Prison.⁵¹

Although additional measures were adopted during this period that helped reduce prison overcrowding – such as presidential pardons for inmates who were convicted of minor offences, which lowered overcrowding from 22% to 10% – the broader deinstitutionalization of the system allowed inmates themselves to control access to cells and prison blocks.⁵² This was compounded by constant large-scale inmate transfers, of which there were more than 2 400 in November 2022 alone.⁵³ These practices ultimately strengthened criminal networks and expanded violence beyond prison walls.



Relatives await news after violent clashes between gangs at the Penitenciaría del Litoral in September 2021 left at least 118 inmates dead. In total, 717 people were killed in prison in Ecuador between 2018 and 2024.

© Gerardo Menocal/Agencia Press South/Getty Images

Militarization and punitive populism (2024–2025)

Since 2018, successive governments in Ecuador have repeatedly resorted to states of emergency to justify military intervention in prisons, driven by the pressure to deliver visible results. The crisis reached its peak in January 2024, when newly inaugurated President Noboa declared the existence of a non-international armed conflict following the live takeover of a television station by Los Tiguerones.⁵⁴

The declaration included the designation of 22 groups as terrorist organizations, the deployment of the military to 19 prisons and a shift toward the deployment of military forces for domestic security.⁵⁵ This was accompanied by the construction of two new mega-prisons and the absorption of SNAI by the Ministry of the Interior – the government body responsible for domestic security and the legal representation of the police.⁵⁶

Despite these measures, violence did not subside. In 2024, three prison directors were murdered in the provinces of Manabí, Sucumbíos and Guayas, demonstrating that militarization neither dismantled the power of criminal structures nor ensured the safety of prison personnel.⁵⁷

MAIN PENITENTIARY POLICY INITIATIVES IN ECUADOR AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

	2014	NEW CRIMINAL CODE The new Criminal Code replaced the former Criminal Procedure and Sentencing Execution Codes. It recognized procedural rights and guarantees, expanded criminal offences, increased sentences and established mechanisms for procedural efficiency. Implications: Represented a normative unification of criminal law, incorporating a framework of rights and guarantees, but it also introduced a punitive trend by expanding offences and increasing penalties, which contributed to the growth of the prison population.
2015	CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM The constitutional reform authorized military involvement in state security matters, a function previously reserved exclusively for the police. Implications: Marked a gradual militarization of domestic security, weakening the distinction between national defence and public order, and normalizing the use of the military for internal control functions.	
2018	ABOLITION OF THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE AND CREATION OF SNAI Abolition of the Ministry of Justice and creation of SNAI, accompanied by budget cuts and the closure of the Penitentiary Guards Training School. Implications: Generated an institutional vacuum in prison management, weakened the state's capacity to train specialized personnel and deepened administrative weaknesses.	CONSTRUCTION OF MEGA-PRISONS Creation of three regional centres: Guayas (Penitenciaría del Litoral and La Roca), Azuay (Turi) and Cotopaxi (Latacunga). Implications: Sought to reduce prison overcrowding, but in practice these facilities became centres for the consolidation and contestation of criminal power, with limited effect on restoring systemic control.
2021	COMMISSION FOR PRISON DIALOGUE AND PACIFICATION The commission was tasked with analyzing system failures and designing strategies, plans, programmes and projects to strengthen and pacify the National Rehabilitation System. Implications: Influenced the pacification of groups within prisons, which led to a reconfiguration of criminal alliances with counterproductive effects, reflected in the rise of intentional homicides between 2022 and 2023.	2020 RASQUIÑA IS RELEASED FROM PRISON The leader of Los Choneros, Rasquiña, is released under a highly questionable semi-open regime. Implications: Had significant effects on the country's criminal dynamics. Just six months after gaining his freedom, Rasquiña was killed in a shopping centre in Manta, an event that catalyzed the internal fragmentation of Los Choneros and triggered a reconfiguration of criminal leadership in Ecuador.
2024	MILITARIZATION OF PRISON CONTROL Decree 111 declared a non-international armed conflict and granted the military direct control over the prison system. Implications: Represented a hardening of criminal policy and a structural dependency on military force for prison management, posing risks to human rights and institutional sustainability.	2022 REOPENING OF LA ROCA PRISON Reopening of the maximum-security prison that closed in 2013 after several high-profile escapes (such as Rasquiña and Fito). Implications: An attempt to regain control over high-risk leaders, although with limited results, as gangs continued to maintain criminal networks. TRANSFER OF GANG LEADERS Relocation of Los Lobos and R7 leaders to different prisons and the assignment of specific cellblocks. Implications: A containment strategy aimed at reducing internal violence, although it backfired by expanding criminal influence networks to other penitentiary centres. PRESIDENTIAL PARDONS The administration granted pardons to persons deprived of liberty who had been convicted of minor offences. Implications: Reduced the prison population and lowered overcrowding from 22% in 2022 to 10% in 2023.



THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Understanding the evolution of criminal governance in Ecuador's prisons requires examining how state institutions have simultaneously failed to contain corruption and, at times, actively engaged in practices that empower criminal actors. On one hand, structural weaknesses within the prison system have transformed penitentiaries into centres of illicit economies and criminal control. On the other, strategies aimed at reducing violence – such as granting privileges to informants in exchange for intelligence – blurred the line between law enforcement and collusion, creating a cycle of dependency on criminal leaders. Together, these dynamics reveal how state actions and omissions have deepened the entrenchment of organized crime both inside and beyond prison walls.

Corruption in the prison system

The rise of William Joffre Alcívar Bautista (alias Comandante Willy) of Los Tigueros – a notorious criminal group known for its involvement in the January 2024 live takeover of a television channel – illustrates how structural corruption in the penitentiary system has long facilitated the consolidation of criminal leadership inside prisons and reinforced the connection between intramural governance and street-level operations.

Since beginning work as a prison guard at the Guayas regional prison in 2012, and subsequently at the Penitenciaría del Litoral, Willy exploited the dynamics of cellblock trading to insert himself into the prison's criminal economy.⁵⁸ By smuggling mobile phones, SIM cards and firearms, he gradually consolidated a criminal structure with the acquiescence of Rasquiña, the former leader of Los Choneros. This was not an isolated phenomenon: the group itself granted cellblock owners and allied factions broad autonomy, which contributed to greater fragmentation and prison violence years later.⁵⁹

Willy's case illustrates the interaction between institutional corruption and criminal governance. Practices such as smuggling and control of the *economato* have historically been recurrent in Ecuadorian prisons, and with the increase in the prison population since 2015, they became the core of an illicit prison economy that the state still does not fully recognize as a structural problem.

According to a former state official, during the years of greatest crisis, 'there was no logistical control or accountability for product transactions'.⁶⁰ This lack of oversight enabled the emergence of extortion networks that charged families for the entry of basic items, manipulated food quotas and favoured certain groups in the purchase of goods.

In a report by the IACHR, the state acknowledged the severity of corruption linked to the smuggling of goods and the irregular use of the *economato*.⁶¹ However, it attributed responsibility to the contracting companies in charge of food and water supply in the prisons, without recognizing the institutional co-option that enables these practices.

Corruption ranges from the irregular entry of basic goods, mattresses, appliances and food to the introduction of weapons, drugs and prohibited items. In many cases, these practices are facilitated through the intimidation or co-option of prison guards, strengthening the power of criminal groups and their control over the prison economy.

Following the prison massacres of 2021, control of the *economato* fell into the hands of criminal organizations, which set prices,⁶² decided who could purchase items and determined which products circulated.⁶³ As a result, the *economato* ceased to serve its original purpose and instead became a central component of extortion and control, exacerbating inequality and violence within Ecuadorian prisons.

The situation is compounded by the opacity in awarding public contracts for water and food services. Investigative journalism and audits have revealed that companies linked to criminal groups secured multi-million-dollar contracts through extensions and uncompetitive processes. During the first months of Noboa's administration, one of the food supply companies was accused of maintaining links with Los Choneros.⁶⁴ However, these claims did not advance to a judicial process resulting in a conviction. Meanwhile, the Prosecutor's Office alleged that suppliers close to the group's leader, Fito, participated in state contracts for water supply, using shell companies and family members as intermediaries to divert public funds to criminal networks.⁶⁵

The corruption scheme reached critical institutional levels in 2022. The 'Metástasis' case revealed how Leandro Norero (alias El Patrón), financier of the Nueva Generación alliance, obtained undue prison privileges – such as placement in certain cellblocks – through payments to the then-director of the Anti-Drug Police and SNAI.⁶⁶ The former police general received a prison sentence of nine years and four months for organized crime.⁶⁷ Other incidents involved prison directors being arrested after rifles, explosives, ammunition and cash were found within the Guayaquil prison complex.⁶⁸

Although investigations led to the detention of officials, many cases were weakened by procedural errors, highlighting the fragility of oversight mechanisms and the state's limited capacity to sustain robust judicial cases.

Corruption has also manifested in high-profile prison escapes, with officials and security personnel suspected of complicity. The case of Rolando Gómez Quinde (alias Fede), leader of Las Águilas, exemplifies this dynamic: his 2025 escape was not solely due to infrastructure failures, but involved the alleged participation of military personnel and prison staff, including a female guard.⁶⁹ Similarly, Fito escaped for a second time from the regional prison of Guayaquil under unclear circumstances.⁷⁰ These escapes mirror previous patterns, such as the escape of Rasquiña and Fito's brother, Javi, in 2013, which prompted the closure of the maximum-security prison La Roca.

Corruption in Ecuador's prisons has not only weakened institutional authority but also consolidated a criminal governance structure that reproduces violence, expands the economic influence of criminal organizations and displaces the state from its regulatory role. These dynamics reveal how prison administration has ultimately become subordinate to the interests of organized crime.

The risks of granting prison benefits in exchange for intelligence

Between 2010 and 2016, Ecuador reduced its homicide rate to historically low levels, dropping from 17 to 5.8 per 100 000 inhabitants. This decline was partly attributed to the Correa administration's introduction of a new Criminal Code, police reform, the strengthening of community policing, and the implementation of new institutional performance targets for the police and the judicial system accompanied by a significant budget increase for equipment and infrastructure.⁷¹

However, the evolution of criminal governance in the country cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between criminal actors and the state. In 2015, in an effort to keep homicide rates low, the police created the UIP, intending to collect information within prisons to prevent the escalation of intramural violence and its potential spread to the streets, particularly in Guayaquil. While similar mechanisms exist in other countries, in Ecuador this was characterized by the absence of democratic oversight over granting privileges to prison informants.

Since its creation, and according to sources consulted for this report, the UIP established a network of informants among inmates and criminal leaders, including Rasquiña, to contain violence both inside and outside prison. This system included negotiations over inmate transfers between cellblocks or prisons, as well as other prison benefits,⁷² in exchange for information on drug transactions or the movements of 'leaders'.

What began as an informal practice evolved into a systematic model of collaboration, giving rise to a perverse criminal intelligence system based on privileges granted to leaders of criminal organizations. UIP officers recruited informants and classified them according to their usefulness: some were simple intermediaries who transmitted rumours, while others, holding higher hierarchical positions, provided strategic information.

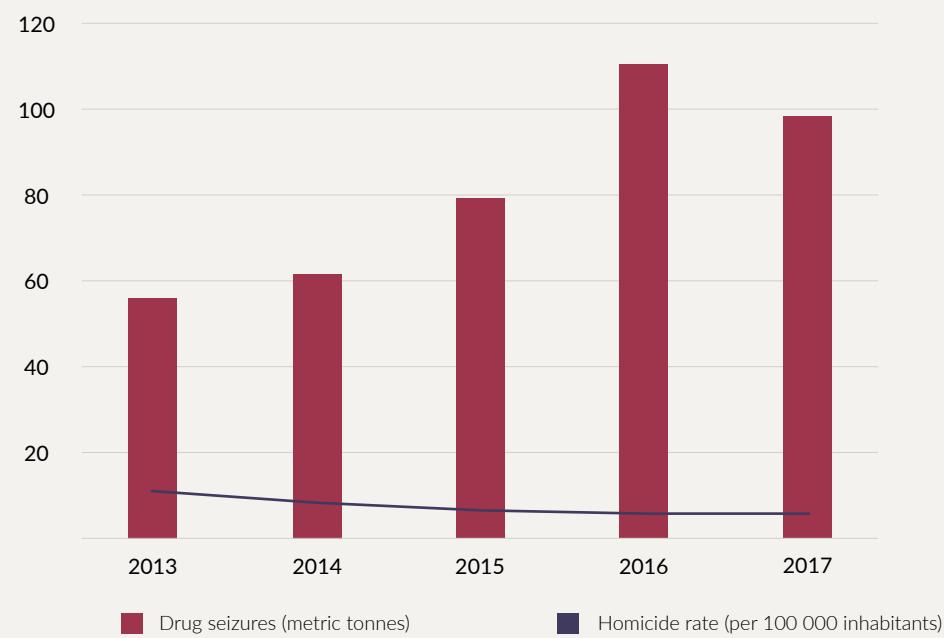


FIGURE 4 Drug seizures and homicide rates in Ecuador, 2013–2017.

NOTE: While drug seizures increased in Ecuador, the rate of intentional homicides decreased significantly. This strategy facilitated the achievement of some of the most visible and politically significant police performance targets during Rafael Correa's administration.

SOURCE: Ecuadorian National Police (2024)

This scheme exacerbated the lack of institutional control and corruption among prison guards and UIP officials, facilitating alliances between state agents and criminal groups. Several local leaders with international ties strengthened connections with members of the security forces by exchanging favours for information. A notable case was that of Albanian drug trafficker Dritan Rexhepi of the criminal group Kompania Bello, who was detained in the Latacunga Regional Centre, where he shared space with Rasquiña. Rexhepi was able to continue operations in alliance with Los Choneros to ship cocaine to Europe.⁷³

In addition to containing violence, the pact with informants involved gathering intelligence on drug trafficking routes. This dynamic created a feedback loop between the consolidation of criminal groups and police success metrics, which contributed to an exponential increase in drug seizures between 2013 and 2017 and a reduction in homicide rates.

Collaboration with informants became one of the primary strategies for Los Choneros to consolidate a hegemonic penitentiary criminal governance model. The mass incarceration of young people – many of whom were unaware of traditional prison codes, such as the pact not to cooperate with the police – transformed the penitentiary ecosystem. The emergence of Los Tigueros, led by a former prison guard, and the presence of a police officer alongside Fito during a statement issued by the leader of Los Choneros from the Guayas regional prison in July 2023 illustrate the blurring of boundaries between inside and outside prison, as well as between the state and organized crime.⁷⁴

The UIP's outcomes lie at the core of the penitentiary system's transformation, shifting it from being a detention space to one focused on recruiting criminal informants. In its pursuit of results in drugs control and homicide reduction, the intelligence system incentivized active collaboration with criminal leaders in exchange for privileges, strengthening criminal organizations within prisons and weakening the state's ability to control intramural violence.

Consequently, the criminal groups that emerged inside prisons expanded their networks to the streets, contesting the state's authority. This expansion reflects a criminal business model based on franchises, where neighbourhood gangs operate on behalf of prison organizations, generating a cycle of violence, extortion and social domination that transcends penitentiary walls.

In July 2023, José Adolfo Macías Villamar (alias Fito), the incarcerated leader of Los Choneros, released a video message calling for peace within the prison system.

Photo: Screengrab from Ecuador Comunicación on YouTube





CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Ecuador's penitentiary crisis reveals not merely administrative dysfunction but the consolidation of a parallel order in which criminal groups have assumed core state functions. The progressive erosion of institutional capacity – accelerated by punitive overreach, chronic corruption and the dismantling of specialized oversight – has allowed prison-based organizations to transform detention centres into strategic nodes of criminal governance. What emerged after the fragmentation of Los Choneros was not a temporary surge of disorder but a structural reconfiguration of power: prisons became arenas where armed groups regulated daily life, enforced coercive norms, managed lucrative economies and projected influence into urban and border territories.

The state's responses – oscillating between militarization, intelligence bargains and late-stage counterterrorism designations – have largely reinforced this governance arrangement. By formalizing gang territoriality through block assignments, trading institutional privileges for intelligence cooperation and deploying the military without addressing the political economy of prison control, governments have deepened the very dynamics they sought to contain. The result is a hybrid system of authority in which criminal organizations operate as de facto custodians, integrating illicit markets, public procurement and external operations into a coherent and profitable structure.

The Ecuadorian case illustrates a critical shift: criminal governance in prisons has evolved from a symptom of state weakness into a consolidated framework of criminal state capture. This configuration endures because it aligns incentives across actors – criminal groups profit from markets within and outside prisons, while corrupt officials benefit from their value chains. Under these conditions, periodic crackdowns or exceptional measures cannot restore order. Instead, they may disrupt surface-level violence but leave intact the institutional architecture that sustains criminal authority.

A sustainable reversal demands more than the restoration of custodial control. It requires dismantling the structural incentives that make prisons profitable territories for organized crime, rebuilding the specialized capacities hollowed out over the past decade, and insulating security and intelligence institutions from political interference and criminal capture. Without confronting these foundations, Ecuador's prison system will continue to reproduce the governance deficits, armed violence and market structures that define the country's broader criminal landscape.

Ecuador's prisons have become the backbone of national criminal governance. Unless the state reclaims authority and integrity inside these institutions, any broader security policy will remain fundamentally compromised.

Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to help Ecuadorian policymakers restore state authority, reduce violence and dismantle entrenched criminal governance in the country's penitentiary system. They emphasize strengthening oversight, regulating internal prison economies and aligning prison management with broader security and rehabilitation strategies.

■ **Implement a comprehensive social rehabilitation policy**

- Establish minimum standards of rights and access to essential services – including food, healthcare, education and work – to prevent criminal groups from monopolizing these resources as mechanisms of control.
- Promote education and vocational training programmes that facilitate social reintegration and reduce economic dependence on illicit prison economies.
- Develop productive and cooperative projects that connect training inside prisons with formal employment opportunities upon release.
- Encourage self-sufficiency and state-regulated productive systems to reduce inmates' reliance on criminal actors for basic subsistence.

■ **Strengthen oversight, accountability and anti-corruption mechanisms**

- Create strict supervision protocols for guards, directors, SNAI personnel and external contractors, establishing clear performance and integrity standards.
- Establish permanent auditing and sanctioning mechanisms to detect and address corruption, abuse of power and collusion with criminal groups.
- Integrate independent oversight bodies, including civil society and academia, to ensure transparency in management and procurement processes.

■ **Redesign the allocation of inmates based on risk and institutional capacity**

- Prioritize small- and medium-sized prisons with manageable populations and demonstrably better control environments, rather than relying on overcrowded mega-prisons with weak governability.
- Ensure that redistribution processes are guided by state-defined security and rehabilitation criteria, not by pacts or de facto privileges granted by criminal leaders.
- Incorporate multidisciplinary risk assessments that consider social cohesion, group dynamics and potential for violence escalation.

■ **Regulate the prison store (economato) and internal resource flows**

- Establish a transparent, state-managed and independently supervised system for the provision of goods and services, eliminating criminal intermediaries.
- Guarantee equitable access to basic goods, reducing extortion dynamics and limiting the internal economies that sustain criminal governance.
- Standardize pricing, procurement and distribution mechanisms, with oversight from external auditing institutions.

■ **Limit risks associated with penitentiary intelligence units**

- Implement democratic oversight frameworks to ensure transparency and prevent abuses, especially the excessive use of informants or collaborators that may inadvertently empower criminal leaders.
- Separate intelligence gathering from operational management and rehabilitation functions to avoid conflicts of interest.
- Establish coordination protocols with judicial authorities to prevent selective intelligence use for political purposes or internal prison negotiations.

- **Integrate prison governance reforms with broader political and community security strategies**
 - Develop a clear state narrative that frames prison governance reform as a democratic and rule-of-law priority, rather than episodic crisis response or politically instrumentalized security discourse.
 - Rebuild trust in state institutions through transparent communication, community engagement and expanded civilian oversight mechanisms.
 - Implement community-level violence prevention programmes – especially in neighbourhoods with high interaction between prison-based groups and local youth – to reduce recruitment pipelines that sustain criminal governance.
- **Strengthen coordination with regional and multilateral mechanisms**
 - Leverage regional and international platforms to share intelligence, monitor regional criminal dynamics and develop coordinated responses to cross-border networks that directly influence prison governance.
 - Promote regional standards on detention conditions, anti-corruption frameworks and the management of high-risk inmates to prevent transnational criminal groups from exploiting institutional weaknesses.
 - Encourage policy alignment between Ecuador, neighbouring countries and multilateral organizations to reduce political fragmentation that benefits prison-based criminal organizations.
- **Disrupt long-term criminal governance and its political connections**
 - Strengthen institutional firewalls between penitentiary management and political processes by prohibiting the use of prison privileges, transfers or intelligence operations as electoral bargaining tools.
 - Implement integrity screenings and anti-capture mechanisms for public officials involved in penitentiary administration, security procurement and inmate classification.
 - Establish long-term, cross-administration policy frameworks to reduce the capacity of criminal groups to exploit changes in government.
- **Reduce dependence on pretrial detention and improve management of pretrial inmates**
 - Prioritize alternative measures to detention for low-risk defendants – such as supervised release, electronic monitoring or community-based measures – to reduce overcrowding and limit the exposure of unconvicted prisoners to criminal governance structures.
 - Create dedicated facilities or separate wings for pretrial detainees, ensuring that they are not placed under the control or influence of criminal groups that dominate general population wings.
 - Expedite judicial processing through increased staffing, digital case management and coordinated efforts between judges, prosecutors and public defenders to prevent prolonged pretrial detention that inadvertently strengthens prison group recruitment.
 - Guarantee that pretrial detainees receive protection from coercion, extortion or forced affiliation by ensuring consistent state presence and routine monitoring.



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