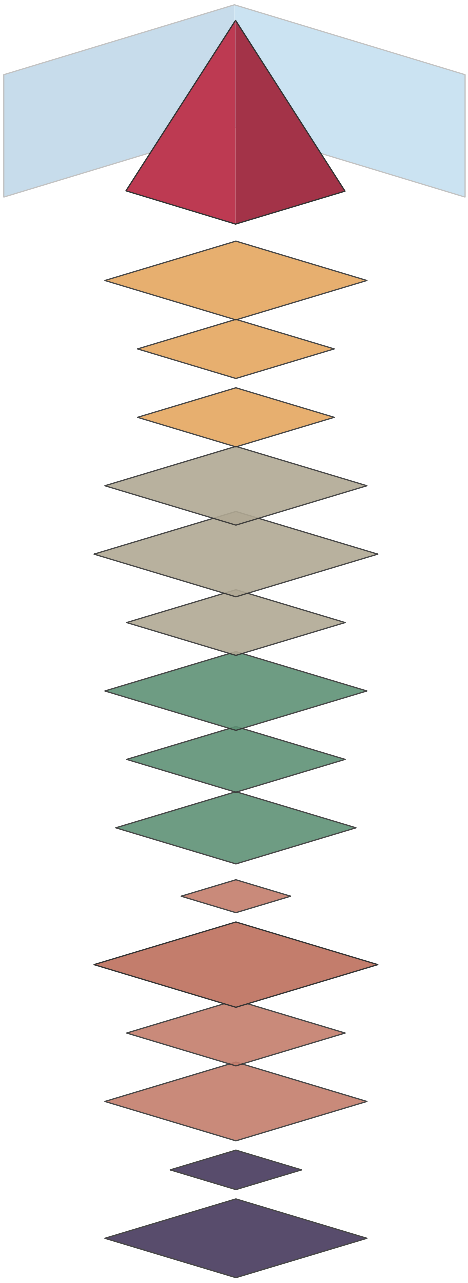
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

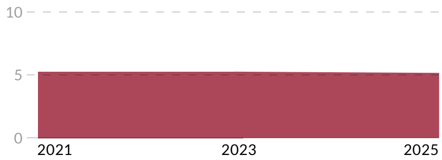
BENIN



5.15 ↘0.17

CRIMINALITY SCORE

93rd of 193 countries ↘12
30th of 54 African countries ↘4
11th of 15 West African countries ↘2



CRIMINAL MARKETS	5.20	↘0.23
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	6.00	↘0.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	4.50	↗0.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	4.50	↗0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	6.00	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.50	↘0.50
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	5.00	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	6.00	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	5.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	5.50	↗0.50
HEROIN TRADE	2.50	↘2.00
COCAINE TRADE	6.50	↘0.50
CANNABIS TRADE	5.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	6.00	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	3.00	↘1.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	5.10	↘0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	↘1.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.00	↗0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	8.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	4.50	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

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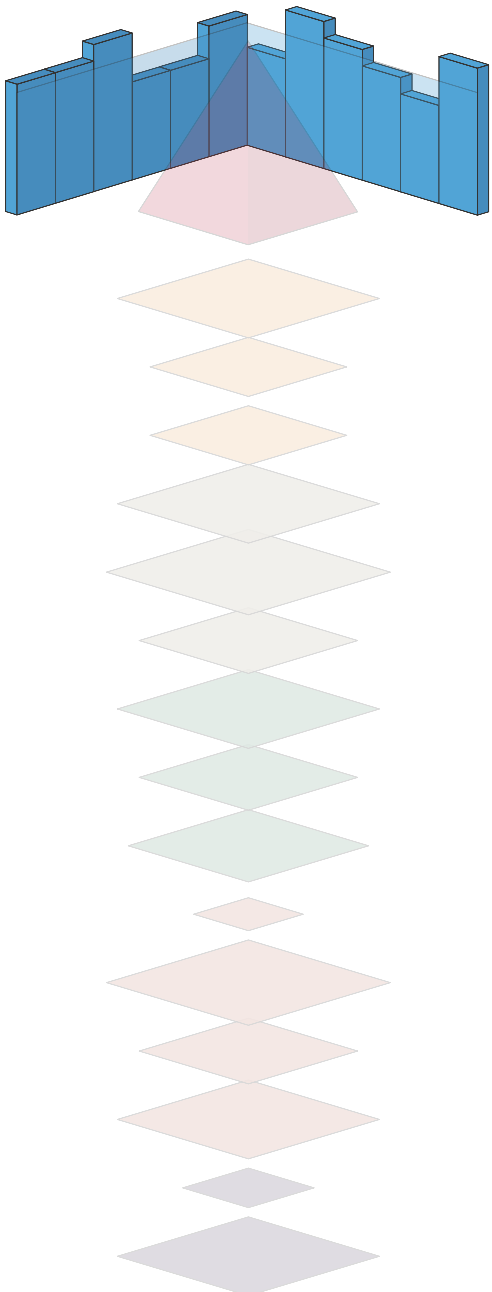
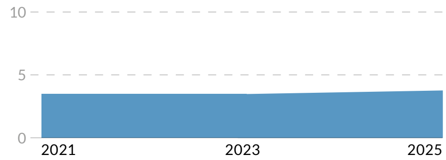
BENIN



3.75 ↗0.25

RESILIENCE SCORE

143rd of 193 countries ↗3
27th of 54 African countries ↗2
9th of 15 West African countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4.00	↗0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	4.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	4.50	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	3.00	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	3.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	4.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	3.00	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	4.50	↗0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.00	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	3.50	↗0.50
PREVENTION	3.00	↗1.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	4.50	↗0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains commonplace in Benin. The country serves as a source, transit hub and destination for smuggled people. Children from impoverished backgrounds and without identity documents, particularly in rural areas, are most at risk. Victims are typically promised education or work by relatives or people in their community, leading to sexual exploitation or forced labour in domestic service, agriculture, market trading or artisanal work. While trafficking is predominantly internal, Benin is also a source and transit country for international trafficking. Beninese victims, including children, have been sent to the Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Gabon and the Gulf states. In turn, children from Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger, are often sent to Northern Benin where they are subjected to forced begging. Women trafficked for sexual exploitation frequently transit through Benin from Nigeria, en route to gold mining areas in Mali and Senegal. Cases of forced labour involving workers from as far afield as Thailand and North Korea underscores the global dimension Beninese trafficking. Perpetrators vary from organized criminal networks to individual actors, many of whom are former trafficking victims themselves. Common participants in the exploitation include farmers, traders, artisans, civil servants and Quranic schools forcing students to beg.

People smuggling in Benin is comparatively underdeveloped and remains a low-level, low-profit and (largely) non-violent market. As a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Benin allows the free movement of ECOWAS nationals across its borders and people without documents are also able to cross by bribing officials, such as at the Benin–Togo border. This removes some of the need for formal smuggling networks, but migration – both voluntary and irregular – through Benin still creates opportunities for traffickers. Benin acts as an informal transit hub for irregular migration from Nigeria to North Africa and Europe. One of the main overland smuggling corridors passes through the Seme border, proceeding north through Burkina Faso or Niger, and on to Libya or Algeria. Smuggling routes from Ghana and Togo likewise traverse Benin. Since April 2023, when increased insecurity in the Sahel disrupted bus routes between Burkina Faso and Niger, northern Benin has become a key transit zone for migrants trying to reach Europe. The closure of the Malanville–Gaya bridge in July 2023 following the military coup in Niger, was only a temporary disruption. After a Beninese crackdown on informal transport and travel across the Niger River in May 2024 failed to stem the flow, it became clear that the migrant smuggling industry had simply adapted and profited from the surge in prices.

Extortion, including kidnapping for ransom and illegal taxation by violent extremist organizations is a major problem. The influx of groups from Burkina Faso and Niger has significantly impacted security in the northern departments of Atacora and Alibori. Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), have increasingly levied zakat (an Islamic tax) on communities in the W–Arly–Pendjari (WAP) national park complex which straddles the tri-border of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger. Other criminal groups are active, often targeting wealthy pastoralists further south in the Borgou and Plateau regions. Kidnappings are rife, with armed groups transporting victims by motorcycle through forests and rivers into Nigeria and leaving Nigerian phone numbers with the victims' families for ransom negotiations.

TRADE

Arms trafficking is a consistent and concerning issue in Benin. Internal demand is largely driven by extremist groups like JNIM in the north. At the same time, civilians – particularly vulnerable traders such as cross-border herders – seek weapons for self-defence. The criminal networks involved in the arms trade operate across borders, with supply chains spanning Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana and Nigeria. Given the ease with which they allow groups like JNIM to move between countries, the national parks in northern Benin, forming part of the WAP complex, are the primary conduit for illicit arms and other equipment.

The trade in counterfeit goods, particularly counterfeit medicines and adulterated alcohol (known locally as sodabi), remains widespread. Benin is primarily a destination country due to high local demand, driven by limited access to affordable, legitimate pharmaceuticals. The Danktopa market and clandestine pharmacies of Cotonou are well-known centres for the counterfeit medicine trade, with products mainly sourced from India, Pakistan and China, as well as Europe. Many counterfeit medicines are smuggled across the border from Nigeria, often in disguised packaging, and sold discreetly to trusted customers. The WAP complex has also been used by violent extremist groups to bring in medicines for their fighters. Counterfeit luxury watches are also commonly sold, reflecting an ongoing demand for affordable replicas, and Benin holds a prominent position in EU-bound counterfeit shipments. Despite their efforts, enforcement is hampered by insufficient resources in customs and policing units.

Illicit trade in excise goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, is commonplace, driven by porous borders and limited enforcement. Benin acts as both a transit and destination country for smuggled tobacco products. Routes often run from Libya and Algeria through Benin to neighbouring countries like Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Mali. The majority of participants are small-scale traffickers from Benin and neighbouring countries. Smugglers tend to use motorcycles for road transport and, to a lesser extent, pirogues and barges to navigate inland waterways. Benin is therefore also an important transit point for the illicit trade in motorbikes – a key operational resource for militant groups operating in the north – which enter the country through the port of Cotonou.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes remain an issue in Benin, but the extent of illegal logging in the country is considerably less than in the 2000s and 2010s, when there was a surge in deforestation. Nowadays, flora crimes are not perceived to be as big an issue in Benin as other environmental crimes such the trade in protected animals. Nevertheless, the rosewood trade is still strong, with significant demand emanating from China. Illegal logging is prevalent in areas like Park W, where extremist activity is on the rise, contributing to environmental degradation and fuelling instability by financing armed groups.

Poaching and trafficking of endangered species, continue to pose risks to biodiversity and conservation. Pangolins are among the most trafficked species, driven by traditional medicine markets in China and local beliefs regarding their medicinal and social value. Elephant ivory, lion fat and panther skin are also targeted, particularly within the WAP complex. Wildlife trafficking routes often pass through Cotonou, which serves as a regional hub thanks to its seaport and airport. Violent extremist groups indirectly benefit from poaching, occasionally collaborating with hunters or offering protection in exchange for resources. Despite support from international NGOs, conservation efforts are hampered by counterterrorism operations and alleged corruption within the water and forest services.

Non-renewable resource crimes mainly take the form of fuel smuggling, and, to a lesser extent, illicit gold mining. Fuel smuggling is pervasive, with illicit fuel making up the vast majority of the market. Again Benin acts as a transit country – cheap fuel is smuggled in small containers by motorcycle from Nigeria and routed through Benin to Burkina Faso, Togo, Niger and Mali. Although fuel prices in Nigeria have increased since the removal of the fuel subsidy in 2023, prices there remain lower than those in Benin, and thus the financial incentive for cross-border smuggling remains. Fuel is also illicitly supplied to armed groups operating in the WAP complex, primarily by locals in towns and villages on the outskirts of the parks. This does not necessarily indicate ideological support – armed groups are willing to pay far higher prices and profit is a strong incentive for local fuel traders. Gold mining, on the other hand, is concentrated in the Atacora region, particularly in Kouatena, Gnagnamou and Tchantangou. Illegal mining often occurs in areas devoid of regulatory oversight and is associated with environmental degradation and drug consumption, including Tramadol and cannabis. Artisanal miners include both locals and migrant workers from neighbouring countries. Violent extremist groups profit from the trade by taxing miners and offering protection.

DRUGS

The cocaine trade is well established, with Benin acting primarily as a transit hub for bulk maritime shipments from South America to Europe or Western Asia, or northbound overland trafficking routes bisecting the Sahel. Cotonou is a central node, with traffickers concealing drugs in cargo shipments and forged shipping documents to disguise their origins. The Seme border also facilitates overland trafficking between Nigeria and Ghana through Benin.

The cannabis trade is widespread and intensifying, particularly in northern regions. Cannabis is cultivated locally in Atacora and Donga, and often sold by producers' spouses, before being trafficked to neighbouring countries including Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria. Extremist groups operating in the north are reported have become involved in the trade. Since 2020, growing volumes of cannabis resin have been trafficked by sea from Morocco to the Gulf of Guinea using a range of non-containerized vessels, including go-fasts, which drop their cargo along the West African coastline, with Benin among the key countries of disembarkation. Domestic consumption is widespread, especially among young people, miners and agricultural workers. Cannabis holds cultural relevance and is used in traditional medicine and rituals.

The synthetic drug trade, especially Tramadol and methamphetamines, is well established. Benin is a significant transit and import hub for Tramadol, which mainly arrives from India. After entering through key areas such as Malanville, Cotonou and Porto Novo, the drug is trafficked through the postal system and on small boats across the Niger River, especially since the Niger–Benin border closure. Domestic users include miners, farm workers and transport workers. Methamphetamine trafficking is also rising, with Benin accounting for a large share of West African seizures in recent years. Ephedrine, a precursor chemical, is also trafficked from Ghana through Benin towards Nigerian methamphetamine laboratories.

By contrast, the heroin trade in Benin is relatively limited in scale. While there have been some seizures in the last few years, domestic use appears low, and the market is not as developed as with other drugs.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime is a significant concern in Benin, with a rise in incidents driven by the country's growing digitalization. Authorities have designated cybercrime as a national security threat and law enforcement operations and arrests have intensified in recent years. However, the data does not clearly differentiate between cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled crimes, making it difficult to accurately assess the scale of the issue. Most cyber-related offenses appear to take the form of cyber-enabled financial crimes. Despite growing concerns, the available data indicates that Benin is not among the most severely affected countries.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Benin is host to a wide range of financial crimes, encompassing cyber-enabled fraud, tax evasion and embezzlement. Online fraudsters, known locally as 'gayman', create fake identities on social media to solicit money. Tax evasion and avoidance by multinational corporations remains an issue, involving methods such as 'transfer mispricing' and 'thin capitalization' (where a company's debt, shares or purchases are transferred between related entities to minimize its tax exposure), and 'treaty shopping' (operating out of another country to exploit its double taxation treaty with the Beninese government). Embezzlement of public funds is also widespread and it is common for project funds to be disbursed without any results, indicating systemic weaknesses in financial governance.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

There are no notable mafia-style groups operating in Benin in the conventional sense. Benin's organized crime landscape is characterized by loosely affiliated criminal networks rather than rigid hierarchical structures. These groups are involved in a variety of illicit markets, such as arms, fuel, gold, wildlife and human trafficking. The WAP complex is a hub for these activities, due in part to the limited access to formal markets for the surrounding population. These criminal networks often intersect with violent extremist groups, which rely on illicit flows for financial and logistical support. For example, arms trafficking networks reportedly supply weapons to violent extremist organizations in the north.

State-embedded actors enable several criminal markets in Benin, particularly at the lower levels of government. Civil servants have been implicated in human trafficking, especially in the 'vidomegon' practice, which involves sending children to wealthier families for educational or vocational opportunities who then subject the children to forced labour or sex trafficking. Fuel and drug smuggling operations have benefited from the complicity of state officials and security forces, who reportedly levy unofficial taxes on transporters. State-embedded actors have also engaged in financial crimes, including embezzlement and fraudulent disbursement of funds.

Foreign actors exert considerable influence on Benin's criminal landscape and Nigerian criminals remain dominant across several illicit markets. Nigerian smuggling networks work with Beninese counterparts to move people through Benin toward North Africa and Europe. Nigerians are also heavily involved in the illicit fuel trade – sourcing cheaper product from border towns in Nigeria for illegal resale in Benin – as well as in cyber-enabled fraud. A migrant smuggling network from Niger is also reported to be active. Chinese-funded logging operations have been linked to environmental crimes, and foreign violent extremist groups, such as JNIM, have established strategic bases in Benin's northern regions. JNIM exploits illicit markets, including gold and fuel smuggling, arms trafficking, fauna crime, as well as extortion as part of their broader governance strategy. As the activities of these foreign groups have expanded in Benin, there has been a corresponding escalation in violence.

Private sector actors in Benin are increasingly involved in financial crimes, particularly tax evasion. This is compounded by widespread corruption among customs officials and in government procurement. Added to this, a perceived nexus between certain private-sector actors and the political elite has created an air of impunity and undermined anti-corruption efforts. These dynamics have helped to integrate of criminal activity into the formal economy, particularly in the trade and financial sectors.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Benin's political leadership has attempted to tackle organized crime but, partly because of recent democratic backsliding, it has proved resilient. In recent years, Benin has sought to fight transnational organized crime and terrorism through international cooperation, even as its domestic governance has deteriorated. The latest parliamentary elections created a window of opportunity, with opposition parties returning to parliament after a four-year absence, but this nascent liberalization remains fragile. In March 2023, electoral laws were amended to increase representation thresholds and restrict candidate sponsorship – a move which drew criticism for entrenching the dominance of the ruling party. Nevertheless, addressing internal security threats is at the forefront of the political agenda. The northern regions have experienced escalating violence linked to violent extremist groups, particularly JNIM. The government has demonstrated military resolve in countering these groups but has had limited success. In the WAP complex, for instance, criminal actors and extremist militants have an arrangement whereby the latter allow the former to continue operating in exchange for fuel, motorbikes, foodstuffs and medicine. Security challenges have been compounded by episodes of political tension, leading to the arrests of several high-profile political and business people. Such incidents have raised concerns over authoritarian practices and the use of security institutions to suppress dissent. Although Benin was previously considered a stable democracy, recent developments point toward increasing centralization of power.

To boost government transparency and accountability, Benin has established a specialized court to adjudicate on corruption, drug trafficking and terrorism cases. However, its effectiveness is contested, and it faces criticism for allegedly targeting political opponents and journalists. While civil society organizations advocate for good governance and citizen oversight, corruption remains widespread. The revocation of asset declaration requirements for politicians and greater restrictions on information access, for example, suggest that transparency has regressed.

International cooperation is an area of relative strength. Benin is party to most major conventions on organized crime and maintains constructive relationships with multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, African Union and ECOWAS. The country has participated in cross-border anti-trafficking initiatives with Gabon, Nigeria, Togo and the Republic of the Congo, and engaged in coordinated repatriation efforts for criminals. Under the Global Fragility Act, Benin receives targeted support for law enforcement, justice sector reforms and border community resilience. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime has supported several initiatives, including training programmes for magistrates and investigators on firearms trafficking and synthetic drugs, and has facilitated joint investigation teams with Burkina Faso. Other partnerships have targeted environmental crimes, asset recovery and cybersecurity, including Benin's ratification of both the Malabo and Budapest conventions. However, a diplomatic dispute with the leader of the Nigerien military junta – which began in 2023 and continued throughout 2024 – has led to a breakdown in collaboration between the two countries over violent extremism, criminal actors and trafficking across their shared border.

Benin's legal framework deals with various forms of organized crime, with only few changes in recent years. Efforts have been made to close loopholes including a tax law introducing stricter anti-avoidance and transfer pricing rules. The legal framework was further strengthened by the ratification of the Malabo Convention on cybersecurity and personal data protection. Nonetheless, some gaps remain. For example, Beninese law does not provide formal legal alternatives to deportation for trafficking victims at risk of retribution.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Benin's judiciary consists of multiple levels of courts and specialized institutions, which handle economic, drug and terrorism offenses. Despite the presence of specialized units, the judiciary struggles with institutional independence and capacity. Judicial appointments are often influenced by politics, with recent appointments to the higher courts raising concerns over executive influence. The judiciary also suffers from underfunding and limited expertise in complex legal areas. To address these gaps, Benin has worked with international partners to train judges on the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking, among other topics. Prison conditions in Benin continue to be a serious human rights concern. Many facilities are severely overcrowded, with populations exceeding three times the intended capacity. Overcrowding is compounded by unsanitary conditions, inadequate medical care and insufficient access to water and food. The high number of pre-trial detainees, some held beyond legal limits, further strains the system. While the government has pledged reforms, meaningful improvements have not yet materialized.

Law enforcement in Benin is primarily conducted by the republican police (DGPR), which succeeded the former national police and gendarmerie. The DGPR includes the directorate of judicial police (DPJ), responsible for investigating serious organized crime. Although international partners have provided capacity-building support, challenges persist. Recently, a new cybercrime unit – the national centre for digital investigations (CNIN) – was created, consolidating several earlier structures. However, corruption continues to undermine law enforcement effectiveness. Some officials have been complicit in human trafficking, particularly involving child exploitation under traditional practices. Others have facilitated fuel smuggling and drug trafficking, with law enforcement agents having been arrested in connection with heroin seizures.

Territorial integrity remains weak. Benin shares porous borders with Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Togo, which enable the unchecked movement of goods and individuals. The Seme border with Nigeria is a key crossing point for fuel, arms, counterfeit goods and irregular migration. The WAP complex, straddling Benin's northern border, is especially difficult to control due to the presence of violent extremist groups. These groups participate in drug trafficking, illegal mining and wildlife poaching, using the revenues to sustain their activities and exert influence over local populations. Hubs like the Kourou–Koualou corridor and Porga border crossing with Burkina Faso are crucial for trafficking arms and fuel, and, since February 2023, Beninese authorities have stepped up military patrols in these northern areas.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Benin has made notable strides in its anti-money laundering efforts. According to recent reports, the country has addressed key technical compliance deficiencies identified in an earlier evaluation. Initiatives include developing an action plan, issuing professional guidelines for the legal and financial sectors and establishing the national agency for the recovery of seized and confiscated assets. In January 2024, Benin adopted a uniform law to combat money laundering, terrorism financing and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The law expanded oversight and introduced regional risk assessments. The financial intelligence unit continues to play an active role and participates in regional training on asset recovery. Despite these reforms, Benin remains at a high-risk for money laundering.

The regulatory environment presents major challenges. Constraints on private sector development, access to finance, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption and unreliable digital and transport infrastructure have all been cited as key barriers to Benin's economic competitiveness. The artisanal gold mining sector and illicit fuel trade are areas where regulatory oversight is especially weak, particularly in the northern regions. These markets operate with minimal supervision, incentivizing communities to engage in informal trade. Benin has recently attracted international investment aimed at supporting private sector growth and revenue collection, but systemic weaknesses continue to present challenges.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Benin has increased efforts to identify and assist trafficking victims, primarily children. Collaboration with NGOs and foreign donors has supported family reunification and provided a short-term shelter in Cotonou, which provided legal, psychological and medical services. However, there is no formal procedure for identifying or referring adult victims and limited shelter capacity still impedes access to justice. Although the authorities have offered ad hoc relief for foreign child victims, protections for adults are limited.

In terms of drug treatment, Benin makes explicit reference to harm reduction in their national policies. Prevention efforts are concentrated in specific areas. The government has continued to implement its national action plan, and awareness campaigns on trafficking and fuel smuggling have been launched. The ECOWAS Commission supported training for drug prevention professionals, while the Benin Revenue Authority introduced a whistle-blower webpage for reporting malpractice. Despite these measures, persistent gaps in adult victim services and law enforcement accountability continue to undermine prevention.

Civil society organizations play a vital role in supporting victims and advocating for transparency. NGOs are active in child protection and provide long-term shelter for trafficking survivors. Nevertheless, civil society is under strain. Activists and political figures have faced arrest, particularly during periods of heightened political tension. Regulatory changes have increased the operating costs for NGOs by requiring re-registration and significant fees. The media landscape in Benin is diverse but constrained. Although the number of media outlets has grown, many hold back from critical reporting on the government due to fear of suspension or closure. Journalists have faced harassment and arrest, particularly those covering sensitive topics such as security forces' conduct or environmental conservation. Structural limitations continue to inhibit investigative journalism.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.