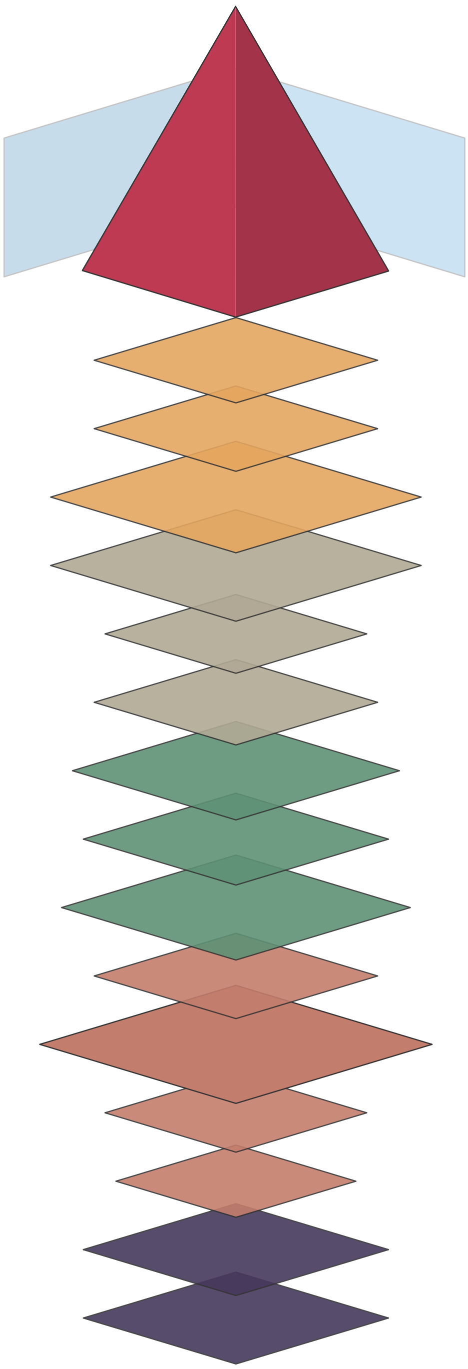
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

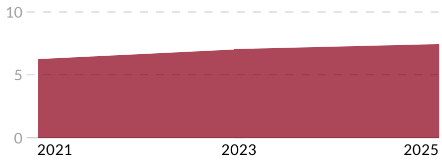
ECUADOR



7.48 ↗0.42

CRIMINALITY SCORE

5th of 193 countries ↗6
4th of 35 American countries -
3rd of 12 South American countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	7.07	↗0.33
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	6.50	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.50	↗0.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	8.50	↗0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.50	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.00	0.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	6.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	7.50	↗0.50
FAUNA CRIMES	7.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	8.00	↗0.50
HEROIN TRADE	6.50	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	9.00	↗0.50
CANNABIS TRADE	6.00	↗0.50
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	5.50	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	7.00	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	7.00	↗0.50

CRIMINAL ACTORS	7.90	↗0.50
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	8.50	↗0.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	8.50	↗1.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.50	↗0.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	8.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	7.00	↗0.50

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

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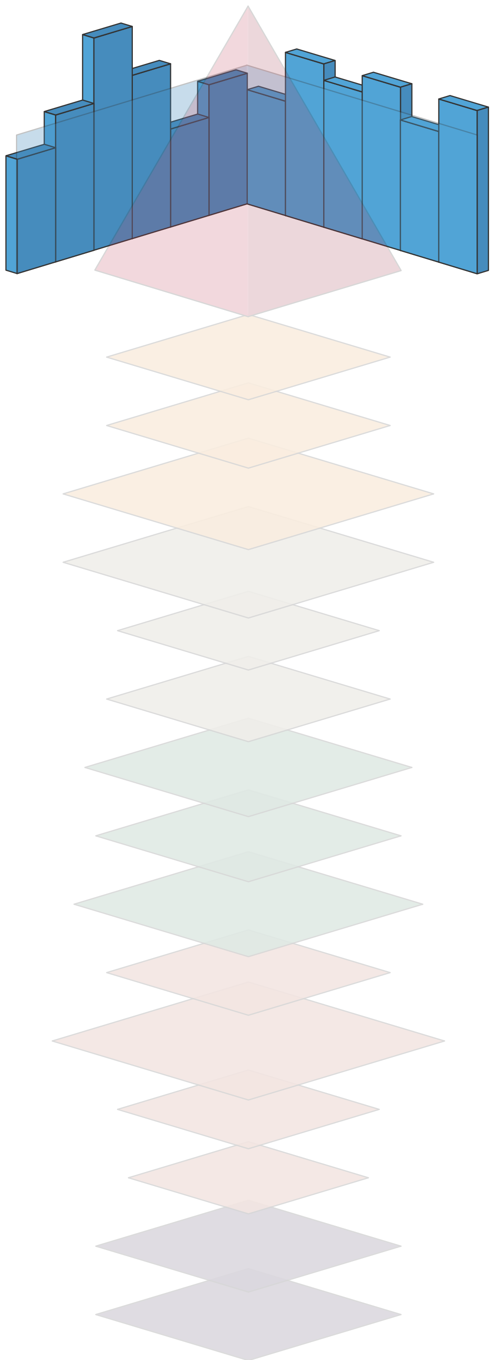
Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

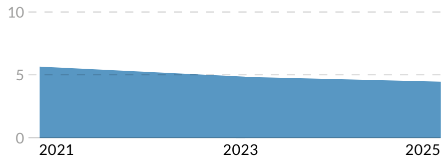
ECUADOR



4.46 ↘0.42

RESILIENCE SCORE

114th of 193 countries ↘18
24th of 35 American countries ↘5
7th of 12 South American countries ↘1



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**3.50**	↘1.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**4.50**	↘1.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**6.50**	↗0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**5.00**	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**3.00**	↘1.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**4.00**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**3.50**	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**5.00**	↘0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**4.50**	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**5.00**	↘0.50
PREVENTION	**4.00**	↘0.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	**5.00**	↘0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains a significant issue in Ecuador, with criminal organizations exploiting vulnerabilities in migration policies. Victims, both domestic and foreign, are trafficked within Ecuador and across borders for purposes of sex trafficking and forced labour. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, with trafficking occurring in labour-intensive industries such as agriculture, domestic work and fishing. Criminal networks operate in border regions and urban centres, employing various tactics, including social media, to recruit victims. Corruption within certain institutions has facilitated trafficking activities, with some private-sector entities indirectly benefiting from exploited labour. Trafficking routes frequently involve movement between Ecuador, Colombia and Peru, with some victims continuing onward to Central America and beyond.

Human smuggling has intensified as Ecuador remains a key transit and origin point for irregular migration, especially to the United States. Criminal networks, including Tren de Aragua and Clan del Golfo, profit from these flows, charging high fees and leveraging Ecuador's porous borders. Smuggling routes through both Colombia and Peru allow for clandestine movement of individuals. Private-sector actors, particularly in the transportation and hospitality sectors, facilitate smuggling operations. Informal crossings into Colombia and Peru allow smugglers to operate with minimal state interference, with corrupt officials reportedly providing false documentation for smuggled individuals.

Extortion and protection racketeering have surged, with mafia-style groups such as Los Choneros, Los Lobos and Los Tiguerones increasingly relying on extortion for revenue. Criminal groups, some operating from prisons, impose protection payments known as vacunas on businesses, transport companies and mining operations. Violence accompanies these extortion schemes, with reports of bombings and kidnappings linked to non-compliance. Despite increased militarization, law enforcement has struggled to curb this trend. In fact, state-embedded actors are known to facilitate extortion schemes by shielding criminal groups from prosecution or providing them with sensitive law enforcement data. Loansharking – locally known as chulcos – also remains widespread, often operated by mafia-style and private-sector actors.

TRADE

Arms trafficking in Ecuador has expanded due to rising demand from criminal organizations. Firearms are sourced from Peru and the United States, with security forces implicated in arms diversion. The black market for weapons has grown alongside gang-related violence, with seizures of firearms and ammunition increasing. Ecuador's relaxed regulations on carrying arms have further fuelled demand. Smuggling routes exploit Ecuador's maritime and land borders, and illicit arms are frequently recycled within security forces before being resold to criminal groups. Cross-border arms trafficking with Colombia has been identified as a major concern, with dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) involved in these operations. Additionally, weapons trafficking is facilitated by corruption among certain security officials, who supply arms directly to organized crime groups.

The counterfeit goods market in Ecuador is sustained by smuggled textiles, pharmaceuticals and electronics. Criminal organizations collaborate with private-sector actors to distribute fake medicines and alcohol, often sourced from Asian markets. Smuggling networks exploit Ecuador's weak border enforcement, and authorities continue to struggle to dismantle these operations. Operations targeting counterfeit liquor rings and fake pharmaceutical distributors have highlighted the extent of the problem. Informal markets in urban centres, including Guayaquil, serve as key distribution hubs for counterfeit goods, with local criminal networks ensuring their circulation. The market for counterfeit medicines has grown notably during the reporting period, with criminal organizations collaborating with foreign suppliers, particularly from Asia.

The illicit trade in excise goods, particularly cigarettes and alcohol, has expanded. Smugglers use the country's ports and informal crossings to move goods from Asia, Paraguay and Colombia. Mafia-style groups and criminal networks are increasingly participating in this market, importing and trading illicit goods within the country. These groups often source products from foreign actors, particularly from Asian countries, due to the lower costs and high availability. The participation of corrupt security forces and private-sector actors, who facilitate the importation of these goods through established links with suppliers, further exacerbates the problem. Despite efforts to combat this trade, it continues to grow, with Ecuador reaching a historic peak in illicit cigarette trade, now accounting for most of the market. This widespread prevalence has turned Ecuador into both a consumption hub and a transit point for these illicit goods. Additionally, reports indicate that proceeds from excise goods smuggling are used to fund other illicit activities, including drug trafficking and money laundering operations.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Ecuador are driven by illegal logging, particularly in the Amazon and coastal forests. The trade in precious woods such as mahogany and cedar is facilitated by bribery and weak enforcement. Criminal networks and foreign actors exploit Ecuador's forests, often using timber shipments to launder illicit profits. The illegal timber trade is closely tied to narcotics smuggling, with traffickers using lumber exports to conceal drug shipments. Reports suggest that state-embedded actors provide falsified permits to allow illegal timber to enter formal markets.

Fauna crimes, including the illegal trade in wildlife and marine species, remain significant. Ecuador's Amazon and Galápagos Islands are major hotspots for wildlife trafficking, with species such as jaguars and turtles targeted for international markets. Shark finning persists, with substantial under-reporting of shark fin exports despite international regulations. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign fleets, particularly Chinese vessels near the Galápagos, has strained Ecuador's marine resources. Ecuadorian ports are frequently used to facilitate the trans-shipment of illegally caught marine species to Asian markets. Investigations suggest that some legal fishing enterprises serve as fronts for laundering illicitly obtained marine resources, further complicating enforcement efforts.

Non-renewable resource crimes are largely driven by illegal gold mining, which has expanded across 17 provinces. Criminal groups, including dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), extort and control mining operations. Mercury use in illegal mining has caused severe environmental damage, with efforts to dismantle operations proving ineffective. Oil theft has also become a growing issue, with organized crime actors siphoning diesel for use in drug trafficking operations. Corrupt state officials have been implicated in facilitating these activities, further undermining enforcement efforts. Reports indicate that illegal mining networks often operate with impunity, taking advantage of remote terrain and limited state presence.

DRUGS

Heroin trafficking persists in Ecuador, primarily as a transit activity. Most heroin originates from Colombia, but Ecuadorian groups are increasingly involved in distribution. Recent seizures indicate a decline in volume, although consumption remains stable. Criminal networks exploit ports and logistical infrastructure, often using the same channels as other drug trades. Local consumption is concentrated among youth in urban centres and is often linked to dangerous substances such as fentanyl. The widespread use of heroin, particularly among youth in urban centres, is contributing to a growing public health issue.

Cocaine trafficking is highly pervasive in Ecuador. The country serves as a key transit hub for the transnational market due to its location between Colombia and Peru. Ports such as Guayaquil and Manta are central nodes in global trafficking networks. Criminal actors include mafia-style groups, foreign cartels (Sinaloa, Jalisco) and Balkan networks, often supported by corrupt state and private-sector actors. Cocaine is exported in fruit shipments and maritime containers. Violence in Ecuador has surged alongside the expansion of the cocaine trade. Homicide rates have risen dramatically, and territorial control is contested by rival groups. The economic benefits of the trade have fostered local acceptance, especially in marginalized communities where micro-trafficking is widespread. The growing cultural normalization of criminal actors in public discourse, particularly through social media, contributes to the entrenchment of the cocaine economy in Ecuador.

Ecuador has a large domestic cannabis market. Despite a legal parallel market introduced in 2020, the illegal trade has expanded, largely driven by organized crime. Criminal groups import, cultivate and distribute cannabis, with foreign suppliers playing a supporting role. Corrupt officials facilitate operations. High domestic demand, particularly among youth, sustains the market. Border provinces such as Carchi, Sucumbíos and El Oro are key trafficking zones. The legal market suffers from competition with illicit actors, and cannabis is often trafficked using the same infrastructure as other narcotics.

Synthetic drugs, including 2CB, ecstasy and LSD, represent a growing market. Consumption is concentrated among youth and tourists, particularly in Quito and Guayaquil. Ecuador also serves as a transit hub for synthetic drugs, supplied by actors from Colombia and Chile. Domestic distribution is handled by subcontracted networks under mafia-style groups. Despite large-scale seizures and identified trafficking routes, the market continues to expand. Prices for synthetic drugs are significantly higher than in neighbouring countries, making the trade highly profitable.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Ecuador has emerged as a target for cyber-dependent crimes, with both domestic and foreign actors involved in ransomware attacks, hacking and malware use. Cybercriminals exploit weaknesses in banking and retail systems, using malware to steal funds. Reports indicate that hacker groups with links to international criminal networks are increasingly active in Ecuador. There has been a surge in cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, including energy companies and public institutions, with state-embedded actors reportedly involved in some cyber-espionage activities. Cybercriminal groups have also been implicated in cryptocurrency fraud, using digital assets to launder illicit proceeds while evading financial oversight mechanisms.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Ecuador span tax evasion and fraudulent investment schemes. These schemes thrive on economic vulnerability and impunity, with victims concentrated in urban centres such as Pichincha. The dollarized economy and high informality rate facilitate cross-border cash movements and obscure financial flows. State-embedded actors, including high-ranking officials, have been implicated in tax evasion and fraud, deepening public distrust. Recent cyber-enabled crimes such as identity theft, phishing schemes and scams account for a significant share of arrests. Despite regulatory frameworks, enforcement remains weak and financial crime continues to undermine Ecuador's economy and institutions.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Ecuador's criminal landscape is dominated by powerful mafia-style groups that exert substantial influence over illicit markets and state institutions. Among these, Los Choneros, Los Lobos and Los Tiguerones stand out as the most prominent and violent organizations, each with a significant presence in drug trafficking, extortion, arms trafficking, illegal mining and human trafficking. These groups operate within Ecuadorian prisons, which serve as command centres for their criminal enterprises. Their internal structures remain fluid due to frequent leadership assassinations and factional disputes, leading to the proliferation of violent splinter groups. Recent notable law enforcement operations revealed the extent of these groups' infiltration into Ecuador's judicial and political systems, highlighting their ability to influence court rulings and finance election campaigns. The growing fragmentation and conflicts between these groups have fuelled Ecuador's escalating homicide rates. Despite recent government interventions, including militarization strategies, mafia-style groups continue to thrive.

Unlike the hierarchical mafia-style organizations, criminal networks in Ecuador function as intermediaries, facilitating illicit transactions across various markets without exerting territorial control. These groups play a key role in cocaine trafficking, arms smuggling and human trafficking, often operating between mafia-style groups and foreign actors. They specialize in logistics, enabling the transportation of drugs through ports, establishing clandestine airstrips and creating storage facilities for illicit goods. Recent developments highlight their growing influence. The killing of a prominent Ecuadorian gang leader in 2024 intensified violent disputes in Durán, Ecuador's most dangerous municipality, where rival networks compete for control of local drug trafficking routes. Similarly, internal divisions within the Chone Killers have exacerbated instability, reflecting a broader trend of power struggles within Ecuador's underworld. Criminal networks have expanded into Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos, two key provinces near the Colombian border, which serve as strategic zones for purchasing cocaine from Colombian producers. These networks also facilitate the movement of international trafficking organizations, providing armed enforcers and intermediaries for foreign criminal groups seeking access to Ecuador's illicit economies. Despite their significance, authorities have historically underappreciated the role of these fluid and adaptable networks, focusing primarily on the high-profile violence of mafia-style groups.

The penetration of organized crime into Ecuador's state institutions remains a critical challenge. Corrupt officials at multiple levels – police, judiciary and political leadership – facilitate the operations of criminal groups through bribery, information leaks and active participation in illicit activities. Recent high-profile investigations have revealed deep-rooted corruption, exposing narco-generals within the security forces and the manipulation of judicial appointments by criminal organizations. Reports indicate that state-embedded actors play a pivotal role in arms trafficking, where corrupt security officials resell military-grade weapons, including those previously seized from criminal groups. Leaks from law enforcement agencies continue to compromise anti-mining operations, with officials tipping off criminals before raids on illegal gold-mining sites. The involvement of state actors in political corruption is also evident. Criminal groups finance electoral campaigns and maintain influence over local governance structures, particularly in coastal provinces like Guayas and Esmeraldas. This collusion between officials and organized crime weakens state resilience, making Ecuador increasingly vulnerable to criminal governance and illicit financial flows.

Numerous foreign criminal organizations are attracted by Ecuador's strategic location, each seeking to exploit the country's ports, border crossings and financial systems. Mexican cartels such as Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation have solidified their presence, partnering with Ecuadorian mafia-style groups to transport cocaine to international markets. Similarly, Balkan mafias leverage Ecuador's banana export routes to smuggle narcotics into Europe. The Colombian Clan del Golfo and FARC dissidents have become increasingly active, particularly in northern Ecuador, where they engage in drug production, arms smuggling and extortion of local businesses. Venezuelan gangs, most notably Tren de Aragua, have also attempted to establish operations in Ecuador, though authorities officially deny their presence. Beyond direct criminal engagement, foreign actors influence Ecuador's criminal landscape through financial networks. Money laundering operations linked to Colombian and Mexican organizations exploit Ecuador's dollarized economy, using real estate, construction firms and agriculture to disguise illicit funds. The interplay between domestic and foreign actors has made Ecuador a pivotal hub in the global drug trade.

Private-sector entities, particularly in transportation, agriculture and finance, play a crucial role in enabling organized crime, either through negligence or direct collusion. The banana export industry remains a key conduit for cocaine trafficking, with shipments frequently used to conceal narcotics destined for Europe. Shipping companies and logistics firms facilitate human smuggling by providing safe passage, often in exchange for bribes. Illegal gold mining is another sector where private enterprises contribute to criminal economies. Mining companies have been implicated in the use of illegally extracted minerals, while local businesses engage in money laundering to obscure the origins of illicit gold. Reports indicate that fuel companies and fishing fleets also engage in illicit activities, supplying vessels linked to IUU fishing operations – a market heavily influenced by external actors.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Ecuador's political leadership has been tested by the deep infiltration of organized crime into the country's institutions and political sphere, which became starkly evident following high-profile assassinations, violent attacks and prison riots that shook public confidence. Organized crime has increasingly shaped political, social and economic debates, particularly during elections and amid an ongoing security crisis. Despite efforts to combat these threats through militarized security measures and declaring an internal armed conflict against criminal groups, violence has escalated both inside prisons and across cities and mining regions, with rising extortion, kidnappings and homicides in areas previously less affected. Governance has also been undermined by a persistent financial crisis, weak institutional planning and a de-institutionalization process that neglected critical state functions, limiting the state's capacity to respond effectively. Corruption at multiple levels of government has further eroded institutional effectiveness, with investigations uncovering links between political and judicial actors and organized crime, weakening transparency and oversight. While partnerships and reforms aim to strengthen Ecuador's response, the security and governance challenges remain severe and evolving. Government transparency and accountability mechanisms function within a context of judicial inefficiencies and reports of political interference. Public confidence in state institutions has been affected by corruption cases and limited prosecution of high-profile figures. The Organic Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information provides a framework for transparency, but enforcement remains inconsistent across state institutions. Recent restrictions on public data access have raised concerns regarding oversight, particularly regarding security operations and crime statistics.

Ecuador engages in international cooperation initiatives to counter organized crime through agreements with the United States, Colombia and the European Union, as well as participation in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and INTERPOL. The country has received financial and security assistance, including technical training and military aid, to strengthen its capabilities against drug trafficking and other transnational crimes. Furthermore, the country also maintains security partnerships with other South American countries. For example, in 2024, a binational council with Colombia was established to address environmental and organized crime in border regions. Despite these efforts, limitations in inter-agency trust and operational coordination have been noted, particularly with the US, Peruvian and Colombian counterparts in border security operations. Furthermore, Ecuador's diplomatic ties with Mexico were severed in 2024 following a police raid on the Mexican Embassy in Quito, which led to the suspension of relations between the two countries.

National policies and laws that address organized crime include legislation targeting human trafficking, money laundering and drug trafficking, with varying levels of enforcement. Ecuador's 2023 anti-human-trafficking law has strengthened prevention and protection measures, although implementation challenges remain. The Phoenix Plan, announced by the government, outlines security strategies, but limited public information on its operational scope has raised concerns about transparency. In terms of its environmental policies and laws, CITES issued an ultimatum to Ecuador to implement measures ensuring sustainable shark fishing in late 2024. In response, Ecuador announced initiatives to regulate the practice. However, an absence of transparency regarding the findings of CITES-mandated studies has compounded concerns raised in 2019 by the European Union's 'yellow card' for the country's failure to control illegal fishing.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in Ecuador faces challenges in handling organized crime cases, with reports of bribery and coercion affecting judicial decisions. Corruption allegations include case dismissals and favourable rulings obtained through financial influence. Ecuador's criminal investigation system has been described as relying on in-flagrante arrests rather than long-term investigations, limiting its capacity to dismantle complex criminal organizations. Additionally, 35% of the prison population is in preventive detention, with over half facing drug-related charges. The penitentiary system remains a focal point of organized crime activity, with high-profile gang leaders operating from within prisons. Frequent escapes and prison massacres have been linked to gang conflicts and the presence of illicit arms within detention centres. The government has implemented emergency security measures in response, including transferring inmates between facilities and deploying military personnel. However, these have not fully curtailed gang control over prisons, as evidenced by ongoing security breaches.

Law enforcement agencies have conducted operations targeting organized crime, with a focus on anti-narcotics and counter-extortion efforts. However, cases of corruption within police ranks have been documented, including instances of collusion with criminal groups. Intelligence-sharing and coordination between different branches of law enforcement have been affected by trust issues and information leaks. The government has initiated reforms, including the rotation of police officials, to mitigate corruption risks. While these measures have led to arrests of high-profile figures, operational challenges persist in containing the expansion of organized crime.

Territorial integrity is affected by criminal organizations operating along key border regions and strategic trafficking routes. Informal crossings facilitate the movement of arms, narcotics and smuggled individuals. State presence remains limited in some areas, enabling criminal groups to establish control. The government has increased joint security operations with neighbouring countries, but arms trafficking from Peru and transnational criminal networks remain persistent issues.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Ecuador's anti-money laundering framework includes regulatory measures aimed at preventing financial crimes, but enforcement has been inconsistent. Financial networks tied to drug trafficking continue to exploit real estate, commercial enterprises and informal financial systems. The government has taken steps to expand financial oversight, including reforms to enhance banking-sector compliance with anti-money laundering regulations. Nevertheless, Ecuador remains particularly vulnerable to money laundering, largely due to the overall ineffectiveness and limited impact of its recent efforts to combat it.

The economic regulatory environment includes oversight mechanisms for financial transactions and tax compliance. However, informal markets and tax evasion remain challenges that disrupt economic stability. Reports have highlighted instances of corruption within regulatory bodies, hindering the enforcement of financial laws. Ecuador has received international assistance to strengthen its financial intelligence capabilities, but legal loopholes continue to be exploited by organized crime groups.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Resources and implementation for victim and witness support services in Ecuador vary across regions. The national system for the protection of and assistance to victims and witnesses provides legal and psychological support, though limitations in security measures for key witnesses in high-profile cases have been noted. The murder of witnesses, including state officials, in organized crime cases has created a disincentive for participation in judicial processes. In recent years, efforts have been made to improve victim identification and access to specialized services, including the creation of two new task forces, though both remain understaffed and under-resourced. For drug users, interagency and multisectoral programmes promote social inclusion, early intervention, treatment and rehabilitation, but lack recovery support. Additionally, the absence of mechanisms to coordinate, collect, and analyze information on these services makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of victim support systems.

Although the central government has yet to establish a definitive policy on crime prevention, several municipal authorities have proactively developed their own plans and policies. Many of these initiatives have been formulated with the support and collaboration of civil society partners. These include community-based programmes and security sector reforms. A criminal policy council coordinates national efforts in crime prevention, though its long-term impact is still under assessment. Reports indicate that efforts to combat forced labour and human trafficking have been impaired by enforcement challenges. The 2023 human trafficking law included enhanced prevention measures, but access to specialized victim services remains limited in some regions.

Non-state actors, including civil society organizations and investigative media, have played a role in exposing corruption and organized crime. Ecuador's media continue to report on governance and security challenges, despite legal pressures and security risks for journalists and activists. Documented threats and violence against reporters covering organized crime have led to cases of self-censorship. Civil society organizations engage in transparency and accountability initiatives, including advocacy for anti-corruption measures and judicial integrity. The government has announced an integrity strategy to regulate CSOs, with implications for operational oversight. Some activists have raised concerns regarding potential restrictions on freedom of association under its framework. Despite these challenges, non-state actors continue to monitor crime trends and advocate for governance reforms.

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