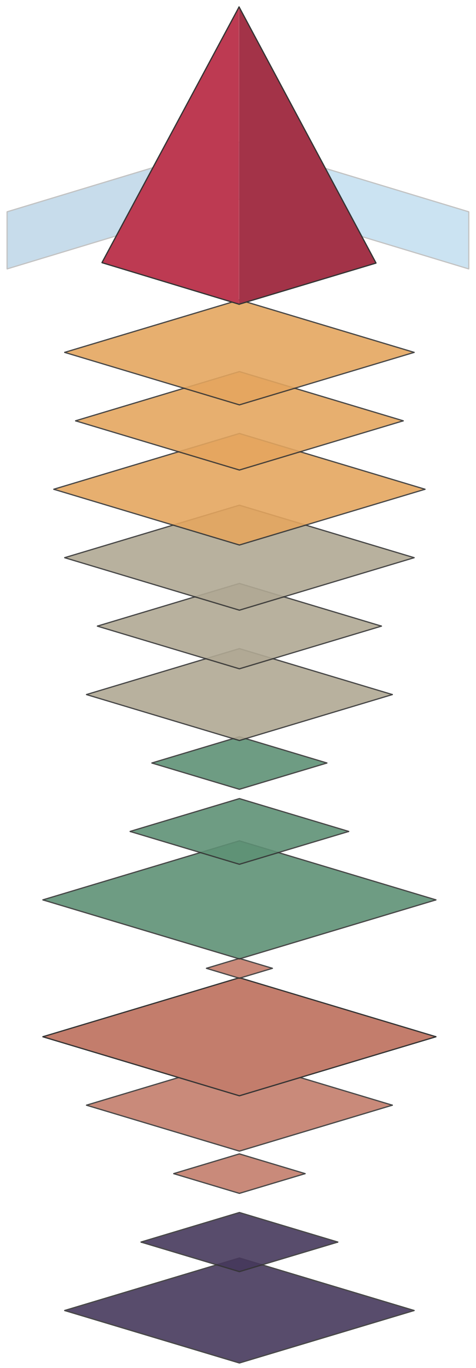
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

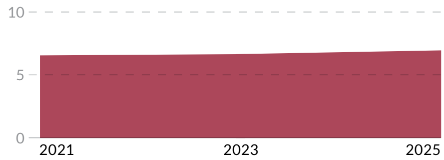
VENEZUELA



6.97 ↗0.25

CRIMINALITY SCORE

20th of 193 countries ↗4
7th of 35 American countries ↗1
5th of 12 South American countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	**6.43**	↗0.40
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00	↗0.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	7.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	8.50	↗1.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.00	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.50	↗1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	7.00	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	4.00	↗0.50
FAUNA CRIMES	5.00	↗2.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	9.00	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	1.50	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	9.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	7.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	3.00	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	4.50	↗1.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**7.50**	↗0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	9.50	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.50	↗0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	9.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	7.50	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6.00	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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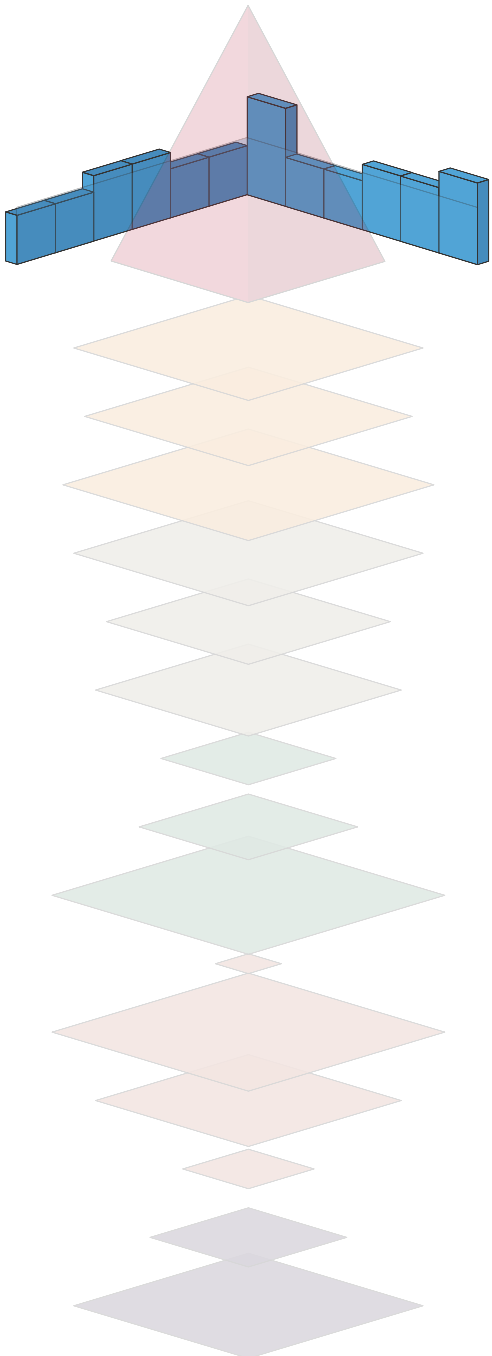
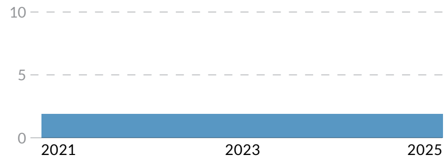
VENEZUELA



1.88 0.00

RESILIENCE SCORE

188th of 193 countries ↘3
35th of 35 American countries -
12th of 12 South American countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**1.50**	↘0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**1.50**	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**2.00**	↗0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**2.00**	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**1.50**	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**1.50**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**3.00**	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**1.50**	↘0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**1.50**	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**2.00**	↗0.50
PREVENTION	**2.00**	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	**2.50**	↗0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Venezuela remains a central hub for human trafficking in the region, with economic desperation and large-scale forced migration fuelling trafficking activities. Victims are trafficked both within Venezuela and across international borders, often for forced labour in agriculture, construction and domestic work. Women and girls are exploited in sex trafficking. The Tren de Aragua, a transnational criminal group, collaborates with Colombian groups to traffic women into prostitution rings. The prevalence of modern slavery remains high, driven by economic vulnerability. Criminal networks also lure migrants with false promises of employment, only to force them into illicit economies, particularly illegal mining. Venezuelan officials, including police and military personnel, have been implicated in trafficking operations, leveraging their positions to facilitate border crossings. Despite international scrutiny, enforcement remains ineffective, with high levels of impunity and corruption hampering any meaningful crackdown on trafficking networks.

Human smuggling operations continue to thrive, with Venezuela serving as a primary source country due to the prolonged economic crisis. Millions of Venezuelans have fled the country since 2014, many relying on smuggling networks to navigate dangerous routes toward the United States and neighbouring Latin American countries. Organized groups such as Tren de Aragua control key smuggling routes, offering passage through illicit networks that extend across the continent. These routes include crossings into Colombia, Brazil and the Caribbean, with criminals charging exorbitant fees and exposing migrants to extreme risks, including kidnapping, exploitation and death. Colombian criminal groups like the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN) oversee extortion systems along migration corridors, extracting payments from migrants and their smugglers. Institutional corruption and legal restrictions on migration exacerbate vulnerabilities, forcing many to turn to illicit actors for assistance.

Extortion remains deeply entrenched in Venezuela, affecting both urban and rural populations. Criminal groups such as Tren de Aragua, Tren del Llano and the ELN exert territorial control through violent extortion schemes targeting businesses, industries and individuals. The ELN, in particular, has steadily expanded its influence and control across the country, increasing their extortive practices in various regions in the country, including but not limited to Apure State and districts of the Orinoco Mining Arc (OMA). In these regions, they systematically extort legal businesses, livestock owners and residents, establishing de facto governance over criminal and social activities. Despite occasional enforcement efforts, state complicity continues to enable extortion to persist with minimal resistance.

TRADE

Venezuela remains a hotspot for arms trafficking, with a strong connection between state actors and criminal networks. Military officers and corrupt officials facilitate the sale of firearms to groups such as Tren de Aragua, who subsequently distribute weapons throughout the region. Grenades have become a signature tool of organized crime, frequently used in extortion attacks against businesses. Venezuelan arms are also trafficked to Trinidad and Tobago, while ammunition is smuggled into the country from Colombia. Transparency in arms procurement remains virtually non-existent, further enabling illicit transfers.

The illicit trade in excise goods, including tobacco and alcohol, continues to flourish. Economic disparities between Venezuela and its neighbours have incentivized smuggling networks to import goods from Colombia and Brazil, rendering Venezuela a destination country for the illicit trade in excisable goods and creating a thriving criminal market for foreign products within its borders. Evidence indicates that the smuggling operations are predominantly managed by loosely structured criminal networks, allowing for the importation of these goods from neighbouring countries. State actors, including police and military officers, have been implicated in the smuggling activities. These corrupt officials are believed to control the smuggling corridors, imposing fees on traffickers.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes remain an emerging concern in Venezuela. The OMA, which is the epicentre of unregulated mining operations, has become a focal point for illegal timber extraction, where high-value species such as mahogany and cedar are harvested and smuggled into Colombia. Corrupt state actors facilitate timber laundering, making it difficult to regulate the trade. Despite sporadic enforcement efforts, deforestation continues unabated.

Wildlife trafficking is also widespread, driven by both domestic consumption and international demand. Venezuela has been identified as the most vulnerable country in terms of illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing in South America, with shark fins and fish bladders smuggled through Lake Maracaibo for export to Asia. Exotic animals, including macaws, anteaters and turtles, are trafficked to Europe and the United States. Again, the complicity of state actors has further enabled the expansion of these operations, despite international scrutiny. Mostly, criminal networks control the trade through violence and intimidation. However, some cases have shed light on the involvement of private companies, state entities, local communities and organized criminal networks.

Non-renewable resource crimes, particularly illegal gold mining, dominate Venezuela's illicit economy. Mining operations in the OMA are controlled by non-state armed groups, including Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents. These groups enforce brutal territorial control, extorting miners and laundering gold through transnational networks. Gold smuggling routes extend to Africa, Western Asia and Switzerland, aided by falsified documentation and corrupt officials. While Venezuela's re-entry into the legal gold trade offers opportunities for reform, illicit activities continue largely unchecked. Gasoline smuggling has declined due to reduced domestic production, but illicit trade in subsidized fuel persists in mining regions where it is used to support illegal gold extraction. Lastly, illegal exploitation of coltan and diamonds and oil theft further contribute to environmental degradation and economic instability.

DRUGS

Venezuela has become a key transit hub for cocaine trafficking, with routes extending from Colombia to international markets in the United States, Europe and Asia. Colombian guerrilla groups, particularly the ELN and FARC dissidents, manage supply chains in cooperation with corrupt Venezuelan officials. They have integrated into local communities, often manipulating young people into working for them under the guise of legitimate employment, and have taken over local justice systems and governance structures. The symbiotic relationship between these guerrilla groups and Venezuelan state officials has facilitated their operations, resulting in minimal violence but significant control over border regions. Coca plantations have expanded in border states, marking a shift from transit to production. While seizures have increased, corruption within the security forces allows trafficking operations to continue with relative impunity.

The cannabis trade remains secondary to cocaine but continues to grow. High-potency Colombian marijuana is smuggled into Venezuela and distributed through mafia-style organizations. The involvement of state actors in the trade mirrors the dynamics seen in cocaine trafficking. Despite enforcement actions, demand for cannabis continues to be stable, particularly in the Brazilian market, for which Venezuela serves as a transit point.

The synthetic drug market remains small but has become more prominent in the last few years. Recent seizures indicate limited but growing availability of substances like ketamine and 2CB. The country's first recorded fentanyl seizure in 2023 suggests emerging trafficking routes, though the market remains underdeveloped.

There is an observed absence of data on heroin-related offences in the country, which suggests a continued trend of reduced heroin trafficking. The market is thus assessed as negligible.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crime in Venezuela has intensified, with ransomware attacks and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks becoming more widespread. The 2024 presidential election was marked by a major DDoS attack on the national electoral council that disrupted vote counting, raising concerns over electoral integrity. Financial institutions and telecom providers have faced high-profile ransomware incidents, resulting in significant economic losses and the exposure of customer data. Despite significant cases reported in recent years, the country is not considered a major hub for cyber-dependent crime.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes are widespread in Venezuela, where corruption, embezzlement and financial fraud have had severe impacts on the national economy. Many individuals involved in these activities are connected to state structures, including government institutions and state-owned enterprises. Ongoing investigations into financial misconduct underscore the systemic nature of the issue, with allegations involving high-level actors in illicit financial operations. These cases often point to the diversion of public funds through opaque transactions and offshore mechanisms. A lack of judicial independence and pervasive impunity have enabled financial crimes to continue largely unchecked, contributing to the country's reputation as a hotspot for such illicit activities.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Venezuela hosts a range of mafia-style groups, many of which have historically exercised significant territorial control and governance. The most notorious among these is the Tren de Aragua, a hierarchical organization involved in a spectrum of criminal activities that includes human trafficking, drug trafficking, extortion and cybercrime. The Tren del Llano, the Tren de Guayana and the R Organization are among other structured groups that dominate illicit markets, particularly illegal mining and extortion. These groups have traditionally maintained strict social control, regulating public behaviour and enforcing their own forms of justice in areas under their dominance. While some have suffered setbacks, their adaptability allows them to shift strategies and sustain illicit economies. Moreover, prison-based criminal governance has played a role in facilitating these groups' operations. Although recent government crackdowns have weakened their direct control over prison systems, some groups have fragmented but not disappeared entirely.

The country's criminal landscape is characterized by fluid and adaptable networks that operate across a variety of illicit markets. These networks often blur the lines between structured organizations and opportunistic criminal alliances. The colectivos – paramilitary groups with state linkages – exemplify this hybrid structure, engaging in activities ranging from political repression to extortion and smuggling. Often working in tandem with state actors, these groups are difficult to dismantle. Beyond the colectivos, criminal networks engage in the smuggling of contraband goods, human trafficking and wildlife trafficking. In border regions, particularly in Zulia and Táchira, these groups control informal trade routes and impose taxes on illicit goods. They also take advantage of Venezuela's weakened economy, exploiting currency-counterfeiting schemes and black-market exchanges. The adaptability of these networks enables them to persist despite occasional government crackdowns, reinforcing the resilience of Venezuela's shadow economy.

State-embedded criminality is one of the most significant threats to Venezuela's rule of law. High-ranking military officials, politicians and law enforcement officers are directly linked to a wide array of illicit markets, including drug trafficking, fuel smuggling, illegal mining and extortion. The so-called Cartel de los Soles – a widely used term for military figures involved in drug trafficking – illustrates the extent to which state actors are implicated in organized crime. However, experts suggest that, rather than a centralized cartel, the military's involvement in criminality is fragmented, with competing factions engaging in illicit activities for personal gain. Officials are also complicit in human trafficking networks, as corruption within the security forces facilitates the movement of victims across borders. State-linked actors also engage in fuel smuggling, leveraging their control over energy resources to profit from illicit fuel sales. While the government has launched anti-corruption campaigns, these efforts appear selective, targeting specific figures while leaving broader networks of state-sponsored criminality intact.

Foreign criminal groups play a pivotal role in Venezuela's organized crime landscape, particularly in border regions and resource-rich areas. The most influential external actors are Colombian armed groups, including the ELN and factions of the FARC. These groups keep a firm hold on illicit mining operations and drug trafficking corridors, often in collaboration with Venezuelan security forces. The ELN in particular has expanded its territorial influence, exerting governance over local communities while taxing illegal mining and cross-border trade. Initially focused on Apure State and the OMA, the group has strengthened its presence along the border, displacing rivals such as FARC dissidents and Los Rastrojos, and securing drug fields, laboratories, clandestine airstrips, and local populations in Zulia and Táchira through ties with state forces. Brazilian criminal organizations, such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), have also increased their footprint in Venezuela. The PCC is known to exploit vulnerable Venezuelan migrants in Brazil, often recruiting them for such criminal enterprises as drug trafficking and illegal mining. Transnational human trafficking networks exploit Venezuelan migrants across Latin America, with Tren de Aragua and Colombian criminal organizations playing leading roles.

Private-sector actors in Venezuela are deeply intertwined with organized crime, particularly through money laundering, human exploitation and the illegal commodities trade. Criminal organizations frequently launder their illicit proceeds through real estate, local businesses and international financial networks. Venezuela's gold trade serves as a key vehicle for illicit financial flows, with illegally mined gold smuggled into Brazil and Colombia before entering global markets. Businesses also benefit from forced labour, particularly in the mining, construction and domestic service industries. Reports indicate that private entities in Venezuela actively participate in the trafficking of minerals and wildlife. Accountants, lawyers and financial service providers are also known to act as professional enablers of money laundering, facilitating these transactions with relative impunity.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Venezuela's leadership has prioritized national security and the fight against organized crime, with emphasis on the importance of dismantling criminal organizations, particularly those involved in drug trafficking. The government claims to have made significant progress, including the recovery of state control over areas previously dominated by criminal groups. Large-scale police operations have been conducted, including extensive crackdowns within the prison system targeting powerful gangs such as the Tren de Aragua. However, there are questions about the underlying motivations of these efforts, with some observers suggesting they may have been influenced by political considerations in the lead-up to the July 2024 presidential elections. Enforcement actions focused on certain criminal groups, while others appeared to operate with relative impunity, leading to differing assessments of the initiatives' effectiveness. Moreover, the government has been accused of using anti-crime measures to justify repression against political opponents and dissenting civil society members. Venezuela's governance remains highly contested due to allegations of electoral fraud during the 2024 elections. Many international actors have rejected the election's legitimacy, citing widespread irregularities, suppression of political opposition and the arrest of dissenters. The government's validity has eroded further due to accusations of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, political repression and suppression of independent media. The election crisis has heightened diplomatic tensions, with Venezuela severing relations with several countries critical of its governance. This instability has raised speculation about the potential resurgence of alliances between state actors and criminal organizations as a means to maintain control over contested regions.

Corruption remains pervasive in Venezuela's government, with officials frequently accused of enabling and benefiting from organized crime. Reports indicate that Venezuela experiences high levels of corruption, affecting governance and oversight, with state institutions widely viewed as complicit in illicit activities. Despite the presence of anti-corruption bodies, enforcement remains selective, typically targeting political adversaries rather than genuine offenders. The government does not consistently publish key economic and crime statistics, further undermining transparency. Information laws are weak and access to public records is severely restricted, limiting oversight and accountability.

International cooperation efforts have been inconsistent. While Venezuela remains a signatory to major international crime conventions, its compliance is questionable. The country has made strides towards reversing the isolation it has endured due to strained relationships with the international community since 2019. Ties have been renewed with allies such as Colombia and Chile in efforts to combat organized crime and with the UN to fight drug trafficking. Despite these efforts, experts remain concerned about the Venezuelan government's weak commitment to an effective international cooperation strategy against organized crime. The international community also shows considerable mistrust toward Venezuela, particularly regarding its adherence to international obligations. The disputed 2024 election has exacerbated tensions, leading to strained relations with democratic nations and further reducing Venezuela's engagement with international anti-crime initiatives. The country's failure to ratify key treaties, including the Arms Trade Treaty, also raises questions about its engagement with global security frameworks.

Venezuela's legal framework for combating organized crime remains largely unchanged. The country continues to rely on outdated laws, such as the 2012 Organic Law against Organized Crime and Financing of Terrorism, which encompasses an extensive range of offences but lacks targeted enforcement. A new asset forfeiture law was recently introduced to allow the state to seize assets linked to illicit activities, although there is scepticism regarding its implementation. Legal frameworks for human trafficking, drug control and arms smuggling remain ineffective due to weak enforcement mechanisms and political interference in the judiciary.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The Venezuelan judicial system is deeply compromised by corruption and political interference. Judges and prosecutors routinely accept bribes from criminal organizations, and cases of judicial favouritism have been documented at all levels. The lack of independence in the judiciary has allowed state actors to weaponize legal proceedings against political opponents while shielding government-aligned criminals. As for the penitentiary system, prison conditions in Venezuela are dire, with severe overcrowding, underfunding and criminal control over many facilities. While state forces reclaimed control of some prisons in 2023, the sustainability of these efforts remains uncertain. Many prison gangs continue to exert influence, orchestrating criminal activities both inside and outside penitentiary walls. The prison system lacks rehabilitation programmes and facilities are plagued by violence and disease, contributing to a cycle of recidivism.

Law enforcement agencies are riddled with corruption, with many officers engaging in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion and extrajudicial killings. The government has increased police recruitment and intelligence capabilities, yet security forces remain widely distrusted due to their role in political repression and human rights abuses. Indeed, reports highlight widespread human rights violations, including politically motivated detentions and the use of coerced confessions obtained through torture. The continued use of paramilitary colectivos to enforce state policies further erodes public trust in law enforcement.

Venezuela's borders are notoriously porous, allowing for the unchecked movement of illicit goods, people and armed groups. Despite increased cooperation with Colombia, criminal organizations such as the ELN and dissident FARC factions continue to exploit Venezuela's weak border security. Smuggling routes remain active, facilitating the trafficking of drugs, gold and weapons. The government has been accused of tolerating or even collaborating with some of these groups to maintain regional control.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Venezuela has significant weaknesses in anti-money laundering (AML) enforcement. Money laundering is widespread, fuelled by the informal dollar economy, corruption and illicit trade. The country was placed on the Financial Action Task Force grey list in 2024 due to its inadequate AML measures, and it ranks among the highest-risk countries for financial crimes. The financial intelligence unit lacks independence and effective enforcement mechanisms, and international cooperation on AML matters is minimal. Weaknesses in money laundering enforcement are underscored by the government's reliance on opaque financial dealings to circumvent international sanctions.

These sanctions have pushed the economy toward grey-market transactions, cash and barter to bypass restrictions and avoid the international financial system. The country's economic regulatory environment is heavily distorted by state intervention, corruption and informal markets. As traditional industries decline, reports indicate the persistence of illicit economic activities, with smuggling, black market currency exchanges and illicit mining sustaining parts of the economy. While economic growth has resumed following a severe recession, it remains fragile. Inflation and poverty are still at crisis levels and state policies continue to suppress private-sector development. Extortion and illegal land seizures also hinder legitimate business operations.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support services in Venezuela are critically underdeveloped. There are no government-run shelters for trafficking victims, and support is largely provided by NGOs operating under difficult conditions. Reports indicate that the government fails to identify and protect trafficking victims adequately. Witness protection programmes exist on paper but are rarely used due to widespread mistrust of law enforcement and the judiciary. Political repression further discourages victims from seeking justice, as state actors have been implicated in human rights abuses.

Prevention efforts against organized crime remain limited and inconsistent. Venezuela has implemented national strategies for drug prevention and cybersecurity, but these initiatives are undermined by corruption and a lack of enforcement. Community-based crime prevention is virtually non-existent and civil society organizations working to address organized crime face severe restrictions. The government has not introduced alternatives for individuals engaged in illicit economic activities, particularly in illegal mining regions.

The Venezuelan government has taken actions that restrict non-state actors, including NGOs, independent media and human rights organizations. Journalists and activists face harassment, arrests and violence, particularly in the wake of the disputed 2024 elections. A new law has further restricted NGO operations, affecting their capacity to report on governance, organized crime issues and organized crime links. Despite these challenges, civil society groups have become crucial in combatting various forms of organized crime, stepping in where state forces and institutions are either absent or compromised. Local NGOs are also the primary actors to gather data on the scale of certain criminal markets, document human rights violations and support victims of organized crime, even at significant personal risk.

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.