Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots

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Principal Findings

What's new? Violence stemming from the drug trade plagues Latin America, despite decades of law enforcement campaigns involving police and the military. Criminal groups have risen in number, spread to previously unaffected countries and diversified their rackets. Competition among these groups for drug profits drives much of the violence afflicting these societies.

Why does it matter? The U.S. is again demanding military-led offensives against criminal groups in the region, yet evidence from past crackdowns suggests that they have served to reconfigure supply routes, spur more complex criminal networks, accelerate efforts to corrupt state officials and generate spikes of violence that harm the most vulnerable.

What should be done? Latin America should learn from its successes and failures. Better policing, economic alternatives to crime, restrictions on gun flows and, under specific conditions, negotiations with illegal groups should all play a role. Foreign states should recognise that it is counterproductive to demand tougher controls when they worsen violence.

Executive Summary

Over half a century on from the declaration of a "war on drugs", Latin America is struggling to manage the eruption of violence tied to the narcotics trade. Though drug-related organised crime has brought notorious peaks of violence in the past, above all in Colombia and Mexico, never has it spread so wide, and rarely has it penetrated so deeply into states and communities. Criminal groups have splintered, multiplied and diversified, adding lethal synthetics like fentanyl to the traditional plant-based supply of marijuana, cocaine and heroin, as well as moving into new rackets like extortion. Where communities are poor and unprotected, criminal groups act as employers and overlords; where state officials are present, they coerce and corrupt them. With Washington pushing for a fresh military-led crackdown on drug cartels, perhaps involving U.S. forces, Latin American leaders face difficult decisions. Despite the pressure to comply, experience suggests that a balance of improved policing, alternative livelihoods, gun control and, under specific conditions, negotiations would be more effective in reducing violence.

The map of the drug trade in Latin America has been transformed in the decades since supply routes from the Andes to the U.S. first emerged. Demand for narcotics outside the region remains at record highs, with newer markets booming – particularly for cocaine in Europe and fentanyl in the U.S. At the same time, waves of U.S.-backed law enforcement, based on capture and extradition of crime bosses (known as kingpins), drug seizures and forced eradication have revolutionised the supply chain. Although Colombia and Mexico remain at the heart of the drug business, a main route to the U.S. and Europe runs down the Pacific, passing through countries that were largely untouched by illicit trafficking such as Costa Rica and Ecuador. Each of these has seen rates of violence rise sharply; in 2024, Ecuador was South America's most violent nation. Across the region, surges of bloodshed have marked the new hubs of a fast-shifting, hyper-violent drug trade.

Understanding how this rolling crime wave came about is fundamental to arresting it. Drug-related organised crime has adapted to the threat posed by law enforcement by becoming more flexible and resilient. In place of hierarchical syndicates that could be dismantled once their leaders were identified, the trade increasingly functions through networks of providers who subcontract each step of the route to lower tiers of operators. High-level financiers engage sophisticated international traffickers, who oversee drug exports to user markets. These in turn partner with national and local crime groups to meet the orders. National groups manage production or ensure safe passage of the drug along a particular trafficking corridor. At the local level, urban gangs are contracted by larger criminal allies for small-scale logistical services like smuggling drugs through ports.

All the layers of these networks have learned that capturing state officials is a business asset. Using a mix of threats and payoffs, they target police officers, judges, prosecutors and politicians who can ensure that business runs smoothly, without the risk of arrest or seizure of shipments. Likewise, prisons in some of Latin America's roughest settings are run by inmates, who manage their criminal enterprises behind bars and carry out vendettas against rivals inside and outside.

If profits in this business tend to flow upward, violence festers at the base. Conventional wisdom about illicit markets would suggest that fighting is a sign of instability and disruption. But violence appears to be a stable feature – and in fact a product of – the way drug trafficking operates in Latin America. The highest echelons of the drug business feature a few players who take care to conceal their connections to the trade. At the local level, where small outfits and gangs vie for control, competition to win the trust of larger criminal allies and enter the drug supply chain is usually fierce. Gangs are often paid in drugs and arms, which they then use to extract more revenue from terrified communities, including through small-scale drug retail, extortion and kidnapping. As rival groups seek to defend their territory from attack, invisible urban front lines emerge between them: civilians who dare to cross these in some of the region's worst-hit communities, such as Durán in Ecuador or Buenaventura in Colombia, face violent retribution.

Even so, organised crime's sway over poor communities is not just a function of intimidation. In many poor communities, households exhausted their reserves to survive months of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, while cuts in welfare systems formerly funded by the commodity boom left a deep economic hole. Organised crime offers an alternative to disheartened young people, who join in the hopes of earning income, status and power in their communities. Veneration of local outlaws has become commonplace among teenagers in myriad hard-up communities.

There is no one remedy for Latin America's sprawling criminal ecosystem, though experience offers evidence of what has not worked. Military crackdowns and high-level captures provide short-term victories, but time and again fuel new waves of violence and generate reconfigurations of the drug business that are more resistant to law enforcement. Latin American states, which have long followed Washington's lead in the "war on drugs", will need to rethink these conventional tools to limit drug supply with an eye to which approaches reduce – rather than exacerbate – harm to civilians. The right policy is likely a mix of interventions. These include strengthening investigations, protecting security forces from corruption, improving community policing and reforming prisons. States must also address the acute social distress that criminal groups prey upon to recruit. In specific cases, governments may also consider talks with criminal groups to stem the worst violence and peel off young members who want a fresh start.

Latin America's established role in the drug trade, entrenched inequalities and institutional weaknesses mean it will likely continue to suffer from criminal activity feeding high global drug demand. In a cruel irony, greater law enforcement, more seizures and stronger prohibition tend to raise the price of drugs – and hence boost the profits for traffickers. The region needs strategies to reduce violence and international partners who are committed not only to stopping drugs from reaching the market, but also to mitigating the fallout. While everyone agrees that organised crime is a scourge to combat, the cost of drug enforcement should not continue to be paid in civilian lives.

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I. Introduction

For the last half-century, the production, trafficking, sale and consumption of illicit drugs have steeped Latin America in violence. Whether in the form of terrorist attacks in Colombia in the 1990s, selective killings during Mexican electoral campaigns, child recruitment or sexual violence, organised crime rooted in the drug trade has threatened millions of lives and upended states and communities. Despite ebbs and flows in its intensity, the harm caused by this illicit business remains a constant, and citizens of Latin American states regularly report criminal violence to be their primary concern – above poverty, inequality and inadequate public services.[1] Today, drugs are far from the only source of revenue for criminal organisations. That said, narcotics production and trafficking continue to be a mainstay of illegal business and the origin of the seed capital that allows organised crime to spread, diversify and prosper.

Since their emergence in the 1970s, Latin America's illegal outfits have expanded into new countries and encroached into emerging markets, some of them legal. Evidence from conversations with security forces, current and former armed group members, state officials and ordinary people indicate that behind this growth are a host of far-reaching changes in form and structure. Transnational criminal networks in the drug supply chain are now arranged in tiers, with fluid alliances of convenience between them. These layers, each involving a variety of often competing groups, have emerged as part of a process of mutation following the dismantling of larger trafficking organisations and the elimination of many of their leaders. Criminal groups across Latin America have tended to splinter following the capture or killing of their bosses. While large, hegemonic cartels still control much of the Mexican market, drug trafficking elsewhere is mostly in the hands of smaller, nimbler outfits that specialise in particular parts of the production, trafficking and retail process.

With more criminal groups jostling for turf, legal and illegal businesses, and above all lucrative drug trafficking routes, rates of lethal violence have fallen in certain countries, while remaining stubbornly high in others and spiking in formerly peaceful places. Law enforcement crackdowns on one part of the supply chain have pushed violent criminals into others, in a cat-and-mouse game of shifting routes and business relationships. As markets reconfigure, communities that are poor or remote from centres of political power consistently find themselves exposed to the greatest harm. Often, the onus of demanding an adequate response from authorities falls on the shoulders of victims, such as relatives of the disappeared in Mexico or the incarcerated in Ecuador.

[1] Carlos Felipe Jaramillo, "La violencia y el crimen organizado, los grandes obstáculos del desarrollo en Latinoamérica", *El País*, 23 January 2024; and "Regional Human Development Report 2021: Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean", UN Development Programme, 22 June 2021, ch. 4.

Rather than focusing on reducing violence, however, Latin American governments have tended to concentrate on cracking down on drug supply, in compliance with international treaties that have criminalised narcotic drugs since the 1960s and often under pressure from abroad, particularly from Washington.[2] Such pressure has sharply increased since the return to the White House of President Donald Trump, who uses the threat and imposition of tariffs to push Mexico and Canada halt fentanyl shipments and has suggested that the U.S. military might intervene directly to fight drug trafficking groups.[3] Trump has listed several drug trafficking organisations as foreign terrorist organisations.[4] Although such designations do not automatically give Washington authorisation to carry out military strikes, they have in the past pointed the way toward the eventual use of force.[5] In a social media message, Elon Musk, head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, said these groups are "eligible for drone strikes", echoing earlier messaging from Republicans who have advocated forceful direct intervention.[6]

Trump's return is also likely to empower Latin American states and citizens who have embraced *mano dura* ("iron fist") policies for fighting crime, which tend to entail mass arrests, reinforced police and military patrols, the declaration of states of emergency, and in extreme cases, tacit endorsement of extrajudicial executions.[7]

Over the long term, however, neither attempts to reduce drug supply nor crackdowns on criminal groups have produced much lasting success.[8] Feeding buoyant

[2] The prohibitionist regime was consolidated in a specially convened session of the UN General Assembly in 1998, which promised a "drug-free world" in ten years. "A Century of International Drug Control", UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), June 2009. Most Latin American countries voluntarily signed up to this regime.

[3] "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Imposes Tariffs on Imports from Canada, Mexico and China", press release, White House, 1 February 2025. It was former U.S. President Richard Nixon who coined the term "war on drugs". Benjamin T. Smith, "New documents reveal the bloody origins of America's long war on drugs", *Time*, 24 August 2021.

[4] On 19 February, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio designated six Mexican criminal groups as well as the Tren de Aragua (which originated in Venezuela) and the Salvadoran gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, making good on an executive order that Trump signed on 20 January, the day of his inauguration. The Mexican groups are the powerful Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartels, as well as four smaller regional groups, Carteles Unidos, La Nueva Familia Michoacana, the Cartel del Noreste and the Cartel del Golfo. "Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists", executive order, White House, 20 January 2025. "Public Notice 12671, 90 FR 10030", U.S. State Department, 20 February 2025.

[5] For more on the designation's implications, see Brian Finucane, "U.S. military action in Mexico: Almost certainly illegal, definitively counterproductive", *Just Security*, 20 February 2025.

[6] Tweet by Elon Musk, @elonmusk, senior adviser to the U.S. president, 2:00pm, 19 February 2025.

[7] Erika María Rodríguez-Pinzón and Thiago Rodrigues, "Mano dura y democracia en América Latina: seguridad pública, violencia y estado de derecho", *América Latina Hoy*, vol. 84 (2020). See also Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°25, *Latin American Drugs I: Losing the Fight*, 14 March 2008; N°62, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 6 April 2017; and N°87, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, 26 February 2021. Forced coca crop eradication is another example of these policies.

[8] Ignacio Cano, Emiliano Rojido and Doriam Borges, "¿Qué funciona para reducir homicidios en América Latina y el Caribe? Una revisión sistemática de las evaluaciones de impacto?", Laboratório de Análise da Violência, Universidade do Estado do Río de Janeiro, Brasil, September 2024. This

user markets in the region and beyond, Latin American drug production has continued to expand. Coca cultivation in Colombia quadrupled over the last decade, while global cocaine production doubled.[9] Drug use has also grown steadily, with the UN noting in 2024 that 292 million people worldwide reported having consumed narcotics in the previous year.[10] While the majority of users prefer cannabis, abuse of much more damaging drugs continues to be tremendously harmful: the synthetic opioid epidemic has killed over 600,000 people in the U.S. and Canada alone.[11] Meanwhile, the drug trade remains hugely profitable for violent criminal organisations. Latin American calls for a change in tack in global drug policy have become loud and insistent in recent years, but so far to no avail.[12]

Against the backdrop of a newly invigorated, U.S.-backed war on drugs, this report focuses on the criminal threats deriving from the illicit drug trade affecting numerous communities in Latin America today. It looks at the shifts in the drug supply chain, the rationale for the use of violence by criminal groups and the reasons why bloodshed is so heavily concentrated along certain parts of the trafficking route. It puts forward a series of recommendations that look to curb the insecurity affecting Latin American countries, while recognising that the many roots of this longstanding problem require an approach that encompasses much more than new security initiatives and extends to alternative livelihoods, arms control and, in certain cases, dialogue with illegal groups. It focuses on Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The report does not include Brazil, which deserves a separate analysis. Crisis Group conducted well over 200 interviews, about one third of them with women, with officials, security force officers, current and former criminal group members, and residents of affected communities.

survey of academic studies found that the most promising interventions to reduce violence include better policing, arms control and efforts to lower alcohol abuse, as well as more responsive justice systems.

[9] "World Drug Report 2023", UNODC, June 2023.

[10] "World Drug Report 2024 – Special points of interest", UNODC, June 2024.

[11] Cannabis use is legal within certain limits in 24 U.S. states, three EU countries and Latin American countries such as Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. On the opioid epidemic, see Tracie White, "Stanford-Lancet report calls for sweeping reforms to mitigate opioid crisis", Stanford Medicine News Centre, 2 February 2022.

[12] Various organisations have echoed these calls. See "Time to End Prohibition", Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2021.

II. Historical Shifts in Latin America's Drug Trade

Latin America is a leading source of organic and synthetic drugs. Over the course of half a century, drug trafficking has evolved and mutated to elude the reach of law enforcement, extending the threat of violence to previously untouched communities and countries across the region.

A. *New and Old Drugs*

The first large criminal organisations built their wealth on the supply of marijuana, cocaine and heroin. Marijuana to some extent, but especially cocaine, remain major moneymakers for organised crime. The bulk of the world's coca, the raw material for cocaine, is still grown in Colombia, with crops also tended in Peru and Bolivia, and to a much lesser extent in Guatemala, Honduras and southern Mexico.[13] The location of the clientele, however, has shifted. U.S. demand for the drug is high but has stagnated, whereas Europe is the largest growth market, with consumption reportedly rising 60 per cent in the decade leading up to 2022.[14] Traffickers are also pioneering newer markets in Asia and Oceania, where prices are higher.[15] Synthetic drugs, meanwhile, have flooded the U.S. market, first methamphetamines and, now, overwhelmingly, fentanyl, some 96 per cent of which is believed to come over the border from Mexico.[16] The expansion of these markets has fortified traffickers and thrown up immense challenges for law enforcement agencies seeking to stop them.

Meanwhile, the growth of drug consumption in Latin America has largely been ignored by policymakers, despite it reportedly doubling between 1990 and 2010. While surveys of regional drug consumption are not widely available, in 2019 the Organization of America States found that cocaine consumption had risen in about half the countries of Latin America, while methamphetamine use in Mexico, this drug's main producer, has boomed in recent years.[17]

[13] "World Drug Report 2024", op. cit.
[14] Ibid.
[15] The price of cocaine is 50 times higher in the European market than in Ecuador and 300 times higher in Oceania. "El Ecosistema criminal en el Ecuador: Líneas de Acción", *Revista Pensamiento Estratégico – ADEMIC*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2024), p. 121.
[16] Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid ten times more potent than morphine, is extremely compact and often disguised as a legitimate prescription drug. A dose of pure fentanyl just the size of several grains of salt can be fatal. See "Facts about Fentanyl", U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration; and "International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports", U.S. State Department, 1 March 2024.
[17] Latin American drug use rates nevertheless remain low by global standards. See "Health at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2023", OECD/The World Bank, 2023, p. 128; "Report on Drug Use in the Americas 2019", Organization of American States, 2019. Crisis Group interview, medical official, Servicio Médico Forense, Baja California, April 2024.

B. *The Rise of Trafficking*

The first drug trafficking networks connecting South America to the U.S. emerged in the 1970s, when Colombian family clans in the Sierra Nevada and La Guajira, both on the Atlantic coast, began moving cannabis northward.[18] Cocaine soon followed, largely consolidated in the hands of the Medellín and Cali Cartels. These organisations were hierarchical, and they built vertically integrated supply chains stretching from coca cultivators in Peru and Bolivia to processing plants in Colombia to U.S.-based dealers. During the two decades of their domination, the cartels honed models of influence over politicians and capture of political and economic power that persist to this day. They used their immense financial capital, together with a capacity for brutality, to buy and threaten their way toward impunity.[19]

In the mid-1980s, U.S. law enforcement intensified operations against cocaine trafficking through the Caribbean by air and sea, prompting routes to shift toward Mexico. Here, existing smuggling groups with a long history of trafficking alcohol, marijuana and heroin began to export cocaine over the U.S. border. Starting out as junior partners in the business, Mexican groups soon raked in unprecedented profits, and their power expanded.[20] Around the same time, a joint Mexican-U.S. operation captured the leader of the then-dominant Guadalajara Cartel, a confederation of trafficking clans formed under the wing of the country's erstwhile one-party system. The group split into four: the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel and the Juárez Cartel.

From these early days, violence was a feature of the drug market, but one that played out in distinct ways across the region. In Mexico, an authoritarian state kept narco-traffickers' ambitions and infighting in check while allowing the market to grow and taking a cut of the proceeds.[21] In Colombia, Medellín Cartel boss Pablo Escobar used violence to wield power over the state, infiltrating its every level, from local police forces to the legislature in Bogotá.[22]

Governments spent a decade chasing Escobar, yet his downfall in December 1993 only opened the way for new players to fill the lucrative void. Violent right-wing paramilitary groups forged ties with former Escobar allies, first to finance their fight with

[18] Lina Britto, *El boom de la marihuana: Auge y caída del primer paraíso de las drogas en Colombia* (Bogotá, 2022).

[19] Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *Conexión Colombia: Una historia del narcotráfico entre los años 30 y los años 90* (Bogotá, 2021); Carlos G. Arrieta, Luis J. Orejuela, Eduardo Sarmiento and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, *Narcotráfico en Colombia: Dimensiones políticas, económicas, jurídicas e internacionales* (Bogotá, 1990).

[20] As early as a century ago, Mexican criminal groups began carving out routes toward the U.S. to feed an appetite for alcohol and narcotics, initially poppy and heroin as well as marijuana. Guillermo Valdés, *Historia del narcotráfico en México* (Ciudad de México, 2013).

[21] Ibid. "In exchange for the tolerance, regulation and protection offered by the local authorities, the latter expected not only income but also political subordination from the criminals". See Mónica Serrano, "States of Violence: State-Crime Relations in Mexico", in W.G. Pansters, *Violence, Coercion and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur* (Stanford, 2012), pp. 135-158.

[22] Luis J. Garay Salamanca, Eduardo Salcedo-Albarán, Isaac de León-Beltrán and Bernardo Guerrero, *La captura y reconfiguración cooptada del Estado en Colombia* (Bogotá, 2008).

leftist guerrilla groups, but soon thereafter primarily to enrich themselves.[23] The rebel Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also sought to control production of the coca leaf to finance its rebellion.[24] In 1999, the U.S. and Colombia signed Plan Colombia, an aid package that reached over $10 billion in value over fifteen years, mixing drug eradication and interdiction with a military counter-insurgency campaign and an overhaul of local security forces.[25]

C. *The "War on Drugs" and Its Aftermath*

The example of Plan Colombia inspired a similar approach in Mexico, where Felipe Calderón declared a "war on drugs" in 2006 soon after winning the presidency.[26] Also backed by the U.S. through the Mérida Initiative, Calderón aimed to deploy the military against organised crime while building more effective police and judicial institutions.[27] Mexican security forces captured or killed scores of criminal kingpins, but many of the root causes of violent crime, including persistent corruption and poverty, went unaddressed.

Despite apparent law enforcement successes, Mexican criminal operations were able to adapt and grow. Illegal organisations fractured into a plethora of smaller groups that clashed with one another to gain a foothold in various illicit businesses. Over the next fifteen years, the number of criminal groups increased ten-fold, from fewer than twenty in 2006 to more than 200 in 2021.[28] Between 2006 and 2016, at least 73,000 people were murdered in cases that seemingly involved organised crime, while another 70,000 were reported missing between 2006 and 2021.[29]

As they fragmented, Mexican criminal networks increased their territorial presence at home and abroad. The role of Central American countries as transit and storage

[23] "Narcotráfico: Génesis de los paramilitares y herencia de bandas criminales", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, January 2013; Gustavo Duncan, *Los señores de la guerra* (Bogotá, 2006).
[24] Jerónimo Ríos Sierra, "La narcotización del activismo guerrillero de las FARC y el ELN, 1998-2012", *Revista UNISCI*, no. 41 (2016).
[25] The effectiveness of Plan Colombia is still debated. While the funds helped expand military operations and improved Colombian armed forces' capabilities, heavy-handed tactics resulted in thousands of civilian casualties and fumigation of coca crops had an alarming impact on public health. For more, see Winifred Tate, *Drugs, Thugs and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford, 2015); Adam Isacson and Abigale Poe, "After Plan Colombia", Center for International Policy, December 2009; and Michael Shifter, "Plan Colombia: A Retrospective", *Americas Quarterly*, 18 July 2012.
[26] As Mexico's one-party state began to break down in the 1980s, central government control of drug traffickers weakened and criminal groups began to act with increasing autonomy. "Con Calderón se rompió entendimiento y subordinación de criminales: Luis Astorga en CNN", *Aristegui Noticias*, 10 August 2015; Benjamin T. Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (London, 2021).
[27] Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond", Congressional Research Service, 29 June 2017.
[28] Jane Esberg, "More than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 May 2020.
[29] "Organised Crime Related Homicides 2006-2017, by Reforma", Justice for Mexico Project; "Una guerra inventada y 350,000 muertos en México", *Washington Post*, 14 June 2021.

hubs, particularly Guatemala and Honduras, grew.[30] By 2011, the amount of cocaine seized in Mexico was a small fraction of the total interdicted in Central America, a region already grappling with chronic violence stemming from its legacy of civil wars.[31]

Another pivotal moment in Latin America's drug trade came in 2016, as the peace agreement that demobilised the FARC also meant losing the most reliable regulator of the raw material for cocaine manufacture in Colombia.[32] Though Colombian groups remain key suppliers for the cocaine market, they have not recovered their role as global traffickers, and almost all armed groups in the country now sell their product at the border or on the high seas, long before it reaches consumers.[33] In effect, Colombian groups have been cut out of the most lucrative parts of the drug trafficking supply chain, with criminal organisations involved in the production of coca and cocaine now relying on their ability to forge international business connections to sell their goods.

D. *The Rise of Fentanyl*

Well before the FARC's dominance faded, Mexican criminal organisations had already taken a leading role in shaping the global cocaine trade. Together with a complex network of transnational investors, and at times working with European organised crime, these Mexican groups spread more deeply into South America to build new routes and avoid the risks of interdiction in Colombia. Ecuador, with its ill-prepared law enforcement bodies, proximity to Colombia's most prolific coca-growing regions and a large container port with preferential trade access to Europe, has most recently fitted the bill.[34]

Mexican criminal groups have also found a lucrative new revenue source in the production of synthetic drugs, first methamphetamine and then, beginning around 2014, fentanyl. Production of the latter in Mexico was pioneered by the Chapitos, a Sinaloa Cartel faction headed by the sons of cartel founder Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known as El Chapo, who was extradited to the U.S. in January 2017. The expansion

[30] Gema Santamaría, "La difusión y contención del crimen organizado en la subregión México-Centroamérica", in Juan Carlos Garzón and Eric Olson (eds.), *La diáspora criminal: la difusión transnacional del crimen organizado y cómo contener su expansión* (Washington, 2013).

[31] "Transnational Organised Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment", UNODC, 2012, p. 19. In Guatemala traffickers seized upon institutional weakness and impunity to infiltrate the state. The extent of this collusion became one of the motives behind the creation of the UN's International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). See "Antecedentes", CICIG, 5 March 2018. In Honduras, traffickers' influence reached the top: in March 2024, former President Juan Orlando Hernández was convicted of taking millions of dollars in bribes to protect cocaine traffickers. See "Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Convicted in Manhattan Federal Court of Conspiring to Import Cocaine into the United States and Related Firearms Offenses", U.S. Department of Justice, 8 March 2024.

[32] The FARC controlled the vast majority of coca-cultivating areas and acted as regulators of the business. See "Informe Final: Hallazgos y Recomendaciones", Colombia Truth Commission, June 2022, pp. 349-351.

[33] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°105, *The Unsolved Crime in Total Peace: Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, 19 March 2024.

[34] "Ecuador's High Tide of Drug Violence", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 November 2022; Renato Rivera-Rhon, "Crimen organizado y cadenas de valor: el ascenso estratégico del Ecuador en la economía del narcotráfico", *URVIO: Revista Latinoamericana De Estudios De Seguridad*, vol. 28 (2020).

of production has been "exponential", according to U.S. court indictments.[35] The cartel imports precursors, often disguised as regular commercial goods, from an array of trusted contacts in China and a network of third-party brokers in and outside of Mexico, including in the U.S.[36]

The number of labs and qualified cooks grew in tandem, including new facilities and individuals not fully under Sinaloa control. Within just five years, Mexico had surpassed China as a manufacturer of fentanyl.[37] U.S. seizures of the drug tripled between 2021 and 2023, even as the drug's continuous influx fuelled an epidemic. Fentanyl is now the main cause of death for U.S. residents aged 18 to 49, even though mortality fell slightly in 2023 and 2024.[38]

The fentanyl market has confounded law enforcement efforts to stop the supply. Precursors are disguised when they enter Mexico. Once produced, traffickers move the compact doses in packages that look like legal prescription medication. They ship the drug through ports of entry into the U.S., hidden in secret compartments in cars, disguised among goods in tractor-trailers, or transported by couriers, usually U.S. citizens who attract little attention moving back and forth across the border. Interdiction of more shipments at the south-western U.S. border has failed to reduce the amounts reaching U.S. consumers.[39] The Trump administration is now leaning on Mexico for stricter enforcement, while Mexico has asked Washington to reduce illicit arms trafficking from the U.S. in return.[40]

The global drug trade is more resilient and harder to combat than ever. The supply chain is composed of an array of groups, many of them easily replaceable should their leaders be captured or their structures dismantled. Profits from cocaine have been reinvested, including in fentanyl, illicit mining and human trafficking – but also in legal businesses. Corruption taints governments at the highest levels, and extortion reaches all the way to societies' most vulnerable people.

[35] *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, U.S. Southern District Court of New York, 4 April 2023.
[36] Crisis Group interview, expert on drug trafficking, Mexico City, April 2024. See also "The fentanyl funnel: How narcos sneak deadly chemicals through the U.S.", Reuters, 1 October 2024.
[37] *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.
[38] "DEA Releases 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment", U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 9 May 2024; "Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts", U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 11 December 2024.
[39] Ibid.; *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.; Aldrin Ballesteros, "Fentanyl Seizures at the Southwest Border: A Breakdown by CBP Areas of Responsibility, Wilson Center, 29 August 2023.
[40] "Presidenta de México: Aranceles se pausan un mes; se establecerán mesas de trabajo con el gobierno de EUA en materia de seguridad y comercio", press release, Mexican Presidency, 3 February 2025.

III. Networked Crime

Organised criminal networks now run complex supply chains that span countries and continents, composed of smaller specialised units that operate with considerable autonomy. Within these criminal networks, four layers of operations stand out in Latin America: financing and management, international trafficking, national-level production and transport, and urban control and distribution. These are not perfectly fixed categories, with some outfits occupying various tiers of the drug trafficking process.

Broadly speaking, profit is concentrated during international transport to user markets or where the largest financial risks are incurred, for example by primary investors.[41] Violence, on the other hand, reaches its greatest intensity in areas occupied by local criminal groups, which are often vying for control of territory that is crucial for exporting drugs or selling them locally, and where other sources of revenue can be found through rackets such as extortion and kidnapping for ransom. At every level, criminal outfits seek to corrupt, co-opt or coerce officials and others who can ensure they go protected and unpunished. Often, officials work with or even form part of criminal networks, putting state power at the service of illegal activities.

A. *Finance and Management*

Like all transnational enterprises, drug trafficking requires investors and managers to provide up-front capital and organise complex transactions. Known in parts of Latin America as "invisible narcos", this layer of the operation is chiefly responsible for deciding where to invest, how to manage routes, which clients to work with and what jurisdictions to operate in.[42] This planning is particularly important for shipping cocaine to Europe and fentanyl precursor imports to Mexico, given the difficult logistics and huge profits at stake. Managers are able move funds to different logistical providers, first to test and then to consolidate routes.[43] A former armed group member described to Crisis Group how this outsourcing functions:

[41] On the concentration of profits among international traffickers, see Manuel Sánchez-Pérez, María Belén Marín-Carrillo, María Dolores Illescas-Manzano and Zohair Souilim, "Understanding the Illegal Drug Supply Chain Structure: A Value Chain Analysis of the Supply of Hashish to Europe", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 10 (2023), p. 276.

[42] Court cases often provide the best glimpses into these networks. Several cases in Panama between 2022 and 2024 included arrest warrants against financiers working out of the United Arab Emirates, Spain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, as part of a network linked to Irish, Italian, Bosnian and Dutch-Moroccan drug traffickers. "Confirman que en Panamá hay personas que cooperaban con el cartel de Dubái", TVN, 1 December 2022; "A notorious drug kingpin set up shell companies in the British Virgin Islands and Dubai to employ alleged cartel underlings, documents show", International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 20 August 2024; "Montenegrin National Charged in Brooklyn Federal Court with Maritime Narcotrafficking of Over 20 Tons of Cocaine", press release, U.S. Attorney General's Office, Eastern District of New York, 31 October 2022.

[43] Crisis Group interview, intelligence official, May 2024. Given the complexity of these networks, investors are often specialised, focusing on one route or product. See, for example, the sentencing memorandum from *United States vs. Sergio Fernando Cifuentes Sagastume*, U.S. Southern District of California, 11 October 2023.

> The financiers are the white collar [criminals], they are businesspeople who come to [move drugs] as a business. They start to make contact with smaller businesspeople … and they offer them a percentage of profits. Those smaller groups provide the logistics, and from there, they will subcontract other smaller logistics providers. From there, these [smaller providers] hire trusted contacts in urban neighbourhoods and offer them a percentage. Everything is a logistics chain.[44]

Outsourcing along these lines limits the risks of arrest and prosecution for investors, who take great care to safeguard their identities and limit their direct contact with armed organisations.[45] Investors are often separated from the most heavily scrutinised parts of the supply chain, particularly those involved in exporting and transporting drugs. They tend to send envoys and intermediaries to sites along the trafficking chain to organise shipments and secure cooperation with lower-tier players.[46] According to a convict, investors in Ecuador "only meet with the leaders [of the armed groups] … to explain the conditions and organise the work: you [the armed group] will earn a certain amount, these are the conditions, these are the tasks you must complete. Then, those group leaders negotiate [to subcontract out] with even more local gangs".[47] Another person close to the drug trade explained: "Today, the criminal boss could be anyone, in plain clothes, in a restaurant or on a yacht, with several cell phones and no obvious links to armed groups".[48]

In the case of fentanyl, inconspicuous businesspeople are vital for access to the formal banking and international trade systems.[49] These individuals, known as "brokers", also play a vital role in importing chemical precursors, largely from China.[50] Their connections include exporters in China, as well as legal companies in Mexico with legitimate reasons to import chemicals and law firms experienced in administrative and legal procedures for importing goods.[51] These operators also supervise efforts to corrupt and infiltrate port workers, who are forced to accept the bribes they

[44] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[45] See, for example, "El ecosistema criminal en el Ecuador: Líneas de Acción", op. cit.
[46] Several Balkan organised crime bosses, for example, have been arrested in recent years for financing and managing cocaine routes from Ecuador and Brazil into southern Europe. These bosses contract other criminals through emissaries. Crisis Group interviews, security officials and former gang members, Guayaquil, May 2024. See also "How Balkan gangsters became Europe's top cocaine suppliers", Reuters, 2 May 2024. Authorities estimate that around 2,000 migrants from the Balkans work in criminal operations in Ecuador. Crisis Group interviews, European security source, May 2024; Ecuadorian naval officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[47] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[48] Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Cartagena, October 2023.
[49] "Money Laundering from Fentanyl and Synthetic Opioids", Financial Action Task Force, November 2022, pp. 16.
[50] "The shadowy 'brokers' helping Mexico's cartels smuggle fentanyl chemicals from China", Reuters, 18 December 2024.
[51] Crisis Group interview, customs broker, Colima, April 2024.

are offered or face violent retribution.[52] U.S. officials believe brokers are crucial nodes in supply chains and have recently begun indicting them.[53]

The power financiers exert over the drug market is enormous. They can help choose winners and losers among armed trafficking organisations, as happened after the 2016 peace accord in Colombia. A person close to the drug trade explained that, when it looked likely that the agreement would be ratified, narco-investors poured money into coca cultivation in that country to ensure that there would still be ample supply when one of the biggest players on the production side quit the market.[54] These investors have also been responsible for expanding coca crops into Central America through investment in Honduras and Guatemala, in the latter case hiring experienced Colombian farmers to set up operations.[55]

Providing capital and coordinating the myriad connections between production sites and consumer markets enables these operators to claim a large share of the profits, which they reinvest either in expanding their drug business or in other illegal or legal markets.[56] Penetrating the business and political elite in key countries along the supply chain, as well as in financial havens such as Dubai and Panama, is fundamental to their ability to launder funds and gain access to the banking system. The footprint of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, for example, is believed to touch business and banking on almost every continent, enabling the group to avoid law enforcement with ease.[57] According to a convict, "The majority of investors in drug trafficking are politicians or businessmen".[58]

B. *International Trafficking*

International trafficking begins with the purchase of raw material or precursor substances overseas, goes on to processing and transnational shipment, and ends with delivery to the consumer market, usually in Europe or the U.S. These traffickers can be understood as the "owners" of international routes, for example from Guayaquil to Rotterdam, Cartagena to Miami or Manzanillo to New York. One criminal organisation usually arranges each long trajectory, with sub-contractors filling specific roles

[52] Crisis Group interview, former Manzanillo port worker, Colima, April 2024.
[53] "2 Mexican nationals charged with conspiring to traffic meth precursors, synthesized meth following HSI Houston, DEA investigation", press release, Homeland Security Investigations, 10 February 2023.
[54] Crisis Group interviews, June and July 2023. Coca crops began expanding in 2014, amid promises that the peace agreement's substitution program would provide financial support to coca farmers. Soon afterward, investors started pouring money into boosting supply. Farmers across Colombia told Crisis Group that strangers arrived in their areas around this time, bearing promises to make up-front payments, fund crop inputs and provide other incentives to plant coca.
[55] Crisis Group interview, community leader, Alta Verapaz, June 2024.
[56] Crisis Group interview, drug market expert, Bogotá, November 2020. See also "Complexities and conveniences in the international drug trade: the involvement of Mexican criminal actors in the EU drug market", Europol/U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 5 December 2022.
[57] "The Expansion and Diversification of Mexican Cartels: Dynamic New Actors and Markets", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 December 2024.
[58] Crisis Group interview, June 2023.

such as storage and passage in and out of ports along the way.[59] Only a few criminal organisations can boast of the contacts, as well as the sophistication with maritime, air and land transport, that this stage requires.[60] The bulk of transnational logistics falls to name-brand criminal organisations such as Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital, as well as a limited but increasing number of European criminal groups.

Cross-border trafficking is highly profitable. The price of drugs increases many times over from start to finish. Crisis Group interviews indicate that a kilogram of coca base paste leaving southern Colombia for Ecuador sells for roughly $550 at the border; $800 in the Ecuadorian border province of Esmeraldas; and $1,000 by the time it reaches the port of Guayaquil.[61] After refining, in 2021 the wholesale price of cocaine at exit in Ecuador was roughly $2,000 per kilo, rising to $40,000 in Western Europe.[62] The lion's share of profit in the cocaine market, in other words, ends up in the hands of international traffickers and the investors backing them.[63] Meanwhile, the price of fentanyl sold on U.S. streets can represent a mark-up of 200 to 800 times the cost of the precursor chemicals used to produce it.[64]

In the case of plant-based drugs, the first step in this part of the chain is purchasing the product from a supplier. South American providers move their product into the custody of Mexican international traffickers at maritime ports, airports or on the high seas, including in Colombia and Ecuador.[65] In the case of synthetics like fentanyl, international traffickers such as the Mexican group Los Chapitos, a faction of the Sinaloa Cartel, both control their own labs and also buy from cooks and smaller allied criminal groups, which may have been contracted to protect freelance labs.[66] International traffickers arrange bulk purchases of drugs through emissaries, who explain the conditions to national-level criminal groups. For example, some trafficking groups demand that the supplier be completely loyal and pledge not to sell to rival organisations.[67]

[59] The two major cartels that move fentanyl from Mexico to the U.S., for example, "can be considered umbrella groups: loosely knit networks with the contacts, infrastructure and wherewithal to move poly-drug loads across the stretch of territory that represents the highest risk". "Mexico's Role in the Deadly Rise of Fentanyl", Wilson Center, February, 2019, p. 19.

[60] The Sinaloa Cartel has a presence in at least 45 countries to coordinate trafficking and money laundering operations. *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.

[61] Crisis Group interviews, coca farmers and drug market experts, Puerto Guzmán and Guayaquil, February and May 2024.

[62] The UNODC corroborates this data. In 2020, a kilogram of coca leaf in Colombia sold for roughly $0.62, while a kilogram of refined cocaine fetched $33,000 in Belgium. "Drug Trafficking and Cultivation: Drug Prices", UNODC.

[63] Ibid.

[64] *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.; "How El Chapo's sons built a fentanyl empire poisoning America", Reuters, 9 May 2023; "Fentanyl", Reuters, 9 August 2023.

[65] Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in Total Peace: Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas,* op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, naval official, Guayaquil, May 2024.

[66] Crisis Group interviews, journalist and experts, Baja California and Mexico City, March and April 2024. See also *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.

[67] Crisis Group interview, academic, Washington, June 2024.

Product quality is also regulated at this stage. In the case of fentanyl, regulation means overseeing the drug's production, appearance and cost.[68] International buyers of cocaine, meanwhile, increasingly insist on a purity level well above 95 per cent.[69] They have at times set a fixed price to buy the drug, leaving local suppliers to compete in order to see who can best meet the required standards while still turning a profit.[70] Once international traffickers take possession of the drugs, they use a sophisticated array of methods to deliver their product across borders.

Calculating the appropriate tradeoff between profit and risks is fundamental in determining how to route any drug shipment. Large parts of the transnational supply route may depend on outsourcing to other groups, which can take charge of temporary storage, in the case of cocaine trafficking through Central America, or movement across a given land border.[71] Traffickers also appear to be pioneering new way stations in countries with weaker enforcement capabilities. Costa Rica, which had long avoided absorption into international drug routes, is a striking example. Cocaine and marijuana are now arriving in large quantities on both its Pacific and Atlantic coasts, spawning a boom in local criminal groups seeking to partner with larger trafficking operations. The homicide rate skyrocketed 40 per cent in 2023, roughly 70 per cent of it linked to drug trafficking, according to authorities.[72]

With the same profit calculations in mind, traffickers increasingly prefer to move cocaine or its unrefined form, coca paste, in container ships to Europe, rather than via more traditional methods such as small planes, speedboats and submarines (though these are also still used).[73] Containers not only move a high volume of product, but trafficking businesses can mathematically predict how much on average of their shipments will be seized (2-10 per cent, according to law enforcement), and then adjust the final selling price to take account of these losses.[74]

[68] Crisis Group interviews, individuals with knowledge of port logistics, Manzanillo, April 2024. See also Victoria Dittmar and Paulina Ríos, "How fentanyl producers in Mexico are adapting to a challenging market", *Insight Crime*, 22 January 2025.

[69] Crisis Group interview, Colombian police officer, Lisbon, June 2024.

[70] For example, in Nariño, Colombia, the international buyers' fixed price per kilogram of cocaine was set at roughly $1,200. Local seller groups had to find a way to lower their own costs, while maintaining quality, so as to capture a high percentage of the sale as profit. As a result, coca growers went from receiving roughly $700 per kilo to $250 per kilo. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Popayán, June 2023.

[71] For example, cocaine taking a route orchestrated by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel reportedly moves from dissidents of the former FARC in Colombia toward Guatemala's Los Huistas, who then transfer it to the Jalisco Cartel or its local allies in Mexico, and from there toward the U.S. border. "Nexos entre Los Huistas de Guatemala, Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación y disidentes de las FARC", *El Faro*, 2 September 2022.

[72] Crisis Group interviews, international security sources, March and April 2024; San José-based diplomat, June 2024. See also Maria Abi-Habib, "How a tourist paradise became a drug trafficking magnet", *The New York Times*, 15 September 2024; and "Bandas de narcos fijan Costa Rica como objetivo", *Euronews*, 12 February 2024.

[73] Crisis Group interviews, drug market expert, Popayán and Bogotá, June and November 2023.

[74] "Criminal Networks in EU Ports: Risks and Challenges for Law Enforcement", Europol/Security Steering Committee of the Ports of Antwerp, Hamburg/Bremerhaven and Rotterdam, March 2023. As a point of comparison, the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force South, which is in charge of interdiction in the Caribbean, believes it captures roughly 10 per cent of the drugs coming in to the U.S. Crisis Group interview, academic, Washington, June 2024.

Traffickers go to extreme lengths to exploit international container shipping. Putting drugs into the container, a process known as "contamination" across South America or "filling the *piñata*" in Mexico, can take a wide range of forms, including hiding cocaine inside another product, inside the container's structure, or inside the ship itself. In Ecuador, cocaine is frequently hidden inside shipments of bananas – a product chosen because it is loaded into the container at the farm and must move quickly through ports to avoid spoiling.[75] Drugs can also be loaded onto ships in ports by corrupt workers who have access to the unique codes to identify, open and then get into containers. Criminal organisations have also started using chemicals to disguise the distinct smell of coca base paste, so that neither scanners nor dogs are able to detect it; it is then refined in Europe.[76]

To avoid port inspections, traffickers load their product onto container ships on the high seas with the collaboration of crew members.[77] A security source explained: "At first, the traffickers would ask the ship to stop on the high seas to load the product. But navies figured this out, and they would undertake control operations on container ships that had stopped. So, the traffickers started to contaminate vessels at full speed, boarding from small speedboats".[78]

After being loaded with drugs in Latin America, vessels can be met again on the high seas before they arrive at their final destinations in Europe. Once again, speedboats approach the ship while it is moving, taking packages tossed to them by complicit crew members. Traffickers in Mexico use a similar method to unload cocaine or fentanyl precursors: container ships stop at the maritime border just before entering Mexican waters, where speedboats collect the products and move them to land. From there, precursors are mainly transported by road.[79] If the drugs are to be removed in the arrival port, traffickers may try to hide their tracks by diverting shipments into containers coming from less suspicious locations, such as Costa Rica, Panama or Guyana.[80]

Bulk shipping is a good way to camouflage both precursors and synthetic drugs. Large ports are generally preferred by traffickers because the volume of incoming goods makes it is easier to avoid detection.[81] International traffickers label precursors as legitimate cargo, hide them in other products or even chemically disguise them to

[75] Roughly 53 per cent of all the cargo shipments found by Ecuadorian authorities to include drugs are shipments of bananas. Crisis Group interview, security source, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[76] Crisis Group interviews, EU drug agency officials, April 2024. See also "Criminal Networks in EU Ports", op. cit.
[77] Crisis Group interview, intelligence source, May 2024.
[78] Crisis Group interview, international security source, January 2024. The traffickers who move speedboats toward container ships are known in South America as *micos* (monkeys).
[79] Crisis Group interviews, local leader and local security officer, Colima, March 2024.
[80] Crisis Group interviews, naval intelligence source, May 2024; international intelligence source, January and February 2024; diplomat based in Costa Rica, June 2024.
[81] Recent money laundering cases raise questions about the possible involvement of Albanian organised crime in trafficking at smaller Mexican ports, such as Ensenada and Rosarito. Jesusa Cervantes, "BC y sus casinos, el paraíso para lavar dinero sucio", *Infosavia*, 6 November 2023.

avoid detection.[82] In other cases, fentanyl precursors are sent directly by mail to addresses rented by criminal groups for the sole purpose of serving as discreet delivery points.[83] Shipment north to the U.S. also requires control of certain corridors, such as the roads between these coastal port cities and the U.S. southern border.[84] Mexican trafficking organisations rely on airplanes, submarines and an extensive network of underground tunnels into the U.S. to move fentanyl and other drugs, according to court documents.[85]

To fend off interdiction, traffickers create wide networks of corruption by paying off officials at various levels, including port workers, pilots, airline and shipping company employees, officers in navies and international law enforcement agencies and senior politicians.[86] Honduras offers an extreme example. After a coup in 2009, the Sinaloa Cartel and other criminal groups invested heavily in ensuring that they would have allies in power, up to the president. As a result, they could count on having Honduras as a transhipment point for most of the cocaine trafficked from South America to the U.S.[87] The chief architect of Mexico's war on drugs from late 2006 to 2012, Genaro García Luna, was convicted in the U.S. in 2023 of taking bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel to protect the group's drug shipments to the U.S. He was sentenced to over 38 years in prison in October 2024.[88]

C. *National-level Production and Trafficking*

Except in Mexico, where certain criminal groups are at the heart of international trafficking operations, national-level organised crime has a narrower range of responsibilities in the drug trade. These outfits are typically responsible for guaranteeing the supply of product to international traffickers or managing that product along a particular part of the trafficking route. Often, there are far more of these national groups than there are international buyers for their product and services. National outfits compete fiercely to secure coveted transnational relationships. In the words of an Ecuadorian naval officer, groups such as the Los Choneros or Los Lobos "want to show

[82] Crisis Group interviews, custom broker, former port manager and journalists, Colima and Baja California, February and March 2024. *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.

[83] Crisis Group interview, former national security officer, Colima, March 2024.

[84] Crisis Group interviews, former port manager, former port worker, local and national security officers, journalists, Colima and Baja California, March and April 2024. An attraction of the Colima port, for example, is likely its road and rail network, linking it to Mexico's centre and to northern cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros.

[85] *United States vs. Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar et al.*, op. cit.

[86] Ibid. According to a senior Argentine official, "Organised crime is becoming a political actor in the region". Crisis Group interview, Lisbon, June 2024.

[87] See the government's sentencing memorandum in *The United States of America vs. Fredy Renan Nájera Montoya*, U.S. Southern District of New York, 23 December 2020; "Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Sentenced to 45 Years in Prison for Conspiring to Distribute More Than 400 Tons of Cocaine and Related Firearms Offenses", U.S. Department of Justice, 26 June 2024.

[88] "Ex-Mexican Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna Sentenced to Over 38 Years' Imprisonment", press release, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, 16 October 2024.

the [international] emissaries that they have control, and the way to do that is through violence".[89]

Bulkier organic drugs require nationally based criminals to maintain territorial control in areas of production, storage and refining. Criminals must ensure that coca fields are safe from security forces and rival organisations, for example. Violent turf wars over raw material are common. In Putumayo, on the Colombian side of the border with Ecuador, jostling to control the buying of coca paste is so rough that members of two rival groups in the area have reportedly dressed as their competitors and entered coca-growing areas in order to identify which farmers are willing to sell coca to the "wrong" group.[90] Criminal groups that manage to secure hegemony over regions or routes, such as Colombia's Gaitanista Army, also known as the Gulf Clan, are often far more successful in forging stable buying relationships, in this case with the Sinaloa Cartel.[91]

As for synthetic drugs, national crime groups seek to control ports to import precursor chemicals, protect brokers and cooks who make the drug, and provide the final product to international traffickers.[92] These criminal groups must meet buyers' conditions: fentanyl, for instance, has to be packaged in Ziploc bags with the client international trafficker's name and a distinctive logo or colouring.[93]

Mexico exhibits a rather different set of arrangements due to the sway of its main criminal groups over not just national trafficking but also the international drug trade. Relationships between the two major crime groups involved in international trafficking, the Sinaloa and New Generation Jalisco Cartels, and smaller regional operations are fluid. At times, these smaller outfits pay to use the routes controlled by the dominant organisations. For example, various local investors may ally to fund a project to ship cocaine or methamphetamine to the U.S., including the cost of paying one of the major groups for port access or safe passage across Mexico. At the same time, smaller groups that have grabbed control of a particular territory, such as La Linea in Chihuahua, the Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima in Guanajuato or the Cartel del Noreste in Tamaulipas, may gain the power to charge national traffickers for operating there.[94]

Strategies for controlling production and in-country transport vary greatly from one country to the next, though all involve violence against civilians and rival outfits.

[89] Crisis Group interview, naval officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.

[90] Crisis Group interview, international monitoring official, Mocoa, February 2024. In the same region, coca paste buyers from Ecuador have been assassinated, apparently for attempting to overstep their territorial bounds.

[91] The Gaitanistas have been able to distinguish themselves through their territorial control and efficient product delivery, winning strong buyer relationships. Other groups, such as FARC dissident factions, struggled to find reliable buyers, often could not sell their product and saw cocaine prices in their territories drop sharply.

[92] Colima's port city of Manzanillo, for example, has experienced an abrupt hike in violence that local security officials say is linked to competition among national-level groups to secure the entry of precursors. Crisis Group interviews, SEDENA officials, local security official and local leaders, Colima, April 2024.

[93] Crisis Group interview, national security officer, journalist and local leaders, Mexico City and Baja California, April 2024.

[94] Crisis Group interviews, local and national security officials, Colima and Mexico City, March and May 2024.

Colombian criminal groups involved in the drug trade often seek to physically occupy territory, largely due to their decades of experience in armed conflict. In transit countries, extensive territorial control is less vital. Ecuador's main national crime groups concentrate their activities along trafficking corridors, including roads and rivers. Security forces describe these areas as "sanctuaries", where criminal assets are strategically clustered.[95]

Capturing state power is vital to national groups' ability to meet international buyers' expectations and not lose shipments to seizures or law enforcement crackdowns. Here, the primary targets are local and, to a lesser extent, national authorities; judges, prosecutors, police officers and security forces personnel, as well as major regional merchants.[96] Criminal groups need to combine armed protection with business, legal, state and political links, in order to ensure that they can operate smoothly, a former head of the Ecuadorian national police explained.[97] They may also wield power in prisons, which have long been hubs of organised crime. Behind bars, crime bosses are safer from physical danger, whether posed by security forces or by rivals, and often better able to organise transactions and recruit new foot soldiers (for more, see Section IV.E).[98]

D. *Urban Control and Distribution*

Many large criminal groups have calculated that, rather than move drugs through cities themselves, it is cheaper, easier and more discreet to strike up partnerships with urban gangs, many of which pre-date the flourishing of the drug trade.[99] These hyperlocal groups end up playing two key roles in the supply chain: ushering the product safely through cities en route to export and expanding local drug retail markets.[100]

Local bands are useful because they can control densely populated neighbourhoods, distract or corrupt local police, and generate cash for their larger clients through drug dealing and extortion. Buenaventura, the city hosting Colombia's largest container port facility, is also home to two dominant gangs that receive payments from larger armed groups to safeguard their product as it moves into town and out

[95] Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Guayaquil, May 2024; person with direct knowledge of the banana sector, Guayaquil, May 2024.

[96] Court cases have revealed the lengths to which Los Cachiros in Honduras worked with sitting elected politicians and elites to launder drug profits. See "Former Honduran Congressman And Businessman Sentenced To 36 Months For Money Laundering", U.S. State Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, 15 December 2017.

[97] Crisis Group interviews, Quito, April 2024.

[98] In Ecuador, "what we believed is now confirmed: that the prisons have become operational centres for transnational crime", a diplomat said. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2024. See also Maria Abi-Habib, Annie Correal and Jack Nicas, "In Latin America, guards don't control prisons, gangs do", *The New York Times*, 21 February 2024.

[99] While many Latin American gangs participate in parts of the drug supply chain, not all of them depend on it. The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 in El Salvador have engaged in small-time drug trafficking, but their primary income source has long been extortion. See "El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, January 2024; Crisis Group Report, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, op. cit.

[100] Crisis Group interviews, local security officers, SEDENA officers, local leaders, journalists and national security officer, Colima, Baja California and Mexico City, March-May 2024.

of the port.[101] Likewise, Ecuadorian gangs operating along Guayaquil's canal leading to the sea store drugs in houses and may be asked to move shipments by speedboat to contamination sites along the waterway.[102] In exchange, larger criminal groups provide neighbourhood strongmen with weapons, lending them prestige and helping them move into predatory activities such as extortion, kidnapping and the regulation of markets such as sex work, gambling and migrant smuggling.

The origin story of these local groups varies from country to country, but all of them share common traits: their members' lives are expendable, while the violence at this level of the supply chain tends to be the most intense of all. Competition among local gangs to secure a slice of the illicit economy is fierce and frequent. Often, it dies down only either when one group or another secures dominance or rivals come to a truce. Colombia's port city of Santa Marta, for example, is dominated by a single criminal outfit whose primary revenue sources are charging protection levies and receiving fees for transiting cocaine shipments.[103] In Monterrey, Mexico, a de facto truce between gangs appears to have been critical to a reduction in violence after a massive surge in killings between 2009 and 2013.[104]

Gangs are useful to their larger criminal allies in various ways. Security forces personnel in Ecuador believe that larger national armed groups stoke gang fights to distract law enforcement from their own movements.[105] While not all urban violence can be explained in that way, it grabs disproportionate media and political attention when it happens, absorbing the police's limited resources.[106]

Gangs also foster local consumer markets, which are now lucrative sources of cash income while reinforcing the local clout of criminal groups. Drug consumption has grown more affordable and prevalent in many Latin American cities.[107] Local drug sales have become a major source of revenue, particularly in Mexico, with a portion of gangs' earnings going back to their larger criminal partners. These sales are lucrative in other regional countries as well, though the proceeds tend to be smaller than in Mexico.[108] Since they depend on establishing a physical presence around key points of sale, as well as corrupting local police, drug retail markets also entrench criminal influence over an area. Larger criminal groups in Mexico appoint or approve the

[101] Crisis Group interviews, security officers and local leaders, Buenaventura, February 2024.
[102] Crisis Group interviews, security and military officers, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[103] This group is the Autodefensa Conquistadora de la Sierra Nevada, which maintains a wing in the city of Santa Marta. Crisis Group interview, Colombian official with knowledge of peace talks, Bogotá, December 2024.
[104] Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures and former gang members, Monterrey, February 2023.
[105] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[106] For example, public outcry over upticks in urban violence in Bogotá and Barranquilla regularly draws troops and resources from the Colombian defence ministry.
[107] Prices across the region have also fallen, with a 1g dose of (generally low-quality) cocaine costing between $5-10 in Guayaquil, $5 in Medellín, $20 in Costa Rica and $19-25 in Guatemala. Crisis Group interviews, members of the Latin American Network of Drug Users (Red Latinoamericana de Personas que Usan Drogas, LANPUD), June 2024.
[108] Crisis Group interviews, local security officers, local leaders and journalist, Colima and Baja California, March-April 2024.

selection of smaller outfits' "plaza leaders" whom they trust to manage the sales.[109] Sellers are also known to forcibly expand their markets. Farm supervisors in Mexico are pushed by local gangs to promote methamphetamine use among their employees, and nightclubs and sex workers are instructed to sell certain amounts of drugs each night.[110]

Traffickers often pay urban gangs in drugs, arms and military training – tools the gangs then use to impose coercive control, greasing their own economic engine. With the blessing of their larger allies, gangs sow terror among the population to generate revenue, most significantly through extortion (see Section IV.D below). Understandably, in many Latin American countries, these local gangs are the part of the narcotrafficking apparatus that sparks the greatest outcry from citizens.

[109] Crisis Group interviews, local security officers, former mayoral candidate, local leaders and journalist, Colima and Baja California, March-April 2024.
[110] Crisis Group interviews, journalist and local labour leader, Colima, April 2024.

IV. **Violence**

Transnational organised crime preys upon – and prospers from – the needs and vulnerabilities of ordinary people. Although high levels of inequality and inadequate social safety nets were common to almost all Latin American countries before COVID-19 hit the region, the pandemic aggravated these problems, set back gains in reducing poverty and enhanced organised crime's ability to capture new recruits and territory.[111] Urban hardship, rural poverty and a pool of young people who had either dropped out of school or lacked job opportunities prepared the ground for criminal organisations' latest geographic spread.[112] Trafficking groups have taken advantage of desperation and failing state services to offer their own forms of employment and governance. Once in place, criminal control further impoverishes most residents, while threatening them with bodily harm as well.

Violence, like profit, is not spread evenly across drug markets, and tends to be concentrated in hotspots – often places where various groups are fighting over territory. Despite a nationwide drop in homicides in Colombia in 2023, for instance, a turf war in the small northern city of Sincelejo made it one of the most violent places in the world.[113] Furthermore, violence is not just unequally distributed inside national borders, but it follows different trajectories from one country to the next. Whereas Ecuador and Costa Rica are experiencing record spikes in homicides, Mexico's rates of violence appear to have plateaued, albeit at a high level. In Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, meanwhile, rates of lethal violence are far lower than the peaks recorded in recent decades.[114] The end of armed conflict (in the case of Colombia), changes in economic conditions, new illicit or licit opportunities for profit, and efforts to reform and strengthen the security and judicial systems, in addition to luck, all appear to play crucial parts in determining the trends in violence in each country.[115]

Law enforcement operations also often have the unintended effect of reconfiguring rather than quelling violence. As authorities clamp down on one part of a trafficking route, criminals shift their operations to areas that offer enticements, whether opportunities for commercial export, vulnerable communities or corruptible state officials. This "balloon effect" of enforcement is a longstanding feature of supply-side counter-narcotics policies: eradication of coca crops in Colombia, for example, simp-

[111] A regional economic contraction of 6.7 per cent in 2020 stalled and even undercut efforts to reduce multidimensional poverty. See "Mapping the Socio-economic Consequences of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Adopted Responses for Recovery", UNDP, 2 June 2023.
[112] "Latin America Wrestles with a New Crime Wave", Crisis Group Commentary, 12 May 2023.
[113] "La guerra urbana que llevó a Sincelejo a ser una de las ciudades más peligrosas del mundo en 2023", *El País*, 15 April 2024.
[114] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°106, *The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico*, 24 May 2024. See also, "Costa Rica's homicide rate rises in deadliest year ever", Reuters, 22 September 2023; "Disminuyeron los asesinatos y la tasa de homicidios es una de las más bajas de la región", *La Nación*, 12 January 2025; "InSight Crime's 2024 Homicide Round-Up", *Insight Crime*, 26 February 2025.
[115] See, for example, "Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean", UNODC, 2023; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°70, *Saving Guatemala's Fight against Crime and Impunity*, 24 October 2018.

ly led producers to jump to other provinces or countries, as if playing hopscotch.[116] Traffickers have also been moving out of Colombia's ports, where scrutiny is greater, to the lightly monitored facilities of Ecuador. Parts of Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Paraguay are among the other places absorbing the spillover of criminal activity as routes shift.[117]

Against these larger trends, the decision by criminal groups to deploy different types of violence can be understood as a strategic one made with particular intentions. Groups may use violence to coerce politicians and penetrate the state, to extract rents from the local population, or to secure control of trafficking routes and distribution zones. Local communities often suffer the most, which is no accident, but a predictable by-product of the networked configuration of Latin American drug trafficking. Opportunities for profit, intensifying competition to enter the supply chain and easy access to firearms have conspired to make criminal coercion a feature of daily life for many of the region's most impoverished people.

A. *Plata o Plomo*

Corruption and co-option are the strategies criminal groups choose to penetrate states and institutions so as to gain protection, impunity and profit-making opportunities. For drug-related crime, state capture is an essential element of doing business. It guarantees that all stages of the logistics chain run with limited risk of seizure or arrest. Criminal groups are most comfortable when "they have judges and prosecutors at their disposal", said a resident of a violence-afflicted community in Honduras. Traffickers seek to corrupt "police and soldiers, who can give the group a heads-up or look the other way if the groups pass by".[118]

Violence is the frequently used fallback option when payoffs fail to secure compliance or when a rival group has the same state official or politician at its service. Often, the criminals present the option of *plata o plomo* (literally, "silver or lead") to state officials: either they accept bribes or they pay with their own or their family's lives. Some officials are willing takers of criminal money, regarding public service as a source of self-enrichment or party financing. Some even join criminal groups. Blurred lines between the state and organised crime pose one of the greatest challenges to efforts to blunt criminal threats.

Mexico is now Latin America's emblematic case of corruption and co-option by organised crime. Court cases and media reports indicate that criminals have in effect captured parts of the security forces, as well as judges, prosecutors, politicians and other state officials, placing entire offices within some institutions at the service of criminal interests.[119] Crisis Group research has shown that armed groups often try to

[116] Leonardo Raffo López, Javier Andrés Castro and Alexander Díaz España, "Los efectos globo en los cultivos de coca en la Región Andina (1990-2009)", *Apuntes del Cenes*, vol. 35, no. 61 (2016).
[117] The port city of Rosario, Argentina, has experienced a spike in homicides in recent years, despite a national-level decline. "Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean", op. cit.
[118] Crisis Group interviews, residents, Colón, May 2024.
[119] Although corruption and collusion extend to most levels of the Mexican state, organised crime has its social base in municipalities and political violence is mostly concentrated at the local level. See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°99, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, 23 June 2023.

avoid apprehension by dialling down visible forms of violence, while ensuring that the right officers and their superiors are paid off. Yet, with a plethora of criminal groups competing to control state officials, the tide of killings of local mayors and councillors keeps rising.[120]

The 2024 elections in Mexico showed once again how criminal groups compete with one another to capture coveted state offices and attack candidates who either refuse to protect them or are believed to be working for rival outfits. At least 130 candidates for office were attacked and 32 killed in the run-up to elections in June 2024, which turned out to be the most violent in the country's history.[121] Even before the electoral cycle, these sorts of attacks on candidates or officeholders had become increasingly common, rising by over 200 per cent between 2018 and 2023.[122] The beheading of the newly elected mayor of Chilpancingo, the state capital of Guerrero, days after he took office in October 2024 revealed the extent of criminal control over much of the state. The new mayor had pledged not to forge pacts with illegal groups, in contrast to his predecessor, who had been videotaped meeting their leaders.[123]

Countries that had until recently appeared peaceful now face a similar ordeal in navigating the twin threats of corruption and violence stemming from criminal groups. The so-called Metástasis judicial case in Ecuador revealed the scale of state penetration by the country's criminal groups, with the courts convicting 32 individuals, including judges, prosecutors and senior members of the security services on charges of collusion with organised crime.[124]

When connivance with officials fails, high-visibility attacks, such as the assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, can serve to send an intimidating political message. On 7 January 2024, prison authorities realised that José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias Fito, leader of the Ecuadorian criminal group Los Choneros, had escaped from prison. President Daniel Noboa declared a state of exception and signalled that the state would move to retake control of the country's

[120] Ibid., and Crisis Group Report, *The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico*, op. cit. Between 2004 and 2018, 178 mayors, former mayors, mayors-elect and alternate mayors were assassinated. See David Pérez Esparza and Helden De Paz Mancera, "Mayoral Homicide in Mexico: A Situational Analysis on the Victims, Perpetrators and Locations of Attacks", Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, June 2018.

[121] Falko Ernst, "As Mexico Votes, What Next for Crime and U.S. Ties?", Crisis Group Commentary, 28 May 2024; "Violencia en elecciones de 2024 superó la de 2018 y 2021", press release, Data Cívica, 2 July 2024. Integralia counted 39 candidates or pre-candidates who were killed in the pre-electoral period from September 2023 to June 2024. "Reporte final de violencia política: Balance poselectoral 2023-2024", Integralia Consultores, 8 July, 2024.

[122] Rates of political violence increased 237 per cent between 2018 and 2023, "Primer reporte de violencia política: Mapa de riesgos de intervención del crimen en las elecciones locales, 2024", Integralia Consultores, February 2024.

[123] "Detienen al encargado de la Seguridad de Chilpancingo por el homicidio del alcalde", *Proceso*, 12 November 2024; "La alcaldesa de Chilpancingo se reúne con el líder de un grupo criminal en Guerrero", *El País*, 5 July 2023.

[124] The investigation of the 2022 murder of drug trafficker Leandro Norero in prison sparked a broad investigation known as Metástasis. It showed that a network of corrupt officials financed by Norero reached almost the highest levels of power and uncovered a plan to ensure impunity for prosecuted suspects. "Un megaoperativo en Ecuador revela la profundidad de la narcopolítica en el sistema judicial", *El País*, 16 December 2023.

jails the next day.[125] Criminal groups responded promptly. On 9 January, armed men burst into a television studio broadcasting live in Guayaquil, riots erupted in several prisons and armed criminals shut down the city. "All the criminal bands came on to the streets, together, on the main avenues. They were days of terror", a resident recalled.[126] Although Noboa adopted even tougher measures in its wake, the mayhem telegraphed criminal groups' ability to disrupt public order and willingness to push back against any attempts by the newly elected government to tighten security or reform prisons.[127]

B. *Controlling Territory*

Competition among local groups jostling for status in the drug trafficking chain is fierce, and one way to guarantee a place – and even rise up the ladder – is to control territory. Ferocious turf wars in cities and rural areas that impose a heavy toll on local people are not exclusive to groups involved in the drug trade. Sky-high homicide rates in Honduras and El Salvador in the period 2010-2016 were caused largely by rivalry among street gangs, with very limited involvement of international trafficking.[128] That said, the epicentres of lethal violence in Latin America do largely overlap with hubs of drug supply routes at present. Moreover, traffickers sometimes pour fuel on the fire by investing in one group over another or ordering local suppliers to capture a certain route from a rival outfit.[129] Larger national criminal groups can act in similar ways by providing weapons or capital to gangs, thus encouraging clashes among them.[130]

Battle lines between local rivals can be both invisible and absurdly precise. A resident may be labelled as loyal to the dominant armed group of the sector in which he or she lives, and by crossing the unmarked frontier to another area, run the risk of being killed. A youth leader in Guayaquil explained: "In a sector made up of 25 blocks, there are about two or three gangs who divide up the neighbourhood. My brother was from Block 4, and he went to a party in Block 3. They killed him because he was

[125] Glaeldys González Calanche, "Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?", Crisis Group commentary, 19 January 2024.
[126] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[127] After Quito ordered the military to take control of the system, jail life improved somewhat, according to civil society groups and former prisoners. But soldiers may subsequently have fallen into similar patterns of collusion as the previous guards. Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil, May 2024. See also González, "Can a War on Crime Bring Relief to Ecuador?", op. cit.
[128] Crisis Group Report, *Mafia of the Poor*, op. cit.
[129] The Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation Cartels have reportedly invested in bolstering their clients in Ecuador, Los Choneros and Los Lobos, respectively, in order to win turf from rivals. Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, Guayaquil, May 2024. In rural Chocó, Colombia, the Gaitanista Army, also known as the Gulf Clan, was reportedly asked by its international clients, the Sinaloa Cartel, to consolidate control of a river just north of Buenaventura in late 2023, pushing the rebel National Liberation Army (ELN) out of the area. Crisis Group interviews, youth leader and woman leader in affected area, Buenaventura, January 2024.
[130] In Mexico, larger criminal groups have invested in arming and training local allies to help them cling to turf. Crisis Group interviews, national and local security officers, SEDENA officers, journalist and local leaders, Colima, Mexico City and Baja California, March-May 2024.

not supposed to enter that area".[131] In Zacapa, south-eastern Guatemala, a woman hawking lottery tickets was disappeared, neighbours said, probably for having crossed an invisible border to sell in a gang-controlled area.[132]

The inviolability of border rules spares no one, including children. Kids living in areas run by one gang cannot attend classes if their school is in an area run by another group.[133] This logic becomes deeply embedded from an early age: "Kids from ages 7 or 8 start saying, 'It's better not to go here or there'", a youth leader in the Colombian city of Buenaventura said.[134] Crime permeates many daily interactions. Another Buenaventura resident recalled children pretending to be members of the Shottas or Espartanos, the main criminal outfits in the city, splitting into two groups while they were playing.[135]

Girls and women are often treated as the property of the group in control of the area where they live. Those who cross invisible front lines to socialise or go on a date can be violently punished to make an example for others. A resident of Guayaquil explained: "They say that a woman 'belongs' to the gang. She cannot have a boyfriend from another area. Last year, they killed two girls who were at a party in another sector. [Gang members] waited for [the girls] to leave the party, hunted them down and killed them both. It was a clear message that no woman can be seen with men from another area".[136] Femicides can also be used by these groups to mark territory, while gangs can also threaten or kill girlfriends of rival group members as a form of pressure.[137] Trafficking of girls and women has taken hold in many areas; in the Mexican state of Baja California, for example, this business is controlled by the same groups involved in the drug trade.[138]

Criminals also fiercely contest territorial control in rural areas. Groups in Honduras, for example, forcibly displace locals to consolidate new drug routes and territory, as well as to protect their trafficking assets. A resident of the department of Colón recounted how an armed group used escalating pressure on her neighbours' family to kick them off their farmland. First, armed men destroyed their crops; then they returned to ransack the property.[139] Other Colón residents described destroying clandestine airstrips, only to be expelled by the criminal groups that had built them.

[131] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024. See also "Durán, Ecuador: A Window into Ecuador's Organized Crime Explosion", Insight Crime, 26 September 2024.
[132] Crisis Group interview, local development committee member, Zacapa, June 2024.
[133] Recognising these risks, the Ecuadorian government allows virtual learning as an option for parents concerned about their children's safety. "Ecuador va a clases virtuales en zonas de alta criminalidad", Deutsche Welle, 25 September 2023.
[134] Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Buenaventura, January 2024.
[135] Crisis Group interview, youth leadership organiser, Buenaventura, January 2024.
[136] Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[137] Crisis Group interview, woman journalist, Guayaquil, May 2024; Crisis Group Briefing, *A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, op. cit.
[138] While some of these women are then trafficked north to the U.S., others stay in Tijuana, where the dominant local group imposes a charge on their place of work as well as each service provided. Crisis Group interviews, local journalists and *buscadoras* collective members, Baja California, April 2024. Humanitarian agency officials in Colombia report similar patterns of girls being recruited or forced into sex work under the patronage of armed groups. Crisis Group interviews, 2023 and 2024.
[139] Crisis Group interview, young woman, Trujillo, Colón, May 2024.

Economic elites in the area "use those lands for drug trafficking and protect them with criminal groups", residents said.[140]

Residents living in the shadow of powerful drug traders are also punished for transgressing other unwritten rules or for reporting crime to authorities. Allegations as apparently frivolous as gossiping are punishable by death amid disputes among drug-dealing gangs in the Mexican port city of Manzanillo, while they carry a fine in some areas of Colombia.[141] Selling drugs to an adversary, or dealing drugs from a rival source, also carries violent punishments.[142] Providing information to security forces or an enemy group is "not forgivable", a clergyman in Putumayo, Colombia, explained of armed groups' unspoken code.[143] The rules and punishment meted out are arbitrary, depending on the personality and disposition of the local boss, who has the power to exercise or curb violence as he sees fit. Many use their positions to pursue personal vendettas.[144]

C. *Recruitment*

The relentless recruitment of children and young people into criminal groups is a daunting challenge for states and security forces trying to weaken the grip of drug trafficking. Transnational organised crime preys on a constant stream of expendable recruits, who are drawn to these outfits in search of income and status: as a former member describes their hopes, "if they manage to live until their mid-twenties, they can be a commander".[145] In some of the most crime-affected areas, entire generations of young people have been absorbed into illegal livelihoods that they will likely find hard to replace with legal alternatives. Criminal groups portray themselves as providing opportunity for young people; in many places, working for them is considered "like any other job".[146]

The glamourisation of profligate spending and criminal life through social media platforms such as TikTok, as well as in popular music, entices young people looking to hold a degree of power in societies where they know there is very little room for upward mobility.[147] As a Honduran explained, "the narcos and criminal groups show youth a different way of life [than what they know] in order to gain money and power, and this is how they convince them to join their structures".[148]

[140] Crisis Group interviews, residents, Tocóa, Colón, May 2024.
[141] Crisis Group interview, public prosecutor, Colima, April 2024; Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in Total Peace: Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, op. cit.
[142] Crisis Group interview, security official, Colima, April 2024.
[143] Crisis Group interview, Mocoa, February 2024.
[144] Crisis Group interview, local leader, Colima, April 2024.
[145] Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[146] Crisis Group interview, adviser to local government, Petén, June 2024.
[147] "They recruit these children with a certain concept of lifestyle: to be powerful, to carry arms", an Afro-Colombian rural community leader explained. Crisis Group interview, Jamundí, October 2022. Crisis Group interviews, residents and former gang members, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[148] Crisis Group interview, resident, Tocoa, Colón, May 2024. A resident of Baja California, Mexico, told Crisis Group: "Today, most young people want to belong to these groups. … These [groups] show up with their trucks and their arms and the kids are enthralled. That's how they are recruited. In other cases, the kids have to enter because they are indebted and end up working as paid hit

In these settings, the line between forced and voluntary recruitment is blurred, particularly when it comes to women and girls. A mother in the Colombian city of Buenaventura recounted a common scenario: a man known to be part of a criminal group arrives at a house and says he wants to take a girl from the family, often as young as nine or ten years old. If the parents decline, the family is threatened.[149] Attempted recruitment of children is, in fact, a common reason for forced displacement.[150] In other cases, families will encourage their young daughters to have relationships with gang members as a form of economic sustenance. Criminal groups also pinpoint women heads of households, pressuring them to join the group or to enter a relationship with a member in order to support themselves and their children.[151]

Once inside these groups' ranks, children realise it is less glamourous than what they had expected. Foot soldiers often receive just enough to survive and nothing more. A former member explained: "The rank and file get nothing. … They only have enough money to drink [alcohol], and they are paid in arms".[152] The reality of large numbers of untrained young people bearing heavy weapons raises a constant risk of violent escalation, a former gang member in Ecuador explained. Disagreements that might have led to fistfights in the past are today causing mass shootings: "The massacres are often committed by young kids who have no training. They do not understand the magnitude of the crimes they are committing".[153]

D. *Extortion*

As criminal control of territory has strengthened, extortion has become a major source of both illicit income and violence against those who are unable or unwilling to pay. Demanding money in exchange for alleged protection, generally from petty crime and threats posed by the illegal groups conducting the shakedown, is not new to the region.[154] But its sharp growth in recent years owes much to the drug trade empowering predatory local groups and supplying them with arms. Extortion now affects millions in Latin America.[155] For larger criminal organisations, the racket offers an important

men. In most cases, they aren't even trained, because even if the young person doesn't know how to use a firearm, they're useful as cannon fodder". Crisis Group interview, Baja California, April 2024.

[149] Crisis Group interview, Buenaventura, February 2024.

[150] Families interviewed by Crisis Group spoke of having to move often within the city (in Guayaquil), across the country (in Colombia) or abroad (in Honduras). Crisis Group interviews, youth leader, Guayaquil, May 2024; residents, Tocoa y Trujillo, Colón, May 2024.

[151] In Colombia, for example, close to half of all households are led by women. See "Casi la mitad de las familias en Colombia tiene una mujer como la cabeza del hogar", *La República*, 25 April 2024. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, 24 February 2023.

[152] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024.

[153] Ibid.

[154] In Central America, transport businesses have long been victims of violent extortion rackets by gangs. According to national human rights institutions in Guatemala and Honduras, more than 5,000 bus or taxi drivers were killed between 2010 and 2024, in many cases, as punishment for failing to pay extortion, "Choferes de Honduras y Guatemala, asediados entre el pago de las extorsiones o la muerte", EFE, 28 September 2024.

[155] Extortion is notoriously difficult to measure, as many victims do not report the crime for fear of reprisal. But existing studies indicate a dramatic increase. Eduardo Moncada, *Resisting Extortion*

revenue stream as well as a way to impress upon residents who is in charge. For residents, it is a violent form of governance under which non-compliance results in attacks, forced displacement or kidnapping. Extortion is also closely linked to the reconfiguration of crime, with lower-tiered groups, especially urban gangs, encouraged to generate their own cash flow independent of the drug trade.

The breakneck growth of the extortion business has turned it into a major security challenge. In Ecuador, 90 per cent of businesspeople said extortion was their primary security threat, even as 70 per cent of victims avoided reporting the crime for lack of trust in state institutions.[156] Cases of extortion reported to the authorities increased by 40 per cent in Colombia in the first trimester of 2023, and then another 27 per cent in 2024; studies indicate that the true number of cases is likely to be higher.[157] Criminal groups responsible for the protection business coerce, threaten and monitor locals.[158] The ELN rebels in Colombia, for example, routinely kidnap extortion targets who refuse to pay.[159] At the same time, competition among criminal groups can lead to direct clashes, often in densely populated neighbourhoods. Alternatively, residents are simply forced to pay repeated bribes to more than one criminal group, to crippling effect.[160]

Businesses are lucrative targets for criminal groups and many owners are forced either to pay, face closure or be killed.[161] "If they do not pay, they burn the place down, which is why many local merchants pay or are permanently shut down", said a labour leader in the Mexican city of Colima.[162] The poorest are also preyed upon. Small local shops and kiosks are frequently shaken down, as are migrants passing through Mexico.[163] Criminal groups whose drug revenue has fallen, or who have lost

(Oxford, 2022). Mexico's public security secretary, Omar García Harfuch, has singled out extortion as a high-impact crime that, along with homicide, will be a focus of the government's new security policy. "Conferencia de prensa de la presidenta Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo del 8 de octubre de 2024", Mexican Presidency, 8 October 2024.

[156] "Radiografía de la Extorsión: Tipologías y resultado de la Encuesta Nacional de Victimización de Casos de Extorsión Empresarial", Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2024.

[157] "Extorsión se disparó en 2024: estos son los departamentos más afectados", RCN Noticias, 21 August 2024. Crisis Group saw a classified document containing these statistics in April 2023. On under-reporting, see "La extorsión y su subreporte: datos de una encuesta en Quibdó", *El Espectador*, 20 March 2024.

[158] Crisis Group interview, residents, San Pablo, May 2023.

[159] The links between kidnapping and extortion became clear in 2024, when Colombian government peace negotiators asked the ELN to stop kidnapping. The group said it would need an economic incentive to do so, since the threat of abduction had become essential to oblige residents to pay. Crisis Group interviews, international observers of talks, February-March 2024. Other armed groups have used sexual violence against women and LGBTQI+ individuals who do not pay.

[160] People in Sur de Bolívar, Colombia report having to pay up to five different extortionist groups every month. Crisis Group interviews, social leaders and residents, San Pablo, May 2023.

[161] Large-scale farmers in Colima pay a fixed amount per month, in addition to a sum paid per tonne of produce shipped by truck. Crisis Group interview, labour leader, Colima, April 2024.

[162] Crisis Group interview, labour leader, Colima, April 2024.

[163] To cite one example, the owner of a small shop in Colima selling cell phone accessories was unable to pay a local gang protection money after it raised the monthly price. He was shot dead in the store one evening in front of his wife and four children. Crisis Group interview, widow, Tijuana, November 2018. See also "Business Extortion and Public Security in Tijuana: Who is Protecting Whom?", México Evalúa, September 2022. Local journalists in Los Algodones said migrants could

important relationships in the supply chain, turn to extortion to fill the gap in income, as is happening across parts of rural Colombia. In Guaviare, in the south west, the dominant criminal group known as Estado Mayor Central has distributed surveys to subsistence farmers to calculate monthly payments based on measures such as how many cattle they own and how big their property is.[164] This group has seen its cocaine trafficking business drop off over the last two years, with international buyers purchasing from other suppliers instead.

E. *Prisons*

Prison control has become fundamental to drug traffickers' operations, and jails are now the sites of some of Latin America's most appalling violence. Criminal leaders "just keep working" while behind bars, a convicted drug trafficker explained.[165] Corruption of prison personnel is indispensable to turning jails into "great business" for everyone involved, in the words of former inmates.[166] Prison guards receive commissions for tasks they carry out for inmates, such as buying equipment, allowing in drugs or purchasing special groceries; a prisoner in Colombia estimated that a guard could make roughly eight times the minimum wage through this pay-for-service system.[167] Higher-ranking personnel receive salaries and even gifts from criminal groups. In exchange, criminals keep running their operations, using cell phones, Wi-Fi and drones, and often living in conditions that, compared to those of other inmates, are opulent.

Many jails throughout the region are, in practical terms, run by inmates. In Colombia and Ecuador, for example, criminal leaders are "in charge of everything", including deciding which prisoners are allowed into their areas.[168] Other gangs have essentially been born in prison, such as the notorious Tren de Aragua, which emerged from a Venezuelan jail and which security officials say has spread its tentacles across the region, though it is focused on migrant trafficking rather than drugs.[169] In Guayaquil, criminal control is so complete that prison authorities lack a comprehensive census of who is in custody, let alone a register of who is in which cell.[170] Powerful criminal outfits in Ecuador's prisons demand fees from other inmates looking to secure a place to sleep, to eat and even to stay alive.[171] Often, women outside prison end up shouldering this expense, whether as mothers, sisters or partners. In essence,

be charged as much as $5,000, on pain of death. Crisis Group interviews, April 2024. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°67, *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, 28 July 2016.

[164] Crisis Group saw this survey, which was sent via WhatsApp. Crisis Group interviews, rural residents, San José del Guaviare, May 2024.

[165] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, April 2024.

[166] Crisis Group interview, former prisoner, Guayaquil, May 2024.

[167] Crisis Group interviews, former prisoners from Colombia and Ecuador, April-May 2024.

[168] Crisis Group interview, convicted drug trafficker, Bogotá, April 2024.

[169] See, for example, "El caso del Tren de Aragua: tráfico de migrantes y transnacionalización del crimen organizado", *Periódico UNAL*, 22 November 2024; Ronna Rísquez, *El Tren de Aragua: la banda que revoluncionó el crimen organizado en América Latina*, (Caracas, 2023).

[170] Crisis Group interview, security experts and human rights activist, Guayaquil, May 2024. In 2024, the EU concluded a two-year program to support prison reform. See "La UE concluye asistencia a cárceles de Ecuador con reducción de hacinamiento y de muertes", EFE, 28 August 2024.

[171] Crisis Group interviews, former incarcerated individuals, Guayaquil, May 2024.

many of these women wind up supporting two households – their family at home and their incarcerated relative.[172]

Riots are an illustration of how fiercely prison control is coveted. Explosions of violence – often pitting one group against another or as a show of force to the authorities – have killed hundreds of inmates across the region, including many small-time offenders who are not part of organised crime, in recent years. These events have taken an even higher toll amid dramatic prison overcrowding. Latin America's prison population has doubled in the last two decades, while Ecuador's has tripled.[173]

Finally, there is strong evidence that prisoners are behind extortion rings outside jails. An emblematic case involved a crime ring in Guatemala that stretched up to the director of the prison system.[174] There and elsewhere, payments are extracted either through phone calls directly to targets or via their associates on the street.[175]

[172] Crisis Group interview, journalist, Guayaquil, May 2024. See also "La crisis carcelaria en Ecuador también tiene rostro de mujer", *Indomita Media*, 7 March 2024.

[173] Studies suggest that prison violence is less common when just one criminal group is in control of a jail. The cost, however, is that the organisation in question can establish largely unfettered rule. Bergman and Fondevila, *Prisons and Crime in Latin America*, op. cit.

[174] "Ligan a proceso a estructura criminal liderada por Byron Lima Oliva", press release, CICIG, 24 September 2014.

[175] Crisis Group interviews, police officer and former prisoner, Buenaventura and Bogotá, January and April 2024.

V. Key Steps in Tackling Violence

Even as Washington pushes to scale up the war on drugs, Latin America needs new policy options to reduce the violent fallout of drug trafficking and attempts to fight it. Decades of efforts to control supply have demonstrated that, despite temporary successes, the flow of drugs generally persists, while heavy-handed interventions fuel new and different kinds of violence. As a first step, consumer countries (particularly in North America and Europe) should acknowledge the growing gap in priorities between their capitals, which seek above all to halt drug shipments, and the region, which is desperate to lower violence. Trump appears prepared to use U.S. might to force other countries to follow his preferred path, putting the counter-narcotics fight alongside migration at the centre of his approach to Latin America. But if policies favoured by user countries do not reduce violence, political and public opposition to them in Latin America is likely to intensify and could prompt a breakdown in cooperation.[176]

A fundamental goal in addressing drug trafficking from Latin America should be to avoid making matters worse than they are already. Past failures offer ample evidence of approaches that generate conflict, with quick wins from high-level captures and extraditions that decapitate criminal groups spawning bouts of bitter fighting. Policymakers and law enforcement officials need to grapple with the uncomfortable truth that short-term gains in weakening criminal groups often end up strengthening trafficking structures, as organisations learn and adapt, spread to new jurisdictions, or come under new, more ruthless management. Reducing violence will instead depend on a broader palette of interventions, ranging from security sector reform and arms controls to the provision of alternative livelihoods and, in certain cases, dialogue with criminal groups.

None of the policies suggested below will on its own be enough to end violence related to the drug trade. Nor is it likely that either drug supply or demand will cease any time soon. But each of these steps is a necessary condition for tempering the wave of violence in Latin America, and all should be part of a multi-layered approach combining humane and responsive law enforcement with serious efforts to address the deep well of public need that criminal groups prey upon.

[176] Although most Latin American countries have been reluctant to confront the U.S. openly, there have been exceptions. Since 2008, Bolivia has stopped cooperating with U.S. counter-narcotics efforts after expelling U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration staff from the country. Simeon Tegel, "Bolivia Ended Its Drug War by Kicking Out the DEA and Legalizing Coca", Pulitzer Center, 21 September 2016. More recently, a number of governments have engaged in what one analyst called "quiet quitting the war on drugs", meaning simply ceasing to do things the U.S. insists upon while saying nothing. Examples are said to include Mexico and Colombia. Brian Winter, "Quiet Quitting the War on Drugs", *Americas Quarterly*, 18 January 2024; "Del Castillo rechaza que la DEA opera en Bolivia y dice que no retornará mientras esté el actual Gobierno", *Los Tiempos*, 20 December 2022.

A. *Security and Justice*

1. Institutional modernisation

Strengthening and professionalising security forces, prosecution services and judicial systems remains an essential response to the threat of organised crime. Prosecutions built on strong evidence are fundamental to deterring crime and ensuring justice and protection for victims. Several states have made notable progress here, for example in vetting prosecutors, improving their investigative capacities and bolstering the legal methods at their disposal. Enabling prosecutors and judges to offer more lenient sentences in exchange for suspects' detailed descriptions of the criminal activity they were involved in is arguably the single most important breakthrough in the effectiveness of Latin America's judicial systems in recent decades.[177]

Still, these efforts face major challenges and setbacks.[178] The number of cases of violent crime that do not end in a conviction, which hovers above 90 per cent for homicides and even higher for femicides and sexual violence across the region, illustrate the scale of impunity.[179] Many states struggle to open corruption cases against powerful political or business elites, for fear of reprisal or due to legal obstacles. As they have done in recent years, international donors can provide invaluable support to justice systems, including with expertise and increased staffing, as well as access to technology for forensic and financial investigation.

Meanwhile, civil servants such as prosecutors and judges need greater physical protection, ranging from security protocols that can be activated in emergencies to armed bodyguards. Police officers, for their part, are usually armed, though they are still outgunned. Forces will need to put systems in place to allow officers to, for example, promptly report threats, request relocation or even go on duty leave until risk levels are lower. High-profile prosecutions of criminals who attack or threaten police can also serve to make clear that officer safety is a state priority.

2. A different form of policing

Tough crackdowns on crime, with El Salvador the most recent case, have left a deep mark on the public imagination in Latin America. President Nayib Bukele's campaign of mass arrests and incarceration in humiliating conditions, which began in 2022, has resulted in a steep decline in homicides.[180] Argentina and Ecuador are among

[177] These new policies have drawn heavily on models of plea bargaining in the U.S. and the collaboration of the *pentiti* (repentant ones) in judicial probes into the Italian mafia. Innovations in this spirit were crucial to the CICIG's work in Guatemala and allowed ambitious investigations into corruption deriving from bribes paid by the Odebrecht construction group in Brazil.

[178] Mexico's judicial reform, which aims to replace all its judges with elected magistrates, could represent a further setback. "IACHR expresses concerns over judiciary reform in Mexico and warns of threats to judicial independence, access to justice and rule of law", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 12 September 2024.

[179] "Comunicado: Solo 1 de cada 10 homicidios dolosos ha sido esclarecido en 6 años", Impunidad Cero, December 2022.

[180] The effectiveness of Bukele's policy has depended largely on his total concentration of power, as well as the specific characteristics of gangs in El Salvador, which are not deeply connected to the transnational drug trade. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°96, *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, 5 October 2022. "World Report 2025", Human Rights Watch, January 2025.

the countries that have tried to emulate this success, albeit with mixed results. Overall, the combined evidence from similar interventions across Latin America suggests that heavily militarised crackdowns on criminal groups do not reduce homicides over the long term – and may even heighten insecurity.[181] Policing, however, does appear to be critical in instances when states have succeeded in reducing violence. These experiences offer important lessons for how to use security interventions to loosen the grip of criminal groups and reduce the harm they cause.

The attraction of Bukele's approach lies in its brutally direct treatment of a problem that had long defied solution, even if the cost in terms of human rights violations and abuses of democratic norms is high.[182] Yet Ecuador offers an illustration of how the security gains of militarised crackdowns are near impossible to replicate, let alone sustain. After an initial drop in violence following President Noboa's declaration of internal conflict and deployment of the armed forces against criminal groups in 2024, violence has risen sharply once again.[183] Overcrowded prisons tend to heighten rather than reduce crime rates, while drug trafficking groups in particular may respond by acquiring greater firepower and making more determined efforts to corrupt public officials.

Policing strategies that emphasise establishing a permanent local presence have had moderate success. The Pacifying Police Units (known by the Brazilian acronym UPPs), for example, were created in Rio de Janeiro in 2008 to calm violent urban neighbourhoods. Rather than eliminate drug trafficking, the initiative looked to undermine the gang bosses' local control and reinstate state presence.[184] Half a dozen academic reviews found robust evidence that this initiative helped reduce homicides for several years after it got under way.[185] Colombia has employed a similar methodology, known as community monitoring through quadrants, since 2010.[186] This model uses indicators to flag particularly challenging areas, where additional police are deployed with a focus on responding to residents' concerns and resolving local disputes.[187]

Stronger community-oriented policing can help states recover some of the legitimacy and territorial control they have lost to criminal groups. While enduring some of the highest rates of perceived insecurity in the world, Latin Americans are acutely

[181] Ignacio Cano, Emiliano Rojido and Doriam Borges, "¿Qué funciona para reducir homicidios en América Latina y el Caribe? Una revisión sistemática de las evaluaciones de impacto", op. cit.
[182] A European diplomat in the region explained, "We have a problem, which is that Bukele's model appeared to work". Crisis Group interview, Santo Domingo, June 2024.
[183] Glaeldys González Calanche, "Resurgent Crime Casts a Shadow over Ecuador's Polls", Crisis Group Commentary, 6 February 2025.
[184] Elizabeth Leeds, "¿Qué se puede aprender del modelo de policía pacificadora de Brasil?", Washington Office on Latin America, 11 March 2016.
[185] Matthew Aaron Richmond, "The Pacification of Brazil's Urban Margins: Peripheral Urbanization and Dynamic Order-making", *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, vol. 17 (2022). Beatriz Magaloni, Edgar Franco and Vanessa Melo, "Killing in the Slums: An Impact Evaluation of Police Reform in Rio de Janeiro", Stanford Center for International Development, 2015.
[186] "Modelo Nacional de Vigilancia Comunitaria por Cuadrantes", Colombian Police, undated.
[187] Lina Marmolejo, Nathalie Alvarado and Robert Muggah, "Por qué el Plan Cuadrante ayudó a reducir los homicidios en Colombia", Inter-American Development Bank, 2016.

distrustful of the police, impeding criminal investigations and encouraging the belief that there is no credible alternative to criminal dominion.[188]

3. Planning for the effects of law enforcement

For decades, law enforcement efforts to combat drug trafficking have focused on punitive measures to halt the supply of illicit substances and dismantle criminal groups. The Trump administration is now leading a push for high-level captures and militarised offensives against criminal groups, despite ample evidence that such tactics fail to stop the flow of narcotics.[189] Faced with the choice between cooperating with Washington or weathering steep tariffs and other economic sanctions, many Latin American states will likely bend to the pressure. But the resulting violence increasingly places the concerns of states with large drug user markets and those in Latin America at odds. Without greater efforts to anticipate and prevent blowback, U.S. and European counter-narcotics strategies are likely to find fewer willing partners in the region.

The U.S. should also think more carefully about when to demand extradition. Today, these efforts are often geared toward securing convictions and intelligence about trafficking routes without considering the violence they often leave in their wake. Recent requests that Colombia send to the U.S. leaders of groups engaged in negotiations with Bogotá under President Gustavo Petro's "total peace" initiative show that Washington continues to see extradition as a central part of its toolkit.[190]

Meanwhile, calls for greater international cooperation among states to combat organised crime have become so common as to sound clichéd. But the failure to share sufficient information and coordinate national strategies helps enable drug traffickers to pioneer new routes and jump to new jurisdictions with relative ease.[191] Recent advances aim to address these gaps, including an agreement in January 2024 among Andean governments to improve coordination and build joint security strategies.[192] Regional countries should use other platforms, including the Organization of American States, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, to foster similar coordination efforts. Cooperation within Latin America should aim first and foremost to prepare vulnerable states for the knock-on effects of mutations in the drug market. Ideally, this coordination would help in disseminating violence reduction strategies that show promise. It will be particularly important as cuts in U.S. foreign assistance bite into budgets for community and youth resilience programs across the board.[193]

[188] "The Global Safety Report", Gallup, 2023. Survey results found that 47 per cent of Latin American residents feel unsafe. Ecuador scored lowest of any country worldwide, with just 27 per cent of respondents saying they would feel safe walking outside at night.

[189] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The New War on Drugs: Why the Fentanyl Crisis Requires a More Comprehensive Strategy Than Threats and Tariffs", *Foreign Affairs*, 17 February 2025.

[190] "La detención de 'Araña' en plena negociación suma otra incertidumbre a la paz total de Petro", *El País*, 13 February 2025.

[191] Yvon Dandurand and Jessica Jahn, "The Future of International Cooperation Against Transnational Organised Crime", Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, October 2021.

[192] "Decisión N°922", Andean Council of Foreign Ministers, 21 January 2024.

[193] The freeze in foreign aid declared by the U.S. administration has also had a direct impact on local counter-narcotics efforts, including defunding police intelligence units in Colombia and paralysing

4. Preventing collusion

Despite widespread corruption, most Latin American states have weak or non-existent systems for detecting and addressing criminal penetration of law enforcement and the judiciary. Latin American governments need to build credible internal oversight and counterintelligence bodies that are independent of the security forces' chain of command, so they can spot and bring to justice any state official working on behalf of criminal interests. Detection and investigation must be paired with policies that seek to prevent criminal complicity from arising in the first place. Working conditions for police are often dire, with low pay relative to the enormous dangers and psychological challenges they face on the job. Basic improvements in compensation, including not just salaries but also opportunities for education, insurance and schooling for families, can all make a difference. A police reform project in the Dominican Republic could offer lessons by emphasising better compensation and educational opportunities for police, as well as the inclusion of more women in the force.[194]

5. Prison reform

Many prisons in the region function as operation centres for illegal groups and hives of extreme violence.[195] Security inside and outside jails depends on whether the state in question can retake control of its prison system.[196] At the same time, recent spates of prison building in the region, most visibly in El Salvador, have concentrated on housing large numbers of prisoners in highly militarised conditions.[197]

Reforming Latin American prisons will depend on better management of guards, stricter controls on inmates and improved opportunities for those behind bars. Stronger supervision of prison guards should help identify corrupt officials while also offering help in resisting collusion, including better compensation and protection for them and their families outside prison walls. Infrastructure inside the prisons is also important.[198] Authorities also need to regulate more effectively what goes in and out of prison. Perhaps the most important measure is ending access to cell phones, the internet and other forms of communication that allow criminals to keep working from prison. This strategy appears to have yielded promising initial results in Rosario,

anti-fentanyl projects in Mexico. Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, February 2025. See also "Trump's foreign aid freeze stops anti-fentanyl work in Mexico", Reuters, 13 February 2025.

[194] "Plan Estratégico para la Reforma Educativa de la Policía Nacional", Presidency of the Dominican Republic, 2024; "Tasa de homicidios registra reducción histórica de 9.58 por cada 100,000 habitantes en 2024", Presidency of the Dominican Republic, 2 December 2024.

[195] Interviews with former prisoners in Colombia suggest that inmates learn a great deal about crime from interaction with members of other armed and criminal groups inside jail. Crisis Group interviews, Neiva and Bogotá, 2022 and 2024.

[196] In one emblematic case, assassins shot and killed the director of Bogotá's La Modelo prison in daylight, with a single shot, in a central location. "Asesinan en Bogotá a Élmer Fernández, director de la cárcel La Modelo, en plena emergencia penitenciaria en Colombia", BBC, 17 May 2024.

[197] "Dentro del 'Alcatraz' de Bukele: 'Es imposible escapar. Estos psicópatas van a pasar la vida entera entre estas rejas'", *El País*, 7 February 2024.

[198] Former prisoners in Ecuador, for example, said gangs were able to firm up their control of jails after they disabled cameras. Crisis Group interviews, Guayaquil, May 2024.

Argentina, and could be replicated elsewhere.[199] Lastly, prisons need to help the incarcerated turn their lives around by offering educational opportunities, incentives for good behaviour and psychological care.[200]

B. *Alternative Livelihoods*

Criminal groups draw on a vast pool of young people to fill their ranks, offering them the economic opportunities they lack in the formal job market. As access to power, prestige and material goods are the main lures into illicit life, it is vital that states work toward providing alternatives, as Crisis Group has long argued.[201] International partners can help with expertise and especially funding, given that tight fiscal constraints will stop regional governments from expanding social spending much in the short term.[202]

A number of experiments with alternative livelihoods have shown promise in recent years. Following Colombia's 2016 peace accord, coca farmers were offered a chance to grow other crops, and they signed up in such numbers that the government had to cap enrolment.[203] Ecuador offered training and livelihood projects to the then-powerful Latin Kings as part of a negotiated demobilisation of that gang that began in 2002. In both cases, participants in these programs said they worked initially; recruits to the illicit economy were willing and often eager to return to lawful activities. Yet both programs struggled with follow-up, and many participants returned to crime.[204]

The challenge of providing genuine economic opportunities to gang and criminal group members is daunting. Vulnerable neighbourhoods often fail to attract private investment and offer inhospitable business environments. Practices such as extortion make it very hard to open small businesses.[205] Yet there are creative pathways forward. Dialogue processes in Buenaventura, for example, have sought to enlist large local businesses in employment creation, including efforts to encourage ports to hire locally. More broadly, the Colombian government is experimenting with a program that would pay young people who leave armed groups a small wage if they stay out of crime.[206] In Monterrey, local civil society groups organised the support of local universities to train former gang members to prepare them for the formal economy.[207]

[199] "Traslados de madrugada y celulares prohibidos: así controlan a los narcos presos que aterrorizaron Rosario", *La Nación*, 3 October 2024.
[200] A recent survey of academic studies on prison education in the U.S. found that such programs reduce recidivism significantly. See Ben Stickle and Steven Schuster, "Are Schools in Prison Worth It? The Effects and Economic Returns of Prison Education", *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 24 January 2023.
[201] Crisis Group Report, *Latin American Drugs I: Losing the Fight*, op. cit. Asked what was needed to improve conditions, a senior military office in Tumaco, on Colombia's Pacific coast, said: "Jobs for the kids". Crisis Group interview, September 2021.
[202] Arturo C. Porzecanski, "Latin America's Renewed Fiscal Challenges", *Americas Quarterly*, 15 June 2024.
[203] Crisis Group Report, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, op. cit.
[204] Crisis Group interview, Guayaquil, May 2024.
[205] Crisis Group interviews, residents, Buenaventura, January 2024.
[206] "Jóvenes En Paz", Colombia Ministry of Equality, 10 July 2024.
[207] Crisis Group interviews, Monterrey, January 2024.

While slow and tough to administer, these initiatives are vital to ensuring that criminal groups are not the only employers in town.

C. *Reducing the Flow of Weapons*

Communities regularly report that the influx of weapons into the hands of illegal groups has been a catalyst for rising violence, while law enforcement agencies complain that their criminal adversaries have access to more and better-quality firearms.[208] Dozens of pipelines are used to move sophisticated guns into Latin America, including from Brazil and Peru into Ecuador.[209] Yet one constant across the region is the prevalence of U.S.-made weapons, many of which flow southward across the U.S.-Mexico border.[210]

Despite an apparent pledge from the Trump administration to limit firearms trafficked into Mexico, stronger domestic gun control regulations in the U.S. appear unlikely.[211] That leaves authorities with few tools to address the weapons flow, though progress has been made. The 2022 Safer Communities Act increased sanctions for illegal exports from the U.S. and closed a number of loopholes on gun-seller registration.[212] The Joe Biden administration also stepped up its emphasis on enforcement, including cooperation with Mexico to trace weapons.[213] The U.S. Department of Commerce has raised the bar on the conditions that Latin American governments must meet to receive official shipments, given that stocks from security forces have filtered into the open market.[214]

Much more can and should be done to stop arms flows. Ideally, the U.S. Congress would take legislative action to strengthen gun seller and buyer licencing restrictions, while weapons makers and dealers would face greater responsibility if their guns are later involved in criminal activity. The latter may soon come to pass: Mexico has filed lawsuits against weapons makers and dealers in the U.S.[215] Meanwhile, an emerging challenge for all Latin American countries is the growing sophistication and ease of 3D printing and other means of making homemade weapons.[216] Such arms repre-

[208] Crisis Group interviews, Colombian military officers, January and February 2023.
[209] "Del Ejército peruano a las mafias del Ecuador: las rutas del tráfico de armamento en la frontera", *Ojo Público*, 14 January 2024.
[210] See Ioan Grillo, "Slow the iron river of guns to Mexico", *The New York Times*, 20 February 2021. Of the illegal arms caught coming into Ecuador illegally, nearly half were from the U.S. See Carla Álvarez, "¿El paraíso perdido? Tráfico de armas de fuego y violencia en Ecuador", Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, June 2024, p. 16.
[211] "Presidenta de México: Aranceles se pausan un mes; se establecerán mesas de trabajo con el gobierno de EUA en materia de seguridad y comercio", op. cit.
[212] "S.2938 – Bipartisan Safer Communities Act", U.S. Public Law No. 117-159, 25 June 2022.
[213] "FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Action to Implement Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, Expanding Firearm Background Checks to Fight Gun Crime", press release, White House, 11 April 2024.
[214] In Guatemala, the Zetas benefited from pilfering state stockpiles between 2007 and 2009. See "U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Guatemala and Mexico", Wilson Centre, April 2013.
[215] "Damming the Iron River: Solutions to Stop the U.S. Gun Industry from Fueling Mexico's Violence", Everytown for Gun Safety, 21 May 2024. Foreign Terrorist designations could raise the legal costs for U.S. gun retailers whose arms are later traced illegally into Mexico.
[216] Maria Zupello, "3D firearm proliferation among Latin American criminal organizations", *Militant Wire*, 16 May 2022.

sent the majority of seized illegal arms in Ecuador, where they are produced locally.[217] Interrupting the online schemes that allow for this manufacture will require a worldwide effort.

D. *Talking with Criminals*

One strategy that has served at times to pacify violent hotspots in Latin America is also highly fraught. Communities, local authorities, business elites and national government officials have on occasion forged quiet deals with criminal bosses to stop the shooting. Much of the controversy around these arrangements stems from their broader effects: while there is evidence to suggest they can reduce violence among criminal groups and against civilians, they risk entrenching illegal outfits in communities, supporting the rise to dominance of a single group and favouring opaque transactions with state officials.

1. Community dialogue

Lacking state protection while living in dire insecurity, a number of communities across Latin America have found no other option than to engage in dialogue with local criminal groups. Local leaders have at times been successful in approaching gang leaders or armed groups to halt practices like recruiting children or selling drugs at schools. Some communities say it works best to approach the local criminal leader in a group of dozens of people.[218] Negotiating in a group may limit the harm caused by any arrangement, as even the most powerful gangs cannot afford to alienate the entire local population.[219] In one instance, a group of neighbours in Buenaventura, Colombia persuaded various gangs to transform a dangerous invisible border between territories controlled by rivals into a demilitarised zone after a horrendous spike in homicides.[220] Residents then secured 24-hour checkpoints at each of the two entrances to the area, one manned by the police and another by the navy. Although the area is small, it remains largely free of extortion, drug dealing and murder after more than a decade.

Others have found it useful to seek an independent intermediary such as a clergy member to facilitate quiet conversations about reducing violence. The Catholic Church is involved in all the formal dialogues now under way in Colombia, but its good offices have also helped de-escalate conflict for years in cities like Tumaco and in rural areas of Arauca.[221] Civil society mediation also contributed to a drop in violence in Mon-

[217] Carla Álvarez, "¿El paraíso perdido? Tráfico de armas de fuego y violencia en Ecuador", op. cit., p. 17.
[218] Crisis Group interview, social leaders in Putumayo, February 2024.
[219] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders in Cauca and Putumayo, 2023 and 2024.
[220] Between 2010 and 2013, a surge of violence shook Buenaventura, as the remnants of right-wing paramilitary groups sought to displace leftist guerrillas from the port city. Roughly 13,000 people were displaced in 2013, and hundreds were disappeared. The city became known for its *casas de pique* (literally, "chopping houses") where victims were killed and dismembered. A number of these houses were located in the area that is demilitarised today.
[221] Crisis Group interviews, participants in talks and clergy, Tumaco and Arauca, 2022 and 2023.

terrey, Mexico, including not only direct engagement to de-escalate conflict but also programs to support gang members who wished to demobilise.[222]

In many cases, community-based approaches rooted in dialogue with criminal groups focus on achievable local priorities, such as preventing recruitment, limiting drug consumption or providing safe spaces for victims of gender-based violence. Community interaction with an armed organisation is high-risk and never a first choice. But when talks are the only option, governments could help support the civilians who find themselves on the front lines of violence. In particular, officials could quietly make clear that they will not pursue prosecutions of civilians who seek humanitarian understandings with illegal groups.[223]

2. Negotiations with the state

State-led negotiations with criminal groups have a long history in Latin America and a poor reputation. Often, they have involved the state turning a blind eye to illicit economic activity, including drug trafficking, so long as the criminal group in question halts violence such as homicides, kidnappings and extortion. As noted above, during its decades under single-party rule, Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party tolerated criminal activity (and benefited from it) under the tacit understanding that cartels should limit the brazen public use of violence. In Colombia, the city of Medellín famously reduced its record-high homicide rates after local authorities apparently reached an understanding with the crime boss Diego Murillo Bejarano, alias Don Berna, in the early 2000s.[224]

Past experience has demonstrated both the benefits and dangers of these approaches. For communities in the grip of powerful armed groups, dialogue sponsored by national and local authorities, and often involving businesspeople, can bring a reprieve and restore a modicum of peace. Cases as diverse as El Salvador, Ecuador, Monterrey in Mexico and Buenaventura in Colombia have shown that when violence is organised and deliberate, dialogue can work to reduce levels of bloodshed.[225] But the drawbacks are impossible to conceal. With a reduced threat of law enforcement (so long as they also follow certain rules), criminal groups, which have little interest in broader political or programmatic objectives, have used truces and other negotiat-

[222] Crisis Group interviews, Monterrey, February 2023.

[223] Customary international humanitarian law offers a number of policy tools that communities could deploy in their interactions with armed organisations, such as the demarcation of protected zones like schools and hospitals, and principles around the protection of particular groups of people, such as women, children and the elderly. See "International Humanitarian Law Databases: Customary IHL", International Committee of the Red Cross, 2024.

[224] Esteban Arratia Sandoval, "Agendas criminales y procesos de paz en Colombia: El caso de la 'Donbernabilidad' en Medellín", *Revista Política y Estrategia*, no. 130 (2017); Christopher Blattman, Benjamin Lessing and Santiago Tobón, "El terrible dilema para reducir la violencia organizada: El caso de Medellín", *Nada es Gratis*, 16 May 2022.

[225] Nearly a decade after the community-led violence reduction effort in Buenaventura, President Petro's government in 2022 supported dialogue with the two major gangs operating in the city that led to roughly three months without a single murder. "Primeros resultados de la paz en Buenaventura: cifras del delito 2021-2022", PARES, 16 February 2023.

ed arrangements to fortify themselves and expand their reach into society and state institutions.[226]

States could nevertheless consider back-room talks as a short-term approach to address spikes of violence. Experiences indicate that this tack will be most effective if the state has a specific objective (and red lines) in mind; if groups are sufficiently hierarchical; and if there are limited spoilers – often other armed groups – waiting in the wings.[227] Talks should begin in an exploratory phase, during which the government can assess a criminal group's interests, goals and reasons for engaging in dialogue. During this phase, the government should seek good-faith gestures from the criminal group to establish confidence.

If an initial understanding can be reached, the two sides should work toward pilot violence reduction programs that can be expanded if they prove successful. For example, in exchange for criminals reducing the worst types of violence, the state could offer a reduction in certain types of offensive operations against them (while never forfeiting the capacity to combat criminal acts and behaviour). Equally important is a clear exit strategy. Governments could choose either to try demobilising part or all of a group, even as the parties keep talking, or to slowly reintroduce types of enforcement. This off-ramp is crucial for limiting the inevitable risks that dialogue will strengthen criminal group control and leverage in the short term. Throughout the process, agreements may also benefit from third party monitoring and mediation, potentially from local, religious or ethnic leaders, to ensure that they are credible and stable.

E. *Drug Control*

Even if all the policies suggested above are enacted, Latin America's established position in the drug trade, persistent economic inequality and lack of robust institutions mean that it will likely continue to suffer from criminal activity feeding resilient global drug demand. Latin America is subject to a cruel equation in which greater law enforcement, more seizures and stronger prohibition raise the price of drugs – and hence the profits for its traffickers.

Even if there is no consensus on this issue in the region, many Latin American leaders have voiced opposition to a drug control system that has placed most of the burden of violence on their people while failing to curtail the market or stem a surge in overdose deaths concentrated in user countries. Regional leaders have been demanding a global review of drug policy for almost two decades. The 2012 Summit of the Americas requested that the Organization of American States produce a report suggesting better approaches.[228] A few years later, the UN convened a special General Assembly session to discuss the topic at the request of Mexico, Colombia and

[226] See, for example, Teresa Whitfield, "Mediating Criminal Violence: Lessons from the Gang Truce in El Salvador", Oslo Forum Paper, 2013; Eric Rahman and Siniša Vuković, "Sympathy for the Devil: When and How to Negotiate with Criminal Gangs – The Case of El Salvador", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 11 (2018).
[227] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Bargaining with the Devil to Avoid Hell?", Institute for Integrated Transitions, 2020.
[228] "The Drug Problem in the Americas", Organization of American States, 2013.

Guatemala.[229] Out of power, ex-presidents have candidly denounced an approach they describe as "an unmitigated disaster".[230] More recently, Petro and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the former president of Mexico, led a regional conference in Colombia to rethink the war on drugs.[231]

Reforms to the existing drug control regime, including a regulated market for narcotics, would not prevent or alleviate all the harm done by criminal groups, which have already expanded into lines of business well beyond drug trafficking. In the current climate, a global proposal of this sort would find few states to back it. But if violence continues to worsen as efforts to limit the supply of narcotics intensify, it should come as no surprise that Latin American governments put the well-being of their citizens over the established playbook of drug control.[232] Rather than issuing threats, foreign partners could help lighten the burden of this choice with greater financial, technical and material support for violence reduction. An approach that focuses not just on impeding drug flows but also on managing the devastating fallout of trafficking and the campaign to stop it is the only formula likely to get lasting Latin American backing.

[229] Lucia Sobekova, "UNGASS: A Very Modest Policy Review", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 May 2016.

[230] "Former Latin American leaders urge the world to end war on drug disaster", *The Guardian*, 11 March 2016. Former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, who is a Crisis Group trustee, has described the "war on drugs" as "pedalling on a stationary bicycle". See "President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia", *The World Today*, 31 March 2021.

[231] "Petro suma a López Obrador en su reclamo por replantear la guerra contra las drogas", *El País*, 7 September 2023. Petro has said the war on drugs has produced "a genocide" in Latin America. "Petro dice que la guerra contra las drogas ha producido un genocidio en América Latina", *Infobae*, 9 September 2023.

[232] Observers note that, as the U.S. and others legalise the use of marijuana and other drugs despite the strictures of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, user countries are losing the moral authority to make demands of Latin American regarding drug policy. "Drug Policy: Ending the Failed U.S. War on Drugs", Washington Office for Latin America, 11 October 2024.

VI. Conclusions

While President Trump has reinvigorated a 50-year war on drugs, Latin America is reeling from its failure. Kingpin captures, crop eradication and aggressive seizures have generated stronger, more resilient and more geographically dispersed drug trafficking networks, which are producing ever more lethal illicit substances for a larger global market. Where there were once vertical supply chains and dominant cartels, an array of criminal players now violently compete or profitably collude with one another, while turning their coercive power on officials, journalists, prosecutors or any other civilians who get in their way. These same groups systematically penetrate and corrupt institutions, hollowing out the very states that are meant to combat them.

Numerous communities across Latin America now confront a fragmented criminal underworld, in which prolonged and intense violence has become the status quo. Meanwhile, some countries with big user markets, particularly in Europe and North America, are calling for stricter controls on drug trafficking – and, in the case of the U.S. under the Trump administration, a revitalised military-led crackdown. Decades of the "war on drugs" provide plentiful evidence that Latin America's traffickers are hard to eliminate. Combating them through armed force generates more rather than less criminal profit, violence, corruption and misery.

Latin America has ample practical experience to build upon in reducing violence. Strengthening security systems, above all policing, prisons and criminal investigation, has a proven track record. On their own, however, these policies will not enjoy sustained success without addressing the reasons why drug production and trafficking survive and reproduce in the face of police and military onslaughts, including the lack of economic opportunities and the easy availability of firearms. Where drug-related violence is entrenched, negotiations with critical groups could also be explored under very specific conditions. Not all of these approaches may gain endorsement among governments outside the region. But so long as Latin America is the source of a large share of the drugs consumed globally as well as the main victim of drug-related violence, it is both unfair to the region and dangerous to the world to intensify a failing war.

Bogotá/Mexico City/New York/Brussels, 11 March 2025

Appendix A: Map of Mexico, Central America and the Andes

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, DG INTPA), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency and Japan External Trade Organization), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organisations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Pivotal Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Stand Together Trust, Stiftung Mercator, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

March 2025

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2022

Special Reports and Briefings

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023 (also available in French).

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025, Special Briefing N°12, 10 September 2024 (also available in French).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas, Latin America Report N°100, 10 July 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap, Latin America Report N°102, 3 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups, Latin America Report N°103, 28 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°49, 5 January 2024 (also available in French and Spanish).

Fear, Lies and Lucre: How Criminal Groups Weaponise Social Media in Mexico, Latin America Briefing N°50, 31 January 2024 (also available in Spanish).

Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru, Latin America Report N°104, 8 February 2024 (also available in Spanish).

The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas, Latin America Report N°105, 19 March 2024 (also available in Spanish).

The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico, Latin America Report N°106, 24 May 2024 (also available in Spanish).

A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers, Latin America Briefing N°51, 17 July 2024 (also available in Spanish and Portuguese).

Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian *Amazon*, Latin America Briefing N°52, 18 October 2024 (also available in Spanish).

Locked in Transition: Politics and Violence in Haiti, Latin America & Caribbean Report N°107, 19 February 2025 (also available in French and Spanish).

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