



EL PACCTO 2.0

EU-LAC Partnership on justice and security

MAPPING AND PROFILING THE MOST THREATENING CRIMINAL NETWORKS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



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INTRODUCTION

Connections between European and Latin American criminal networks have surged in recent years, with drugs, gold, and human trafficking proving particularly lucrative in the European market.

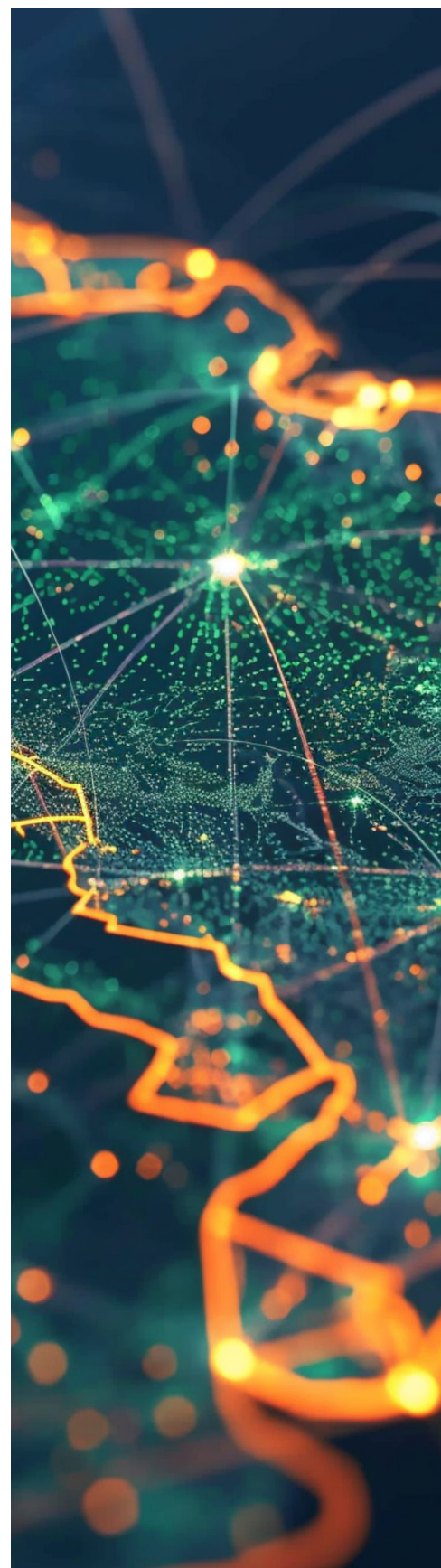
The number of European citizens linked to criminal networks arrested in Latin America has increased significantly, especially in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Argentina. The strengthening alliance between Latin American and European crime groups now poses a global threat.

Today's Latin America's major criminal networks, unlike the cartels of the 1980s, operate in a world of subcontracting. Groups, or nodes in the network, often specialize in specific roles or stages of the supply chain. If a node is targeted by law enforcement, the network can quickly adjust and reconfigure itself, ensuring efficiency and the uninterrupted flow of criminal commodities.

These networks pose a serious threat to the rule of law, subverting it by establishing social norms through violence to exercise control with different forms of criminal governance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, they pose the single biggest threat to democracy in the region, using corruption to penetrate the state, and violence where bribery fails. This means it is the primary motor for human rights abuses and homicides. Corruption, like cancer, is spreading through state institutions in many nations of the region. Additionally, these networks harm economic stability development, distorting local economies, deterring foreign investment and affecting international financing.

Studying these networks is crucial to understanding the flow of illicit goods from Latin America to Europe, and essential to crafting effective strategies to combat these structures. After an analysis of different variables such as their criminal economies, geographical distribution or state response, EL PACCTO 2.0 and InSight Crime, with the support of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), particularly within the Operational Action 8.3, of the High Risk Criminal Networks EMPACT, have ranked the 28 most active or relevant high-risk criminal networks in Latin America and the Caribbean, identifying key factors about their operations that reveal potential opportunities for combating organized crime in the region. This work has direct implications for both Latin America and Europe.

The list ranges from criminal networks with thousands of members to small brokers or gangs operating in Latin American countries, Caribbean islands or in Central America. In addition, the current report has sought to identify the connections or influence that high-risk criminal networks may have in different countries. This has led to the creation of a specific file for each criminal network with a specific individual map. Likewise, an aggregate map of all the information on the 28 criminal networks has been designed to provide a global overview.





eneration (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, CJNG)
el del Golfo – CDG)

artel de los Soles)
army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN)
(Estado Mayor Central – EMC)
(Segunda Marquetalia)



GUYANA

- Roger Khan Network



BRAZIL

- First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC)
- Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV)
- Tren de Aragua



BOLIVIA

- Castedo Clan
- First Uruguayan Cartel
- Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV)
- Tren de Aragua



PARAGUAY

- First Uruguayan Cartel
- Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV)
- Rotela Clan
- Tren de Aragua



ARGENTINA

- Alvarado Clan
- Castedo Clan
- The Monos



URUGUAY

- First Uruguayan Cartel

CRIMINAL NETWORKS

- CONQUERING SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF THE SIERRA NEVADA (AUTODEFENSAS CONQUISTADORES DE LA SIERRA NEVADA- ACSN)
- GAITANIST SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF COLOMBIA (AUTODEFENSAS GAITANISTAS DE COLOMBIA – AGC)
- ALVARADO CLAN
- BARRIO 18
- CARTEL OF THE SUNS (CARTEL DE LOS SOLES)
- CASTEDO CLAN
- JALISCO CARTEL NEW GENERATION (CARTEL DE JALISCO NUEVA GENERACIÓN, CJNG)
- NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY (EJÉRCITO DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL – ELN)
- CENTRAL GENERAL STAFF (ESTADO MAYOR CENTRAL – EMC)
- FAMILIA MICHOCANA
- FIRST URUGUAYAN CARTEL
- THE GULF CARTEL (CARTEL DEL GOLFO – CDG)
- MS13
- OFICINA DE ENVIGADO
- FIRST CAPITAL COMMAND (PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL – PCC)
- RED COMMAND (COMANDO VERMELHO – CV)
- ROGER KHAN NETWORK
- ROTELA CLAN
- SECOND MARQUETALIA (SEGUNDA MARQUETALIA)
- SHINING PATH (SENDERO LUMINOSO)
- SINALOA CARTEL
- THE CHONEROS
- THE HUISTAS
- THE LOBOS
- THE MONOS
- TREN DE ARAGUA
- TREN DEL LLANO
- YOUNG FAITH



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METHODOLOGY

Criminal groups and network nodes were selected from countries including Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and the Caribbean.

This analysis employed an adapted version of InSight Crime's methodology, designed to identify, analyse, profile, and evaluate each transnational organized crime actor based on their capabilities and complexity across various variables.

The variables considered for this study were history, geography, criminal economies, structure and leadership, state response, criminal governance, and positions in criminal networks.

- **History:** This indicator outlines the criminal group or network's evolution, highlighting key moments in its development and consolidation over illicit economies between Latin America and other regions.
- **Geography:** This examines the presence of criminal networks or groups in critical locations for illegal economies, including drug trafficking, illegal mining, environmental crimes, and more.
- **Criminal Economies:** This specifies the primary illicit economies in which the criminal group or network is involved, including its level of control and influence in these markets. Additionally, it assesses how the group's participation in specific illicit economies facilitates connections between Latin America and Europe.
- **Structure and Leadership:** This variable analyses the internal organization of the criminal group or network and how it has contributed to its consolidation in the criminal structure of a country or region. It also identifies the main leaders and their relationship with the broader organization.
- **State response:** This section evaluates each government's response to a criminal network or group, as well as the types of measures that have proven successful or unsuccessful in confronting the organization.
- **Criminal governance:** This variable explores the networks' presence in territories, often including their interference in various aspects of residents' daily lives, as they frequently assume roles typically associated with the state.
- **Positions in criminal networks:** This analyzes each group's role within larger criminal networks and the key alliances they have forged, linking Latin American and European criminality.

Each of these indicators contains key information for understanding the scope of a group's influence within its country of origin and internationally, its participation in illegal transnational economies, the adaptation of its internal operations to maximize profits, and its main alliances, among other aspects.

Additionally, a gender perspective was incorporated into the profile analysis, offering a deeper look into issues such as roles within the organization and the differential impacts of these networks' violent actions on men, women, and people with diverse sexual identities.



MAPPING AND IDENTIFYING THE MOST RELEVANT HIGH RISK CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The days when a single criminal group controlled all aspects of the drug, arms or other criminal trafficking chain between Latin America and Europe are long gone. Today, the illicit supply chain can integrate a multitude of national and international criminal groups and networks of varying size and changing influence. These elements were confirmed by Europol in its report “Decoding the EU’s Most Threatening Criminal Networks”.

While there are large, well-identified criminal groups infiltrated in all social spheres and with great economic and financial power with hundreds of members, one element identified in the Latin American and European region as a whole is the specialisation of criminal groups. Under this perspective of specialisation, organised crime has been fragmented and specialised into more versatile, smaller and more flexible criminal groups which become brokers, facilitators or enablers for criminal activities. Those brokers can provide financial, legal and logistical support, stockpiling of illicit goods, cybersecurity and support to large criminal groups. In this sense, while specialised criminal groups generally act as service providers (crime-as-a-service), large criminal groups rely on subcontracting specialists in transport, contract killings, corruption nodes, straw men, money launderers and actors linked to law and economics such as lawyers, accountants and bankers, in order to manage their criminal business. This subcontracting can be done by integrating them into their criminal structures or as contracts to illicit service providers.

For instance, the creation and use of legal corporate structures to hide criminal activity and launder illicit proceeds is a common element among criminal groups in both Latin America and the European Union.^{1,2,3} This can be done directly by organised crime groups, brokers or by what is newly called “high risk criminal networks.” The IDEAL 2021 report already identified that 71% of criminal groups were already using front companies and front men in their operations. This percentage of the use of front companies rises to 86% of criminal groups operating in Europe according to Europol (2024).

Although there is no agreed definition of what a high-risk criminal network is, some elements are key to classifying an organisation within this concept or simply as an organised criminal group. Variables such as state penetration, infiltration and influence, territorial control, the volume of assets it moves, whether its own or as a broker, as well as the response it receives from state security and justice authorities are key to determine whether an organisation can be classified as high risk criminal networks (HRCN) or not. These variables are, in part, those used in this report. However, it is important to note that a high risk criminal network can be as large with thousands of members as a small group of less than a dozen people that provides specialised services in money laundering, cyberspace or physical security, among others.

When an analysis of criminal networks is carried out taking into account not only the typical descriptive indicators such as nationality, criminal activity or common characteristics, in many cases the analysis reveals a fragmented landscape of different networks of individuals and criminal groups that collaborate with each other. These groups or individuals interact with each other on a permanent or ad hoc basis in pursuit of common criminal objectives that can bring them either profits, expansion possibilities, territorial control or new forms of criminality that allow them to diversify their illicit services. Moreover, depending on their needs, criminals may operate in or provide services to several different networks. In many cases, autonomous partners provide their services to multiple networks at the same time.

¹ Bélisa Catarino, Cristina Curto, Iván Villanueva, José Alvaro, Marc Reina, Pascal Benitez and Yesid Romanos, [Latin American Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment – IDEAL](#) (2021). EU Programme EL PACCTO 2.0.

² Europol (2021), [Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment. A Corruption Influence: the infiltration and undermining of Europe's economy and society by organised crime](#).

³ Europol (2024), [Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks](#).

ALVARADO CLAN



ALVARADO CLAN

ORIGIN



Argentina

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

Low

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Money laundering
- Micro trafficking



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



Esteban Lindor Alvarado

December 2024

The fighting between rival criminal clans has turned Rosario into Argentina’s most violent city. And while much of the violence stems from the sheer number of small criminal bands fighting for territory, most of these groups answer to one of two umbrella groups: the Monos and the Alvarado Clan.⁴

⁴ Gabrielle Gorder, “[Why Are Murders Spreading Across Argentina’s Most Violent City?](#),” InSight Crime, 8 November 2022.

HISTORY

Although the criminal histories of its key members likely began earlier, the Argentine government identified 2012 as the year the clan began its criminal activities, under the leadership of Esteban Lindor Alvarado.⁵ During this period, the group is believed to have established local drug dealing, money laundering, and extortion rackets, often with cooperation of corrupt police officials.⁶

In 2019, Alvarado was arrested and charged with instigating homicide, money laundering, threats, shootings of judicial buildings and employees, and illicit association, for which he received a life sentence in 2022. Six days later, he was convicted of drug trafficking, which added 15 years to his sentence.⁷

He planned a cinematic escape from Ezeiza prison in Buenos Aires Province in 2023, hiring a pilot to fly a helicopter into the prison courtyard to lift him over the walls. But the plan was foiled when the pilot, fearing he would be murdered once the escape was over, informed the authorities.⁸

Another of the Alvarado Clan's leaders, Francisco Riquelme, was arrested in early 2024. He is accused of allegedly ordering extortion and shooting up a police station to intimidate authorities after they intensified their crackdown against criminal gangs in Rosario.⁹

GEOGRAPHY

The Alvarado clan is based in Rosario, a port city in Argentina's Santa Fe province that has become infamous for being the deadliest city in the country. The clan has traditionally controlled drug dealing in the western and northwestern parts of the city, allegedly with police cooperation.¹⁰

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Alvarado Clan has engaged in various criminal economies over the years, capitalizing on any profitable opportunities. The mainstays of the group, however, have been drug dealing and extortion.¹¹ Almost 500 kilograms of marijuana was seized in 2017, which led to the imprisonment of the clan's leader, Alvarado.¹² The band has been heavily involved in extortion,¹³ which has become an increasingly significant criminal economy in Rosario.¹⁴

In 2024, the Argentine government accused Alvarado of continuing to run a money laundering scheme from inside federal prison.¹⁵

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Alvarado Clan oversees several small bands, operating as a franchise. These groups are allowed to operate largely independently, so long as they pay a "tax" to clan leadership.¹⁶

5 La Nación, "[El archirrival de Los Monos: confirman la condena a 15 años de cárcel para Esteban Lindor Alvarado](#)," 26 September 2023.

6 Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Rivals for the Throne – Can Argentina's Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#)," InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

7 La Nación, "[El archirrival de Los Monos: confirman la condena a 15 años de cárcel para Esteban Lindor Alvarado](#)," 26 September 2023; Redacción LAVOZ, "[Drogas. Los tentáculos del narco rosarino Esteban Alvarado otra vez llegan a Córdoba](#)," La Voz, 2 May 2024.

8 Alicia Florez and Christopher Newton, "[How Rosario Became Argentina's Drug Violence Capital](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2024; Germán de los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Rosario: La historia detrás de la mafia narco que se adueñó de la ciudad](#)" (Buenos Aires, 2023).

9 Andrés Abramowski, "[Nuevas acusaciones contra miembros de una banda vinculada a Alvarado en la zona noroeste](#)," La Capital, 4 July 2024; La Capital, "[Amenazas a Pullaro: cuatro detenidos en 28 allanamientos 'al núcleo duro' de Fran Riquelme](#)," 6 February 2024.

10 Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Rivals for the Throne – Can Argentina's Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#)," InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

11 Andrés Abramowski, "[Nuevas acusaciones contra miembros de una banda vinculada a Alvarado en la zona noroeste](#)," La Capital, 4 July 2024.

12 Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Rivals for the Throne – Can Argentina's Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#)," InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

13 Andrés Abramowski, "[Nuevas acusaciones contra miembros de una banda vinculada a Alvarado en la zona noroeste](#)," La Capital, 4 July 2024; La Capital, "[Nuevo golpe a la banda de Fran Riquelme: cinco detenidos en varios allanamientos](#)," 5 July 2023.

14 Alicia Florez and Christopher Newton, "[How Rosario Became Argentina's Drug Violence Capital](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2024.

15 Public Prosecutor's Office of Argentina, "[Rosario: indagaron a Esteban Lindor Alvarado, acusado de conformar una asociación ilícita destinada al lavado de activos](#)," 21 May 2024.

16 Gabrielle Gorder, "[Why Are Murders Spreading Across Argentina's Most Violent City?](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2022.

At the head of this scheme is Alvarado, who is currently in prison. Though he has been able to continue issuing orders from behind bars, it is believed that crackdowns in federal prisons have led Alvarado to increasingly delegate to his sister, Yanina Alvarado. Yanina was sentenced to 11 years for drug trafficking in 2023 but received house arrest in lieu of incarceration. In August 2024, however, she was arrested again for transporting 32 kilograms of cocaine from Buenos Aires to Rosario.¹⁷

Alvarado previously worked closely with a businessman involved in various legal and illegal endeavors named Luis Medina, but they parted ways in 2013. Shortly after, Medina and his girlfriend were murdered; prosecutors believe Alvarado ordered the assassinations.¹⁸

In recent years, much of the Alvarado Clan's violence has been attributed to a faction led by Francisco "Fran" Riquelme, who was arrested in 2024 for allegedly orchestrating attacks intended to intimidate officials.¹⁹

STATE RESPONSE

On January 2, 2024, the government launched Operation Flag, a joint effort by federal and provincial forces to increase patrols and operations in Rosario. The federal government has hailed the operation a success, citing large increases in the number of arrests and drug seizures. The provincial government, however, has stated that more time is needed to determine whether the operation can bring long-term safety and stability.²⁰

The government has attempted to crack down on the imprisoned leaders of Rosario's bands.

17 German de los Santos, "[Estaba con prisión domiciliaria, pero eso no le impedía distribuir en sus búnkeres de Rosario la cocaína que compraba en Buenos Aires](#)," La Nación, 18 August 2024.

18 Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Rivals for the Throne – Can Argentina's Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#)," InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

19 Andrés Abramowski, "[Nuevas acusaciones contra miembros de una banda vinculada a Alvarado en la zona noroeste](#)," La Capital, 4 July 2024; La Capital, "[Nuevo golpe a la banda de Fran Riquelme: cinco detenidos en varios allanamientos](#)," 5 July 2023; La Capital, "[Amenazas a Pullaro: cuatro detenidos en 28 allanamientos 'al núcleo duro' de Fran Riquelme](#)," 6 February 2024.

20 Germán de los Santos, "[Operativo Bandera. A la fuerte disminución de los homicidios en Rosario se sumó una drástica caída de las balaceras](#)," La Nación, 24 August 2024.

Alvarado and other leaders of criminal groups were moved to isolated, more secure cells in federal prisons.²¹

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The Alvarado Clan collects "taxes" from local drug dealers and has previously attempted to regulate crime in their territory, but no evidence has been uncovered showing the group providing services or taking over state functions.²²

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Alvarado Clan controls several small groups operating in Rosario. The group likely has some international connections to secure drugs; however, the clan does not appear to play a significant role in trafficking outside of Argentina.²³

21 Virginia Messi, "[Ordenan un régimen de súper seguridad para el narco que iba a fugarse en helicóptero de la cárcel de Ezeiza](#)," Clarín, 10 April 2023.

22 Gabrielle Gorder, "[Why Are Murders Spreading Across Argentina's Most Violent City?](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2022; Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Rivals for the Throne – Can Argentina's Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#)," InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

23 Alicia Florez and Christopher Newton, "[How Rosario Became Argentina's Drug Violence Capital](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2024.

BARRIO 18



18TH STREET GANG (BARRIO 18)

ORIGIN 
El Salvador

LEADER (S)





IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

30,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Extortion
-  Micro trafficking
-  Arms trafficking
-  Hired assassination



No single identifiable leader

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE

The 18th Street Gang, also known as Barrio 18, has historically been one of the largest and influential criminal gangs in the Western Hemisphere, alongside their rival the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13). Although its power base in El Salvador has been notably weakened due to a security crackdown by President Nayib Bukele’s administration, Barrio 18 continues to pose a significant criminal threat in the region. The gang previously operated from Central America to Canada.

HISTORY

Barrio 18 first emerged as a small street gang in Los Angeles, evolving into its current form in the 1980s after splitting from another group. Initially, the gang's numerous cells, known as "cliques," were composed exclusively of Mexican immigrants, but it soon expanded to include members from other Latino nationalities, which facilitated its spread into other nations, particularly in Central America.

Like its rivals, the MS13, Barrio 18 expanded southward into Central America and Mexico, largely due to US immigration policies in the mid-1990s, which deported foreign-born residents convicted of crimes. In response, Central American governments—starting with El Salvador in the late 1990s—adopted *mano dura* (iron fist) policies, resulting in mass arrests of gang members. However, this inadvertently strengthened the gangs' by concentrating members in prisons, giving them a new power base.

On the streets, Barrio 18 branched into micro-trafficking and extortion. As profits grew, it began laundering money through small businesses, such as car washes.

In March 2012, Barrio 18 and MS13 leaders agreed to a government-mediated truce, temporarily halving El Salvador's homicide rate. However, the truce quickly unraveled, and violence resurged. Extortion and disappearances reportedly increased, and by 2015 homicides peaked before gradually decreasing.

El Salvador's murder rate dropped sharply in 2019 amid reports of an informal pact between certain government officials and imprisoned gang leaders, exchanging reduced killings for better prison conditions and protection from extradition.

The fragile peace was shattered in November 2021, when members of Barrio 18 and MS13 carried out a three-day killing spree, leaving 46 people dead. This was followed by a massacre of 92 people in March 2022, targeting shoppers, traders, and bus passengers. Barrio 18 distanced itself from the massacre, which appeared to be a message to the government.

In response, the Salvadoran government launched the most extensive gang crackdown in the country's history, arresting tens of thousands of suspected gang members under a state of emergency that remains in effect today.²⁴

GEOGRAPHY

In Central America, Barrio 18 primarily operates in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The gang also has a significant presence in the United States, with operations in dozens of cities across approximately 20 states.²⁵

During the 2010s, members of Barrio 18 were arrested in Italy²⁶ and Spain,²⁷ suggesting the gang's interest in expanding into Europe. However, there is little evidence to suggest it has established a significant presence or operations on the continent.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Barrio 18 is involved in various criminal economies, with extortion serving as its primary revenue stream. The gang traditionally extorts businesses, local vendors, public transportation systems and residents in areas under its control, using violence and intimidation to enforce payments.²⁸

The group is also engaged in micro-trafficking of drugs, auto theft, carjacking, drive-by shootings, and robbery, according to US authorities, though the extent of these activities varies by country.²⁹

Additionally, Barrio 18 members have been involved in identity fraud schemes, including posing as vendors to illegally claim government pandemic relief payments.³⁰

24 InSight Crime, "[Barrio 18](#)," 14 November 2023.

25 US Justice Department, "[Criminal Street Gangs](#)," 29 April 2021. Press release.

26 Arron Daugherty and James Bargent, "[Arrests Show Arrival of Barrio 18 Gang in Italy](#)," InSight Crime, 24 September 2015.

27 David Gagne, "[Spain Arrest of Barrio 18 Leader Signals Gang's European Expansion](#)," InSight Crime, 12 September 2016.

28 InSight Crime, "[Barrio 18](#)," 14 November 2023.

29 US Justice Department, "[Criminal Street Gangs](#)," 29 April 2021. Press release.

30 Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Barrio 18 Poses as Vendors to Pilfer El Salvador Pandemic Funds](#)," 1 March 2022.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

It is nearly impossible to determine Barrio 18's exact membership across all the countries in which it operates. However, the US Department of Justice estimated that in 2015, the gang had between 30,000 and 50,000 members across El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States.³¹

In El Salvador, internal conflict led to a split around 2005, dividing Barrio 18 into two rival factions: the Revolucionarios and the Sureños.

Before El Salvador's 2022 state of emergency, Barrio 18 maintained a relatively clear leadership structure. At the top were palabrereros (leaders), most of whom were incarcerated and coordinated the gang's criminal activities. However, imprisoned palabrereros of the Sureños faction requested that street leaders halt the November 2021 killing spree. A subsequent series of murders in 2022 led to speculation of a rupture between the gang's imprisoned leaders and its street-level leadership.

While many high-ranking members were already in prison before the March 2022 crackdown, the operation led to further imprisonment and displacement of street leaders.

In Guatemala, the gang's operations are overseen by a group known as the Rueda (wheel), whose members, including leader Aldo Dupie Ochoa Mejía, alias "El Lobo," are mostly incarcerated. Similarly, in Honduras, Barrio 18's key leaders, such as Nahum Medina, alias "Tacoma," operate from behind bars.

On the outside, the gang organizes itself into canchas, territorial divisions not strictly based on municipal boundaries. Each cancha is subdivided into tribus (tribes), the smallest organizational units of Barrio 18. The gang relies on colaboradores (collaborators), non-members who assist with minor tasks such as gathering intelligence and transporting or storing illicit goods.³²

31 US Justice Department, "Criminal Street Gangs," 29 April 2021. Press release.

32 InSight Crime, "Barrio 18," 14 November 2023.

STATE RESPONSE

Barrio 18 has long been entrenched in the communities of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, terrorizing residents through extortion and murder. For years, the gang's power made traditional security policies largely ineffective.

However, President Nayib Bukele's state of emergency in El Salvador, now extended for over two years, has drastically altered this dynamic. Security forces have arrested more than 77,000 individuals, including members of both Barrio 18 and MS13, leading to a seismic shift in the region's criminal landscape. This crackdown has driven violence to historic lows.³³

The crackdown has decimated Barrio 18's rank-and-file, forcing thousands of members to flee or go into hiding. For the first time in decades, the gang has lost control of key territories and criminal economies in areas it once dominated.³⁴

As of October 1, 2023, the Salvadoran government reported the arrest of 13,682 members of the Barrio 18 Sureños faction –65.1% of the total members– and 10,741 members of the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios faction, representing 54.3% of the overall membership.³⁵

In Honduras, President Xiomara Castro attempted to replicate Bukele's strategy by declaring a state of emergency in November 2022 to combat rising extortion. However, these measures have so far had little impact on gang activity.³⁶

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Barrio 18 has traditionally imposed extortion on nearly every business within the areas it controls, a criminal economy it shares with rivals MS13. In Guatemala, Honduras, and El

33 Alex Papadovassilakis, "How Bukele's Government Overpowered Gangs: Summary & Major Findings," InSight Crime, 6 December 2023.

34 InSight Crime, "Barrio 18," 14 November 2023.

35 Alex Papadovassilakis, "'Too Many Soldiers': How Bukele's Crackdown Succeeded Where Others Failed," InSight Crime, 6 December 2023.

36 Sam Woolston, "Honduras Doubles Down on Flawed Mano Dura Strategy," InSight Crime, 25 June 2024.

Salvador, extortion proceeds amounted to an estimated US\$1.1 billion annually in 2022, underscoring the scale of this illicit economy.³⁷

The gang also exerts significant control over prisons, which have long served as operational bases for their top leaders. For example, in June 2024, Guatemalan police relocated 225 Barrio 18 members from a notorious prison known as “El Infiernito” (Little Hell). Inside the facility, gang members ran a criminal call center and enjoyed luxuries like televisions, refrigerators, and even raised chickens.³⁸

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Currently, there is little evidence to suggest that Barrio 18 has developed deeper relationships with transnational drug trafficking organizations. Despite its size and territorial control, the gang remains a subsistence-level criminal group, primarily relying on extortion, micro trafficking, and violence to generate profits.

³⁷ Julia Yansura, “[Extortion in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Following the Money](#),” Global Financial Integrity, September 7, 2022.

³⁸ Agence France-Presse, “[Guatemala reclaims prison where gang members had call center, held crocodiles](#),” 2 June 2024,

CARTEL OF THE SUNS (CARTEL DE LOS SOLES)



CARTEL OF THE SUNS (CARTEL DE LOS SOLES)

ORIGIN 
Venezuela

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Drug trafficking
- Money laundering



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



No single identifiable leader

December 2024

The Cartel of the Suns (Cartel de los Soles) is the term used to describe the cellular network of Venezuelan government officials involved in drug trafficking. This is not a monolithic, hierarchical drug cartel. Instead, it is a porous, fluid and loosely interconnected network rooted principally in the Armed Forces, which relies on the protection of other state institutions.

HISTORY

The term “Cartel of the Suns” was first used in 1993 in a drug trafficking investigation involving two National Guard generals. The name derives from the sun-shaped insignia worn by high-ranking Venezuelan military officers on their uniforms. By the 2000s, after President Hugo Chávez came to power, high-ranking military officers from the National Guard and other branches of the Armed Forces began to take on much more active roles in the narcotics trade. They shifted away from merely extorting money from drug traffickers and allowing shipments to move, to directly buying, storing, transshipping and distributing cocaine.³⁹ During the administrations of Chávez and his successor President Nicolás Maduro, multiple cases and accusations have surfaced, demonstrating the ongoing nature of the criminal structure. In 2020, the United States accused Maduro and 14 other officials of leading the drug trafficking organization.⁴⁰

GEOGRAPHY

The operations of the Cartel of the Suns have been primarily concentrated in the border states with Colombia, through which the drugs enter, such as Zulia, Apure, and Táchira, and the key coastal regions, which are crucial for the exit of shipments through the Caribbean Sea, such as Falcón, Sucre, Nueva Esparta.⁴¹

Military officials involved in these drug trafficking cells can be stationed anywhere in Venezuelan territory. By the nature of their border surveillance and security function, they control border crossings, highway checkpoints, and all airports and ports. Puerto Cabello, in Carabobo state,⁴² for example, was used by drug trafficker Walid Makled in the 2000s to ship cocaine shipments to Central

America and Europe under the protection of corrupt generals.⁴³

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Cartel of the Suns has been primarily dedicated to drug trafficking. Military officials, protected by political actors within the Chavista regime, leverage their influence and connections to collect payments from trafficking networks, allowing them to operate in Venezuelan territory with impunity.

Among their services, they provide criminal organizations state-level protection to ensure the passage of drug shipments, from their entry into the country to different exit points. They are sometimes also responsible for storing and transporting the shipments. Some members have gone further and organized drug exports themselves, taking advantage of their control over ports and airports.⁴⁴

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Cartel of the Suns lacks a clear structure or hierarchy due to its nature. However, several high-ranking military officials have been accused of being part of the cartel’s front line, including former military intelligence chief Hugo Carvajal and former Army Major General Cliver Alcalá. Diosdado Cabello, the Venezuelan regime’s number two, is frequently mentioned as the senior member of the network.⁴⁵ At the same time, Maduro’s involvement from the presidency is less visible, with little direct evidence linking him to the cartel.⁴⁶

STATE RESPONSE

The military composition of the Cartel of the Suns, dependent on state power, implies the network’s activities and members are

39 InSight Crime, “[Cartel de los Soles](#),” 14 May 2022.

40 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Beyond the Cartel of the Suns](#),” InSight Crime, 2 May 2022; U.S. Department of Justice, “[Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges](#),” press release, 26 March 2020.

41 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[The Paraguaná Cartel: Drug Trafficking and Political Power in Venezuela](#),” InSight Crime, 3 May 2022; Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Drug Trafficking Uses Venezuela’s Margarita Island as Gateway to Europe](#),” InSight Crime, 4 December 2019.

42 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Beyond the Cartel of the Suns](#),” InSight Crime, 2 May, 2022.

43 InSight Crime, “[Walid Makled](#),” September 21, 2021.

44 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Beyond the Cartel of the Suns](#),” InSight Crime, 2 May 2022; Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Venezuelan Military Served Drug Ring on Trial in the United States](#),” InSight Crime, 21 December 2023.

45 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Beyond the Cartel of the Suns](#),” InSight Crime, 2 May 2022.

46 Ibid.

protected by state institutions. Under the Maduro regime, criminal operations have persisted, benefiting from the protection and impunity provided in exchange for political loyalty.⁴⁷ However, the Venezuelan government has been forced to respond to highly publicized drug trafficking cases, especially when there is security collaboration with other countries. Although several military and civilian officials implicated in drug trafficking have been investigated, arrested, and convicted, these high-ranking officials are usually quickly released.⁴⁸

Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), such as the Segunda Marquetalia. These groups control production, storage, and transport centers along Venezuela's border with Colombia.⁵⁰ Their connections also extend to local cartels, like the Paraguaná Cartel and La Guajira Cartel.⁵¹ Their influence reaches even further, as evidenced by connections with Mexican cartels and European networks through drug operators, according to information from cases that have surfaced.⁵²

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Due to the fluid nature of the network's cells, which tend to rotate based on agreements, decisions, and political influences, their criminal activities are generally not rooted in a specific geographic area or among those regions' residents. Nevertheless, in criminal fiefdoms where cells have managed to establish strong links with other criminal groups, the networks have supported the criminal governance already in place. Also, the political and military influence of the networks give them significant weight in governance decision-making, although their role is more of a hybrid nature than purely criminal.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Military officials involved in drug trafficking cells frequently act as service providers for criminal networks and groups seeking to transport drugs through Venezuela. They facilitate the creation of drug trafficking corridors using national infrastructure, transporting shipments, and protecting operations by paying taxes and bribes.⁴⁹ Some of these drug trafficking cells have worked hand in hand with Colombian guerrilla groups, particularly National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed

47 Ibid.

48 Douwe den Held, [“The rise of “silver” over “lead”: the cancer of corruption,”](#) InSight Crime, 9 February 2021.

49 Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“Beyond the Cartel of the Suns,”](#) InSight Crime, 2 May 2022; Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“Venezuelan Military Served Drug Ring on Trial in the United States,”](#) InSight Crime, 21 December 2023.

50 Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“Venezuela’s Transition to Cocaine Production: Cultivation, Chemicals and Criminal Evolution,”](#) InSight Crime, 2 May 2022.

51 Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“El cartel de Paraguaná: narco-trafficking and political power in Venezuela,”](#) InSight Crime, 3 May 2022; Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“Gordito González y los narcooperadores de Venezuela,”](#) InSight Crime, 3 May 2022.

52 Douwe den Held, [“The rise of “silver” over “lead”: the cancer of corruption,”](#) InSight Crime, 9 February 2021; Venezuela Investigative Unit, [“Venezuela military served narco network prosecuted in the United States,”](#) InSight Crime, 21 December 2023.

CASTEDO CLAN



CASTEDO CLAN

ORIGIN 
Argentina

LEADER (S)



IMPACT

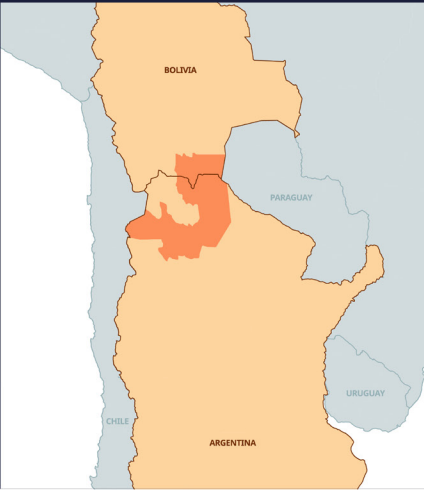
Low

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Drug trafficking
-  Money laundering



Delfin Reinaldo Castedo

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



After 20 years of involvement in the international cocaine trafficking game in northern Argentina, the Castedo Clan appears to have lost much of its power.

HISTORY

Sharing a border with Bolivia, one of the world's principal cocaine-producing countries, Argentina began playing a significant role in cocaine trafficking in the 1980s, with the Loza Clan pioneering operations in northern Argentina. In the 1990s, the Castedo Clan entered the industry, leveraging a combination of land ownership on both sides of the border and corruption.⁵³

In 1999, Delfín Reinaldo Castedo secured his position as leader of the clan, using the farms and estates of his family and friends to move cocaine from the Gran Chaco Province across the border into Salta, Argentina.⁵⁴ Under Delfín Castedo's leadership, the clan established a near monopoly over cocaine trafficking, which lasted more than a decade.⁵⁵

While several arrests over the years chipped away at the Castedo Clan, the most significant was Delfín's July 2016 capture.⁵⁶ However, the clan managed to continue operations, with Delfín's sister, Roxana Castedo, controlling large swathes of land on the Bolivian side of the border, and her husband, Mario Morfulis Herrera, maintaining critical connections in Bolivia.⁵⁷

Herrera was arrested in 2019, while authorities seized 20,000 acres of land following Delfín's 2022 conviction. With many members in jail, increased surveillance in Salta, and the loss of strategic land, the clan appears to have largely fallen from power. Smaller groups emerged in Salta, yet none has risen to the dominance that the Castedo once enjoyed. With trafficking no longer secure through Salta, it seems groups are now using a route through Paraguay. After crossing the Brazil-Paraguay border with small planes, they move the drugs to the Paraná River, where containers full of cocaine are shipped to Argentina and Uruguay, then eventually to Europe.⁵⁸

53 Josefina Salomon, "[From Argentine Shrine to Marijuana Corridor: The Story of Itatí](#)," InSight Crime, 16 March 2021.

54 Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022; Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

55 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019.

56 Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

57 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019.

58 Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022; Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

GEOGRAPHY

The Castedo Clan's territorial control was centered around the Bolivia-Argentina border, specifically Gran Chaco province in Bolivia and the Salta province in Argentina. The clan owned thousands of acres on both sides of the border, which it used to smuggle cocaine concealed in charcoal.⁵⁹

Once in Argentina, the clan transported the drugs down by road to Rosario and Buenos Aires, where they were shipped to Europe. The clan seems not to have controlled any territory along this route, however.⁶⁰

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Castedo Clan's principal source of income was cocaine trafficking, with money laundering essential due to the lucrative nature of its criminal operations. During the nearly two decades the clan dominated cocaine trafficking in the north of Argentina, it is estimated it was able to traffic up to 4 tons of the drug to Europe each month.⁶¹

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Castedo Clan operated as a mafia, with most key players belonging to the same family. The primary leader was Delfín Reinaldo Castedo, who was arrested in 2016 and sentenced in 2022. Delfín's sister, Roxana, played an important role, owning thousands of acres in Bolivia that were used to move drugs across the border, while her husband, Mario Morfulis Herrera, was well-connected in Santa Fe de la Sierra, Bolivia.⁶² Delfín's ex-wife, Melba del Carmen Araujo, was also convicted for her role in the clan, as

59 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019; Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022; Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

60 InSight Crime, "[Chaco, Argentina](#)," 15 March 2021.

61 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019; Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022.

62 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019.

was Delfín's brother, Raúl Castedo, who was responsible for securing the cocaine from suppliers in Bolivia.⁶³

STATE RESPONSE

Various members of the clan, including Delfín Castedo, Raúl Castedo, Rafael Castedo, Roberto Castedo, Melba del Carmen Araujo, and Mario Morfulis Herrera, have been arrested, but this didn't immediately hinder the clan's operations.⁶⁴ However, as arrests and convictions continued, and authorities seized around 20,000 acres of land in Salta, it seems the clan's ability to continue trafficking largely collapsed.⁶⁵ Although the group appears to be a shadow of its former self, it may still be partially active. A seizure of 420 kilograms of cocaine in Salta on July 10, 2024, was stamped with a dolphin, the Castedo Clan's symbol, indicating that the clan may continue to operate from prison.⁶⁶

Europe, predominantly Spain.⁶⁹ However, it is suspected that the Castedo were never the "owners" of these shipments, instead operating for European groups that would handle the distribution on the continent.⁷⁰ The specific groups involved in Castedo's network are still unknown.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

While the Castedo Clan did not appear to engage in much criminal governance, Delfín Castedo provided local jobs, which earned him loyalty that may have made investigations into the clan's illicit activities more difficult.⁶⁷

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

To obtain tons of cocaine, the Castedo are believed to have built networks with groups in both Bolivia and Colombia.⁶⁸ The ultimate destination for the drugs was

63 Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022.

64 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019.

65 Alicia Florez, "[How Did the Castedo Clan Run the Drug Trade in Northern Argentina?](#)," InSight Crime, 14 December 2022.

66 El Tribuno. "[La droga secuestrada por Gendarmería a los narcopolicías salteños tiene la marca del 'Delfín'](#)," 11 July 2024.

67 Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

68 Public Prosecutor's Office of Argentina, "[Solicitaron penas de hasta 20 años de prisión para los integrantes del 'Clan Castedo'](#)," 26 August 2024; Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

69 Parker Asmann, "[Argentina's Castedo Clan Continues to Survive Despite Top Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2019; Mimi Yagoub, "[Argentina Finally Catches Up With International Cocaine Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 25 July 2016.

70 Josefina Salomon, "[From Argentine Shrine to Marijuana Corridor: The Story of Itati](#)," InSight Crime, 16 March 2021.

CENTRAL GENERAL STAFF (ESTADO MAYOR CENTRAL – EMC)

			CENTRAL GENERAL STAFF (ESTADO MAYOR CENTRAL – EMC)		ORIGIN  Colombia			
					LEADER (S)			
December 2024	IMPACT High	APPROXIMATE SIZE 3,500 members						
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES <div> Extortion</div> <div> Drug trafficking</div> <div> Kidnapping</div> <div> Illegal mining</div> <div> Contraband</div> <div> Money laundering</div>							
	 WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS ✓	 STATE PENETRATION ✓	 CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE ✗					
 Néstor Gregorio Vera alias "Iván Mordisco" Alexander Díaz alias "Calarcá"								

The Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central – EMC) is an umbrella organization comprising dissident groups from the now disbanded Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC). It has systematically regained historically significant territories once controlled by the FARC through the country and neighboring Venezuela. Depending on the region and the associated Front (a unit with a given geographic territory), revenues vary, but its criminal portfolio is mainly based on drug trafficking revenues in the south of the country, illegal mining, and extortion.

HISTORY

The EMC was formed during the peace negotiations that took place in Havana, Cuba, between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016. Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias “Iván Mordisco”, chose not to participate in the talks, retaining command over approximately 400 FARC members and control over drug trafficking routes in several southeastern Colombian departments.⁷¹

Mordisco also convinced other former FARC commands, such as Miguel Botache Santillana, alias “Gentil Duarte,” to join his project.⁷² In the years following its creation, the EMC has significantly expanded throughout Colombia and into neighboring Venezuela.

In 2019, Luciano Marin Arango, alias “Ivan Marquez,” the former FARC’s second-in-command, announced the creation of the Second Marquetalia, another group composed of former FARC fighters, which also proclaimed itself the successor to the guerrilla project. The EMC labeled their fellow dissidents as traitors and they became enemies. The rivalry between both groups of ex-FARC was evident in the border territory between Apure, Venezuela, and Arauca, Colombia.

The disputes between the two structures, plus pressure from the security forces in Colombia and Venezuela, also resulted in the death of several of the EMC’s most important commanders, among them Gentil Duarte.⁷³

With the arrival of Gustavo Petro to the presidency in 2022, the EMC began peace negotiations with the government in the context of its “Total Peace” policy. However, the negotiation process was convulsive. At the end of 2023, the Colombian government made a military advance in the department of Cauca, the EMC’s stronghold. This led to divisions within the criminal group, between those who wanted to maintain talks with the government and those who wanted to confront the state militarily, among them Ivan

Mordisco. This led to a split within the group and the breakdown of the negotiations with the government and the faction led by Ivan Mordisco.⁷⁴

GEOGRAPHY

The EMC is present in 172 municipalities across 14 of Colombia’s 32 departments. Its traditional stronghold is in the Amazon region, including departments of Guaviare, Meta, Caquetá, Vaupés, and Guainía.⁷⁵

The group controls several strategic corridors crucial for drug trafficking and illegal mining. These include the border with Ecuador through Nariño and Putumayo, routes providing access to the Pacific Ocean through Cauca and Valle del Cauca, and the border with Venezuela through Casanare, Arauca, and Norte de Santander. Additionally, the EMC fights for dominance with other criminal groups over key mining areas in Antioquia and Cauca.

The EMC’s presence in Colombian departments bordering Venezuela has allowed it to extend territorial influence into Venezuela, particularly in the states of Zulia, Bolívar, and Amazonas. Its control over the border with Ecuador has also become increasingly significant, with alleged EMC members being captured on the Ecuadorian side of the border.⁷⁶

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The EMC’s primary criminal activity is drug trafficking,⁷⁷ with increasing influence in Colombian regions that are highly susceptible to drug trafficking, including Norte de Santander, Arauca, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Meta, Guaviare, and Amazonas.⁷⁸

71 InSight Crime, “[Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias ‘Iván Mordisco’](#),” 28 February 2024.

72 InSight Crime, “[Miguel Botache Santillana, alias ‘Gentil Duarte’](#),” 27 May 2022.

73 InSight Crime, “[Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia](#),” 14 June 2024.

74 Henry Shuldiner and Sergio Saffon, “[From Total to Partial Peace: Colombia’s Talks With Crime Groups Fragment](#),” InSight Crime, 3 May 2024.

75 InSight Crime, “[Central General Staff – Ex-FARC Mafia](#),” 14 June 2024.

76 Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “[Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador’s Criminal Chessboard](#),” InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

77 Sergio Saffon, “[In Cauca, Colombian Rebels Make War While Talking Peace](#),” InSight Crime, 11 October 2023.

78 Juliana Manjarrés and Chris Dalby, “[Ex-FARC Civil War in Putumayo Tests Colombia Government’s Resolve](#),” InSight Crime, 21 November 2022.

In addition to drug smuggling, the group is involved in illegal gold mining, extortion, kidnappings, and contraband.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The EMC has about 3,500 members organized into six military “blocs” or divisions, each operating in different regions of the country. Within these blocs, there are at least 26 smaller units and Fronts.⁷⁹ Fronts participate in various criminal economies based on location.

After the death of Gentil Duarte in 2022, the leadership of the EMC initially rested solely with Iván Mordisco. However, in April 2024, the group split into two factions. One faction, consisting of approximately 60% of the group’s combatants, remains under the leadership of Iván Mordisco. The other faction, comprising the remaining 40% of fighters, is led by Alexander Díaz Mendoza, alias “Calarcá”.⁸⁰

STATE RESPONSE

The government of President Gustavo Petro initiated peace negotiations with the EMC on March 13, 2023, following the signing of a bilateral ceasefire on January 1, 2023. However, the process has faced numerous controversies and setbacks.

Iván Mordisco’s faction withdrew from the negotiations after the government suspended the ceasefire in Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño—regions controlled by Jacobo Arenas Western Bloc—following several violent incidents. This faction has indicated that it will suspend participation in dialogues while the ceasefire remains partially suspended. In response, the government has intensified military actions against Iván Mordisco’s dissidents since its withdrawal.⁸¹

Conversely, the faction led by Calarcá has

79 Fundación CORE, “¿En que está el “EMC” actualmente?,” 25 April 2024.

80 Henry Shuldiner and Sergio Saffon, “From Total to Partial Peace: Colombia’s Talks With Crime Groups Fragment,” InSight Crime, 3 May 2024.

81 Ibid.

continued at the negotiating table and made progress in dialogue while maintaining its ceasefire agreement.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The EMC imposes strict codes of conduct and social control in the communities under its influence. This includes requiring residents to present identification, enforcing road checkpoints, restricting movement in certain areas, imposing curfews, and prohibiting common crimes such as robbery, rape, and domestic violence. It also imposes taxes or extortion fees on legal businesses operating in its territories.⁸²

Additionally, the EMC uses its criminal governance to enforce compliance through forced disappearances of those who refuse to pay extortion or resist its presence. It also intimidates or threatens social leaders and forcibly recruits new members, including minors.⁸³

The EMC has also been linked to a growing number of terror attacks against both civilians and armed forces in the past year, including using drones to drop explosives, car bombs, and an assassination attempt against the father of Colombian Vice President Francia Márquez.⁸⁴

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The EMC is a major supplier of coca base and cocaine in the región. It controls extensive coca cultivation areas, production zones, and cocaine laboratories. The group also manages key drug trafficking corridors and departure points within Colombia, positioning itself as a cocaine wholesaler and providing security for its transportation through its controlled areas.

82 Juan Camilo Jaramillo, “Colombia’s Ex-FARC Mafia Issues IDs to Enforce Criminal Governance,” InSight Crime, 8 April 2024.

83 Henry Shuldiner and Luisa Maria Acosta, “Colombian Armed Groups Continue Recruiting Children Amid Peace Talks,” InSight Crime, 14 November 2023.

84 Henry Shuldiner and Sara Garcia, “High-Level Attack Punctuates Security Crisis in Southwestern Colombia,” InSight Crime, 19 June 2024.










The EMC maintains alliances with other criminal actors, such as National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) in its fight against Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), depending on the region of the country. However, these alliances are not without conflict, as the EMC has also engaged in confrontations with these same groups in different areas of Colombia.

Internationally, the EMC is connected to drug trafficking syndicates and criminal organizations in neighboring countries, including the Familia do Norte, First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC), and Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV) in Brazil,⁸⁵ as well as local drug transport networks in Ecuador.⁸⁶

85 Juan Diego Cárdenas and Seth Robbins, “[Expanding Drug Trafficking on Peru’s Borders With Colombia and Brazil](#),” InSight Crime, 8 August 2023.

86 Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “[Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador’s Criminal Chessboard](#),” InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

CONQUERING SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF THE SIERRA NEVADA (AUTODEFENSAS CONQUISTADORES DE LA SIERRA NEVADA- ACSN)

December 2024	<div><div>ACS</div><div></div></div> <div>CONQUERING SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF THE SIERRA NEVADA (AUTODEFENSAS CONQUISTADORES DE LA SIERRA NEVADA - ACSN)</div>		<div>ORIGIN<div></div>Colombia</div> <div>LEADER (S)<div></div>Fredy Castillo Carrillo alias "Pinocho"</div>
	<div>IMPACT</div> <div>Low</div>	<div>APPROXIMATE SIZE</div> <div>600 members</div>	<div></div>
	<div>CRIMINAL ECONOMIES</div> <div><div> Extortion</div><div> Drug trafficking</div></div>		
<div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div>			

The Conquering Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada (Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada – ACSN), also known as the Pachencas, is an armed group with presence in the north of Colombia. Since 2019 they have been in an intense fight with the Gaintanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC) for the control of Santa Marta’s port, one of the most important departure points for cocaine in northern Colombia.

HISTORY

The group emerged in 2007 following the demobilization of paramilitary forces led by Hernán Giraldo on Colombia's Caribbean coast. In 2008, Giraldo was extradited to the United States for drug trafficking (he had been a major drug trafficker, sending annual shipments worth anything up to \$1.2 billion to the United States and Europe).⁸⁷

Although extradited, he left behind an extensive network of sons, brothers, and nephews, which continued to run criminal operations under the banner of the Oficina del Caribe, also known as the GiralDOS.

In 2012, the group entered into a dispute over drug trafficking territories with the AGC. Skirmishes broke out between the Gaitanistas and the Giraldo clan, leading to more than 150 deaths in just a few months.⁸⁸

The conflict began to die down after a former AGC lieutenant, Jesús María Aguirre Gallego, alias "Chucho Mercancía" or "Chucho Pachencia," assumed leadership of the Giraldo clan in 2013. Under Chucho Mercancía, the group assumed the name the Pachencas, and began to work alongside the AGC to move drugs from the northern part of the country.

Despite a calm that lasted for several years, by the end of the decade, the Pachencas' position was weakened by internal divisions and blows by public security forces. Chucho Mercancía was killed by security forces in 2019, and Hernán Giraldo's nephew, Deimer Patiño Giraldo, alias "80," assumed leadership of the group. The new leadership led to a new name: the Conquering Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada and simultaneously, it began to dispute key drug trafficking areas in the Caribbean with the AGC.⁸⁹

It has since consolidated power in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and now controls one of the region's key drug trafficking corridors. Despite engaging in peace talks with the Colombian government since August 2024, the group continues to pursue criminal activities.

⁸⁷ Sara García and Laura Ávila, "A Desperate Effort to Rebuild Lives," InSight Crime, 13 April 2022.

⁸⁸ James Bargent "Arrest May Shake Up Gaitanistas War in Colombia's Caribbean," 27 February 2013

⁸⁹ InSight Crime, "The Pachencas," 10 May 2022

GEOGRAPHY

The ACSN operates primarily in three Colombian departments: Cesar, Guajira, and Magdalena. It controls much of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a mountain range on Colombia's Caribbean coast, which serves as a vital transportation corridor connecting the Pacific Ocean with key coca cultivation areas, such as Catatumbo near the Venezuelan border.

These rugged mountains have historically been an epicentre of drug trafficking in Colombia, hosting some of the country's earliest marijuana and coca plantations. This long-standing association with drug production has established the region as a crucial trafficking hub in the north. Additionally, the presence of rich gold deposits and other valuable minerals has made the area a target for illegal mining operations.⁹⁰

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The ACSN generates its primary revenue through drug trafficking, focusing mainly on the transportation of cocaine. The group controls coca production zones and manages the trafficking of cocaine to ports along the Caribbean coast, overseeing the departure of these shipments to international markets.

Extortion represents the group's second major source of income. The ACSN imposes "war taxes" on local businesses, including tourist enterprises such as hotels, tour guides, and other establishments in the Santa Marta region.⁹¹

In recent years, the ACSN has also become increasingly involved in land grabbing and the illegal sale of real estate. For example, members of the group forcibly seized approximately 10 acres of land in a rural area of Santa Marta, expelled the farmers, coerced the landowners into signing over the deeds, and claimed ownership. Several similar incidents have been reported by residents, highlighting the group's diversifying criminal portfolio.⁹²

⁹⁰ InSight Crime, "The Pachencas," 10 May 2022

⁹¹ Karen Ortiz H, "Así operan los grupos paramilitares en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta," Caracol Radio, 31 March 2023.

⁹² Cambio Colombia, "El miedo se toma Santa Marta: Conquistadores de la Sierra están despojando tierras," 9 June 2024.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The ACSN comprises approximately 600 members and operates with a hierarchical leadership structure.⁹³

In recent years, the group has been led by three brothers: Danilo Castillo Carrillo, alias “El Menor,” Carmen Evelio Castillo, alias “La Muñeca,” and Fredy Castillo Carrillo, alias “Pinocho.” El Menor and La Muñeca have been arrested by authorities. Cesar Gustavo Becerra, alias “Camilo,” who previously served as the group’s spokesperson and a promoter of peace talks, was also arrested in early 2024.⁹⁴ According to Colombian authorities, Pinocho assumed the leadership of the group.⁹⁵

STATE RESPONSE

The Colombian government has made significant strides in capturing and arresting ACSN leaders. Despite these efforts, the group has demonstrated considerable resilience and remains the dominant criminal actor in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta nearly 20 years after its emergence.

In late 2022, the ACSN sought inclusion in Colombian President Gustavo Petro’s flagship initiative, “Total Peace,” which aims to engage with any armed groups willing to negotiate with the government. The ACSN agreed to a six-month bilateral ceasefire, beginning in January 2023, which included other criminal groups in Colombia.

However, negotiations did not progress beyond preliminary informal talks, and when the ceasefire agreement expired in June 2023, the government chose not to renew it despite appeals from the ACSN. While the group publicly called for peace, it continued its violent conflict with the AGC. In August 2024, the government announced the creation of

a “Socio-Legal Dialogue Space,” marking the start of an exploratory phase of peace negotiations with the ACSN.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The ACSN assumes a quasi-police role in many communities it controls, leading to lower crime rates and relatively high social acceptance in areas it dominates. Its extortion fees and protection rackets targeting tourist businesses in the region also ensure the safety of tourists, with the group mostly refraining from interfering with those visiting Santa Marta’s beaches and mountains.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The ACSN controls crucial coca cultivation areas and is a major supplier of coca base, producer of cocaine, and drug wholesaler along Colombia’s northern coast. Its operations span the entire supply chain, from coca cultivation to cocaine production and distribution.

The group’s primary rival is the AGC, with which it has had a turbulent relationship. The AGC, was an essential ally of the ACSN until their alliance fractured in 2019. From 2013 to 2019, the ACSN managed drug shipments for the AGC in northern Colombia, a critical departure point for cocaine destined for Europe.

Following the collapse of their non-aggression pact, the ACSN denied the AGC access to the Sierra Nevada and the key routes leading to Colombia’s northern ports. In retaliation, the AGC has increasingly encroached upon the Sierra Nevada from La Guajira and northern Cesar, areas that border the mountain range.

⁹³ Santiago Rodríguez Álvarez, “[Cifras secretas del gobierno confirman que todos los grupos armados crecieron](#),” La Silla Vacía, 13 March 2024.

⁹⁴ Pares, “[La familia que controla a Los Pachenca, el grupo que pone a temblar al Magdalena](#),” 7 June 2024.

⁹⁵ Luciano Niño, “[Este es el narco más buscado en Colombia: será el jefe de Los Pachenca tras el arresto de sus hermanos](#),” Infobae, 5 June 2024.

FAMILIA MICHOACANA

	<h2>FAMILIA MICHOACANA</h2>		ORIGIN Mexico
	IMPACT High	APPROXIMATE SIZE Unknown	LEADER (S)
	<div><div>CRIMINAL ECONOMIES<ul style="list-style-type: none">ExtortionDrug traffickingKidnappingIllegal miningHuman smugglingMoney laundering</div><div></div><div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div><div><div>✓</div><div>✓</div><div>✗</div></div></div>		
December 2024	<p>The Familia Michoacana is a Mexican criminal group that has experienced the heights of power and near-extinction since its origins in the 1990s. After a period of decline, the group re-emerged in 2020 as the New Familia Michoacana, a coalition of various factions. This reformation allowed the group to consolidate in key areas for drug production and access to precursor chemicals, solidifying its position as one of Mexico's leading criminal groups.</p>		

HISTORY

The Familia Michoacana was born as a self-defense group and in the 1990s allied with the Zetas –at the time, the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel– to oust the Milenio Cartel, which until then dominated the territory, from Michoacán.⁹⁶

The Familia Michoacana learned military tactics from the Zetas, which they later used to drive them out of the territory. In 2006, five human heads were dumped on a dance floor in a bar in Uruapan, Michoacán, marking the beginning of the Familia Michoacana's war against its former ally.⁹⁷ It was then that the Familia Michoacana began to gain national and international notoriety.

In addition to its violent acts, the group was distinguished by its pseudo-religious ideology. Nazario Moreno, alias "El Chayo" or "El Mas Loco" –the organization's main leader– served as a kind of religious pastor, imposing a series of moral standards on its members. They were required to attend motivational talks and read a document known as the "family bible."⁹⁸

After expelling the Zetas from Michoacán, the group expanded to other states, such as Guerrero, Morelos, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Jalisco, and Mexico City. However, its decline began shortly after.

In December 2010, the death of El Chayo was announced. In January 2011, the criminal group signaled its intention to disband. Three months later, in March, Servando Gomez, alias "La Tuta," a senior member of the Familia Michoacana, revealed his departure from the group to create a splinter group called the Knights Templar.⁹⁹ Leadership of the Familia Michoacana then passed to Jose de Jesus Mendez, alias "El Chango," who engaged in conflict with the Knights Templar, but was captured in June 2011.¹⁰⁰ The government then declared the end of the Familia Michoacana.

⁹⁶ La Silla Rota, "[El renacer de 'La Familia Michoacana'](#)", 5 October 2020.

⁹⁷ El Universal, "[Cabezas humanas en un bar: el día que llegó el terror a Michoacán](#)", 6 September 2019.

⁹⁸ Alberto Nájara, "[Los estrictos valores de La Familia Michoacana](#)", BBC, 10 December 2010.

⁹⁹ Geoffrey Ramsey, "[Knights Templar Fill Familia's Shoes in Michoacán](#)", InSight Crime, 5 November 2012.

¹⁰⁰ InSight Crime, "[José Jesús Méndez Vargas, alias 'El Chango'](#)", 10 March 2017.

It was later revealed that El Chayo's death in 2010 had been staged and that he had been working with the Knights Templar until he was killed by Mexican marines in 2014.¹⁰¹

After six years of operating largely in the shadows, the Familia Michoacana resurfaced in 2020. This new group, however, retains few elements of its predecessor.

GEOGRAPHY

Currently, various factions of the Familia Michoacana are active in the Mexican states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Mexico, Hidalgo, and Morelos.¹⁰² In Guerrero, it is in open dispute with other local groups such as the Tlacos and the Tequileros for control of key areas for extortion and drug production.¹⁰³

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Familia Michoacana is heavily involved in drug trafficking, focusing primarily on the production and distribution of methamphetamine. Although it does not have a direct presence in the border zone with the United States, it engages in transnational trafficking through alliances with other groups.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the US government has accused some splinter factions of the Familia Michoacana of being involved in the flow of fentanyl.¹⁰⁵

Beyond drug trafficking, the group participates in other illegal economies such as extortion, illegal mining, kidnapping, human smuggling, and money laundering. Adita Hurtado Olascoaga, the sister of the group's current top leaders, has been investigated for allegedly laundering the criminal organization's assets.¹⁰⁶ Members of

¹⁰¹ InSight Crime, "[Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, alias 'El Chayo'](#)", 24 July 2019.

¹⁰² La Silla Rota, "[El renacer de 'La Familia Michoacana'](#)", 5 October 2020.

¹⁰³ Sara García and Daniela Valle, "[Criminal Violence Paralyzes Mexico's Southern State of Guerrero](#)", InSight Crime, 13 February 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Appleby, "[3 Takeaways From the Return of the Familia Michoacana](#)", InSight Crime, 6 January 2023.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of Treasury, "[Treasury Sanctions Illicit Fentanyl-Trafficking La Nueva Familia Michoacana and its Leaders](#)", 17 November 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Luis Carlos Sáinz, "[Atrocities of La Familia Michoacana: by misgovernment and collusion](#)", Zeta Tijuana, 15 January 2024.

the criminal organization also launder drug money through clothing businesses.¹⁰⁷

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The organization is led by brothers Johnny Hurtado Olascoaga, alias “El Fresa” and Jose Alfredo Hurtado Olascoaga, alias “El Pez”.¹⁰⁸ The present-day group retains little of the old Familia Michoacana. Instead, it consists of various factions that operate semi-independently, each with different areas of influence and activities.

STATE RESPONSE

The state’s response against the Familia Michoacana has focused on captures. While this strategy may have weakened the group in the 2010s, particularly after the emergence of the dissident Knights Templar and the reported death of its main leader, this appears less effective today. While members of the group have been captured, the leadership remains largely unaffected. They appear to operate with impunity, free to move around different municipalities and states. In April 2024, for example, it was reported that El Fresa, one of the group’s main leaders, attended a concert in the state of Mexico without intervention from the authorities.¹⁰⁹

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The group has a long history of using violence to exert control. In recent years, the use of drones to drop bombs on enemies has become popular among its ranks, a tactic that has significantly impacted the civilian population.¹¹⁰ Extortion is one of its main weapons for controlling the civilian population, but the group’s violent actions

have also directly affected communities. For example, in December 2023, a conflict between members of the Familia Michoacana and inhabitants of Texcapilla, in the state of Mexico, left 14 dead, including 10 members of the criminal group.¹¹¹

As part of territorial disputes with other criminal groups, it has committed massacres and disappearances.¹¹² The Familia Michoacana has ambushed members of the security forces, such as a 2021 confrontation where 13 police officers were killed.¹¹³

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

While historically the group has engaged in methamphetamine distribution with networks in European countries, including the Netherlands and Bulgaria, there are no recent indications that these links remain active. However, the group has sought to establish links with markets in Asia and Oceania.

107 U.S. Department of Treasury, “[Secretary Yellen Announces Sanctions Against Top Leaders of Mexico’s La Nueva Familia Michoacana Drug Cartel](#), New Fentanyl Advisory,” 20 June 2024.

108 U.S. Department of Treasury, “[Treasury Sanctions Illicit Fentanyl-Trafficking La Nueva Familia Michoacana and its Leaders](#),” 17 November 2022.

109 Milenio, “[Captan a ‘El Fresa’, líder de La Familia Michoacana, en evento musical de Edomex; autoridades investigan](#),” 17 April 2024.

110 Henry Shuldiner, “[Mexico Drone Attacks Spike After CJNG, Familia Michoacana Alliance](#),” InSight Crime, 22 May 2023.

111 El Universal, “[Extorsiones, 7 personas halladas, 14 muertos: recuento del enfrentamiento en Texcaltitlán](#),” 17 January 2024.

112 Pablo Ferri, “[Una nueva masacre en Guerrero deja al menos cinco muertos y apunta otra vez a La Familia Michoacana](#),” El País, 6 January 2024.

113 Max Radwin, “[Deadly Ambush of 13 Police Meets Little Government Response in Mexico](#),” InSight Crime, 24 March 2021.

FIRST CAPITAL COMMAND (PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL – PCC)

		FIRST CAPITAL COMMAND (PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL – PCC)		ORIGIN  Brazil
December 2024	IMPACT High	APPROXIMATE SIZE 30,000 members		 Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, alias “Marcola”
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES <div><div> Extortion</div><div> Bank robberies</div><div> Drug trafficking</div><div> Prison robberies</div><div> Arms trafficking</div><div> Illegal mining</div></div>			
	<div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div>			
<p><i>The First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC), now the largest and best-organized criminal organization in Brazil, is believed to have a presence in every Brazilian state and operations extending internationally to neighboring South American nations in addition to Europe and Turkey.</i></p>				

HISTORY

The PCC was formed in the 1990s by prisoners as self-protection groups in Brazil's brutal prison system. The PCC arose in São Paulo and has forged a bloody path to dominance throughout the country.

By 2001, the group had coordinated the biggest prison rebellion in history, simultaneously shutting down 29 facilities across São Paulo state. Over the next decade, the PCC grew in strength and sophistication, aided by a virtually unimpeded ability to conduct business in Brazil's under-resourced prisons as well as a reported truce with the São Paulo police.

GEOGRAPHY

The PCC is based in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous and economically important state, but also dominates criminal markets in at least six Brazilian states, including Paraná, Ceará, Mato Grosso do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul, and Roraima. Together, these states have a combined population of about 76 million people. The PCC also maintains smaller, less dominant footholds in Rondônia, Rio Grande do Norte, Acre, and Alagoas.¹¹⁴

Since 2015, the PCC has expanded its activities internationally, developing operations in nearly every country in South America and establishing ties with European criminal groups. It has also shored up support in the northern territories along Brazil's coast, home to important drug trafficking routes and departure points.

Neighboring Paraguay has also become an important stronghold for the Brazilian organization, vital for moving and sourcing drugs, with strong to intermittent presence in 12 of Paraguay's departments (equivalent of states) and many of its prisons.¹¹⁵

But the PCC's reach extends far beyond the southern cone of South America. Brazilian

authorities in 2020 identified nearly 400 members in 16 foreign jurisdictions in the Americas and Europe, including the US, Suriname, Argentina, Guyana, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, England, Portugal, Holland, and France.¹¹⁶

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The PCC maintains a diverse criminal portfolio, ranging from orchestrating prison robberies and riots in penitentiaries under its control to engaging in transnational drug trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal mining, and large-scale heists and robberies outside prison walls.¹¹⁷

Brazil serves as a key transit route for cocaine from other South American countries destined mainly for European markets. Additionally, the country has a thriving domestic drug market, positioning criminal groups like the PCC as importers, exporters, and controllers of street-level sales. It is estimated that up to 80 percent of the PCC's income comes from drug trafficking.¹¹⁸

The PCC's strategic presence along the Paraguayan border, particularly in the states of Mato Grosso do Sul and Paraná, has allowed it to dominate Brazil's principal cocaine corridor. The organization also controls the flow of drugs through the Port of Santos, responsible for up to 80 percent of the cocaine seized en route from Brazil to Europe.¹¹⁹

In addition to controlling the sale of marijuana, cocaine, and cocaine derivatives in Brazil's major cities, the PCC also operates as a wholesaler for other criminal organizations. The group is involved in the trafficking of counterfeit cigarettes and other contraband goods. The PCC is heavily engaged in arms trafficking, receiving weapons from sources in Paraguay and Venezuela.

¹¹⁴ InSight Crime, "[The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond](#)," December 2020.

¹¹⁵ Steven Dudley and Matt Taylor, "[While Taking Paraguay-Brazil Border, PCC Tries to Control Its Own](#)," InSight Crime, December 2020.

¹¹⁶ InSight Crime, "[The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond](#)," December 2020.

¹¹⁷ Beatriz Vicent Fernández, "[Despite Rumors of a Split, PCC Remains United](#)," InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

¹¹⁸ InSight Crime, "[The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond](#)," December 2020.

¹¹⁹ Ibid

Illegal mining in the Amazon region has also been profitable for the group. The PCC has provided heavy machinery and weaponry to miners in the Yanomami Indigenous reserve in the northern state of Roraima, acted as security at certain sites, and helped to transport extracted gold out of the Amazon. The PCC also runs prostitution and drug trafficking rings on Yanomami land.¹²⁰

The PCC's money laundering operations have been relatively low-tech until recently, with profits typically invested in fixed assets, such as homes, cars, and boats, rather than reinvested into criminal activities directly.¹²¹

There is indication, however, that the PCC is engaging in more sophisticated money laundering through layered use of financial institutions or with transactions extending beyond Brazil to neighboring countries. For example, in August 2024, Brazilian authorities uncovered a PCC network that laundered proceeds from drug trafficking in São Paulo through a conglomerate of companies and bank exchanges in Brazil and Uruguay.¹²² The group has also begun experimenting with money laundering through cryptocurrencies in recent years.¹²³

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The PCC has an estimated 30,000 members, primarily concentrated in São Paulo.¹²⁴ It operates through a decentralized structure with strong, independent local leadership, functioning more like a franchise system than a traditional vertical hierarchy. Members, many of whom are recruited in the country's prisons, form local groups that operate both inside and outside the prison system. These members pay fees that fund legal representation, bribes to

corrupt police, and the purchase of weapons and drugs, all under the protection of the group's leadership.¹²⁵

Despite the decentralized structure, all cells report to a central committee of leaders, with Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, alias "Marcola," holding the highest position from his cell in the Papuda Penitentiary Complex in Brasília.¹²⁶

One of the PCC's strengths is the strong sense of unity among its members and a strict code of conduct that takes priority over any dissent or individual desires.¹²⁷ There is also a rising number of women in the ranks. The PCC increasingly recruits women from female prisons in Brazil, as well as those with a close relationship with existing members. Although the numbers are unclear, women could comprise up to 10 percent of all baptized members—or anywhere between 1,000 and 3,000—along with a much larger number of female "sympathizers" and allies.¹²⁸

STATE RESPONSE

Although the PCC has targeted judges and police officers with assassinations, the organization generally avoids confrontations with law enforcement in its daily operations.

The senior leadership has been destabilized by the continuous operations against the PCC, ongoing conflicts with rival organizations, and the transfer of top leaders to federal penitentiaries from local prisons that they control. Despite these pressures, the PCC's amorphous organizational structure appears to provide it with a degree of resilience, allowing it to withstand and adapt to these challenges.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Although the PCC is known for its brutal violence against rival groups, once it establishes control over a prison or territory, it typically works

¹²⁰ Sean Doherty and Chris Dalby, "Brazil's PCC Complicates Fight Against Illegal Mining in Amazon," InSight Crime, 26 May 2023.

¹²¹ InSight Crime, "The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond," December 2020.

¹²² Aline Ribeiro, "Polícia mira sistema bancário do PCC que lava dinheiro da Cracolândia," O Globo, 23 August 2024.

¹²³ Marina Cavallari, "Cryptocurrency Money Laundering Is on the Rise in Brazil," InSight Crime, 19 August 2024.

¹²⁴ InSight Crime, "The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond," December 2020.

¹²⁵ Beatriz Vicent Fernández, "Despite Rumors of a Split, PCC Remains United," InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

¹²⁶ InSight Crime, "Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, alias 'Marcola,'" 18 July 2022.

¹²⁷ Beatriz Vicent Fernández, "Despite Rumors of a Split, PCC Remains United," InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

¹²⁸ InSight Crime, "The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond," December 2020.

to impose order and reduce overall criminal violence.

The PCC's role as a regulator of crime, including its use of internal tribunals (criminal courts) to enforce its rules, has contributed to a reduction in the epidemic levels of violence in Brazil's south and southeast regions.

The group has also been linked to supposed bid-rigging in favor of companies connected to the PCC in São Paulo. These include both front companies or legitimate businesses controlled by the organization, which have secured as much as \$38 million in government contracts over the last five years, authorities said.¹²⁹

Inside and outside prisons, the PCC enforces a strict code of conduct against rapists and pedophiles, garnering support from parts of the population who feel neglected by inadequate police services.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The PCC functions as both a transporter and distributor of cocaine and marijuana, sourcing these drugs from Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia to supply both local consumption and export markets. The PCC exports through ports and airports, often routing shipments to the Caribbean, European markets, and occasionally via Africa.¹³⁰

The group has established international alliances with several criminal organizations, including the 'Ndrangheta in Italy, Serbian organized crime groups, Colombian factions such as the Oficina de Envigado and FARC dissident groups, as well as the Gulf Cartel in Mexico.

¹²⁹ Steven Dudley, "[Brazil's PCC Wades into Municipal Contracts Game](#)," InSight Crime, 18 April 2024.

¹³⁰ InSight Crime, "[The Rise of the PCC: How South America's Most Powerful Prison Gang is Spreading in Brazil and Beyond](#)," December 2020.

FIRST URUGUAYAN CARTEL



FIRST URUGUAYAN CARTEL

ORIGIN 
Uruguay

LEADER (S)



Sebastián Marset

IMPACT

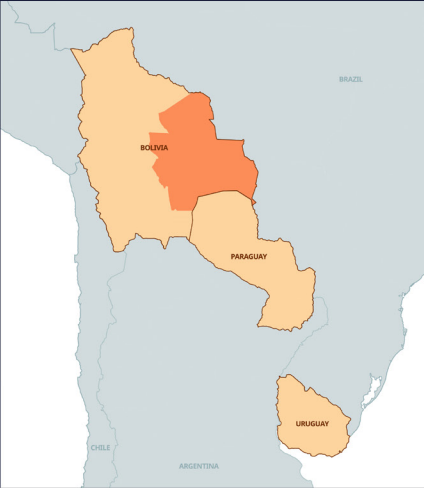
Low

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Drug trafficking
- Money laundering



December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



On the run, with his network crumbling and authorities closing in, Sebastián Marset's career as an international drug trafficker appears to be winding down. But only a couple of years ago, he was at the helm of an international cocaine trafficking scheme, coordinating multi-ton shipments from Bolivia to Europe.

HISTORY

Marset grew up in the Piedras Blancas neighborhood of Uruguay's capital, Montevideo. He began selling drugs in nightclubs, eventually moving up to international marijuana trafficking.¹³¹ In 2012, he received a 450-kilogram shipment of marijuana from Paraguay, flown by Juan Domingo Viveros Cartes, the uncle of Paraguay's ex-president, Horacio Cartes. In 2013, Marset was arrested for receiving 137 kilograms and sentenced to five years in prison.¹³²

While inside, Marset established connections with organized crime groups that would help accelerate his criminal career on the outside, admitting in an interview that "one learns a lot in prison."¹³³ After his release in 2018, Marset was suspected of murdering a childhood friend in Uruguay, but the case was closed due to lack of evidence. In 2019, he relocated to Paraguay, where he began building his network, playing soccer in a second-tier club he used to launder money, and getting close with the politically connected Insfrán family, with whom he would build his trafficking and money laundering network.

It was around this time that Marset also began building connections in Bolivia to buy cocaine at source. Small planes from the land-locked nation would fly the drug into Paraguay, where it could be packaged in shipping containers and sent downriver to Atlantic ports, and eventually Europe.¹³⁴

By 2021, Marset began traveling, allegedly seeking new ways to launder money through sports, such as a soccer team in Greece and a mixed martial arts league in Dubai, when he was arrested for traveling on a forged passport.¹³⁵ Marset had become a known trafficker to various governments by this

point, with US and Paraguayan authorities inquiring about his detention, while people within the Uruguayan government warned he was a "serious trafficker." Yet, Uruguay delivered Marset a new passport; he was released and disappeared.¹³⁶

Information about Marset's whereabouts was scarce until July 2023, when authorities in Santa Fe, Bolivia, raided his mansion. Marset had relocated to the Andean nation and, as he had in Paraguay, was playing in a second-tier soccer team. But Marset and his family were nowhere to be found. He had loaded his family into an SUV and narrowly escaped before police arrived. He later appeared in a video on social media, expressing gratitude to the head of Bolivia's special narcotics unit, whom Marset claimed tipped him off about the operation.¹³⁷

Once again, Marset vanished. While his current whereabouts are unknown, it appears his family has relocated to Dubai. Paperwork was filed for his children to attend school there, and his partner, Gianina García Troche, flew from Dubai to Spain, where she was arrested and is awaiting extradition to Paraguay or Bolivia.¹³⁸

GEOGRAPHY

The main centers of Marset's operation have been Asunción, Paraguay, and Santa Fe, Bolivia.¹³⁹ Despite this, Marset and his clan have never controlled territory in the way organized criminal groups typically do. Marset never ran a neighborhood or even a prison block. Instead, his influence stemmed from the ability to build and manage an international network. Marset's group is believed to have coordinated payments and logistics between cocaine producers in Bolivia, and major trafficking groups in Eastern South America and Europe that would ship and sell the cocaine.

¹³¹ Kevin Sieff, "[A double life: The cocaine kingpin who hid as a professional soccer player](#)," The Washington Post, 18 July 2024.

¹³² Chris Dalby, "[Behind the Manhunt for Sebastián Marset, Founder of the First Uruguayan Cartel](#)," InSight Crime, 31 August 2022.

¹³³ Santo y Seña, "[Santo y Seña - Informe: Cara a cara con Sebastián Marset](#)," Canal 4, 27 November 2024.

¹³⁴ Christopher Newton, "[The Networks of Uruguay's Most-Wanted Drug Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2023.

¹³⁵ Kevin Sieff, "[A double life: The cocaine kingpin who hid as a professional soccer player](#)," The Washington Post, 18 July 2024; Kevin Sieff, "[As a trafficker pursued dreams of soccer glory, investigators closed in](#)," The Washington Post, 18 July 2024.

¹³⁶ Chris Dalby, "[Behind the Manhunt for Sebastián Marset, Founder of the First Uruguayan Cartel](#)," InSight Crime, 31 August 2022; InSight Crime, "[Sebastián Marset](#)," 8 November 2023.

¹³⁷ Chris Dalby, "[Behind the Manhunt for Sebastián Marset, Founder of the First Uruguayan Cartel](#)," InSight Crime, 31 August 2022.

¹³⁸ Christopher Newton, "[Marset's Inner Circle Crumbles as the Elusive Uruguayan Trafficker Evades Capture](#)," InSight Crime, 12 August 2024.

¹³⁹ Christopher Newton and Chris Dalby, "[Uruguay's Top Trafficker Disappears Yet Again in Bolivia](#)," InSight Crime, 31 July 2023.

He is also believed to have maintained a sophisticated money laundering operation consisting of luxury car shops, ranches, churches, and professional sports teams.¹⁴⁰

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The main economic focus of Marset's clan was cocaine trafficking, with laundering the illicit proceeds being a major and necessary element of the group's operation.¹⁴¹

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

At the center of the network is Marset himself, and Miguel Angel Insfrán Galeano, alias Tío Rico. While Marset oversaw much of the product side of the business, Tío Rico was more involved with the money and logistics, often relying on his connections in Paraguayan politics. The Insfráns have been connected to numerous former and current high-level politicians in Paraguay. Two former congressmen have been arrested, suspected of helping Insfrán and Marset launder money.

Marset kept a close-knit circle, using members of his family to make connections in the underworld and set up money laundering fronts. He also relied on others with criminal schemes in Paraguay and Bolivia to handle logistics, coordinate drug flights, and launder profits.¹⁴²

STATE RESPONSE

Paraguay's largest ever drug trafficking and money laundering investigation, Operation A Ultranza Py,¹⁴³ failed to capture Marset. It did, however, manage to dismantle much of his network. Many of the clan's key players, from Tío Rico, to the mother of Marset's children, García Troche, have been arrested. Marset is

wanted in both Paraguay and Bolivia for drug trafficking and money laundering.¹⁴⁴

Uruguay's Minister of the Interior, Nicolás Martinelli, claimed that authorities became aware of Marset's whereabouts after the trafficker began making mistakes. Martinelli stated that an arrest is likely imminent, but that cooperation with local authorities would be necessary.¹⁴⁵

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Since Marset's clan never controlled significant territory,¹⁴⁶ there is no evidence that they engaged in any criminal governance.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Marset played a key role in connecting cocaine producers in Bolivia to groups that trafficked the drug to Europe. Although it remains unclear exactly which groups were involved in the network, there are indications that Marset worked with Brazil's First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC), and Italy's 'Ndrangheta.¹⁴⁷

140 Christopher Newton, "[The Networks of Uruguay's Most-Wanted Drug Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2023.

141 InSight Crime, "[Sebastián Marset](#)," 8 November 2023.

142 Christopher Newton, "[The Networks of Uruguay's Most-Wanted Drug Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2023; Christopher Newton, "[Marset's Inner Circle Crumbles as the Elusive Uruguayan Trafficker Evades Capture](#)," InSight Crime, 12 August 2024.

143 Cat Rainsford and Sergio Saffon, "[Paraguay's Narco-Politics Exposed By Colossal Anti-Drug Operation](#)," 7 March 2022.

144 Christopher Newton, "[Marset's Inner Circle Crumbles as the Elusive Uruguayan Trafficker Evades Capture](#)," InSight Crime, 12 August 2024.

145 Montevideo Portal, "[Martinelli dijo que tiene 'certezas' sobre dónde está prófugo el narco Sebastián Marset](#)," 1 August 2024.

146 Christopher Newton, "[The Networks of Uruguay's Most-Wanted Drug Trafficker](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2023.

147 InSight Crime, "[Sebastián Marset](#)," 8 November 2023.

GAITANIST SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF COLOMBIA (AUTODEFENSAS GAITANISTAS DE COLOMBIA – AGC)



GAITANIST SELF-DEFENSE FORCES OF COLOMBIA (AUTODEFENSAS GAITANISTAS DE COLOMBIA – AGC)

ORIGIN


Colombia

LEADER (S)










IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

7,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Extortion
-  Migrant smuggling
-  Micro trafficking
-  Drug trafficking
-  Loan sharking
-  Illegal mining
-  Sexual exploitation
-  Contraband
-  Money laundering



Jobanis de Jesús Ávila
alias "Chiquito Malo"

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia) is Colombia’s most important criminal group today. It has survived the various transformations of criminality in Colombia since the days of the Medellin Cartel, not only adapting but flourishing. Today, the AGC operates in a range of transnational criminal economies, such as drug trafficking, illegal mining, and migrant smuggling, among others.

HISTORY

The AGC emerged in 2006, after the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), an umbrella organization uniting various regional paramilitary groups. Some of the AUC's top commanders, such as Vicente Castaño, chose to return to arms and reclaimed strategic locations and routes in northern Colombia once controlled by the AUC. This led to the recycling of national and international criminal alliances that were key to the group's rapid rise on Colombia's criminal chessboard.

GEOGRAPHY

The AGC's stronghold is the Urabá region, between the northwestern departments of Antioquia and Chocó and the department of Córdoba. However, the group's presence extends to other territories in the north of the country, mainly Magdalena, Sucre, Bolívar, and La Guajira. Its presence in these areas is key, as they are home to drug cultivation zones, routes, and ports of departure for the Caribbean, Central America, and Europe.

The group has a strong presence in the department of Chocó, mainly in the north, which has been important to its involvement in migrant smuggling through the Darien gap, a treacherous stretch of about 160 kilometers that joins Colombia and Panama. It also has a presence in some border areas with Venezuela and the southwest of the country, although it is not dominant.

The AGC does not have a territorial presence beyond Colombia. However, in the past, it has sent emissaries to different countries, including Spain, mainly to facilitate drug trafficking.¹⁴⁸

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

AGC participates actively in drug trafficking, illicit mining, extortion, loan sharking, human smuggling, and retail distribution of drugs. It uses several strategies to launder money,

148 Salud Hernandez Mora, "[Aldo, el colombiano enviado al sur de España para la 'gran alianza' de las drogas](#)," El Mundo, 22 May 2018.

for example, through involvement in different industries such as Colombia's entertainment sector,¹⁴⁹ as well as real estate and cattle, among others. In territories under its control, sexual exploitation of women is also common.¹⁵⁰

Women close to the group's leadership have played important economic roles, mainly in money laundering but also in drug trafficking. The most well-known case is that of Nini Johana Úsuga David, sister of Dairo Antonio Úsuga David, alias "Otoniel," leader of the AGC until his capture in October 2021. Nini Johana played a key financial role in managing the resources of the organization's leadership. She was captured three times and finally extradited to the United States in 2022, where she made a plea agreement with authorities and was released in 2023.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The group is now led by Jobanis de Jesús Ávila Villadiego, alias "Chiquito Malo," who took command after Otoniel's capture.¹⁵¹ Below "Chiquito Malo" there is a board of directors composed of five commanders with a presence in strategic territories for the group, such as Antioquia, Chocó, and Córdoba. With the arrival of Chiquito Malo, the group's organization has shifted from a hierarchical model to more of a horizontal structure. This board of directors has become more relevant as a result.¹⁵²

According to most recent estimates by Colombian authorities, the AGC has 7,062 members, of which 2,499 are part of the armed structure, and 4,563 are integrated into its support networks or franchises.¹⁵³ Women and children are recruited to the AGC's as informants and watchers.¹⁵⁴

149 Sara García, "[Colombian Criminals Use Music Industry to Launder Money](#)," InSight Crime, 22 February 2024.

150 International Crisis Group, "[The Unsolved Crime in 'Total Peace': Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas](#)," 19 March 2024.

151 InSight Crime, "[Jobanis de Jesús Ávila Villadiego, alias 'Chiquito Malo'](#)," 15 November 2023.

152 Cambio Colombia, "[Los cambios en la cúpula del Clan del Golfo](#)," 28 March 2023.

153 Jesús Antonio Blanquicet, "[La ficha de Carlos Castaño que representa al 'clan del Golfo' en los diálogos con el Gobierno](#)," El Tiempo, 9 August 2024.

154 International Crisis Group, "[The Unsolved Crime in 'Total Peace': Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas](#)," 19 March 2024.

STATE RESPONSE

The most important strategy developed against the group was Operation Agamemnon, launched in 2015. Agamemnon, which brought together members of the army and the police, focused on weakening the structure by capturing key leaders and disrupting its financial chain. Agamemnon's main achievement was the arrest of alias "Otoniel," but the operation also dealt important blows to senior members of the armed structure and relevant family networks. Between 2015 and 2021, 3,224 members of the group were captured and 147 killed.¹⁵⁵

In early 2024, the Colombian government announced it would resume this strategy against AGC, after months of tension following the breakdown of a ceasefire between the group and the government. The ceasefire collapsed in March 2023, after a mining strike imposed by the AGC in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia. This occurred within the framework of President Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" strategy, which aims to negotiate with the country's main illegal groups. In August 2024, the Colombian government announced it would reopen negotiations with the AGC.¹⁵⁶

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

In areas where the AGC is present but not dominant, the use of violence is greater, mainly through threats, selective assassinations, forced displacements, confinement, and planting of antipersonnel mines, among other tactics. In regions under the group's control, social norms and rules of conduct are established and violence rates tend to be lower.

Women and members of the LGBTQI community suffer from differential violence. Besides using sexual exploitation as a criminal economy, the AGC has used sexual abuse of girls and women to exert control over territories. The LGBTQI community has

faced threats by the criminal group,¹⁵⁷ with some cases ending in assassinations, such as the case of Dania Polo in the department of Bolívar.¹⁵⁸

In September 2024, AGC factions in Quibdó, Chocó, circulated a list naming at least 27 women, accusing them of having links to enemy groups. They threatened to kill them if they did not leave the municipality.¹⁵⁹

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The AGC is the main driver of drug trafficking in northern Colombia. Its dominant influence in key locations for the cultivation, production, transit, and international dispatch of cocaine has given it a strategic position on the country's criminal chessboard. Its dominant position in most of the country's northern departments has instilled confidence in international cocaine buyers, resulting in stable coca and cocaine prices in its areas of influence.

The AGC maintains important international drug trafficking allies, including Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, Italian mafias such as the 'Ndrangheta, and Albanian mafias. In August 2024, an Albanian national in possession of several firearms was captured in an operation against the assets of an important AGC member.¹⁶⁰ There have also been connections with Dutch criminal networks. In 2020, Saïd Razzouki, a close associate of one of Europe's most notorious drug dealers, Ridouan Taghi, and allegedly a liaison between Taghi's organization and the AGC, was captured in Sabaneta, Antioquia.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Nelson Ricardo Matta, "Operación Agamenón recargada: va por los duros del Clan del Golfo," 25 February 2024.

¹⁵⁶ Henry Shuldiner and Lara Loaiza, "Colombia Government Announces Peace Dialogue With AGC," InSight Crime, 7 August 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Daniela Díaz, "Los líderes emberá LGBTI que resisten a las terapias de conversión y a las amenazas de los paramilitares," El País, 29 June 2024.

¹⁵⁸ El Colombiano, "Clan del Golfo estaría detrás de asesinato de una líder LGBTI en Bolívar: Defensoría," 14 May 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Alicia Florez and Lara Loaiza, "Violence Against Women Is Being Used as a Weapon of War in Colombia. Again," InSight Crime, 9 October 2024.

¹⁶⁰ El Espectador, "Desalojan bienes que serían de alias 'Falcón', narcotraficante del Clan del Golfo," 14 August 2024.

¹⁶¹ Mateo Isaza, "Capturan en Sabaneta a uno de los más buscados en Holanda," El Colombiano, 7 February 2020.

GULF CARTEL (CARTEL DEL GOLFO – CDG)

	<h1>THE GULF CARTEL (CARTEL DEL GOLFO – CDG)</h1>			ORIGIN  Mexico
				LEADER (S)  No single identifiable leader
	December 2024	IMPACT Medium	APPROXIMATE SIZE Unknown	
CRIMINAL ECONOMIES  Drug trafficking  Oil theft  Migrant smuggling  Arms trafficking  Money laundering				
 WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS 		 STATE PENETRATION 	 CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE 	
<p><i>The Gulf Cartel (Cartel del Golfo – CDG) is one of Mexico's oldest criminal organizations. Once regarded as the country's most powerful underworld entity, the CDG's influence has waned in recent years due to arrests, internal fragmentation and territorial losses. Today, the criminal organization operates through smaller factions, including the Metros and Scorpions, which are active in the US-Mexico border cities of Matamoros and Reynosa, and profit from smuggling drugs, arms, and migrants, as well as extorting illicit and licit businesses.</i></p>				

HISTORY

The Gulf Cartel, originally known as the Matamoros Cartel, was founded in the 1930s and initially focused on smuggling alcohol into the United States during the Prohibition era. When Prohibition ended, the criminal group diversified its activities into gambling, prostitution, car theft, and other illegal enterprises before shifting its focus to drug trafficking by the 1980s.

In the 1980s, Juan García Abrego took control of the organization from his uncle and transformed a small-time operation into a major drug trafficking powerhouse by brokering a deal with Colombia's Cali Cartel. The agreement put the CDG in charge of transporting large quantities of cocaine across the Mexican border into the United States, sharing up to 50% of the profits in exchange for assuming significant risk.

After García Abrego's capture in 1996, the group faced a period of instability, with various leaders being arrested or assassinated. However, in 1999, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, one of Mexico's most famous criminals, consolidated power and hired former Mexican Special Forces soldiers to create Los Zetas, a ruthless enforcement wing. Initially, Los Zetas gave the CDG a massive military advantage due to their combat experience.¹⁶²

But after Cárdenas' arrest in 2003 and extradition in 2007, the Zetas grew larger and more powerful than their parent group, the Gulf Cartel. Under the leadership of Heriberto Lazcano, alias "El Lazca," or "Z3," about 300 Zetas members broke away and formed their own independent criminal network.¹⁶³

At its peak, the CDG had a presence across at least 11 Mexican states, including Oaxaca, Michoacán, and parts of the Yucatán Peninsula. However, leadership changes, arrests, and assassinations in the late 2000s led to the group's fragmentation. Today, the Gulf Cartel has splintered into various substructures and lost much of its former power.

¹⁶² InSight Crime, "[Gulf Cartel](#)," 20 August 2024.

¹⁶³ InSight Crime, "[Zetas](#)," 30 August 2024.

GEOGRAPHY

The CDG's traditional power base lies in the northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, specifically in the border cities of Matamoros and Reynosa. These cities are strategically vital, allowing the group to control the flow of arms, drugs, and migrants across the US-Mexico border.

Following the CDG's fragmentation, its influence has become more localized, with factions primarily concentrated in Tamaulipas. Some splinter groups still operate in parts of San Luis Potosí and Nuevo León, though their influence in these areas is limited compared to their stronghold in Tamaulipas.

Internationally, the group's activities are suspected to extend across the border into the United States, particularly in the metropolitan area around Brownsville and McAllen, Texas, which lie just across from Matamoros and Reynosa. However, the nature of the group's connections to criminal operations on the US side of the border is unclear.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The factions of the CDG exploit their control over border areas to engage in various criminal activities. Drug trafficking remains a core operation, with the group profiting from taxing the smuggling of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, and fentanyl. Migrant smuggling is another major revenue stream; the CDG uses its dominance over border regions to facilitate illegal crossings into the United States.

In cities like Matamoros, for example, the group profits from nearly all migrant crossings, either by directly collecting fees from the migrants or by extorting organizations that bring migrants through their area of control.¹⁶⁴

Kidnapping migrants is also common and has become a lucrative practice for certain factions of the CDG in recent years.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ InSight Crime, "[Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Fosters Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border](#)," June 2023.

¹⁶⁵ InSight Crime, "[Gulf Cartel](#)," 20 August 2024.

Extortion is widespread, especially targeting some legal businesses and all illicit operations conducted in the group's territories. It imposes "protection" fees on businesses, using violence and threats to enforce compliance.

The CDG's criminal activities are not confined to taxing drug trafficking and human smuggling. It also engages in arms trafficking, obtaining weapons from the United States, and supplying them to other criminal organizations. This arms trade supports much of their operational control and enforcement within their territories.

To launder the proceeds of their criminal activities, the group employs a range of money laundering techniques, from the simple to the sophisticated. These include physical cash transfers from the United States into CDG-controlled areas in Mexico.¹⁶⁶ They also utilize various methods such as casinos, horse racing, and legitimate businesses to integrate illicit funds into the financial system.¹⁶⁷

Oil theft was once a notable activity for the CDG. They siphoned fuel from pipelines and sold it on the black market. While this activity was significant in the past, its current extent remains unclear.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The CDG no longer exists as a unified organization and has split into many different factions, each vying for control over Tamaulipas' extensive borderlands. Some of the factions include the Scorpions, Cyclones, Rojos, Metros, and Panthers.

The current leadership structure is unclear due to the group's fragmentation, making leaders more difficult to discern. In January 2024, the Mexican Navy captured José Alberto García Vilano, alias "La Kena," who had been the leader of the Gulf Cartel's Scorpions faction in Matamoros. US and Mexican

authorities have identified Armando López Garcés, alias "El Pajarito," as La Kena's likely successor. The Scorpions remain the group's most formidable criminal faction, largely due to an alliance with the Cyclones.¹⁶⁸

STATE RESPONSE

Mexican and US authorities have made significant progress in arresting and, at times, killing leaders of the CDG since Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was apprehended in 2003, after a \$2 million bounty was placed on his head by the US State Department. However, these efforts have led to the fragmentation of the group, illustrating how the kingpin policy can sometimes increase violence rather than reduce it.

After Cárdenas' extradition to the United States in 2007, the CDG experienced a rapid turnover of leaders due to arrests, assassinations, and military operations. Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sánchez, alias "El Coss," was believed to be handling the group's day-to-day operations until his capture in September 2012. Antonio Cárdenas Guillén, alias "Tony Tormenta," Osiel's brother, managed the CDG's drug trafficking activities until he was killed in November 2010.

Following Tony Tormenta's death, contenders for leadership emerged, but many met violent ends. In January 2013, David Salgado, alias "El Metro 4," was murdered by unknown assassins. Mario Ramirez Treviño, alias "X20," briefly assumed control but was arrested in Tamaulipas in August 2013, following a Mexican army operation that captured 24 members of his group.

These arrests and killings left the CDG in a state of instability, with repeated power vacuums leading to increased fragmentation. Julián Manuel Loisa Salinas, alias "El Comandante Toro," took over leadership but was killed by federal security forces in April 2017. A month later, the Mexican army captured José Antonio Romo López, alias "La Hamburguesa," further destabilizing the group's leadership.

José Alfredo Cárdenas Martínez, alias "El Contador," Osiel Cárdenas Guillén's nephew,

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "[9 members of Gulf Cartel money laundering cell arrested, 1 fugitive remains](#)," 28 October 2013. Press release.

¹⁶⁷ Shivangi Sinha, "[Jose Trevino: Where is Los Zetas Cartel's Money Launderer Now?](#)," The Cinemaholic, July 31, 2024.

¹⁶⁸ InSight Crime, "[Gulf Cartel](#)," 20 August 2024.

was the last significant leader left. Although Mexican forces arrested him in 2018 and again in 2019, a judge released him both times, citing insufficient evidence. In 2022, he was arrested by the Mexican Marines and remains in custody.¹⁶⁹

These constant leadership changes contributed to the group's fragmentation. To maintain influence and cover territory, the CDG often formed alliances with local gangs. Under law enforcement pressure, leadership voids, and ongoing violence, these local groups grew more independent, often resulting in increased violence between factions that were once part of the unified CDG.¹⁷⁰

Despite the Mexican government's success in targeting CDG leaders, the power vacuum left behind in Reynosa—a crucial entry point into Texas for drugs and migrants—remains. This ongoing instability has allowed organized crime to thrive, ensuring that the CDG and its factions remain public enemy number one for US law enforcement on the US-Mexico border.¹⁷¹

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The CDG has infiltrated various industries and business sectors across different municipalities in Tamaulipas. It exerts control over transportation companies, often extorting and at times directly managing these businesses. The group also imposes informal regulations and taxes on both legitimate and illicit commerce, including street sales.

In addition to these activities, some factions have expanded into the agricultural sector, the construction industry, and automotive services, involving themselves in the rental and sale of machinery, as well as specialized equipment, further entrenching their presence in the local economy.¹⁷²

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The CDG plays a pivotal role as smugglers of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and synthetic drugs from Mexico into the United States, with local leaders overseeing key smuggling routes (plazas, as they are known in Spanish) across the border.¹⁷³ The group is not involved in the production of these drugs but buys them from other parts of Mexico at wholesale prices to sell to their own clients in the United States. The group also imposes taxes on drug traffickers using the border crossings it controls.

Beyond drug trafficking, the CDG is involved in taxing human smuggling operations and extorting migrants. They also engage in weapons trafficking, transporting firearms from the US into Mexico to supply their operations.¹⁷⁴

At its peak, the group maintained strong alliances with powerful international criminal organizations, most notably the Cali Cartel in Colombia. This relationship was instrumental in securing a steady supply of Colombian cocaine to smuggle into the United States.¹⁷⁵

However, the fragmentation of the CDG in recent years has led to a significant loss of these international connections and suppliers. As the group splintered into rival factions, its influence and reach diminished, shifting its focus in the global drug trade from importers to almost exclusively transporters.

¹⁶⁹ InSight Crime, "[Gulf Cartel](#)," 20 August 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Parker Asmann and Steven Dudley, "[Is Mexico's CJNG Pushing the Gulf Cartel From Tamaulipas?](#)," InSight Crime, 17 May 2023.

¹⁷¹ Steven Dudley and Parker Asmann, "[Gulf Cartel Still 'Public Enemy No. 1' on US-Mexico Border: Homeland Security](#)," InSight Crime, 18 May 2023.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Steven Dudley and Parker Asmann, "[Gulf Cartel Still 'Public Enemy No. 1' on US-Mexico Border: Homeland Security](#)," InSight Crime, 18 May 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ InSight Crime, "[Gulf Cartel](#)," 20 August 2024.

JALISCO CARTEL NEW GENERATION (CARTEL DE JALISCO NUEVA GENERACIÓN – CJNG)



JALISCO CARTEL NEW GENERATION (CARTEL DE JALISCO NUEVA GENERACIÓN, CJNG)

ORIGIN



Mexico

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Drug trafficking
- Drug production
- Kidnapping
- Money laundering
- Oil theft



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



Nemesio Oseguera alias "El Mencho"

December 2024

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG) is one of Mexico’s most prominent criminal organizations, operating across multiple states with strategic control in key locations for various criminal economies.

HISTORY

The CJNG originated from the Milenio Cartel, a group led by the Valencia family and associates, who operated under the Sinaloa Cartel in the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Colima.¹⁷⁶ In the 2000s, the Milenio Cartel was pushed out of Michoacán by the Zetas, a powerful Mexican criminal group composed of deserters from the armed forces and allied with the Gulf Cartel. Milenio retreated to Jalisco under the command of Ignacio “Nacho” Coronel. Coronel’s death in 2010, combined with a series of arrests, led to a split within the Milenio Cartel. Two factions emerged: Los Torcidos and La Resistencia.

Los Torcidos, led by former police officer Nemesio Oseguera, alias “El Mencho,” became Coronel’s successor in the region. This faction eventually evolved into the CJNG.¹⁷⁷

GEOGRAPHY

The CJNG has a broad operational reach across Mexico, except Durango and Sinaloa, which remain strongholds dominated by its main rival, the Sinaloa Cartel.

Its strongest presence is in Pacific coast states such as Jalisco, Nayarit, and Colima, and Gulf states like Veracruz. These strategic locations are crucial for the flow of cocaine and chemical precursors used in methamphetamine and fentanyl production, positioning CJNG to manage key parts of the supply chain. However, much of its influence is sustained through alliances with semi-independent criminal groups and allies across these regions.

The CJNG also holds significant influence along Mexico’s northern and southern borders. To the north, its presence is limited mainly to Baja California and certain parts of Tamaulipas, but it maintains a much stronger operation on the Mexico-Guatemala border. This allows it to play a crucial role in the drug trade and human smuggling operations between Central America to the United States.

¹⁷⁶ InSight Crime, “[Jalisco Cartel New Generation \(CJNG\)](#),” 27 May 2024.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

The CJNG strategy is rooted in territorial control and forging alliances with local criminal groups that specialize in different stages of the drug trafficking chain and other criminal economies.¹⁷⁸

Beyond Mexico, the group has expanded its influence by forming partnerships with criminal organizations in Guatemala,¹⁷⁹ Ecuador,¹⁸⁰ and Colombia. It also maintains connections with drug distribution networks in Asia, Europe, and Oceania.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The CJNG’s primary criminal economy revolves around drug trafficking, with a focus on methamphetamine. The criminal group sources chemicals through brokers, associated trafficking networks, and illegal producers to fuel its synthetic drug operation.¹⁸¹ In addition to meth, the CJNG also traffics heroin, fentanyl, and cocaine into the United States and is involved in retail drug sales, attempting to create local markets for synthetic drugs in its strongholds.¹⁸²

The CJNG also engages in illegal mining, particularly in Michoacán, where it extracts iron ore, allegedly exporting it to China in exchange for chemical precursors used in synthetic drug production.¹⁸³ However, the CJNG faces competition in this sector, clashing with groups like the Knights Templar over mining territory.

Additionally, the CJNG profits from fraud schemes targeting hotel timeshare owners, particularly in Puerto Vallarta,¹⁸⁴ and other criminal economies such as

¹⁷⁸ InSight Crime and American University’s Center Latin American Studies and Latino Studies, “[Criminal Networks in the Americas](#),” January 2022.

¹⁷⁹ Alex Papadovasilakis, “[The Jalisco Cartel’s Quiet Expansion in Guatemala](#),” InSight Crime, 18 May 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “[Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador’s Criminal Chessboard](#),” InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

¹⁸¹ Sara García, “[Beyond China: How Other Countries Provide Precursor Chemicals to Mexico](#),” InSight Crime, 28 February 2024.

¹⁸² Victoria Dittmar, Peter Appleby and Mike LaSusa, “[How Mexico’s CJNG Controls Guadalajara’s Expanding Drug Market](#),” InSight Crime, 19 July 2024.

¹⁸³ Yago Rosado, “[CJNG Control of Illegal Mining in Michoacán, Mexico, Claiming Indigenous Lives](#),” InSight Crime, 27 January 2023.

¹⁸⁴ Henry Shuldiner, “[CJNG Reaps Revenues From Tourist Real Estate Scam in Mexico](#),” InSight Crime, 3 May 2023.

human trafficking,¹⁸⁵ extortion, and forced disappearances, although it often relies on local gangs for these activities, taking a cut of the profits. Allied factions also profit from gasoline theft in several parts of Mexico.¹⁸⁶

The CJNG also entered Mexico's illicit cigarette trade, with links to the "Cartel del Tabaco," a major player in this underground market in Mexico.¹⁸⁷

Money laundering is a crucial component of the CJNG's operations, primarily through its financial wing, the Cuinis. The group has been linked to real estate in countries like Uruguay and Argentina,¹⁸⁸ and it launders money through businesses in sectors such as tequila production, advertising, agribusiness, and restaurants.¹⁸⁹

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Nemesio Oseguera, alias "El Mencho," is the group's top leader, but there are also regional and state-level commanders—known as "plaza bosses"—who oversee operatives and hitmen.¹⁹⁰

While US authorities view El Mencho as the figurehead in the hierarchical organization, in reality, the group is composed of dozens of semi-autonomous cells that operate across the country. Some factions have a more centralized command structure, but overall, the group is much more horizontally integrated.

Nonetheless, the Valencia family continues to play a crucial role in the organization, as "El Mencho" is married to Rosalinda González Valencia. The González Valencia brothers, known as "Los Cuinis," manage the CJNG's

finances, overseeing business operations and money laundering. Rosalinda González was arrested in May 2018 on charges of money laundering,¹⁹¹ released on bail that same year, and rearrested in 2021.¹⁹² In 2020, Jessica Oseguera, one of "El Mencho" and Rosalinda's daughters, was arrested in the United States for money laundering.¹⁹³

Women also appear to hold other roles within the CJNG structure beyond money laundering. In Jalisco, a key state for the criminal organization, the number of women imprisoned for involvement in forced disappearances is rising, dubbed by some security analysts as a silent but effective war.¹⁹⁴

STATE RESPONSE

The current Mexican government has focused much of its efforts on the Sinaloa Cartel, but many top CJNG leaders have also been arrested, placed under US Treasury sanctions, and face criminal charges.¹⁹⁵

Notable strikes have been made against El Mencho's inner circle. In 2020, his son, Rubén Oseguera González, alias "El Menchito," was extradited to the United States, while his wife remains imprisoned after her 2021 arrest. In 2023, the Mexican government linked his daughter, Jessica Oseguera, to a money laundering case.¹⁹⁶

Beyond El Mencho's family, Mexican authorities arrested Ricardo Ruiz, alias "Doble R," a key figure in the CJNG's armed wing, in 2022.¹⁹⁷ Another major blow came when "El Jardinero," a potential successor to El Mencho with a \$5 million US bounty, was arrested in Mexico and sentenced to 45 years for

185 Juliana Manjarrés, "What Is Behind the Criminal Conflict Raging in Chiapas, Mexico?", InSight Crime, 8 February 2024.

186 Jerónimo López, "CJNG's Fuel Theft Empire in the Crosshairs of US Treasury Sanctions," InSight Crime, 16 September 2024.

187 Peter Appleby, "Jalisco Cartel Cashing in on Mexico's Illegal Cigarette Market," InSight Crime, 8 June 2022.

188 Josefina Salomon, "Los Cuinis May Have Laundered Money Through Argentina, Uruguay," InSight Crime, 25 April 2019.

189 United States Department of Treasury, "CJNG & LOS CUINIS Drug Trafficking Organizations," September 2015.

190 InSight Crime and American University's Center Latin American Studies and Latino Studies, "Criminal Networks in the Americas," January 2022.

191 Parker Asmann, "Mexico Authorities Close In on CJNG With Arrest of Leader's Wife," InSight Crime, 28 May 2018.

192 David Saúl Vela, "Rosalinda González, lejos de la libertad: FGR apela no vinculación a proceso," El Financiero, 14 May 2024.

193 Amanda Mars, "Detenida en EE UU la hija de El Mencho por operaciones financieras relacionadas con el narcotráfico," El País, 27 February 2020.

194 Daniela Valle, "Why Are There More Women in Mexican Prisons for Organized Crime?", InSight Crime, 13 May 2024.

195 Alberto Nájjar, "La silenciosa -y efectiva- guerra de AMLO contra el CJNG," Pie de Página, 5 October 2020.

196 Sin Embargo, "La FGR va contra la hija de 'El Mencho', apodada 'La Negra', por lavado de dinero," 30 May 2023.

197 Gustavo Castillo, "Confirman captura de El Doble R, jefe de sicarios del CJNG," La Jornada, 11 August 2022.

his involvement in the murders of 15 police officers in Jalisco.¹⁹⁸

In 2012, the Mexican Army also captured brothers Ramón Álvarez Ayala, alias “R-1,” and Rafael Álvarez Ayala, alias “R-2,” both high-ranking members of the CJNG who held significant leadership roles according to Mexican authorities.¹⁹⁹

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The CJNG is infamous for its extreme violence, often targeting both civilians and authorities. Notably, the group was behind the 2020 assassination attempt on Omar García Harfuch, then Mexico City’s Secretary of Public Security,²⁰⁰ the murder of a former Jalisco state governor in 2020,²⁰¹ and a rocket-propelled grenade attack on the Mexican Army in 2015.²⁰²

The CJNG has also used drones to drop explosives as part of its broader strategy to establish its criminal brand.²⁰³

Beyond violence, the CJNG has attempted to build a social base through public works and infrastructure projects. In 2020, Mexican authorities discovered a hospital in Jalisco, allegedly built by the CJNG, to provide medical treatment to El Mencho without risking his capture.²⁰⁴ In 2021, the group distributed gifts in communities across Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán as part of a Mother’s Day event.²⁰⁵

198 Roman Ortega, “[Sentencian a 45 años de prisión a ‘El Jardiner’](#),” *El Occidental*, 11 May 2024.

199 Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, “[El Ejército Mexicano detiene en Jalisco a los hermanos Álvarez Ayala, integrantes del ‘Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación’](#),” 9 September 2012. Press release.

200 Victoria Dittmar and Chris Dalby, “[Attempt to Kill Mexico City’s Top Cop Puts Jalisco Cartel in Crossfire](#),” *InSight Crime*, 27 June 2020.

201 Anay Nuño, “[Mexico: assassin shoots former state governor in restaurant bathroom](#),” *The Guardian*, 18 December 2020.

202 Jo Tuckman, “[Mexico declares all-out war after rising drug cartel downs military helicopter](#),” *The Guardian*, 4 May 2015.

203 InSight Crime and American University’s Center Latin American Studies and Latino Studies, “[Criminal Networks in the Americas](#),” January 2022.

204 Zachary Goodwin, “[El Mencho’s Hospital Rare Example of Infrastructure Built by Mexico Cartels](#),” *InSight Crime*, 30 July 2020.

205 Ashley Pechinski, “[Happy Mother’s Day from Your Friendly Neighborhood Cartel Boss](#),” *InSight Crime*, 14 May 2021.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The CJNG plays a pivotal role in Mexico’s drug trade, controlling key Pacific ports, such as Manzanillo in Colima, a major entry point for drugs and precursors used in fentanyl and methamphetamine production.²⁰⁶ While its influence along Mexico’s northern border is limited, it holds significant power on the southern border with Guatemala.

Internationally, the CJNG has partnered with groups like the Huistas in Guatemala for drug trafficking. These alliances have allowed the CJNG to expand into criminal markets in Asia and Oceania.

While the CJNG’s connections in Europe remain unclear, Spanish authorities have intercepted drug shipments believed to be linked to the group.²⁰⁷ Additionally, the group has sourced chemical precursors for synthetic drug production from legally established companies in European countries.²⁰⁸

206 Mark Wilson, “[US Sanctions Reveal CJNG’s Grip on Mexico Port To Move Fentanyl](#),” *InSight Crime*, 8 October 2021.

207 *El Financiero*, “[Los tentáculos del CJNG en Europa: ¿Dónde se asienta el cártel del Mencho?](#),” 23 May 2023.

208 Sara García, “[Beyond China: How Other Countries Provide Precursor Chemicals to Mexico](#),” *InSight Crime*, 28 February 2024.

MARA SALVATRUCHA – MS13

	MS13		ORIGIN  El Salvador
	IMPACT Depending on the country	APPROXIMATE SIZE 50,000 members	LEADER (S)
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES <div><div> Extortion</div><div> Micro trafficking</div><div> Human trafficking</div><div> Human smuggling</div><div> Arms trafficking</div><div> Hired assassination</div><div> Car theft and resale</div><div> Sexual exploitation</div></div> <div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div>		  No single identifiable leader

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) was one of the hemisphere’s largest and most formidable street gangs. However, following a security crackdown on the group involving mass arrests, implemented in El Salvador by the administration of President Nayib Bukele, anything up to two-thirds of its membership is behind bars.

HISTORY

MS13 was formed in Los Angeles during the 1980s, following civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua that led to a surge of refugees into the United States. Many of these refugees, facing marginalization, joined or formed street gangs in their new environment. MS13 quickly became notorious for its violent conflicts with rival gangs, which attracted law enforcement attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in the incarceration of many members.

In the mid-1990s, US deportation policies escalated, sending thousands of convicted immigrants, including MS13 members, back to Central America. Between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 20,000 criminals were deported to the region. Weak institutions in Central American countries struggled to manage the influx, leading many deportees to join or form gangs.

In the early to mid-2000s, Central American country's "mano dura" (iron fist) policies overwhelmed local prison systems by sending thousands to prison. Prisons were important bases for recruitment and criminal activity for the MS13, so mass incarceration ended up inadvertently fueling gang violence and reorganization.²⁰⁹

In 2012, during the government of former El Salvador president Mauricio Funes, the MS13, and the factions of their rivals Barrio 18 gang, agreed to a truce. In exchange for a reduction in homicides, security forces stopped harassing gang members in the jails and prisons. It also permitted the gangs to expand their extortion operations, the gang's principal source of income.²¹⁰

The truce saw the homicide rate drop by half from 72 per 100,000 inhabitants to 36 in just a year. However, by the end of 2013, strong citizen opposition to the truce caused the Funes administration to renounce the pact. Homicides increased by 57 percent the following year.

This cycle of violence escalated, reaching global highs by 2015. In response, governments

implemented harsh crackdowns.

In El Salvador, violence began to decrease slowly after 2015. This may have been the result of an alleged pact between MS13 and the government of El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele who came to office in 2019, though the government has denied such claims.

One of the most seismic changes to the El Salvadorian criminal landscape occurred in March 2022, when the Salvadoran government launched the *régimen de excepción*, or state of emergency in English. This campaign took *mano dura* policies to a new level, leading to mass arrests that landed approximately 2% of the country's population in jail. It has resulted in notable gang activity reduction in El Salvador. Despite this, MS13 remains active in other parts of Central and North America.

GEOGRAPHY

MS13 members are primarily concentrated in urban areas across Central America and places with significant Central American diaspora. In Honduras and Guatemala, the gang remains predominantly urban. However, in El Salvador, MS13 had gradually expanded into rural areas before the state of exception.

In the United States, the gang's expansion beyond urban centers has been notable in regions such as Long Island, North Carolina, and increasingly in California. MS13 has tried to establish in Europe, particularly in urban areas of Spain and Italy, according to sporadic reports.²¹¹

In the case of Spain, these expansion cells of the group were focused on opening legal businesses that could be used to launder illicit funds and provide jobs outside of Central America for members. The expansion was financed through the sale of marijuana and cocaine, as well as with monthly dues paid by members in Spain. Police have reported their presence in urban areas such as Madrid, Barcelona, Girona, and near Alicante. But today, there is little to suggest anything remains of these cells.²¹²

²⁰⁹ InSight Crime, "MS13," 28 February 2024.

²¹⁰ Héctor Silva Ávalos, "El Salvador Arrests General Behind 2012 Gang Truce," InSight Crime, 28 July 2020.

²¹¹ Steven Dudley and Héctor Silva Ávalos, "MS13 in the Americas: Major Findings," InSight Crime, 16 February 2018.

²¹² Angelika Albaladejo, "MS13 Trial in Spain Highlights Gang's Struggle for International Unity," InSight Crime, 21 February 2018.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

MS13 relies heavily on territorial control to generate revenue. The gang's decentralized leadership structure has kept it relatively impoverished, despite having established revenue streams.

Extortion remains the most significant source of income for MS13 in Central America. However, an increasing share of the gang's revenue now comes from local drug peddling, particularly in US cities like Los Angeles.

In addition to extortion and drug trafficking, MS13 is involved in other criminal activities such as prostitution, human smuggling, and theft.

The MS13's various revenue streams have resulted in some limited capital accumulation, which has, in turn, led to a few money laundering schemes. However, these schemes remain relatively rudimentary and small in scale, concentrated in some of the most sophisticated "clicas" or cliques of the organization.²¹³ Some of these include car theft and resale.

Another form of laundering occurs through many small businesses, many the targets of extortion, which end up washing criminal money in lieu of extortion payments. Gang members also acquire products that are later sold at a higher price in local clothing, food, and liquor stores typically located in central plazas.

The gang has also used remittance services — offered by the cell phone service provider Tigo and known as Tigo Money — to collect extortion payments locally and from abroad. The same dynamic exists with Western Union and other money transfer services.²¹⁴

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The MS13 historically has operated with two primary centers of power: Los Angeles, where

the gang was founded, and El Salvador, home to many of its historic leaders. However, the state of emergency and gang crackdown have drastically changed the role of El Salvador as the center of power.

MS13 lacks a single leader or a centralized leadership council. Instead, MS13 functions as a federation with multiple layers of leaders who interact, follow, and respond to each other depending on circumstances. Most decisions are made by individual cells, known as "clicas" (cliques). In some regions, the highest-ranking members form a leadership council, but not all areas have such councils.

MS13 is focused on generating revenue and also creating a collective identity, which is built and reinforced through shared, often criminal, experiences —especially acts of violence and expressions of social control. The gang draws on a mythic sense of community, and an ideology rooted in its violent rivalry with the Barrio 18 (18th Street) gang to maintain its large, loosely organized social and criminal network.²¹⁵

Estimates of MS13's size vary, with membership pegged between 50,000 and 70,000. In El Salvador alone, the gang has over 30,000 fully-fledged members, known as "homeboys," according to El Salvador police intelligence. However, most are now incarcerated following the ongoing state of emergency.

Some top Salvadoran MS13 leaders are believed to be seeking refuge in Mexico, where the gang operates its so-called "Mexico Program." This program was formed by exiled Salvadoran members who have become involved in human smuggling and the drug trade.²¹⁶

STATE RESPONSE

For decades, MS13 has deeply embedded itself in poor communities, terrorizing urban residents through extortion and murder. Successive governments in El Salvador had tried and failed to dismantle the gangs using aggressive security policies.

213 InSight Crime, "[MS13 in the Americas](#)," February 2018.

214 Felipe Puerta, "[5 Ways the MS13 Launders Money](#)," InSight Crime, 7 September 2018.

215 Steven Dudley and Héctor Silva Ávalos, "[MS13 in the Americas: Major Findings](#)," InSight Crime, 16 February 2018.

216 Carlos García, "[The Birth of the MS13's Mexico Program](#)," InSight Crime, 15 February 2022.

In March 2022, following a brutal gang massacre that left 87 people dead, President Nayib Bukele's government enacted a state of emergency. The legislature quickly approved the measure, which suspended constitutional rights and loosened restrictions on arrests. The measures have been extended for over two years, in which security forces arrested over 77,000 people.

Those who escaped arrest either went underground or fled into exile. MS13 and its rival gang, Barrio 18, virtually disappeared from the streets of El Salvador.²¹⁷

The state of emergency has been extended 29 times, despite widespread reports by human rights groups of arbitrary arrests based on little or no evidence, and a lack of due process, including denial of legal counsel. Reports have also surfaced of torture and mass graves, with over 150 people dying in the penitentiary system since the state of emergency began.²¹⁸

Despite these human rights abuses, the controversial crackdown appears to have temporarily crippled the gangs in El Salvador, driving violence to historic lows.

Unlike past crackdowns, the gangs haven't retaliated violently during the state of emergency. It's unclear if this was a strategic choice, or if the gangs were simply overwhelmed by the crackdown's speed and severity.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

MS13's criminal governance is most evident in the extortion and protection rackets they operate throughout the Northern Triangle. In Honduras, the gang exerts control over municipal services, including trash collection and waste management sites.²¹⁹ In El Salvador, before the state of emergency, their reach extended to nearly every type of business, from gas stations and bakeries to taxi

services.²²⁰ In Guatemala, MS13 dominates bus routes and transportation networks.²²¹

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

MS13 is a transnational gang, but not a fully functioning transnational criminal organization (TCO). While the gang operates across two continents and in at least half a dozen countries, its role in international criminal schemes is limited and part-time. For example, in international drug trafficking, MS13 often depends on other criminal organizations like the Mexican Mafia. The gang plays a similarly peripheral role in other transnational criminal activities, such as human smuggling.

Two key factors have prevented MS13 from evolving into a TCO: its diffuse organizational structure and its notorious public displays of violence. While some criminal activities—most notably the gang's involvement in petty drug dealing on a local level—are contributing to its maturation and opening up new opportunities, this evolution is slow and has caused significant internal conflict within the gang.

The mass arrests in El Salvador, beginning in early 2022, have decimated MS13's street-level membership. Consequently, the gang has lost control over strategic territories that were crucial for generating income through extortion and drug trafficking. In its weakened state, a significant comeback by the gang seems unlikely in the near future.

However, outside El Salvador, MS13's ranks remain largely intact. The gang continues to pose a serious threat to public safety in urban areas in Honduras and Guatemala, while also maintaining a presence in several US cities.

²¹⁷ Alex Papadovassilakis, "[How Bukele's Government Overpowered Gangs: Summary & Major Findings](#)," InSight Crime, 6 December 2023.

²¹⁸ France 24, "[Directo a... Antigua y la extensión del estado de excepción en El Salvador](#)," 9 August 2024.

²¹⁹ Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson, "[How the MS13 Became Lords of the Trash Dump in Honduras](#)," InSight Crime, 19 January 2022.

²²⁰ Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson, "[The Omnipresent Business of the MS13 in El Salvador](#)," InSight Crime, 25 January 2022.

²²¹ Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson, "[When the MS13 Played Possum in Guatemala](#)," InSight Crime, 7 February 2022.

NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY (EJÉRCITO DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL – ELN)



NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY (EJÉRCITO DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL – ELN)

ORIGIN 
Colombia

LEADER (S)



Eliécer Herlinto Chamorro alias "Antonio García"












IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

7,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Extortion
-  Migrant smuggling
-  Loan sharking
-  Drug trafficking
-  Arms trafficking
-  Illegal logging
-  Kidnapping
-  Contraband
-  Money laundering
-  Illegal mining
-  Cattle rustling



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



December 2024

The ELN is Colombia's last Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group and one of the country's most powerful criminal organizations following the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC). Owing to its recent expansion and strengthening in Venezuela, the ELN has established itself as a binational force.

HISTORY

The ELN guerrilla movement emerged in the 1960s, fueled by the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the group was funded through kidnappings, extortion, and attacks on oil infrastructure, using Venezuela's Apure state as a refuge from Colombian authorities.

During the 1990s, the ELN's reputation for violence grew, even as it participated in unsuccessful peace negotiations in 1994 and 1998.

In 1999, the ELN kidnapped 190 people from a church in western Colombia, in what remains the largest kidnapping in the country's history. The group also seized a commercial plane, forced it to land in a remote area in the south of Bolívar, and kidnapped its passengers.

These events put the ELN at the center of Colombia's conflict and made them a target for other illegal armed groups. Increasing pressure from Colombian security forces, coupled with attacks by the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), as well as its antagonistic relationship with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) forced the ELN to abandon some territories in Colombia and increase its presence in Venezuela. There, the ELN found a willing host in then-President Hugo Chávez in 1999, who was openly friendly with the ELN and the FARC.

Although the ELN initially resisted becoming directly involved with drug trafficking, the increasing pressure on the group led the ELN's commanders to rethink their financial, military, and political strategies in various parts of Colombia. Several ELN fronts ventured into new criminal economies, such as coca growing, drug trafficking, and illegal mining, which would become crucial sources of income for the guerrilla group.

The ELN participated in another round of unsuccessful peace talks with the Colombian government between 2005 and 2007, which broke down due to disagreements between both sides and the weakening relationship of the Colombian government with Venezuela, which was acting as facilitator.

Peace negotiations resumed in 2014 under President Juan Manuel Santos,²²² paralleling the FARC peace process, but collapsed in 2019 after the ELN attacked a police academy.²²³

In 2022, a strengthened ELN resumed peace talks with Colombian President Gustavo Petro, achieving its first bilateral ceasefire with the group agreement in August 2023, however, it is no longer in effect.²²⁴

In September 2024, the Colombian government suspended talks with the ELN following an attack by the criminal group against a military base.²²⁵

GEOGRAPHY

The ELN is present in at least 231 municipalities across 19 of Colombia's 32 departments. The group vies for control over Colombia's two of the border regions and therefore has immense influence over the drug trade.

First, the border with Venezuela in Norte de Santander, Casanare, Arauca, Cesar, La Guajira, Vichada. Second, the Pacific corridor, spanning Chocó, Cauca, and Nariño. They control not only the coca cultivation fields and plantations but also drug trafficking routes on land and sea, key exit points for cocaine leaving Colombia.²²⁶

The ELN is a binational guerrilla group with at least two of its War Fronts, or fighting divisions, having significant presence in several Venezuelan states, including Zulia, Apure, Amazonas, and at least five others.²²⁷

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Initially, the ELN's economic activities relied on income from kidnapping and extortion. Despite resisting direct involvement in drug

222 Kyra Gurney, "[Colombia Announces Peace Talks with ELN Guerrillas](#)," InSight Crime, 11 Jun 2014.

223 Javier Villalba and Ronna Risquez, "[ELN Car Bomb in Bogotá Takes Fight to Colombia's Cities](#)," InSight Crime, 24 January 2019.

224 InSight Crime, "[National Liberation Army \(ELN\)](#)," 18 June 2024.

225 Henry Shuldiner, "[ELN Attack Destroys Chances for Peace With Strengthening Colombian Guerrilla Group](#)," InSight Crime, 18 September 2024.

226 Ibid.

227 InSight Crime, "[National Liberation Army \(Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN\) in Venezuela](#)," 8 August 2024

trafficking for several decades, the group has gradually increased its participation in the drug trade and today controls great swathes of coca cultivation territory, as well as cocaine production laboratories.²²⁸

Additionally, the ELN is involved in illicit gold,²²⁹ coal, and coltan mining,²³⁰ illegal logging, extortion, and loansharking. It exercises control over cross-border flows of contraband from Venezuela to Colombia, and is also used for migrant smuggling²³¹ and cattle rustling.²³² Historically, it has participated in large-scale oil theft.²³³

Given the ELN's decentralized command structure, each unit is responsible for its financing and likely its money laundering operations. As a result, the group likely only can carry out money laundering on a multi-departmental level, rather than a national level.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The ELN has approximately 7,000 members. The political decision-making and strategy rests with a body called the Central Command (Comando Central – COCE), comprising five commanders headed by Eliécer Erlinto Chamorro, alias “Antonio García,” the commander-in-chief of the group, and Israel Ramírez Pineda, alias “Pablo Beltrán,” the political commander and chief peace negotiator.

The ELN's internal structure is confederated, meaning eight different War Fronts operate across different parts of the country.

228 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Venezuela and the ELN's Love-Hate Relationship with Drug Trafficking](#),” InSight Crime, 3 Oct 2022.

229 Maria Luisa Valencia, “[Gold Mining in Colombia Increasingly Tied to Organized Crime: Report](#),” InSight Crime, 7 December 2023.

230 Juan Camilo Jaramillo, “[The Scale of Illegal Coltan Trafficking in Colombia and Venezuela](#),” InSight Crime, 18 August 2021.

231 InSight Crime, “[Ex-FARC Mafia, Venezuela and the Current International Climate](#),” 11 November 2019.

232 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[ELN Oversees Rampant Cattle Smuggling Between Colombia and Venezuela](#),” InSight Crime, 26 October 2022.

233 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Colombia-Venezuela Border Closure Contributes to Oil Theft](#),” InSight Crime, 17 November 2015.

The War Fronts and their commanders maintain a certain operational and financial independence. While the Central Command has a certain amount of control over the war fronts, they sometimes act independently, raising questions as to the real control of the Central Command.²³⁴

STATE RESPONSE

The Colombian government of President Gustavo Petro entered peace dialogues with the group in 2022 and signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement in August 2023, which expired in August 2024. Talks are currently frozen, with each side accusing the other of not meeting the terms of their agreements and violating various aspects of the ceasefire.²³⁵

Notably, several women have participated in the peace negotiations on both sides of the table. Vera Grabe heads the government delegation, with six other women. Six women form part of the ELN delegation.²³⁶

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The ELN has established significant levels of control over the areas it dominates. This allows the group to govern territories by establishing restrictions on movement and requiring ID cards to enter areas.²³⁷

Moreover, the group terrorizes many civilians using various methods, including forced disappearance and forced displacement, armed strikes or mass confinements, massacres, threats and intimidation of social leaders, selective assassination, forced recruitment of minors, and explosive attacks, such as blowing up or attacking infrastructure.²³⁸

234 Ibid.

235 Lara Loaiza and Henry Shuldiner, “[Colombia's Total Peace Hangs by a Thread After Ceasefire With ELN Expires](#),” InSight Crime, 5 August 2024.

236 Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, “[Informe de negociación con el ELN](#),” November 2023.

237 Colombia Investigative Unit, “[Criminal Governance Under Coronavirus: How Colombian Groups Seized the Day](#),” InSight Crime, 3 September 2020.

238 Juan Diego Posada, “[ELN Show of Force Confirms its Unmatched Criminal Presence in Colombia](#),” InSight Crime, 2 March 2022.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The ELN oversees vast swathes of territory where coca is grown, especially in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander. Colombian authorities routinely dismantle cocaine laboratories allegedly belonging to the ELN, which control exit routes for the drug through Venezuela.²³⁹

It is increasingly participating in and overseeing illegal mining, both in Colombia and Venezuela, making it an important player in this illicit supply chain as well.²⁴⁰

The ELN has several allies and ties to local criminal structures throughout the departments where they maintain a presence. They also have ties to local and governmental criminal syndicates in neighboring Venezuela.²⁴¹

239 Venezuela Investigative Unit, "[Venezuela and the ELN's Love-Hate Relationship with Drug Trafficking](#)," InSight Crime, 3 Oct 2022.

240 Venezuela Investigative Unit, "[The Governors, the Gang and the War for Bolívar's Gold](#)," InSight Crime, 17 Nov 2021.

241 InSight Crime, "[National Liberation Army \(Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN\) in Venezuela](#)," 8 August 2024.

OFICINA DE ENVIGADO



OFICINA DE ENVIGADO

ORIGIN 
Colombia

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

12,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Illegal mining
- Loan sharking
- Drug trafficking
- Sexual exploitation
- Kidnapping
- Money laundering
- Debt collection
- Micro trafficking



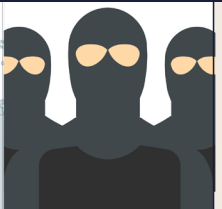
WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



José Leonardo Muñoz alias "Douglas"
Juan Carlos Mesa Vallejo alias "Tom"

December 2024

The Oficina, also known as the Oficina de Envigado, is a coalition of criminal organizations that serve drug trafficking mafias and dominate most of the criminal dynamics in the city of Medellín and neighboring municipalities. The historic heir to Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel, the Oficina has skillfully adapted to the different criminal transformations in the city. Currently, it is negotiating with the government in the framework of the "Total Peace" policy of Gustavo Petro.

HISTORY

The Oficina de Envigado was established in the 1970s as the Security and Control department of the Mayor's Office of Envigado, a neighboring municipality to the city of Medellín. However, once Pablo Escobar, once resident of Envigado, became the most powerful criminal in the city in the 1980s, this department was used as a debt-collection office for the Medellín Cartel's drug trafficking.²⁴²

Following Escobar's death in 1993, Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano, alias "Don Berna," took over the Oficina de Envigado. In the early 2000s, Don Berna joined the paramilitary structure of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC) and dubbed the Oficina's military wing, the Bloque Cacique Nutibara. This synergy between paramilitarism and Pablo Escobar's former debt-collection office gave Berna even more power in Medellín's criminality, which he came to control completely in 2003.²⁴³

However, Berna's reign came to an end in 2008 after he was extradited to the United States for drug trafficking. This was followed by an internal war for power in the Oficina between two of Berna's lieutenants: Erickson Vargas, alias "Sebastian," and Maximiliano Bonilla, alias "Valenciano."

After an intense conflict, both Valenciano and Sebastian were captured, leaving a criminal vacuum in the city that was filled by the Urabeños, a criminal group that emerged after the demobilization of the AUC in 2006, now known as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC). In 2013, an agreement was struck between the remnants of the Oficina de Envigado and the Urabeños, in which they shared territorial control of the city, and the Oficina members were allowed to use the Urabeños' international drug trafficking routes. This arrangement remains in place today.

242 Jeremy McDermott, "Colombia Elites and Organized Crime: 'Don Berna'," InSight Crime, 9 August 2016.

243 Jeremy McDermott, "Colombia Elites and Organized Crime: 'Don Berna'," InSight Crime, 9 August 2016.

GEOGRAPHY

The presence of groups associated with the Oficina is concentrated in the department of Antioquia, with Medellín and its neighboring municipalities as their main areas of influence.²⁴⁴

Although their area of control is limited to parts of Antioquia, the Oficina has a network of alliances with key players that allow them to move drugs beyond Antioquia to departure ports in northern Colombia and on Colombia's Pacific coast, from where they are shipped to destinations such as Europe and the United States.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Oficina has several criminal economies in its portfolio, such as drug trafficking, extortion, micro-trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of minors, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, illegal mining, kidnapping, loan sharking, and debt collection, among others.

Since its origins, the Oficina has used different schemes to bring illicit money into the legal system, including through soccer teams, hotels, shopping malls, commercial premises, and real estate.²⁴⁵ The organization's money laundering schemes have even reached countries such as Italy and Spain.²⁴⁶ The role of women in the organization has been predominantly financial, facilitating money laundering and capital concealment strategies.²⁴⁷

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Currently, the Oficina's leadership is divided

244 Santiago Olivares Tobón, "El Mesa, la banda que nació en Bello y ya se extendió por todo el país," El Colombiano, 25 March 2024.

245 James Bargent, "US Sanctions Colombia Soccer Club for Crime Ties," InSight Crime, 20 November 2014; El Tiempo, "Así trabajaban lavadores de la Oficina de Envigado," 14 February 2009.

246 Jimmy Ávila, "Cabecillas de la oficina de cobro de envigado lavaron US\$ 480 millones: Fiscalía de Massachusetts," W Radio, 2 June 2011.

247 Elyssa Pachico, "Female Crime Boss Runs Finances for Medellín Mafia," InSight Crime, 8 August 2012.

into two: the wing led by Juan Carlos Mesa Vallejo, alias “Tom,” who was captured in 2017, and another led by Jose Leonardo Muñoz, alias “Douglas,” who has been in prison since 2009. Despite both being behind bars, this has not prevented them from running the city’s criminality. In addition, some analysts claim that behind these operational leaderships, there is an invisible financial leadership made up of powerful individuals who move between legality and illegality.²⁴⁸

Both Douglas and Tom have different armed structures under their command in the city, known as “oficinas de cobro” the rough translation of which is “debt collector offices,” which exercise control over local street gangs, the “combos.” Estimates indicate that there are between 15 and 20 oficinas de cobro in Medellín, most of which operate under the Oficina.²⁴⁹ These, in turn, coordinate the neighborhood-based combos. In Medellín and neighboring municipalities, there are between 350 and 400 combos.²⁵⁰ The Oficina’s entire armed structure is estimated at 12,000 people.²⁵¹

STATE RESPONSE

The state response to the Oficina has come mostly from local administrations in Medellín. The strategy against the organization has focused on arrests, which have had little effect on the criminal dynamics of the organization. The crackdown has also focused on dismantling the organization’s financial networks, with property seizures being a primary strategy.

In June 2023, the Oficina initiated a dialogue with the government of President Gustavo Petro in the framework of the Total Peace policy with the aim of demobilizing armed structures in the city of Medellín and neighboring municipalities. However, the dialogue faces major challenges, primarily due to the lack of a legal framework to conduct

negotiations with criminal organizations such as the Oficina.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The criminal governance of the groups associated with the Oficina is extensive, and the organization has demonstrated its power to influence the security situation in the city. This became evident in the 2000s when Berna established himself as the lord and master of Medellín’s criminality. This criminal dominance under Berna led to a drastic drop in homicides in the city, a phenomenon known as “Donbernabilidad”.

Since then, the gangs and combos understood that it was more favorable for them to keep homicides low, as they would face less pressure from the state, so since then a series of criminal pacts and agreements have kept the city’s security contained.

In addition, these groups often control daily activities in the neighborhoods, such as commerce and transportation, decreeing which companies and products can enter the territories, and even the prices at which products of the family food basket are sold.²⁵²

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Although the criminal groups associated with the Oficina do not influence beyond Antioquia, their role in the criminality of Medellín –a city that remains key for drug trafficking and money laundering– makes them strategic players for organized crime in Colombia and other countries.

In Medellín, the Oficina provides services to Mexican criminal groups and European mafias. Similarly, it has sent emissaries to European countries to set up model debt-collection offices and provide services to criminal groups exporting cocaine from Colombia to Europe.²⁵³

248 Nelson Ricardo Matta, “[Cómo opera “La Oficina”, máquina de guerra que ahora pide paz](#),” 22 January 2023.

249 Christopher Blattman, Gustavo Duncan, Benjamin Lessing, Santiago Tobón, Juan Pablo Mesa-Mejía, “[Gobierno criminal en Medellín: panorama general del fenómeno y evidencia empírica sobre cómo enfrentarlo](#),” Universidad EAFIT, 21 October 2020.














250 Ibid.

251 Camilo Alzáte, “[La instalación de la mesa de diálogos con bandas de Medellín sería el 5 de mayo](#),” El Espectador, 28 April 2023.

252 Juan David Ortíz, “[Huevos, ropa y buses: la extorsión en Medellín vista desde tres objetos de la vida diaria](#),” Pacifista, 18 August 2016.

253 Jeremy McDermott, “[Another Colombia Mafia Boss Arrested in Spain](#),” InSight Crime, 21 July 2014.

RED COMMAND (COMANDO VERMELHO – CV)

		RED COMMAND (COMANDO VERMELHO – CV)		ORIGIN  Brazil	LEADER (S)
December 2024	IMPACT High	APPROXIMATE SIZE 30,000 members		 No single identifiable leader	
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES  Drug trafficking  Robbery  Money laundering  Prison robberies  Illegal mining  Contraband				
	 WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS ✓	 STATE PENETRATION ✓			 CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE ✓
<p><i>The Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV) is one of Brazil’s oldest criminal groups and the second most powerful, behind the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC). Originating within a prison in Rio de Janeiro,²⁵⁴ it fights for territory with other criminal organizations in the state, such as militia groups and its own splinter group, the Pure Third Command (Terceiro Comando Puro – TCP).²⁵⁵</i></p>					
<p>²⁵⁴ InSight Crime, “Red Command Profile,” August 2023.</p> <p>²⁵⁵ Rafael Soares, Roberta de Souza, Thayssa Rios, “Em ofensiva do Comando Vermelho, favelas do Rio convivem com rotina de invasões, explosões, barricadas em chamas e traçantes no céu,” O Globo, 14 July 2024.</p>					

HISTORY

The Red Command was founded in the 1970s in a Rio de Janeiro prison as a left-wing militia known as the Red Phalanx (Falange Vermelha), through an alliance between common criminals and leftist militants during Brazil's 1964-1985 military dictatorship. The group primarily protested against the poor conditions at the Candido Mendes prison, on Ilha Grande island in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1979, the gang spilled onto Rio de Janeiro's streets and its ideas spread to other prisons, increasing its power. When the group began committing muggings and bank robberies, it abandoned its original leftist ideology and was dubbed the Red Command by the media.²⁵⁶

The Red Command shifted focus from robberies to international cocaine trafficking in the 1980s, which greatly expanded its influence. By the 1990s, Rio de Janeiro's powerful gambling bosses, known as "bicheiros," had lost some of their influence, creating an opening for the gang.

The group formed an alliance with the PCC, Brazil's most powerful gang, in 2002,²⁵⁷ but the alliance fell apart in 2016, sparking a wave of violence as the groups fought for control.

GEOGRAPHY

The Red Command is based in the state of Rio de Janeiro, where it competes for control with militia groups and other criminal organizations, such as the TCP and the Amigos dos Amigos.²⁵⁸ Besides its home state, the gang extends its reach to the north and mid-west of Brazil, where it fights over trafficking routes with the PCC and the Family of the North (Familia do Norte – FDN).²⁵⁹

The group exerts a strong influence in northern Amazonas state and in mid-western Mato Grosso state.²⁶⁰ Through these territories, the

Red Command is able to operate in Paraguay and Bolivia and maintain links with Colombian criminal groups.²⁶¹ The group also appears to be expanding into French Guyana.²⁶²

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Red Command's main criminal activity is drug trafficking, but also actively engages in assaults and robberies, smuggling,²⁶³ money laundering, gold mining, and contraband.²⁶⁴ The Red Command often takes over and manages state services, such as water and sewage systems.²⁶⁵

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Red Command is not a strictly hierarchical organization, as it is not headed by a single leader. It is structured more like a franchise, with local divisions and independent networks working as allies.²⁶⁶ Brazil's government intelligence estimated that the group had around 30,000 members in 2020.²⁶⁷ The group has women among its members,²⁶⁸ but there are no records of women in high positions.

Despite the lack of a dominant leader, the group has had some well-known figures in leadership positions, such as Luiz Fernando da Costa, alias "Fernandinho Beira-Mar,"²⁶⁹ and Luiz Cláudio Machado, alias "Marreta,"²⁷⁰ both currently imprisoned, and Isaías da Costa Rodrigues, alias "Isaías do Borel," who

261 InSight Crime, "[Red Command Profile](#)," August 2023.

262 UOL Notícias, "[Garimpo e tráfico são foco de viagem de Macron à Guiana Francesa, onde Comando Vermelho e PCC ganham terreno](#)," 25 March 2023.

263 Mônica Betancur, "[Brazil's pesticide war rages on two fronts](#)," InSight Crime, 6 January 2020.

264 Chris Dalby, "[Could militia-Red Command feud explain Manaus violence in Brazil?](#)," InSight Crime, 9 June 2021.

265 Ioan Grillo, "[Brazil's Red Command fights Rio police for control of favelas](#)," InSight Crime, 10 September 2014.

266 Pedro Venceslau, "[Facção dos fúgitivos de Mossoró: Comando Vermelho tem estrutura de franquias e rivaliza com PCC no cenário nacional](#)," CNN Brasil, 15 February 2024.

267 Robson Bonin, "[Comando Vermelho vira preocupação do governo Bolsonaro](#)," Veja, 22 August 2020.

268 Fabíola Perez, "[Elektra e Bibi Perigosa: como mulheres disputam espaço no tráfico de drogas](#)," UOL, 30 April 2023.

269 Marcos Guedes, "[Fernandinho Beira-Mar: Veja quais são os crimes atribuídos ao narcotraficante condenado a mais de 300 anos de prisão](#)," CNN Brasil, 4 March 2024.

270 Márcia Brasil, Leslie Leitão, "[Justiça determina que Marreta volte para presídio federal](#)," G1, 11 April 2024.

was released from prison after 20 years in 2022.²⁷¹

STATE RESPONSE

Police strategies in Rio de Janeiro disproportionately target the Red Command rather than militia groups, even though the militias control more than half of the city today. While the Red Command loses territory, militias fill the gaps left by the gang and operate with high levels of impunity.²⁷²

One of the most relevant measures against the Red Command was the Police Pacification Units (UPPs) Program, launched in 2008. The program established permanent police presence in poor neighborhoods known as favelas in Rio de Janeiro, aiming to reduce the influence of organized crime. However, most of the units were closed in 2018, as authorities deemed the program a failure after almost 10 years of operation.²⁷³ Rio's government launched a new version of the program in 2021,²⁷⁴ but it failed once again to achieve any significant results.

Police operations against the Red Command often result in violent confrontations and the death of civilians. The result is a growing lack of trust in the police by the local population.²⁷⁵

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The Red Command controls many neglected neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro, establishing leadership positions and a parallel government system inside these favelas. Besides supplying local populations with basic services, such as internet and energy, the group also provides employment to residents lacking formal opportunities.²⁷⁶

However, the Red Command obstructs legal companies from providing alternative services

and extorts residents. Residents of favelas controlled by the Red Command are forced to use services provided by companies linked to the gang, ensuring the group's profit.²⁷⁷

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Red Command maintained important drug trafficking allies for many years, working with the PCC until 2016 and with the FDN from 2015 to 2018. However, these three groups currently compete over trafficking routes in northern and mid-western Brazil.

Today, the group has allies in all the states where it operates,²⁷⁸ acting as local networks linked to the Red Command in a structure of regional franchises.²⁷⁹ This structure allows the group to maintain its operations nationally.

The Red Command is believed to have links to the Colombian ex-FARC Mafia, as the dissident groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC) are known, and to networks trafficking cocaine from the Andes region and marijuana from Paraguay.²⁸⁰ In recent years, the group appears to have intensified its cocaine trafficking to Europe.²⁸¹

271 Diário do Rio, “[Isaias do Borel, um dos principais chefes do tráfico no Rio, é solto pela justiça](#),” 17 August 2022.

272 InSight Crime, “[Red Command Profile](#),” August 2023.

273 Bette Lucchese, “[Gabinete de intervenção no RJ decide acabar com metade das UPPs](#),” G1, 16 April 2018.

274 Henrique Coelho, “[Governo do RJ anuncia ocupação no Jacarezinho](#),” G1, 19 January 2022.

275 Ioan Grillo, “[Brazil's Red Command fights Rio police for control of favelas](#),” InSight Crime, 10 September 2014.

276 InSight Crime, “[Red Command Profile](#),” August 2023.

277 Polícia Civil do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, “[Polícia Civil deflagra segunda fase de operação contra facção criminosa da Zona Oeste](#),” 13 April 2024; Felipe Freire, Guilherme Santos e Jefferson Monteiro, “[Segunda fase da Operação Rainha no Rio de Janeiro é deflagrada](#),” G1 13 April 2024.



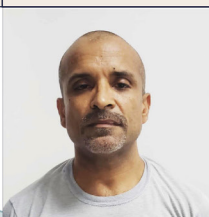







278 Secretaria Nacional de Políticas Penais (SENAPPEN), “[Relatório do Mapa de Orcrim](#),” 2023.

279 Pedro Venceslau, “[Facção dos fugitivos de Mossoró. Comando Vermelho tem estrutura de franquias e rivaliza com PCC no cenário nacional](#),” CNN Brasil, 15 February 2024.

280 InSight Crime, “[Red Command Profile](#),” August 2023.

281 Daniel Hirata, Carolina Grillo, “[Nos últimos anos, Comando Vermelho passou a atuar de forma mais intensa no tráfico de cocaína para a Europa](#),” O Globo, 15 July 2024.

ROGER KHAN NETWORK

 5.01 06	<h1>ROGER KHAN NETWORK</h1>			<div>ORIGIN</div>  Guyana
				<div>LEADER (S)</div>  Roger Khan
	<div>IMPACT</div> <div>Low</div>	<div>APPROXIMATE SIZE</div> <div>Unknown</div>		
<div>CRIMINAL ECONOMIES</div> <div> Drug trafficking</div> <div> Arms trafficking</div> <div> Money laundering</div>				
December 2024	 WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS	 STATE PENETRATION		
		 CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE		

Shaheed ‘Roger’ Khan was once the most prominent drug trafficker in Guyana until his arrest in Suriname and subsequent extradition to the United States in 2006. His organization sourced cocaine from neighboring South American countries and shipped it to the US and Europe.

HISTORY

Khan's criminal career began in the early 1990s. In 1993, he was arrested in the US District of Vermont and charged with being a felon in possession of firearms after purchasing three guns from a federal agent in exchange for two ounces of marijuana. To avoid imprisonment, he fled to Guyana in early 1994.²⁸²

Once back in Guyana, Khan became heavily involved in the cocaine trade. From around 2001 until his arrest in June 2006, he exported cocaine to the United States and Europe, though details of his operations remain limited. On June 29, 2006, Khan was apprehended and extradited to the United States,²⁸³ where he later pled guilty to conspiracy to import cocaine, obstruction of justice, and illegal firearm possession. In 2009, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Khan was released from prison in September 2019 and deported back to Guyana. Upon his return, he was briefly arrested by Guyanese police for his alleged involvement in two murders from 2005-06. However, he was released shortly after.²⁸⁴

GEOGRAPHY

The Khan Drug Trafficking Organization operated primarily out of Georgetown, Guyana, sourcing cocaine from Colombia using transit routes through Venezuela to export cocaine to New York and beyond.

When Khan went into hiding in Suriname in 2006, he allegedly received protection from Desi Bouterse, the former Surinamese dictator, then president, and convicted cocaine trafficker.

Khan is also believed to have exported cocaine to Europe, though the specific countries and individuals involved remain unclear. It is speculated that his alleged partnership with Desi Bouterse may have facilitated potential cocaine shipments to the Netherlands.

²⁸² Presentence report quoted in "US v Khan - Letter to Judge Case 1:06-Cr-00255-DLI Document 226," September 29, 2009.

²⁸³ "US v Simels, Khan, Irving - Sealed Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrants." United States District Court Eastern District of New York, September 8, 2008.

²⁸⁴ News Room Guyana, "[Roger Khan Released from Police Custody](#)," 24 September 2019.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Khan led a criminal enterprise primarily focused on exporting cocaine, but his operations extended to arms trafficking, providing armed services, and managing companies in construction, real estate, and logging, among others.

Guyana's vast, largely unpatrolled coastline has long made it an attractive departure point for cocaine shipments bound for Europe. The Guyanese coast guard's inability to patrol its approximately 135,000 square kilometer exclusive economic zone further facilitated the traffickers' operations.

Khan used various methods to transport cocaine, including speedboats ("go-fasts") and cargo ships to transport the drugs, relying on networks across the Caribbean to facilitate his operations, according to a former DEA agent consulted by InSight Crime. In the US and Europe, Khan's contacts ensured the safe arrival and wholesale distribution of the cocaine.²⁸⁵

Khan was also involved in smuggling weapons into Guyana from Suriname, French Guiana, and possibly France, in exchange for cocaine. He reportedly established connections with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC), acting as a middleman in cocaine-for-arms transactions, and smuggling guns into Guyana and trading them with the FARC for cocaine.²⁸⁶

His timber companies were granted a State Forest Exploratory Permit, providing him with access to large tracts of land in Guyana's interior. This may have enabled drug traffickers to establish autonomous outposts deep in the jungle and far beyond the reach of law enforcement.²⁸⁷

Khan also laundered money through various development and investment ventures, including housing development schemes and ownership stakes in several nightclubs and other enterprises.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ InSight Crime interview, former DEA agent on Roger Khan, 7 July 2021.

²⁸⁶ "[Shaheed 'Roger' Khan: Guyana's Own Escobar?](#)" Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy. Guyana Georgetown, 1 February 2006.

²⁸⁷ United States Department of State, "[International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume I 2005](#)," March 2006.

²⁸⁸ Stabroek News, "[Shaheed 'Roger' Khan: drugs, dirty money and the death squad](#)," 20 August 2009.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Roger Khan group operated with a hierarchical structure resembling a pyramid, with Khan at the top of three main layers. Below him were key individuals overseeing different aspects of the drug trade, and at the base was a criminal workforce. The Phantom Squad functioned as the armed wing of the organization, supporting its drug trafficking activities.²⁸⁹

In addition to Khan, Ricardo Rodrigues was a key partner in the drug trade within Guyana, while Barry Dataram, also known as “Kevin” or “Mogatoni,” managed Khan’s cocaine exports to the United States and Europe.²⁹⁰

The Phantom Squad, Khan’s enforcement unit, included members such as Paul Rodrigues, Gerald Perera, Fredboy Willabus, Lloyd Roberts, and Sean Bellfield. These individuals, many of them former police officers, were tasked with carrying out kidnappings and killings on Khan’s orders. An individual known only by the alias “Regan” reportedly supplied Khan with ammunition and firearms from Brazil, according to court testimony.²⁹¹

The exact size of the Roger Khan organization remains unclear. The Phantom Squad is believed to have consisted of at least half a dozen ex-convicts and former police officers. Estimates of the organization’s overall size vary, with some academics suggesting it had between 300 and 400 members, while others believe it was smaller, numbering in the dozens. The Former DEA agent estimated the Phantom Squad at fewer than 200 members.²⁹²

STATE RESPONSE

Khan had connections within the Guyanese government, which allowed him to operate with impunity. According to a US government cable, officials believed the Guyanese

government was so compromised that it lacked the will to seriously pursue Khan, despite publicly claiming to fight against drug trafficking.²⁹³

In 2006, Khan was arrested alongside a dozen others during a drug bust in neighboring Suriname. He was later transferred to Trinidad and Tobago before being extradited to the United States, where he served 15 years in prison.²⁹⁴

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Khan maintained control over Guyana’s cocaine industry largely through the support of the paramilitary Phantom Squad. This group, acting under Khan’s direct orders, was responsible for threatening, intimidating, or killing individuals who posed a threat to his illegal activities.

It remains unclear whether Khan directed a single Phantom Squad or multiple groups, but what is certain is that the squad carried out extrajudicial killings, primarily targeting ethnic Afro-Guyanese, with backing from elements within the Guyanese government.²⁹⁵

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Khan organization exemplifies the roles of transporters and middlemen in the cocaine trade. The organization established connections with criminal groups throughout the region, including Colombia’s FARC,²⁹⁶ and drug trafficking networks in Venezuela and Brazil.²⁹⁷

The organization also maintained close ties with drug traffickers in consumer markets. For example, US authorities seized a ledger

293 “[Shaheed ‘Roger’ Khan: Guyana’s Own Escobar?](#)” Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy. Guyana Georgetown, 1 February 2006.

294 Stabroek News, “[Shaheed ‘Roger’ Khan: drugs, dirty money and the death squad](#),” 20 August 2009.

295 “US v Simels, Khan, Irving - Sealed Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrants.” United States District Court Eastern District of New York, September 8, 2008.

296 InSight Crime interview, former DEA agent on Roger Khan, 7 July 2021.

297 “[\(C/Nf\) Guyana Response: Desi Bouterse and Shaheed Roger Khan Activities \(c-A16-00586\)](#),” Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy, Guyana Georgetown, 29 June 2006.

289 InSight Crime interview, former DEA agent on Roger Khan, 7 July 2021.

290 “US v. Simels and Irving - Transcript of Trial.” United States District Court Eastern District of New York, August 10, 2009.

291 “US v. Simels and Irving - Transcript of Trial.” United States District Court Eastern District of New York, August 10, 2009.

292 InSight Crime interview, former DEA agent on Roger Khan, 7 July 2021.

showing that in early 2003, the criminal organization had sent over 150 kilograms of cocaine to Devendra Persaud, a Guyanese trafficker based in Queens, New York. Connections with other wholesale buyers and distributors were also common.²⁹⁸

It is unclear whether Roger Khan is currently involved in criminal activities. However, since his return to Guyana, the country has witnessed several significant cocaine seizures, including 4.4 metric tons in the northwestern coastal region of Barima-Waini on August 31, 2024.

Earlier in the year, on March 29, authorities made another significant bust, confiscating 536 kilograms of cocaine from a go-fast boat in the north-central region of Essequibo Islands-West Demerara.

²⁹⁸ Presentence report quoted in “US v Khan - Letter to Judge Case 1:06-Cr-00255-DLI Document 226,” September 29, 2009.

ROTELA CLAN



ROTELA CLAN

ORIGIN 
Paraguay

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

1,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Drug trafficking
- Micro trafficking
- Prison riots
- Extortion



Armando Javier Rotela Ayala

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



The Rotela Clan rose to prominence as a dominant force in crack cocaine distribution in Asunción, Paraguay. Over time, the group extended its influence into the country's overcrowded prison system, eventually establishing itself as Paraguay's most powerful homegrown criminal organization.

HISTORY

The Rotela Clan was founded around 2007 on the outskirts of Asunción, Paraguay, by cousins Armando Javier and Óscar Rotela Ayala. Initially, the group focused on dealing crack cocaine in Asunción's poorest neighborhoods.²⁹⁹

The clan rapidly expanded its operations, recruiting small-time dealers, and by 2014, it had developed substantial crack cocaine production capabilities. In 2016, following Armando Javier Rotela's incarceration, the group began recruiting prisoners and took over drug dealing from within Paraguay's prisons.³⁰⁰

By 2019, it was estimated that the Rotela Clan controlled half of all crack cocaine sold in Paraguay. Despite its dominance, the group was outnumbered in many prisons by the Brazilian criminal organization, First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital — PCC). In June 2019, PCC members in San Pedro prison killed 10 Rotela Clan members during a riot.³⁰¹

As the Paraguayan government focused on dismantling PCC's control by redistributing known members to different facilities, the Rotela Clan capitalized on this shift and gained control of Paraguay's largest prison, Tacumbú.³⁰² Following a riot led by the Rotela Clan, Armando Javier was transferred out of Tacumbú, with authorities claiming to have dismantled his influence in the prison.³⁰³

GEOGRAPHY

The Rotela Clan has expanded its base beyond Asunción, now operating in various departments across Paraguay, including

Cordillera, Central, Concepción, Pedro Juan Caballero, and Misiones. Within the prison system, officials reported in 2019 that the clan had members in 15 of the country's 18 prisons. Despite recent efforts to curb the group's influence, particularly in Tacumbú, it is likely that the Rotela Clan still maintains a significant presence within Paraguay's prison system.³⁰⁴

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Rotela Clan's operations are primarily centered around crack cocaine. The group imports coca paste from Bolivia to Asunción, where it is processed into crack cocaine. This product is then distributed throughout Paraguay's cities and prisons.³⁰⁵ Authorities estimate that the Rotela Clan controls around half of the crack cocaine selling points in Paraguay.³⁰⁶

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Rotela Clan is led by Armando Javier Rotela Ayala, with his cousin Óscar Rotela Ayala serving as second-in-command. Beyond this core leadership, the group remains relatively unstructured.

Inside prisons, members frequently move in and out, working for the Rotela Clan while incarcerated but showing little long-term loyalty. The clan often recruits addicts who protect the leadership and help to secure a steady supply of crack cocaine. On the outside, the group consists of numerous semi-independent drug dealers³⁰⁷. According to Paraguayan authorities, Sofia Rotela, Armando Javier Rotela's sister, has gained importance in the group's organization chart.³⁰⁸

299 InSight Crime, "[Rotela Clan](#)," 23 August 2020.

300 Marguerite Cawley, "['Microtrafficking Czar' Raid Highlights Paraguay Domestic Drug Market](#)," InSight Crime, 12 March 2014.

301 Laura Marcela Zuñiga and Tristan Clavel, "[Prisons in Paraguay Struggle to Combat Violence from Crack Epidemic](#)," InSight Crime, 19 November 2019; Laura Marcela Zuñiga, "[Deadly Riot Shows Paraguay Prisons Unprepared for PCC Onslaught](#)," InSight Crime, 20 June 2019; InSight Crime, "[Rotela Clan](#)," 23 August 2020.

302 Gavin Voss, "[Paraguay's Tacumbú Prison Takeover Marks Rotela Clan Resurgence](#)," InSight Crime, 13 October 2023.

303 ABC Color, "[La seguridad de Tacumbú seguirá a cargo de la Policía](#)," 18 January 2024; Agencia IP, "[Fuerte inversión en seguridad y los mayores golpes al crimen organizado, logros en el primer año de Peña](#)," 1 July 2024.

304 Gavin Voss, "[Paraguay's Tacumbú Prison Takeover Marks Rotela Clan Resurgence](#)," InSight Crime, 13 October 2023; ABC Color, "[La seguridad de Tacumbú seguirá a cargo de la Policía](#)," 18 January 2024; Agencia IP, "[Fuerte inversión en seguridad y los mayores golpes al crimen organizado, logros en el primer año de Peña](#)," 1 July 2024.

305 Marguerite Cawley, "['Microtrafficking Czar' Raid Highlights Paraguay Domestic Drug Market](#)," InSight Crime, 12 March 2014.

306 Laura Marcela Zuñiga and Tristan Clavel, "[Prisons in Paraguay Struggle to Combat Violence from Crack Epidemic](#)," InSight Crime, 19 November 2019; InSight Crime, "[Rotela Clan](#)," 23 August 2020.

307 Ibid.

308 Crónica, "[¿La hermana de Javier Roleta es la nueva cabeza al 'clan'? el Gobierno le sigue los pasos](#)," 6 October 2024.

STATE RESPONSE

The Rotela Clan has faced several arrests, with both Armando Javier and Óscar Rotela currently imprisoned. Armando Javier was initially arrested in 2011 but escaped along with eight other clan members the following year.³⁰⁹ Óscar was arrested in 2014 for homicide and drug trafficking. Armando Javier was apprehended again in 2016, and in 2020, he was convicted of drug trafficking and criminal association, receiving a 27-year sentence. Despite these arrests, the Rotela Clan has not been significantly weakened. Since Armando Javier's 2016 capture, the group has intensified its recruitment efforts within the prison system, significantly increasing its numbers.

In October 2023, the Rotela Clan led an uprising of the Tacumbú prison, taking guards and visitors hostage and raiding the armory.³¹⁰ Paraguay's national police subsequently regained control, leading to the transfer of Armando Javier and the dismantling of his operations center within the facility.³¹¹

The government has credited these actions with reducing violence and drug dealing in Asunción and the surrounding Central department. However, it remains uncertain whether this will lead to a long-term reduction in the Rotela Clan's operations or if another group will step in to control Paraguay's crack cocaine market.³¹²

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The Rotela Clan has historically controlled large sections of the prisons where they have a presence, and in 2023 was the dominant group controlling Tacumbú. However, following the transfer of Armando Javier Rotela, it remains unclear how much influence the clan still holds within the prison or any other facilities.³¹³

309 Edward Fox, "[Paraguayan 'Micro-Trafficking Czar' Orchestrates Prison Break](#)," InSight Crime, 26 November 2012.

310 Gavin Voss, "[Paraguay's Tacumbú Prison Takeover Marks Rotela Clan Resurgence](#)," InSight Crime, 13 October 2023.

311 ABC Color, "[La seguridad de Tacumbú seguirá a cargo de la Policía](#)," 18 January 2024.

312 Agencia IP, "[Fuerte inversión en seguridad y los mayores golpes al crimen organizado, logros en el primer año de Peña](#)," 1 July 2024.

313 Gavin Voss, "[Paraguay's Tacumbú Prison Takeover Marks Rotela Clan Resurgence](#)," InSight Crime, 13 October 2023.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

To ensure a steady supply of coca paste to Paraguay, the Rotela Clan maintains ties with cocaine trafficking groups in Bolivia. However, its operations are primarily domestic, and there is no evidence suggesting it has expanded into international networks.³¹⁴

314 Marguerite Cawley, "['Microtrafficking Czar' Raid Highlights Paraguay Domestic Drug Market](#)," InSight Crime, 12 March 2014.

SECOND MARQUETALIA (SEGUNDA MARQUETALIA)



SECOND MARQUETALIA (SEGUNDA MARQUETALIA)

ORIGIN 
Colombia

LEADER (S) 
Luciano Marín
alias "Iván Márquez"






IMPACT

Medium

APPROXIMATE SIZE

1,750 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Extortion
-  Drug trafficking
-  Illegal mining
-  Contraband
-  Money laundering



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



December 2024

The Second Marquetalia is a criminal group with a presence in both Colombia and Venezuela. It emerged after the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) signed a peace agreement in 2016. The group has been significantly weakened in recent years, suffering substantial losses among its leadership.

HISTORY

The group emerged on August 29, 2019, when Luciano Marín, alias “Iván Márquez,” the former second-in-command of the FARC, announced that a group of ex-combatants who had signed the Havana peace agreements in 2016 would resume armed activities, citing the state’s betrayal of the terms agreed upon in the accords.³¹⁵

In addition to Márquez, Second Marquetalia brought together several key commanders from the former FARC, including Seuxis Pausías Hernández, known as “Jesús Santrich”; Hernán Darío Velásquez, alias “El Paisa”; and Henry Castellanos Garzón, alias “Romaña.”

From its inception, the group actively recruited former FARC members. However, they entered the race late, as what is now known as the Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central – EMC)—a dissident faction from the FARC peace process, had already established itself as the main successor to the FARC.

This delay impacted the development of Second Marquetalia, preventing it from effectively establishing a strong presence in Colombia. However, the group made Venezuela—particularly the border state of Apure—its refuge, leveraging the close ties that the FARC guerrillas had maintained with the Venezuelan government for years.³¹⁶

GEOGRAPHY

In Colombia, Second Marquetalia is present in the departments of Bolívar, Arauca, Vichada, Guainía, Meta, Caquetá, Huila, and Tolima.³¹⁷

In Venezuela, the group’s primary stronghold is the state of Apure, which borders Colombia’s Arauca department. Additionally, the Acacio Medina Front operates in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas.³¹⁸

315 InSight Crime, “[Second Marquetalia](#),” 5 July 2022.

316 InSight Crime, “[Ex-FARC Mafia in Venezuela](#),” 20 September 2022.

317 Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, “[¿Plomo es lo que viene? Balance y retos de la política de Paz Total 2022-2024](#),” 16 July 2024.

318 InSight Crime, “[Ex-FARC Mafia in Venezuela](#),” 20 September 2022.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The group primarily finances its operations through drug trafficking and illegal mining. In Colombia, it has presence in key areas for cocaine production and distribution, particularly along the Pacific coast, the southern border, and in departments bordering Venezuela.

It is also involved in illegal gold mining in the territories under its control. The group’s presence in Venezuela facilitates drug trafficking through Venezuelan territory and the illegal exploitation of mining sites, with the complicity of the Maduro regime.³¹⁹ Additionally, the group engages in extortion in the areas where it operates.³²⁰

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Second Marquetalia currently operates as a coalition led by Iván Márquez. Alongside Márquez are other key leaders, including José Manuel Sierra, alias “Zarco Aldiver” and Gener García, alias “Jhon 40,” commander of the Acacio Medina Front.³²¹

Under Márquez’s command, the group consists of eight guerrilla structures. These include the FARC-EP wing, which is composed of subgroups such as fronts, companies, columns, commissions, and commandos.

STATE RESPONSE

The state response to Second Marquetalia in recent years has varied depending on the government in power. During President Iván Duque’s administration (2018-2022), the approach was both political-discursive and military. From a discursive perspective, the Duque government aimed to portray the group as a criminal and drug-trafficking organization devoid of political objectives.

319 InSight Crime, “[Acacio Medina Front – Ex-FARC Mafia](#),” 15 February 2023.

320 Ombudsman’s Office, “[Alerta temprana de inminencia N° 002-24](#),” 5 February 2024.

321 Conflict Responses Foundation, “[Las disidencias de las FARC-EP. Dos caminos de una guerra en construcción](#),” 1 March 2024.

This characterization influenced the military response, granting the Armed Forces full authority to engage with combat force, including the use of aerial bombings.³²²

With Gustavo Petro's arrival in the presidency in August 2022, the approach shifted with the introduction of Total Peace, a government strategy designed to create parallel negotiating tables with various illegal groups. Since then, establishing a negotiation space with Second Marquetalia has been a priority. In June 2024, a dialogue table was initiated between the government and the group.³²³ However, progress has been slow, mainly due to differences between the negotiating leaders of the government and the illegal group over the suspension of arrest warrants for the main commanders.

various criminal economies depends on the geographic location. In border areas with Venezuela, the group is involved in moving cocaine into Venezuelan territory.³²⁶

In Venezuela, Second Marquetalia is directly engaged in mining, specifically gold and coltan.³²⁷

The group's most significant ally in Colombia is National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN).³²⁸ Links with the Venezuelan government are crucial for maintaining territorial presence and facilitating the flow of drug trafficking through that country.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The violence perpetrated by fronts associated with Second Marquetalia is particularly intense in areas where they are in open conflict with other criminal groups. In these regions, social leaders are especially targeted, facing threats, displacement, and even homicide. This violence also extends to civil society, which has suffered from forced recruitment and confinement. Additionally, the group is involved in planting anti-personnel mines.³²⁴

In areas where Second Marquetalia has operated, such as Nariño, Afro-descendant women are particularly victimized. Some are coerced into working as domestic servants for group members under the threat of violence against their families. Additionally, Colombian authorities have identified the risk of women being used as informants for the illegal group.³²⁵

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Second Marquetalia's involvement in

322 Ideas for Peace Foundation, "[La Segunda Marquetalia: disidentes, rearmados y un futuro incierto](#)," July 2021.

323 Sergio Saffon, "[Why Colombia's Second Marquetalia May Finally Be Ready for Peace](#)," InSight Crime, 27 June 2024.

324 Ombudsman's Office, "[Alerta temprana de inminencia N° 002-24](#)," 5 February 2024.

325 Ibid.

326 Conflict Responses Foundation, "[Las disidencias de las FARC-EP. Dos caminos de una guerra en construcción](#)," 1 March 2024.

327 Ibid.

328 Ibid.

SHINING PATH (SENDERO LUMINOSO)



SHINING PATH (SENDERO LUMINOSO)

ORIGIN 
Peru

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

Low

APPROXIMATE SIZE

420 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

☛ Drug trafficking



Victor Quispe Palomino
alias "Comrade José"

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



The Shining Path, or the Militarized Communist Party of Peru (MPCP), is the last remnant of the Peruvian guerrilla movement founded in the early 1970s. Although its armed power is reduced, it still plays a strategic role in the Peruvian drug trafficking chain due to its presence in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valley (VRAEM), the most important area for coca cultivation and processing in Peru.

HISTORY

Sendero Luminoso originated in 1970 as a splinter group of the Peruvian Communist Party (PCP). It was initially led by Abimael Guzmán, a philosophy professor at the University of Ayacucho who was strongly inspired by Maoist doctrine.³²⁹

In the 1980s, the group launched a series of violent attacks against Peruvian authorities and rural communities it considered enemies of its revolutionary struggle. However, it wasn't until the 1990s that the group reached its real peak, with an estimated 3,000 members. It is believed that between the 1980s and 2000, the Shining Path killed more than 30,000 people.

In 1992, following Guzman's capture, he urged his followers to sign a peace agreement with the government. A Shining Path faction with a presence in the VRAEM rejected the idea, declared Guzmán a traitor, and continued the fight. Initially, the faction was led by Oscar Ramirez Durand, alias "Feliciano," but after his capture in 1999, the Quispe Palomino brothers took control, forming the MPCP.

In 2015, the US Treasury Department sanctioned the MPCP and its top leaders for allegedly financing their operations with drug money trafficked from Peru to the United States.³³⁰

Today, the MPCP continues to follow its ideological path, with targeted attacks against Peruvian security forces. However, its historical presence in the VRAEM has secured it a significant role in drug trafficking in the area.

GEOGRAPHY

The MPCP's primary area of influence lies within the key drug trafficking corridor known as the VRAEM, a valley between the departments of Ayacucho, Huancavelica, Junin, Apurimac, and Cusco, although its presence is concentrated in the first three. In 2022, the latest year with available official

data, 35,709 hectares of coca were planted in this area, making it the nation's main hub for cocaine production.

The group's stronghold is Vizcatán del Ene, located in Satipo province within Junín, at the heart of the VRAEM, a key location for drug trafficking to Brazil and Bolivia.³³¹

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The MPCP is financed mainly from drug trafficking, albeit indirectly. It charges fees for drug production, processing, and transportation, while providing protection services to laboratories, coca transporters, and drug traffickers in the VRAEM. From this area, drugs are transported by land, river, and air to the Peruvian coast or neighboring Bolivia.³³²

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The MPCP's operates with a hierarchical structure. Its top leader is Victor Quispe Palomino, alias "Comrade Jose," who joined the Shining Path in the 1980s.

In 2023, the group had an estimated 420 members, with a significant number of women among them.³³³ Since 2013, Tarcela Loya Vilchez, alias "Comandante Olga" has served as the group's military commander, becoming the first woman to hold the position.³³⁴

The group is organized into a central committee, comprised of ideological and strategic leaders. Below this is the political bureau, consisting of 12 people, 7 of whom are women. Next in the hierarchy are the mid-level cadres or commanders, the militants – with political, social and military training– and the combatants, with military experience.

331 InSight Crime, "[Shining Path](#)," 28 May 2024.

332 Óscar Chumpitaz, "[Las nuevas rutas de la droga y la muerte en el valle cocalero del Vraem](#)," La República, 9 June 2024.

333 Abby Ardiel, "[Estructura de remanentes de Sendero pierde familiaridad en su línea de sucesión: crisis en la dinastía terrorista de los Quispe Palomino](#)," El Comercio, 21 November 2023.

334 Chales Parkinson, "'[Camarada Olga](#)' New Military Leader of Peru's Shining Path," InSight Crime, 2 September 2013.

329 InSight Crime, "[Shining Path](#)," 28 May 2024.

330 US Department of Treasury, "[Treasury Sanctions Peruvian Narco-Terrorist Group and Three Key Leaders](#)," 1 June 2015.

Only a minority of the group has political and military training.

STATE RESPONSE

The Peruvian government's response to the MPCP has focused on military operations against the group's members. In 2008, the Peruvian army established the VRAEM Special Command to reclaim territory from the criminal group in the VRAEM. However, the strategy has seen limited success, mainly due to the collaborative ties between farming communities –which often reject the actions of the armed forces– and members of the group.

In 2020, Peruvian authorities seriously wounded Jorge Quispe Palomino, alias “Comrade Raul,” the brother of the group's leader. In January 2021, alias “Comrade Raul” died of his wounds.³³⁵ Months later, in August 2022, during an army offensive in the VRAEM, Victor Quispe Palomino was wounded and several members of his close circle were killed.³³⁶ The strikes dealt significant blows to the group's command, further compounded by the November 2023 capture of José Quispe Zúñiga and Iván Quispe Vargas, son and nephew, respectively, of Víctor Quispe Palomino, which affected the family line of command that has characterized the MPCP.³³⁷

In October 2024, Peruvian authorities captured Ivan Quispe Palomino, brother of Comrade Raul and second-in-command of the MPCP.³³⁸

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Under Quispe Palomino's leadership, the group has sought to strengthen its relationship with the communities in the VRAEM, leaving aside violent practices that once characterized the Shining Path.

³³⁵ Parker Asmann and Laura Avila, “[Shining Path Commander's Death Strikes Blow to Peru Rebel Group](#),” InSight Crime, 31 March 2021.

³³⁶ DW, “[Herido grave el jefe del último reducto de Sendero Luminoso](#),” 13 August 2022.

³³⁷ Abby Ardiles, “[Estructura de remanentes de Sendero pierde familiaridad en su línea de sucesión: crisis en la dinastía terrorista de los Quispe Palomino](#),” El Comercio, 21 November 2023.

³³⁸ DW, “[Capturan en Perú al “número dos” de Sendero Luminoso](#),” 16 October 2024.

However, the group has not abandoned violence against communities altogether. In May 2021, 16 people –including two minors– were allegedly massacred by the MPCP. Pamphlets bearing the group's insignia were found at the scene, urging the population to boycott the upcoming presidential elections.³³⁹

The MPCP has also generated differentiated violence against women. In 2015, 26 women and 13 children, who had been abducted by the group from a convent decades earlier and subjected to sexual abuse, were released from captivity.³⁴⁰

The group imposes significant social control on communities in its areas of influence, imposing rules and punishments, such as those against thieves, further consolidating its hold over local populations.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

While the MPCP is not directly involved in drug trafficking, it is an important dynamo in the flow of cocaine from the VRAEM to the Peruvian coast and other countries in the region, such as Bolivia. Its alliances with local drug trafficking clans make it a crucial player in the broader cocaine network, with some of the drugs under MPCP control ending up in Europe and the United States. In addition, while its presence is localized, its capacity to attack Peruvian military forces makes it a major threat to the country's security.

³³⁹ BBC, “[Perú: al menos 16 personas mueren en un ataque atribuido a remanentes de Sendero Luminoso](#),” 24 May 2021.

³⁴⁰ David Gagne, “[39 Women, Children ‘Rescued’ from Peru's Shining Path](#),” InSight Crime, 28 July 2015.

SINALOA CARTEL



SINALOA CARTEL

ORIGIN


Mexico

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

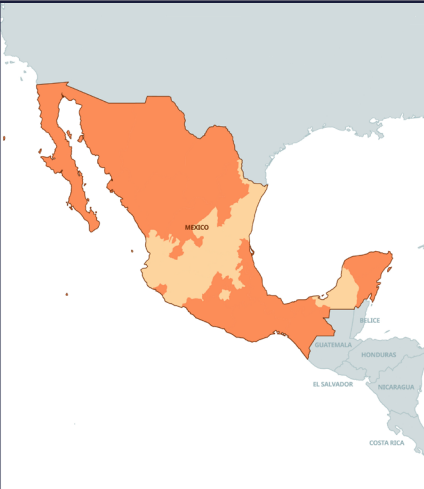
High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Drug trafficking
- Money laundering
- Drug production
- Extortion
- Arms trafficking



The Chapitos
Ismael Zambada Sicaños
alias "Mayito Flaco"

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



The Sinaloa Cartel is rated as one of the largest and most powerful drug trafficking organizations in the Western Hemisphere. Rather than a hierarchical organization, the group operates more like a “federation” of various trafficking networks based in Sinaloa, northeastern Mexico, which came together for protection but have remained semi-independent. The group traffics various drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, and, more recently, fentanyl, across the globe, with a significant focus on the US-Mexico border.

HISTORY

The origins of the Sinaloa Cartel can be traced back to the collapse of the infamous Guadalajara Cartel in the late 1980s. After its downfall, various members of the Guadalajara Cartel began establishing new bases across Mexico. Sinaloa became the stronghold of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias “El Chapo,” Ismael Zambada García, alias “El Mayo,” Juan José Esparragoza Moreno, alias “El Azul,” Héctor Luis Palma Salazar, and several other traffickers that had established their operations around opium poppy and marijuana.

Given its decentralized nature, the Sinaloa Cartel formed alliances with multiple groups across the country, allowing them access to key ports of entry, border crossings, and drug corridors. For example, several traffickers associated with the Sinaloa Cartel maintained an alliance with the Milenio Cartel, which operated in the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Colima.

The Milenio Cartel has since splintered into several factions, one of which eventually became the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva generación – CJNG). The Sinaloa Cartel’s alliance with the Milenio Cartel provided access to the Pacific ports of Manzanillo and Lázaro Cárdenas, which were key to receiving cocaine from South America and later became entry points for precursor chemicals needed to produce synthetic drugs.

However, the remnants of the Guadalajara Cartel that scattered mostly across northwestern Mexico quickly turned on each other, battling for dominance and control over drug trafficking routes. These power struggles triggered unprecedented levels of violence in Mexico over the next two decades.³⁴¹

Within the Sinaloa Cartel, there has never been a true single leader. From its inception, the group has been led by multiple leaders, each commanding their own faction, and some wielding more power than others. For example, El Chapo, El Azul, El Mayo, and others held leadership roles simultaneously. But this “first-generation” of kingpins within the group has been arrested, and now many

of their children have assumed leadership positions.

GEOGRAPHY

The Sinaloa Cartel’s primary base of operations covers the Mexican states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua, encompassing a mountainous area known as the Golden Triangle. For many years, this region was the epicenter of plant-based drug production of heroin and marijuana. The organization also maintains a strong presence through alliances or armed wings in Sonora, Baja California, Nayarit, Jalisco, and Chiapas, with authorities estimating that their activities span 19 of Mexico’s 32 states.³⁴²

With the decline in illicit marijuana and opium poppy cultivations, the organization has shifted its focus to synthetic drug production, particularly methamphetamine and fentanyl. However, for approximately the last year and a half, some factions of the group have imposed at least partial bans on fentanyl production in Sinaloa, especially for independent fentanyl producers that operate with the permission of the Sinaloa Cartel factions but are not formally part of the group.³⁴³

The group’s strong presence in territories along both the US-Mexico and Guatemala-Mexico borders grants it access to key border crossings, enabling it to influence the flow of drugs, people, and other contraband.

Internationally, the Sinaloa Cartel has established relationships with clients and suppliers on nearly every continent, operating in over 40 countries, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The group sources precursor chemicals from suppliers in China, India, and other Asian and European countries. Additionally, it regularly dispatches emissaries to Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador to secure a steady production and supply of cocaine.³⁴⁴

342 Daniel Alonso Viña, “[Más de 44.000 efectivos en 100 países diferentes: la DEA de Estados Unidos informa sobre las operaciones del Cartel de Sinaloa y el CJNG](#),” El País, 28 July 2023.

343 Parker Asmann, Victoria Dittmar and Peter Appleby, “[Mexico Fentanyl Production Migrates North as Chapitos Death Threats Loom](#),” InSight Crime, 18 March 2024.

344 Elías Camhaji, “[The DEA’s crusade against the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels: ‘The most dangerous and deadly drug crisis the US has ever faced’](#),” El País, 10 May 2023.

341 InSight Crime, “[Sinaloa Cartel](#),” 15 March 2024.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Sinaloa Cartel primarily engages in the international trafficking of fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, and heroin, with the United States and Europe being its principal markets. In recent years, Australia and Eastern Asia have also become increasingly important for the group's drug trafficking operations. Some factions of the group are also involved in local drug dealing and taxing other criminal networks, including migrant smugglers.

Extortion, or imposing taxes on other traffickers who use their territory to move or sell drugs, as well as setting prices for legal goods such as fish and minerals, are other methods by which factions of the Sinaloa Cartel generate revenue.

Although it's nearly impossible to estimate with any degree of certainty the organization's annual profits are believed to begin at \$6 billion and could be significantly higher.³⁴⁵ Accurate estimation is challenging due to the group's non-hierarchical structure, which makes it unclear who is a part of the organization and who isn't.

The Sinaloa Cartel has leveraged its dominance in various drug markets to develop sophisticated money-laundering techniques, including complex financial transactions, the use of legal businesses, shell companies, and the exploitation of cryptocurrencies.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Membership estimations are near impossible, given the lack of clear distinctions between members and non-members. The Sinaloa Cartel is a complex network of various legal and illegal actors who may collaborate at different times, either permanently or temporarily.

Unlike traditional criminal organizations, the Sinaloa Cartel does not operate with a strict hierarchical structure. Instead, it functions as

a network of various cells that collaborate. The organization often outsources its operations, both internationally and within Mexico, in regions it does not directly control, to local partners.

Although there is no clear central leadership, the Sinaloa Cartel operates through at least three pillars that share resources, offer protection, and set rules in the territories it controls. The first was commanded by El Mayo, the last remaining member of the group's old guard until his arrest in July 2024.

It is believed that his son, Ismael Zambada Sicaños, alias "Mayito Flaco," is now in charge. The second faction is led by El Chapo's sons—Joaquín Guzmán López, Ovidio Guzmán López, Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar, and Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar—collectively known as "Los Chapitos." Joaquín Guzmán López and Ovidio Guzmán López are both in custody in the United States. The third pillar is led by El Chapo's brother, Aureliano Guzmán, alias "El Guano."

Each faction within the Sinaloa Cartel commands its own armed branches, or "mini armies," responsible for protecting their territories. For example, Los Chapitos are associated with groups like Los Ninis, Los Salazar, Gente Nueva, and Los Chimalas. Meanwhile, networks loyal to El Mayo collaborate with groups such as Los Ántrax and Los Rusos.

STATE RESPONSE

Both Mexico and the United States have offered multimillion-dollar rewards for information leading to the capture of key Sinaloa Cartel leaders, including members of the Chapitos and other armed factions. The US government, in particular, has targeted the Sinaloa Cartel for decades, intensifying its efforts in recent years due to the organization's alleged leading role in fentanyl trafficking.

In 2016, Mexican authorities captured El Chapo for the third and final time, extraditing him to the United States a year later.³⁴⁶ In 2023, El Chapo's son, Ovidio, was also extradited to the

³⁴⁵ Patrick J. McDonnell, "[How many people work for the Mexican drug cartels? Researchers have an answer](#)," Los Angeles Times, 21 September 2023.

³⁴⁶ InSight Crime, "[Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias 'El Chapo'](#)," 29 March 2019.

United States to face drug trafficking charges after a dramatic operation left dozens dead and a community terrorized.³⁴⁷ With the July 2024 capture of El Mayo, another founding member of the Sinaloa Cartel, Mexican and US authorities have effectively eliminated the group's old guard.

Despite these high-profile arrests, the flow of synthetic drugs, particularly fentanyl and methamphetamine, into the United States and other parts of the world has barely slowed. The increasingly decentralized synthetic drug supply chain has lowered barriers to entry for new players and reduces the importance of single players like El Mayo or the Chapitos.³⁴⁸

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The Sinaloa Cartel has excelled in systematically building political capital by forging alliances with legitimate actors, including business elites, social influencers such as priests, politicians, members of the armed forces, government officials, and local communities.³⁴⁹

The group has infiltrated entire supply chains across various sectors and industries, both legal and illegal. In some parts of Sinaloa, for example, it controls fisheries, managing everything from the catch to processing and sales to restaurants. This approach creates legal and illegal jobs for some of Mexico's most marginalized communities, further legitimizing the network and bolstering its political capital.³⁵⁰

Factions of the Sinaloa Cartel are still the de facto authorities in illicit crop-growing regions in the mountains of Sinaloa, setting up armed convoys to patrol highways and transportation routes. These networks associated with the Sinaloa Cartel control who can buy marijuana and opium poppy crops from producers, thus enforcing another form of criminal governance in areas they control.³⁵¹

347 Peter Appleby and Parker Asmann, "[Truth or Lie? A Letter From El Mayo Fuels Mexico-US Tensions Over Sinaloa Cartel Arrests](#)," InSight Crime, 14 August 2024.

348 Parker Asmann and Victoria Dittmar, "[Sinaloa Cartel Leaders Arrested in Symbolic, but Hollow Victory for US](#)," InSight Crime, 26 July 2024.

349 Zeta Tijuana, "[CDS controla venta de mariscos](#)," April 15, 2024.

350 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "[How the Sinaloa Cartel rules](#)," Brookings Institute, 4 April 2022.

351 InSight Crime, "[The End of \(Illegal\) Marijuana: What It Means for Criminal Dynamics in Mexico](#)," December 2022.

The group also provides protection services to local businesses and residents, keeping government tax collectors and inspectors at bay and moderating street crime like robberies. To further cement their influence and popularity, Sinaloa Cartel leaders fund community events and celebrations, donate to local churches and schools, build soccer stadiums, and even provide aid during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Sinaloa Cartel plays a vital role within the global drug supply chain, engaging in the production, procurement, transportation and sale of fentanyl, methamphetamine, marijuana, and heroin. Its factions also act as intermediaries and transporters for cocaine, primarily sourced from Colombia and destined for markets in the United States and Europe.

The organization has cultivated a vast network of national and international alliances. In Latin America, it historically partnered with the now-defunct Norte del Valle Cartel to source cocaine. Today, it collaborates with other Colombian groups such as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - AGC), and the Conquering Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada (Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada - ACSN), as well as Venezuelan criminal organizations and Ecuadorian gangs.

In Europe, the Sinaloa Cartel's clientele and business partners allegedly include a diverse range of criminal organizations, such as the Moroccan mafia, Serbian mafia, Kinahan Cartel, Irish mafia, Chechen mafia, Albanian mafia, Romanian mafia, and the 'Ndrangheta. To support its synthetic drug production, the group also relies on intermediaries with chemical-producing companies in China and India, which supply the necessary chemical substances needed for its operation.³⁵²

352 InSight Crime, "[Sinaloa Cartel](#)," 15 March 2024.

THE CHONEROS (LOS CHONEROS)



THE CHONEROS

ORIGIN 
Ecuador

LEADER (S)







IMPACT

High

APPROXIMATE SIZE

12,000 members

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

-  Extortion
-  Illegal mining
-  Drug trafficking
-  Money laundering
-  Kidnapping
-  Micro trafficking



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



Adolfo Macías Villamar
alias "Fito"

December 2024

The Choneros are one of Ecuador's most prominent criminal groups, playing a central role in the country's rise as a cocaine transshipment zone and organized crime hub. Originally a small-time gang committed to extortion and robbery,³⁵³ the Choneros used Ecuador's prison system in the 2010s to expand their influence across the entire country, while simultaneously deepening ties with transnational drug trafficking groups. Today, the Choneros are locked in a battle with their former ally, the Lobos, over territory for drug trafficking and other criminal economies.

353 Plan V, "[¿Quién asesinó a alias Rasquiña?](#)," 3 January 2022.

HISTORY

The Choneros were founded in the 1990s in the town of Chone, in Ecuador's western province of Manabí. Jorge Bismarck Véliz España, alias "Teniente España," the group's first leader, established connections with cocaine traffickers, helping them export cocaine through Manta, a coastal city near Chone in Manabí.³⁵⁴

Following a rival group's murder of Teniente España in 2007, the leadership of the Choneros passed to Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias "Rasquiña" or "JL." Rasquiña's stint as Choneros leader while outside prison was short, and by 2011 authorities had arrested and imprisoned the Choneros boss, as well as other leaders Junior Roldán, alias "JR," and Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias "Fito."

Rasquiña saw an opportunity to revamp the group from behind bars. A skilled diplomat, he invited various crime groups—including leaders and members of juvenile street gangs like the Latin Kings, Ñetas, and Vatos Locos—to join the Choneros federation. Small gangs could boost their standing in Ecuador's criminal underworld under the Choneros umbrella, while still maintaining relative autonomy. Meanwhile, Ecuadorian authorities attempted to disrupt the group's growing influence by transferring its leaders to different prisons around the country. Instead, the Choneros grew in membership and geographical reach. By 2020, they had become the hegemonic power within the prison system.

The murder of Rasquiña in December 2020 debilitated the Choneros federation by eliminating its primary conciliator, leading to the fragmentation of Ecuador's criminal landscape. Prominent affiliate gangs like the Lobos, Tiguerones, and Chone Killers split off from the Choneros. In the prisons, these gangs all clashed, resulting in a series of brutal prison massacres in 2021 and 2022 that left hundreds dead.³⁵⁵

Out of this conflict, the Lobos have emerged as the Choneros' main rival, while the Tiguerones,

Chone Killers, and other smaller groups regularly switch allegiances with either of the two big players.

GEOGRAPHY

Manabí is the traditional stronghold of the Choneros, where the group has a significant presence in the major cities of Manta and Portoviejo. However, they are also present throughout Ecuador in 10 provinces.³⁵⁶ Parts of the province of Guayas, also a valuable coastal drug trafficking territory, are controlled by the group. They are entrenched in various Guayaquil neighborhoods and nearby municipalities like El Triunfo.

Choneros cells are spread throughout the country's prison system. The group has been especially strong in La Regional prison in Guayaquil, as well as the Rodeo prison in Portoviejo. They have also controlled numerous other small prisons around Ecuador.³⁵⁷

The group does not have a territorial presence outside of Ecuador.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Choneros are service providers for transnational drug trafficking groups, namely the Sinaloa Cartel, and some European mafia groups. The group's ability to quickly move cocaine from the Colombian border region to export points in Manabí's coastal region has made them appealing to foreign groups.³⁵⁸ In exchange for moving cocaine through Manabí, the Choneros are paid in cocaine that they can then sell for domestic consumption.

As the Choneros transformed into a prison gang in the 2010s, prison economies have come to represent an increasingly large portion of their income. In many prisons, the group is the de facto governing power, meaning they can control the everyday lives of incarcerated people. They extort prisoners, sell food and drugs, and smuggle contraband. Ecuador's

³⁵⁴ Chris Dalby, "The Rise and Fall of the Choneros, Ecuador's Drug Trafficking Opportunists," InSight Crime, 20 July 2023.

³⁵⁵ Chris Dalby, "Ecuador's Smaller Gangs Making Deadly Statements in Large-Scale Massacres," InSight Crime, 10 May 2022.

³⁵⁶ Anastasia Austin, "Why Have Ecuador's Drug Trafficking Gangs Turned to Extortion?," InSight Crime, 20 December 2023.

³⁵⁷ InSight Crime interview, Choneros spokesperson, Manta, Ecuador, 9 May 2024.

³⁵⁸ Samantha Schmidt and Diana Durán Núñez, "Ecuador's prison riot: Drug cartels, overcrowded cells and a bloodbath," Washington Post, 30 September 2021.

criminal groups are believed to earn hundreds of millions of dollars per year just from these economies.

At the neighborhood level, Choneros cells are involved in kidnapping, extortion, drug dealing, murder for hire, robbery, and other small-scale criminal economies. The Choneros may also be moving into illegal mining, with Ecuadorian security forces arresting members of the group in the Amazonian province of Orellana in May 2024.³⁵⁹

The women's role within the group appears to focus on the management of drug trafficking money and money laundering.³⁶⁰

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

After hitmen murdered Rasquiña in December 2020 and JR in May 2023, leadership of the Choneros fell to Fito, the last remaining member of the Choneros high command. Fito escaped from prison in January 2024 and his whereabouts are unknown. It is unclear how much influence Fito still has, and the organization currently has no clear successor.

The Choneros follow a loose, constantly shifting hierarchical structure. Beneath Fito, there are a series of regional commanders who coordinate the group's operations in different parts of Ecuador, as well as incarcerated commanders who control different prison wings. These regional commanders are crucial as they maintain order between different street gangs that operate relatively autonomously and often have conflicting interests.

Below the regional and prison commanders are neighborhood bosses. Neighborhood bosses oversee low-level criminal economies like extortion, kidnapping, and drug dealing, sending a portion of the earnings higher up in the group. The regional Choneros commanders then provide them with arms and drugs to sell in their neighborhoods.

359 Fuerzas Armadas del Ecuador [@FFAAECUADOR], "...En San José de Guayusa, durante operación militar contra la minería ilegal 22 presuntos integrantes de 'Los Choneros' fueron aprehendidos...", *Post* (abbreviated), X, 1 May 2024.

360 El Universo, "[Alias 'la Madrina' administraría parte del dinero de Los Choneros en Manta](#)," 22 May 2024.

STATE RESPONSE

Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa's "war on gangs" —a heavily militarized approach— has targeted Choneros strongholds, especially in Manta. This has led to the arrest of high-profile leaders and relatives of Fito. These security operations may have weakened the Choneros' position in Manabí, but the Lobos are trying to expand their influence in the province in an attempt to flip neighborhoods previously under Choneros control.³⁶¹

Security operations have imprisoned most Choneros leaders, while the Lobos leadership largely remains free. This could make the Choneros vulnerable to further Lobos incursions, especially as the government's intervention in the prisons has disrupted communication between Choneros leaders in prison and street-level members.³⁶²

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Criminal governance in territories controlled by the Choneros largely depends on local leaders, who run day-to-day operations at the neighborhood level.

In general, Choneros leaders appear more focused on criminal governance than the Lobos, which seem more predatory in their areas of influence. In their home province of Manabí, the Choneros are especially focused on fostering good relationships in the community, often banning crimes like extortion and kidnapping. However, enforcing these bans can be difficult if a local leader decides to commit the crimes.³⁶³

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Choneros are one of, if not the most powerful criminal group in Ecuador. While the Lobos have taken more territory and gained more control, a recent reshuffling of

361 Primicias, "[Violencia en Manabí: Los Lobos quieren eliminar a cabecillas de Los Choneros](#)," 30 March 2024.

362 InSight Crime interview, Choneros spokesperson, Manta, Ecuador, 9 May 2024.

363 InSight Crime interview, Choneros spokesperson, Manta, Ecuador, 9 May 2024.

alliances has left the Lobos without any major Ecuadorian allies. Meanwhile, the Choneros have reestablished their alliances with groups like the Tiguerones and Chone Killers. This suggests momentum could be tilting in their favor. Their control of key swathes of territory and various criminal economies means they are well-financed and well-armed, representing a significant security threat to the Ecuadorian government.

Internationally, the Choneros are little more than a powerful intermediary group, responsible for transporting and exporting drugs through Ecuador. They do not have the same level of sophistication or logistical capacity as some Colombian, Mexican, and European criminal networks, though they may try to reach that level going forward.

THE HUISTAS (LOS HUISTAS)



THE HUISTAS

ORIGIN 
Guatemala

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

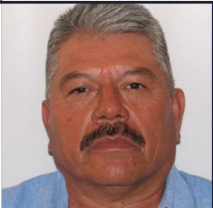
Medium

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Drug trafficking
- Money laundering
- Contraband



Eugenio Darío Molina-López
alias "Don Darío"

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE

The Huistas are one of the most powerful drug trafficking groups in Guatemala, controlling critical territory along the border with Mexico. The group’s longstanding ties to businessmen, law enforcement officials, and politicians have enabled it to dominate the criminal underworld in parts of northwestern Guatemala.

HISTORY

The Huistas have been active in the narcotics trade in the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, since the late 1990s and their members have been targeted by both US and Guatemalan authorities since the late 2010s.

While marijuana and poppy cultivation began in some mountainous areas of Huehuetenango in the 1970s, these were isolated activities driven by demand from independent Mexican traffickers. It wasn't until the late 20th century that groups like the Huistas developed the capacity to manage the storage and transport of drugs into Mexican territory.

Initially, these operations were dominated by Mexicans affiliated with the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels, who had established alliances with local Guatemalan groups and had experience in contraband and migrant smuggling. Over time, these Guatemalan groups built their own logistics networks, allowing them to move and store drugs from other parts of Guatemala to the border.

Though traditionally linked to various Mexican criminal organizations, the Huistas have gradually acquired a certain degree of autonomy. They have expanded from mere transshipment of drugs to handling storage and, in the last ten years, producing methamphetamine, according to US authorities.

In addition to their drug trafficking operations, the Huistas have developed a strategy that includes building a network of legitimate businesses such as hotels, recreation centers, workshops, and construction companies. These ventures serve to launder illicit funds and allow the group to forge connections with businesspeople, officials, and other authorities through intermediaries at both local and national levels.³⁶⁴

GEOGRAPHY

The Huistas dominate the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, which borders

Chiapas, Mexico. This area is a crucial drug trafficking corridor and a vital route for goods, people, and international migration.

The group takes its name from the region it controls; "Huista" refers to San Antonio Huista and Santa Ana Huista, two small municipalities located in the northeast of Huehuetenango. They control other municipalities in the region, such as La Democracia and the capital city of the department, Huehuetenango.³⁶⁵

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

US authorities allege that the Huistas smuggle cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin from northern Guatemala to Mexican organizations like the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG). US authorities claim the group also produces heroin and methamphetamine for export, controls poppy cultivation fields in the mountainous regions of Huehuetenango and San Marcos, and imports precursor chemicals from China for methamphetamine production.³⁶⁶

The Huistas' primary revenue stream is cocaine smuggling. They transport the drug from the borders with Honduras and El Salvador, as well as from the Pacific coast and Guatemala City to the Mexican border. The group maintains storage facilities in Huehuetenango, Santa Ana Huista, San Pedro Necta, and Nentón.

In recent years, the Huistas have allegedly expanded their operations to include methamphetamine production within their areas of control. Methamphetamine laboratories have been detected in La Democracia, Santa Ana Huista, Jacaltenango, and Nentón, signaling the group's transition from merely storing and transporting drugs to producing them, according to an InSight Crime investigation from 2016.³⁶⁷

To launder their illicit earnings, the Huistas have developed a network of businesses that extend into various departments of Guatemala,

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ US Treasury Department, "[Treasury Sanctions Guatemala's Los Huistas Drug Trafficking Organization with Ties to Mexican Cartels](#)," 18 March 2022. Press release.

³⁶⁷ InSight Crime, "[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The 'Huistas'](#)," 1 September 2016.

³⁶⁴ InSight Crime, "[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The 'Huistas'](#)," 1 September 2016.

with their core operations centered in Huehuetenango. These investments include real estate, hotels, recreation centers, and possibly coffee cultivation and sales.³⁶⁸

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Huistas organization operates with a centralized and hierarchical structure, incorporating specialized units for money laundering, as well as smuggling, storing, and producing drugs.

The group is primarily led by Eugenio Darío Molina-López, alias “Don Dario,” who allegedly oversees all operations of the Huistas. He is sanctioned by the US Treasury Department, and the US Department of State has offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to his arrest and/or conviction.³⁶⁹

Another leader within the organization is Aler Balamero Samayoa Recinos, alias “Chicharra,” who allegedly manages the trafficking operations, specifically coordinating the transportation of cocaine shipments from Huehuetenango, Guatemala, into the Mexican state of Chiapas. Samayoa has been indicted on drug trafficking charges by the US District Court for the District of Columbia.³⁷⁰

As government efforts to combat drug trafficking have intensified, and with the rise of conflicts between Mexican criminal organizations and criminal networks engaged in drug theft, security is fundamental to the survival of the Huistas. The group has long operated a sophisticated security apparatus designed to protect Samayoa and other leaders from rival groups and potential security operations.

This security system is comprehensive, monitoring roads, bridges, and intersections, and controlling the movement of people and vehicles. It includes a network of “lookouts” who report any suspicious activity. Typically, each lookout team consists of two people: one

on foot, responsible for communication, and the other on a motorcycle, ready to follow and monitor any suspects. This structure allows the Huistas to swiftly respond to potential threats, ensuring the continued operation and protection of their criminal enterprise.³⁷¹

STATE RESPONSE

Several members of the Huistas have been sanctioned by various US government departments, including the Department of State, Department of Justice, and the Treasury Department, for their collaboration with Mexican drug trafficking organizations and for “threatening the people and security of the United States and Guatemala.”³⁷²

Despite these international sanctions, the Huistas have infiltrated state institutions in Guatemala, achieving corruption across multiple levels of government. Their links with local politicians, law enforcement, and other government officials have provided the group with protection and the ability to operate with relative impunity, allowing them to expand and sustain their illegal businesses.

This infiltration has been critical to the group’s survival and growth, as it has enabled them to evade law enforcement efforts and maintain control over trafficking routes and territories. The Guatemalan government’s efforts to combat the group have been hampered by this corruption, making it difficult to effectively tackle the organization.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Within its stronghold, primarily in the municipalities of Santa Ana Huista and San Antonio Huista, the Huistas have established a sophisticated system of criminal governance. This system revolves around two elements: a protection network designed to enforce an unwritten rule that punishes informants, and the cultivation of social legitimacy through the sharing of wealth.

368 Ibid.

369 US Treasury Department, “[Treasury Sanctions Guatemala’s Los Huistas Drug Trafficking Organization with Ties to Mexican Cartels](#),” 18 March 2022. Press release.

370 Ibid.

371 InSight Crime, “[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The ‘Huistas’](#),” 1 September 2016.

372 US State Department, “[Department of State Offers Reward for Information to Bring Guatemalan Drug Trafficker to Justice](#),” March 18, 2022.

The group's money laundering operations have enabled the creation of a network of businesses that offer employment opportunities to local residents. For many youths in these municipalities, involvement in the Huistas' illicit activities has become a status symbol and a significant aspiration, as joining the group is seen as a pathway to prestige.

However, the inhabitants of these areas are acutely aware that any disclosure of the group's activities is met with violent retribution. The Huistas enforce a strict "zero tolerance" policy toward common crime within their territory. Their security forces have been known to execute suspected gang members, rapists, and other criminals, effectively preventing the presence of rival groups and reinforcing their role as the de facto guarantors of community safety.

The National Civil Police rarely intervene in such matters. It is widely acknowledged that some police officers are on the group's payroll, ensuring that law enforcement turns a blind eye to the Huistas' operations. Although there is a notable police presence on the roads leading to San Antonio Huista and Santa Ana Huista, these security agents do not stop suspected smugglers. Instead, they appear to protect these groups, closely monitoring visitors and strangers who enter the municipalities.³⁷³

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORK

The Huistas have significantly benefited from the increasing presence of Mexican criminal groups in Central America, a region that is strategically crucial for the cultivation and transportation of drugs to the United States and Europe.

Primarily, the Huistas serve as transporters in the regional drug trafficking landscape. They are responsible for moving cocaine and other drugs from Guatemala into Mexico, thereby facilitating the operations of both the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel.

Drugs are typically transported from Guatemala's eastern border, southern coast,

or Guatemala City into Huehuetenango. The group utilizes caravans of vehicles with hidden compartments and makeshift runways on roads in northern Huehuetenango for rapid drug plane operations. These road sections are illuminated by torches, allowing planes to land, unload the drugs into waiting pickup trucks, and take off again in a matter of minutes.
















In January 2022, Colombian authorities revealed that cocaine labs operated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — FARC) dissident group, Second Marquetalia, were supplying the CJNG with tons of cocaine. Evidence of this was found in a jet that departed from a clandestine landing strip in Venezuela and landed in Petén, Guatemala, on December 15, 2021. Guatemalan authorities seized one ton of cocaine from this shipment. These drugs were en route to Huehuetenango, the stronghold of the Huistas, to then be transported into Mexico.³⁷⁴

This incident illustrates the Huistas' critical role in the cocaine supply chain, serving as the link between major criminal groups and acting as logistical facilitators for larger drug trafficking operations that extend beyond their immediate control.

³⁷³ InSight Crime, "[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The 'Huistas'](#)," 1 September 2016.

³⁷⁴ Julie López, "[The Guatemalan Link between Jalisco New Generation Cartel and FARC Dissidents](#)," El Faro, 6 July 2022.

THE LOBOS (LOS LOBOS)

		<h1>THE LOBOS</h1>		ORIGIN  Ecuador
December 2024	IMPACT High	APPROXIMATE SIZE 8,000 members		LEADER (S)  Wilmer Geovanny Chavarria Barre alias "Pipo" Ángel Esteban Aguilar Morales alias "Lobo Menor" Jhonny Lutgardo Mera Mera alias "Chumado" Colón Fabrício Pico Suárez alias "Capitán Pico"
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES <div><div> Extortion</div><div> Drug trafficking</div><div> Kidnapping</div><div> Micro trafficking</div><div> Illegal mining</div><div> Sexual exploitation</div><div> Robbery</div><div> Money laundering</div></div>			
	<div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div>			

The Lobos (the Wolves) are one of Ecuador’s two largest criminal networks fighting for control of drug trafficking routes in the country. The group has grown rapidly, engaging in increasingly sophisticated and varied criminal operations across Ecuador.

HISTORY

The Lobos emerged sometime between 2015 and 2019 when a pre-existing Cuenca-based criminal structure integrated into the Choneros federation.³⁷⁵ Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias “JL” or “Rasquiña,” then-leader of the Choneros, built the federation by incorporating small existing groups who were allowed to operate with considerable autonomy.³⁷⁶

JL’s assassination in 2020 shattered the federation as the groups comprising it blamed each other for his murder, fragmented, and began a brutal battle for control of the dead leader’s criminal empire.³⁷⁷ Amidst this bloodbath, the Lobos formed an alliance with two other important but less powerful factions, the Tiguerones and Chone Killers, against what remained of the Choneros. Collectively, they called themselves Nueva Generación (New Generation) as a nod to their ties with Mexico’s Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG).³⁷⁸

Although this alliance splintered after the 2022 murder of the group’s financial backer, Leandro Norero, the Lobos remain one of the CJNG’s main service providers for trafficking large cocaine shipments through Ecuador to Europe and the United States.

GEOGRAPHY

The Lobos operate in 16 of Ecuador’s 24 provinces. The group’s strongholds include Turi prison in the southern Azuayan city of Cuenca and Latacunga prison, located in Cotopaxi province, just 70 kilometers from the capital of Quito. The gang also has a significant presence in the Bellavista prison in the province of Santo Domingo de Tsáchillas and the Inca prison in Quito.³⁷⁹

Police and media reports suggest the group is expanding into new provinces, including

the streets of Santa Elena and the gold mines of Orellana, but InSight Crime has not yet been able to confirm whether this presence is permanent or substantial.³⁸⁰

The Lobos are also attempting to expand into strategic drug trafficking corridors passing through the coastal cities of Manta and Portoviejo, traditionally ruled by their rivals, the Choneros.

There is no evidence that the Lobos have an established presence outside Ecuador.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Lobos engage in transnational and retail drug trafficking, illegal gold mining, extortion, kidnapping, and robbery.³⁸¹ A local Lobos commander also told InSight Crime that the group participates in human trafficking, forcing women to participate in sex work.

Transnational drug trafficking likely continues to be the most profitable criminal economy for the Lobos, who organize and oversee the transport, security, and dispatch of cocaine shipments belonging to large Mexican and European drug trafficking networks.³⁸² In recent years, they have aggressively expanded into illegal gold mining, first extorting legal and illegal gold mining operations before making violent plays to take them over completely.³⁸³

High-ranking prison-based leaders orchestrate these sophisticated drug trafficking and illegal mining operations, while the leaders of street-level “combos” handle retail drug sales, extortion, kidnapping, and robbery.

The group’s top leadership has traditionally also made immense profits from their near-total control of some prisons, primarily Turi and Latacunga. They would charge inmates

380 Anastasia Austin, “[As Government Pressure Mounts, Ecuador’s Gangs Strike Gold](#),” InSight Crime, 23 July 2024.

381 Ibid

Anastasia Austin, “[Why Have Ecuador’s Drug Trafficking Gangs Turned to Extortion?](#),” InSight Crime 20 December 2023.

382 Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “[Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador’s Criminal Chessboard](#),” InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

383 Anastasia Austin, “[As Government Pressure Mounts, Ecuador’s Gangs Strike Gold](#),” InSight Crime, 23 July 2024.

375 Primicias, “[Los Lobos ganan espacio en Quito, en alianza con ‘famoso’ delincuente](#),” 8 January 2024.

376 InSight Crime, “[Choneros](#),” 26 September 2023.

377 InSight Crime, “[Lobos](#),” 8 November 2023.

378 Anastasia Austin and Henry Shuldiner, “[Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador’s Criminal Chessboard](#),” InSight Crime, 7 March 2024.

379 Anastasia Austin, “[Ecuador Faces a Tangled Web in Its War on Gangs](#),” InSight Crime, 19 January 2024.

for necessities, communication privileges, and protection. The Ecuadorian government's 2024 war on gangs, which saw the military take over prisons, seems to have disrupted this control, but the disruption may only be temporary.³⁸⁴

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The Lobos are a hierarchical organization whose top leadership has typically led from within prisons, coordinating between the organization's prison, specialist, and street-level nodes, according to underworld and security sources.

Top leaders tend to act both as *jefes de zona*, or zone chiefs, and *comandantes de pabellon*, or prison pavilion commanders. The Lobos top leaders include Wilmer Geovanny Chavarria Barre, alias "Pipo," Angel Esteban Aguilar Morales, alias "Lobo Menor," Jhonny Lutgardo Mera Mera, alias "Chumado," and Colón Fabricio Pico Suárez, alias "Capitán Pico."³⁸⁵

Within prisons, they oversee "gatitos," or cats, as detained rank-and-file members of the Lobos are known. Outside of prisons, they coordinate with specialist nodes of the organization who carry out sophisticated criminal operations with little contact with the rest of the group, as well as *jefes del barrio*, or neighborhood chiefs, who run street-level operations in one or more neighborhoods.

Neighborhood chiefs enjoy significant autonomy at the street level. Their role in the structure and loyalty to the Lobos can be fluid, often existing in a gray area between allies and full-fledged members. However, the core of the Lobos' criminal operations comes from the specialist nodes, which answer directly to the zone chiefs. This structure means that while lower-level operators can be unreliable, they are also easily replaced by others seeking the financial opportunities that come with being part of the Lobos network.

³⁸⁴ James Bargent and Karol Noroña, "Prisoner Torture and Abuse Rife in Ecuador's Gang Crackdown," InSight Crime, 7 June 2024.

³⁸⁵ Policía Ecuador, "Los Mas Buscados," 15 February 2024. Presentation.

Neighborhood chiefs oversee combos, small groups often composed of minors who handle street-level crimes, like selling drugs or collecting extortion rent, and provide muscle for larger operations.

The estimated size of the Lobos is often cited as 8,000 members, but this figure is rarely attributed to any specific source, and the group's decentralized nature makes it difficult to provide a precise number.³⁸⁶

STATE RESPONSE

President Daniel Noboa declared war on Ecuador's gangs on January 9, 2024, designating 22 of them, including the Lobos, as terrorist organizations.³⁸⁷

So far, this "war" has been characterized by increased resources for the country's security forces with a focus on drug interdiction, joint operations on the streets, and –most of all– a near-permanent presence of Ecuador's military in its prisons.

The administration also transferred many high and mid-level Lobos leaders from other prisons, including the group's strongholds in Turi and Latacunga, to the high-security La Roca prison, where authorities presumably have more control.³⁸⁸

However, the Lobos may prove resilient to this assault. The Lobos already had multiple leaders –including Pipo– operating from the outside. Following the intervention, others escaped, and the group has continued to mount sophisticated operations throughout the intervention.³⁸⁹

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

There is a great deal of variation in how the Lobos govern the territory under their control. Some local Lobos commanders exhibit extreme brutality and practice unbridled

³⁸⁶ Christy Cooney & Vanessa Buschschlüter, "Candidate in Ecuador's presidential election Fernando Villavicencio shot dead," BBC, 10 August 2023.

³⁸⁷ Anastasia Austin, "Ecuador's Explosive War on Gangs Lacks Exit Strategy," InSight Crime, 9 January 2024.

³⁸⁸ El Universo, "Daniel Noboa ordena traslado de tres cabecillas de Los Lobos a La Roca por alertas de atentados contra la fiscal Diana Salazar," 4 January 2024.

³⁸⁹ InSight Crime, "Assessing the Early Days of Ecuador's War on Gangs," InSight Crime, 16 January 2024.

extortion, others cultivate a “Robin Hood” image, while others offer services to local communities but only at a very high cost.³⁹⁰

On the whole, however, the Lobos are more predatory than their main rivals, the Choneros, and much more willing to use extreme violence to eliminate rivals, seize territory, punish disloyal members, coerce victims, and pressure officials.³⁹¹

In July 2024, a mid-level Lobos leader was convicted for organizing the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio that rocked Ecuador at the end of 2023.³⁹² And, though there have been no convictions in Norero’s murder, there is consensus among police and underworld sources, as well as media reports, that the Lobos ordered the hit because Norero was negotiating with a rival behind their backs.

Unlike other Ecuadorian criminal organizations, the Lobos’ ranks seem to include a surprisingly high number of women and girls, even in leadership positions. A local Lobos leader told InSight Crime that the zone chief in Quito is a woman, that his combo has an equal balance of men and women, and that there are even combos within the gang composed exclusively of women. Media reports of women allegedly leading and participating in Lobos’ criminal operations support his account, though it is unclear how far it extends beyond the capital city.³⁹³

traffickers, who hire the group to transport and guard large cocaine shipments.

However, the practice of receiving payment for these services in cocaine they can sell further up the demand chain may give the Lobos a foothold in international trafficking in the future.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

While the Lobos have grown to become one of the most powerful criminal networks in Ecuador, they remain secondary players on the international stage.

Their main role is acting as service providers for the CJNG and European drug trafficking networks, as well as individual Ecuadorian

390 Chris Dalby, “[GameChangers 2023: Ecuador Loses Its Grip on Crime](#),” InSight Crime, 4 January 2024.

391 Gavin Voss, “[Ecuador’s War on Gangs Stumbles in Key Coastal City](#),” InSight Crime, 10 June 2024.

392 Anastasia Austin, “[Convictions in Ecuador Political Assassination, But No Clarity](#),” InSight Crime, 16 July 2024.

393 La Hora, “[Conozca a las lideresas de bandas criminales en Ecuador](#),” 26 April 2024.

THE MONOS (LOS MONOS)



THE MONOS

ORIGIN 
Argentina

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

Medium

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Money laundering
- Micro trafficking



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE



Ariel Máximo Cantero
alias "Guille"

December 2024

The Monos, a criminal group led by members of the Cantero family, dominated micro-trafficking in much of the port city of Rosario, Argentina for years. However, following the murder of one of their leaders and the convictions of other clan members, their power and control over criminal economies in Rosario is waning.

HISTORY

The Monos criminal group originated in the 1990s in Rosario. Initially, the group provided security for other micro-trafficking gangs and transported marijuana from Paraguay to Rosario for distribution.³⁹⁴

However, the early 2000s marked a turning point when Ariel Cantero, alias “El Viejo,” took over leadership of the gang after the disappearance of his partner, Juan Carlos Fernandez. From that moment, the Monos expanded their influence in some of Rosario’s marginal neighborhoods through ferocious violence, a characteristic that continues to define the group today.

The Monos capitalized on the financial crisis that hit Argentina, positioning themselves as a parallel state in Rosario’s marginal areas and eliminating much of the competition in the micro-trafficking business.³⁹⁵ Over the years, and thanks to its strategic connections with the security forces, the group became one of the main distributors of marijuana and cocaine for local consumption in certain parts of Rosario.³⁹⁶

The group enjoyed success and operated without major problems until 2012. During this time, the leadership managed to avoid imprisonment, used their police connections to eliminate their rivals, and relied on their social bases to recruit “soldaditos,” or (little soldiers, –children and youths who worked in drug bunkers, small brick structures in the city’s most marginalized neighborhoods– to expand their operations further into other deprived areas of Rosario. However, a pivotal murder would forever change the course of the group and the city.³⁹⁷

On May 26, 2013, Claudio Cantero, alias “El Pájaro,” heir to the group’s leadership, was murdered.³⁹⁸ The Monos, in their thirst for

revenge, launched a wave of indiscriminate violence against rivals and anyone suspected of involvement in the killing. Faced with escalating violence, the national government and the government of the province of Santa Fe took action and began a crackdown on the Cantero clan.³⁹⁹

The crackdown into the Monos spanned several years, becoming one of the most important criminal group investigations in Argentina’s recent history. The case was known as “Los Patrones”. In 2018, the trial against the group’s leadership and at least nine members of the security forces involved with the gang.⁴⁰⁰ At least 34 people were sentenced, with penalties ranging from six to 37 years in prison.⁴⁰¹

Since then, Ariel Maximo Cantero, alias “Guille,” the younger brother and successor to “El Pájaro,” has attempted to maintain command of the organization from prison. However, the siege against the Monos continues, leading the organization to atomize and become increasingly dispersed.⁴⁰² New family clans have tried to co-opt areas in micro-trafficking, challenging the Monos’ dominance and taking advantage of the constant disruptions to their leadership.⁴⁰³

GEOGRAPHY

The Monos are active in the city of Rosario in Argentina’s northeastern Santa Fe province. The group has controlled micro-trafficking in different marginal areas of the port city for decades, but they have not evolved into other criminal activities that would allow expansion to other provinces.⁴⁰⁴

While the Monos have suppliers for cocaine in Bolivia and marijuana in Paraguay, they

394 Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, “[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)” (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017).

395 InSight Crime, “[Monos](#),” 28 April, 2022.

396 Josefina Salomon, “[Police Corruption Blamed as Bodies Pile Up in Rosario, Argentina](#),” InSight Crime, 10 March 2020.

397 Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, “[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)” (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017).

398 Josefina Salomón, “[The Trial of the Monos: Historic Blow to Argentina’s Underworld?](#),” InSight Crime, 9 April, 2018.

399 InSight Crime, “[Monos](#),” 28 April, 2022.

400 Josefina Salomon, “[3 Reasons Why the Monos Trial in Argentina Matters](#),” InSight Crime, 20 September, 2018.

401 Mauro Aguilar and Lucas Aranda, “[“Los Patrones”, la causa narco que acorrala a amigos y enemigos de Los Monos](#),” Clarín, 25 November, 2019.

402 Gabrielle Gorder, “[Monos Leader Continues to Call the Shots from Behind Bars](#),” InSight Crime, 10 September, 2021.

403 Christopher Newton, “[New Strategies in Rosario, Argentina, as Monos Fight](#),” InSight Crime, 14 March, 2023; Scott Mistler-Ferguson, “[Rivals for the Throne - Can Argentina’s Alvarado Clan Threaten the Monos?](#),” InSight Crime, 16 June 2022.

404 Alicia Florez, “[Los Monos Defending Their Territory in Rosario, Argentina](#),” InSight Crime, 20 November, 2020.

do not have a permanent or consolidated presence in these countries. Instead, their contacts in these countries guarantee the flow of drugs to Rosario, where they manage distribution.⁴⁰⁵

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The Monos' main economic activity is micro-trafficking. For more than three decades, the group has been dedicated to selling drugs using bunkers.⁴⁰⁶

Beyond micro-trafficking, the Monos generate illicit income from extortion. They also offer assassination services and charge for providing security to other drug bunkers in different areas of Rosario.⁴⁰⁷

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

The leadership of the Monos organization originally consisted of members of the Cantero family, including Ariel Cantero, alias "El Viejo," Celestina Contreras, alias "La Cele," and her sons Claudio and Ariel Cantero; as well as Ramón Ezequiel Machuca alias "Monchi". All of them were convicted in "Los Patrones" case.⁴⁰⁸

Today, Ariel Cantero, alias "Guille" continues to head the organization from prison.⁴⁰⁹ On November 4, 2024, a 25-year sentence was added to the pile of court rulings against him that could total 160 years. Most of the sentences against him have been for crimes committed from prison.⁴¹⁰ Despite these challenges, the group has adapted to

maintain its relevance in Rosario, and several younger members of the Cantero family have begun to lead their own cells.⁴¹¹

The size of the group is not known with certainty. However, in the so-called mega-case, at least 34 people were convicted, including members of the Cantero family and members of security forces who cooperated with the group. On the streets, thousands of the gang's "soldiers" and hired killers respond to the orders of the Cantero family.⁴¹²

Women close to the group's leadership have played a key role in laundering its profits. During the trial against the gang, alias "La Cele," partner of "El Viejo," was identified as a key figure in the Monos operations, highlighting the significant role women play in the organization's financial activities.

The partners of the Cantero brothers have also participated in money laundering schemes and were convicted in the mega-case of the federal justice system.⁴¹³

STATE RESPONSE

The Monos operated with relative ease and police complicity until 2013, when the group unleashed an unprecedented wave of violence in Rosario following the murder of Claudio Cantero.⁴¹⁴ The surge of street violence led to significant social pressure, prompting the national government to act. Authorities first dismantled a series of bunkers belonging to the Cantero clan, and subsequently the judicial branch carried out one of Argentina's most important criminal investigations.⁴¹⁵

To counteract the Monos, the state implemented a major purge of Rosario's security forces. In an effort to curb the violence,

405 Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)" (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017).

406 Josefina Salomón, "[The Trial of the Monos: Historic Blow to Argentina's Underworld?](#)," InSight Crime, 9 April, 2018.

407 Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)" (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017); Alicia Florez, "[Extortionists Copycat Argentina's Monos Gang](#)," InSight Crime, 23 November, 2021.

408 Josefina Salomon, "[3 Reasons Why the Monos Trial in Argentina Matters](#)," InSight Crime, 20 September, 2018.

409 Gabrielle Gorder, "[Monos Leader Continues to Call the Shots from Behind Bars](#)," InSight Crime, 10 September, 2021.

410 Christopher Newton, "[Head of Argentina's Monos Gang Racks up 160 Years in Sentences](#)," InSight Crime, 8 November 2024.

411 Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "[Capture of Monos' Young Blood Shows Criminal Lineage of Argentina's Premier Gang](#)," InSight Crime, 30 September, 2022.

412 Mauro Aguilar and Lucas Aranda, "[Los Patrones, la causa narco que acorrala a amigos y enemigos de Los Monos](#)," Clarín, 25 November, 2019.

413 Josefina Salomon, "[3 Reasons Why the Monos Trial in Argentina Matters](#)," InSight Crime, 20 September, 2018.

414 Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)" (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017).

415 InSight Crime, "[Monos](#)," 28 April, 2022.

the government resorted to militarization.⁴¹⁶ However, violence in Rosario remains rampant despite the actions of the various provincial and national governments.⁴¹⁷

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Violence is one of the Monos' main weapons. The group has been characterized by the use of violence to intimidate authorities, as well as businessmen and traders who are coerced into paying extortion money.⁴¹⁸ A stark example of their intimidation tactics is seen in the period leading up to the trial against the Monos, when judicial headquarters and the private homes of judges were targeted in shooting attacks by the group.⁴¹⁹

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Monos play a predominantly local role and have not been identified as participants in the broader drug trafficking chain from Rosario's ports to Europe. While they control micro-trafficking in the city, they have not evolved to other nodes in the chain.⁴²⁰ The group is not known to have relationships with large criminal groups.

416 Josefina Salomón, "[Police Corruption Blamed as Bodies Pile Up in Rosario, Argentina](#)," InSight Crime, 10 March, 2020; Germán De los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Los monos: Historia de la familia narco que transformó Rosario en un infierno](#)" (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017).

417 Christopher Newton, "[New Strategies in Rosario, Argentina, as Monos Fight](#)," InSight Crime, 14 March, 2023.

418 Alicia Florez, "[Los Monos Defending Their Territory in Rosario, Argentina](#)," InSight Crime, 20 November, 2020.

419 Germán De los Santos, "[Un nuevo ataque a balazos enciende el miedo antes de las apelaciones de Los Monos](#)," La Nación, 14 August, 2018; InSight Crime, "[Ariel Máximo Cantero, alias 'Guille'](#)," 20 October, 2022.

420 Alicia Florez and Christopher Newton, "[How Rosario Became Argentina's Drug Violence Capital](#)," InSight Crime, 30 January 2024; Germán de los Santos and Hernán Lascano, "[Rosario: La historia detrás de la mafia narco que se adueñó de la ciudad](#)" (Buenos Aires, 2023).

TREN DE ARAGUA

		<h1>TREN DE ARAGUA</h1>		<div>ORIGIN Venezuela</div> <div>LEADER (S)</div>	
December 2024	IMPACT High		APPROXIMATE SIZE 4,000 members		 <div>Héctor Rustherford Guerrero Flores alias "Niño Guerrero"</div> <div>Larry Amaury Álvarez alias "Larry Changa"</div> <div>Yohan José Guerrero alias "Yohan Petrica"</div>
	CRIMINAL ECONOMIES <div><div> Extortion</div><div> Illegal mining</div><div> Theft</div><div> Drug trafficking</div><div> Contraband</div><div> Cybercrime</div><div> Kidnapping</div><div> Human smuggling</div><div> Micro trafficking</div><div> Sexual exploitation</div></div>				
	<div><div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div><div> STATE PENETRATION</div><div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div></div> <div><div>✓</div><div>✓</div><div>✗</div></div>				
	<p><i>Tren de Aragua is Venezuela's most successful homegrown criminal organization. By taking advantage of the mass exodus of Venezuelans in the second half of the last decade, it evolved from a local prison gang to a transnational enterprise, specializing in extortion, human trafficking, and human smuggling.</i></p>				

HISTORY

Tren de Aragua came into being at Tocarón prison, located in the state of Aragua in northern Venezuela. It emerged after the former prisons minister, Iris Varela, responded to a series of prison revolts by effectively ceding control of prisons to high-ranking criminals, who became known as “pranes,” inside the prisons. These de facto criminal wardens struck a tacit agreement with the government: as long as they maintained order within the prisons, the government would not interfere with their criminal structures or how the prisons operated.⁴²¹

Tocarón pran, Héctor Rustherford Guerrero Flores, alias “Niño Guerrero,” founded the organization, alongside Larry Amaury Álvarez, alias “Larry Changa,” and Yohan José Guerrero, alias “Yohan Petrica.”⁴²² The gang expanded from Aragua into at least five other states in Venezuela before following the wave of migration across South America and developing a significant presence across the continent.⁴²³

GEOGRAPHY

Since its inception, Tren de Aragua has used Tocarón prison in the state of Aragua as its criminal headquarters. However, a major turning point came in September 2023 when the government deployed 11,000 security force officials to take over the site. Its leader Niño Guerrero avoided capture.⁴²⁴

Although security forces continue to confront the gang’s various factions in Aragua,⁴²⁵ cells have managed to maintain a presence there and in the states of Carabobo, Sucre, Bolívar, Guárico, and Lara.⁴²⁶

Tren de Aragua’s international expansion has drawn significant attention to the organization.

421 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Is the ‘Pran’ System in Venezuela’s Prisons Finished?](#),” InSight Crime, 15 November 2023.

422 InSight Crime, “[Tren de Aragua](#),” 12 July 2024.

423 InSight Crime, “[Tren de Aragua](#),” 12 July 2024; Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Three Stages in the Construction of the Tren de Aragua’s Transnational Empire](#),” 4 October 2023.

424 Jeremy McDermott, “[Venezuelan Military ‘Invades’ Notorious Prison](#),” InSight Crime, 20 September 2023.

425 Venezuela Organized Crime Observatory, “[Operations Continue Against Tren de Aragua Factions](#),” InSight Crime, 3 May 2024.

426 InSight Crime, “[Tren de Aragua](#),” 12 July 2024.

It has followed Venezuelan migration patterns, developing a significant presence in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with additional footholds in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil.⁴²⁷

Reports from the United States and Mexico suggest that Tren de Aragua may have expanded to North America, but there is little evidence linking these cells to the larger organization. The proliferation of copycat groups using Tren de Aragua’s name for intimidation purposes complicates the identification of genuine members.⁴²⁸

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Tren de Aragua’s criminal portfolio includes extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, migrant smuggling, contraband, illegal mining, retail drug sales, small-scale drug trafficking, cybercrime, and theft.⁴²⁹

The gang developed its transnational empire by smuggling Venezuelan migrants into countries across South America, particularly Colombia, Peru, and Chile. These migrants often became its first victims, facing extortion or being trafficked into sexual exploitation on arrival.⁴³⁰ While not a major player in international drug trafficking, Tren de Aragua has been linked to a surge in ketamine trafficking in Chile, where it has also been blamed for a rise in kidnappings.⁴³¹

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Tren de Aragua was founded by Niño Guerrero,

427 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Three Stages in the Construction of the Tren de Aragua’s Transnational Empire](#),” InSight Crime, 4 October 2023.

428 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Is Venezuela’s Tren de Aragua ‘Invading’ the US?](#),” InSight Crime, 1 April 2024; Gavin Voss, “[Tren de Aragua Brand Spurs Criminal Imposters Outside Venezuela](#),” InSight Crime, 6 September 2024.

429 InSight Crime, “[Tren de Aragua](#),” 12 July 2024; Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Tren de Aragua’s Criminal Portfolio: Adapt or Die](#),” InSight Crime, 4 October 2023.

430 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Tren de Aragua’s Criminal Portfolio: Adapt or Die](#),” InSight Crime, 4 October 2023.

431 Beatriz Vicent Fernández, “[Ketamine Trafficking Rising in Chile’s Thriving Synthetic Drugs Market](#),” InSight Crime, 2 August 2024; Juliana Manjarrés and Marina Cavalari, “[Is Venezuela’s Tren de Aragua Behind Surge in Chile Kidnappings?](#),” InSight Crime, 18 July 2024.

Larry Changa, and Johan Petrica. But unlike a traditional hierarchical organization, its transnational cells operate through strategic alliances with each other. In Puerto Montt, southern Chile, prosecutors even identified a “franchise” cell that paid money to Tren de Aragua to use its name.⁴³² This decentralized structure makes law enforcement efforts challenging, as dismantling one cell has little impact on how others function. Additionally, some cells, such as the Gallegos in Peru, are believed to have severed ties with the larger organization, becoming independent cells.⁴³³

The group’s expansion and mutation make it difficult to estimate its size. Analysts suggested somewhere between 2,500 and 5,000 members in September 2023, while non-governmental organization Transparencia Venezuela estimated 4,000 members back in June 2022.⁴³⁴

Although the cells largely operate independently, co-founder Larry Changa is believed to have played an important role in planning Tren de Aragua’s transnational expansion. His arrest in the department of Quindío, Colombia, on 1 July could potentially impact the group’s future direction, but it remains to be seen how.⁴³⁵

STATE RESPONSE

Government connections once kept Tren de Aragua relatively safe from large-scale law enforcement operations within Venezuela. The group’s control of Tócoron prison meant that even when members were arrested, they could continue extorting civilians and planning operations from behind bars, ensuring a steady income.

However, the government’s takeover of Tócoron marked a change in how the authorities dealt with the group, which

had drawn increasingly negative attention thanks to its international expansion. Venezuelan officials have been keen to distance themselves from the damage the organization has wrought. In April, Foreign Minister Yvan Gil dismissed Tren de Aragua as a mere fiction created by the international media. Yet in August, following the contested announcement that Nicolás Maduro had won the presidential election, he claimed, without proof, that Tren de Aragua was working with the political opposition to orchestrate a coup in Venezuela.⁴³⁶

Authorities in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, have recognized the threat posed by Tren de Aragua, leading to the capture of hundreds of members. However, the arrests have created security challenges, as the gang’s prison-based origins mean that incarcerated members can still pose a threat.⁴³⁷ Growing concern over the group’s potential threat led the US Treasury Department to designate it a transnational criminal organization in July 2024.

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Tócoron prison served as a criminal headquarters and personal fiefdom for Niño Guerrero. The facility was outfitted with a nightclub, ATM, zoo, and swimming pool, and housed an arsenal that included assault rifles, grenades, and rocket launchers.⁴³⁸ But beyond its operational role, Tócoron was a major source of income for Tren de Aragua. Within the prison, all inmates were forced to pay an extortion payment known as “la causa,” generating millions of dollars for the group annually.⁴³⁹

Prior to the Venezuelan authorities’ takeover of

432 Soy Chile, “[Facción local del Tren de Aragua compró en Venezuela la franquicia para delinquir en Puerto Montt](#),” 30 June 2024.

433 InSight Crime interview, Police General at the National Police of Perú, Lima, Perú, 22 February 2024.

434 Norberto Paredes, “[Cómo opera el temido Tren de Aragua, la sangrienta megabanda de Venezuela que se ha expandido por América Latina](#),” BBC, 21 September 2023; Transparencia Venezuela, “[Chapter 3: Tren de Aragua](#),” June 2022.

435 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Tren de Aragua Just Sustained Its Biggest Leadership Blow](#),” InSight Crime, 2 July 2024.

436 Agencia EFE and Redacción Política, “Canciller de Venezuela dice que el Tren de Aragua es una ficción mediática,” *El Espectador*, 8 April 2024; Zharick Tatiana Ruiz, “[Tren de Aragua fue contratado por la oposición para golpe de Estado: Canciller venezolano](#),” Caracol, 21 August 2024.

437 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Peru, Chile Prisons May Struggle to Contain Tren de Aragua](#),” InSight Crime, 16 November 2022.

438 ABC, “Tócoron, la prisión venezolana que tiene discoteca, banco, zoo y hasta un centro hípico,” 10 August 2015; Jeremy McDermott and Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Has Venezuela Prison Raid Smashed Tren de Aragua?](#),” InSight Crime, 25 September 2023.

439 Jeremy McDermott and Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Has Venezuela Prison Raid Smashed Tren de Aragua?](#),” InSight Crime, 25 September 2023.

Tocorón prison in September 2022, the nearby neighborhood of San Vicente in the capital of Aragua, Maracay, served as perhaps the most notorious example of criminal governance in Venezuela. Tren de Aragua used the front foundation Somos el Barrio JK to establish a parallel government within San Vicente, exerting control over the residents just as Niño Guerrero controlled the inmates within Tocorón. Foundation representatives not only directly punished thieves and those accused of domestic violence, but also mandated strict rules for residents, such as displaying plants in their windows, keeping homes lit, and prohibiting political discussion.⁴⁴⁰

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Tren de Aragua has become one of the most essential players in migrant smuggling in South America. However, the presence of well-established and sophisticated criminal networks controlling migrant smuggling from Mexico into the United States makes it unlikely that Tren de Aragua will benefit significantly from the trend of Venezuelan migrants traveling northwards. This contrasts with its success during previous migrant waves to Colombia, Peru, and Chile. But Tren de Aragua's ability to form alliances with local groups to establish a foothold in a territory before pushing the groups out has allowed it to become firmly entrenched in Colombia, Peru, and Chile.

⁴⁴⁰ Venezuela Investigative Unit, "[How Venezuelan Gangs Masquerade as Community Organizers to Secure Territory](#)," InSight Crime, 11 April 2022; Venezuela Investigative Unit, "[Hybrid Governance and the Criminal Fiefdoms of Tren de Aragua](#)," InSight Crime, 12 July 2023.

TREN DEL LLANO



TREN DEL LLANO

ORIGIN 
Venezuela

LEADER (S)

IMPACT

Medium

APPROXIMATE SIZE

Unknown

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Kidnapping



Óscar de Jesús Noguera Hernández alias "Óscar del Llano"

December 2024



WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS



STATE PENETRATION



CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE

Tren del Llano is one of Venezuela's large-scale gangs, known as "megabandas." Its relevance has waxed and waned, and its refusal to align with government interests has led to repeated security force operations. Yet, it has maintained an important position in central Venezuela's criminal landscape and remains one of the most significant armed groups of Venezuelan origin operating within the country.

HISTORY

Tren del Llano was formed around 2008, initially as a gang dedicated to vehicle theft in the states of Guárico and Aragua before expanding into other crimes, particularly extortion, and small-scale drug trafficking.⁴⁴¹ The gang earned infamy nationwide following the July 2013 murder of a police officer and the November 2014 massacre of 11 people on a farm. The events drew the ire of the authorities and led to the death of its leader and founder, José Antonio Tovar Colina, alias “El Pícaro,” during a security force operation in May 2016.⁴⁴²

The gang remained relatively low-profile in the years following El Pícaro’s death but resurfaced in 2019. The group reportedly stole a cocaine shipment belonging to the Cartel of the Suns (Cartel de los Soles), the term used for drug-trafficking cells embedded within the Venezuelan military. In response, a security force operation targeted the group in 2021, killing its new leader, Gilberto Malony Hernández, alias “Malony.”⁴⁴³ Despite ongoing security force efforts to dismantle the organization, and related offshoot factions in the years since, Tren del Llano continues to engage in extortion and attack security forces in Guárico.⁴⁴⁴

GEOGRAPHY

Since its inception, Tren del Llano has maintained a presence in the central Venezuelan state of Guárico, where it operates in almost every municipality. The gang’s stronghold has been in and around the town of Altagracia de Orituco, in northern Guárico, a base it has held since Malony became the group’s leader, having previously led a cell

there. The mountainous terrain provides some level of protection against security force operations.⁴⁴⁵

Although the gang once expanded to the coastal state of Sucre, it appears that it has been driven out, losing its role in cocaine trafficking to the Caribbean as a result.⁴⁴⁶ However, by June 2023 the gang had expanded into Apure, the state to the south of Guárico,⁴⁴⁷ possibly in response to multiple security force operations in Guárico. Venezuelan authorities also identified another cell in Barina, to the south-west of Guárico, in March 2023.⁴⁴⁸

Unlike Tren de Aragua, another of Venezuela’s large-scale gangs, Tren del Llano has not expanded beyond Venezuela.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

Tren del Llano’s criminal portfolio expanded from car theft to include kidnapping and contract killings, but its principal activity currently is extortion, specifically targeting farmers.

The group was once present in Sucre, a coastal state that is an important departure point for drugs trafficked internationally via Trinidad and Tobago. However, security force operations have since pushed the group out, seemingly reducing it to the retail sales of drugs.⁴⁴⁹ Its expansion into Apure, a key drug entry point for Colombian cocaine, could suggest a plan to gain a significant role in international drug trafficking.

441 Unidad de Investigación RunRunes, “[Murió “El Pícaro”, pero dejó sus herederos](#),” RunRunes, 3 May 2016; Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, “[Militares ultimaron a El Pícaro, el delincuente más buscado del país](#),” 5 May 2016.

442 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Police Vendetta Ends ‘Myth’ of Venezuela Crime Boss](#),” 13 May 2016; Reportero24, “[CICPC: busca a “El Pícaro” en la Región Central del país](#),” 16 December 2013; Ronna Rísquez, “[El Pícaro no es un llano solitario](#),” RunRunes,” 16 November 2014.

443 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Venezuelan Government Targeting One of Country’s Oldest Gangs for Annihilation](#),” InSight Crime, 23 June 2022.

444 El Regional del Zulia, “[Delincuentes del Tren del Llano emboscaron a comisión policial y mataron a un GN](#),” 11 June 2024.

445 Ernestina García, “[Militarizaron Guárico tras asesinato de los cuatro hombres por banda asociada con el Tren del Llano](#),” Noticia al Día, 14 July 2023; Eligio Rojas, “[El Conas identificó en Guárico a cinco células del Tren del Llano](#),” Últimas Noticias, 6 July 2023.

446 Connectas, “[Piratas al Acecho](#),” 3 July 2022.

447 Eligio Rojas, “[El Conas identificó en Guárico a cinco células del Tren del Llano](#),” Últimas Noticias, 6 July 2023.

448 Idania González, “[Desmantelada célula armada del Tren del Llano en Barinas](#),” 13 March 2023.

449 Connectas, “[Piratas al Acecho](#),” 3 July 2022; Eligio Rojas, “[El Conas identificó en Guárico a cinco células del Tren del Llano](#),” Últimas Noticias, 6 July 2023; Eligio Rojas, “[Abatieron en Apure a dos integrantes del Tren del Llano](#),” Últimas Noticias, 12 March 2024.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Óscar de Jesús Noguera Hernández, alias “Óscar del Llano,” has reached a leadership position within the group following the death of former commander Malony, who was also Óscar del Llano’s cousin. This has put him in the crosshairs of the government, which placed him on a list of Venezuela’s ten most wanted criminals in late 2023.⁴⁵⁰

Venezuela’s Bolivarian National Guard identified five separate Tren del Llano cells based in Guárico and Apure in June 2023. However, at least one former cell, formerly led by Carlos José Pirela, alias “Carlitos Pirela,” killed in 2022, has broken away from the larger structure, suggesting that the Tren del Llano under Óscar del Llano leadership may be weaker than it was under his predecessors.⁴⁵¹

STATE RESPONSE

Pressure on Tren del Llano has been relentless since November 2021, when the government deployed 500 security force officials to tackle the group, reportedly after members stole a cocaine shipment from the Venezuelan military-linked drug trafficking network known as the Cartel of the Suns.⁴⁵² The operation drove the gang out of Sucre and was followed by Operation Thunder in Guárico in April 2022, which was marred by cases of human rights abuses committed by security forces.⁴⁵³

Operations targeting the group have continued into 2024. During the protests that followed the contested announcement that Nicolás Maduro had won the July 28 presidential election, Tren del Llano uploaded a video threatening to attack security forces in defense of “the people.”⁴⁵⁴

450 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Venezuela’s Most Wanted List Notable for Its Absences](#),” 18 October 2023.

451 Venezuela Organized Crime Observatory, “[Security Forces Eliminate Tren del Llano’s Rival in Guárico](#),” InSight Crime, 7 August 2024.

452 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[Venezuelan Government Targeting One of Country’s Oldest Gangs for Annihilation](#),” InSight Crime, 23 June 2022.

453 James Bargent, “[When Terror Swept Through Guárico, Venezuela](#),” InSight Crime, 10 July 2024.

454 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “[After Venezuela Elections, Criminal Groups Work For or Against the Regime](#),” InSight Crime, 21 August 2024.

Shortly afterwards, around 6,000 security force officials were deployed in Guárico.⁴⁵⁵ Attorney General Tarek William Saab also claimed the group was collaborating with the government’s political opposition, though he provided no evidence to support his claim.⁴⁵⁶

Apure’s governor declared the group had been driven out of the state in April 2024, yet police have continued to arrest alleged members there in the months since.⁴⁵⁷

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

Tren del Llano does not prioritize exerting criminal governance over residents within its territory. However, the group has become so dominant in certain parts of Altigracia de Orituco in Guárico that these areas have become no-go zones for security forces or anyone attempting to pass through without permission.⁴⁵⁸

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Tren del Llano has reached agreements with other large-scale gangs in Venezuela, such as Tren de Aragua and Tren del Oriente, to avoid encroaching on each other’s territory, a Guárico political leader told InSight Crime.⁴⁵⁹ However, the group does not currently maintain strategic alliances with other significant criminal actors in the country.

455 El Aragueño, “[Mantienen cerco al Tren del Llano y sus células en Guárico](#),” 20 August 2024.


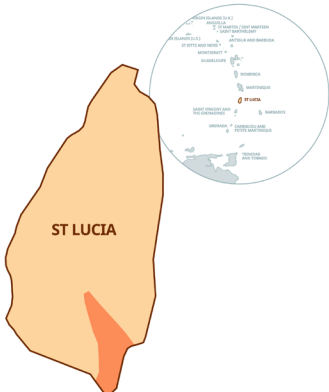







456 MPvenezolano, “[FGR Tarek William Saab reveló los nexos entre grupos violentos, ‘Tren del Llano’ y ‘Wilexys’](#),” YouTube, 16 August 2024.

457 Venezuela Organized Crime Observatory, “[Apure Governor Insists Tren del Llano Driven Out of State](#),” InSight Crime, 3 April 2024; Venezuela Organized Crime Observatory, “[Killings and Seizure Show Tren del Llano’s Move Toward Marijuana Trafficking](#),” InSight Crime, 6 May 2024.

458 Eligio Rojas, “[Pedro Solórzano: Hay sectores interesados en mantener al Tren del Llano](#),” Últimas Noticias, 24 April 2023.

459 InSight Crime electronic communication, political leader of Valle de la Pascua, Guárico state, 23 October 2022

YOUNG FAITH

		<h1>YOUNG FAITH</h1>		<div>ORIGIN<div>Saint Lucia</div></div> <div>LEADER (S)</div>
December 2024	<div>IMPACT</div> <div>Medium</div>	<div>APPROXIMATE SIZE</div> <div>50 members</div>		<div><div>Ronal Kendall Jhon alias "Banan"</div></div>
	<div>CRIMINAL ECONOMIES</div> <div><div> Drug trafficking</div><div> Contraband</div><div> Money laundering</div></div>			
	<div> WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS</div> <div> STATE PENETRATION</div> <div> CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH EUROPE</div>	<div> </div> <div> </div> <div> </div>		
<p>Young Faith is one of the most influential gangs on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, playing a role in the drug trafficking chain to Europe. The gang provides services to European drug trafficking networks, boosting its position in the drug supply chain. While Caribbean gangs like Young Faith are relatively unsophisticated and fluid, the region's growing importance for drug trafficking has elevated their status in the supply chain.</p>				

HISTORY

The gang was founded between the 1980s and the 1990s as a small group. However, in 2000, when Ronal Kendall Jhon, alias “Banan,” assumed leadership, he adopted a strategy that allowed the group to grow and bolster its criminal economies on the island.

Although the group has been in conflict with other bands such as Death Trap, it has managed to maintain its territory and operations.

GEOGRAPHY

Young Faith has a strong presence in Bruceville and other communities east of the Vieux Fort district of St. Lucia.⁴⁶⁰ The gang may also have access to other coastal areas of the island through alliances with other gangs, although its direct influence outside Vieux Fort is limited.

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

The group buys cocaine from Colombian and Venezuelan suppliers and then sells it to European drug trafficking networks. It also works as a subcontractor for Venezuelan networks to transport drugs to and from the island.⁴⁶¹ The group has a fleet of some 30 vessels, and additional boats contracted through intermediaries, so the gang is well-equipped for smuggling operations.⁴⁶² It is estimated that more than 60% of the drugs passing through the eastern Caribbean transit through St. Lucia on their way to Europe, mainly France.⁴⁶³

Banan, the gang’s leader, allegedly launders money through several legitimate businesses, including restaurants, barbershops, and ice cream parlors. The group is also involved in smuggling illegally fished conch (sea snails) to the island of Martinique.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁰ InSight Crime, “Criminal Dynamics in St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Guyana,” October 2023.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² InSight Crime interview, police intelligence officer, Saint Lucia, May 2023.

⁴⁶³ InSight Crime, “Criminal Dynamics in St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Guyana,” October 2023.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Young Faith is led by alias “Banan”, and consists of an estimated 50 members within its main structure. The gang is divided into subgroups, some focused on drug trafficking activities and others on money laundering. It also collaborates with other smaller networks, such as Pepper Yard, No Side, and One Link.

Women do not participate directly in the gang structure.

STATE RESPONSE

The government’s efforts to combat gang activity in St. Lucia are flawed. The local police force sought to implement an anti-gang strategy through a special task force, but the initiative failed due to insufficient funding and staffing.⁴⁶⁵

CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The gang exerts significant control over residents in the territories under its dominion, enforcing surveillance and strict rules for the civilian population, such as not to talk to the police. Anyone who breaks the rules suffers violence from the group.

Despite this, bands such as Young Faith maintain important links to the community, gaining legitimacy by providing services such as financial support to students, building public infrastructure such as parks, and organizing recreational events.

POSITIONS IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Young Faith is a clear example of how the growth of the Caribbean as a transit point for cocaine bound for Europe has fueled the expansion of gangs on islands like St. Lucia. Despite its relatively small size and fluid structure, Young Faith has secured

⁴⁶⁵ InSight Crime interview, police intelligence officer, Saint Lucia, May 2023.

a position in the drug trafficking chain by offering transport services to European and Venezuelan networks. This involvement highlights the evolving dynamics of criminal networks in the region

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE OF CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE



The connection of Latin American high risk criminal networks with their European counterparts is well documented and has been increasing in recent years. Examples are the connections between the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Sinaloa Cartel, with the Italian Ndrangheta and the Albanian mafia.

Based on data from all member states and 17 partnering countries, Europol highlighted and identified in its 2024 Report *“Decoding the EU’s Most Threatening Criminal Networks”* 821 highest-risk criminal networks operating in Europe whose membership exceeds 25,000 people. The groups were chosen based on the threat they pose to the EU’s internal security. They are active in a wide range of criminal business areas: drug trafficking (295), fraud (125), property crime (63), migrant smuggling (48), trafficking in human beings (36), counterfeiting (13), cybercrime (9), environmental crime (7), extortion (5) and firearms (5).

In the Latin American region, while in 2021 more than 436 major organised criminal groups were identified as present in 7 Latin American countries⁴⁶⁶, of which 50% of these groups correspond to drug trafficking organizations mainly involved in cocaine trafficking; the second IDEAL report (2021-2022) identified the presence of 176 major organised criminal groups in 11 Latin American countries, which corresponds to a decrease of 60% compared to what was previously reported. Nevertheless, it is currently estimated that the figure should be much higher.

In Latin America, 71% of organised criminal groups are made up of members who have more than one nationality, but in 79% of cases their main nationality coincides for the most part with the nationality of the country in which they operate. Whereas in

⁴⁶⁶ Bélisa Catarino, Cristina Curto, Iván Villanueva, José Alvaro, Marc Reina, Pascal Benitez and Yesid Romanos, [Latin American Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment – IDEAL](#) (2021). EU Programme EL PACCTO 2.0.

Europe, according to Europol, 68% of criminal groups are composed of members of different nationalities. A total of 112 nationalities were represented among the members of the 821 most dangerous criminal networks.

According to the [Global Organized Crime Index](#) published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GITOC) in September 2023⁴⁶⁷, the countries with the highest incidence of organised criminal groups in Latin America and the Caribbean are, in order, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama, Brazil, Venezuela, Guatemala and Peru. Colombia and Mexico, moreover, occupy the second and third position, respectively, in the world ranking.

In the case of Europe, the Index states that this is the continent where crime has increased the most, particularly in the areas of human trafficking, trade in synthetic drugs and cocaine, and crimes against flora, while resilience has barely increased. In addition, the countries with the highest incidence of crime in Europe are Russia, Ukraine, Italy, Serbia, Montenegro, Spain, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France and the United Kingdom, respectively.

This rate does not necessarily coincide fully with countries' homicide rates, as not all criminal groups are equally violent or exercise their power in the same way. Moreover, some countries may have a large presence of transnational criminal groups due to circumstantial reasons such as the production of coca leaf and coca paste, their geographical position as logistical, transport or financial hubs, or because of their legal, economic and corporate framework that may benefit them directly or indirectly.

While the data show that most Latin American and Caribbean criminal groups are polycriminal and hybrid, and diversify their illicit activities into drug trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking, cybercrime and environmental crime, among others, as reflected in the IDEAL⁴⁶⁸ and GITOC (2023) reports; European criminal groups might be more focused and specialised in single criminal area, as indicated in the Europol report "[Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks](#)" (2024). Nevertheless, past and ongoing judicial investigations show that European criminal groups also tend towards polycriminality⁴⁶⁹.

In most cases, the diversification of illicit activities of polycriminal groups occurs in order to accumulate economic power and threaten populations with the aim of controlling large territorial areas. This allows them to launder ill-gotten assets, make huge profits that they incorporate into local and national economies to corrupt state actors and absorb possible losses such as seizures or confiscations by



⁴⁶⁷ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime –GI-TOC. [Global Organized Crime Index](#) (2023).

⁴⁶⁸ Bélisa Catarino, Cristina Curto, Iván Villanueva, José Alvaro, Marc Reina, Pascal Benitez and Yesid Romanos, [Latin American Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment – IDEAL](#) (2021). EU Programme EL PACCTO 2.0.

⁴⁶⁹ Europol (2024), [Decoding the EU's Most Threatening Criminal Networks](#).

security and justice institutions⁴⁷⁰. Nevertheless, although polycriminality is well extended, the main criminal activity or, where most of the high risk criminal networks develop much of their activity, is drug trafficking.

In this regard, the flow of illicit goods from Latin America to Europe shows no sign of diminishing. In Colombia, the world's primary cocaine producer, coca cultivation has been increasing since 2020, reaching a peak of 253,000 hectares in the last year. The potential cocaine production grew by 53% in 2023, reaching 2,664 tons.⁴⁷¹

Similarly, European criminal actors are becoming more prominent in Latin American countries. In October 2024 alone, two high-ranking members of Italian mafias were arrested in Medellin, Colombia.⁴⁷²

The recent presidential election in Venezuela may also lead to an increase in migration from that nation. These migrants may be exploited by networks such as the Tren de Aragua.

Meanwhile, high gold prices continue to fuel criminal networks in Latin America as they profit from the illegal gold mining, which is sold to countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Italy under the guise of legality.

The profiling of criminal groups and networks in Latin America showed that they are supremely agile in adapting as conditions shift in their favor or against them. Many of these organizations have evolved from past criminal experiences and law enforcement offensives and reemerged with better skills and resilience.

While enforcement efforts in most Latin American countries have focused on captures and seizures, these seldom have a lasting impact on criminal actors, who have adapted internal structures to be resilient so that no single individual is indispensable or irreplaceable within the network.

To generate impact, it is necessary to go beyond the traditional approach of arrests and seizures to identify the key nodes in the flow of illegal economies and pinpoint the actors within that node. Also vital to the functioning of these networks are brokers, who connect different nodes, forging deals, ensuring agreements are fulfilled and connecting service providers to end clients. Brokers often have to travel and meet criminal representatives face to face. They present one of the most visible elements in the criminal networks.

Strategies cannot be limited to law enforcement. There are also political, social and economic factors at play. Especially considering the corrupt links these criminal networks weave with public officials to facilitate the flow of illicit goods. Without addressing these deeper, systemic issues, enforcement efforts will likely remain temporary.

470 Ibid.

471 Lara Loaiza, "[Colombia's Coca Crops Grew, But Cocaine Production Exploded, Latest Figures Show](#)," Insight Crime, 18 October 2024.

472 Mario Saiz, "[Italy's Camorra Moves Into Colombia's Cocaine Capital](#)," Insight Crime, 31 October 2024.

EL PACCTO 2.0

