https://www.crimejusticejournal.com/ *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*
Advance online publication https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.4024

The Shifting Landscape of Organised Crime

Gonzalo Croci
Universidad ORT Uruguay/Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Inseguridad y Violencia [Latin American Center for Studies on Insecurity and Violence] (CELIV) -UNTREF

Abstract

While organised crime has long been entrenched in Latin America, the spatial configuration of violence associated with it has undergone significant transformations in recent years. Homicide rates have escalated beyond traditional epicentres, spreading to countries once perceived as relatively safe. In Ecuador, the homicide rate rose by 429% between 2019 and 2024, largely driven by drug-related violence, while in Uruguay, 21% of homicides are connected to conflicts related to the illegal drug market. Beyond security concerns, organised crime undermines governance, erodes trust and constrains development. This article develops a mid-range analytical framework to explain these trends, linking criminal group fragmentation, institutional weakness and illegal market dynamics through the concepts of criminal governance and thick crime habitats. Using comparative case studies of Montevideo, Rosario, Guayaquil and Limón, it shows how organised crime adapts to varying contexts of institutional fragility and illegal market dynamics. The findings contribute to the refinement of existing theories of state–crime relations and highlight the emergence of new forms of criminal governance in urban and lower-violence contexts.

Keywords: Organised crime; illegal markets; violence; institutional fragility.

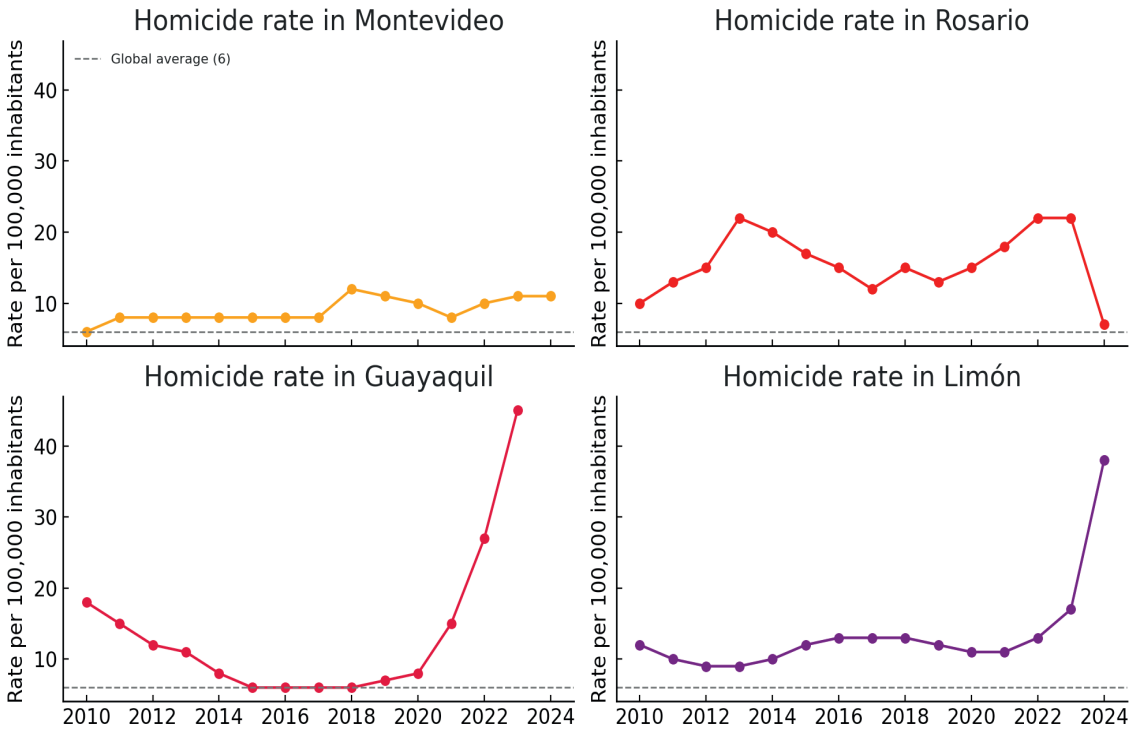
Introduction[1]

Although organised crime has long been entrenched in Latin America, its spatial and quantitative patterns of violence have changed sharply in recent years, spreading from traditional hotspots to countries once regarded as stable, including Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Costa Rica (see Figure 1). In 2023, Ecuador reached the highest homicide rate in the Americas, escalating from 25.5 to 44.5 per 100,000 inhabitants in just one year (Human Rights Watch, 2025), a rise largely driven by drug-related conflicts (UNODC, 2023a). Similarly, in Uruguay, roughly one-fifth of all homicides are connected to disputes within the illicit drug trade (Ministerio del Interior, 2025).

As illustrated in Figure 2, homicide rates have risen markedly across urban centres since 2015, with Guayaquil showing the steepest increase (+1283%), followed by Limón (+217%), Montevideo (+69%), and Rosario (+29%), revealing a clear regional pattern of escalating urban violence. This intensification of violence reflects a broader regional trend, where transnational criminal organisations engage in violent competition for control of strategic corridors. These include ports, logistical hubs and border regions essential for drug trafficking and other illicit economies. Territorial disputes over these high-value areas have become a key driver of lethal violence, as criminal networks seek to consolidate influence and operational control.

Figure 1

Comparison of Homicide Rates in Selected Cities (2010–2023)



Source: Own elaboration with data from Homicide Monitor (2025).
Note: Dotted line represents the average global homicide rate.

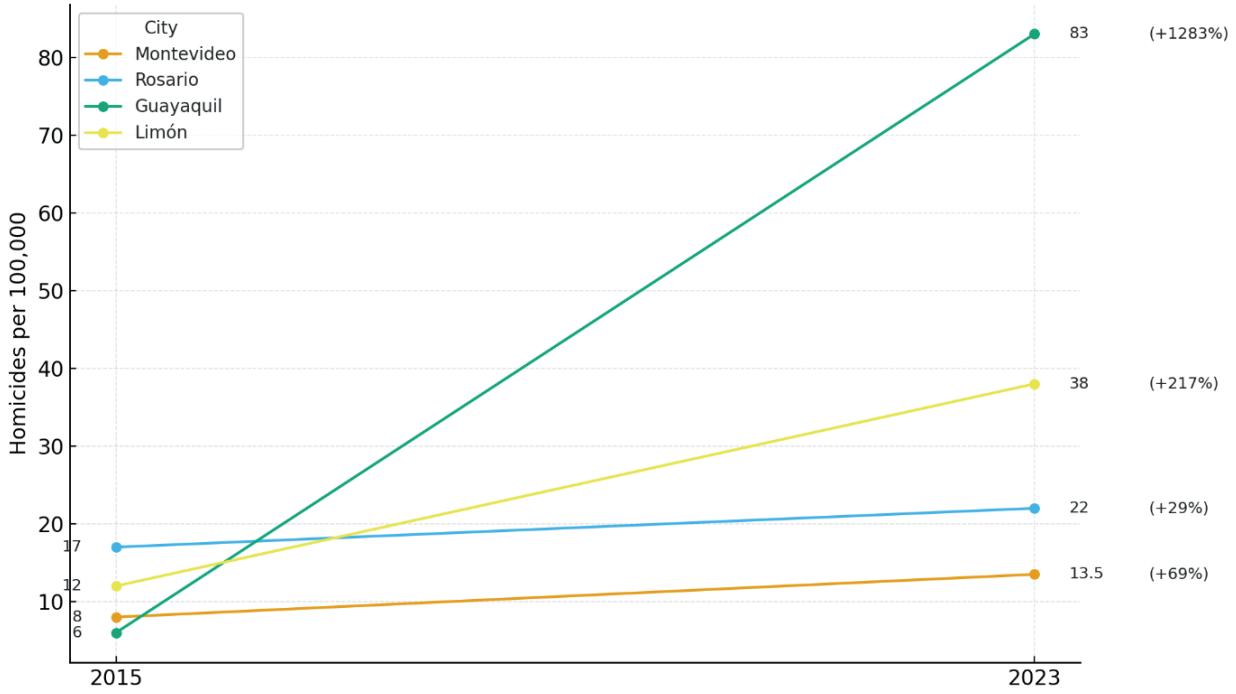
This study addresses a key gap by analysing why violence related to organised crime is emerging in countries once perceived as low risk. Previous scholarship has examined organised crime primarily in high-violence contexts such as México, Colombia and Brasil (Calderón et al., 2015; Dias & Darke, 2016; Duarte Villa and Souza Pimenta, 2019; Durán-Martínez, 2015; Fandiño-Losada et al., 2017; Ferreira, 2019; Fuerte Celis et al., 2019; Kotzé, et al., 2022; Phillips, 2015; Rodríguez Ferreira, 2016). Comparatively less attention has been given to the institutional and social dynamics that facilitate its emergence and consolidation in countries with lower levels of violence. By examining the intersection between transnational criminal networks, institutional fragility and the evolution of illicit markets, this study contributes to understanding how organised crime adapts across different governance environments and advances theoretical debates about its underlying drivers.

Expanding on recent theoretical developments, this study conceptualises organised crime as an institutionally embedded ecosystem that evolves within weak governance environments. Drawing on Felson's (2006) concept of thick crime habitats, Lessing's (2020) theory of criminal governance and institutional theories of state capture (Levitsky & Murillo, 2013; Paoli, 2014), the article proposes a mid-range analytical framework (Merton, 1968)[2] linking the three mechanisms mentioned above. This framework contributes to comparative criminology by showing that organised crime does not require state collapse to thrive, but rather emerges in hybrid environments where legality and illegality coexist.

Building on the work of Croci, Dammert and Larroca (2025), this study extends previous analysis with updated data, comparative cases, and new conceptual insights. It examines how transnational criminal networks, institutional fragility and shifts in trafficking routes and local illicit markets interact to explain the evolution of organised crime and its relationship with violence in Latin America. A comparative case study approach, involving Montevideo (Uruguay), Rosario (Argentina), Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Limón (Costa Rica), is employed to analyse how organised crime adapts across distinct social, economic and institutional contexts.

Figure 2

Slope Chart Homicide Rate Change (2015 vs. 2023)



Source: Own elaboration with data from Homicide Monitor (2025).

The next section develops the theoretical framework linking the three hypotheses to criminological and institutional perspectives. This is followed by an examination of four comparative case studies, before cross-case findings are synthesised and their theoretical implications for understanding organised crime in lower-violence contexts are discussed.

Literature Review

Research on organised crime in Latin America has moved from early accounts centred on drug trafficking and state absence to more nuanced analyses of governance, markets and institutional adaptation. This review highlights three dimensions shaping the region's criminal transformation: (1) the diffusion and fragmentation of criminal groups; (2) uneven state capacity; and (3) the role of illicit market structures in generating violence. These perspectives underpin the analytical framework presented later in the article.

The Regional Reconfiguration of Organised Crime Groups

Rather than viewing organised crime as confined to a few epicentres, this article argues that its expansion across Latin America has produced increasingly fragmented criminal ecosystems. Transnational flows of drugs, arms and people have eroded the dominance of hierarchical cartels and fostered more fluid and localised criminal networks, competing for market control and protection rents. Recent studies have highlighted how organised crime networks have become increasingly fragmented yet interconnected through pragmatic collaborations (Atuesta & Pérez-Dávila, 2018; EMCDDA & Europol, 2022; Guerrero, 2013). These networks not only coordinate trafficking activities but also subcontract specialised services, share logistical routes and pool operational resources. For example, transnational criminal organisations such as the Albanian mafia and the 'Ndrangheta have forged alliances with major Latin American groups, including the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels, as well as with smaller regional and local actors. These partnerships enable the exchange of expertise, financial flows and trafficking infrastructure, strengthening the resilience and reach of global criminal networks (Catino, 2020; OECO, 2023; Prieto & Moreno Martín, 2025; Sergi, 2019).

The region is experiencing growing criminal fragmentation. In México, the disintegration of major criminal organisations has exacerbated both competition and violence, as the number of groups expanded from 98 in 2010 to 198 in 2019. Today's Mexican criminal landscape includes roughly 37 large cartels (many the product of prior splits) and more than 130 smaller affiliates that operate within their orbit (Esberg, 2020). Similarly in Rosario, the once-dominant Los Monos clan has fragmented into rival factions, coupled with the emergence of at least ten other groups, intensifying intra-group violence ("Ludueña: Condena para un gatillero de una banda ligada a Los Monos," 2025). In Port-au-Prince, Haití, more than a hundred criminal gangs are currently active and involved in a wide range of criminal activities (Global Initiative Against Organized Crime, 2022). The proliferation of firearms further exacerbates this dynamic, with Latin America exhibiting the highest global proportion of gun-related homicides (UNODC, 2023a). These dynamics reveal how violence functions as a mechanism of dispute resolution, market enforcement and territorial control (Gambetta, 1996; von Lampe, 2015). This regional diffusion of fragmented groups cannot be fully understood without considering the institutional environments in which they operate.

Uneven State Presence and the Rise of Parallel Control

Gaps and inconsistencies in state presence generate the vacuums through which criminal actors establish governing authority (Skaperdas, 2001). In contexts of low state legitimacy, limited capacity or corruption, organised crime finds space to regulate markets and mediate violence. The capacity of the state to project authority therefore becomes a key variable shaping both the level and the form of criminal violence. Institutional inefficacy is expressed through multiple dimensions, from inadequate law enforcement and ineffective judicial systems to the inability of governments to adapt to evolving criminal dynamics (Croci & Gomez, 2025; Levitsky & Murillo, 2013; Müller, 2018). Prisons, often under-resourced and poorly managed, further exacerbate this problem by functioning as incubators of criminal networks rather than instruments of deterrence or rehabilitation (Bergman & Fondevila, 2021; Skarbek, 2016).

The notion of criminal governance captures how organised groups replace weak state functions by regulating markets and communities in areas where formal authority is absent (Arias & Barnes, 2017; Lessing, 2020). Corruption within state institutions often creates mutually beneficial ties with criminal groups – relations that stabilise illicit markets while eroding public safety and institutional credibility (Paoli, 2014; Schelling, 1971; Skaperdas, 2001). In sum, institutional fragility shapes the opportunity structure, but it is the nature of illegal markets that ultimately determines the incentives for cooperation or confrontation.

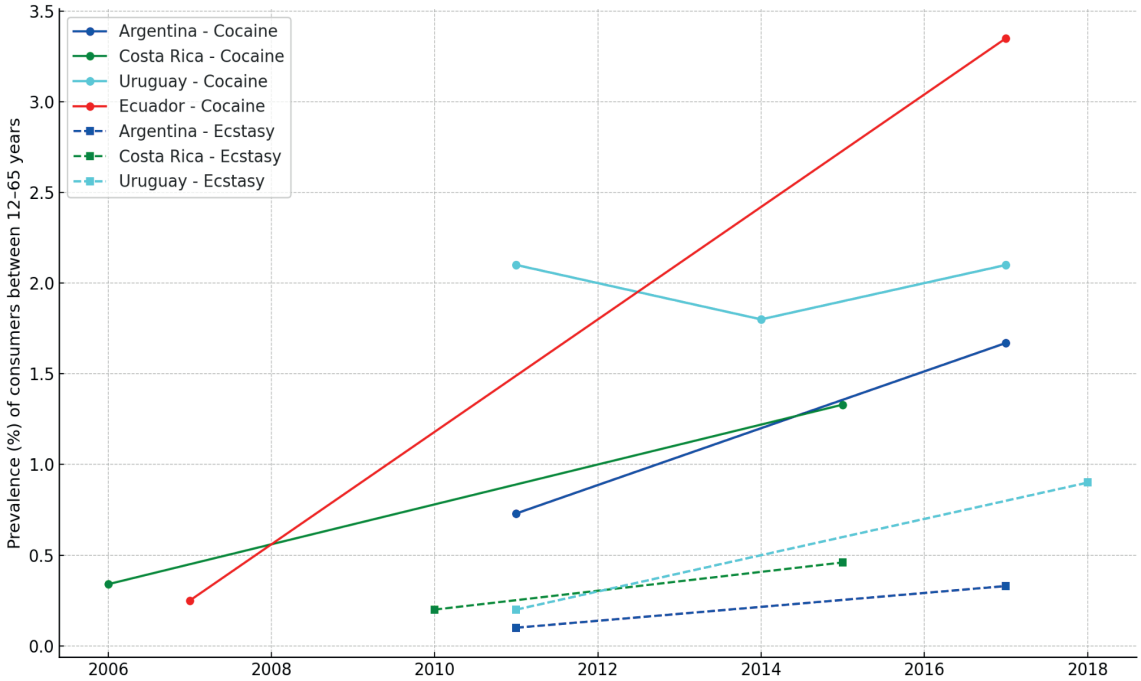
How Market Incentives Shape Criminal Violence

Illegal markets differ in their organisation, profitability and exposure to law enforcement. These characteristics influence the incentives for cooperation or confrontation among criminal groups. Highly competitive markets (such as retail drug distribution) often intensify disputes, while more stable markets tend to foster negotiated forms of criminal governance. Understanding how market structures interact with institutional capacity is thus central to explaining patterns of violence across cases.

Latin America's porous borders and good transport networks have made it a key corridor for cocaine shipments to Europe, a trade worth about €12.8 billion (EMCDDA & Europol, 2022). At the same time, domestic drug use is rising, with roughly 4.7 million cocaine users in South America and high consumption levels in countries such as Uruguay, Argentina, Ecuador and Brasil (UNODC, 2023a). Similarly, there has been a substantial increase in synthetic drug consumption. Between the mid-2000s and the late 2010s, Latin America experienced a clear rise in cocaine and ecstasy (MDMA) use. Across the region, stimulant use has risen sharply. In Uruguay, cocaine prevalence remained stable at around 2.1% (about 72,000 users), while ecstasy use grew from 0.2% in 2011 to 0.9% in 2018. In Argentina, cocaine consumption more than doubled from 0.73 to 1.67% and ecstasy tripled to 0.33%. Ecuador recorded the steepest rise, with cocaine use climbing from 0.25% in 2007 to 3.35% in 2017 (approximately 557,000 users). Costa Rica also experienced growth, from 0.34% to 1.33% in cocaine use and a doubling of ecstasy consumption to 0.46% (about 22,500 users) (UNODC, 2025a). These trends suggest a broader regional pattern of rising stimulant use over the past decade (UNODC, 2025a), reflecting the deepening interconnection between transit dynamics and domestic consumption.

Figure 3

Trends in Cocaine and Ecstasy Use in Selected Countries (2006–2018)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from UNODC (2024).
Note: As of the publication of this study, there are no data available for Ecuador's ecstasy consumption levels.

As domestic markets expand, criminal organisations diversify their revenue streams – often in ways that heighten the risk of violent competition. For example, criminal organisations involved in the cocaine trade have also engaged in illegal mining and extortion, often employing violence to maintain territorial control (UNODC, 2023b). This pattern reflects "crime convergence": overlapping illicit ventures that exploit shared routes, logistics and intermediaries. Trafficking corridors commonly serve multiple illicit trades (cocaine, migrant smuggling or illegal gold extraction), enabling overlapping enterprises that share routes, logistics and protection networks to raise profits and lower exposure (UNODC, 2023b). In certain contexts, corruption dampens visible violence by stabilising illicit exchanges through clientelist bargains linking state officials and criminal actors, as seen in México and Brasil (Adorno & Dias, 2019; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

This research situates the rise of organised crime violence in Latin America within a broader criminological debate about criminal opportunity, governance, and institutional failure. Rather than viewing organised crime solely as a by-product of illegal markets, the analysis draws from ecological and institutional theories of crime to explain how these organisations adapt to structural weaknesses and fragmented enforcement environments.

Following Felson (2006), organised crime develops within thick crime habitats – densely networked environments rich in illegal opportunities and "convergence settings", where offenders, facilitators and enablers interact repeatedly. These habitats emerge where formal regulation is weak but illicit exchanges are routine, allowing criminal groups to exploit overlapping legal and illegal spheres. Such contexts generate both opportunities and incentives for cooperation among offenders while normalising violence as a mechanism of regulation and enforcement.

The idea of criminal habitats connects directly with the literature on illegal markets in economic sociology (Beckert & Wehinger, 2011; Dewey, 2019), which conceptualises these markets as complex institutional systems rather than mere zones of absence. Illegal exchanges require trust, protection and coordination mechanisms that, in the absence of an effective state, are provided by criminal organisations themselves. Violence thus becomes a form of contract enforcement and reputation building, fulfilling governance functions analogous to those of legitimate institutions.

This perspective aligns with Lessing's (2020) notion of criminal governance, which describes how organised groups regulate social, economic and political life within areas of limited statehood. In such territories, criminal organisations provide dispute resolution, enforce order and control illegal markets (functions that fill the vacuum left by weak or corrupt institutions). Levitsky and Murillo (2013) and others (Croci & Chainey, 2023; Dammert, Croci, & Frey, 2024) emphasise that the persistence of weak institutional enforcement in Latin America creates fertile ground for these governance systems. Organised crime thus thrives not "against the state" (Paoli, 2008), but within and through its institutional failures, exploiting opportunities created by inconsistent rule enforcement.

From a criminological standpoint, this framework bridges institutional theories of state weakness with environmental criminology and crime-science perspectives of opportunity. It also incorporates Ayling's (2009) concept of convergence environments, where recurrent interactions among offenders enable learning, cooperation and market adaptation. Together, these perspectives explain why criminal networks in Latin America exhibit both fragmentation and resilience: fragmentation increases competition and volatility, while the structural density of illegal opportunity environments maintains continuity and profit.

Data and Methods

The primary unit of analysis in this research is the neighbourhood, as it provides the most detailed level of government data and a meaningful context for studying variables such as homicide and inequality (Messner & Tardiff, 1986). Neighbourhoods also reflect urban life and governance, making them ideal settings for examining complex social issues (Grafmeyer & Joseph, 1979). Using a case study approach, this research conducts in-depth analyses of organised crime in Uruguay, Argentina, Ecuador and Costa Rica – each with distinct social, economic and institutional contexts. This qualitative method enables a holistic exploration of organised crime dynamics, capturing nuances that may elude quantitative analyses and yielding insights relevant to both theory and practice (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). As Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, case studies generate context-dependent knowledge that deepens theoretical understanding and enhances practical insight, making them particularly valuable for examining multifaceted social phenomena.

The selection of these four cases was deliberate and comparative. They were chosen because they represent diverse trajectories of organised crime violence: countries with historically low violence that now face sharp increases. This variation in institutional capacity, homicide levels and position in global trafficking routes allows for a structured comparison across cases. Importantly, the case study method and triangulation are not treated as separate stages but as integrated elements of the research design. For each case, triangulation was systematically applied by combining three categories of data: (1) quantitative indicators such as homicide statistics, socio-economic data and international indices; (2) institutional sources such as UNODC reports, judicial and police documents and international think tanks outputs; and (3) qualitative evidence from academic research and local media. This approach strengthens internal validity by cross-verifying findings across independent data sources. By embedding triangulation into the case study design, the study enhances the validity and credibility of its findings, reduces bias and provides a more robust understanding of the research problem (Denzin, 2017).

The analysis proceeded in two steps: first, within-case analysis identified the local drivers of organised crime violence in each city; second, cross-case comparison was used to detect common structural factors (e.g., criminal fragmentation, market shifts). This structured, focused comparison allows the article to go beyond descriptive accounts and to test the three hypotheses outlined in the introduction (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007).

Results

Montevideo: Emerging Organised Crime Dynamics and Urban Vulnerability

Uruguay's homicide rate increased from six to nearly eleven per 100,000 inhabitants between 2003 and 2024, an 83% rise. In Montevideo, violence is heavily concentrated: Zones 3 and 4 record the highest rates (28.1 and 20 per 100,000 respectively), while just a few neighbourhoods (La Paloma–Tomkinson, Casavalle, and Casabó–Pajas Blancas) account for over 30% of all homicides, revealing the sharp spatial concentration of lethal violence (Ministerio del Interior, 2024). Moreover, recent data indicate that 21.1% of homicides in the country are associated with disputes within the illicit drug market (an increase of 627% compared with a decade ago), making it the leading motive category for homicide nationwide (Ministerio del Interior, 2025).

Transnational organisations such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Comando Vermelho (CV), and 'Ndrangheta operate in Uruguay, using the country both as a transit point for cocaine shipments to Europe and as a regional hub for broader money-laundering activities (Brombacher, 2025; McDermott & Dudley, 2025; OCCRP, 2023). Evidence from law enforcement sources and media confirms the presence of these organisations in several border departments, where local criminal networks

provide logistical support for international trafficking operations. Uruguay has consequently become a key node in the transatlantic cocaine supply chain, serving both as a transit and redistribution point for shipments to Europe,[3] while its domestic drug market continues to expand. The Paraná–Paraguay waterway has further consolidated its role as a major fluvial corridor facilitating regional drug flows (Newton, 2024a; UNODC, 2023a). Within this context, the port of Montevideo has become a key logistics hub for cocaine trans-shipment to Europe, benefiting from advanced infrastructure, high cargo volumes and limited security oversight. Its status as a low-risk entry point for international customs and security agencies makes it particularly attractive to criminal organisations (Sampó & Troncoso, 2022). In 2022 alone, Uruguayan authorities seized 4.5 tonnes of cocaine, underscoring the scale of the flows through national ports (Doherty & den Held, 2023). These dynamics have been compounded by recent corruption scandals that exposed institutional weaknesses, negligence in port security and deficient oversight mechanisms (Dalby, 2023; "Entrega de pasaporte a Marset: Fiscalía de Delitos Económicos y Complejos investigará el caso," 2022; Newton, 2024b).

As previously discussed, certain zones in Montevideo exhibit a higher concentration of violence and thicker criminal habitats. Among them, Casavalle stands out. Located in the northern part of the city, it comprises several micro-neighbourhoods and has consistently ranked among the most violent areas of Montevideo over the past decade. Casavalle illustrates how criminal fragmentation can sustain high levels of violence without the presence of large, centralised organisations. In the absence of structured hierarchies, multiple small groups compete for territorial control, using violence as the primary mechanism of regulation and dispute resolution. Casavalle is one of Montevideo's most deprived neighbourhoods, marked by severe housing deficits, unemployment and limited access to essential services (Municipio de Montevideo, 2019). Overcrowding, poor sanitation and substandard housing levels are well above national averages (Calvo, 2013). At the household level, drug-related crime and addiction transform domestic spaces as homes become increasingly fragmented, making family cohabitation difficult for those affected by substance use and insecurity (Álvarez Pedrosián, 2013).

Research consistently links social deprivation and overcrowding to higher crime levels and weaker community cohesion (Osborn & Tseloni, 1998; Tseloni, 2006). In Uruguay, overcrowding forms part of the Unsatisfied Basic Needs (UBN)[4] index, reflecting its relevance as a measure of social exclusion (Calvo, 2013). This condition is associated not only with stress and deteriorating mental health, but also with lower academic achievement and increased antisocial behaviour among children (Makinde et al., 2016; Regoeczi, 2008; Ruiz-Tagle & Urria, 2022; Solari & Mare, 2012). In Casavalle, the impact of these factors is particularly acute: 60% of residents lack access to essential services, making it Montevideo's most deprived area (Echevarría et al., 2019).

According to a recent report, the average educational attainment in Casavalle corresponds to the completion of primary school, a level below the national average. Only 13.6% of Casavalle's population has attended high school or higher education, compared with over 78% in affluent neighbourhoods. Just 4% have completed tertiary studies, while nearly half (49%) have only primary education (MIDES & DESyTC, 2018). Casavalle also records Montevideo's highest rate of teenage motherhood (17.1%), almost three times the rate of Punta Carretas (Calvo, 2013). Teenage motherhood is strongly associated with educational disruption, poverty and intergenerational risk (Kane et al., 2013). Young mothers face higher chances of school dropout and child neglect, while their children often experience lower academic performance, reduced life satisfaction and greater exposure to delinquency and substance use (D'Onofrio et al., 2009; Lipman et al., 2011).

In Casavalle, consumption, crime and illegality are deeply intertwined, forming a cycle that is hard to break in conditions of poverty and exclusion (Echevarría et al., 2019). Theft and resale of goods, often involving neighbours or relatives, sustain this dynamic: stolen items are resold in local markets at low prices, creating a network of dependency that reinforces the local criminal economy. The area is also a recognised hotspot for drug use and street-level dealing (Portela, 2012). Within this economy, households involved in producing or selling cocaine base paste earn far more than through other formal activities, making drug trade participation both attractive and persistent despite its social costs (Baudean & Rudnitzky, 2023; Tenenbaum, 2018).

In sum, the case of Montevideo illustrates how organised crime can expand in the absence of entrenched cartels. The proliferation of small, flexible groups engaged in retail drug trafficking and territorial disputes reflects a process of adaptive fragmentation, where loosely connected actors exploit the permeability of urban spaces. Within these conditions, violence becomes a mechanism of reputation and market regulation rather than large-scale territorial control. The city thus exemplifies the rise of "thick criminal habitats," where poverty, opportunity and limited state presence converge to sustain localised systems of criminal governance.

Rosario: From Criminal Governance to Violent Market Fragmentation

Argentina remains among the least violent countries in Latin America, recording 1961 homicides in 2022 – equivalent to 4.6 per 100,000 inhabitants – and a 33% decline in the rate over the past two decades. Yet, lethal violence is spatially concentrated in a few urban areas. At the same time, the country has consolidated its position as a logistical hub within the South American cocaine trade, linking production zones in the Andes to consumer markets in Europe. Its porous borders, under-resourced port controls and efficient transport infrastructure make it highly attractive to transnational networks. The Paraná–Paraguay Waterway and ports such as Rosario and Buenos Aires serve as key outlets for cocaine shipments, where organisations like the PCC, Sinaloa Cartel and 'Ndrangheta have developed partnerships with local actors, embedding Argentina in broader trafficking and laundering circuits (EMCDDA & Europol, 2022; McDermott & Dudley, 2025; Sampó & Troncoso, 2023).

Rosario is currently the most violent city in Argentina, with a homicide rate of 22 per 100,000 inhabitants – five times the national average. Over the past decade, competition for control of the drug trade has been the main driver of this persistent violence (Bergman et al., 2023). Rosario's geographical location and its port (the country's largest agro-export terminal) make it a strategic hub for criminal organisations involved in cocaine transit and storage destined for international markets (Florez & Newton, 2024). At the same time, the expansion of the local cocaine market has intensified disputes among domestic actors, further fuelling lethal violence. The absence of a dominant criminal organisation has turned the local drug trade into a source of violent competition. Groups such as Los Monos and the Alvarado Clan once controlled trafficking and extortion, but arrests and internal disputes fragmented the market. Today, more than fifteen smaller gangs compete for control of micro-trafficking and extortion, using violence to secure profits and territory (McDermott & Dudley, 2025; Santos, 2024). This contrasts with the largely non-violent nature of international trafficking, where large shipments move through established networks with little conflict (Dammert et al., 2024).

These dynamics are aggravated by institutional fragility and entrenched corruption, including recent cases involving senior police officials (Iazzetta & Gaiero, 2025). Such failures have enabled criminal infiltration of state institutions, particularly at the local level (Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Flom, 2019). Weak governance has limited the state's capacity to curb violence, with officials, police and prison staff often facilitating drug trafficking and extortion (Croci & Chainey, 2023; GI-TOC, 2023a). Prisons play a central role in this system: gang leaders continue directing extortion and criminal operations from inside facilities, exposing the inability of the penitentiary system to assert control. In marginalised communities. This institutional vacuum allows criminal groups to exert social and economic dominance, further consolidating their power.

The spatial pattern of violence in Rosario closely aligns with socio-economic deprivation, particularly in areas marked by overcrowding, poverty and weak institutional presence. These urban 'hotspots' often coincide with zones of criminal group activity and territorial disputes (Bergman et al., 2023). In the most vulnerable neighbourhoods, limited state capacity has created conditions of impunity and parallel governance, allowing organised crime to entrench itself and perpetuate cycles of inequality and violence (Miraglia et al., 2012).

An example is Ludueña in the city's northwest, where social and environmental deprivation overlap with rising criminal activity. Since 2021, rival groups involved in homicides, extortion and street-level drug sales have violently contested control of the area. A study by Conicet (2024) underscores the neighbourhood's multiple deficits: inadequate housing, education and health services, compounded by pollution, flood exposure and a scarcity of public and cultural spaces, all of which deepen social exclusion. Infrastructure conditions further illustrate these disparities: around 40% of homes lack sewage connections and many rely on irregular water and electricity supply (Conicet, 2024; "Encuesta de Hogares Rosario: Un tercio de la población no logra acceder a los servicios básicos," 2022). School facilities are also precarious, with leaking roofs, insufficient heating and chronic staff shortages limiting access to quality education ("Docentes de una escuela de Ludueña denuncian que hace 4 años que están sin gas," 2024).

In sum, Rosario reveals how criminal fragmentation and institutional co-optation reinforce each other to produce escalating violence. The decline of centralised organisations has generated a landscape of competing mid-level groups that rely on violence to secure extortion and drug markets. Weak law enforcement and corruption enable this process, transforming prisons into nodes of criminal governance that reproduce violence from within the state apparatus. This case demonstrates that fragmentation does not dissolve organised crime; instead, it reconfigures its structure into networked governance systems that blur the boundary between coercion and regulation, confirming the interplay between state weakness, market incentives and institutional complicity.

Guayaquil: Transnational Criminal Groups and the Geopolitics of Cocaine Ports

Between 2018 and 2023, Ecuador's homicide rate increased by 650% (from six to 46 per 100,000 inhabitants), placing it as the most violent country in Latin America (UNODC, 2025b). This dramatic rise was largely driven by conflicts among organised crime groups competing over illicit markets (OECO, 2024a). The trend is concentrated in specific areas of the country. For example, in the canton of Guayaquil, homicides rose by 360% between 2020 and 2022. In contrast, cantons like Lomas de Sargentillo, the number of homicides declined by 67% (OECO, 2024b). Other high-impact crimes also increased sharply during this period: extortion complaints rose from 1570 in 2018 to 22,228 in 2024 (an increase of about 1316%) and kidnappings went from 1129 to 3566 (approximately a 216% increase) (Ecuador Chequea, 2024).

According to a recent report, drug trafficking is the primary activity of organised crime in Ecuador (OECO, 2023). From a transit country, Ecuador has become a storage and distribution hub, particularly along the northern border with Colombia's coca-producing regions of Nariño and Putumayo, which serves as key entry point for trafficking routes (UNODC, 2023a). It is estimated that about a third of Colombia's cocaine passes through Ecuador before reaching North America and Europe (Jütten, 2024). The cross-border trafficking of narcotics for criminal organisations is a highly lucrative activity, driven by substantial price escalations throughout the supply routes. In southern Colombia, a kilogram of coca base paste sells for about US$550, rising to US$800 in Esmeraldas and US$1000 at the port of Guayaquil. After refinement, its value reaches roughly US$2000 upon exit from Ecuador and can fetch up to US$75,000 in Hamburg (EMCDDA & Europol, 2022; GI-TOC, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2025).

In 2020, Ecuador, Brasil and Colombia emerged as the main departure points for cocaine shipments seized in or destined for European ports. In Ecuador alone, seizures rose dramatically, from around 31 tonnes in 2019 to 179 tonnes in 2022, a 477% increase (UNODC, 2024). The province of Guayas reflects this trend: cocaine seizures intended for export climbed from 3.8 tonnes in 2019 to 109 tonnes in 2022 (OECO, 2024b). Trafficking from the port of Guayaquil to Antwerp also intensified, increasing by approximately 833%, from 6 tonnes in 2018 to nearly 56 tonnes in 2021 (Jütten, 2024). As a result, the port of Guayaquil, one of the largest in the region, has become a central hub for international drug trafficking. The use of this port is facilitated by the benefits of large-scale container transport, which enables traffickers to transport large quantities of drugs while anticipating potential losses. Law enforcement estimates that only 2–10% of drug shipments are seized, allowing traffickers to adjust the final selling price to account for these losses (International Crisis Group, 2025).

The role of small to medium-sized criminal organisations in this global cocaine trade is increasing, operating as networks rather than clearly defined entities. These groups control specific segments of the supply chain and form partnerships with other organisations, a decentralisation that has been observed in different regions and has led to increasing specialisation among the actors involved (UNODC, 2023a). In this sense, the Global Organized Crime Index (GOCI) score for the criminal network's indicator revealed an increase from 5.5 to 7.5 points out of 10, thus positioning the country in the top quintile alongside countries such as Colombia, México, Syria and Jamaica (GI-TOC, 2023b).

Since 2015, Ecuador has experienced accelerating criminal fragmentation driven by the expansion of illicit drug markets and regional realignments following the FARC demobilisation. The resulting proliferation of rival groups has intensified violence along urban and trafficking corridors as they dispute control over routes and illegal markets. Domestic organisations such as Los Choneros, Los Lobos and Los Tiguerones have forged alliances with transnational groups, including the Sinaloa cartel, Jalisco Nueva Generación and Albanian networks, consolidating Ecuador's strategic role within the global cocaine trade (Jütten, 2024; McDermott & Dudley, 2025).

The decentralisation of transnational criminal networks has given rise to a system of service providers that manage different stages of the drug supply chain – collecting cocaine from ports, arranging local transport and securing shipments – without directly owning the product. These intermediaries often serve multiple clients, including Balkan and Italian traffickers who have established operations in Ecuador to supply European markets (UNODC, 2023a). The Sinaloa Cartel's reorganisation in 2019, shifting from direct control to smaller intermediary cells, exemplifies this wider trend of criminal atomisation. In Ecuador, the fragmentation of major groups such as Los Choneros has generated new factions, intensifying competition over trafficking routes and domestic markets (UNODC, 2023a; OECO, 2023). The deaths of prominent leaders have further destabilised the criminal landscape, fuelling recurrent cycles of violence. Once mere subcontractors for Colombian and Mexican cartels, Ecuadorian organisations now exert greater control over international distribution, amplifying territorial disputes, particularly along the northern border, where the Choneros have moved from subordination to direct competition with the Comandos de la Frontera, a FARC dissident group dominant in extortion economies (Parada Lugo, 2024).

Persistent corruption scandals have underscored Ecuador's institutional fragility, revealing systemic links between state officials and criminal organisations ("Odebrecht scandal: Ecuador vice-president given six years' jail," 2017; Vanderford, 2024). High-ranking authorities (including members of the judiciary, police and the prison agency [SNAI]) have been convicted for facilitating impunity and protecting drug trafficking networks (Fiscalía General del Estad, 2024). Organised crime groups such as Los Choneros, Los Lagartos and Los Tiguerones exert significant control over the prison system, which functions as both operational base and recruitment hub. Their influence extends beyond prison walls, fuelling violent competition for territorial control in urban areas (Berg & Bledsoe, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Limited state presence has enabled criminal groups to consolidate governance not only in prisons but also in ports and marginalised urban areas (Araújo and Costa, 2024; Orozco, 2022). Drug trafficking organisations exploit weak institutional control to move illicit cargo through coastal provinces, often concealing cocaine in legitimate shipments (GI-TOC, 2023c). In coastal and low-income communities, economic deprivation pushes residents – particularly fishers and youth – into criminal economies as lookouts, transporters or street dealers, frequently paid in product (UNODC, 2023a; Wiser, 2024). These dynamics generate environments of fear and coercion marked by forced labour, sexual exploitation and extortion (Marinelli & Mendoza, 2023), with children and adolescents especially vulnerable to recruitment and victimisation in contexts of school dropout and family instability (Ramírez, 2024).

Located in Guayas Province, Durán has become the most violent canton in Ecuador, with a homicide rate of 148 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2023, higher than Colima (140), Ciudad Obregón (117) and Port-au-Prince (117), the world's most violent cities in 2024 (World Atlas, 2024). Much of this violence stems from clashes between the Chone Killers and the Latin Kings over control of illicit markets (GI-TOC, 2023a). The city's severe urban precariousness exacerbates this dynamic: around 70% of residents lack access to potable water, 78% are not connected to sewerage systems (Walk Free Foundation, 2023) and more than half live in irregular settlements with limited public services (Investigación Durán, 2023). Poverty affects seven in ten inhabitants, while educational attainment remains low: only 47% have completed primary education and 37% secondary (INEC, 2022). These conditions have eroded social resilience and facilitated recruitment, particularly of minors: in 2023, fifteen children were murdered (the second-highest figure nationwide) and between January and June that year, police arrested 367 minors – most of them from Durán – for offences including contract killings, drug dealing and theft. This structural marginalisation has created a vacuum of authority that allows criminal groups to operate with impunity, exploiting deprivation to consolidate territorial control (Walk Free Foundation, 2023).

The case of Guayaquil exemplifies how transnational market integration and domestic institutional erosion converge to create a hybrid system of authority. As Ecuador's principal port becomes a strategic hub for cocaine exports, transnational alliances and local groups compete for control over logistical infrastructures and areas where the state presence is limited. Guayaquil thus illustrates how global illicit markets embed themselves within weak institutional ecosystems rather than operating outside them.

Limón: Security Challenges in an Emerging Trafficking Corridor

Costa Rica has experienced a sustained increase in homicides in recent years. In 2023, the country recorded its most violent year, with more than 900 homicides (most linked to drug-trafficking groups); this was followed by 2024, which registered the second-highest level, at 16.6 per 100,000 inhabitants (OIJ, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2025). According to the Observatorio de la Violencia (2024), 74% of these killings were motivated by revenge or retaliation, a pattern consistent since 2019 and largely associated with drug-related disputes (Cavalari et al., 2024). This increase reflects a combination of rising local consumption of cocaine and crack cocaine, along with intensified competition among criminal organisations for control of domestic markets and key trafficking corridors. The profits have fuelled corruption and weakened institutional integrity, transforming Costa Rica (long regarded as one of the region's most stable democracies) into a logistical hub for both domestic and international drug trafficking (Abi-Habib & Cegarra, 2024).

With its extensive maritime territory spanning both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, the country has become a major transit hub for drug trafficking, which has resulted in a score of 7.5 out of 10 in the cocaine trade indicator of the GOCI for 2023 (GI-TOC, 2023b), reflecting a high level of criminal activity. Costa Rica serves as a leading first-stop trans-shipment point for cocaine and other drug (mainly cannabis) shipments destined for the United States and Europe. This is evidenced by the frequent seizures of containers destined for ports in Spain, France, Croatia, the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium. A smaller proportion of these drugs remain in Central America to meet local demand. This combination has contributed to the emergence of local criminal groups that align with larger trafficking organisations to access international markets (GI-TOC, 2023d).

In this context, Colombian and Mexican cartels along with the 'Ndrangheta are involved in trafficking with local groups such as the Movimiento Revolucionario de Crimen Organizado (Los Moreco) (GI-TOC, 2023d). Mexican cartels, particularly the Sinaloa Cartel, have fuelled violence in Costa Rica by supplying weapons to local gangs, effectively waging a proxy war to secure control of drug routes. Meanwhile, Colombian criminal groups, including ex-FARC, have intensified competition in Costa Rica's drug trade through their established networks, as evidenced in previous activities in Venezuela and Ecuador (Sidhu, 2024). Colombia's Gulf Clan operates at the southern end of Costa Rica, while México's Sinaloa and CJNG cartels operate at the northern end. These international groups work with local Costa Rican drug trafficking organisations to facilitate the movement of their illicit products allowing the efficient transit of drugs through the country (Abi-Habib & Cegarra, 2024). In addition to drug trafficking, local criminal groups have diversified their activities to engage in extortion schemes, such as the "gota a gota"[5] informal lending system, which relies on coercion to force repayment (GI-TOC, 2023d).

Furthermore, in recent years, major drug trafficking organisations have shifted to paying Costa Rican logistical criminal services in cocaine rather than cash. As a result, more drugs remain in the country, enabling local groups to distribute and sell domestically (Stoenner, 2024). The growth of local consumption and the presence of small networks that facilitate the transport and storage of drugs contribute to contract killings, disputes between armed groups and the forced recruitment of young people. These problems are exacerbated by the worsening socio-economic conditions in Costa Rica, including rising unemployment and growing social unrest, which have contributed to a significant decline in public perceptions of security. Consequently, crime has emerged as the top social concern, while increasing cases of corruption and bribery have further eroded trust in public institutions (GI-TOC, 2023d).

Structural challenges have severely restricted access to quality education and formal employment, particularly for young people. Consequently, many are pushed into the informal labour market, where their precarious conditions make them vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups seeking to expand their operations (Stoenner, 2024). The erosion of opportunities has been accompanied by a sharp rise in violence affecting public spaces that were once considered safe. Schools have increasingly become sites of violent incidents, with parents murdered while dropping off their children, severed limbs left in plastic bags in public parks and even patients killed inside hospitals by rival gangs (Abi-Habib & Cegarra, 2024).

In Costa Rica, in 2024, most homicides were concentrated in the provinces of San José, Puntarenas and Limón. Data reveal a higher incidence of crime in certain regions, such as Limón (the Caribbean coastal province), where the homicide rate reached 37.8 per 100,000 inhabitants (SWI, 2025). The port city of Limón, along with the nearby Moín container terminal, has become a central hub for drug trafficking and the preferred departure point for cocaine shipments to Europe. In 2023, the canton of Limón, within the province of Limón, recorded a homicide rate of 91 per 100,000 inhabitants, surpassing the rate of 83 per 100,000 recorded in the canton of San José, which has three times Limon's population, to become Costa Rica's homicide capital (Municipalidad de San José, 2020; Organismo de Investigación Judicial, n.d.). This surge in violence is largely attributed to disputes over control of trade routes and the increasing flow of cocaine through the region (Ford, 2022). The struggle for territorial control also involves groups transporting cannabis from Jamaica to the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. However, these groups are less organised than those involved in cocaine trafficking, leading to violent clashes over vulnerable urban areas, particularly among small-scale drug traffickers (Calderón Umaña, 2013). Meanwhile, larger drug trafficking organisations seek to secure access to these ports to export cocaine from Latin America, relying on local collaborators. This dynamic has fuelled the rise of increasingly sophisticated and powerful criminal organisations in Costa Rica.

Limón illustrates how a once-peripheral port city has become a convergence zone connecting local actors, regional logistics and global cocaine flows. Rising domestic demand and the spread of fragmented groups have produced a violent yet adaptive ecosystem where competition sustains conflict and regulates markets. This case shows how the diversification of illicit economies generates new criminal habitats that mirror regional patterns of hybrid governance at the local level.

Taken together, these four cases illustrate how fragmentation, institutional weakness and shifting illicit market dynamics interact in distinct yet comparable ways across different national contexts. While the specific manifestations vary, the underlying mechanisms remain consistent: criminal adaptation within weak governance environments. Table 1 summarises these patterns, highlighting how each case reflects the broader regional mechanisms proposed in this study.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Organised Crime and Violence

City	Homicide rate	Main drivers of violence	Transnational actors	Key local groups	Corruption dynamics	Trafficking routes & role	Socioeconomic factors
Montevideo	13.5 (2023)	Localised drug conflicts, fragmented networks, socio-economic vulnerability	PCC, CV, 'Ndrangheta	Micro-networks, family clans, no large cartels	Oversight failures; recent scandals expose institutional weaknesses	Paraná-Paraguay Waterway to Montevideo port; export hub to Europe	Fragmented neighbourhoods characterised by concentrated structural disadvantages: poverty, exclusion, and limited access to services and opportunities
Rosario	22 (2023)	Collapse of dominant gangs, micro trafficking, institutional corruption	PCC, Sinaloa Cartel, Albanian Mafia, 'Ndrangheta	Los Monos (splintered), Alvarado Clan, 15+ gangs	Police and political corruption; prison-based extortion	Bolivia/Paraguay to Rosario via river; export via Rosario/Buenos Aires ports	Urban poverty, weak institutional presence, limited job access, education shortfalls
Guayaquil	83 (2023)	Fragmentation of criminal groups, international drug trafficking, port control disputes	Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, Albanian Mafia, 'Ndrangheta	Los Choneros, Los Lobos, Los Tiguerones, Chone Killers	Infiltration of judiciary, prisons, and police; protection of traffickers	Colombia to Guayaquil to Europe (e.g., Antwerp, Hamburg); storage hub	Marginalised port areas, high youth unemployment, minimal service provision, informal economies
Limón	38 (2023)	Territorial disputes over drug routes, rising cocaine use, gang competition	Sinaloa, CJNG, Gulf Clan, 'Ndrangheta	Local gangs linked to international groups	Customs and port corruption; rising bribery undermines governance	Transit point for US and Europe-bound cocaine; Moín/Limón ports key	Neglected coastal zones, poor infrastructure, youth unemployment

Limitations

This study faces several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relies primarily on secondary data sources rather than original fieldwork. While triangulation across diverse sources strengthens validity, the absence of interviews or ethnographic data restricts the ability to capture first-hand perspectives. Second, official statistics on homicides and organised crime are often incomplete or contested, which may affect both accuracy and comparability across cases. Third, the study's reliance on descriptive accounts and publicly available datasets constrains the capacity to disentangle causal mechanisms with precision. Finally, the comparative case study design involves trade-offs: while the selection of four countries allows for meaningful cross-case analysis, it inevitably limits the depth of exploration within each context.

Despite these constraints, the study opens the way for further research. Ethnographic and mixed-method approaches could illuminate the micro-dynamics of organised crime, while network and geospatial analyses may strengthen causal insights into links between state fragility, illegal markets and violence. As an exploratory contribution, it refines conceptual frameworks and identifies patterns to guide future work on organised crime in Latin America.

Discussion and Conclusion

The comparative evidence presented across Uruguay, Argentina, Ecuador and Costa Rica shows that the recent expansion of homicidal violence is best understood as the product of interaction between structural and illegal market dynamics rather than a single causal factor. Across these countries, fragmented criminal networks operate within institutional vacuums that allow the proliferation of what Felson (2006) terms "thick crime habitats" (dense environments where illegal and legal markets overlap). These habitats enhance the resilience of criminal groups because they continuously generate new criminal opportunities, optimal convergence environments for criminals where they can share information and resources, and provide the space for self-organisation (Ayling, 2009). Drawing on Felson's ecological framework and Lessing's theory of criminal governance, this study offers a mid-range explanation for why violence persists even where the state is present. Weak institutional enforcement and inconsistent legality create hybrid zones of authority, where state agents, private actors and criminal groups interact symbiotically. These spaces foster corruption, cooperation and confrontation, producing shifting patterns of criminal governance rather than pure anarchy. The three mechanisms proposed – criminal fragmentation, institutional weakness and illicit market dynamics – intersect and reinforce one another, generating distinct but connected trajectories of violence.

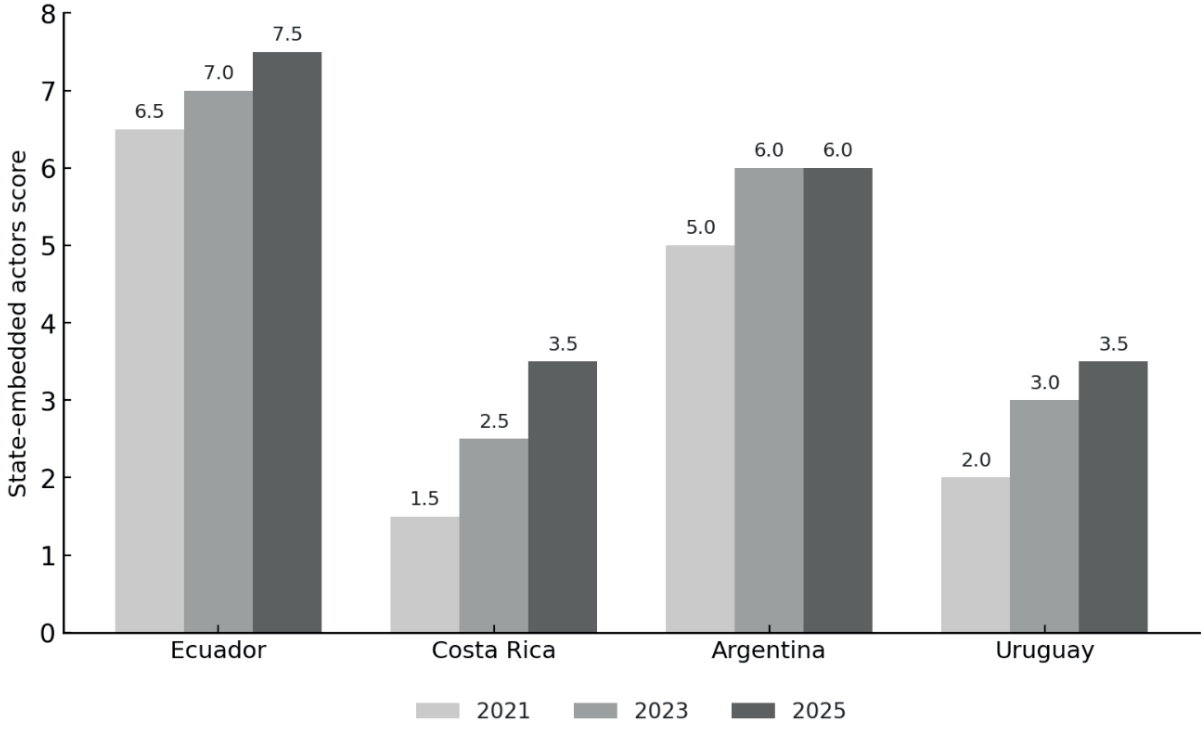
Extending earlier findings, the cases of Montevideo, Rosario, Guayaquil and Limón illustrate how transnational criminal networks, local fragmentation and institutional vulnerabilities converge to drive violence. While each city presents unique dynamics, common structural factors (including expanding illicit markets and socio-economic deprivation) create environments conducive to organised crime proliferation. In Ecuador, the dismantling of dominant criminal organisations enabled the rise of smaller, more violent groups, intensified by transnational linkages with actors such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Albanian mafia. Rosario experienced the decline of centralised groups such as Los Monos, which gave way to more than a dozen rival gangs competing over drug distribution and extortion rackets. Montevideo, although lacking large-scale criminal organisations, exhibits patterns of micro-level violence driven by small-scale networks involved in local trafficking and territorial disputes. Similarly, Limón exhibits an illicit market diversification driven by its emergence as a key distribution hub in the region, exacerbated by the supply of firearms from transnational groups, thereby fostering intragroup violence. In this context, the proliferation of firearms across the region has acted as a catalyst, turning violence into a multifunctional tool used by criminal organisations (Gambetta, 1993; Sanjurjo, 2025; UNODC, 2023b; von Lampe, 2015). These dynamics echo patterns observed in Europe, where increasingly complex and diverse criminal networks have similarly intensified market-related activity (EMCDDA & Europol, 2022).

A second key finding underscores the central role of institutional fragility in enabling organised crime expansion. In all four cases, corruption and weak law enforcement have eroded the state's ability to contain violence, confirming long-standing arguments on limited institutional effectiveness (see Figure 4). In Rosario, criminal groups have penetrated political and police structures; in Guayaquil, security forces struggle against transnational infiltration; in Montevideo, policing strategies remain insufficient to tackle structural drivers of crime; and in Limón, growing corruption amid worsening socio-economic conditions has facilitated the consolidation of criminal networks. As Skarbek (2016) and Bergman and Fondevila (2021) note, prisons across Latin America often function as operational hubs where incarcerated leaders coordinate extortion and violence. These institutional failures foster symbiotic relationships between state actors and criminal enterprises, undermining legitimacy and blurring the boundary between enforcement and collusion (Paoli, 2014; Skaperdas, 2001). The concept of criminal governance captures how organised crime exploits these gaps to assume quasi-governmental roles, providing services, enforcing order and

regulating illegal markets in territories with minimal state presence, from Rio's favelas to Jamaica's garrisons (Arias & Barnes, 2017; Blake, 2013).

Figure 4

State-Embedded Actors (2021 vs 2023)



Source: Own elaboration with data from the Global Organized Crime Index (GI-TOC, 2025).
Note: State-embedded actors is a metric from the Index that measures how much state officials (like police, politicians, or military) are involved in or enable organised crime.

The third dimension concerns the evolution of illegal markets and their impact on violence. Latin America's role as a transit region for cocaine shipments has expanded into domestic markets and logistical control. The Paraná–Paraguay Waterway now serves as a major corridor for cocaine trafficking through Uruguay and Argentina, while the ports of Guayaquil and Limón have become key trans-shipment hubs where criminal groups compete for control of strategic infrastructure. In Costa Rica's Limón, the sharp rise in cocaine trafficking has led to high levels of homicide rates, as groups fight for port access and territorial control. Because many of these emerging groups lack the hierarchical power of traditional cartels, they rely on active violence rather than deterrent capacity to enforce dominance. This underscores how the diversification of illegal markets has multiplied both conflict and cooperation, producing increasingly volatile criminal ecosystems.

Beyond regional implications, these findings speak to broader criminological debates on the adaptive capacity of organised crime. The Latin American evidence supports the notion that fragmentation can coexist with coordination through fluid criminal networks (Bouchard, 2020; Kleemans, 2007). It also reinforces the idea that illegal markets operate as self-organising systems within thick crime habitats, where violence and cooperation alternate as regulatory mechanisms. This contributes to comparative criminology by illustrating how governance and opportunity structures interact in hybrid institutional environments.

The study shows how fragmentation and weak governance have manifested differently across countries that were once considered safe, refining existing frameworks and revealing new forms of criminal governance in contexts experiencing emergent violence. By identifying patterns of criminal expansion and institutional vulnerability before violence escalates, it offers an early-warning perspective to inform preventive rather than reactive policy responses. The comparative evidence shows

that organised crime violence stems from the interaction between state fragility and illicit-market dynamics, mediated by factors such as neighbourhood inequality, institutional penetration, and the strategic importance of ports, advancing a more nuanced framework for understanding organised crime adaptation.

Acknowledgement
The author wishes to express his sincere gratitude for the valuable support and research assistance provided by Maité Larroca and Joel Gomez in the preparation of this research.

Correspondence: Dr. Gonzalo Croci, Professor of Organized Crime, Universidad ORT Uruguay.
gonzalo.croci@facs365.ort.edu.uy

References

Abi-Habib, M., & Cegarra, S. (2024, September 15). Cómo un paraíso turístico se convirtió en un imán para el narcotráfico. *New York Times en Español*. https://www.nytimes.com/es/2024/09/15/espanol/america-latina/costa-rica-trafico-de-drogas.html

Adorno, S., & Dias, C. N. (2019). Brazil: Organised crime, corruption and urban violence. In F. Allum, & S. Gilmour (Eds.), *Handbook of organised crime and politics*. Edward Elgar.

Álvarez Pedrosián, V. (2013). Casavalle bajo el sol: Investigación etnográfica sobre territorialidad, identidad y memoria en la periferia urbana de principios de milenio. Universidad de la

Araújo, V. C., & Costa, M. A. (2024). Redução de Homicídios pelos Programas "pacto pela Vida" e "Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora" entre 2008 e 2017: Uma Análise por Controle Sintético. *Revista Econômica do Nordeste Fortaleza, 55*(2), 68–86. https://www.bnb.gov.br/revista/ren/article/view/1487/1817

Arias, E. D., & Barnes, N. (2017). Crime and plural orders in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Current Sociology*, *65*(3), 448–465. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116667165

Atuesta, L. H., & Pérez-Dávila, Y. S. (2018). Fragmentation and cooperation: The evolution of organized crime in México. *Trends in Organized Crime*, *21*(3), 235–261. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-017-9301-z

Ayling, J. (2009). Criminal organizations and resilience. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, *37*(4), 182–196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2009.10.003

Baudean, M., & Rudnitzky, F. (2023). El crecimiento de la violencia en los mercados de drogas El caso de Uruguay (2012-2019). *Revista de Ciencias Sociales, 36*(53), 89–127. https://doi.org/10.26489/rvs.v36i53.4

Beckert, J., & Wehinger, F. (2011). In the shadow: Illegal markets and economic sociology. *Socio-Economic Review, 11*(1), 5–30. https://hdl.handle.net/10419/48646

Berg, R., & Bledsoe, R. (2024). *Eye of the storm: Ecuador's compounding crises*. Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). https://www.csis.org/analysis/eye-storm-ecuadors-compounding-crises

Bergman, M., Ambrogi, J., Bruno, M., Croci, G., & Prueger, E.A., (2023). *Estudio sobre homicidios en Argentina: un análisis del periodo 2001–2021*. Universidad de Tres de Febrero.

Bergman, M., & Fondevila, G. (2021). *Prisons and crime in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.

Blake, D. K. (2013). Shadowing the state: Violent control and the social power of Jamaican Garrison Dons. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 8*(1), 56–75.

Bouchard, M. (2020). Collaboration and boundaries in organized crime: A network perspective. *Crime and Justice, 49*(1), 425–469. https://doi.org/10.1086/708435

Brombacher, D. (2025). *Criminal embassies: European organized crime in Latin America*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

Calderón, G., Robles, G., Díaz-Cayeros, A., & Magaloni, B. (2015). The beheading of criminal organizations and the dynamics of violence in México. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 59*(8), 1455–1485. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715587053

Calderón Umaña, R. (2013). Proposiciones analíticas para el estudio de la violencia en centroamérica: una mirada desde la exclusión social. *Revista Digital De Ciencias Penales De Costa Rica, 5*, 199–226. https://archivo.revistas.ucr.ac.cr/index.php/RDMCP/article/view/12443

Calvo, J.J. (2013). Atlas sociodemográfico y de la desigualdad del Uruguay: Las Necesidades Básicas Insatisfechas a partir de los Censos 2011. INE. https://uruguay.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/85_file1.pdf

Catino, M. (2020). Italian organized crime since 1950. *Crime and Justice*, *49*, 69–140. https://doi.org/10.1086/707319

Cavalari, M., Manjarrés, J., & Newton, C. (2024). InSightCrime's 2024 homicide round-up. *InSight Crime.* https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2024-homicide-round-up

Conicet. (2024). *Registro Nacional de Barrios Populares—Ludueña* [Map]. https://mapa.poblaciones.org/map/#/@-32.930831,-60.702489,16z/f=f1064726687647445

Croci, G., & Chainey, S. (2023). An institutional perspective to understand Latin America's high levels of homicide. *The British Journal of Criminology, 63*(5), 1199–1218. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azac083

Croci, G., Dammert, L., & Larroca, M. (2025). From safe havens to hotspots: The spread of organised crime violence in Latin America. In K. Carrington, R. Hogg, J. Scott, & M. Sozzo (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of criminology and the global south* (pp. 1-20). Palgrave Macmillan.

Croci, G., & Gomez, J. (2025). Breaking the cycle: The role of the criminal justice system in understanding homicide rates. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 99*, 102450. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2025.102450

Dalby, C. (2022). Uruguay asks difficult questions about Italian mobster's jailbreak. *InSight Crime.* https://insightcrime.org/news/uruguay-confronts-legacy-jailbreak-high-profile-italian-mobster

Dammert, L., Croci, G., & Frey, A. (2024). *¿Por qué tanta violencia homicida en América Latina? Caracterizando el fenómeno y expandiendo su marco de interpretación*. Fundación Carolina. Documentos de Trabajo, 94, 2ª. https://doi.org/10.33960/issn-e.1885-9119.DT94

Denzin, N. K. (2017). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(1), 8–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864

Dewey, M. (2019). The characteristics of illegal markets. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.486

Dias, C. N., & Darke, S. (2016). From dispersed to monopolized violence: Expansion and consolidation of the Primeiro Comando da Capital's Hegemony in São Paulo's prisons. *Crime, Law and Social Change, 65*(3), 213–225. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-015-9578-2

D'Onofrio, B. M., Goodnight, J. A., Van Hulle, C. A., Rodgers, J. L., Rathouz, P. J., Waldman, I. D., & Lahey, B. B. (2009). Maternal age at childbirth and offspring disruptive behaviors: Testing the causal hypothesis. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *50*(8), 1018-1028. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2009.02068.x

Docentes de una escuela de Ludueña denuncian que hace 4 años que están sin gas. (2024, June 6). *La Capital*. https://www.lacapital.com.ar/la-ciudad/docentes-una-escuela-luduena-denuncian-que-hace-4-anos-que-estan-gas-n10137347.html

Doherty, S., & den Held, D. (2023). Balance de InSight Crime de las incautaciones de cocaína en 2022. *InSight Crime.* https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/balance-insight-crime-incautaciones-cocaina-2022

Duarte Villa, R., & Souza Pimenta, M.C. (2019). Violent non-state actors and new forms of governance: Exploring the Colombian and Venezuelan border zone. *Journal of Human Security, 15*(1). https://jhumansecurity.com/menuscript/index.php/jhe/article/view/49/42

Durán-Martínez, A. (2015). To kill and tell? State power, criminal competition, and drug violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 59*(8), 1377–1402. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24546347

Echevarria, M., Passeggi, C., Rinaldi, H., & Sartorio, V. (2019). *Casavalle, un palimpsesto urbano y humano—Precariedad Socio Urbano Habitacional: Análisis, acciones y propuestas.* FADU -UDELAR. https://www.fadu.edu.uy/sie/files/2020/05/PSUH-CH84-Echevarria_Passeggi_Rinaldi_Sartorio.pdf

Ecuador Chequea. (2024, July 3). *Secuestros y extorsiones sostienen la economía criminal*. Ecuador Chequea.

EMCDDA & Europol (2022). 2022 EU drug markets analyses from Europol and the EMCDDA. https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/2022-eu-drug-markets-analyses-europol-and-emcdda

Encuesta de Hogares Rosario: Un tercio de la población no logra acceder a los servicios básicos. (2022, November 24). *La Capital.* https://www.lacapital.com.ar/la-ciudad/encuesta-hogares-rosario-un-tercio-la-poblacion-no-logra-acceder-los-servicios-basicos-n10033967.html

Entrega de pasaporte a Marset: Fiscalía de Delitos Económicos y Complejos investigará el caso. (2022, January 9). *El País*. https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/judiciales/entrega-de-pasaporte-a-marset-fiscalia-de-delitos-economicos-y-complejos-investigara-el-caso

Esberg, J. (2023). *More cartels than counting: Mexico's crime rings.* International Crisis Group. https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/more-cartels-counting-mexicos-crime-rings

Fandiño-Losada, A., Guerrero-Velasco, R., Mena-Muñoz, J. H., & Gutiérrez-Martínez, M. I. (2017). Efecto del control del Crimen Organizado Sobre La Violencia Homicida en CALI (Colombia). *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals, 116*, 159–178.

Feldmann, A. E., & Luna, J. P. (2022). Criminal governance and the crisis of contemporary Latin American states. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *48*(1), 441–461. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030420-124931

Felson, M. (2006). *Crime and nature*. Sage.

Ferreira, M. A. S. V. (2019). Brazilian criminal organizations as transnational violent non-state actors: A case study of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). *Trends in Organized Crime, 22*(2), 148–165. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-018-9354-7

Fiscalía General del Estado. (2024). *Caso Metástasis: Fiscalía obtiene sentencia contra 20 procesados por delincuencia organizada*. Fiscalía General del Estado. https://www.fiscalia.gob.ec/caso-metastasis-fiscalia-obtiene-sentencia-contra-20-procesados-por-delincuencia-organizada/

Flom, H. (2019). State regulation of organized crime: Politicians, police, and drug trafficking in Argentina. *Latin American Politics and Society*, *61*(3), 104–128. https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2019.6

Florez, A., & Newton, C. (2024, January 30). How Rosario became Argentina's drug violence capital. *InSight Crime.* https://insightcrime.org/news/interview/how-rosario-became-argentinas-capital-drug-violence

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Ford, A. (2022). Provincia de Limón, Costa Rica: concentración de narcotráfico y homicidios. *InSight Crime*. https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/provincia-limon-costa-rica-concentra-narcotrafico-homicidios

Fuerte Celis, M. P., Lujan, E. P., & Ponce, R. C. (2019). Organized crime, violence, and territorial dispute in México (2007–2011). *Trends in Organized Crime, 22*(2), 188–209. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-018-9341-z

Gambetta, D. (1996). *The Sicilian mafia: The business of private protection.* Harvard University Press.

George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.

Gerring, J. (2007). Is there a (viable) crucial-case method? *Comparative Political Studies, 40*(3), 231–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006290784
GI-TOC [Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime] (2021). *The cocaine pipeline to Europe.* https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-cocaine-pipeline-to-Europe-GI-TOCInsightCrime.pdf
GI-TOC. (2023a). *Profile: Argentina*. https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2023/english/ocindex_profile_argentina_2023.pdf
GI_TOC. (2023b). *Global organized crime index*. https://ocindex.net/
GI-TOC. (2023c). *Profile: Ecuador.* https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2023/english/ocindex_profile_ecuador_2023.pdf
GI-TOC. (2023d). *Profile: Costa Rica.* https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2023/english/ocindex_profile_costa_rica_2023.pdf
GI_TOC. (2025). *Global organized crime index*. https://ocindex.net/report/2025
Global Initiative Against Organized Crime. (2022). *Gangs of Haiti. Expansion, power and an escalating crisis.* https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GITOC-Gangs-of-Haiti.pdf
Grafmeyer, Y., & Joseph, I. (1979). *La ville-laboratoire et le milieu urbain*. L'ecole de Chicago, Paris.
Guerrero, E. (2013). Towards a transformation of Mexico's security strategy: Priorities and challenges. *The RUSI Journal*, *158*(3), 6–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.807579
Human Rights Watch. (2025). *World Report 2025: Rights trends in Ecuador.* https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/ecuadorc
Iazzetta, M., & Gaiero, M. (2025). Narcotráfico y política. Gestión de la seguridad pública y violencia en Rosario, Argentina (2013–2015). *URVIO. Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de Seguridad*, *41*, 30–46. https://doi.org/10.17141/urvio.41.2025.6277
INEC. (2022). *Censo Ecuador*. https://www.censoecuador.gob.ec
International Crisis Group. (2023). *Ecuador's high tide of drug violence*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/ecuador/ecuadors-high-tide-drug-violence
International Crisis Group. (2025). *Curbing violence in Latin America's drug trafficking hotspots.* https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/colombia-ecuador-guatemala-honduras-mexico/108-curbing-violence-latin-america-drug-trafficking-hotspots
Investigación Durán. (2023, September 13). *Durán: Radiografía de una ciudad paralizada*. https://investigacionduran.ec/reportajes/duran-radiografia-de-una-ciudad-paralizada
Jütten, M. (2024). *EU cooperation with Latin America: Combating drug trafficking in the Andean region*. European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762286/EPRS_BRI(2024)762286_EN.pdf
Kane, J. B., Morgan, S. P., Harris, K. M., & Guilkey, D. K. (2013). The educational consequences of teen childbearing. *Demography*, *50*(6), 2129-2150. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0238-9
Kleemans, E. R. (2007). Organized crime, transit crime, and racketeering. *Crime and Justice, 35*(1), 163–215. https://doi.org/10.1086/501509
Kotzé, J., Antonopoulos, G. A., & Rahman, M. (2022). The processes, logics and economies of violence in organised crime. *Trends in Organized Crime, 25*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-022-09445-2
Lessing, B. (2020). Conceptualizing criminal governance. *Perspectives on Politics*, *19*(3), 854–873. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720001243
Levitsky, S., & Murillo, M. V. (2013). Lessons from Latin America: Building institutions on weak foundations. *Journal of Democracy*, *24*(2), 93–107. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0031
Lipman, E. L., Georgiades, K., & Boyle, M. H. (2011). Young adult outcomes of children born to teen mothers: Effects of being born during their teen or later years. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *50*(3), 232–241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.12.007
Ludueña: Condena para un gatillero de una banda ligada a Los Monos. (2025, September 24). *La Capital*. https://www.lacapital.com.ar/policiales/luduena-condena-un-gatillero-una-banda-ligada-los-monos-n10155307.html
Makinde, O., Björkqvist, K., & Österman, K. (2016). Overcrowding as a risk factor for domestic violence and antisocial behaviour among adolescents in Ejigbo, Lagos, Nigeria. *Global Mental Health*, *3*, e16. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2016.10
Marinelli, C., & Mendoza, D. (2023). *Riesgos e impactos de la doble afectación y el crimen organizado sobre las personas refugiadas y migrantes de venezuela*. Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela (R4V). https://www.r4v.info/es/riesgos-doble-afectacion
McDermott, J., Bargent, J., den Held, D., & Ramírez, M. F. (2021). *The cocaine pipeline to Europe.* Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-to-europe
McDermott, J., Dudley, S. (2025). *Mapping and profiling the most threatening criminal networks in Latin America and the Caribbean*. EL PACCTO 2.0. programme. https://elpaccto.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ENG_Mapping-and-profiling-HRCN_LAC_Vpages.pdf
Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social theory and social structure.* The Free Press.

Messner, S. F., & Tardiff, K. (1986). Economic inequality and levels of homicide: An analysis of urban neighborhoods. *Criminology*, *24*(2), 297–316. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1986.tb01497.x
MIDES & DESyTC. (2018). *Informe de caracterización Territorios educativos "Enseña Uruguay" Montevideo y Maldonado*. https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-desarrollo-social/sites/ministerio-desarrollo-social/files/2019-06/respuesta-del-mides%5B1%5D_6.pdf
Ministerio del Interior. (2024). *Informe sobre violencia y criminalidad en todo el paí)*. Ministerio del Interior.
Ministerio del Interior. (2025). *Plan Nacional de Seguridad Pública (2025 - 2035) Diagnóstico general de la criminalidad y la violencia en Uruguay*. Ministerio del Interior.
Miraglia, P., Ochoa, R., & Briscoe, I. (2012). *Transnational organised crime and fragile states*. OECD. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2012/10/transnational-organised-crime-and-fragile-states_g17a2274/5k49dfg88s40-en.pdf
Müller, M.-M. (2018). Governing crime and violence in Latin America. *Global Crime*, *19*(3-4), 171–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2018.1543916
Municipio de Montevideo. (2019). *Casavalle*. https://municipiod.montevideo.gub.uy/node/168
Municipalidad de San José. (2020). *Diagnóstico Cantonal 2020*. Municipalidad de San José.
Newton, C. (2024a, October 2). Uruguay enfrenta creciente amenaza del crimen organizado. *InSight Crime.* https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/uruguay-enfrenta-creciente-amenaza-crimen-organizado
Newton, C. (2024b, September 25). Uruguay corruption in spotlight after ex-official's release from prison. *Insight Crime*. https://insightcrime.org/news/interview/uruguay-corruption-spotlight-ex-official-release-prison
Observatorio de la Violencia. (2024). Homicidios dolosos 2024. Ministerio de Justicia y Paz. https://observatorio.mj.go.cr/sites/default/files/docs/homicidios_dolosos_2024.pdf
OCCRP. (2023, December 5). Massive global raids target 'Ndrangheta. Organized crime and corruption reporting project. https://www.occrp.org/en/news/massive-global-raids-target-ndrangheta
Odebrecht scandal: Ecuador vice-president given six years' jail (2017, December 14). *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/odebrecht-scandal-ecuador-vice-president-given-six-years-jail?
OECO. (2023). *Boletín semestral de homicidios intencionales en Ecuador*. Observatorio Ecuatoriano De Crimen Organizado. https://oeco.padf.org/boletin-homicidios-intencionales-ecuador
OECO. (2024a). *Boletín semestral de homicidios intencionales en Ecuador: 2024*. Observatorio Ecuatoriano De Crimen Organizado. https://oeco.padf.org/boletin-semestral-de-homicidios-intencionales-en-ecuador-enero-junio-2024
OECO. (2024b). Visualizador de datos: número de homicidios. Padrino International Disaster Response. https://oeco.padf.org/visualizador-de-datos-numero-de-homicidios
Organismo de Investigación Judicial [OIJ]. (n.d.) Costa Rica OIJ 1. https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25230868-costa-rica-oij-1
Orozco, M. (2022). *Estas son las provincias con mayor y menor pobreza del país*. https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/amazonia-provincias-pobreza-empleo-ecuador
Osborn, D. R., & Tseloni, A. (1998). The distribution of household property crimes. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 14*(3), 307–330. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023086530548
Paoli, L. (2008). Organized crime: New label, new phenomenon or policy expedient? *International Annals of Criminology*, *46*, 39–62. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003445208009367
Paoli, L. (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of organized crime*. Oxford University Press.
Parada Lugo, V. (2024, November 29). Los grupos narcotraficantes de Colombia y Ecuador se enfrentan en la frontera amazónica por el negocio de la coca. *El País.* https://elpais.com/america/amazonia-sin-fronteras/2024-11-29/los-grupos-narcotraficantes-de-colombia-y-ecuador-se-enfrentan-en-la-frontera-amazonica-por-el-negocio-de-la-coca.html
Phillips, B. J. (2015). How does leadership decapitation affect violence? The case of drug trafficking organizations in México. *The Journal of Politics, 77*(2), 324–336.
Portela, M. (2012). *Diagnóstico local sobre la problemática de las drogas en Casavalle – Barrio Municipal*. Observatorio Uruguayo de Drogas (OUD) and Junta Nacional de Drogas - Presidencia de la República.
Prieto, C. S., & Moreno Martín, F. (2025). The spider's web of organized crime: Structural configuration of a real criminal organization and its relevance for the management of its security and efficiency needs. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2025.2466815
Ramírez, M. F. (2024, December 4). Disputes over drug trafficking routes drive child recruitment in Ecuador. *Insight Crime*. https://insightcrime.org/news/disputes-over-drug-trafficking-routes-drive-child-recruitment-ecuador
Regoeczi, W. C. (2008). Crowding in context: An examination of the differential responses of men and women to high-density living environments. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *49*(3), 254–268. https://doi.org/10.1177/002214650804900302
Rodríguez Ferreira, O. (2016). Violent Mexico: Participatory and multipolar violence associated with organised crime. *International Journal of Conflict & Violence, 10*(1).

Ruiz-Tagle, J., & Urria, I. (2022). Household overcrowding trajectories and mental well-being. *Social Science and Medicine*, *296*, 114051. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114051
Sampó, C., & Troncoso, V. (2023). Cocaine trafficking from non-traditional ports: Examining the cases of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. *Trends in Organized Crime*, *26*(3), 235–257. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-021-09441-y
Sanjurjo, D. (2025). Violencia armada y tráfico de armas en América Latina. *Análisis Carolina, 6.* https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33960/AC_06.2025
Santos, G. (2024, April 2). Cambio de objetivos. En Rosario la guerra ya no es entre bandas: Ahora, el crimen organizado quiere tener la ciudad en su puño. *La Nación.* https://www.lanacion.com.ar/seguridad/nuevo-objetivo-en-rosario-la-guerra-ya-no-es-entre-bandas-ahora-el-crimen-organizado-quiere-tener-la-nid02042024/
Schelling, T. C. (1971). What is the business of organized crime? *The American Scholar, 40*(4), 643–652.
Sergi, A. (2019). Traditional organised crime on the move: Exploring the globalisation of the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. In L. S. Talani, & R. Roccu (Eds.), *The dark side of globalisation* (pp. 123–145). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05117-4_5
Sidhu, A. (2024, August 7). A crackdown in the making: Cartel violence in Costa Rica. *Geopolitical Monitor.* https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/a-crackdown-in-the-making-cartel-violence-in-costa-rica
Skaperdas, S. (2001). The political economy of organized crime: Providing protection when the state does not. *Economics of Governance*, *2*(3), 173–202. https://doi.org/10.1007/PL00011026
Skarbek, D. (2016). Covenants without the sword? Comparing prison self-governance globally. *American Political Science Review*, *110*(4), 845–862. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000563
Snyder, R., & Duran-Martinez, A. (2009). Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, *52*(3), 253–273. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-009-9195-z
Solari, C. D., & Mare, R. D. (2012). Housing crowding effects on children's wellbeing. *Social Science Research*, *41*(2), 464-476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.09.012
Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Sage.
Stoenner, C. (2024, October 18). Costa Rica faces record-breaking levels of crime against tourists. *Cronkite News*. https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2024/10/18/costa-rica-face-record-breaking-levels-crime-tourist s
SWI. (2025). Costa Rica cerró 2024 con 880 homicidios, la segunda cifra más alta de su historia. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/costa-rica-cerr%C3%B3-2024-con-880-homicidios,-la-segunda-cifra-m%C3%A1s-alta-de-su-historia/88672716
Tenenbaum, E. G. (2018). El mercado de las drogas ilegales en Uruguay. *Revista Mexicana De Sociología*, *80*(4). https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0188-25032018000400855
Tseloni, A. (2006). Multilevel modelling of the number of property crimes: Household and area effects. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society), 169*(2), 205–233. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3559670
UNODC. (2023a). *Global report on cocaine 2023 – local dynamics, global challenges*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf
UNODC. (2023b). *World drug report 2023: The nexus between drugs and crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime in the Amazon Basin*. https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH4_Amazon.pdf
UNODC. (2024). *Drug trafficking & cultivation.* https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-drug-seizures
UNODC. (2025a). *Drug use prevalence*. https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-drug-use-prevalence
UNODC. (2025b). *Intentional homicides: Victims of intentional homicide*. https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims
Vanderford, R. (2024). Ex-Vitol trader pleads guilty to additional bribery charges after conviction, August 21). *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/ex-vitol-trader-pleads-guilty-to-additional-bribery-charges-after-conviction-878122ac?
von Lampe, K. (2015). *Organized crime: Analyzing illegal activities, criminal structures, and extra-legal governance*. Sage.
Walk Free Foundation. (2023). *Global Slavery Index: Regional findings – the Americas.* Walk Free Foundation. https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/regional-findings/americas
Wiser, D. (2024, July 29). From Guayaquil to "Guaya-Kill"? Examining Ecuador's descent into drug violence. *Lacuna.* https://lacuna.org.uk/politics/guayaquil-to-guaya-kill-ecuadors-descent-from-tourist-haven-to-drug-violence/
World Atlas. (2024). The most dangerous cities in the world. https://www.worldatlas.com/cities/the-most-dangerous-cities-in-the-world.html
Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

[1] A preliminary version of this article was developed as a book chapter titled "From Safe Havens to Hotspots: The Spread of Organised Crime Violence in Latin America" (Croci et al., 2025), published in *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South* (Springer). The present version revises and extends that work by introducing a new analytical framework, expanding the comparative scope, and updating data and theoretical discussion.

[2] The term "mid-range analytical framework" refers to a theoretically informed model that operates between grand, abstract theories and case-specific explanations. It seeks to identify causal mechanisms that can be empirically observed across contexts, linking macro-level structures (such as state institutions and markets) with meso- and micro-level dynamics (such as criminal governance and local violence). The notion draws on Merton's (1968) idea of theories of the middle range, which emphasise explanation through observable processes rather than overarching paradigms.

[3] Cocaine trafficking to Europe yields higher profits than to the United States due to elevated prices and lower risks of interception or extradition. Wholesale prices average around US$28,000 in the United States and US$40,000 in Europe, reaching up to US$80,000 in some markets (McDermott et al., 2021).

[4]The Unsatisfied Basic Needs (UBN) framework provides a multidimensional measure of poverty, identifying deficits in housing, education, and access to basic services that hinder the fulfilment of social rights.

[5] "Gota a gota" loans provide quick cash to individuals or small businesses with no formal requirements but carry excessive interest rates and daily repayment demands. When borrowers default, criminal groups use intimidation and violence to collect debts, turning lending into a mechanism of extortion and territorial control.