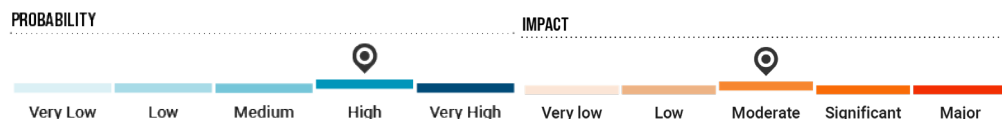


# Increased violence amid internal armed conflict leads to protection concerns



## BACKGROUND

On 8 January 2024, Ecuador's President, Daniel Noboa, decreed a new nationwide state of exception declaring an internal armed conflict alongside an order for security forces to launch operations against 22 organised criminal gangs (El País 09/01/2024; US Mission Ecuador 09/01/2024). Initially, the state of exception was planned to last 60 days (Ecuadorian President 08/01/2024). On 7 March, it was extended for another 30 (Jurist 09/03/2024; VOA 08/03/2024).

Recent escalations in criminal gang violence led Noboa to declare this state of exception. Such escalations included the takeover of a TV station during live broadcast, the escape of a notorious gang leader from the Guayaquil regional prison, riots and mass prison escapes, and attacks on public institutions and the army (BBC 09/01/2024; InSight Crime 09/01/2024 and 19/01/2024). There have also been instances of civilians being shot, shops looted, and car bombs and other explosives going off in the capital, Quito, and other cities (ICG 19/01/2024; iMMAP 12/02/2024).

Since May 2021, over ten states of exception have been declared in Ecuador (El Comercio 02/04/2023). The latest one stands out, however, as it includes a declaration of internal armed conflict and authorises the use of lethal force against criminal gangs designated as 'terrorist groups' (Meythaler & Zambrano 11/01/2024). The state of exception also orders the mobilisation of the armed forces and police throughout the country (ICG 19/01/2024; Penn Today 22/01/2024; Meythaler & Zambrano 11/01/2024). Correspondingly, this state also limits Ecuadorians' rights to assemble and move freely. It also allows the authorities to enter homes without a warrant and open civilians' correspondence, rights previously protected by law (Dentons 12/01/2024).

Between 2020–2022, gang-related homicides in Ecuador increased by 245%. In the first half of 2023 alone, there were 75% more homicides than in the first half of 2022 (Confirmado 12/07/2023), making it the most violent year in history, with a rate of 40 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (IRC 13/12/2023). In the same year, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was killed in the national capital, Quito, marking an increase in criminal gang violence against political entities in 2022–2023. 2022 recorded 36 violent events against politicians, a significant increase from

the seven reported between 2018–2021 (ACLED 14/08/2023). As a result, Ecuador has become one of the ten most violent countries worldwide (iMMAP 12/02/2024).

Although Ecuador does not produce cocaine, the country's size and location – between Peru and Colombia – make it a strategic shipping hub for the drug to reach major markets, such as the US and Europe. For years, Ecuador experienced lower rates of criminal violence linked to drug trafficking. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), an armed group originating from Colombia, historically controlled drug routes in Ecuador. Since 2016, however, following the Colombian peace agreement that led to FARC-EP's demobilisation, violence has escalated as different criminal gangs fight to control drug trafficking routes. In Ecuador, as FARC-EP's influence declined, a void emerged in cocaine distribution and transportation networks (PIIE 16/01/2024; GOCI accessed 07/03/2024; InSight Crime 20/03/2023). Criminal gangs in Ecuador have taken advantage, seizing drug trafficking routes and instigating rising violence (InSight Crime accessed 13/03/2024; InSight Crime 21/02/2024).

### About this report

**Aim:** this report is an anticipatory analysis of the potential humanitarian consequences of recent escalations in criminal gang-related violence in Ecuador following the state of exception and internal armed conflict decreed and declared by President Daniel Noboa in early 2024.

**Method:** this report is based on a secondary data review of public sources. More information on the risk methodology can be found in the ACAPS Risk Analysis Methodology document.

**Limitations:** the lack of information available on displaced people in Ecuador, as well as others affected by violence, such as those confined and threatened, makes it difficult to establish the number of people likely to be affected in the future.

## RATIONALE

Ecuador's recent history and multiple states of exception, with varying results, demonstrate the limitations of the security forces in their fight against organised crime. In recent years, criminal gangs have increased their arsenal and influence, including in their strongholds (El País 10/01/2024). The Ecuadorian Government's response of mobilising the police and military suggests an increase in clashes in the coming months. As at February 2024, the authorities had already announced over 118,000 police and military operations against gangs (USIP 18/01/2024; Primicias 23/02/2024).

Criminal gangs have large numbers and substantial financial resources, giving them the capacity to resist for long periods (InSight Crime 14/02/2024). These gangs also benefit from complicity in both the administration and security forces, exemplified by the Ecuadorian Attorney General's large-scale investigation of links between government officials and the gangs in late 2023, which further complicates operations against these gangs (USIP 18/01/2024; El País 16/12/2023).

As criminal gangs are fragmented, dispersed across the country, and able to exploit the lack of resources for recruitment, the dismantling of ones prominent in certain areas would only leave a void others would likely try to fill (InSight Crime 14/02/2024). Such a situation would lead to more competition over drug trafficking routes.

The rising violence could lead more civilians to try to defend themselves against criminal gangs. Since 2022, self-defence groups have formed and become increasingly active amid loosening gun restrictions, especially in Azuay, Guayas, Pichincha, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, and Tungurahua provinces. At least 46 militia-related events were recorded from January–August 2023, nearly double the number recorded in all of 2022 (ACLED 14/08/2023; CFR 14/06/2023). If militia operations persist, security incidents will increase. Criminal gangs may retaliate against areas and communities they perceive as a threat, worsening insecurity.

## IMPACT

Communities are most at risk in the provinces of El Oro, Esmeraldas, Guayas, Los Ríos, and Manabí, alongside the national capital, Quito, in Pichincha, where the largest number of criminal gangs operate. These are areas where recent military operations have been carried out and are also among the areas most affected by extortion, murder, and armed attacks (El Comercio 12/01/2024; InSight Crime 19/01/2024 and 20/12/2023).

## Protection risks

For the population, getting caught in the middle of active fighting is one of the main threats. An increase in anti-criminal gang operations is likely to increase that risk and the number of deaths in 2024 (UNICEF 12/01/2024). This likelihood is compounded by criminal gangs' collusion with youth and political groups (BBC 17/01/2024). As many camouflage themselves in densely populated neighbourhoods and use houses as operational centres or to store weapons, it is difficult for the authorities to differentiate gang members from civilians, creating the risk of some of them being attacked (ICG 19/01/2024; BBC 17/01/2024).

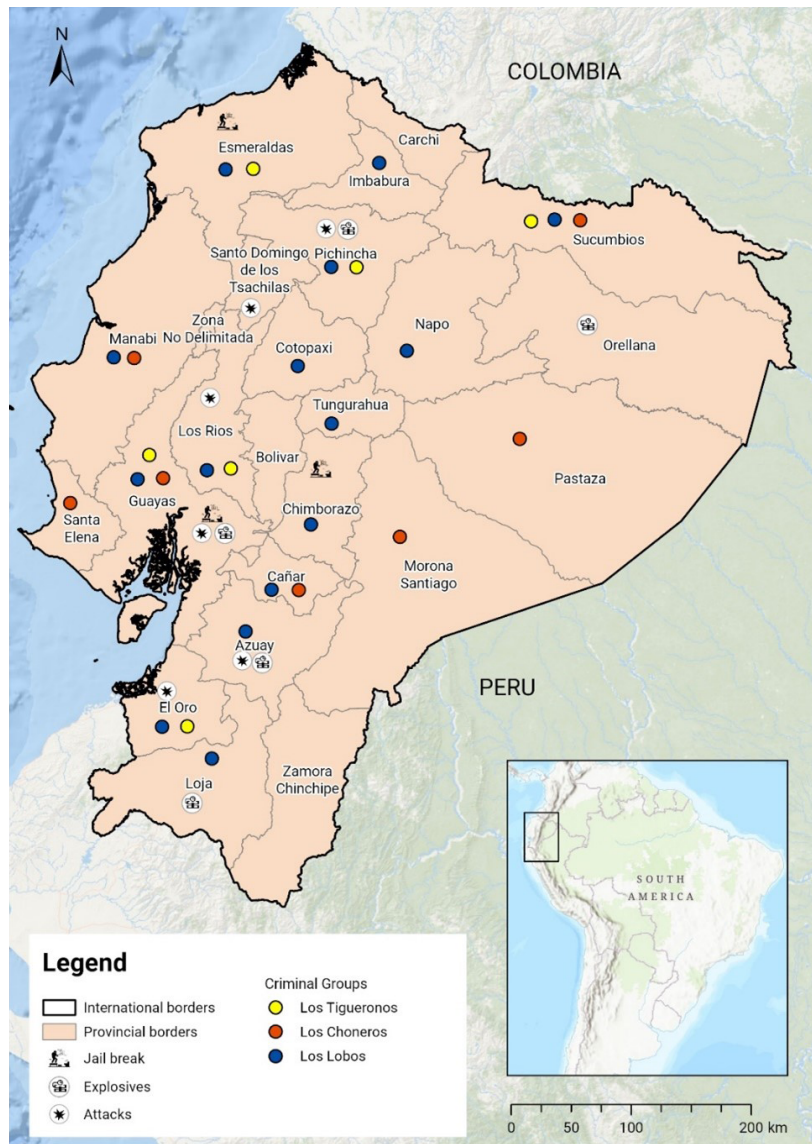
Captures and kills can incentivise an increase in the forced recruitment of children and adolescents. In 2023, Ecuador recorded at least 770 child and adolescent homicides, a drastic increase of 640% compared to the 104 recorded in 2019. Criminal gangs use children and adolescents to carry out murders, traffic drugs, conduct robberies, and carry weapons (UNICEF 15/01/2024; iMMAP 12/02/2024). Forced recruitment exposes children and adolescents to armed clashes, a trend that will worsen if criminal violence persists.

Extortion cases – already on the rise as criminal gangs expand their grip on criminal economies – will continue to increase, affecting civilians. From 2022 to November 2023, Ecuador experienced an over 65% increase in extortion cases, which is an almost 400% increase from 2021 (InSight Crime 20/12/2023). If security forces were to weaken the drug trafficking trade, criminal gangs may resort to extortion as an alternative income source.

Movement restrictions linked to the state of exception will disrupt livelihoods in affected areas, worsening food insecurity. In 2022, 2.4 million people were severely food-insecure (WFP 31/03/2023). In 2023, Ecuador's economy has slowed significantly as a result of worsening structural challenges and rising insecurity from criminal violence (El País 09/10/2023; WB accessed 18/03/2024). Increasing violence will likely lead to greater access barriers to essential goods and services, particularly for those already in poverty, who represent 38% of the population (IRC 07/03/2024).

In 2023, around 4.3 million children could not attend school because of temporary school closures resulting from insecurity (iMMAP 12/02/2024). Criminal gangs have also threatened, robbed, attacked, and recruited students in affected areas (CNN 06/02/2024). An increase in security force operations may force the closure of more educational institutions and increase their use by criminal gangs.

Map 1. Criminal gang presence since 2023



Source: InSight Crime (19/01/2024)

Disclaimer: The layouts 'jail break', 'explosives', and 'attacks' do not match the number of events and are meant to illustrate that at least one event took place in the province by January 2024. The 'criminal groups' category does not show all gangs in Ecuador, only the three most active.

## Increased internal displacement and migration

An increase in conflict between the State and criminal gangs could push more people in affected areas, or those with a relationship with either side, to move to avoid death, threats, and kidnapping.

The number of Ecuadorians on migration routes to the north of the continent, which go through the Darien Gap on the Colombia-Panama border, reinforces that many people are leaving the country as violence increases. In 2023, more than 50,000 Ecuadorians crossed that border, a 75% increase compared to 2022 (Primicias 14/02/2024; SNMP accessed 13/03/2024).

A new dynamic involves Ecuadorians leaving the country, especially for North America. The reasons for their displacement vary; some cite increased violence, extortion, and threats at the US border (NMás YouTube 13/01/2024; Primicias 14/02/2024).