

Why Cities Fail: The Urban Security Crisis in Ecuador

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Why Cities Fail: The Urban Security Crisis in Ecuador

Abstract

Compared to other countries in Latin America, Ecuador was traditionally considered a peaceful territory. However, 2022 was the most violent year in the history of Ecuador with a homicide rate of 25.6. In particular, the littoral city of Guayaquil (46.6) poses extraordinary challenges to Ecuadorian security agencies while criminal governance and firepower of criminal armed groups increased steadily in the past four years. This paper explores the relationship between ports, violence, and governance in the context of criminal wars. Through a process-tracing method, it studies the path through which Guayaquil ended up in a security crisis between 2018 and 2022. Using in-depth interviews, criminal justice data, and direct observations, we argue the relations between states and communities can dramatically change under the perception of state weakness despite the implementation of iron fist approaches as exceptional public safety measures.

Introduction

Several factors explain the fall of Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador, in the most violent year (2022) in its history. The authors argue that state security, governance capacity dismantling, criminal wars resulting from kingpins' removal, and state-criminal arrangements were the underlying mechanisms behind the surge of violence. Parallel to state-sponsored protection rackets, state security, and justice capacity reduction in urban areas gave Organized Crime Groups (OCG) territorial control in the second most important city of the Andean country.

In short, dismantling the security governance capacities facilitated criminal encroachment and fragmentation. As a result, security and crime policies transformed from a clientelistic to a reactionary model, in which authorities implemented states of exceptions and militarized responses. However, criminal governance dynamics in peripheral neighborhoods and prisons prove state response ineffectiveness, creating more violence and political instability. This paper shows that after reaching a high-crime equilibrium situation characterized by powerful OCGs and weak state capacities—the *mano dura* (firm hand) course of action adopted by national and local authorities—fostered more violence in Guayaquil.

Previous Literature

This study builds upon literature on crime, security, and prison governance in Latin America. Bergman's crime equilibrium theory states that crime is a function of profit opportunities in illegal markets, and the strength of the criminal justice system and states to enforce the rule of law is a pillar of how the authors understand Ecuador's security landscape evolution. According to Bergman, the growth of criminal activity reflects a breakdown of the social equilibrium: A low crime equilibrium shifts to a violent high crime equilibrium at the point where the demand for illegal market goods is greater than the ability of local law enforcement to neutralize such demand, producing the growth of organized crime.¹

Hence, crime waves between 2018 and 2022 occurred because of overwhelming profits generated by acquisitive crime or inadequate criminal justice institutional performance. Guayaquil presents both conditions: A spillover effect from the overlap of transnational and

local drug markets, prompting criminal factions to expand into new markets and systematically eroded criminal justice capacity at national and local levels.

The relationship between violence and criminal contagion is central to Guayaquil's security crisis. As the authors will further explain, despite the recent *mano dura* policy taken by the government in the city, such courses of action have proved ineffective. From a high crime equilibrium perspective, the contagion effect explains how a critical mass of delinquents forms and why changes in law enforcement rarely neutralize the powerful effects of imitation.²

The literature on drug violence and criminal wars in the region shapes this paper's approach to the dynamics of violence in Guayaquil and how different factions compete between them and with the state for governance, illicit economies, and territorial control. Central to organized crime dynamics in Latin America is the scale and scope of violence, which led to a debate about whether citizens are in front of a crime or a conflict challenge.

Recently, some authors have explored the operational implications of OCG tactics on the militarization of policing and the use of armed forces for citizen security purposes.³ For Sullivan, crime wars refer to the broad range of criminal conflicts, while criminal insurgency refers to the influence of criminal conflicts and criminal governance on States and interstate institutions.⁴ As criminal insurgencies are a form of crime wars, the scale of power, territorial control, and violence exhibited by OCGs becoming *de facto* guerillas has profound political implications.⁵ In short, the appetite of OCGs in Guayaquil to gain economic and social control over marginalized urban sectors ended in hollowing state capacity and public services. Following Sullivan's typologies of criminal insurgencies, Ecuador's OCGs went from local criminal insurgencies controlling urban enclaves to engaging the state and even surpassing the military capacity of law enforcement, mining its legitimacy at a national and local level.

Ecuador is a country that transited from a low to a high crime equilibrium situation, violent competition, and where the tactics, techniques, and procedures used by OCGs will be central to the answer if Guayaquil turned into a criminal governance enclave defined as areas where lawbreakers (gangs, cartels, criminal warlords) exert political

and social control.⁶ Social control and operational sophistication are critical to this analysis.

The operational sophistication of OCGs speaks to the visibility and frequency of violence and how these groups communicate violence during criminal wars. Massacres, beheadings, dismemberments, and exposition of corpses with OCG messages have shocked Ecuadorian society in the past two years, signaling the dimension of the unstoppable bloodbath.⁷ Previous research on drug wars in Colombia and Mexico has shown that the frequency of violence increases as the illicit markets become more competitive and the visibility of violence as the state security apparatus fragments. A fragmented state sends the message it can no longer protect criminals nor dismantle criminal organizations. Durán Martínez argues that the visibility of violence depends primarily on how cohesive or fragmented the state's security apparatus is. Violence will be more visible in contexts where criminals do not expect protection or effective coercion from the state. In contexts where the market and criminal competition are fragmented, violence will be more frequent.⁸

Interactions between criminals and the state can also be open confrontation against the state or violence toward public officials and law enforcement. As per Lessing's research, OCGs deploy violence against the state when the benefits of doing so surpass the cost.⁹ The prior is when states decide to launch unconditional crackdowns even more if such a course of action occurs in corrupt contexts. The conditionality of repression, how and when states use its coercive power, affects whether these groups opt for a violent rule of the underworld and, more importantly, to evade or confront the state.¹⁰

The city government's response to crime in Guayaquil is influenced by both the levels of violence, particularly homicide rates, and the patterns of armed territorial control. According to Monacada's findings, there are three types of political responses to territorial criminal control:

- Reactionary
- Participatory
- Clientelist

Reactionary responses involve *mano dura* approaches and low levels of social investment, while clientelist responses direct economic resources toward social projects to build and strengthen political support. These

models are crucial to understanding and tracing the processes of security deterioration from the *Revolución Ciudadana* period to the current crime crisis in Ecuador.

Finally, the article states it is difficult to understand the relationship between urban features, governance, and violence amid criminal wars without looking at how the penitentiary crisis in Ecuador shapes interactions between criminal factions. To do so, the authors build on Skarberk's theory of prison governance to explore how what happens inside prisons in Guayaquil informs what happens in the streets. From the prison's governance perspective, all prisoners face the general problem of order and need for services, but how governance varies from prison to prison depends on local conditions.¹¹ For instance, Latin American prisons are way more crowded and violent than prisons in Western Europe, while they share the fundamentals of confinement. Political economy determines how prisons, prison life, and inmate populations are organized, which explains this variation.

Following Skarberk, prisons present a fundamental issue of the political economy related to how institutions emerge to control and distribute power. In the absence of formal institutions and scarce confidence, prisoners often create institutions as forms of self-help.¹² Challenges such as untrustworthiness and direct threats, corruption, and the lack of services or access to leisure are among the reasons prisoners might resort to mechanisms of extralegal governance.¹³ Hence, there are at least four formats of prison extralegal governance:

- Official governance regimes
- Co-governance regimes
- Self-governance regimes
- No governance regimes

According to the data, Guayaquil's prison extralegal governance stands between a co-governance and a self-governance regime.

Why Guayaquil? Security and Crime Context, 2018-2022

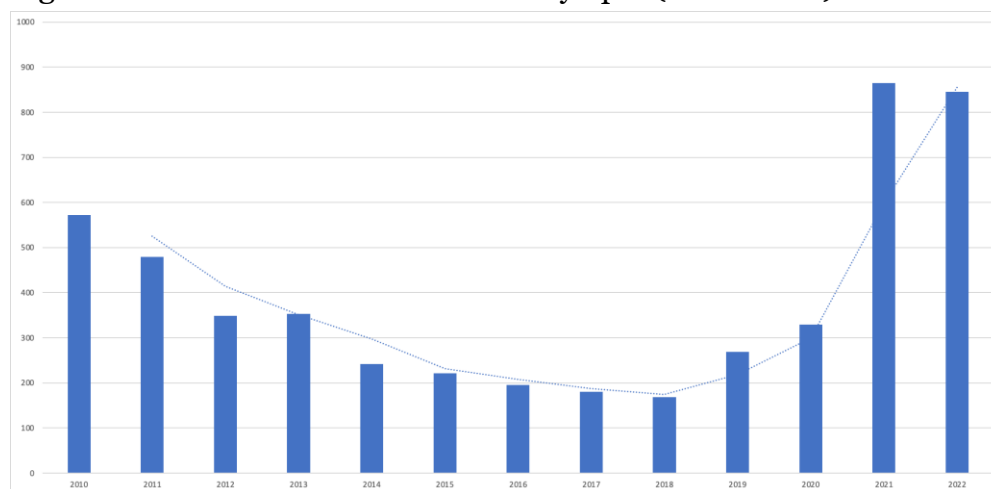
In 2005, Ecuador was under siege of violence; the homicide rate was 17.6 per 100,000 inhabitants. In the subsequent years, Ecuador became the second-safest country in the region, with a sustained reduction in homicide rates.¹⁴ In 2015, international organizations wondered what happened to the best-paid police in Latin America.¹⁵ The Interamerican

Development Bank IDB highlighted the growth in public investment in security from 1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) to 2.3 percent. This translated into strengthening physical, human, technical, and technological capacities. The average salary of a recently graduated police officer went from \$358 U.S. dollars in 2006 to \$933 in 2016.¹⁶

Legal and institutional reforms accompanied public investment growth. In 2004, the Ecuadorian government introduced the Modernization Plan of the National Police. In 2007, with the Police Modernization Commission and, in 2008, with the new Constitution, a fundamental reformation of the security institutions came into place, centered on a new constitutional approach to integral security.¹⁷ During the following years, these changes translated into new regulatory frameworks and comprehensive security management models. It went from a military police model that privileged repression to one of community police transforming the security institutional landscape.

However, since 2018, the crime statistics trend has shifted. The number of intentional homicides suffered an increment of 347 percent between 2018 and 2022, reaching a rate of 25.6 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, making 2022 the most violent year in Ecuador's history.¹⁸ Violence has become more evident with a spiking homicide rate, primarily concentrated in the provinces of Guayas (35 percent), Manabí (10 percent), Los Ríos (9 percent), and Esmeraldas (9 percent). Currently, Guayas amounts to 3642 homicides registered between 2018-2022. Within this province, Guayaquil concentrates 68 percent of the total homicides, making it the second most violent city in the country after Esmeraldas, which reached a 77.4 homicide rate in 2022.

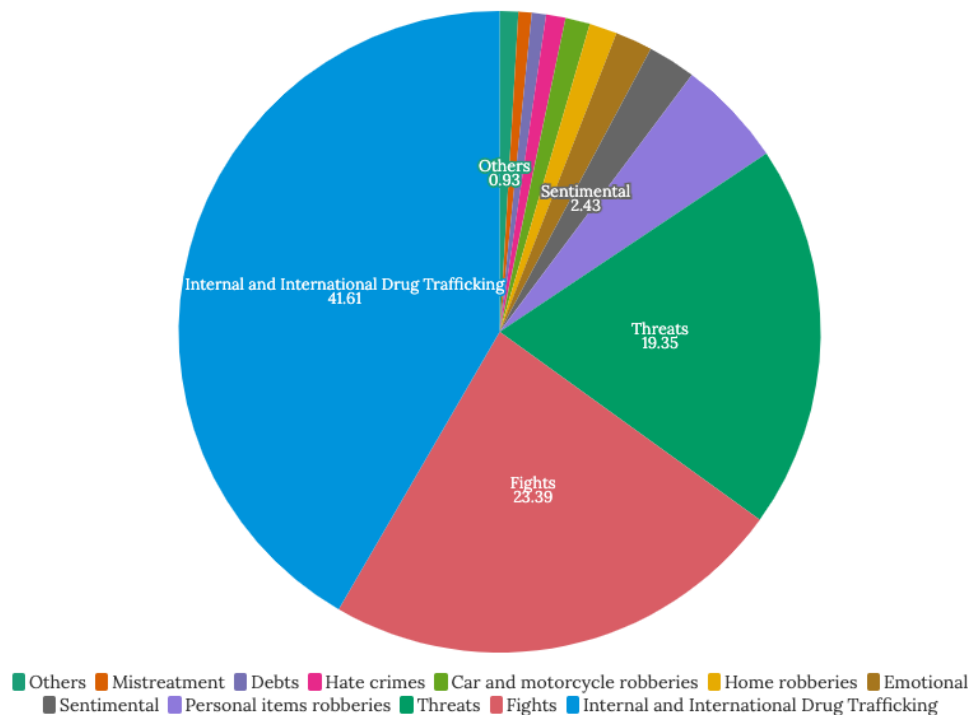
Figure 1. Intentional Homicides in Guayaquil (2018-2022)



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022. Note: Data is available until August 2022.

Guayaquil, Ecuador’s largest city, has 2.6 million residents and contributes 20 percent to the national GDP. It is the second-largest economic center, primarily due to its role as a major maritime port. Ranked 7th in Latin America, Guayaquil’s port handles a significant amount of cargo, with an average throughput of 2.06 million between 2019-2021, accounting for 91.4 percent of the country’s freight.¹⁹ Ecuador’s role in the global production of illicit economies tied to drug trafficking has put the State in a critical situation. The National Police has reported that in 4 out of 10 intentional homicides, the primary motivation is drug trafficking.²⁰

Figure 2. Intentional Homicides per Motive (2018-2022)

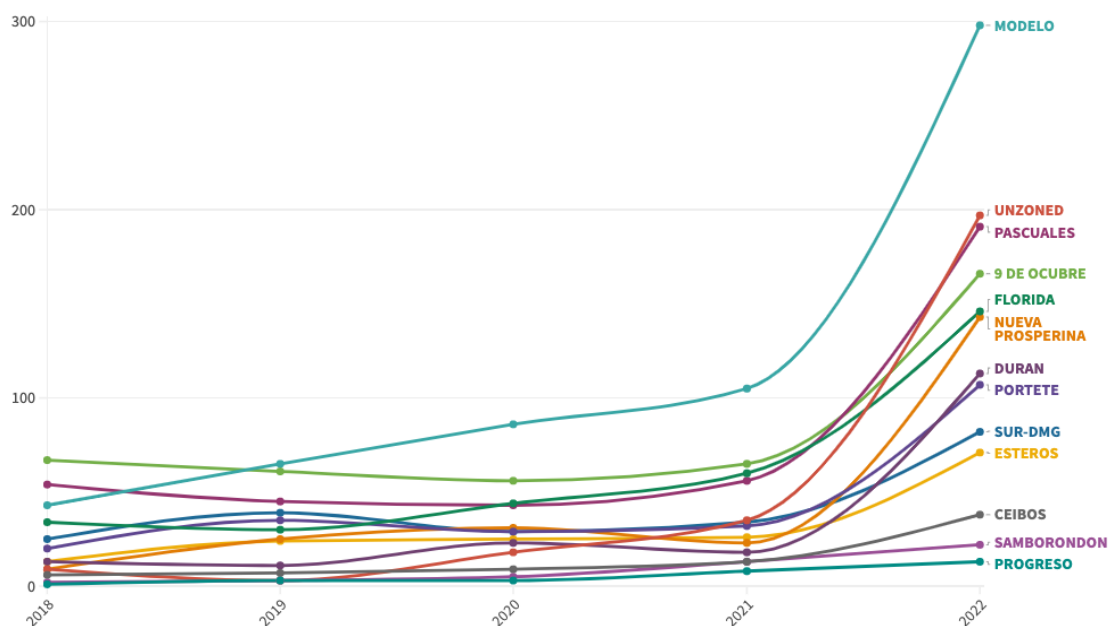


Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

Note: Data is available until January 2022.

In all districts of Guayaquil, the National Police registers a growth of more than 200 percent in extortion, especially in Durán, Nueva Prosperina, and Pascuales. From the complaints made at the national level about extortion, less than 10 percent have received a favorable court ruling, while the rest continue to be investigated by the police.²¹

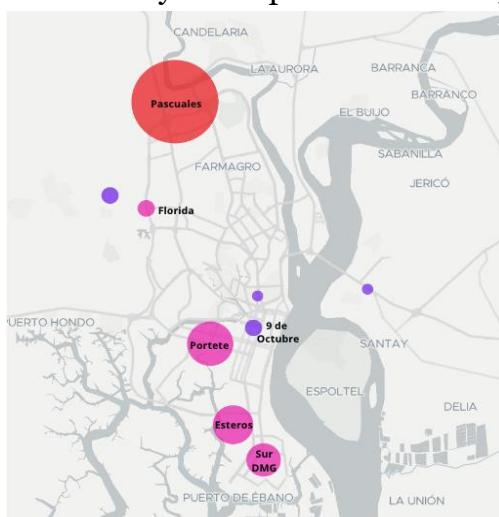
Figure 3. Number of Extortion Registered in Guayaquil per District (2018-2022)



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

Until August 2022, there were 147 bomb attacks in the national territory. Over 49.7 percent of the attacks occurred in Guayaquil, Durán, and Samborondón; this translates into 72 explosions. In 2022, 50 attacks with explosives took place, mainly in the Pascuales district on the northern side of the city.²² Such transformation marks the operational sophistication of OCGs and the way crime equilibrium shifted in the city.

Figure 4. Explosive Attacks by Metropolitan Districts, 2022

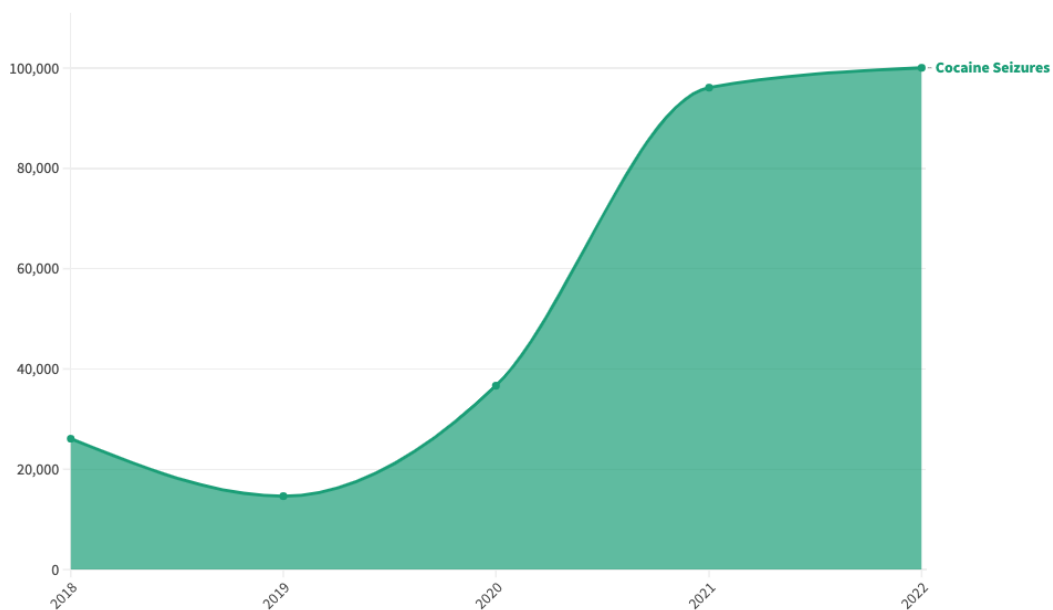


Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

Confrontations between competing OCGs to control the growing cocaine trade are responsible for the violence spike. Additionally, Balkan traffickers have settled in Guayaquil, establishing supply lines

to European markets.²³ In 2021, 33 percent of seized cocaine was destined for Europe, a significant increase from 9 percent in 2019. Despite not being a cocaine production site, Ecuador has witnessed record cocaine busts. From 2019 to 2021, cocaine seizures increased by 150 percent, totaling 210 seizures nationally, with Guayaquil contributing 96 tons.²⁴ In comparison, Colombia produced 972 tons of cocaine and seized 670 tons in the same period. Ecuador ranks third globally in cocaine interdiction, accounting for 6.5 percent of seizures, trailing behind Colombia (41 percent) and the United States (11 percent).²⁵

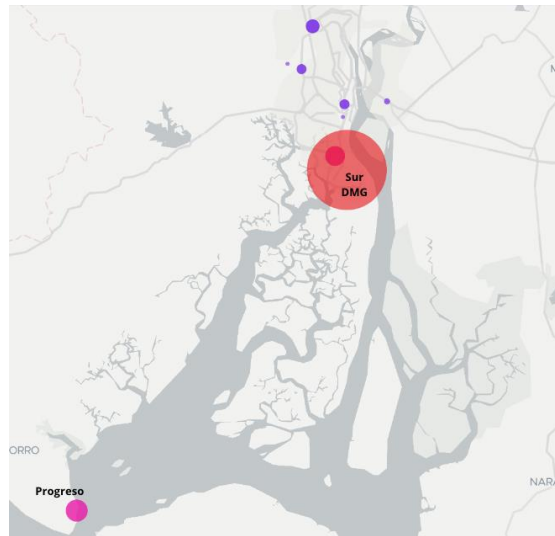
Figure 5. Cocaine Seizures in Guayaquil (2018-2022)



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

Due to its strategic location, Guayaquil has become a promised land for drug trafficking and criminal organizations. Through its ports, Guayaquil serves as a gateway of drugs to international markets and an ideal location for Albanian gangs to find partners.

Figure 6. Cocaine Seizures per District (2018-2022)



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

From its ports, cocaine is transported in ship containers, severely under-inspected by authorities.²⁶ Lax border controls, corruption, dollarization, and the lack of an integrated security strategy have facilitated criminal enterprises. The growth of the international drug market embedded in the coastal urban setting and its port impacts the interactions among OCGs and the state.

Guayaquil's Criminal Map: Organizations and Crime-affected Areas

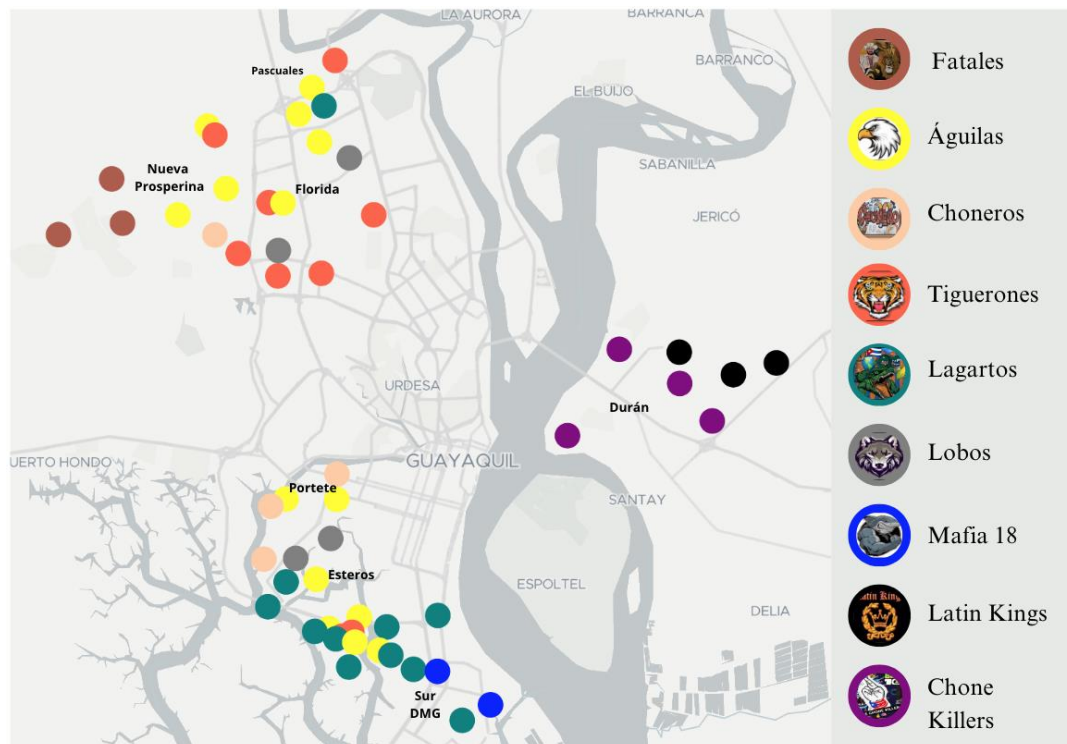
Organized crime and drug trafficking are not new threats in Ecuador. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, Ecuador ranks 11 below countries such as Colombia and Paraguay. Being ten the highest level of crime, Ecuador has an evaluation of 7.07, above the global average of 5.03, while countries like Mexico (7.57) and Honduras (7.05) are among the highest levels in Latin America.

Until 2020, the *Choneros* was the organization that monopolized criminal violence in Ecuador. In charge of the cocaine transfer routes to Ecuador's interior, shipments' security, and prisons' apparent peace, the *Choneros* were the privileged partners of Mexican and Colombian cartels. However, the release of its leader *Rasquiña* and his murder soon after would unleash a dispute over a new leadership and control in the monopoly of criminal violence.

Since 2020, two OCGs have operated at the national level: *Los Choneros* and *Los Lobos*, who control routes for the shipment of drugs

to international markets. These OCGs are cartels' allies. On one hand, the *Choneros* work with the Sinaloa Cartel; on the other, *Los Lobos* are in alliance with the *Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel*. These OCGs coordinate their criminal actions with local criminal gangs, mainly in the coastal zone. *Los Choneros*, for its part, maintains alliances with *Los Gangsters*, *Los Águilas*, *Los Fantasmas*, and *Los Fatales*; and *Los Lobos* work in criminal alliances with *Los Tiguerones*, *Los Lagartos*, *Los Chones Killers*, and *Los Ñetas*.

Figure 7. Location of Criminal Organizations in Guayaquil's Territory (2022)



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022. Note: Criminal Organizations distribute and compete the control of Prison wards in the Penitentiary Complex.

These organizations compete to control drug trafficking areas in multiple provinces. Although the criminal business revolves around international cocaine trafficking, each organization takes part in different criminal activities, whether controlling drug trafficking networks, crimes such as robberies, or providing criminal services such as assassination, kidnapping, and extortion linked to attacks with explosive devices. These criminal organizations have expanded into environmental crimes like illegal gold mining and logging related to money laundering networks.

Prisons and Massacres

Since 2021, Ecuador has witnessed over twelve massacres inside its prisons, in which over 400 inmates have died. Seven of these massacres occurred in the Guayaquil prison complex, killing approximately 260 inmates in a set of incidents provoked by what the director of Ecuador's penitentiary director called a struggle to keep the status quo inside prisons.²⁷ The previous toll represents a 587 percent increase in deaths under state custody compared to 2020. This section explains the status quo or prison order that has ruled prisons in Ecuador and Guayas. Then, it explores the governance of prisons in Guayaquil by OCGs and how fragmentation affected levels of violence within them.

Ecuador's incarceration rate has grown because of the excessive use of preemptive prison, obstacles to applying alternative sanctions, and the lack of a criminal and penitentiary policy centered on re-socializing and rehabilitating inmates. Until 2021, 44.24 percent of the population imprisoned in Ecuador were between 18 and 30 years old, while the majority were repeat offenders without the support of their families.²⁸ Approximately 56.8 percent (22,000) of the total inmates are already under a judiciary sentence, while 43.08 percent (17,000) are imprisoned preventively. Almost 50 percent (20,000) of the inmates have served between 40 and 80 percent of their time, which makes them eligible for reentry programs, including parole.²⁹

Paradoxically, parallel to the steady increment of the incarcerated population and the rise of a penitentiary system crisis, the public budget and other resources allocated towards prisons were reduced by 64 percent only in 2021.³⁰ Such reductions are the continuation of the system's capacity dismantling and the culprit for prison extralegal governance. As stated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the absence of space can generate different problems inside prisons related to sanitation, violence, insecurity, prison subculture, and the reduction of essential services quality.³¹

The two prisons that are key to this analysis are *Litoral* and *La Roca*. While *Litoral* is the main prison complex, *La Roca* is a maximum-security prison that closed in 2013 due to a massive escape but reopened in 2021 as a response to the prison crisis. The prominent leaders of the *Choneros*, *Lobos*, and R7 remain in *La Roca*, which has caused numerous incidents and a few massacres.³² On the contrary, the *Litoral* penitentiary is where most inmates remain. The overcrowding

in the prison system in Guayas is particularly critical. The five penitentiaries of the province, which can host 9553 inmates, host 39 percent (12,291) of the national inmate population (31,216), translating into an overpopulation rate of 29 percent and a 12 percent nationally, 12 percent.³³

On February 23, 2021, a coordinated attack against *Choneros'* middle rank occurred in four prisons across the country, leaving a toll of 78 inmates assassinated. After the death of *Rasquiña* in December 2020, this was the first backlash in the process of *Choneros'* fragmentation from an OCG that transformed from a drug dealing organization to one of the most prominent prison gangs in the last decade. This was not the first episode of violence between prison gangs. However, it was the bloodiest prison massacre in Ecuadorian history. Journalist, Carolina Mella, explains:

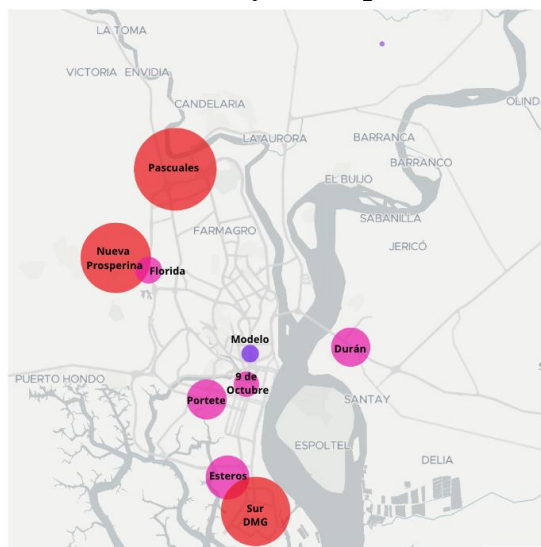
To survive in the jail, inmates must belong to one band. It is hard to pass a low profile, even more so in this penitentiary (Litoral), known as a hellhole. Families are afraid that anything they say can be misconstrued [*sic*] by the band's leaders. Because of that, what prevails is silence.³⁴

Besides the institutionalization and expansion of the prison code, another repercussion of the intramural wars between OCGs was the degradation of violence and the communication of threats, killings, and terror. After the massacre of February, episodes of massive violence continued without authorities being able to stop them. Remarkably, on September 28 at *Litoral*, an incident in which *Lagartos* and *Tiguerones* entered Pavilion 5 under *Chonero's* control claimed the lives of 125 inmates. Forensic authorities showed how the attack included beheadings, mayhem, and corpse incineration to the extent that some victims were not identifiable.

Guayaquil's underworld is prison-governed, necessitating power management and collective action within prisons to control street crime and drug trafficking. A violent reputation is critical to communicating power shifts in criminal fragmentation, corruption, and limited law enforcement contexts. To prevail, OCG must provide credible protection, which necessitates high levels of violence. Assessing the urban security crisis involves revealing spatial complexity and power circuits between the coast, prisons, and slums. As depicted in Figure 8, Pascuales, Prosperina, and the South DMG exhibit the

highest homicide concentration. Notably, these districts house the critical urban assets for controlling illicit economies: Prisons, public housing ghettos, and the port. This geography shapes Ecuador's urban crisis.

Figure 8. Intentional Homicides by Metropolitan Districts 2018-2022



Elaborated by Authors with Data from National Police, 2022.

Regarding state criminal collusion, the Commission of Penitentiary Pacification stated that criminal fragmentation and systemic corruption within law enforcement and the penitentiary system made any intent of peace agreements with OCGs impossible. The report described the situation as an unequal system imposed by OCGs inside prisons: “The leaders of the groups force hunger strikes when they want to protest, while (them) receive excellent food in the max security pavilion at the *Regional*.³⁵” The privileges surrounding the bosses include barricades for protection and better armament than the army, all under the public force’s protection.³⁶ In the next section, the authors analyze state-criminal interactions after President Lasso launched a *mano dura* campaign in Guayaquil, proving to be widely ineffective and increasing violence.

State Response: Mano Dura Narrative

The *mano dura* approach is common in Latin America. Despite lacking active armed conflicts, the region has become the world’s most violent because of persistent violent democratic political systems with multiple parties in which elections are conducted periodically but have been unable to assure the monopoly of violence.³⁷ Consequently, insecurity

and criminal violence are endemic across the region, and formerly peaceful countries now face significant security challenges.

In 2018, the destruction of the state’s governance capacities and security governance began. This resulted in the elimination of the Coordinating Ministry of Security, responsible for strategic and intersectoral planning and public policies; the Ministry of the Interior, in charge of citizen security policy—which was integrated into political management under the figure of a Ministry of Government; the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and Cults (MJDDH), in charge of the social rehabilitation system and management of prisons; as well as the governing body of State Strategic Intelligence, in charge of coordinating the National Intelligence System. See Table 1.

Table 1. Modifications in the Security Institutional Framework, 2017-2022.

Date	Institutional Modification
May 2017	Through Executive Decree No. 7, the administration eliminated the Ministry of Security Coordination to reduce the state’s spending.
January 2018	Ecuador registered the first terrorist attack in its history. A car bombing took place in San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas. After this event, OCG perpetrated multiple attacks against the National Police and journalists.
September 2018	The government announced the closure of the National Intelligence Secretariat. The Strategic Intelligence Center replaced it and took on the coordination of the National Intelligence System.
November 2018	The government announced the transformation of The MJDDH into the Human Rights Secretariat. Besides, its control over the prison turned over to the newly created SNAI.
December 2018	The Ministry of Interior, with all its functions, and the Public Management Secretariat merged under one entity, the Ministry of Government.
March 2022	Executive Decree No. 381 established the new configuration of the Ministry of Government. This entity remained but passed the public security management to the Ministry of Interior.
April 2022	Lasso presented the Strategic Plan for Security that assigns an investment of 1.2 million dollars to fight organized crime and drug trafficking.
August 2022	Executive Decree No. 514 created the National Secretariat of Public and State Security to create a new coordinating body of national security. This entity builds public policy, plans, and directs the Public Security System.

Note: Institutional modifications took place through executive decisions made by the administrations. Lenin Moreno was President between 2017-2021, and Guillermo Lasso came to power in May 2021.

Elaborated by Authors.

These changes in public administration were not minor. There was a reduction, weakening, and elimination of qualified and professionalized human resources, appropriate financial resources, and technical and technological capabilities. The weakening of governance capacities generated comparative opportunities for the advancement of OCGs in a regional scenario with a historically increasing trend of crops for the illicit use of coca and a social and economic crisis post-COVID-19.

Institutional changes in 2018 should have resulted in a reorientation of the political-strategic vision of the Security Sector, not in eliminating governance capacities necessary to address existing threats. As a result, there was a shift from a model committed to prevention to one increasingly accustomed to repressive reactions that do not allow strategic thinking in medium and long-term scenarios at the state level.

Faced with a severe security crisis, the measures taken by the state were the declaration, via decrees, of forms of exception. This ‘patch response’ focused on trying to contain the accelerated growth of criminal violence–homicide rate–without addressing the structural causes of its increase. Proof of the failure of reactive-dispersed actions is that President Lasso decreed seven states of exception due to severe internal commotion, one revoked by the National Assembly.³⁸ Until April 2023, President Lasso enacted four states of emergency: three due to extreme internal unrest due to increasing crime and violence rates, and one due to public calamity.

In the case of Guayaquil, President Lasso announced a Special Security Plan from the *El Guasmo* slum in the Proserpina district in April 2022. The plan consisted of three pillars which were:

- Violence Contention
- OCGs dismantling
- Community empowerment.

In practice, the plan’s focus, which cost \$1.2 million, was dismantling OCGs, particularly incarcerating its members. President Lasso’s orders were clear: “The important thing is to catch the heads of these bands that

sow terror among the community. We need to catch them, send them to La Roca, and neutralize them.”³⁹ Implementing the plan enhanced the prison crisis and empowered OCG in the penitentiary system.

The data reveals the failure of the actions classified as contingency, for example, states of exception, the militarization of streets, increased penalties, and the lack of a comprehensive security strategy. This is a set of *mano dura* actions that are not sustainable over time due to their limited focus limitations and mid- and long-term effectiveness. Likewise, it is an intervention that only contemplates a more excellent police and military presence to deter crime without planning a comprehensive intervention involving other sectors to recover the territories with their population under the control of organized crime.

Conclusion

Combining *mano dura* policies with fragmented criminal justice institutions exacerbates urban violence. When this happens in the context of systemic corruption and criminal fragmentation, crises emerge as violence toward state officials and organized crime groups gain power and sophistication. As the case of Guayaquil shows, these dynamics are spatially informed as while illicit economies take place in the streets, the decision-making of criminal wars takes place behind prison walls. For that reason, inmate transfer policies can ignite or contain violence, depending on the dynamics of alignment and fragmentation between OCGs. This article has made an essential contribution to urban security studies in Latin America by analyzing how cities fail in an unexplored setting such as Guayaquil.

Theoretically, the article connects the literature on criminal and prison governance, assessing how urban security policies must consider the spatial connections between prisons, violent slums, and illicit economic circuits—in this case, authors argued that the shifts in the role of Ecuador within the transnational drug market had drastic implications for prison violence and urban security. Contrary to politicians’ assumptions in the region, despite how popular the tough-on-crime narrative might be, their implementation in high-crime equilibrium cities demands more than formal states of exception.

Policy-wise, Ecuador will need years to recover from the crime and violence spiral that it is currently undergoing. To do so, the country will need, in the first place, to solve the penitentiary crisis by moving

toward a co-governance penitentiary regime that contains violence and manages criminal fragmentation. However, that would not be possible if the institutional infrastructure is not reinstalled in the midterm building capacities to prevent and control crime.

Endnotes

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