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**Analysis of the Merida Initiative in the area of  
National Security and the fight against drug  
trafficking to generate recommendations for  
Ecuador's National Comprehensive Security Plan**

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work and effort to my parents who are my life engine and to my siblings who have helped and inspired me to achieve this goal to develop professionally with all the respect, generosity, and dedication they represent.

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# **Analysis of the Merida Initiative in the area of National Security and the fight against drug trafficking to generate recommendations for Ecuador's National Comprehensive Security Plan**

## **Abstract**

Ecuador, affected by drug trafficking, faces a crucial situation in terms of national security, as it is a problem that transcends borders, a multipolar vision is required. For this reason, international cooperation becomes a tool to combat organized crime, through the collection of secondary sources of information focused on mixed methods, the objectives and strategies presented in the pillars of the Merida Initiative, a bilateral agreement on international cooperation in security matters between Mexico and the United States, were analyzed. It was determined that it was not effective in the long term due to the direct struggle, but after understanding the successes and failures of the plan, recommendations were generated to the National Comprehensive Security Plan of Ecuador, it was advised that it is necessary to attack the roots of the problem, creating strong communities from social programs, representing a long-term plan and progress in the fight against drug trafficking.

**Key words:** Drug Trafficking, International Cooperation, Organized Crime, Security, Strategies.

# **Análisis de la Iniciativa Mérida en el plano de Seguridad Nacional y lucha contra el narcotráfico para generar recomendaciones al Plan Nacional de Seguridad Integral de Ecuador**

## **Resumen**

El Ecuador afectado por el narcotráfico enfrenta una situación crucial en la seguridad nacional, al ser una problemática que trasciende fronteras se exige una visión multipolar. Por esta razón, la cooperación internacional se convierte en una herramienta para combatir el crimen organizado, mediante la recopilación de fuentes secundarias de información enfocada en métodos mixtos, se analizó los objetivos y estrategias presentadas en los pilares de la Iniciativa Mérida, un acuerdo bilateral de cooperación internacional en materia de seguridad entre México y Estados Unidos. Se determinó que no fue efectivo a largo plazo por la lucha directa, pero tras comprender los éxitos y fracasos del plan se generó recomendaciones al Plan Nacional de Seguridad Integral de Ecuador, se aconsejó que es necesario atacar a las raíces del problema, creando comunidades fuertes a partir de programas sociales, representado un plan a largo plazo y un avance en la lucha contra el narcotráfico.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategias, Cooperación Internacional, Crimen Organizado, Narcotráfico, Seguridad.

# **Analysis of the Merida Initiative in the area of National Security and the fight against drug trafficking to generate recommendations for Ecuador's National Comprehensive Security Plan**

## **1. Introduction**

Drug trafficking, or illegal drug trafficking, has become a global problem that is constantly evolving. Its impact goes beyond the sale and production of illicit substances, causing serious problems in the society, economy and politics of the affected states. Criminal activity is complex as the criminal groups involved resort to violence to affect the population, control territories, and control the drug trafficking market. In the same way, corruption is an important part of the illicit business, weakening institutions and generating political instability in the State (Cuestas, 2013).

Criminal drug trafficking groups trade a wide variety of drugs, including cannabis, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. This illegal activity has become a multi-billion dollar industry globally, with high demand from consumers. As a result, drug trafficking has become more complex and structured (Luna-Fabritius, 2014). The ease of crossing international borders has facilitated the access and consumption of drugs anywhere in the world, which has generated a worrying increase in consumption and a risk to public health at a global level, "hindering progress towards the SDGs in all areas, from peace and justice to health, human rights, the environment, and equality" (ONU, 2023).

The risks to public health at a global level from this problem are worrying, as the "supply of illicit drugs continues to register unprecedented numbers and trafficking networks aggravate converging global crises and generate a challenge for health services and police responses" (ONU, 2023). Supply is growing as demand continues to increase, with an estimated 22 million people using cocaine in 2021, representing 0.4% of the world's population in the Americas and Western and Central European regions, which remain the two main consumer markets (ONU, 2023).

The fight against drug trafficking presents a complex and multifaceted battle, where the reality of each State plays a fundamental role in addressing this problem. To achieve effective results, it is necessary to have solid institutions with resources that can face forceful political and economic strategies against drug trafficking. However, the scarcity of financial and human resources in many affected countries limits their capacity to act in the face of this problem.

In view of the growing security problem in Ecuador, the National Comprehensive Security Plan was developed to improve the control institutions responsible for protecting Ecuadorian society from the various threats and dangers posed by the country. This was done in order to create objectives and strategies for the control forces. On the other hand, the Merida Initiative laid the foundations for international cooperation in security between Mexico and the United States, the objectives and strategies of the plan marked the beginning of the fight against drug trafficking in Mexico, setting an example for the development of new bilateral cooperation programs, the results of success and failures will be analyzed in order to identify which ones could be used in the Ecuadorian context in the face of the problem of drug trafficking to generate recommendations for Ecuador's National Comprehensive Security Plan.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The general objective of the research is to analyze the Merida Initiative, a bilateral international cooperation agreement between the United States and Mexico, in order to identify strategies that can be included in Ecuador's National Comprehensive Security Plan.

In the specific objectives as a first point, an analysis of the current context of organized crime and drug trafficking in Ecuador will be carried out. Emphasizing the importance of national security and the need for international cooperation to address this problem. Subsequently, the strategies implemented in the Merida Initiative will be examined, with the ultimate objective of identifying those that have proven to be successful and that could be adapted to the Ecuadorian context. On the last point, the results of this study



hope to contribute to the strengthening of the National Comprehensive Security Plan 2019-2030, providing viable strategies to combat organized crime and guarantee citizen security in Ecuador.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

### 1.2.1 Organized Crime

Crime and delinquency are phenomena inherent in the history of societies. Currently, their development, complexity, and growth make them what is known as organized crime. While globalization has boosted human development in areas such as foreign trade, communications, and land, naval, and air transportation routes, it has also allowed crime to transform. Criminal networks, taking advantage of globalization, have become more sophisticated and extensive, operating at the state level, opening up to transnational crime or organized crime, adapting to market demands with new criminal modalities. They operate without cultural, social, linguistic or geographical restrictions, that is, a business without borders (Solís, 2008).

In the case of Ecuador, delinquency or organized crime is considered a crime against the public security of the State and its organization. According to Article 369 of the Organic Comprehensive Penal Code (COIP) an organized crime is considered to be a “person who, by agreement or concertation, forms a structured group of two or more persons who, permanently or repeatedly, finance, in any way, exercise command or direction or plan the activities of a criminal organization, with the purpose of committing one or more offences punishable by imprisonment, the ultimate objective of which is to obtain economic or other material benefits” (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014, Artículo 369)

This activity has become one of the main security threats in the Americas. In Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela, security and access to social services have become a crucial challenge. The lack of institutions has allowed organized crime to fill that vacuum, replacing the state and acquiring a high degree of legitimacy among the population (Niño, 2012).

Organized crime encompasses the structures and strategies of legitimate companies with operating models, long- and short-term strategies, hierarchies, and even strategic alliances at a global level, with the aim of maximizing their profits and minimizing risks (Interpol, 2017). The business represents a multi-million-dollar criminal enterprise that operates in various criminal domains such as:

- Trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants.
- Trafficking, production, financing, and storage of controlled substances.
- Trafficking and storage of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and accessories.
- Trafficking, storage, transport, packaging, illicit marketing of hydrocarbons.
- Illicit trafficking of wild flora and fauna.
- Illicit trafficking in cultural heritage and property.
- Smuggling of goods.
- Environmental crimes.
- Illegal mining and related offences.
- Money laundering.
- Extortion.
- Offences against the security of information and communication system assets;
- Counterfeiting of currency and documents.
- Cybercrime.

(Ministerio de Defensa Nacional del Ecuador, 2019)

These activities represent a serious threat to peace and human security, preventing the development of states affected by organized crime because they generate violations of human rights and impede economic, social, cultural, and political development throughout the world (UNODC, 2012).

The main economic activity of organized crime groups continues to be the trafficking of drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, marijuana, among others, as global illegal markets generate large economic benefits due to the high demand for drugs. This activity is known as drug trafficking. The term “drug trafficking” comes from “narcotics” and “trafficking” It is used to identify the problem of the illegal drug trade, but it also carries a political and ideological charge. It has been used as a synonym for the illegal

activity, against which all political-criminal efforts must be fought and directed to combat it (Morales, 2006).

Drug trafficking has become the main source of income for organized crime, surpassing even activities such as robbery or extortion. Drug activities range from the production, storage, distribution, and laundering of assets, these are strategic activities for these groups. Its operation tends to be part of the capitalist system, where drug trafficking networks are responsible for production, distribution, and sale internationally. Because of this, they employ various routes and methods to evade the action of state authorities, since their power is strengthened by the social, economic and political conditions where it has proliferated, so they tend to make use of democratic and internationalization structures to be able to advance at the economic and political level, which makes drug trafficking the main threat to the preservation of the security and democracy of the states (Chabat, 1994).

### **1.2.2 National Security**

The concept of national security has changed and evolved over time. Initially, it was understood as the ability of a country to protect its internal resources from external threats. This concept was often used to justify the intervention of the armed forces or control forces, but it was criticized for focusing on the security of the state and not on the security of citizens. In addition, it did not consider other sources of insecurity, such as global, internal, economic or environmental insecurity, which must be addressed (Font & Ortega, 2012).

Understanding and interpreting national security from different points of interpretation is essential to define the security of states, as it helps to understand the problems that each of them has. The concept of security can be interpreted in different ways in the different countries of North, Central and South America due to the realities that each one lives. Some countries focus primarily on protecting the state from external threats, while others focus on local protection of citizens and economic development (Faundes, 2015).

- Argentina and Peru focus on state security within the framework of the rule of law.
- Bolivia adopts a Comprehensive Security model that includes the protection of development and social justice.
- Colombia is developing a model of Democratic Security.
- Bolivia, Colombia and Canada broadly consider citizens to be subjects of security.
- The United States is focused on the physical security of people, both at home and abroad.
- The U.S. also views economic development as a part of security.

In this context, after an analysis of drug trafficking, including its evolution and the different perspectives on this phenomenon, the complex, and worrying relationship with national security is revealed. The proliferation of drug trafficking groups, constant rivalries, the struggle for control of territories and activities related to organized crime generate high levels of violence and insecurity. This limiting opportunities for economic and social development, as it fragments the social fabric and generates instability in the affected states. Drug trafficking becomes a factor that weakens the rule of law as institutions are overwhelmed by violence, corruption and impunity, undermining the foundations of the State and putting at risk the ability to guarantee national security, mainly in the protection of territory, population, and government (Chabat, 1994).

### **1.2.3 International Cooperation in the Fight Against Drug Trafficking**

The rise of drug trafficking and growing national security concerns prompted the United Nations to take a number of measures. In 1990, the "Decade of the Fight against Drug Trafficking" was declared based on the preamble of the Vienna Convention of 1988 which mentions that drug trafficking not only affects individual health and well-being, but also has a negative impact on the economy and represents a threat to stability the security and sovereignty of nations (Naciones Unidas, 1988).

The "Decade of the Fight Against Drug Trafficking" focused on strengthening international cooperation, understood as the actions carried out by countries, international organizations, civil society organizations or even the private sector with the aim of promoting the economic and social progress of the nations involved. The aim is to achieve collaboration between countries and face new global and regional challenges. This collaboration can take various forms, such as financial cooperation, technical cooperation, technology and knowledge exchange, joint action in areas such as health, environment and safety, among others (Smith, 2013).

International cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking has been hampered by differences in national legislation on organized crime, differing conceptions of crimes, sentencing, and extradition procedures. These have limited collaboration between countries and allowed criminal groups to take advantage of legal loopholes (Molina, 2006).

Overcoming these barriers requires a sustained joint effort on the part of the international community. The creation of a more uniform global legal framework, harmonizing national laws and facilitating judicial and police cooperation, is crucial for a more effective fight against drug trafficking. In this regard, international financial and technical cooperation is essential to successfully confront the problem of drug trafficking. The United States, Colombia, Mexico and other countries have shown that joint collaboration has been key to combating the growing problem (Achig & Castillo, 2022).

## **2. Literature Review**

Since the need to address the fight against organized crime from a global perspective was recognized, international strategies and tools have been developed to combat drug trafficking and consumption. The creation of entities such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for international assistance in strengthening national drug control policies. Through this collaboration, it seeks to develop and implement plans for the elimination and prevention of crime, promoting comprehensive and sustainable development. In this context, cooperation between countries is essential to confront drug trafficking, which affects the security and well-being of societies globally (Achig & Castillo, 2022).

This tool has taken on a relevant role in the security agenda of the Ecuadorian State due to the growing problem of drug trafficking, which has become a crucial issue to be addressed within national public policy. The threats that challenge national security are diverse in nature, which is why a multidimensional security concept is proposed, seeking to strengthen cooperation in different aspects and the development of regional policies (Achig & Castillo, 2022).

Marisela Morales Ibáñez, former Attorney General of the United Mexican States, in the analysis of the Criminological Profile of Organized Crime, mentions that it is necessary to unify an infrastructure with the databases of the different countries with this problem. With the aim of creating a continental shelf that allows diagnoses, strategies to be developed and public policies to be formulated at the regional level to combat organized crime. With international coordination and cooperation, it will be critical to success in the fight against organized crime (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2012).

On the other hand, there could be certain problems in Ecuador's access to international cooperation as the country continues to seek access to foreign aid, adjusting its agenda to the priorities of international donors. As a result, aid does not conform to local concerns about citizen security if it does not focus primarily on the fight against drugs, catering primarily to U.S. national security concerns, while violence prevention actions such as education, border control, or drug prevention receive less attention. This trend creates an imbalance between the idea of ensuring the well-being of citizens and the real impact of international aid on Ecuador's security agendas (Torres, 2006).

### **2.1 Evolution of Crime and Drug Trafficking in Ecuador**

In the 1980s, with the beginning of the criminal drug trafficking groups, “the cartels focused on the Colombian and Peruvian coca leaf, due to the very high amount of alkaloid it contained for the production and transformation into basic paste” (Tapia, 2015), which made “Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador the only countries in the world that have the cultivation of the three basic SPS (Illicit Psychoactive Substances)” (Pyszczek, 2021). This means that Ecuador is a target for drug cultivation and trade for criminal organization groups due to its geographic proximity to cocaine-producing countries, its internal corruption, dollarized financial system, poor customs control, and a road network that connects processing zones to Ecuadorian ports and airports (Espinosa, 2009). These factors have been attractive to different transnational criminal groups around the world, which have seen Ecuador as a perfect transit route for drug trafficking that began in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia and is destined for the United States and European markets (Rivera, 2011).

The Ecuadorian State must ensure national security, and to this end it must take measures to strengthen its capacity to control new threats that pose a risk to society, such as drug trafficking, the prison crisis, migration, illegal mining, among others. Currently, it is a challenge for the Ecuadorian state to

combat organized crime, so having international support is essential to eradicate violence and insecurity (Velasco, 2022). This can be achieved through the different tools of international cooperation, such as technical or financial assistance by various states that collaborate on national security and the fight against drug trafficking, as the United States, Israel, the United Kingdom, Colombia, France, among others, have done (Primicias, 2022).

The United States provides cooperation in matters of national security, as it has done with Mexico. The Merida Initiative, which is a bilateral cooperation program of financial and technical assistance by the United States to combat organized crime, initiated in 2007 with several updates. Its objective is to improve the capacity of security agencies through equipment and assets, as well as new technology to strengthen coordination between the security and information forces of Mexico and the United States, which has enhanced the results of the Mexican Navy and Armed Forces in their operations (Salime, 2015). Similarly, the new justice system proposed by this plan is fundamental to the initiative, but it was insufficient compared to the structural problems of the Mexican government, so the expected results were not obtained no matter how much equipment and training were invested (Salime, 2015).

In seeking solutions to the situation in Ecuador, the Merida Initiative becomes an example of analysis in order to know its successes and failures. It is also a model of bilateral cooperation, whether it contains strategies that could be useful for the country. The United States has expressed interest in providing support to Ecuador, as mentioned in the press release on November 8, 2023, which the U.S. expresses that it seeks to promote a “holistic, citizen security-focused approach to addressing crime and violence in the Ecuadorian government to support the design and implementation of customized security plans” (USAID, 2023).

## **2.2 National Comprehensive Security Plan 2019 – 2030**

Ecuador faces increasing narco-criminal violence, especially in port cities. This violence, as mentioned by Haro Ayerve in his research “Ecuador: Between Security and Unconstitutionality” (2014), It could escalate into a narco-terrorist war if immediate measures are not put in place and work is not done within the framework of international cooperation. The security problem in Ecuador has led to the development of its own strategic plan, the "National Comprehensive Security Plan 2019-2030" which aims to improve the public institutions responsible for protecting Ecuadorian society from the different threats and dangers presented by the country (Haro, 2014).

The purpose of the plan is to integrate and articulate other public policy instruments. These include the Intersectoral Coordination Agenda, the White Paper, the Comprehensive Border Security Plan for the Northern Border, the National Plan for Citizen Security and Peaceful Coexistence, and the National Disaster Response Plan. This is done in order to create adequate conditions for the State to make decisions in advance of the different situations that may arise. In this way, the security of the population is guaranteed, and it will be possible to build a better State free of threats or risks (Gabinete Sectorial de Seguridad, 2019). The functions of the National Comprehensive Security Plan highlight the limited involvement of international cooperation. Being a key element in achieving the security of the Ecuadorian State, this would allow the country to access resources and knowledge from other countries, which strengthens the State's capacities to deal with security threats. New drug trafficking networks continue to evolve, so strategies need to be constantly adapted, and cooperation could be a necessary tool to achieve this (Cadena, 2022).

The Ministry of Defense's accountability for the years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 shows the limited work of international cooperation. According to Torres in his research “International Cooperation and Citizen Security: The Case of Ecuador” (2008), mentions that, if the international cooperation that Ecuador receives is mainly focused on the fight against drug trafficking, to the detriment of efforts to prevent violence, an imbalance will persist between the idea of guaranteeing the well-being of citizens and the real impact of cooperation on the country's public security, so this mechanism is indispensable for national security and the Merida Initiative is a clear example.

## **2.3 U.S.-Mexico International Security Cooperation**

Felipe Calderón Hinojosa was the president of Mexico from 2006 to 2012, he began cooperation with the United States on security matters. Mexican foreign policy focused on aligning with U.S. security policy on the basis of mutual interest. The fight against drug trafficking, arms trafficking and human trafficking became the central axis of the bilateral agenda. This bilateral cooperation allowed Mexico to

access greater resources and technical assistance from the United States. The containment of the flow of drugs into the North American country and the dismantling of the criminal networks involved placed Mexico as a key piece in the anti-drug strategy. The United States, in particular, fears that the instability of its neighbor and trading partner will affect its own economy and society. In this context, both administrations focused on national security issues, which were determined by trade relations with the United States (Medina, 2015).

The Merida Initiative was the beginning of international cooperation on national security matters between Mexico and the United States, consolidating unprecedented cooperation as "strategic partners" in the region of the Americas. The intense exchange and convergence of interests have transformed their relationship, moving from a commercial relationship as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has done to a political-operational alliance in terms of security and border management, which means a new relationship landscape to be regional allies (Salime, 2015).

## **2.4 United States and the Fight Against Drug Trafficking**

The fight against drug trafficking in the United States has been extensive, the war on drugs began in 1971 with the declaration of President Richard Nixon. In 1973, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was established with the notion of combating a problem in society both inside and outside its borders. This action marked a turning point in U.S. drug policy, cementing a more proactive and centralized approach (Vásquez, 2018).

Similarly, the struggle was consolidated during the 1980s under the administration of President Ronald Reagan. He considered that the production and trafficking of illegal drugs in the Andean region constituted a serious threat to U.S. national security. Reagan would promote programs such as Plan Dignity and Operation Blast Furnace, both of which were aimed at combating drug production in the Andean countries. The action plans were based on international cooperation through military and economic assistance with measures to control and eradicate illicit crops (Rosen & Martínez, 2016).

Reagan focused primarily on the supply and delivery of drugs from South America, completely neglecting the demand for illegal substances. Reagan fought drug production in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia, but it had an unintended effect, the displacement of drug trafficking to other countries. Coca production shifted to Colombia, which by 2000 had become the world's leading producer and trafficker of cocaine. Despite the displacements of cultivation and trafficking, the countries involved in drug trafficking remain the same and the war on drugs, in its original approach, has failed to eliminate the problem, but has relocated it and proliferated it to new countries (Vásquez, 2018)

Like the United States, Colombia and Mexico have extensive experience in the fight against drug trafficking. They face similar threats from terrorism to organized crime (Niño, 2012). For this reason, the United States has offered its cooperation to Mexico for "the concerns and priorities of both governments in order to reduce the flow of illicit drugs, combat terrorism and transnational organized crime, protect borders, and strengthen security institutions" (Padinger, 2021). The cultural, social, and economic ties of the United States and Mexico have led them to establish a shared commitment to a prosperous and secure North America (White House, 2021).

Based on the distinctions in the conception of security, we understand that national security plans and strategies must be based on an analysis of the current realities in which countries live, which are complex and changing. In these realities, they highlight the uncertainty caused by state and non-state actors, such as terrorist groups or criminal organizations (Faundes, 2015). In search of fundamental security for their sovereignty and having different internal and external problems, many States have developed plans and initiatives through International Cooperation, among them we have Plan Colombia or the Merida Initiative (Delgado & Romano, 2011).

## **2.5 The Merida Initiative**

It is a plan of action through international cooperation between the United States and Mexico in the field of national security. It includes the participation of the State Department, the Department of Justice, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the CIA, the FBI, and the DEA on the U.S. side. On the Mexican side, the Congress of the Union, the Ministry of National Defense, the Mexican Navy, the Ministry of Public Security, the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic and CISEN (Armando, 2010).

Initiated in 2007, with the objective of achieving national security and development through the fight against organized crime in Mexico and the United States, it seeks to safeguard security interests and stability in the region (Medina, 2015).

The Merida Initiative stems from the growing transnational threats affecting both countries. This relates to international security theory, which holds that states face threats not only from other states, but also from non-state actors such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism. These transnational actors challenge national security and require an international cooperative response between the government agencies of both countries with the following objectives:

1. Strengthen domestic law enforcement efforts in Mexico.
2. Strengthen domestic law enforcement efforts in the United States.
3. Expand bilateral and regional cooperation, addressing the threat posed by transnational organized crime.

(Cámara de Diputados, 2008)

This plan was presented by former Mexican President Felipe Calderón, who made this issue a central issue of his presidential campaign, with the primary objective of combating organized crime under forceful measures. In the March 2007 negotiations, Mexican President George W. Bush met at the Merida Summit, where they recognized that organized crime was a threat to the security of both countries (Galvano, 2011). In December 2008, the Merida Initiative entered into force as a strategic framework for the implementation of strategic programs to combat drug trafficking, delimited in four primary pillars:

1. Dismantling the operational capacity of organized crime
2. Institutionalization of rule of law capacity in security and justice institutions
3. Creation of a strong border structure to facilitate the transit of people
4. Building Strong Communities

(Zoraida, 2014)

## **2.6 The pillars of the Merida Initiative**

### **2.6.1 Pillar I. Dismantling Criminal Organizations**

To comply with these actions, the United States transferred surveillance technologies such as drones, satellites, high-definition cameras, etc. to Mexico. Military equipment such as armored vehicles, firearms, and ammunition and with training in intelligence, counterintelligence and special operations (Congressional Research Service, 2017).

In 2007 and 2011, Mexico captured 29 of the world's most dangerous traffickers, increased seizures of marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine. These results led to the creation of the Bilateral Follow-Up Office in Mexico, to facilitate the exchange of information and cooperation between the two countries, which provided technical assistance to Mexican security forces on issues of financial investigation, money laundering, organized crime, human trafficking, witness assistance and cybercrime (Zoraida, 2014).

The integration of the Financial Intelligence Units into the bilateral security and anti-organized crime programs in the Merida Initiative enabled the two agencies to provide software, services, specialized applications, hardware infrastructure, and communications. This enabled the two agencies to share information in a more efficient and timely manner, which has been a fundamental element in combating organized crime (Vargas, 2016).

### **2.6.2 Pillar II. Institutional strengthening**

This pillar was used to implement constitutional reforms in the areas of criminal justice and public security, approved by the Senate (Zoraida, 2014). The reform implied that Mexico would move from a traditional model of inquisitorial criminal procedure to an accusatory criminal process. Its aim was to improve the institutions of public security, borders and judicial institutions responsible for ensuring the Mexican rule of law. The Mexican and U.S. governments have agreed to train more than 5,000 police officers in investigative techniques, evidence collection and ethics with high-level resources (Zoraida, 2014).

### **2.6.3 Pillar III. Creating a 21st Century Frontier**

One of the primary objectives of the Merida Initiative is border control. Both governments established the Bilateral Executive Committee to ensure that border infrastructure and operations were in a position to facilitate trade and the transit of people at low cost. Under this pillar, the Tax Administration Service received the transfer of 161 dogs, non-intrusive equipment to detect narcotics, firearms and cash, for which \$14.5 million in biometric equipment was allocated (Congressional Research Service, 2017), which was installed at three points along Mexico's southern border. Likewise, the Trust Traveler program was operated to control the transit of travelers, for which more than 1,100 people have been trained by Mexican and U.S. officials to detect false documentation (Zoraida, 2014).

### **2.6.4 Pillar IV. Building stronger, more resilient communities**

The last pillar focuses on investing resources in order to pursue community development as one of the ways to prevent drug use and combat the rising levels of violence in the northern states. Thus, the U.S. government trained different civil society organizations on the culture of legality, the new criminal justice system, anonymous reporting and citizen participation. It was agreed to take action to prevent the involvement of children and young people in criminal activities and to create new models free of violence (Zoraida, 2014).

## **3. Methods**

In relation to the techniques used in the investigation, it was carried out through research in secondary sources of information on the Merida Initiative, the bilateral international cooperation of the United States and Mexico in matters of national security in order to analyze how both countries have combated organized crime and drug trafficking with their successes and failures. In order to analyze and make recommendations that Ecuador could implement through its National Comprehensive Security Plan 2019 to 2030. In the same way, the research has a mixed methods approach, as Creswell (2006) mentions this method is valuable, since it combines data collection and analysis in a qualitative and quantitative way with the aim of providing a better understanding of a research problem.

The documentary analysis of the investigation contains quantitative and qualitative information from legal and institutional documents, information collected from the ministries for the purpose of the investigation, the National Police, the Armed Forces, experts in national security and international cooperation. In addition, we will analyze the history and results of the increase in drug trafficking in Ecuador, data in the Ministry of Defense's accountability accounts, and data from the Merida Initiative. In a combined and integrated way, the main problem of the case study is answered in a sequential explanatory design, qualitative data are collected and analyzed to explain the quantitative results in order to better understand the relationships between variables of the case study (Sánchez, 2015).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Ecuador and Organized Crime**

The Republic of Ecuador extends over a territory of 256,370 km<sup>2</sup>, bordered by Colombia to the north, Peru to the south and east, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. It is divided by twenty-four provinces into four regions: Coast region, Andean region, Amazon region and Island region. It is home to a population of around 17.9 million mestizo, indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and white people. Since 2000, the U.S. dollar has been the official currency. Ecuador is a constitutional State of rights and justice, social, democratic, sovereign, independent, unitary, intercultural and plurinational. It is organized as a republic and governed in a decentralized manner. In addition to the traditional powers: Executive, Legislative and Judicial, it has the Electoral and the Participation and Social Control powers (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, 2023).

After its independence in 1830, the country remained in an internal instability between democratic governments and military dictatorships, until the return to democracy in 1979, when power returned to an elected president. In the early 2000s, the state experienced an increase in street gangs and violence due to the demobilization of the FARC in Colombia and the rise of new local gangs in the early 21st century. The evolution from gangs to gangs and mafias has been notable for wars between criminal groups in prison massacres, sophisticated weaponry such as explosives to carry out attacks, assassinate public officials and

politicians. The increase in activities of criminal groups have been relevant factors in making Ecuador's security landscape critical, with an uptick in organized crime and an escalation of violence (InSight Crime, 2023).

Ecuador was not known for the violence associated with organized crime. Ecuadorian criminal landscape was distinct because local gangs did not participate significantly in organized crime, criminal groups were limited to logistical activities for foreign Colombian and Mexican organizations. The rise of criminal activities, especially drug trafficking, in the Pacific has radically transformed the reality of Ecuador. The increase in the demand for drugs has generated a network of transnational criminal alliances, which have taken advantage of institutional fragility, the weakness of the security forces, judicial corruption and distrust in public institutions to permeate the country's borders (Artieda et al., 2023).

Its location makes it a strategic point within the regional organized crime landscape. Illicit activities such as cocaine production, which are present in both neighboring countries Colombia and Peru, major cocaine producers, make Ecuador vulnerable to drug trafficking. This situation is aggravated by internal corruption, a dollarized financial system, and an extensive road network that facilitates the trafficking of drugs and precursor chemicals from Colombia to Ecuadorian ports and airports. In addition, in the local context, the evolution of transnational organized crime and the limitations in governance create an environment conducive to the development of illicit activities of regional scope (Pan American Development Foundation, 2023).

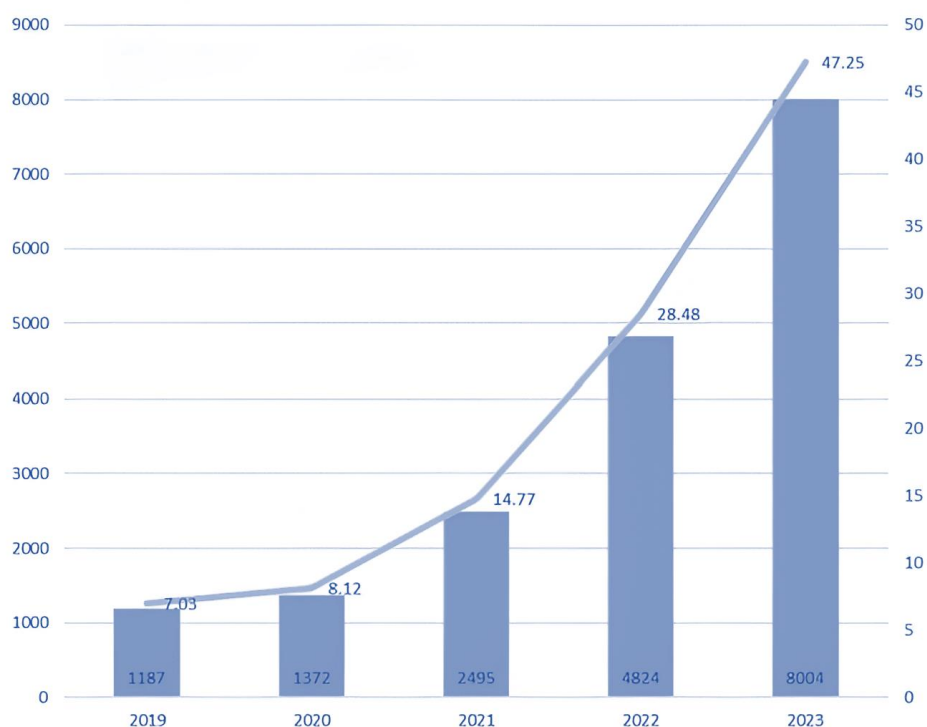
The Colombian peace process in 2016 brought with it the fragmentation of the FARC and the emergence of new criminal groups seeking to take advantage of the border with Ecuador in order to control illegal trafficking. The collection and logistical development of illegal operations, impacting the socioeconomic system of the border areas, where drug trafficking has developed (Pan American Development Foundation, 2023) and it has generated uncontrollable violence in Ecuadorian society.

The main indicator of insecurity is violent deaths, which is reflected in the rate of intentional homicides. Murder is considered an aggravated form of homicide, with greater severity due to how the death occurs. The National Directorate of Information Analysis of the National Police mentions that murder is the type of death with the highest incidence, followed by homicide, femicide, and contract killings (La Hora, 2024). 90% of homicides are murders linked to organized crime, the figures have been remarkable as expressed by Renato Rivera, coordinator of the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime (OECS), representing the harsh reality facing the country (BBC, 2024). Similarly, Presidential Decree No. 110 mentions that 91% of the intentional homicide rate is attributed to criminal violence related to the trafficking of controlled substances, both nationally and internationally (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) uses the homicide rate as the primary measure to assess violence and criminality in a country. InSight Crime Co-Director Jeremy McDermott highlights the importance of this tool as a key indicator of the security challenges facing each country, with the aim of taking an in-depth look at the roots of violence. This has become a critical measure for academics, politicians, and journalists seeking to understand the complex dynamics of organized crime in Latin America (InSight Crime, 2024).



**Figure 1**  
*Intentional homicide rate in Ecuador from 2019 to 2023*



Note. The graph shows the rate of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in Ecuador based on data from the Ministry of the Interior and National Police. Adapted from the 2023 Annual Homicide Bulletin, by the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime. In the public domain.

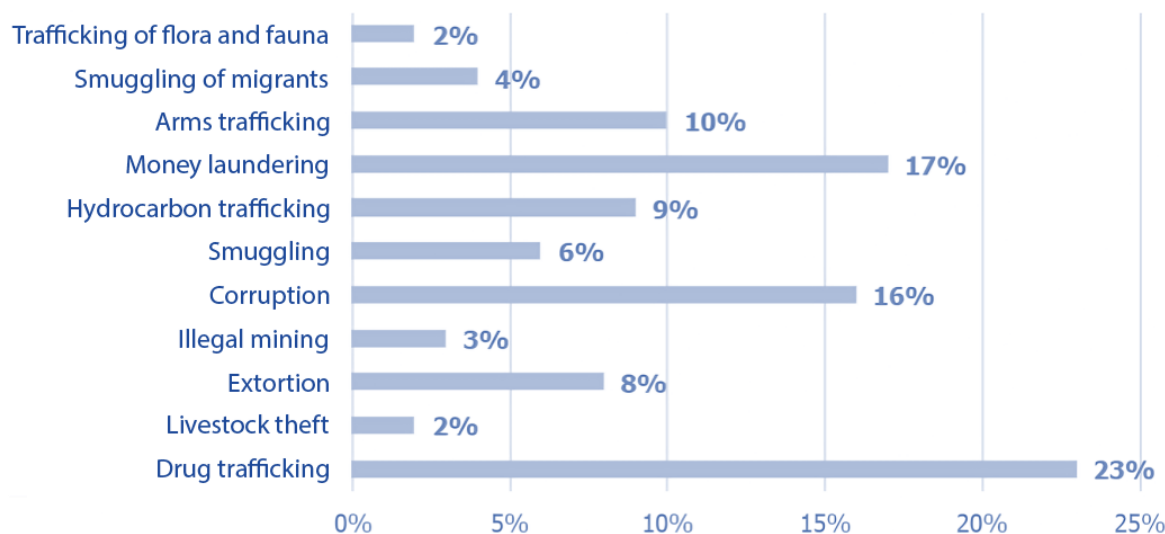
Ecuador is in a critical situation, the rates of violence related to organized crime continue to increase due to the territorial struggle for control of border drug trafficking routes, in 2023 the National Police reported 8,004 violent deaths, which translates into a homicide rate of 47 per 100,000 inhabitants, in 2022, 4,824 deaths were reported with a rate of 28.48 per 100,000 inhabitants, which means that there was a 65.9% increase in violent deaths, the growing figures make Ecuador one of the most violent countries in Latin America and the world.

Organized crime operates as a profit-making enterprise, it is not based on ideologies or political principles, but seeks to satisfy a strong demand for illegal services. The activity has diversified both locally and transnationally, using methods and tactics of violence to achieve its economic, political and social objectives. Their success depends on the existence of a market in supply and demand for their illicit products and services to thrive, classifying illicit activities as a threat to the security and development of societies (Rivera, 2011).

The rise of criminal organizations and the flow of illicit economies generates a greater perception of insecurity. The situation is crucial, as it contrasts with the official figures that reflect the complex reality of Ecuador. The boom of illicit economies in the country began years ago due to migration, economic crisis, dollarization, political instability, open borders, conflicts at the Manta military base (Ruiz, 2019) and the COVID-19 crisis have created a scenario conducive to the development of organized crime, especially drug trafficking. Pandemic restrictions impacted the illegal economy, criminal groups expanded into new illegal activities, setting up a new environment of criminality and intensifying turf battles between criminal gangs in Ecuador (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2023).

The Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime (OECS) carried out a study in cities and maritime borders: Carchi, El Oro, Manabí, Sucumbíos, Guayas and Santa Elena, due to their status as spaces permeable to organized crime with the aim of determining the associated illicit markets in the aforementioned provinces. The results revealed that drug trafficking is the main threat at the national level, with an incidence of 23%, followed by money laundering, corruption, arms trafficking and hydrocarbon trafficking.

**Figure 2**  
*Organized Crime environment in Ecuador*



Note. The main illicit markets with the greatest impact related to organized crime in Ecuador are identified. Adapted from Characteristics of Organized Crime – Ecuador Report by the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime 2023.

#### 4.2 Ecuador and Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking is considered the main source of income for organized crime in Ecuador, encompasses different activities from production and storage, to trafficking and distribution (Rivera, 2011). Due to its strategic location, Ecuador is a key point for drug activity due to the advantages of collection, storage, and distribution by national and international gangs in maritime, air and land traffic. With new and innovative techniques in seaports, semi-submersibles, fishing boats, contaminated containers, cargo below decks, boats, human couriers, among others (Ruiz, 2019).

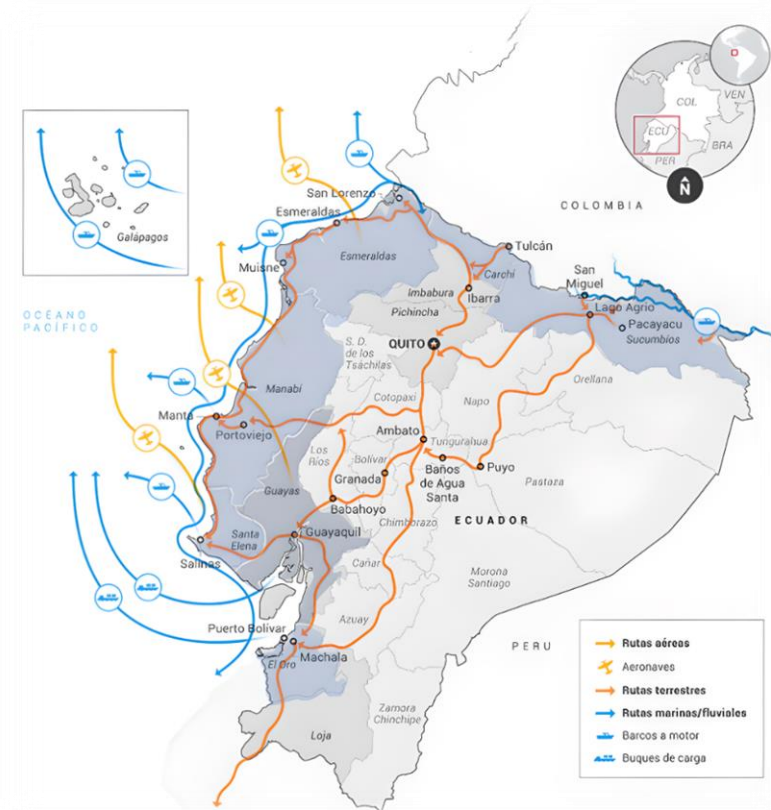
The border areas of northern Ecuador are in a critical situation due to their proximity to Colombia and especially to the departments of Nariño and Putumayo, the main epicenters of cocaine production. In this way, the incursion of drug trafficking into Ecuadorian territory is facilitated, since the plantations and laboratories are nearby. Ecuador's borders have proven to be key due to the low control and transit of people and goods, proving to be beneficial for drug trafficking and bringing a series of problems such as violence, corruption, and insecurity. This threatens the stability and well-being of local communities, especially the provinces of Esmeraldas, Carchi, and Sucumbíos (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2023).

In order for the production of illicit drugs to be delivered to international consumer markets, maritime, air and land transport is essential for criminal groups. They are distributed by various means, mainly concentrated on the Ecuadorian coast, a strategic territory for the logistics of drug trafficking, along with six main typologies:

1. Storage in farms, warehouses and residential houses where it is hidden before being shipped overseas.
2. Ground traffic using vehicles with secret compartments to specific storage points.
3. Maritime traffic of boats, semi-submersibles and artisanal fishing vessels for maritime transport.
4. Contamination of containers under the modalities of rip-on and rip-off, blind and white hook and contamination under the hull of the ship.
5. Air transport using low-performance aircraft such as Cessna or Piper.
6. Illegal clandestine airstrips for the landing of light aircraft.

(Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2023)

**Figure 3**  
National Drug Trafficking Routes in Ecuador



Note. The map depicts the main air, land, and sea drug trafficking routes in Ecuador. Adapted from Record Cocaine Seizure Strikes Gangs in Ecuador, by InSight Crime 2024 (<https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/incautacion-record-cocaina-propina-golpe-bandas-ecuador/>). In the public domain.

Drug trafficking in Ecuador is characterized by three main distribution routes:

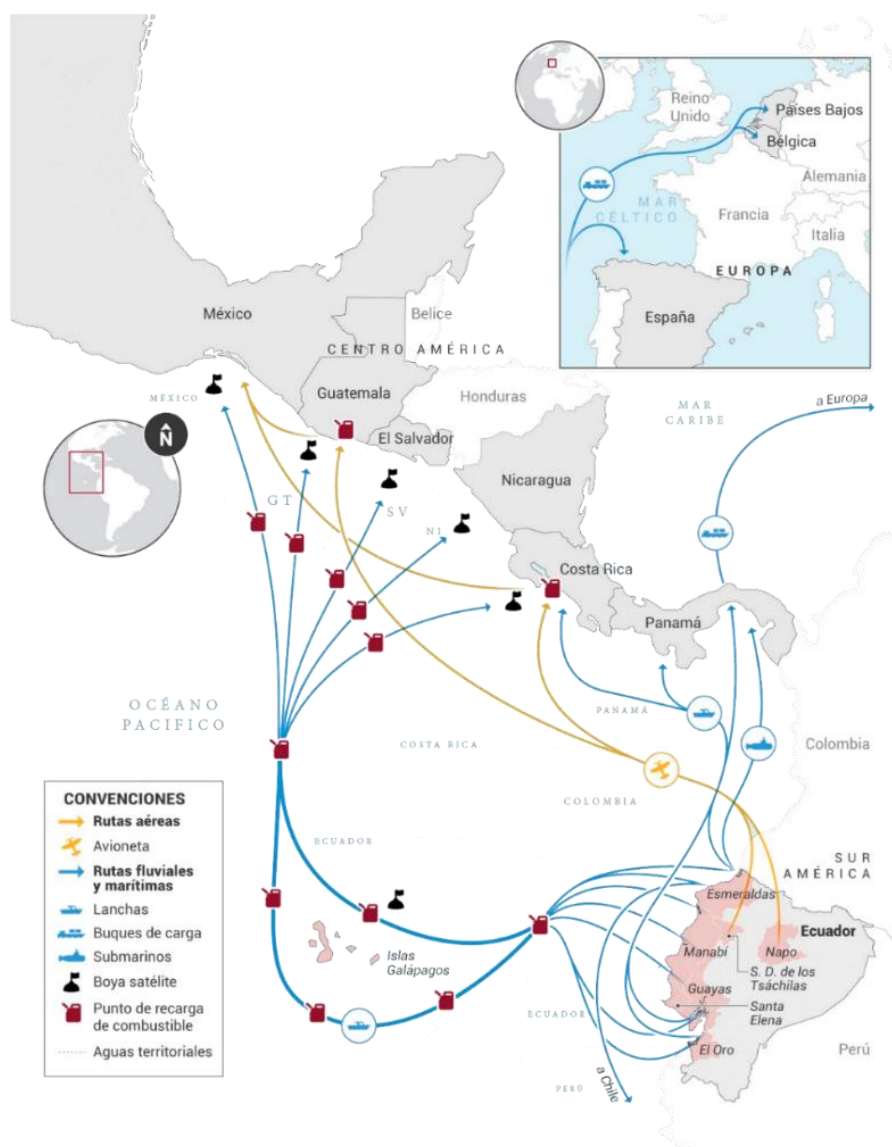
1. Pacific Route: The drugs enter through Esmeraldas and are transported through Manabí, Guayas and Santa Elena. From there, it is sent abroad by sea in ports, using speedboats, and by air by mail and small planes.
2. Andean Route: The drugs enter through Carchi and are transported through Imbabura, Pichincha, Cotopaxi and Chimborazo. Finally, it reaches the coastal areas of Manabí, Guayas, Santa Elena, and El Oro.
3. Amazon Route: The drugs enter through Sucumbíos and are transported through Napo, Puyo, Tungurahua, Bolívar, Los Ríos and finally Guayas.

There is a complex network that covers several provinces of the country, especially the border and coastal provinces, the first phase of the business of criminal organizations begins with land trafficking. Maritime trafficking represents the second phase, where container contamination and new drug export tactics come into play.

The routes used by drug traffickers converge on the country's main export seaports, especially in Guayaquil where Contecon is located, the main maritime terminal of Guayaquil and Ecuador. In the same way, the different routes have proliferated in a large part of the Ecuadorian provinces. This provokes struggles not only for the control of routes and collection centers, but also for the dominance and territorial control in strategic sectors for organized crime. This is accompanied by other illicit activities such as extortion, fuel trafficking, animal trafficking, weapons, among others. Ecuador's border provinces and coasts specialize in different drug trafficking activities depending on their economic and geographic environment. For example, Manabí and Santa Elena focus on transporting drugs using fishing vessels and

low-performance light aircraft, taking advantage of the 54 existing clandestine airstrips for illicit air trafficking (Ruiz, 2019).

**Figure 4**  
*International Drug Trafficking Routes in Ecuador*



Note. The map depicts the main air, land, and sea drug trafficking routes in Ecuador. Adapted from Ecuador: Cocaine Highway to the United States and Europe, by InSight Crime 2024 (<https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/incautacion-record-cocaina-propina-golpe-bandas-ecuador/>). In the public domain.

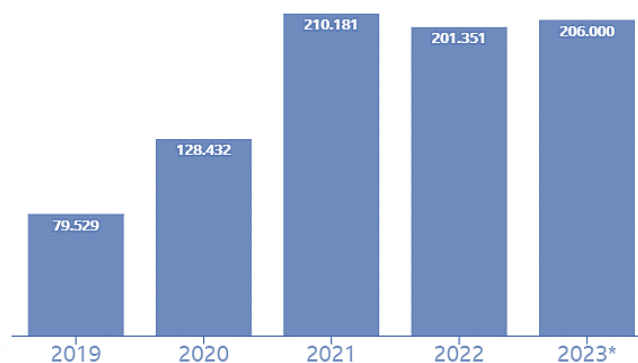
The dynamics of drug trafficking at the national level in Ecuador are complex, which have driven the development and growth of the illegal trade within the drug production and distribution chain at the international level. Ecuador plays a relevant role in this business, serving as a transit point for countries close to the main consumer markets, such as Europe and the United States, as well as in the new markets of Asia and Oceania.

Ecuadorian ports are consolidating themselves as strategic platforms for the distribution of drugs to Central and North America. The fishing boats loaded with drugs set sail from the Ecuadorian coast, continue to strategic refueling points in the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands and continue their journey to Costa Rica, Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, countries that function as bridges to the Mexican and United States markets. Similarly, air routes are part of this dynamic, with flights transporting drugs from Ecuador to Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico. Finally, semi-submersibles and boats are transported from Ecuador

to Panama, where they are distributed to the European market, mainly to Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Drug trafficking in Ecuador has experienced remarkable growth, evidenced by record seizures since 2019.

**Figure 5**

*Amount of drugs seized in Ecuador per year in kilos (kg) from 2019 to 2023*



Note. The amount of drugs mobilized in Ecuador is reflected in a record number of seizures recorded from 2019 to 2023 based on data from the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime, DAI, and the National Police. Adapted from the 4 charts showing the extent and impact of the main criminal gangs in Ecuador, by BBC News 2024 (<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cw0llyjqllro>). In the public domain.

Ecuador is in a complex situation in the face of drug trafficking, its location on the Pacific makes it a key and strategic point for drug activity, positioning it as the country with the second largest amount of cocaine seized in South America, only behind Colombia (Newton & Manjarrés, 2023). The country is an important exit point to the international market according to the latest information from the United Nations Office on Drugs (Mella, 2024), closing 2023 with around 206,000 kg of drugs.

The fight against drug trafficking and the violence associated with this problem continues to be a challenge in terms of national security. The reality of Ecuador has unleashed a war between the different criminal organizations in the country, taking violence to levels never seen before in the country, causing damage to society, economy, and education.

#### **4.2.1 Social consequences**

Drug trafficking and consumption have become one of the greatest concerns in today's society, in Ecuador the growing number of traffickers and consumers evidences the magnitude of the problem, drug trafficking becomes a social threat that not only impacts the individuals who consume, it adds a series of consequences for today's society in the physical and mental health of consumers along with the close social circle who suffer the consequences of consumption. In addition, the production of clandestine laboratories contaminates the environment, generating a risk to the health of nearby communities. Consumption is related to drug trafficking and microtrafficking, which generates a climate of insecurity in the communities that have been affected by this problem. Finally, one of the main harms of drug trafficking lies in young people, because they are vulnerable to the harmful effects of drugs, attraction can have consequences for their personal and social development, affecting social relationships and mental health (Molina, 2006).

Drug trafficking infiltrates culture, corrupts institutions and creates a dynamic of violence and illegality through social ties, to carry out transactions, exchanges, and articulations that allow it to traffic drugs effectively, it uses social spaces to obtain dispositions, complicity, support, and effectiveness allows the development of illegal business in society, through trust, fear, or coercion. Social conditions have shaped a social order that is permissive of illegal practices by boosting social power in contexts characterized by socio-economic inequality, exclusion, poverty, the absence of the state, weak controls, and unemployment, ultimately undermining social cohesion. From there, it is strengthened and legitimized as a safety net for those disadvantaged sectors (Luna et al., 2021).

The situation in Esmeraldas is the result of the state neglect it has suffered. According to INEC (2021), 25.3% of the province has the highest poverty and unemployment rate in the country, which is why gangs seek to reach children, recruiting them from the age of eleven to control territories, expand their

domain, instill terror and increase their power. Families, caught in the web of violence, are forced to accept this reality and allow their children to join gangs (Méndez, 2022).

#### 4.2.2 Implications for education

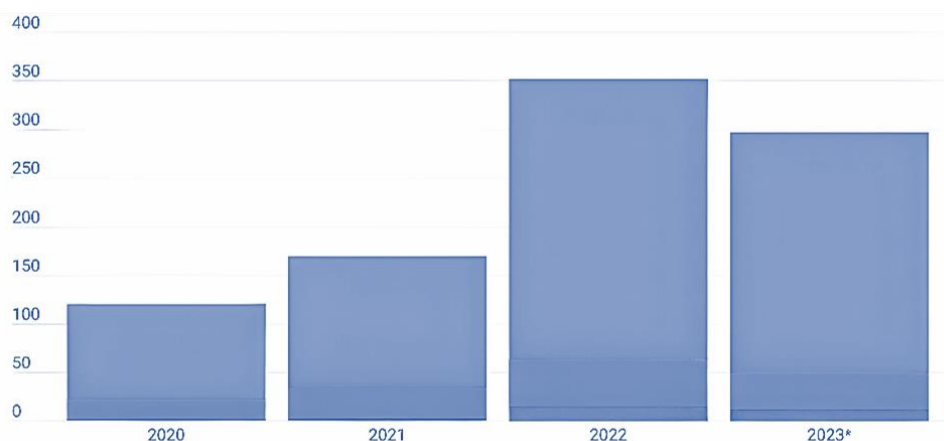
Drug use among students has become a serious threat to education, since being influenced by organized crime, especially drug trafficking, drug use has also increased, especially heroin, cocaine, and marijuana. Students between ninth grade and third grade consume the different drugs on the market, the average age of consumption is between 14 and 17 years old, which shows the need for prevention measures in the face of this problem (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

Likewise, drug trafficking has had a devastating impact on the well-being and educational development of children and adolescents in Ecuador. Currently, many minors are involved in criminal activities, becoming soldiers forced to fulfill the purposes of criminal organizations, perpetuating the cycle of violence and depriving them of childhood and future. In the case of Esmeraldas, education has been in crisis, as only 65.3% of young people complete the unified general baccalaureate, while 90.9% do not access higher education and insecurity aggravates the situation, with children and young people not attending classes for fear of gang violence (Méndez, 2022).

The National Police reported that between January and June 2023, around 1,326 children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 were arrested. The arrests were related to crimes such as weapons trends, contract killings, microtrafficking, robbery, and other activities associated with organized crime. Although there are no official child recruitment figures in Ecuador, homicides and arrests of minors provide an indication of the extent of this problem.

**Figure 6**

*Children aged 0-19 murdered in Ecuador from 2020 to 2023*



Note. The number of murders of minors in Ecuador from 2020 to 2023 is shown based on the Ministry of Government and the National Directorate of Crimes Against Life, Violent Deaths, Disappearances, Extortion and Kidnappings (DINASED). Adapted from Child Recruitment Grows in Ecuador's Drug Control Disputes, by InSight Crime 2023 (<https://urlis.net/z5kwsq46>). In the public domain.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the social problems in Ecuador, mainly in Guayaquil and Durán, cities that have become the main scenarios of territorial dispute between criminal groups where young people actively participate. This situation was aggravated by cuts in social programs, which generated a vacuum where criminal groups were quick to fill young people (Ramírez, 2023). As a result, these cities concentrate the highest number of deaths of minors aged 0 to 19 in the entire country, especially in 2022, due to the fact that child recruitment is present among the disputes for control of drug trafficking in Ecuador.

#### 4.2.3 Economic consequences

It is evident that the fight against drug trafficking is a war against national and transnational criminal organizations with economic power associated with illegal mining activities, extortion, trafficking of arms,

people, and hydrocarbons. This fight against drug trafficking is not easy economically, as well as the implementation of new economic and security policies to promote Ecuadorian development and socioeconomic welfare.

Businesses continue to be victims of extortion and threats by criminal groups, demanding monthly payments depending on the size, product, or service of the business in exchange for “protection” The impact of this situation has been devastating for small, medium and large companies that have suffered from this problem. So, entrepreneurs have been forced to close their businesses, migrate to other provinces or even leave the country, directly affecting sales, consumption and economic development (Méndez, 2022).

**Table 1**  
*Economic cost of violence in South America*

Ranking	Country	Cost % of GDP	Economic Cost of Violence USD
7	Colombia	29%	217.440.197.948
23	Venezuela	12%	52.994.352.557
29	Brasil	11%	351.919.079.535
62	Uruguay	8%	6.075.251.196
75	Argentina	7%	68.673.106.798
<b>97</b>	<b>Ecuador</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>12.229.701.866</b>
103	Chile	6%	28.392.876.071
105	Bolivia	6%	5.500.835.418
113	Peru	5%	22.525.784.812
114	Paraguay	5%	4.858.222.657

Note. The table reflects the economic cost of violence in South America by the Institute of Economics and Peace using the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in dollars. Adapted from the Global Peace Index 2023. In the public domain.

Ecuador has experienced the largest drop in the 2023 Global Peace Index score, dropping 24 positions to 97th place out of 163 countries. The Global Peace Index report evaluates various indicators, including internal conflicts, homicide rate, death count, social security metrics, military aspects, armed service personnel, among others. Ecuador's fall in the index reflects a deterioration in the country's security and peace, which has a negative impact on the well-being of the population and economic development.

According to a report by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the economic impact of crime accounted for 6% of Ecuador's GDP in 2023 and the cost of violence amounts to \$12.229 billion annually. The deterioration in the overall score is due to the increase in violent crime and deaths from internal conflicts under the power and prominence of national organized crime groups and transactions operating in Ecuador (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

### 4.3 Ecuadorian Organized Crime Groups

Criminal organizations continue to develop and fragment, and these organizations continue to work together with transnational criminal groups in order to establish businesses related to drug trafficking. Ecuadorian criminal groups have evolved significantly since 1990, from local networks to transnational groups with greater organization and power, the expansion of gangs, international alliances, and the emergence of new actors have created a complex situation that takes on importance in Ecuador's national security.

#### 4.3.1 Los Choneros

It is the main criminal group in Ecuador, the oldest criminal organization being the most numerous and sophisticated in the country, the development of the criminal group has been transformed from the streets to cities and provinces, with a large presence in the country's penitentiaries. The group had its origins starting in 1998 in the province of Manabí in the city of Manta under the leadership of Jorge Véliz España

alias “El Chonero” or “Teniente España” starting with microtrafficking and robbery activities, the gang was involved in a territorial conflict with the criminal group “Los Queseros” in 2005. The confrontation triggered an escalation of violence between gangs and gangs in the region, and the situation was aggravated by the murder of Jorge Véliz España's wife and son, intensifying the war between criminal groups.

In 2003 the Choneros emerged victorious by expanding their territorial control to Santo Domingo, Los Rios and Guayas, taking full control of the drug trafficking route and drug transport logistics from Colombia to Ecuador. As the criminal organization spread throughout Ecuadorian territory, so did its top leaders: Jorge Luis Zambrano Gonzalez alias “Rasquiña”, brothers William Leodán Macías Villamar alias “Lan”, José Adolfo Macías Villamar alias “Fito”, and Ronal Javier Macías Villamar alias “Javi” (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

Following the assassination of Jorge Veliz España and other leaders of the organization in 2007, the leadership of the criminal organization was assumed by Jorge Luis Zambrano González alias “Rasquiña”. The new leader expands the organization and continues with the main activity of drug trafficking, extortion, robbery, arms trafficking and contract killings in order to finance organized crime operations (Plan V, 2017). Despite being in prison, he maintained control and operations of the organization. The other opposing criminal groups would also have influence, growth and development such as “Los Tiguerones”, “Lobos” and “Chone Killers” who were accountable and loyal to “Los Choneros” (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

2019 marks a new era of organized crime in Ecuador, with criminal groups operating directly from prisons. The drug trafficking business is disputed by several groups inside and outside the prisons, generating war between gangs, the conflict ends with the murder of William Poveda, alias “Cubano”, leader of the gang “Los Cubanos” in the Litoral Penitentiary, with deaths inside and outside the prisons and laying the groundwork for future prison crises (Primicias, 2021).

In 2020, Jorge Luis Zambrano González, alias “Rasquiña” is released from prison and murdered. However, his murder unleashed a wave of violence in the prisons and areas of Guayas, Manabí and El Oro. A prison crisis begins again with the dispersion of the organized crime criminal groups that alias “Rasquiña” had gathered (Plan V, 2017), “Los Choneros” went from being leaders to being a target. The power of the organization ascends to the acting leader José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias “Fito”, causing the groups gathered by Jorge Luis Zambrano González, alias “Rasquiña”, “Los Lobos”, “Los Tiguerones” and “Chone Killers” to disassociate themselves from the faction and become rivals in order to expand their criminal activities nationwide (Primicias, 2021).

This again generated a war for prison control, on February 23, 2021, clashes caused outbreaks of extreme violence with the deaths of several gang leaders and rival gangs in several prisons in Ecuador, 79 people died in the riots inside the country's four prisons, this event is cataloged as the worst prison massacre in the history of Ecuador (Primicias, 2021).

Los Choneros' international ties to transnational organized crime groups have been established with Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, transporting cocaine for the Mexican cartel (InSight Crime, 2023). The Sinaloa Cartel has been active in Ecuador since 2003, through emissaries and representatives who coordinate drug trafficking to Central and North America. Jorge Luis Zambrano Gonzalez alias “Rasquiña” coordinated and operated jointly with the cartel, allowing strategies to be established for the transportation and exit of drugs. The National Anti-Drug Investigation Directorate carried out several operations detecting the presence of Sinaloa Cartel emissaries in the provinces of Sucumbíos, Pichincha, Manabí, Los Ríos, Guayas and Santa Elena (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

The capture of former Ecuadorian army intelligence captain Telmo Remigio Castro marked a turning point in the investigation into the Sinaloa Cartel's expansion in Ecuador. The former captain became an ally of the cartel, facilitating the transport of cocaine with the contamination of containers and alliance with local groups such as “Los Choneros”. Castro's influence was maintained until his murder in the Guayaquil Regional Prison in December 2019 (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

### **4.3.2 Los Lobos**

Los Lobos emerged as a dissident faction of “Los Choneros”, the fragmentation of gangs and factions that considered themselves allies, united with the goal of fighting “Los Choneros”. Among these groups are “Los Lobos”, “Chone Killers” and “Los Tiguerones”; due to their union they are called the New



Generation, referring to alleged ties to Mexico's Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) (InSight Crime, 2022).

The criminal organization began its influence in prisons, delegating operations to illegal mining, robbery, extortion, and trafficking of illicit substances in Azuay and El Oro. After the prison massacres of 2021 and 2022, the state took the step of separating members of the criminal organization, but facilitated the expansion of its operations to subzones of Imbabura, Pichincha, Chimborazo, Los Ríos, Napo, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Santa Elena, and Loja (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

The presence of “Los Lobos” and their allies has unleashed a wave of violence in Ecuador, with police killings, car bombs and bodies hanging from bridges from the transfers of its main members. The criminal organization engages in drug trafficking activity with its international partners and allied groups, and has created a network of connections with transnational criminal groups. Its allies include Balkan criminal groups, especially Albanians, who are responsible for the distribution of cocaine in Europe (InSight Crime, 2022). Likewise, they maintain links with the “Frente 48” which allows them to access drug trafficking and arms routes in Colombia. These factors have turned “Los Lobos” into a powerful organization capable of diversifying its criminal activities and expanding its influence and fear in Ecuador.

### **4.3.3 Chone Killers**

The Chone Killers originate from Puerto Rico's transnational gang “Los Ñetas”. In Ecuador, “Los Ñetas” clashed with “Latin Kings”, another international gang in the fight for control of the drug trade. As “Los Choneros” became Ecuador's largest criminal organization, they were allies of the faction. The brothers Terry Israel Camacho alias “Trompudo” and Antonio Benjamin Camacho alias “Ben 10” lead the gang, in its beginnings they acted jointly with “Los Choneros”, after the prison crisis and the death of Jorge Luis Zambrano González alias “Rasquiña” they became independent and focused their activities on drug trafficking, robbery and extortion (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

Since emancipation, the criminal organization has developed from a local organization to a criminal drug trafficking group, so they are fully armed in their area of operation, the Durán canton in the El Arbolito sector, with the exception of the Cerro Las Cabras sector, controlled by “Los Águilas” (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022). The past of the leaders of the criminal organization along with connections with drug trafficking groups in Colombia and Mexico. Previously, the gang was considered one of the main economic and financial suppliers of the rival gangs “Los Choneros”, “Los Lobos” and “Los Tiguerones” (Sierra et al., 2022).

The new criminal organization gained strength, influence, and power. In April 2022, the National Anti-Drug Investigation Unit executed Operation Great Impact 9 against the “Chone Killer” group. Members of this organization were involved in drug trafficking, robberies, violent murders with beheadings, and terrorist acts with explosive devices in judicial entities (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

### **4.3.4 Los Lagartos**

The criminal organization was born under the criminal group “Los Cubanos” dedicated to hired killers, illicit drug and arms trafficking. Currently, the organization is under the command of Carlos Christian Mantilla Ceballos, alias “Choclo” who directs the organization's illicit activities from the Provisional Detention Center (CDP). The criminal group's presence is in Guayaquil, mainly in Punta Arrecha and Ciudad Perdida, strategic areas due to the connection with the country's seaports, using small boats to transport drugs to cargo ships to Central America, North America and Europe (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

The organization controls this route and has an armed wing composed of minors from the Guasmo Sur sector in order to confront organizations that try to access the territory. The gang's hitmen are known for their brutality and operability in Ecuador (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

### **4.3.5 Tiguerones**

The band started in 2017 in the Nueva Prosperina District of Guayaquil, originally performing in conjunction with “Los Choneros” as a support force. The organization is established in Esmeraldas, Manabí and Pichincha under the leadership of William Jofre Alcívar Bautista, alias “Comandante Willy”, the

criminal organization experienced a growth in drug trafficking and arms trafficking operations. Currently, they are in a territorial dispute with the gang “Los Gánster”. This struggle has led to an increase in violence in areas where various criminal groups operate (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

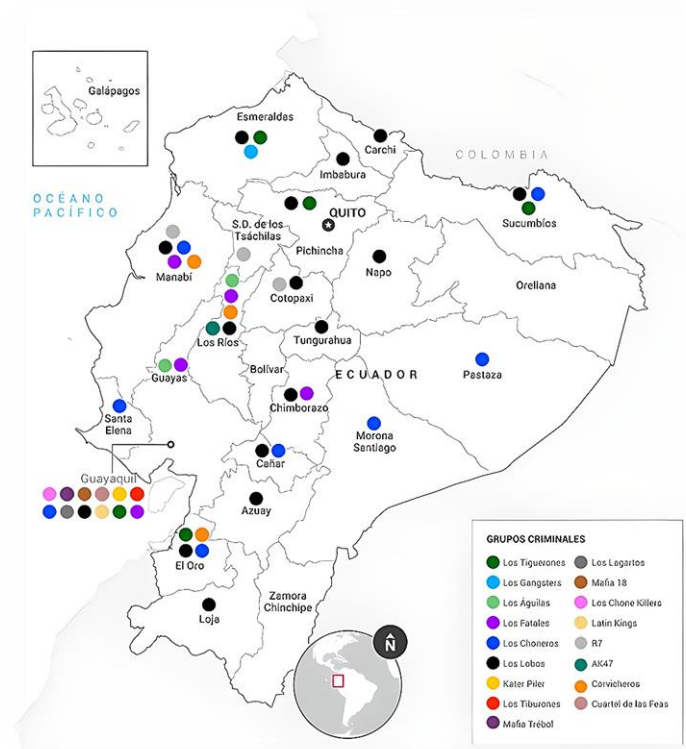
Following the assassination of several leaders of the criminal organization, it underwent several leadership changes, but the changing members strengthened ties with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and Colombian cartels. The organization has managed to penetrate state institutions such as the Council of the Judiciary, the Prosecutor's Office, the National Police, and Decentralized Autonomous Governments expanding the organization and developing into one of the most dangerous in Ecuador (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

#### **4.3.5 Latin Kings**

Los Reyes Latinos, is a criminal organization that began in the streets of Chicago in 1940, its expansion throughout Latin America reached Ecuador in 1992 in the south of Quito and Guayaquil. They started as a gang dedicated to robbery and other illegal activities such as assaults, homicides, robbery, and money laundering. However, his development expanded into drug trafficking activities with the international ties of his own organization (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

After a process of negotiation with the State, in 2007 many members were reintegrated into society, but it was not exempt from violence as the assassination of its leader, Manuel Zúñiga alias “King Majestic”. Currently, the criminal organization in Ecuador is under the leadership of Carlos Macías Saverio alias “Diablo” and continues to be involved in criminal activities such as robbery, contract killings, illegal arms trafficking and drug trafficking, mainly in Guayaquil where they continue to clash with Los Choneros, Chone Killer, Tiguerones and Lobos (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

**Figure 7**  
Presence of criminal groups in Ecuador



Note. The map depicts the presence of criminal groups in Ecuador's provinces by the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime. Adapted from [terrorist gangs operate in at least 20 provinces of Ecuador, for Primicias 2024 \(https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/seguridad/bandas-terroristas-operan-provincias-conflicto-interno/\)](https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/seguridad/bandas-terroristas-operan-provincias-conflicto-interno/) In the public domain.

Drug trafficking in Ecuador has undergone a remarkable transformation, local gangs previously limited to small gangs, have evolved into gangs to become mafias with a presence in all the provinces of the country. The development of these criminal organizations has allowed Ecuadorian gangs to partner with Mexican, Colombian, and Balkan cartels, consolidating their position in the international drug trafficking landscape.

The Sinaloa Cartel has expanded into Ecuador since 2003, using emissaries and proxies to coordinate drug trafficking in aircraft, speedboats, and container contamination to Central and North America, using local gangs such as “Los Choneros” to exert violent control over various prisons in the country extended to the civilian population and generating a climate of violence and insecurity (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) is another dangerous criminal organization worldwide, its main activity is focused on drug trafficking and arms trafficking, extending its influence to Central and South America. Ecuador has become a vital corridor for the CJNG in air and sea drug trafficking in the contamination of containers, artisanal fishing boats and speedboats. As mentioned above, the struggle between Ecuadorian criminal organizations has been influenced by the positioning of the CJNG and the search for alliances with local gangs such as “Los Lobos”, “Chone Killers” and “Tiguerones”.

The Balkan Mafia is a transnational criminal organization in Eastern Europe, dominating the illicit drug trade globally. The mafia's presence in Ecuador dates back more than 12 years, and the organization has expanded, now including Ecuadorian, Albanian, and Kosovar citizens. Currently, they are in charge of container contamination in the seaports of Guayas, El Oro and the Metropolitan District of Guayaquil, facilitating the shipment of drugs to the ports of Antwerp in Belgium and Rotterdam in the Netherlands (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022), another way to finance their operations is the School of Hitmen that extends to young people and children who are recruited and offered to local gangs.

They are instructed in the handling of weapons, the tracking of targets and assassination techniques (El Universo, 2022).

The criminal organization integrates Balkan citizens with different nationalities without immigration registration in Ecuador, obtain Ecuadorian nationality illegally, coordinate drug shipments to Europe and carry out money laundering operations through the purchase and sale of Ecuadorian exporting companies. For this reason, the organization has developed the strategy of acquiring exporting companies that are used as a front for the shipment of drugs through drug contamination in bananas, timber, seafood and fruits (Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado, 2022).

#### **4.4 Prison crisis**

Ecuador has been engulfed in an unprecedented wave of prison violence. The struggle for territorial control in drug trafficking routes has marked unprecedented violence in Ecuador, giving way to a new stage of organized crime, where criminal groups operate directly from prisons.

Since 2019, clashes between criminal organizations in prisons have left more than 400 people dead. Similarly, in 2021, around 120 deaths were recorded in the Penitenciaría del Litoral and during the same year, a total of 320 deaths due to clashes in the country's prisons (Pontón, 2022). The mutilations and beheadings spread on social networks have generated great repudiation both nationally and internationally, turning the situation into a serious crisis facing the Ecuadorian prison system, overcrowding, lack of control and the presence of different criminal gangs with great power have reached a point of extreme violence in the country's prisons (Pontón, 2022).

The leaders of the criminal organizations are found in Ecuadorian prisons, especially in the Penitenciaría del Litoral in Guayaquil, they constitute themselves as the leaders of the pavilions segmenting other organizations to take control of other pavilions, turning it into the safe place for their habitability, because when they leave, they run the risk of being killed by opposing gangs, as was the situation of Jorge Luis Zambrano González, alias “Rasquiña” after being released (Pontón, 2022).

Prisons have become part of Ecuador's drug trafficking insecurity crisis, with drug gangs exercising complete control over the detention centers. The BBC documentary “Bajo el asedio de las bandas” portrays the harsh reality of Ecuadorian prisons, new inmates, without belonging to any criminal organization are extorted by the dominant gang of the pavilion, they are forced to pay “security” and even to join the dominant gang of the pavilion, the possibility of reprisals by the rival gang itself forces the inmates to join the organizations Criminals expanded to the group in search of safety (BBC, 2024).

The crimes for which the detainees were admitted are those related to drug trafficking in a national and international manner. The criminal activity of drug trafficking is coordinated inside the prisons, which has caused organized crime groups to dispute control of the wards, mainly in the Penitenciaría del Litoral (Pontón, 2022). The penitentiary system is in a critical state, prison overcrowding is alarmingly high, corruption, the struggle for power, and riots are frequent, especially in the Penitenciaría del Litoral, where there is evidence of the lack of forceful actions in terms of justice, human rights, control and surveillance in prisons (Arandia et al., 2022).

Due to the prison crisis and the expansion and development of criminal organizations, on January 9, 2024, the newly elected President Daniel Roy Gilchrist Noboa Azn, through decree No. 111, indicated that the country is in a critical situation with an alarming increase in violence by organized crime groups. These groups have affected the social and institutional structures of the country with terrorist acts threatening national security and sovereignty of the State (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024).

A report submitted to the Presidency of the Republic by the National Police describes that criminal groups have experienced an increase in their organization and capacity to confront the forces of order, due to the fact that armed groups use weapons, ammunition, explosives and accessories of greater lethality, including military weapons for exclusive military use.

**Table 2**  
*Weapons and ammunition destroyed*

Year	Lethal Weapons	Non-lethal weapons	Accessories	Lethal Ammunition	Non-lethal ammunition
2020	4.729	122	1.669	101.091	119.740
2021	9.768	1.088	14.309	96.215	4.845
2022	4.484	299	2.899	88.911	10.983
2023	4.243	323	8.520	82.124	19.463
Total	23.224	1.832	27.397	368.341	155.031

Note. The table mentions figures from 2020 to 2023 on the destruction of lethal and non-lethal weapons, accessories, and ammunition. Adapted from the National Police presented in Presidential Decree No. 111. In the public domain.

The amount of weapons of criminal organizations is a clear reflection of the power they have acquired, they have become belligerent non-state actors, capable of planning, coordinating and executing acts of violence against the civilian population instilling chaos and terror, all the characteristics of terrorism. The growing violence in Ecuador led to the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Alcibiades Villavicencio Valencia in August 2023, a few weeks before the elections. Likewise, the murder of the mayor of Manta Agustín Intriago Quijano in July of the same year and the death threats against the mayor of Durán, Luis Chonillo. The panorama is worrisome, organized crime has total control and political violence has become a reality in Ecuador (Botero, 2024).

At the end of 2023, Operation Metastasis was presented in the fight against drug trafficking and corruption, with a panorama of infiltration into the structures of the State, the Prosecutor's Office directed 75 raids with the capture of 29 people, including judges, former judges, police officers and individuals with ties to organized crime. On January 8, 2024, there was a wave of prison violence, generating escapes and riots in prisons. Among the inmates who left the detention centers was José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias "Fito", leader of the "Los Choneros" gang, and later Fabricio Colón Pico alias "Capitán Pico", the alleged leader of "Los Lobos" (Botero, 2024).

Faced with the new crisis, the president decreed a state of emergency, imposing a curfew, on January 9, 2024 the decree brought swift and brutal reprisals by criminal organizations, creating a new prison crisis, taking guards hostage, the armed attack on the production team on a television channel with live broadcast, criminal groups taking over university schools, car bombs in cities and police control bodies (Botero, 2024).

Organized crime had declared war on the Ecuadorian state, the president responded through presidential decree No. 111 declaring Ecuador in an internal armed conflict and identifying 22 organized crime groups as "terrorists", among the groups are: Águilas, Águilas Killer, Ak47, Caballeros Oscuros, ChoneKiller, Choneros, Corvicheros, Cuartel de las Feas, Cubans, Fatales, Gangster, Kater Piler, Lagartos, Latin Kings, Lobos, Los p.27, Los Tiburones, Mafia 18, Mafia Trébol, Patrones, R7 and Tiguerones. In this context, Articles 4 and 5 of Decree No. 111 enshrine "the mobilization and intervention of the Armed Forces in the national territory to guarantee sovereignty and territorial integrity against transnational organized crime, terrorist organizations and belligerent non-state actors" (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024), authorizing military forces to "neutralize" them under the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024).

#### **4.5 Terrorism in Ecuador**

Terrorism in the international framework, especially in North America and Europe, began maintaining a clear ideology, religion, in Latin America specifically in Ecuador developed differently, since it has been a transformation on organized crime groups in the country, after analyzing the criminal groups of Ecuador reveals that some of them have received direct influence from Colombian armed organizations or guerrillas such as Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), among others (Vargas, 2021). These terrorist movements were born under "revolutionary"

ideas and thoughts marked by a direct relationship to political tendencies, generating terror and chaos through the use of force such as assassination, bombings, attacks on security centers, extortion, among others, so terrorism shares similarity to crime (Vargas, 2021).

Since the year 2000, global terrorism has been religious fundamentalism with the events of September 11, 2001, but in Latin America another type of terrorist struggle began outside religious beliefs, if not a struggle with a great political charge. At the same time that the guerrillas were developing, drug trafficking was fully developed as a source of their economic resources, which explains why the guerrillas are formed in the jungle borders as armed groups and criminal organizations dedicated to drug activities. In this way, terrorism has evolved in criminal groups as they share activities related to organized crime, turning terrorism into a challenge in terms of security and national defense.

The events of January 2024 completely changed the landscape of organized crime in Ecuador, transforming it into a threat of a terrorist nature, due to the sophistication of its weaponry, extreme violence, terrorist attacks and the explicit intention of generating terror and chaos in Ecuadorian society configured organized crime as terrorism. For this reason, through Decree No. 111 and after identifying the 22 organized crime organizations, they are not judged as criminal groups, but as terrorists.

## **4.6 Ecuador's Anti-drug Trafficking Mechanisms**

The research has analyzed how drug trafficking in Ecuador has experienced a remarkable growth, the situation is reflected in the constant increase in the homicide rate, the strengthening of criminal gangs and the persistent prison crises. The struggle over drug trafficking routes has unleashed unprecedented violence, making drug trafficking the main threat to the Ecuadorian state. In this context, the Ecuadorian government, with different state entities, civil society and the international community, are looking for mechanisms to combat drug trafficking, due to the complexity of this problem, it requires an approach at the national and international level.

### **4.6.1 International scope**

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, known as the Palermo Convention, is a multilateral treaty signed in 2000 due to the growing problem of organized crime globally. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly with the objective of preventing and combating transnational organized crime in the economic sources of organizations such as trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, sexual exploitation, illicit production and trafficking of drugs, illicit manufacture and trafficking of firearms, and money laundering. In response to the development of transnational organized crime, the international community met in Italy in the city of Palermo in 2000 to sign the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (Naciones Unidas, 2004).

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime establishes an international legal framework for collaboration in the fight against transnational organized crime in Ecuador, adopted in 2000 and ratified in 2003. The Convention focuses on attacking the financial roots of these criminal organizations by covering crimes such as trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, sexual exploitation, drug production and trafficking, manufacture and trafficking of firearms, and money laundering, which establishes mechanisms for extradition, mutual legal assistance, and the management of assets derived from crime.

In response to the events of terrorism by organized crime in January 2024 in Ecuador, the Andean Community (CAN) countries Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia, met in Lima, Peru, on January 21, 2024, for the twenty-fourth extraordinary meeting of the Andean Council of Foreign Ministers. The meeting, known as the Andean Security Meeting, had as its objective the elaboration of the "Resolution Plan of Action of the Countries of the Andean Community on Transnational Organized Crime" in decision No. 922, urgent joint actions for the fight against transnational organized crime. In the plan, the following measures were agreed to combat organized crime in the Andean region:

1. Border Actions
2. Migration cooperation
3. Customs cooperation
4. Cooperation in Illegal Mining
5. Cooperation in the fight against illicit drug trafficking

6. Coordinated Operations
7. Intelligence Cooperation
8. Enhanced cooperation against arms trafficking
9. Cooperation in penitentiary matters
10. Training in the fight against transnational organized crime
11. 24/7 Andean Security Network
12. International Forum
13. Andean Regional Security Observatory

(Comunidad Andina, 2024)

With the Republic of Colombia and Ecuador, it has a joint declaration of national defense, since they are two sister nations, concerned about the importance of analyzing the existing problems in the border area, in terms of subversion, drug trafficking, illicit trafficking in arms, ammunition and explosives, and other crimes, with the need for mechanisms capable of neutralizing, timely and effective, coordination and efforts in the fight against organized crime, especially in the drug trafficking activity in the border zone, in order to establish security and tranquility the “Binational Border Commission, COMBIFRON” was created to evaluate and supervise compliance with the military and police commitments to border security between the two countries, as well as timely solutions to existing problems or problems that may arise in the border area and to strengthen relations, at all levels between the Public Forces of Colombia and Ecuador (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1996).

The rapprochement of the United States is present in Ecuador, after the prison crisis of 2023 and the growth of drug trafficking, a memorandum of understanding was implemented and signed to share information between governments. Likewise, in 2023, former President Guillermo Lasso signed the agreement between the Republic of Ecuador and the United States of America, relating to operations against illicit transnational maritime activities. With the events of January 2024, and through executive decrees 164 and 165 enters into force in order to prevent, identify, combat, impede and intercept illegal cargoes. It also contemplates the Status of the Forces with collaboration mechanisms in ship visits, military training, joint exercises, humanitarian, and cooperation activities to face common security challenges, such as illicit drug trafficking, international terrorism and other (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024).

The agreement between the Government of the Republic of Ecuador and the Government of the Republic of Peru on production, alternative development, prevention of consumption, rehabilitation, control of illicit trafficking in drugs and psychotropic substances and related offences, in force since 2001, aims to undertake joint efforts between the parties in order to harmonize technical and financial cooperation policies and to carry out specific programs in the field of alternative development, prevention and effective control of drug production of illicit trafficking and consumption, as well as related crimes. The bilateral agreement is another mechanism that Ecuador has to fight drug trafficking in its article 3 with measures for the prevention and control of money laundering, money and related crimes, in its article 4 with sanitary control, article 5 in technical assistance, article 6 in coordinated actions in interdiction and in article 7 in an ecuadorian-peruvian commission (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2001).

With the Republic of the United Mexican States, there is an understanding between the government of the Republic of Ecuador and the government of the United Mexican States to implement mechanisms for the verification of information for migratory purposes in order to strengthen international cooperation to verify the information of persons in transit, which allows the competent authorities to distinguish flows of low-risk persons and facilitate their international mobility. This understanding is related to organized crime in its second annex. Although human mobility is a complex issue, its analysis is fundamental in the fight against organized crime; the understanding is another tool for sharing data on individuals linked to this type of criminal activity such as human smuggling, trafficking of migrants, organ trafficking, financing of terrorism, illicit production of scheduled controlled substances, illicit trafficking of scheduled controlled substances, unauthorized firearms, ammunition and explosives, illicit trafficking of firearms, chemical, nuclear or biological weapons, terrorism, among others (Corte Constitucional del Ecuador, 2017).

#### **4.6.2 National scope**

Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador of 2008 imposes on the State the obligation to guarantee and defend national sovereignty, as well as the right of its inhabitants to a culture of peace, integral security and a life in a democratic society free of corruption (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador,

2008, Artículo 3). These fundamental duties constitute the essential pillars for the well-being and development of the Ecuadorian people. In the same way, Article 47 enshrines the responsibilities of the President of the Republic to safeguard the sovereignty and independence of the State, as well as to guarantee internal order and public security with a focus on the policy of national defense (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2008, Artículo 47).

In the defense and security sector, with the paradigm shift, adoption and strengthening of the theory of Integral Security, its approach is incorporated into the new policies that transform security institutions into fundamental pillars of social development. The doctrines of human security and citizen security have given rise to a normative framework, from the perspective of the plan, drug trafficking is identified as a latent threat that could restrict human rights and damage the environment in all its dimensions. In the event that this threat exceeds the capacity of the State, the State may opt for exceptional measures, including the declaration of a state of emergency (Sanabria, 2019).

The second national mechanism is the Organic Comprehensive Penal Code (COIP), in force since 2014, Article 366 punishes terrorism as “a person who, individually or by forming armed associations, provokes or keeps the population or a sector of it in a state of terror, through acts that endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of persons or endanger buildings, means of communication, transport, using means capable of wreaking havoc” (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014). In the same way, Article 367 clearly punishes the financing of terrorism.

Article 369 defines organized crime as “a person who, by agreement or concertation, forms a structured group of two or more persons who, permanently or repeatedly, finance, in any way, exercise command or direction or plan the activities of a criminal organization, with the purpose of committing one or more crimes” (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, Artículo 369). It is therefore important to develop a regulatory framework for the creation of the Unit of Specialized Prosecutors. The National Specialized Investigation Unit against Transnational Organized Crime (UNIDOT) is the unit that investigates crimes related to organized crime, terrorism and its financing, large-scale illicit trafficking in controlled scheduled substances, whether national or transnational, and crimes committed by a national or transnational criminal group.

Article 219 of the Comprehensive Penal Code (COIP) establishes penalties for the illicit production of narcotic and psychotropic substances and their scheduled precursors subject to control. This article is part of the comprehensive strategy to combat illicit drug trafficking and protect society from its harmful effects (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014, Artículo 219).

Article 220 punishes illicit trafficking in scheduled substances subject to control by:

Any person who, directly or indirectly, without authorization or in breach of the requirements set forth in the current regulations governing controlled substances, traffics, offers, stores, mediates, distributes, buys, sells, ships, transports, imports, exports, possesses or possesses for the purpose of marketing or placing on the market narcotic and psychotropic substances or preparations containing them (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, Artículo 220).

Within the same article, point two, punishes with the same scope the person who “possesses or in general carries out illicit trafficking in chemical precursors or specific chemical substances, intended for the illicit manufacture of narcotic and psychotropic substances or preparations containing them” (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014, Artículo 220).

Article 221 punishes the organization or financing for the illicit production or trafficking of drugs to any person who directly or indirectly finances, organizes, directs, arranges, orders, administers, or activities of persons or groups of persons engaged in the illicit production or trafficking of scheduled controlled substances. Similarly, article 222 punishes a person who sows, cultivates or harvests plants to extract substances whose active ingredients are to be used in the production of drugs for marketing purposes, and article 223 punishes a person who supplies narcotic or psychotropic substances or preparations containing them (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014).

The development of criminal groups in Ecuador has given rise to a new form of financing with the recruitment of children and young people for the schools of hitmen that are offered to criminal groups. Article 369.1 of the Organic Comprehensive Penal Code (COIP) punishes the following:



Any person who, individually or as part of a criminal structure, recruits or enlists children or adolescents for the purpose of engaging in conduct classified as trafficking in controlled substances, crimes against property, crimes against life, sexual and reproductive integrity, organized crime, trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, contract killings, extortion, robbery or terrorism (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2014, Artículo 369).

Finally, article 474 on the analysis and destruction of scheduled substances subject to control shall be subject to "chemical analysis, for which purpose samples shall be taken, which the National Police shall deliver to the experts appointed by the prosecutor, who shall submit their report within the specified period" (Código Orgánico Integral Penal, 2014, Artículo 474) for destruction. Drug seizures continue to increase, making Ecuador the third country with the most registered drug seizures, according to the 2022 report of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The Ecuadorian government acts in the destruction of drugs seized under the encapsulation procedure. The process is used in order to avoid contamination due to its efficiency and speed compared to the incineration technique, it is carried out by means of a special mixture that solidifies the substance with rigorous environmental protocols, the blocks with the alkaloid are crushed and dissolved with binders and additives so that the mixture forms a microencapsulation and thus obtain a very hard earthenware. The process guarantees the total destruction of the substance and its definitive confinement under tons of concrete.

In the case of seized cocaine, it is mixed with cement, lime, concrete accelerators and other types of waste, such as expired medicines or destroyed contraband items that are introduced into concrete mixers or industrial mills. The method prevents the cocaine from polluting the environment, the process is guided by experts and supported by the United Nations, the U.S. Embassy and the European Union making Ecuador a pioneer in drug destruction (Secretaría General de Comunicación de la Presidencia, 2023).

Finally, in April 2024, a referendum was held that included 11 questions to be voted on. Of these questions in the consultation, two proposals unrelated to security were rejected, and 9 questions focused on citizen security issues obtained popular approval. The consultation marks a change in the security policy endorsed by Ecuadorians, such as allowing the complementary support of the Armed Forces to the National Police without the need to decree a state of emergency, increasing penalties in cases of terrorism, organized crime, murder, hired assassination, human trafficking or arms trafficking, among others, extradition for the heads of drug trafficking or organized crime groups required by other countries and the automatic transfer of weapons seized from these organizations to the Ecuadorian security forces, among others.

## 5. Discussion

The U.S.-Mexico bilateral cooperation has had successes and failures. Since it was signed it has resulted in great changes. The Mexican government received financial cooperation for about 2,900 million dollars from 2007 to 2017 and technical cooperation in the pillars of the plan. The economic and technical resources provided by the United States were destined to the military sphere, which questions whether the military approach in this cooperation for the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking is a military approach.

**Table 3**  
*The Merida Initiative in Fiscal Year 2008 Against Organized Crime*

Pillar	Objectives	Results of the cooperation	USD
<b>Pillar I. Dismantling Criminal Organizations</b>	Diminish the power of Mexican organized crime groups.	Eight Bell 412s transport helicopters, with logistical equipment, parts and training package. 7 UH-60m Blackhawk helicopters.	306,3
	Capture and imprison the leaders of criminal organizations.	2 reconnaissance aircraft (CASA CN-235-300) for maritime air surveillance for the Mexican Navy.	
	Reduce profits from drug trafficking.	87 manual ION scanners for the army and air force.	

	<p>Curb money laundering and financial assets.</p> <p>Decrease drug production.</p>	<p>Financial cooperation to the National Institute of Migration, modernization of its database, training and equipping operational personnel in rescue and rescue techniques on Mexico's southern border.</p> <p>Financial Cooperation on the Secure Communications System at National Security Agency Facilities.</p> <p>Financial and technical cooperation in the elimination of illicit economic sources with the Money Laundering Detection System (UIF).</p> <p>Financial Cooperation to Expand the Attorney General's Office Capacity in the Anti-Smuggler Work Initiative to Identify and Prosecute Human Smugglers at the Border.</p> <p>Financial and technical cooperation in X-ray scanners and training in canine detection and customs agents at the border.</p> <p>Financial cooperation in the interconnectivity of intelligence databases, to operate a secure communications network.</p>	
<b>Pillar II. Institutional strengthening</b>	<p>Increase the capacity of Mexican organs.</p> <p>Constitutional reforms in the areas of criminal justice and public security</p>	<p>Financial cooperation to renew forensic information systems at the Attorney General's Office and biometric equipment to store the identity of criminals and secure prison facilities.</p> <p>3 ballistic identification systems (IBIS).</p> <p>Technical cooperation to provide training in court management, prison management, and police professionalization, as well as support to anti-crime units, victim and witness protection programs, and extradition training.</p> <p>Financial cooperation at the National Institute of Forensic Sciences.</p> <p>Financial cooperation in the Attorney General's Office to digitize all the functions of judges, granting management systems and rebuilding databases.</p> <p>Financial cooperation for anti-corruption, transparency and human rights programs.</p>	56,1
<b>Pillar III. Creating a 21st Century Frontier</b>	<p>Facilitate the legitimate trade/transit of people and restrict the illicit flow of drugs, people, weapons and cash.</p>	<p>Financial cooperation in non-intrusive inspection equipment (X-ray scanner in Vans) for the Federal Police (SSP).</p> <p>168 dogs trained to detect narcotics, weapons, ammunition and money.</p> <p>Expansion of a laboratory equipped for immigration officers in the detection of false passports and credentials.</p> <p>Non-intrusive equipment to detect and prevent trafficking in illicit goods.</p> <p>Financial cooperation on security equipment (armored vehicles, radios, bulletproof vests and helmets, training and associated equipment) for personnel against criminal organizations.</p>	100,6

		Financial cooperation in the Financial Intelligence Unit to improve the computing infrastructure and information analysis tools.	
<b>Pillar IV. Building stronger, more resilient communities</b>	Strengthen communities by creating a culture of respect for the law and diminishing the attractiveness and power of criminal organizations.	Financial Cooperation in U.S. Personnel Administration, Budget Services to Support Programs.  Financial cooperation in the Ministry of Health with computer systems in the national database and to reduce the demand and consumption of drugs. Support the efforts of non-governmental organizations and other non-state actors collaborating on demand reduction and rehabilitation.	37
<b>Total</b>			<b>500</b>

Note: The table describes the strategies of the Merida Initiative with the main objectives of the plan. Based on data from Congressional Research Service 2008. In the public domain.

The National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) focuses on the defense of the Ecuadorian territory from the continental and maritime space, adjacent islands, territorial sea, the Galapagos Archipelago, soil, submarine shelf, subsoil and the overlying continental, insular and maritime space. National defense guarantees the protection of Ecuador's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the protection of the population and its resources. Threats from organized crime or terrorism generates risks to the interests of the State, which is why defense becomes the essential instrument, along with strategic defense objectives:

1. To exercise effective control of the national continental and insular territory, aquatic and aerial spaces; as well as the development of infrastructure and resources in strategic areas.
2. To support institutions in the protection of the population's rights and freedoms in the face of serious situations of internal commotion and disaster situations.
3. To strengthen the joint strategic capabilities of the Armed Forces to maintain a capacity to deterrence and defend territorial integrity and national sovereignty.
4. To contribute to international cooperation in accordance with the national interests and foreign policies of the State.
5. To contribute to national development through cross-sectoral cooperation, research and innovation in defense industries.

(Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2018)

The results in the first pillar of the Merida Initiative highlights that between 2007 and 2011, 29 of the most dangerous leaders of Mexican criminal organizations were captured through the financial and technical cooperation of the plan, especially through the financing of military equipment. The permanent support of the first pillar was to fight fire with fire against criminal organizations. They focused on the excessive use of military forces as well as training and improvement of tactical equipment. The first years of the plan had results, but the resources were spent on technology and weapons, since the first three years were allocated to around 1,400 million dollars of which 500 million dollars corresponded to the first year. Similarly, in the first pillar program, helicopters, heat-tracking aircrafts, advanced computer and radio communication software and equipment were delivered to the Mexican Armed Forces, along with technical cooperation for specialized training in the use of the equipment provided and specialized training in anti-narcotics operations.

The National Comprehensive Security Plan in the field of military technology is aligned with three main axes: communication, mobility and the automation of weapons systems. Digital communication and connectivity networks focus on the new cyberwarfare landscape, followed by mobility in more efficient vehicles with modern systems. Finally, the robotization and automation of weapons systems and machine-man interfaces seeks support in the new war landscape for the Ecuadorian control forces (Gabinete Sectorial de Seguridad, 2019).

In the matrix of objectives, strategies and specific strategic actions of the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) in the specific defense plan of the Ministry of Defense, its general objective is to defend land, sea, air, space and cyberspace sovereignty through military strategies throughout the national

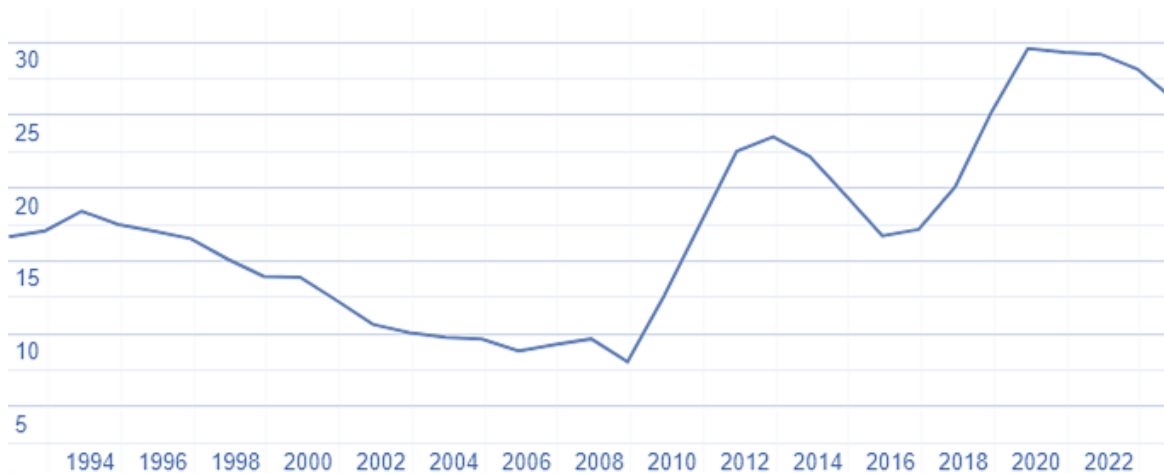
territory, shield infrastructure and materialize a structure with strategic capabilities. In this context, the growing problem of terrorism and organized crime threatens the development of this objective, so combating and improving Ecuadorian military equipment is essential, although the events of January 2024 improved international relations with the United States in terms of security with the delivery of the C-130 Hercules aircraft to reinforce the armed forces, 6 Navistar trucks, engines for boats for maritime military operations, 20,000 vests for the National Police, technological equipment and technical cooperation in training.

The understanding with the United States reflects a commitment to Ecuador's security, U.S. Ambassador Michael J. Fitzpatrick emphasized that this donation symbolizes support for Ecuador's security and its determination to collaborate in the fight against national and transnational criminal organizations and Laura Richardson, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, emphasizes the alliance and cooperation that exists between the two countries with the investment portfolio of 93.4 million dollars in security for Ecuador. Likewise, it is imperative to enhance military cooperation through joint operations, expand intelligence sharing and count on the presence of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in operations against organized crime.

Strengthening law enforcement aligns with the strategies of the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) to defend sovereignty in the short term, but it does not mean an effective solution against drug trafficking. The negative results demonstrated by the Merida Initiative in the first pillar are remarkable, despite increasing the armament and capacity of law enforcement in Mexico, it failed to reduce levels of violence, but instead tripled it, as the homicide rate skyrocketed during 2007 to 2012.

**Figure 8**

*Intentional homicide rate in Mexico from 1994 to 2022*



Note. The graph represents the rate of intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in Mexico. Adapted from Mexico - Intentional Homicides, by Macro Data (<https://shorturl.at/ILP17>). In the public domain.

The strategy of fighting fire with fire, arresting and extraditing leaders and capos of Mexican mafias, only fragmented the creation of new criminal organizations such as the South Pacific Cartel, Independent Cartel, La Resistencia, Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), among others. Due to the creation of new groups, it intensified territorial struggles and increased the number of deaths after the start of the Merida Initiative in 2007. While major drug lords ended up in jail, transnational criminal organizations continued to operate and develop in search of new drug trafficking routes and zones of control, Mexico's intentional homicide rate from 2008 to 2012 solved at 13 to 24 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the figures have a similar uptick to Ecuador's current intentional homicide rate (**Figure 1**), it also shares the same segmentation of organized crime groups in much of Ecuadorian territory (**Figure 7**). For this reason, for the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) it is necessary to increase military capacity through the financing of equipment and technical cooperation, but it is necessary to understand that arresting the leaders of Ecuadorian criminal organizations is not a feasible long-term solution. On the other hand, the possibility of greater militarization against organized crime could generate serious consequences in terms of human rights, since it implies an excessive predominance of the Armed Forces in the control of security forces.

Despite this rejection of the first pillar of the Merida Initiative in the fight against drug trafficking, other important strategies were implemented to consider. Within the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI), objective No. 4, to contribute to the implementation of international cooperation mechanisms for the fight against the socio-economic problem of drugs, within the framework of its strategy 1 and 2, has as its main objective to counteract criminal economies in money laundering.

Reducing the profits from drug trafficking and curbing the illicit capital generated by drug trafficking became an objective within the first pillar of the plan, financial and technical cooperation was carried out in the integration of the Financial Intelligence Unit (UIF) in the investment of financing in technological modernization and development of specialized software and assistance in hardware and communications infrastructure. In a collaboration between the United States and Mexico, the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) allowed for the optimization of operations with a 38% reduction in the collection of dollars in cash from the United States to Mexico and a 35% decrease in illegal flows sent from Mexican financial institutions in 2011 (Vargas, 2016). In the same way, it made it possible to identify the sectors susceptible by illegal economies for money laundering. In this part the pillar facilitated cooperation between both countries and the exchange of technical personnel, transfers of equipment and training.

In the case of Ecuador, the Financial and Economic Analysis Unit (UAFE) is the institution in charge of the fight against money laundering. After analyzing **Figure 2**, the panorama of organized crime in money laundering represents 17%, making it the second main concern when fighting organized crime. Roberto Andrade, former director of UAFE in 2023, mentions that drug trafficking, corruption, and tax fraud are the main actors in money laundering. In addition, it mentions that in 2023 money laundering was around 285 million dollars (Celi, 2023). The study carried out by the Organized Crime Observatory based on the analysis of sentences for money laundering in Ecuador between 2020 and 2022 shows that only 5% of investigations originated from international cooperation (Observatorio de Crimen Organizado, 2023). In other words, the figure expresses the limited collaboration between national and international entities to combat organized crime, especially drug trafficking.

Within the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI), in the specific intelligence plan in its specific objective No. 4, in its strategies 1 and 2, it seeks to increase international cooperation to counter criminal economies. In the first pillar of the Merida Initiative, technical cooperation programs were implemented in the area of training for justice operators with training in the use of special investigative techniques, asset investigation and recovery of assets derived from money laundering. For this reason, it is recommended to intensify this tool, considering that obtaining information through this channel has been scarce in Ecuador, representing only 5%, so the implementation of a cooperation network in the investigation of money laundering is necessary to combat organized crime.

In the second pillar, the main objective was to strengthen the rule of law, institutional strengthening was established for the performance of Mexican entities responsible for public security, border management and administration of justice with the reforms in the following constitutional articles:

- Article 16: Precautionary measures and searches
- Article 17: Alternative Means of Dispute Resolution
- Article 18: Agreements for the social rehabilitation of convicted persons
- Article 20: Rights of Defendants and Victims
- Article 21: Public Prosecutor's Office, police and private criminal prosecution of the victim
- Article 22: Confiscation of public property derived from organized crime
- Article 73, Section XXI, and Article 122, Section V: Single Penal Code
- Article 123, Section XIII: Removal of members of police institutions

(Zoraida, 2014)

Through the Merida Initiative, Mexico adopted a new model of criminal justice, moving from an inquisitorial system to an accusatory one, granting greater investigative powers to the police under the supervision of the Attorney General's Office, and strengthening the capacities of police institutions for preventive investigation and intelligence gathering. Finally, the modernization of the federal penitentiary system began due to overcrowding that compromised security and social reintegration, so resources from the Merida Initiative were allocated to the training of officers in techniques of detention, classification and transport of prisoners.

The Merida Initiative sought to combat organized crime with a special focus on anti-corruption in Mexican courts by implementing a new prosecution model. However, there were practical difficulties in the processes within the Mexican judicial system since it was plagued by corruption and inefficiencies. In addition, the lack of economic resources in the pillar failed to train police and prosecutors in the new functions within the reformed system, generating an institutional weakness, so it is considered a failure within the plan and would not be considered an example for the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) since Ecuador has the same accusatory justice system.

The third pillar focuses on the creation of a 21st century border in order to enhance regional competitiveness and optimize infrastructure to facilitate trade and the transit of people. Within the pillar, there was financial and technical cooperation, such as the installation of biometric equipment at key points on Mexico's southern border to strengthen security and immigration control, the transfer of canine units and non-intrusive technology to the Tax Administration Service to reinforce the detection of narcotics, firearms and cash at the border. In addition, technical cooperation in training to detect fraudulent documents was essential to combat and guarantee border security.

In the matrix of the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI), its public and citizen security strategy in specific objective No. 4 contributes to the guarantees of institutionality and mechanisms linked to people on the move due to migration control, in its strategy 1 it seeks to strengthen the national migration control system by guaranteeing safe and orderly human mobility. Likewise, in the section of the specific plan on foreign relations and human mobility, in its general objective No. 1, it guarantees security within the framework of foreign relations, through policies in the field of defense, public security and risk management to strengthen institutional strategies through its general strategy 1, it promotes and positions mechanisms of strategic alliances and international instruments at the local level that leverage the security domains.

To understand the results of the third pillar of the Merida Initiative, it is critical to understand the border realities of Mexico and Ecuador. In the case of Mexico, the northern border with the United States is characterized by subtropical deserts, which makes it somewhat easier to "control" it by military intelligence. On the other hand, the northern border of Ecuador and Colombia presents a complex jungle environment, with minimal control due to the Amazonian jungle vegetation, the lack of signal in large areas, and extreme climatic variations generate difficulties for Ecuadorian military intelligence. The militarization of the borders has turned them into dangerous areas, the population living in border cities is forced to migrate due to the lack of opportunities and the threat of violence.

The Ecuadorian State's response has been limited to military and police combat to fight drug trafficking and drug production in border cities, the combat has resulted in the amount of drugs seized detailed in **Figure 5**, but in the current situation, the Armed Forces must develop new tactics against organized crime to reduce the penetration of criminal organizations at the borders. In compliance with the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) with a view to improving international cooperation and with the example of the Initiative Mérida, it is recommended, through financial and technical cooperation, to pay for devices for both the National Police and the Armed Forces to increase the response capacity in border security control, since due to the complexity of the border, technology, training, and equipment is needed.

The analysis of the first and third pillars of the Mérida Initiative indicates that bilateral cooperation between Mexico and the United States focused mainly on the military sphere, with a strong investment in equipment and strengthening of Mexican security forces. In the case of Ecuador, the reality of organized crime presents complex challenges, and an examination of Ecuador's international cooperation in the area of security identifies economic constraints as the main obstacle to the fight against drug trafficking.

**Table 4**  
*Budget execution of the Armed Forces 2023*

<b>Program</b>	<b>Planned Budget</b>	<b>Budget executed</b>	<b>% Execution</b>
Central government	124.735.2681	123.290.755	98.84 %
Protection and surveillance in the territory	1.177.456.807	1.174.767.335	99.77 %

International cooperation to contribute to regional and global peace	7.334.213	7.054.216	96.18 %
Operational isolation of the Armed Forces	44.106.415	34.171.676	77.48 %
Strengthening Strategic Capacities	135.790.412	26.370.313	19.42 %
Research, development and innovation	21.265.079	19.017.062	89.43 %
Integral Security	85.103.661	23.443.543	27.55 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.595.791.859</b>	<b>1.408.114.904</b>	<b>88.24 %</b>

Note: The table describes the budget execution figures of the Ecuadorian Armed Forces for 2023. By the General Administrative Financial Coordination of the Ministry of National Defense, presented in the (2024). In the public domain.

Ecuador has a complex war against drug trafficking in the financial sphere, the economic cost of eliminating violence in Ecuador, analyzed in **Table 1**, according to the report of the Institute for Economics and Peace is around 12,229 million dollars per year and the annual investment in the executed budget of the Armed Forces is 1,408 million dollars. That is to say, the country has a deficit to eliminate violence and an economic limitation in terms of security. In view of this scenario, it is necessary to enhance financial cooperation with equipment and investment to the border control forces in order to detect and counteract the predominance of criminal groups, as well as within the specific defense plan of the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) in its general objective No. 2 and general strategy 4. It seeks international cooperation and support for defense in order to contribute to the development of public safety and risk management strategies.

Finally, the fourth and last pillar of the Mérida Initiative is the construction of strong and resilient communities, where bilateral cooperation resources prioritized community development as a strategy to prevent drug use and violence. A model rehabilitation and addiction prevention center were created with non-governmental organizations such as the Juvenile Integration Centers for job training, diagnosis and prevention of addictions, as well as artistic and sports activities for four vulnerable groups.

In the case of Ecuador, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a hard blow to existing social programs with no possibility of recovery, the situation generated a vacuum in the attention to children and adolescents from marginal neighborhoods living in dysfunctional homes, with low economic conditions and little institutional presence. Criminal gangs, through state neglect, found opportunities for growth, becoming powerful structures through the recruitment of children and adolescents. Although child recruitment is a new problem in Ecuador, there is no strategy contemplated in the National Integral Security Plan (PNSI), so it is recommended that action be taken to weaken criminal groups.

At the beginning of the war against organized crime, no clear strategy has been outlined to exit the conflict. The militarized response is necessary in the short term, but it does not represent a sustainable long-term solution to the problems of organized crime, the president of the republic has not presented a concrete plan for the future despite having a short term of office, the lack of a strategy generates uncertainty about the internal conflict, engaging in a long-term struggle without definite action. After analyzing the pillars of the Mérida Initiative, strategies have been investigated within the pillars that could be used for the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI), but the problems and causes in the reality of Ecuador are numerous with several economic, political and social complications, so it is necessary to determine which strategy would really work in the long term to confront drug trafficking.

The problem tree is a methodology that identifies the problems that affect the territories prioritized in the intervention, developing cause and effect relationships between these problems. In this context, an analysis of the problem of drug trafficking in Ecuador was carried out (**Appendix 1**) and through research and analysis of the Mérida Initiative it is suggested to act in a long-term plan, clearly it is necessary to carry out a short-term financial and technical cooperation in military investment and control forces, but

understanding that it was not a solution and analyzing the shortcomings in the first, second and third pillars, a solution should be sought through the analysis of the problem tree.

The problems are numerous and the difficulties to solve each one are complicated due to the very high economic and political burden that hinders the fight against drug trafficking, but based on the tree diagram represented in **Appendix 1**, alludes to a cause that generates drug trafficking is the lack of educational and employment opportunities. Likewise, as a result of this problem, resources have been diverted to social programs that help people in critical situations. As a result of the Mérida Initiative plan, the plan had negative results in certain pillars, because the plan focused its objectives on the direct fight against organized crime, which worked in the short term, but generated a rebound in violence.

In the context of Ecuador, direct confrontation is necessary to weaken the control of criminal groups, especially in provinces bordering Colombia and Peru, as well as large investments in tactical equipment and training for the control forces; however, as reflected in the low investment in the fourth pillar of the Merida Initiative, it proved not to be a long-term response. For this reason, it is advisable to implement objectives and strategies within the National Integral Security Plan (PNSI) in the area of international cooperation in social programs aimed at helping children and young people so that they do not form or are not recruited by criminal organizations.

## 6. Conclusions

Ecuador has suffered an unprecedented escalation of violence by organized crime, in recent years it has quietly become a key country for transnational criminal groups as they have taken advantage of border vulnerabilities to develop within the country, due to the struggle for control of national and international drug routes. It registers a worrying figure in the rate of intentional homicides, which is why it has become the most violent country in South America compared to subsequent years with economic, political and social effects.

For these reasons, international cooperation plays a fundamental role in the development of national security, since it is a challenge against transnational crime, it is necessary to have a multipolar vision in financial and technical cooperation, since it opens up a range of opportunities for institutions, allowing for the optimization and strengthening of control capacities. Through this tool, the Ecuadorian control forces promote their growth and development in order to meet the objectives of the National Comprehensive Security Plan (PNSI) present from 2019 to 2030, which is why the Merida Initiative, an example of international cooperation in security, has been analyzed.

The Merida Initiative was a bilateral cooperation between the United States and Mexico in national security matters, under different points of view it has been questioned and open to debate among politicians, academics, and the media for the successes and failures present in the structure, objectives, and strategies in the pillars of the plan. In relation to the delivery of equipment to reinforce the security forces and technical cooperation to personnel, it has been a success. However, criticisms have also been present in the plan due to the increase in the homicide and violence rate in Mexico since the beginning of the cooperation, as well as the argument that the fight against drug trafficking should start from the demand and consumption of drugs in the United States. There are different points of view, but from the perspective of international relations, it is worth mentioning that this strategy has marked the beginning of bilateral cooperation in security matters between Mexico and the United States, it was the beginning and an example of cooperation in security matters for the world.

After analyzing the objectives, strategies and results of the Merida Initiative in relation to combating organized crime, especially drug trafficking, it was effective in the short term, since through financial and technical cooperation it increased the response capabilities of Mexican control forces and succeeded in arresting and imprisoning the main leaders and heads of Mexican criminal groups, It also succeeded in eliminating much of the criminal financing of drug sales and money laundering, but it was a failure in trying to eliminate violence in Mexico, as the rate of homicide has increased due to the segmentation of criminal groups that have developed and have now become transnational criminal organizations such as the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation (CJNG), which not only affects Mexico, but has managed to establish itself in several countries worldwide, including Ecuador.

While the strategies of the National Comprehensive Security Plan and the strategies of the Merida Initiative were analyzed, greater financial and technical cooperation is recommended to the Ecuadorian



Armed Forces and the Financial and Economic Analysis Unit (UAFE) in the short term. After the analysis of the failures of the Merida Initiative and the current phenomena of drug trafficking in the recruitment and death of children and young people in Ecuador, it is advisable in the long term to have a greater role in social programs through financial and technical cooperation that counteracts the growth of criminal groups for a forceful fight against organized crime.

In addition to the contributions of the Merida Initiative, the mechanisms that Ecuador already has at the international level should be strengthened. It is essential to strengthen the Andean Community countries' Resolutive Action Plan on transnational organized crime, as it involves a joint effort with the cocaine-producing countries affected by the problem. Also, continue with the monitoring reports of territories affected by illicit crops of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), since the last update of the report is from 2015, continue with the development of new social programs through international cooperation for children and youth, and continue with collaborative efforts through international agreements.

Trying to reach a formal agreement with the United States on security matters would be an advance in financing for the security forces, currently there are certain collaborations on the part of the United States, but the interventions are largely similar to Plan Colombia in terms of size, scope and commitment, for example the difference in monetary cooperation is notable because Plan Colombia was invested around 605 million dollars while The U.S. proposal for Ecuador is \$93.4 million.

Laura Richardson mentions that the United States has interests in the region due to the lithium triangle (Argentina, Bolivia and Chile) for technological development, oil and other resources in the region, as well as the competition for control of the presence against China and emphasizes the concern of nine countries that contain Russian equipment, including Ecuador, so it seeks to replace it with U.S. military equipment and technology (Atlantic Council, 2023). For this reason, the strategic interests behind U.S. "aid" in the region and Ecuador could develop a security cooperation agreement, without generating a complete dependence on the country, since Ecuador contemplates international mechanisms in the face of organized crime (Atlantic Council, 2023).

Finally, understanding the problems of drug trafficking in Ecuador are complex due to the economic, political and social consequences it has. The country faces a complicated criminal landscape due to the fight of key drug trafficking routes and criminal economies continue to develop and create alliances, so creating a direct fight in the short term is necessary, but it is essential to carry out long-term actions and understand the importance of social programs that address the problems of the country. Consequences and primary roots of this problem, it is necessary to create strong communities affected by poverty, lack of educational and job opportunities, which through union and cooperation means an effective fight against organized crime and drug trafficking.

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## Appendix 1

### Cause Tree Diagram for Problem Solving in the Face of Organized Crime in Ecuador

