

2025 Country Conditions: Ecuador

Ecuador, wedged between Colombia and Peru, was once known as an island of peace in the Andes. In 2020, its homicide rate was [6.7 per 100,000](#) inhabitants, one of the lowest in the region.

Today, drug trafficking and associated gang violence have fractured this peace. In January 2024, cartel members, armed with explosives, took television broadcasters hostage in front of a live audience. Prisoners from the major cartels posted videos of themselves holding knives to the necks of the guards. Gang leaders staged a jailbreak. The recently inaugurated President, Daniel Noboa, declared a state of emergency, casting the country into lockdown.

At [44.5 homicides per 100,000 people](#), Ecuador's homicide rate is now beyond that of Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras, and the highest in South America. Children and youth are particularly targeted, experiencing a [640% increase in child homicides](#) since 2019. Increasing numbers of people are being displaced: after Venezuelans, Ecuadorians are now the [second](#) most intercepted population in the Darien Gap, the infamously dangerous border crossing from Colombia to Panama.

Yesterday, Noboa was reelected, beating leftist candidate Luisa González. Noboa has taken his win as a mandate to continue his iron-fisted approach to tackling the country's spiraling security crisis. González refuses to accept the result, citing concerns that Noboa manipulated the vote by declaring a state of emergency in seven states only days before the election. To situate the election results, USCRI explores Ecuador's ongoing crisis of crime and displacement.

Background: From an 'Island of Peace' to an Armed Conflict

Ecuador's rapid spiral from peace into conflict repeats some patterns that have driven crime in the Americas in the past, from Medellín in the 1980s to Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s. A highly profitable illicit economy for cocaine, driven by demand from consumers in Europe and the United States, creates a high-stakes competition to control the market. Elite corruption and criminal impunity further metastasize into human insecurity. Unsafe conditions displace people, driving them to seek safety elsewhere.

Ecuador's insecurity comes in the [aftermath](#) of peace in Colombia. In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a leftist guerilla group commonly known as the FARC, for its acronym in Spanish. The FARC financed its war with the sale of cocaine. In Ecuador, they controlled the market. As Ecuador itself is not a coca producer, its role within the drug trade stems from the strategic location of its ports along the Pacific Coast. Drugs are brought in from neighboring Peru and Colombia, then shipped to Europe.

Focused largely on their strategic objectives in Colombia, the FARC—a structured and hierarchal organization—treated the cocaine trade in Ecuador as a business enterprise. Their demobilization in 2016 opened space for new and old criminal networks to fill the void. At the same time, the demand for cocaine in Europe soared, increasing the value of Ecuador's ports for drug traffickers. The combination of a power vacuum after the FARC's demobilization and a shift in demand created a climate ripe for violent competition.

This new dynamic was worsened by the age-old problem of political corruption. The political elite in Ecuador enriched themselves with the cash flow brought in by gangs and cartels. Members of Rafael Correa's (2007-2017) government were wrapped up in drug trafficking scandals, with Correa himself later sentenced to eight years for bribery. The judiciary and cartel leaders developed a symbiotic relationship, money exchanged for favorable sentences. Colón Pico, the leader of the Los Lobos gang, was released from jail on six [different](#) occasions—each time by the same judge.

Within this climate of corruption, Ecuador's prison system became fertile ground for its security crisis. Slashes to the [national penitentiary budget](#) worsened prison overcrowding and facilitated the growth of a thriving illicit economy within the prison system. Prison authorities were understaffed, and the government's control over the nation's prisons unraveled. Authority over the prison system and its multi-million dollar criminal economy has [allowed](#) gangs to finance their activities and recruit new members. This, combined with an impunity problem—in 2023, [90% of crimes](#) committed in Ecuador went unpunished—has meant that the state has no real mechanism to contain rising violence.

In 2023, the [assassination](#) of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio crystallized the extent of the crisis, an incident chillingly reminiscent of Pablo Escobar's assassination of Luis Carlos Galán in Colombia during the 1980s. Villavicencio had run a campaign promising to tackle corruption and criminal networks. He reportedly received death threats from the Sinaloa cartel, although members of the Los Lobos gang remain the most prominent suspects in his murder. Daniel Noboa, the son of Ecuador's richest man, would ultimately win the snap election defined by Villavicencio's assassination.

The situation in Ecuador reached a tipping point in January of 2024, with Noboa's declaration of 'internal armed conflict.' The declaration followed the escape of key gang leaders, including Colón Pico, prison riots, and an attack on a live television broadcast. A nightly curfew was imposed, with Noboa deploying the military to the streets. Since the declaration was announced, human rights [advocates](#) have raised concerns about its impact on civilians. There has been at least [one reported incident](#) of an extra-judicial killing, and numerous instances of arbitrary detainment, with prisoners reporting being subject to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment by authorities.

Citizen Insecurity

Drug trafficking and political instability have manifested into human insecurity for Ecuador's people, with violence concentrated in the coastal provinces of Esmeraldas, Manabí, El Oro, and Guayas.

The number of [massacre victims](#) in Ecuador surged from 30 in 2022, to 375 in 2021, to 834 in 2023. While massacres were originally concentrated within the penitentiary system, they have since seeped outside of it. [Experts](#) state that massacres in Ecuador are a tool for armed actors to intimidate civilian populations and assert control over territory. In coastal towns, gangs go door to door demanding payment in exchange for protection.

Durán, on the coast of Guayas, provides a window into how Ecuador's crisis has entangled crime and governance, with civilians suffering the consequences. At the center of Ecuador's drug trade, Durán is now [one of the world's murder capitals](#). Humanitarian aid and the Ecuadorian government are absent from the city, which lacks even adequate water and sanitation facilities. This vacuum has fostered a

climate [ripe](#) for drug traffickers to create a parallel service economy, providing citizens with security, income, and services that the state and international community have failed to provide. Criminal actors have also [infiltrated](#) the municipal government, buying off political candidates in exchange for appointments upon election.

The Latin Kings and Chone Killers dominate the city's criminal landscape—fighting between them is [credited](#) with the city's homicide increase. While the Latin Kings principally do not prey on civilians in their territory, the Chone Killers do not have similar rules. The treatment of civilians depends on the mood of faction leadership—who often govern with cruelty. Residents interviewed by [Insight Crime](#) reported that the Chone Killers rob and extort even schoolchildren. Some are also employed by criminal gangs, a trend that has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.



Refugees and Forced Displacement

Ecuador, given its history of stability, is home to one of South America's largest refugee populations, [hosting nearly 500,000 people in need of international protection](#). The majority are Venezuelans fleeing the Maduro regime and surrounding humanitarian crisis. 2024 also saw a [sharp](#) increase in the number of asylum applications filed by Colombians in Ecuador. Despite Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC, the internal armed conflict persists, dominated by FARC dissidents, paramilitary groups, criminal gangs, and the National Liberation Army. Shelters hosting both Colombians and Venezuelans are above capacity, with little relief in sight: only [3.3% of the migrant and refugee response plan](#) is funded. Now grappling with its own armed conflict, the Ecuadorian government is [strained](#) to provide essential services and protection to refugees and asylum seekers.

As the security situation in Ecuador rapidly deteriorates, its own citizens are now driven from their homes, pushed to seek safety elsewhere. Recent survey data estimates that, between January and October of 2024, more than [80,000 people](#) from Ecuador were displaced internally as a result of armed violence.

Others seek safety across borders, with Ecuadorians now the second largest population crossing the dangerous route through the Darien Gap. Because criminal actors have infiltrated Ecuador's law enforcement agencies, Ecuadorians threatened by the cartels lack a safe internal relocation option. [Data](#) from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) shows a sharp increase in encounters with Ecuadorians that aligns with the changes in security. In 2022, CBP [reported](#) 24,936 encounters with Ecuadorians migrating irregularly across the southwest border; in 2023, that number rose to 117,487, mounting to 124,023 encounters in 2024. These are the numbers of a population driven from their homes by insecurity: they desire to live in safety, without worrying about being kidnapped or having their family members disappear.