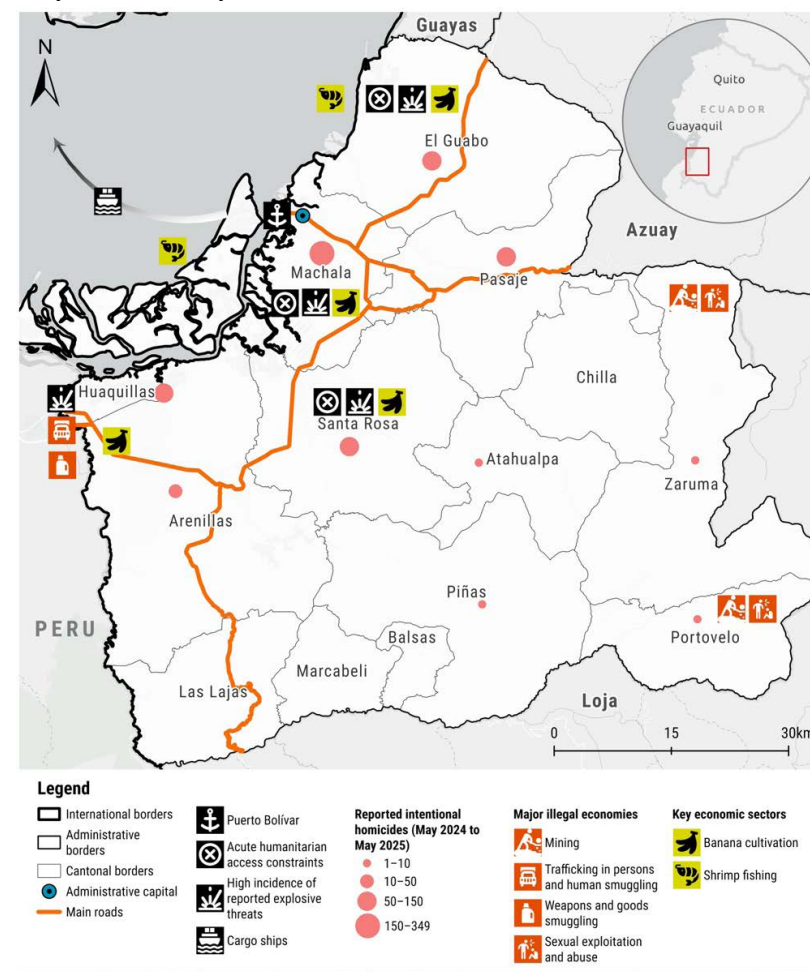


KEY FINDINGS

- Escalating violence — particularly extortion and homicide — has severely disrupted livelihoods in El Oro, forcing changes in daily routines, business operations, and market access. The cantons most affected include El Guabo, Huaquillas, Machala, and Santa Rosa.
- Extortion affects all economic sectors, from large industries — such as banana and shrimp farms — to informal market vendors, triggering business closures, income losses, and heightened economic insecurity.
- In El Oro, the homicide rate for children and adolescents is alarming, double the national rate, giving the province the second-highest rate nationwide.
- The 2024 energy crisis and climate-related events have compounded economic deterioration, especially for small businesses and rural producers, aggravating food insecurity and unemployment.
- Livelihood collapse has triggered critical protection risks, including internal displacement, child recruitment, sexual exploitation, and forced labour, particularly among women, children and adolescents, and migrants and refugees.
- Access to essential services has been severely compromised by violence, infrastructure stress, and rising costs, limiting healthcare, education, and WASH access for the most affected populations, such as IDPs, refugees and migrants, informal workers, and residents of areas controlled by organised criminal groups (OCGs).
- The humanitarian response is constrained, with reduced funding, insecurity in key areas, and the suspension of cash assistance as a result of extortion threats, weakening recovery efforts and resilience.

Map 1. Key violence and livelihood indicators in El Oro province, May 2024 to May 2025



Sources: ACAPS using data from IEDG (accessed 17/07/2025); INEC (accessed 01/07/2025); KII (03/07/2025); KII (27/06/2025); Global Initiative (25/06/2025); OCHA (03/02/2025); ECU911 (accessed 10/07/2025); MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 a); MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 b); InSight Crime (25/02/2025 and 30/10/2019); Primicias (08/12/2024); MPCEIP (08/03/2024)

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report aims to analyse the humanitarian effects triggered by violence-induced livelihood deterioration in El Oro, Ecuador, from May 2024 to May 2025. The analysis establishes the underexplored correlation between violence and livelihood degradation, examining how this deterioration subsequently affects protection risks and access to services.

Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive desk review of over 45 secondary sources, including UN reports, government publications, and national and local news outlets. This review is complemented by seven key informant interviews with stakeholders, including representatives from humanitarian organisations (protection and livelihoods), NGOs, and government institutions. El Oro province was selected for this analysis because of its increase in local violence in 2024, including homicides, compared to the national level, which has been experiencing a reduction. In 2024, El Oro had the second-highest homicide rate nationwide after Los Ríos province (OECD 17/06/2025). Analysis of the intentional homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants is based on official population projections for 2024 and 2025 from Ecuador's National Institute of Statistics and Census, combined with official data on the number of intentional homicides reported by the Ministry of Interior (INEC accessed 03/07/2025; MDI accessed 03/07/2025 a; MDI accessed 03/07/2025 b).

Limitations and information gaps

Existing information gaps, particularly concerning direct quantitative data demonstrating a precise correlation between specific violence indicators (e.g. extortion rates) and their direct economic impacts (e.g. unemployment figures or declines in specific economic sectors) within El Oro province, mean this report has inherent limitations. For instance, granular information on the number of suicide cases at the provincial level, which may be linked to violence or livelihood deterioration, is insufficient. Anecdotal evidence from key informants indicates, however, significant mental health impacts within the young population as a result of violence and loss of livelihoods (KII 14/07/2025; KII 04/07/2025). There is also a lack of detailed information on the impacts of violence and livelihoods on indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian populations in El Oro. Despite representing a small percentage of the population in El Oro, these groups may face disproportionate impacts, highlighting the critical need for better disaggregated data.

Data availability also often varies across population groups, with more information available on refugee and migrant populations than the Ecuadorian population. While the humanitarian crisis in Ecuador has traditionally been viewed through the lens of refugee and migrant needs, often overlooked in targeted assessments and dedicated programming, attempts to grasp the implications of violence affecting the Ecuadorian population more broadly have emerged only recently, notably around 2024 (3iS 02/04/2025). A significant limitation is the widespread underreporting of sensitive issues, such as extortion and gender-based violence (GBV), largely out of fear of retaliation. This underreporting skews sectoral analysis, leading to an apparent drop in reported extortion cases despite worsening insecurity. Such persistent challenges in obtaining comprehensive and specific data limit the ability to provide a fully robust and statistically definitive analysis of the interconnected impacts of violence on livelihoods and protection risks in El Oro.

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CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Ecuador is experiencing a complex and multi-faceted crisis, marked by escalating violence by OCGs, widespread socioeconomic impacts, and restricted access to basic needs and services, with El Oro emerging as a flashpoint for these trends (UNHCR 19/06/2025). The country has witnessed a systematic escalation in criminal violence since 2021, driven by territorial disputes among OCGs linked to transnational drug trafficking (IFRC 17/05/2025). The homicide rate dramatically increased from 14.16 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 to 27.58 in 2022. By 2023, the rate had reached 46.25 per 100,000 inhabitants, with over 8,200 homicides (OECD 17/06/2025). Ecuador was among the most violent countries globally in 2024, including high-profile events such as homicides of political figures, armed attacks, and car bomb explosions (UNHCR 19/06/2025; KII 27/06/2025). By 2024, Ecuador's national homicide rate of 39.14 per 100,000 inhabitants was the highest in Latin America, surpassing Venezuela (26.2) and Colombia (25.4) (InSight Crime 26/02/2025).

In January 2024, the Ecuadorian Government declared a state of 'internal armed conflict' against OCGs. This declaration was accompanied by militarisation and human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions and arbitrary detentions (ACAPS 11/12/2024; HRW 22/05/2024). The declaration acknowledges the widespread threat posed by OCGs, which have established control over communities and diversified their illegal activities, including extortion and illegal mining. This diversification has transformed the country into a critical hub for drug storage and transit, particularly along the Pacific coast and in key areas such as the mining cantons and other coastal cities of El Oro (ICG 06/02/2025).

The main OCGs are Los Lobos and Los Choneros, along with international criminal groups such as Mexican cartels. The fragmentation of these groups has led to a proliferation of smaller, more volatile groups that dispute specific areas based on economic interests (InSight Crime 03/12/2024). Los Lobos, for instance, are reported to control drug shipments from key ports – such as Guayas and El Oro – to Europe (Primicias 08/12/2024).

Curfews imposed during the state of 'internal armed conflict', as well as violent events such as extortion and homicides, severely disrupted commercial activities and livelihoods, leading to economic stagnation (IFRC 17/05/2025). Ecuador's GDP registered a 2% contraction in 2024 (BCE 15/04/2025). Scheduled electricity blackouts since April 2024 have also critically impeded access to essential services such as electricity, affecting health, education, and industry sectors (IFRC 17/05/2025). The country is severely affected by climate and environmental hazards, including floods, landslides, drought, and wildfires, the impacts of which are compounded by environmental degradation, high population density in urban coastal areas, and weak infrastructure (WB accessed 24/07/2025).

Between January–June 2025, over 200,000 people were affected by flooding, which damaged or destroyed over 73,000 houses, damaged infrastructure, and affected livelihoods across the country. The impacts were particularly concentrated in western provinces, including El Oro, where over 7,200 houses were affected and 234 destroyed (Government of Ecuador 28/06/2025). El Oro's geographic, economic, and criminal exposure positions it as particularly vulnerable to the crisis of escalating violence and the associated socioeconomic and humanitarian impacts.

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Table 1. Baseline data: population statistics and economic indicators

Projected total population for 2025

El Oro: 753,036 | Ecuador (national): 18,103,660

Indicator		El Oro	National
% of population by ethnic group	Mestizo	91	78
	Indigenous	1	8
	Afro-Ecuadorian	4	5
% of unemployment (2024)		5	4
% of informal sector (2024)		38	52
% of underemployment (2024)		23	21
% of population living in income-based poverty		12	24
% of net school attendance (middle and secondary education)		78	72
% of chronic malnutrition among children under five		10	17

Note: the informal sector in Ecuador comprises legal economic activities that are typically small in scale and operate with rudimentary organisation, including forms of self-employment. The population living in income-based poverty refers to individuals whose family per capita income falls below a defined threshold. In June 2024, this threshold was set at USD 91.55 in monthly income (INEC 2015 and 06/2024).

Sources: ACAPS using data from INEC (accessed 03/07/2025); INEC (accessed 02/07/2025); INEC (accessed 26/06/2025 a); INEC (accessed 26/06/2025 b)

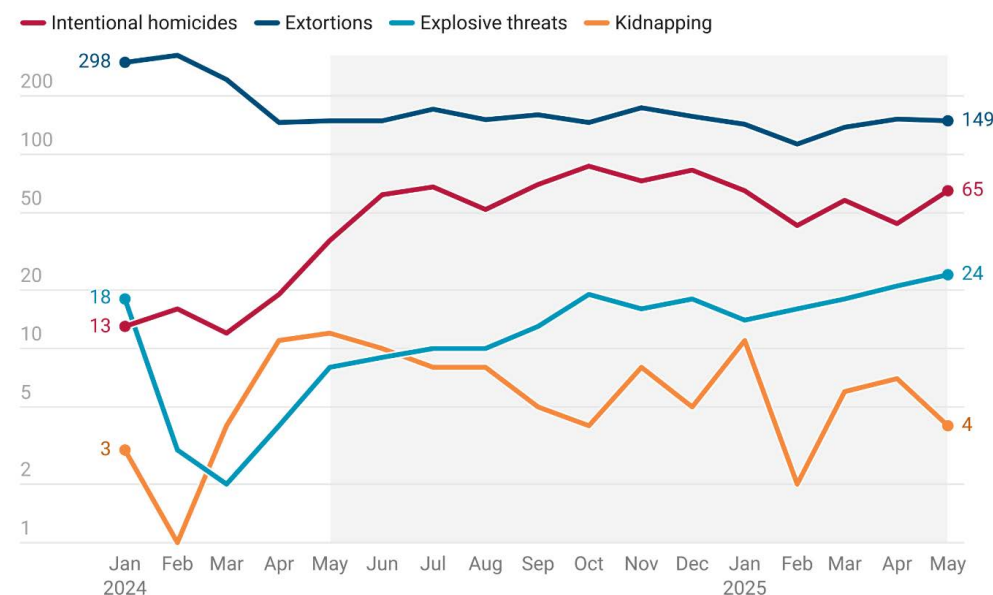
El Oro province, located in southwestern Ecuador, is a coastal province that shares borders with Peru. El Oro's strategic location and significant export activities – such as bananas and shrimp, two of the country's main export products – are used for drug transit via cargo ships (MAG 16/05/2025; Primicias 08/12/2024). In the cantons of Zaruma and Portovelo, mining is also exploited primarily for money laundering (Global Initiative 25/06/2025). These illegal activities make El Oro a key corridor for criminal groups, rendering the province a priority target in their struggle for territorial control. The cantons of Arenillas, El Guabo, Huaquillas, Machala, Pasaje, and Santa Rosa report the highest number of violent events, including homicides, extortion, and explosive attacks (MDI accessed 03/07/2025 a; FGE accessed 10/07/2025).

El Oro was the province with the second-highest number of homicides in 2024, with 591 homicides resulting in a rate of around 82 per 100,000 inhabitants, surpassing its own record of 561 homicides in 2023 (OECD 17/06/2025). Targeted assassinations of authorities in Arenillas and Portovelo in 2025 underscore the severity of the violence (InSight Crime 27/01/2025; KII 01/07/2025). Events involving explosives are also notable: between May 2024 and May 2025, a total of 196 reports of bomb threats to emergency services were recorded (ECU911 accessed 10/07/2025). Official data is not available to confirm whether these threats resulted in actual detonations.

Extortion figures remain high, with over 2,400 cases reported in 2023, nearly 2,300 in 2024, and 694 from January–May 2025 (FGE accessed 10/07/2025). The underreporting challenge is particularly acute in 2025, where apparent statistical decline likely hides continued or increased extortion activity amid escalating violence, which is largely a result of fear of retaliation and normalisation of violence (KII 02/07/2025). Extortion affects all economic levels and non-compliance frequently leads to violent attacks, including homicides, explosive attacks, and kidnappings (KII 27/06/2025). Kidnappings are an increasing trend, with 33 cases in 2022, 74 in 2023, 79 in 2024, and 30 from January–May 2025 (FGE accessed 22/07/2025). While figures showed increases up to 2024, data for the first five months of 2025 suggest a potential slight decrease compared to 2024. This could, however, be influenced by underreporting out of fear of retaliation.

Violence and territorial control exerted by OCGs have severely disrupted daily life, forcing communities to alter routines and business hours (ACNUR 30/05/2025; KII 30/07/2025). There are specific areas that are impossible for even humanitarian organisations to enter, such as Puerto Bolívar in Machala, severely constraining humanitarian access and directly affecting the livelihoods of port workers and vendors (KII 07/07/2025). This direct impact on livelihoods increases protection risks, including internal displacement, child recruitment, and sexual exploitation, as well as creates significant barriers to accessing essential services.

Figure 1. Reported incidents from key violence indicators in El Oro province, January 2024 to May 2025



Note: the 'extortions', 'kidnapping', and 'explosive threats' indicators reflect presumptively reported incidents, which may have involved multiple affected individuals. In contrast, figures for the 'intentional homicides' indicator correspond to individual cases.

Sources: ACAPS using data from FGE (accessed 22/07/2025); FGE (accessed 10/07/2025); ECU911 (accessed 10/07/2025); MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 a); MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 b)

DRIVERS OF THE DETERIORATION OF LIVELIHOODS

Illegal economies and strategic routes

The province of El Oro is highly strategic for OCGs, as its geographical advantages and lucrative illegal economies make it a critical hub for OCG operations and territorial disputes. As a result, OCGs control specific areas and neighbourhoods, leading to internal displacement and extortion. These activities severely disrupt local markets and livelihoods (KII 01/07/2025). El Oro is a coastal province, providing OCGs with vital access to the Pacific Ocean. This is crucial for drug trafficking routes, particularly through El Oro's main port, Puerto Bolívar in Machala, which has become a significant battleground for OCGs, directly disrupting livelihoods through the extortion of fishers, reduced tourism, and restricted civilian access, further impeding economic activities (Primicias 24/02/2025; KII 07/07/2025). In 2024, Ecuador registered over 250mt in cocaine seizures, positioning it as the second largest cocaine-seizure country after Colombia (InSight Crime 07/05/2025). Record cocaine seizures in El Oro, such as over 10mt in August 2024, underscore its importance as a drug transit point, especially for shipments destined for Europe (InSight Crime 27/01/2025).

The province shares a border with Peru that features numerous irregular and strategic border crossings vital to various illegal activities, including human trafficking, human smuggling, and weapons and goods smuggling (KII 03/07/2025). Migrants and refugees are particularly affected, facing a higher risk of exploitation and forced labour (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 03/07/2025).

El Oro, along with neighbouring Azuay, is a central hub for illegal gold mining, leading to environmental degradation, the destruction of local economies such as farming and fishing, and the exposure of artisanal miners to exploitation and forced labour by OCGs (Global Initiative 25/06/2025). This industry was estimated to be worth between USD 800 million and USD 1 billion annually in 2022 (InSight Crime 27/01/2025). OCGs, notably Los Lobos, initiate their involvement by extorting legal and irregular miners before seizing full control of mining operations, even forcing owners to abandon their mines (InSight Crime 23/07/2024; KII 27/06/2025). In gold mines entirely controlled by OCGs, there are also reported cases of child recruitment (Global Initiative 25/06/2025).

Extortion

"Extortion goes beyond the economy: it is a form of total control over the lives of people" (KII 27/06/2025).

Extortion, often referred to as *vacuna* (meaning 'vaccine' in Spanish), is a tactic commonly used by OCGs and involves the use of force, violence, or intimidation (real or threatened) to obtain money or goods from individuals or businesses. This also includes forced payments for alleged 'protection' by these groups (UNHCR 30/05/2025).

While extortion serves as a financing method for OCGs and is one of their multiple illegal economies, it also constitutes a form of social control. This strategy establishes dominance, enforces compliance, and deeply influences the daily lives of individuals and communities, as the constant threat of brutal and indiscriminate violence conditions behaviours (KII 27/06/2025). Extortion compels individuals to modify their routines and spend more time in their homes, altering social interactions and communal life and directly contributing to income loss or job abandonment, such as shop owners closing early or market vendors relocating (UNHCR 30/05/2025).

OCGs employ various methods to extort and target a wide range of sectors to secure revenue and exert control, including small to large businesses and individuals such as teachers and students (UNHCR 30/05/2025). OCGs, such as Los Lobos and Los Choneros, use direct threats against individuals or their families to coerce payments (NRC 26/06/2025). Non-compliance often leads to homicides, explosive attacks, and kidnappings (KII 27/06/2025).

In 2024, Ecuador reported over 23,000 extortions. El Oro ranked third among the country's provinces with over 2,200 reported cases, after Pichincha (more than 2,600) and Guayas (8,900). While the number of reported cases of extortion in El Oro surged significantly from 156 cases in 2021 to 2,443 cases in 2023, the slight decrease observed in 2024 was likely influenced by underreporting as a result of fear (FGE accessed 26/07/2025). Between January–May 2025, El Oro reported 694 cases of extortion. The cantons reporting the highest numbers are those located near the coast in the western part of the province, from north to south, including Huaquillas, Machala, Pasaje, and Santa Rosa (FGE accessed 10/07/2025). These cantons are characterised by port activity and banana and shrimp production (MAG 16/05/2025).

Table 2. Reported extortion incidents by canton in El Oro, January 2024 to May 2025

	2024	Jan to May 2025	Total
Machala	1,171	356	1,527
Santa Rosa	298	98	396
Pasaje	289	50	339
Huaquillas	231	51	282
El Guabo	124	71	195
Arenillas	89	47	136
Piñas	18	9	27
Zaruma	21	5	26
Portovelo	16	2	18
Balsas	3	3	6
Las Lajas	3	2	5
Marcabellí	3		3
Atahualpa	2		2

Source: ACAPS using data from FGE (accessed 10/07/2025)

Extortion affects all economic levels, from large businesses to small, informal street vendors, including women in situations of survival sex as a result of extreme economic vulnerability (KII 01/07/2025).

- **Businesses:** this includes large, medium, and small businesses, such as car dealerships, restaurants, bars, and even modest street vendors (KII 27/06/2025). By December 2024, extortion had led to business closures as owners struggled to pay or feared for their safety (IFRC 17/05/2025). Many businesses are forced to have shorter operating hours to avoid becoming targets (KII 02/07/2025).
- **Individuals:** teachers and students are extorted in schools, affecting student enrolment and teacher resignations, as families withdraw children and educators leave out of concerns for their safety (NRC 26/06/2025; KII 27/06/2025). Women involved in situations of survival sex face additional exploitation, forced to pay weekly fees. If they cannot pay, they are compelled to sell drugs or act as informants (KII 01/07/2025; KII 27/06/2025).

- **Traditional industries:** shrimp and banana farmers also face extortion, and fishers are forced to participate in drug and arms trafficking (KII 01/07/2025). Illegal and legal miners are initially extorted before OCGs seize full control of their operations (InSight Crime 23/07/2024). Owners of larger industries often have robust private security, making smaller businesses more vulnerable (KII 27/06/2025).

Criminal groups control the contraband of gasoline, imposing higher prices, extorting those involved, and stealing supply trucks. OCGs also control the principal routes and impose extortion fees for passage, causing the price of food and other essential goods to rise for consumers (KII 03/07/2025). This form of imposed route taxation inflates prices and erodes household purchasing power, especially for food and fuel.

Homicides and explosive attacks

Homicides and explosive attacks are often linked to unpaid extortion demands and territorial control (KII 04/07/2025; KII 02/07/2024). OCGs use these practices to enforce compliance and weaken trust within communities, affecting people's livelihoods (KII 04/07/2025; OCHA 03/02/2025). The methods used by OCGs include dismemberment, decapitation, and the incineration of bodies (InSight Crime 27/01/2025). This leads to widespread fear, compelling individuals to limit their daily activities and social interactions (KII 02/07/2025).

While homicides decreased at the national level in 2024, they increased in El Oro. Ecuador registered 7,033 intentional homicides, a decrease of 1,215 compared to 2023, representing a 14.7% reduction in the national homicide rate. By 2024, in contrast, El Oro was second only to Los Ríos in terms of provinces with the highest homicide rates nationwide, with a rate of 78.94 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, representing an increase of 3% (76.26) compared to 2023 (OECO 17/06/2025). In 2024, Machala, the capital of El Oro, was the most violent city in both Ecuador and South America, and the seventh most violent city in the world (CCSPJP 19/02/2025).

Between January–May 2025, the provinces of El Oro, Guayas, and Los Ríos were particularly affected by homicides. 275 homicides were recorded in El Oro, with Huaquillas reporting the highest homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (71.1), followed by El Guabo (56.4), Arenillas (52.9), and Machala (36.4) (MDI accessed 03/07/2025 a). Factors such as coastal and international border access make these cantons strategic locations for OCG operations (MDI accessed 03/07/2025 a). Targeted assassinations of authorities included the mayors of Arenillas in January 2025 and Portovelo in April 2025 (InSight Crime 27/01/2025; KII 01/07/2025).

According to a key informant, violent deaths of children and adolescents in El Oro have risen disproportionately since 2024 (KII 27/06/2025). In 2024, the homicide rate for children and adolescents (0–18 years) in El Oro was 6.14 per 100,000 inhabitants, making it the province

with the second highest rate nationally, with a rate double the national average of 3.17 (MDI accessed 03/07/2025 b). There is no official information indicating whether these children and adolescents were deliberately targeted or involved with OCGs.

Table 3. Reported homicides – total figures and incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants – of children and adolescents (0–18 years) by province and at the national level, 2024 to May 2025

Province	Homicide rate	Homicides
2024		
Los Ríos	7.43	72
El Oro	6.14	46
Guayas	5.99	284
Esmeraldas	5.32	32
Manabí	3.18	54
National	3.17	569
January-May 2025		
Los Ríos	5.11	50
Sucumbíos	4.41	9
Guayas	4.16	199
El Oro	3.05	23
Esmeraldas	2.64	16
National	2.08	376

Source: ACAPS using data from MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 a); MDI (accessed 03/07/2025 b); INEC (accessed 03/07/2025)

Explosive-related incidents increased notably during the analysis period. Between May 2024 and May 2025, authorities recorded 196 bomb threat calls to the 911 emergency line. Of these, 93 were reported between January–May 2025, compared to 35 during the same period in 2024. The main cities affected were Machala (128), Santa Rosa (24), and Huaquillas (14) (ECU911 accessed 10/07/2025).

Between January–May 2025, at least eight–ten homes were destroyed by explosions in Machala (KII 01/07/2025). An additional source documented five explosion-related incidents between 24 March and 1 April 2025 (Expreso 01/04/2025). Figures vary across sources and are likely underreported, given the lack of a centralised monitoring mechanism for such incidents.

In 2024, a drone attack using explosives on residential homes was also reported in El Oro (KII 04/07/2025). This tactic, attributed to OCGs, is considered a new method of inter-group confrontation, increasing the risk of civilians and local businesses being caught in the crossfire (El Universo 25/06/2024).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Energy crisis

The energy crisis from April–December 2024 across Ecuador compounded the vulnerability of populations already affected by violence, disrupting income generation, deepening dependency on coping mechanisms with potential harmful effects, and worsening livelihood deterioration and access to basic services (KII 03/07/2025; KII 02/07/2025). The energy crisis was a consequence of the unprecedented drought since 2023, the worst recorded in 60 years, which drastically depleted reserves to critical levels, coupled with the national energy system's high dependence on hydropower, accounting for up to 72% of its energy supply (Copernicus 25/10/2024; MEM 23/09/2024).

By September 2024, the Government of Ecuador had ordered programmed suspensions of electric services (MEM 23/09/2024). The suspensions caused severe and prolonged power outages lasting 12–14 hours daily, devastating commerce and industry. This also aggravated food insecurity, as many households, particularly those without generators, could not cook or access potable water owing to reliance on induction stoves and water pumps (BBC 15/11/2024; KII 03/07/2025). The energy crisis contributed significantly to Ecuador's economic deceleration in 2024, with the total loss from power cuts reaching USD 1.916 billion, representing a 1.4% contraction in GDP. Commerce, manufacturing, and services were the three sectors most affected by the power cuts, with losses of USD 763.1 million, USD 380.2 million, and USD 374.1 million respectively (BCE 15/04/2025). This situation led to the loss of over 250,000 jobs in the second half of 2024 and a rise in informal labour (UNHCR 19/06/2025).

Businesses have been forced to incur significant additional expenses, such as installing diesel generators, which entail monthly maintenance costs. As a consequence, businesses have increased prices to cover these costs (BBC 15/11/2024; KII 04/07/2025). The energy crisis particularly affected the operational capacity of small and medium-sized businesses and informal workers, as they often lack the resources to cope with prolonged power interruptions (UNHCR 19/06/2025; KII 03/07/2025).

In El Oro, these power outages severely affected livelihoods, forcing many businesses to close permanently, especially those dependent on evening and nighttime operations, such as bars, ice cream shops, and food stands, leading to considerable economic losses (KII

02/07/2025). The lack of electricity at night affected people's mobility, as they avoided leaving home out of self-protection, as darkness in public spaces meant a higher risk of being victims of violence (France 24 06/02/2025; KII 02/07/2025).

If extended power outages resume in late 2025 with the start of the dry season, which extends from June–November, recovery efforts may backslide, especially in already destabilised areas such as El Oro (WB accessed 21/07/2025). In July 2025, some key informants expressed concern about possible future power cuts, as the population had not yet had sufficient time to re-establish their livelihoods already affected by the previous energy crisis (KII 04/07/2025; KII 03/07/2025). This continued economic fragility heightens vulnerability to violence-related effects, as weakened livelihoods reduce communities' resilience to extortion and other criminal pressures.

Climate and natural hazards

Livelihood deterioration in Ecuador, aggravated by violence, is further worsened by climate change and environmental degradation, as climatic events cause crop loss, destruction of housing, and displacement, heightening communities' vulnerability to OCG pressures and illegal economies (ACAPS 11/12/2024). In November 2024, forest fires, likely driven by dry conditions and above-average temperatures, were reported in Loja and Azuay provinces, bordering El Oro, with nearly 30,000 hectares of forest destroyed. These fires affected Podocarpus National Park, a key biodiversity hotspot that also contributes to temperature regulation (Primicias 25/11/2024). The proximity of these fires to El Oro increased risks for the province, such as those related to air quality and potential agricultural damage. By 27 November 2024, fires were reported across 22 of the country's 24 provinces (Primicias 27/11/2024).

From January–June 2025, heavy rains affected 24 provinces, including El Oro, Guayas, Los Ríos, and Manabí (ECHO 05/06/2025; ACAPS 14/03/2025). By 5 June, over 1,400 landslides and more than 1,300 floods had been recorded, causing widespread destruction. These events led to 49 deaths, affected nearly 204,000 people, and resulted in over 70,000 damaged or destroyed structures (ECHO 05/06/2025). Affected infrastructure included homes, schools, and bridges (Government of Ecuador 25/06/2025). Up until 24 June 2025, 328 adverse events as a result of heavy rain had been reported in El Oro and 3,645 events reported across the country, with landslides and floods being the two most recurrent (Government of Ecuador 25/06/2025).

Heavy rains also severely affected the agricultural sector, damaging crops, reducing yields, and leading to increased food prices. This situation has affected over 8,000 producers nationwide, with estimated losses exceeding USD 10 million in damages. The most affected crops included bananas, rice, cocoa, and maize, which are also key livelihood crops in El

Oro (El Comercio 14/03/2025). By 18 April 2025, approximately 300 hectares had been affected in cantons such as Arenillas, Huaquillas, and Las Lajas, affecting around 400 producers (Ecuavisa 18/04/2025).

Seasonal forecasts for August–October 2025 anticipate near-normal precipitation but a high probability (40% to over 60%) of above-normal temperatures across most of the country, especially in central and eastern provinces (IRI accessed 21/07/2025). High temperatures are likely to accelerate evapotranspiration, potentially aggravating dry conditions and increasing the risk of wildfires. By 21 July 2025, El Niño-Southern Oscillation was in a neutral state. The increasing likelihood of La Niña conditions towards late 2025 (56% chance in August–October), however, presents a potential risk of drought in 2026 (NOAA 21/07/2025). Climate impacts, such as drought, may deepen household economic stress, weakening resilience against extortion or incentivising engagement in illegal activities.

IMPACTS ON LIVELIHOODS

Loss of livelihoods

"OCGs informal microloans: 20% interest, weekly, leading to rapidly increasing debt" (KII 07/07/2025).

Territorial disputes have led criminal groups to control specific zones and neighbourhoods, creating what residents refer to as 'invisible borders' (KII 02/07/2024). This has forced people to seek employment and education in their own neighbourhood to avoid being targeted by rival groups, potentially leading to job losses and educational dropout (KII 04/07/2025).

The social and territorial control exerted by OCGs, coupled with the increased risk of child recruitment, drives internal displacement (NRC 26/06/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024). Given the inability to guarantee safety from violence in other cantons or provinces, however, and the challenges of re-establishing livelihoods elsewhere, individuals increasingly adapt their movement patterns as a self-protective measure against insecurity. People are compelled to remain in their homes for extended periods or limit outings to specific hours or days to avoid being targeted, resulting in financial losses and affecting local economies (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 04/07/2025).

By December 2024, in Machala, 243 business closures had been reported alongside increased extortion and violence (IFRC 17/05/2025). In all the cantons of El Oro, many small and medium-sized businesses had to close permanently or reduce their operating hours because

of insecurity, a situation aggravated by the energy crisis of 2024, reducing incomes and leading to unemployment (KII 27/06/2025). The energy crisis also aggravated the operational capacity of small businesses dependent on electricity, such as ice cream shops and food stands, leading to closures or forcing businesses to incur additional costs for generators, resulting in significant economic losses and layoffs (UNHCR 19/06/2025; KII 04/07/2025).

Areas such as Puerto Bolívar, characterised by commerce and local tourism, are affected by the fear of violence (KII 01/07/2025). Tourism expenditure in El Oro decreased from USD 16 million in 2023 to USD 14 million in 2024. Hotel occupancy declined from 36% in 2023 to 32% in 2024 (Ministry of Tourism accessed 10/07/2025). While the year-on-year decline in tourism expenditure (12.5%) and hotel occupancy (a four-percentage-point drop, amounting to an 11.1% relative decrease) may seem moderate, in a context of escalating violence and fear in key economic hubs – such as Puerto Bolívar – these figures point to a deeper disruption to local livelihoods and economic confidence.

Formal employment is largely inaccessible, especially for migrants and refugees, who face discrimination and strict requirements for financial services, hindering their ability to start businesses or secure stable work (KII 04/07/2025). This exclusion not only deepens economic insecurity but also increases exposure to trafficking and extortion. According to the 2024 Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) by the Working Group for Refugees and Migrants (GTRM), among refugee and migrant populations across three provinces, including El Oro, 93% of surveyed households with an intention to remain in Ecuador worked informally. This figure rose to 99% for refugees and migrants with irregular status in the country. Further, 59.7% of working individuals were underemployed, receiving incomes below the minimum wage of USD 460, even when working full-time (UNHCR 19/06/2025).

According to the 2024 JNA, 61.4% of households had no access to financial services and only 35.6% had at least one member with a savings bank account (UNHCR 19/06/2025). Barriers to accessing the formal economic system have forced individuals into informal loans with OCGs and other groups, involving extremely high interest rates – for example, USD 100 with a 20% monthly rate – and collected weekly, rapidly increasing debt (KII 07/07/2025). Failure to repay these loans significantly heightens protection risks, including kidnapping and homicide (KII 14/07/2025).

The humanitarian livelihood response has been constrained by the fact that traditional cash-based assistance (cash kits) has been suspended in all cantons, as criminal groups demand a portion of recipients' financial aid (KII 01/07/2025). Livelihood assistance is also among the sectors most affected by the 2025 US funding cuts. Programmes that previously offered training, support, and access to entrepreneurship or formal employment have been drastically curtailed, leaving over 2,000 people without options for economic stabilisation and integration in 2025, which not only limits their ability to achieve self-sufficiency but also

significantly weakens efforts to prevent risks such as adolescent recruitment or displacement (UNHCR 19/06/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024). Prolonged economic insecurity also contributes to the erosion of community cohesion and social trust (IRC 11/03/2025).

By March 2025, the Ecuadorian Government's cancellation of migratory amnesty and the extraordinary regularisation process for Venezuelans, initiated in August 2024, had significantly affected Venezuelan refugee and migrant populations (SWI 11/03/2025). This measure, which previously allowed Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and their families to obtain residence permits, now restricts their ability to access essential services and construct sustainable livelihoods (UNHCR 19/06/2025). Without a regular migration status, individuals face increased barriers to formal employment and access to financial services, potentially driving involvement in illegal economies.

Increased risk of food insecurity

Widespread violence in Ecuador disrupts markets, compromises supply chains, and reduces household purchasing power as a result of livelihood losses, with specific acute impacts observed in provinces such as El Oro. Despite El Oro's overall lower prevalence of chronic malnutrition, significant disparities exist within the province. Figures from the National Survey on Child Malnutrition from 2023 showed that chronic malnutrition among children under the age of five across Ecuador was 17%, and 11% in El Oro. The cantons most affected by chronic child malnutrition include Chilla (37.7%), Las Lajas (18.4%), and Zaruma (16.2%) (INEC accessed 02/07/2025).

According to a partial needs assessment conducted in May 2025 by the HOPE Project – focused on providing humanitarian assistance and development support to people affected by the humanitarian emergency in Ecuador and Peru – 314 individuals (community members as well as refugees and migrants) in the project's intervention areas, including El Oro, identified food as their primary need. Employment was cited by 235 individuals, followed by health (201) and shelter (200). This assessment was based on 422 interviews and represents a partial, non-probabilistic sample. As such, its findings are indicative of needs within the project's intervention areas and should be interpreted with caution regarding wider representativeness (HOPE unpublished).

According to the 2024 JNA, 24.2% of Venezuelan households were experiencing acute food insecurity, with 21.6% facing moderate insecurity and 2.6% severe insecurity. This vulnerability was significantly higher for newly arrived households (less than a year in the country), with 59.5% experiencing acute food insecurity (GTRM 24/10/2024). The situation was even more alarming for the population in transit, 89% of whom faced food insecurity. This population is often compelled to critical survival strategies such as precarious informal

labour or survival sex, increasing protection risks. For instance, 75% reported having to beg for money or donations, and 42% engaged in high-risk activities to cope with basic needs. These activities are defined as “income-generating activities that are high-risk or socially degrading, leading to loss of human dignity and posing protection risks for household members involved”, with specific acts intentionally not specified because of their sensitive nature. A substantial portion of the population in transit had also spent their savings (72.1%), asked for money (66.3%), or sold personal belongings (52.4%) (GTRM 24/10/2024).

Violence coupled with economic precarity and a lack of dignified employment further contribute to the inability to access quality food. For many households interviewed in the JNA, the ability to cover basic needs was severely compromised: 77% did not have full access to the basic food basket and 38% were unable to cover their food and water needs (GTRM 24/10/2024). Extortion and control of transportation routes have also led to higher prices for food and essential goods, further affecting consumers (KII 03/07/2025).

In May 2025, Machala experienced a notable monthly Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase of 2.12%, significantly higher than the national average of 1.03%. This upward trend in prices directly affects household purchasing power. The annual change in the CPI in Machala for May 2025 was 1.21%, which means that, compared to May 2024, overall consumer prices increased by more than 1%. These CPI changes are leading to an erosion of household purchasing power, aggravating the livelihoods crisis by making essential goods less affordable, contributing to household economic precarity and likely increasing reliance on coping strategies with potential harmful effects (INEC accessed 10/07/2025).

In the canton of El Guabo, particularly in the commune of El Bajo Alto, access to food is highly complex because of OCG control. Families can only enter or exit at specific times. When attempting to leave to purchase food or return with provisions, they are often intercepted, their purchases inspected, and the products even confiscated. Migrant populations supported by the WFP with food vouchers are particularly affected, as criminal groups are aware they receive this assistance and threaten them to surrender this benefit (KII 14/07/2025). Specific information on the broader extent of these food voucher seizures or WFP operational adaptations is not available.

The direct and indirect impacts of violence on market access, supply chains, and household incomes create a cycle in which food insecurity further aggravates existing vulnerabilities and livelihood precarity within affected communities. This drives protection risks such as internal displacement, debt entrapment, child recruitment, and sexual exploitation by OCGs.

INCREASED PROTECTION RISKS

Given OCGs’ widespread territorial and social control in El Oro, the population’s livelihoods are deteriorating, triggering a range of heightened protection risks. Violence directly disrupts economic opportunities, ultimately increasing the exposure of individuals and households to various forms of exploitation, abuse, and displacement.

Increased risk of internal displacement

The escalating violence and subsequent deterioration of livelihoods in Ecuador are driving a complex underreported pattern of internal displacement. While internal displacement monitoring has improved recently, substantial information gaps persist regarding the primary causes of displacement and the needs of affected populations (3iS 14/04/2025). These gaps include a lack of national historical data as well as specific provincial and cantonal information on movement patterns and return intentions. For El Oro, as such, there is insufficient secondary source information to fully understand how livelihood deterioration aggravated by constant violence increases the risk of internal displacement.

In 2024, the first internal displacement monitoring exercises due to conflict and violence were carried out in Ecuador by 3iS (3iS 02/04/2025). Between January–December 2024, according to this monitoring, nearly 92,900 people were displaced by armed violence. Of those displaced, 76% were Ecuadorian, highlighting that the humanitarian crisis extends far beyond migrant and refugee communities, directly affecting Ecuadorian citizens and their livelihoods. Men constituted 59% of the displaced population and the most affected age group was 18–29 year olds (3iS 02/04/2025).

Over 46% of the displaced population was displaced along with their entire family, 30% of displaced individuals experienced extortion, and 100% reported having suffered a violent event such as extortion, sexual violence, or kidnapping (3iS 02/04/2025). This significantly increases housing, school access, and protection needs. Extortion is not only a protection risk but also threatens the displaced population’s livelihoods by directly affecting their economic activities and forcing income reduction through demanded payments. In fact, the primary needs of displaced people are employment and housing support. Of the total displaced, over 67,400 cited the deterioration of their economic situation as the primary cause of displacement, indicating that deteriorating livelihoods — often linked to extortion, job loss, or business closures — are a leading driver of displacement (3iS 14/04/2025).

By May 2025, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre had reported 101,000 internal displacements by conflict and violence in Ecuador in 2024 (IDMC 13/05/2025). It is important to note that this figure represents the number of displacement events, not unique individuals, as a person may have been displaced multiple times, suggesting a risk of cyclical displacement among the same population.

- While El Oro is considered an expelling province, the difficulty of re-establishing livelihoods in distant provinces means that displacement is predominantly inter-cantonal (DP 07/2025). For instance, movements from Machala to Santa Rosa or mining zones such as Piñas, Portovelo, and Zaruma (KII 14/07/2025; KII 27/06/2025).
- This pattern is often influenced by the presence of existing support networks and a fear of discrimination in larger cities or northern border areas. Insecurity can persist, however, as OCGs often have the capacity to locate displaced families (KII 14/07/2025; KII 27/06/2025).
- People often lack better economic alternatives outside El Oro, making them more likely to move to another canton or neighbouring province with mining activities, increasing the risk of use and exploitation by OCGs, such as forced labour and extortion (KII 01/07/2025).

Increased risk of child recruitment and use

In Ecuador, there is a significant lack of educational and employment opportunities after high school, particularly outside major cities. This lack of opportunity increases children's vulnerability to recruitment by OCGs, as it creates pressure to contribute to household income (KII 04/07/2025; KII 01/07/2025). In the JNA conducted by the GTRM, 36.3% of respondents reported resorting to crisis coping strategies in response to livelihood deterioration. These potentially harmful strategies included withdrawing children from school for economic contributions to the household, reducing expenditure on education, health (including medicine), and clothing, as well as selling productive assets or means of transport (GTRM 24/10/2024). Information regarding the age group and more disaggregated data on affected children remains unavailable.

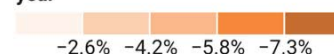
While there are no available secondary sources on crisis coping strategies among Ecuadorian families residing in El Oro, key informants confirm that livelihood deterioration is linked to an increased risk of child recruitment and use (KII 07/07/2025; KII 02/07/2024). OCGs exploit economic vulnerability by offering income-generating opportunities to entice children from low-income households (UNHCR 30/05/2025). Recruitment often occurs through coercion disguised as support, with offers of money or material goods. For instance, an adolescent whose parents earn around USD 500 per month might be offered USD 1,000 per month by a criminal group, along with a motorcycle, a cell phone, and a sense of belonging and power (KII 27/06/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024).

An assessment conducted between 20–22 August 2024 by the GTRM and Ministry of Education in Huaquillas of 371 students aged 14–17 found that 24% of surveyed students, or their peers within the same age group, were engaged in income-generating activities to support their families. This economic pressure places adolescents at heightened risk of recruitment and increases the likelihood of permanently dropping out of school to continue working (GTRM/Ministry of Education unpublished).

Table 4. Total number of enrolled students and annual rate of change by academic year, Machala and Puerto Bolívar

Academic year	Machala	Rate of change (Machala)	Puerto Bolívar	Rate of change (Puerto Bolívar)
2021–2022	73,249		8,552	
2022–2023	72,461	–1.1%	8,050	–5.9%
2023–2024	70,292	–3.0%	7,333	–8.9%
2024–2025	67,830	–3.5%	6,738	–8.1%

Rate of change in student enrolment compared to the previous school year



Note: student enrolment figures are calculated at the beginning of the school year. In Ecuador, the academic year typically begins in September and concludes between June and July, with slight variations depending on the geographical zone and public holiday dates (Ministry of Education 12/12/2024; Primicias 28/08/2024).

Source: ACAPS using data from Ministry of Education (accessed 25/07/2025)

While dropout rates in Machala declined slightly from 2.78% in the 2021–2022 academic year to 1.86% in 2023–2024, enrolment figures in both Machala and Puerto Bolívar show a more sustained decrease in the total number of students. In Machala, total enrolled students declined from over 73,200 in 2021–2022 to over 67,800 in 2024–2025, with annual decreases reaching up to 3.5%. Similarly, Puerto Bolívar experienced a notable reduction in enrolment from over 8,500 students in 2021–2022 to over 6,700 in 2024–2025, with annual rates of change reaching up to 8.9% (Ministry of Education accessed 25/07/2025). While this trend cannot be solely attributed to violence and livelihood deterioration, other potential drivers – such as migration and demographic shifts – are likely contributing to the complex interplay of factors influencing school dropout in El Oro.

The presence of OCGs outside educational institutions contributes to unsafe learning environments, with reports indicating the use of children for drug sales and transportation of weapons (KII 07/07/2025; NRC 26/06/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024). Children and adolescents between 10–14 years old are often used for drug sales and collecting extortion payments (UNHCR 30/05/2025). A key informant stated that, in El Oro, girls in particular are forced to collect extortion payments and act as informants for these criminal groups (KII 07/07/2025). By January 2025, in Guayaquil (Guayas), Huaquillas (El Oro), and Machala, at least one in 15 children and adolescents had either abandoned school or requested a school transfer because of violence. It should be noted that school transfers are not always directly linked to violence, as families often request transfers under the criteria of ‘internal mobility’ out of fear of reprisal if they report violence. In schools in the three cities mentioned above, which are located in violence-affected areas, only 5% of transfers are directly related to violence (NRC 26/06/2025).

The National Union of Educators has reported cases of extortion, kidnapping, and murder of teachers in Ecuador, which have led to teacher resignations (El País 20/07/2025). This trend may threaten education continuity and learning outcomes, particularly in areas where vacancies are filled by less experienced or temporary staff. In El Oro, on 28 May 2025, a teacher was found murdered in Machala after several days missing (Ecuavisa 28/05/2025). Teachers in Huaquillas have also faced extortion from their own students, who are used by OCGs (NRC 26/06/2025; KII 27/06/2025).

As livelihood deterioration forces families to resort to crisis coping strategies — such as withdrawing children from school for economic contributions or reducing essential expenditure on education — children and adolescents become increasingly vulnerable to recruitment and use by OCGs (ACAPS 11/12/2024). The livelihoods crisis also increases other protection risks, including child trafficking and the worst forms of child labour, such as debt bondage and engagement in hazardous work, including in mining and construction, undermining both the protection and long-term development of children and adolescents.

Risk of sexual exploitation and other forms of GBV

Loss of livelihoods, particularly informal job losses and self-imposed limitations on movement, in El Oro significantly aggravates the risks of GBV, particularly for women, girls, and LGBTQ+ individuals, forcing them into highly precarious situations and constraining their ability to escape abusive environments (KII 01/06/2025). From January–March 2025, one femicide of a trans woman was reported in El Oro (ALDEA 31/03/2025).

According to a survey conducted by IOM and the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) between November–December 2024, which covered 12 cities including Huaquillas and

Machala in El Oro province, and 4,860 people were interviewed. Among those with the intention to migrate internally or identified IDP, 31.4% of the unemployed were women — more than twice the proportion of unemployed men (IOM/DTM 01/07/2025).

The severe lack of formal employment opportunities and economic stability, especially for refugee and migrant women and girls, increases the risk of **sexual exploitation and survival sex**. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in illegal mining areas controlled by OCGs in Portovelo and Zaruma, trafficking of women and girls has occurred, both from other countries and from other provinces, with girls from the age of 12 subjected to sexual exploitation (KII 07/07/2025; KII 27/06/2025). There is, however, insufficient information available regarding the specific origin of these women and girls. Driven by desperation to find any form of income, some women are also compelled to accept jobs in bars or discos, which may be linked to OCGs or operate under their influence, and where these women subsequently face sexual assault and psychological abuse (UNHCR 30/05/2025).

The loss of livelihoods, coupled with the context of violence, increases the risk of **sexual violence and femicide**. In November 2024, the UN Human Rights Committee issued an alert regarding the high incidence of sexual violence against and femicides of women and girls in Ecuador (UN News 07/11/2024). By 2024, 28,504 cases of sexual violence had been reported through the National Education System, 74% of which occurred outside educational institutions (Ministry of Education accessed 11/07/2025). By June 2025, out of the 50 cases reported in three provinces where a humanitarian organisation operates, 20 occurred in El Oro, 18 of which were cases of sexual violence. This means that approximately 38% of reported cases happened in El Oro, an alarming and unprecedented situation according to the humanitarian organisation in question (KII 04/07/2025). Granular information on specific cantons or comparative data with 2024 is not available.

Many femicide cases are linked to partners or relatives who are members of OCGs (KII 07/07/2025). In 2024, Ecuador reported 274 femicides, 129 of which were committed within the context or as a result of OCG activities (ALDEA 28/01/2025). From January–March 2025, Ecuador reported 82 femicides, with approximately 50 linked to criminal groups (ALDEA 31/03/2025). Survivors often fear reporting physical and sexual violence because of the severe threat of retaliation against themselves or their families (KII 01/06/2025). In El Oro, from January–March 2025, nine femicide cases were reported, making it the province with the highest number of reported cases after Guayas and Manabí (ALDEA 31/03/2025). This figure is nearly half of the 20 cases reported in the province for the entirety of 2024, suggesting a potential upward trend (ALDEA 28/01/2025).

Fear of GBV compels women and girls to limit their mobility, hindering their access to vital economic opportunities. In El Oro, for instance, the perception of GBV risk is high among refugee and migrant populations: 26.3% of households with female members reported

avoiding certain public places out of fear for their safety. This self-imposed limitation on mobility serves as a coping mechanism against GBV, yet it directly restricts women and girls' ability to engage in daily economic and educational activities, further limiting their capacity to financially support themselves and their families (GTRM 24/10/2024). The Ministry of Women's budget, reduced in 2024, is insufficient to address the escalating violence, impeding the provision of adequate GBV support (El País 17/06/2024; KII 07/07/2025).

Increased risk of forced labour

Violence and significant loss of livelihoods heightens the risk of forced labour and other forms of exploitation, including exploitative informal labour. OCGs are central to these dynamics, leveraging their territorial control and illegal economies to coerce economically vulnerable populations into dangerous and illegal work. Fishers in El Oro face threats and extortion, forced to participate in drug trafficking by moving substances or weapons (KII 01/07/2025). Some shrimp farms have been abandoned because of the risk of extortion, while some rural areas are used to store drugs owing to their difficult access (KII 04/07/2025). Truck and taxi drivers are compelled to transport illicit merchandise (drugs and contraband), as otherwise they face threats to themselves or their families (KII 14/07/2025). This coercion imposes significant psychological burden and stress, especially given threats to a person's family.

Many individuals, particularly migrants with irregular status, face significant barriers to formal employment. If they cannot find jobs as day labourers (jornaleros) in banana or shrimp farms, they are forced to accept more precarious, low-wage, informal jobs and illegal activities, such as stevedores moving merchandise for contraband gasoline smuggling, making them disproportionately targeted for exploitation (KII 07/07/2025; KII 27/06/2025).

In a shelter provided by a humanitarian organisation in El Oro, migrant and refugee families commonly leave daily to seek work opportunities. OCGs have been observed identifying these families and compelling them to work in fishing activities, transporting them by pickup truck to the El Bajo Alto commune in El Guabo canton, which is a trafficking and smuggling corridor. In these instances, the male head of the household typically works in fishing for two to three days while the women and children are coercively confined to a house controlled by OCGs (KII 14/07/2025). This increases the risk of forced involvement in criminal activities for refugee and migrant men, as criminal groups commonly use activities such as fishing as a facade for illegal economies (Primicias 14/07/2025; La Fuente 21/02/2025). Refugee and migrant women face compounded protection risks. Beyond the burden of childcare in precarious contexts, they are exposed to sexual abuse and physical violence, as they are forced to remain in a house with criminal group members (KII 14/07/2025).

ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

Health

Ecuador's healthcare system struggles significantly to ensure access amid escalating violence and livelihood deterioration, aggravating humanitarian needs. The national healthcare system is composed of both the public and private sectors. The public sector, primarily led by the Ministry of Public Health, is mandated to offer free, comprehensive health services to the entire population. Social security institutions cover affiliated salaried workers, while municipalities and the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion provide programmes for the uninsured population. The private sector consists of for-profit entities and non-profit organisations, with private insurance covering a small percentage (approximately 3%) of the higher-income population (Lucio et al. 01/2011). Despite the constitutional guarantee of free and universal health access, high out-of-pocket expenditures, which represented 30.62% of total health expenditure in 2021, directly aggravate health inequities for at-risk groups, as livelihood deterioration worsens their ability to afford care (PAHO 19/09/2024). This indicates that financial barriers significantly impede access to care, particularly for individuals facing livelihood challenges.

Increasing violence and livelihood deterioration in El Oro has affected access to health and generated mental health impacts. By May 2025, the national health system was facing overcrowding in emergency rooms and urgent care units, leading to delays in medical care aggravated by security procedures. Some health units suspended services because of threats of explosions, compelling patients to seek care at more distant centres (IFRC 17/05/2025).

By May 2025, according to an International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' report on the security crisis in areas where the organisation operates, including El Oro, violence had significantly increased the number of people affected by traffic accidents, intoxication, poisoning, traumatic injuries, and medical or gynaecological emergencies, often requiring urgent pre-hospital care for knife or firearm wounds. There is a constant need for adequate materials, supplies, and biomedical equipment for pre-hospital care and ambulances (IFRC 17/05/2025).

Violence leads to 'invisible borders' and restricted mobility, making it challenging for people to reach health facilities or aid workers to deliver services. Curfews and insecurity on transportation routes complicate the provision of health services (IFRC 17/05/2025). For instance, in certain neighbourhoods in El Oro, pharmacies cannot complete home deliveries of medicines, increasing the risk of complications or death for people unable to access essential medication. In Puerto Bolívar, as a result of OCGs' control of the area, medicine and ambulances face difficulties entering (KII 07/07/2025). This control not only restricts supply but also affects patients' willingness to seek care because of fear of reprisal, limiting access to essential health services for Puerto Bolívar's population.

The main hospital in Machala, El Oro, often lacks specialists and necessary medicines (KII 07/07/2025). Health centres in Arenillas, El Guabo, Huaquillas, Pasaje, and Santa Rosa are also under-resourced (Diario Opinión 08/07/2025). The situation is similar for Puerto Bolívar's municipal health centre (KII 07/07/2025).

Loss of livelihoods directly aggravates financial barriers to healthcare, with high costs for services and a general lack of economic resources preventing access to care (GTRM 24/10/2024). This particularly affects refugee and migrant populations, who also face discrimination and xenophobia from health personnel (UNHCR 30/05/2025; GTRM 24/10/2024). By October 2024, according to the JNA conducted by the GTRM, 11.4% of individuals who did not receive medical attention cited high costs as a limiting factor and 15.7% stated that poor treatment or discrimination from health personnel prevented their access to care (GTRM 24/10/2024).

Mental health

Threats and direct experiences of violence, continuing protection threats, and the deterioration and loss of livelihoods have a significant impact on the mental health of El Oro's population. By May 2025, according to UNHCR analysis of ten areas where it has a presence, including Machala and Huaquillas, people were experiencing anxiety and panic from the constant fear of violence, including explosions, violent deaths, assaults, and kidnappings (UNHCR 30/05/2025). Self-imposed limitations on movement, adopted as survival or self-protection mechanisms against violence, were also limiting families' daily activities and social interactions, particularly for women and children, affecting households' capacity to maintain livelihoods and sustainable incomes (UNHCR 30/05/2025).

These factors have led to increased stress, sleep problems, a higher consumption of psychoactive substances, and self-medication as coping mechanisms with potential harmful effects (IFRC 17/05/2025). Constant fear, coupled with deteriorating mental health, significantly compromises individuals' ability to maintain daily activities, including work and access to livelihoods, further impeding their capacity to engage with support mechanisms and social networks, subsequently entrenching isolation (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 02/07/2025).

Access to psychological assistance is limited not only by the lack of personnel but also high costs, as an appointment with a private psychologist can cost up to USD 30 (UNHCR 30/05/2025). According to a key informant, only one or two psychologists are available for El Oro's entire population, severely restricting access to mental healthcare (KII 17/07/2024). Beyond formal services, traditional community coping mechanisms – such as collective social activities and sports – are also significantly disrupted. This fragmentation of community support further aggravates isolation and reduces overall support for mental wellbeing (KII 02/07/2025).

The below list includes mental health impacts for specific groups.

- **Women** often bear the brunt of violence, from sexual assault to other forms of GBV, leading to increased fear of reporting. Women experience an added psychological burden, as they often prioritise their children's safety over their own (UNHCR 30/05/2025). Women-headed households, in particular, face additional challenges when seeking daily income, as they experience stress when leaving children at home. This leads to an increased care burden, further complicated by the reported closure of daycare centres (KII 14/07/2025).
- **Men** often feel incapable of fulfilling their traditional roles as providers and protectors amid insecurity, leading to identity crises, stress, and a risk of intimate partner violence (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 01/07/2025).
- **Adolescents and children** are at high risk of being killed in shootings and/or recruited and used, leading to fear and distrust of peers and adults (UNHCR 30/05/2025). The risk of suicide as a result of the impacts of violence on mental health has been reported among the young population (IRC 11/03/2025; KII 14/07/2025; KII 04/07/2025). There is not sufficient information to provide granular data on case numbers at the provincial level or directly link these cases to violence and livelihood deterioration.
- **Refugees, migrants, and IDPs** experience anguish and frustration, having fled violence in their home countries or original cantons or provinces only to encounter similar or worse situations in Ecuador and El Oro, compounded by a lack of support networks (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 07/07/2025).
- **Humanitarian personnel** also face psychological consequences from being constantly alert and hypervigilant (KII 04/07/2025). Pre-hospital care staff are at high risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (UNHCR 30/05/2025). This stress can significantly affect their operational capacity and overall service delivery.

WASH

Ecuador faces significant challenges around access to WASH services. These barriers stem from a complex interplay of escalating organised crime, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and weak infrastructure, further compounded by the energy crisis, the impact of drought on water availability, and damage to WASH infrastructure triggered by flooding. According to the 2024 JNA by the GTRM, 76.2% of households obtained drinking water from a tap in their home, patio, or plot. A significant portion (20.7%), however, relied on bottled water, indicating concerns about tap water quality or availability. In coastal provinces, there has been a notable rise in bottled water consumption, particularly in El Oro (79.9%), linked to limited water supply and/or reduced access to sewage systems (GTRM 24/10/2024).

For populations in transit, the situation is more dire, with 21.6% defecating or urinating in the street or open air, and 27.4% paying for access to a toilet. Similarly, 17.1% use rivers or lagoons for bathing and 8.7% have no access to bathing facilities, posing significant health risks. For women and girls in transit, 3.8% of surveyed groups reported a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products (GTRM 24/10/2024). The lack of safe and private WASH facilities also increases protection risks, particularly for women and girls, including exposure to sexual violence and exploitation.

In El Oro province, particularly around Portovelo and Zaruma, illegal gold mining activities lead to significant environmental concerns. Processing plants dump tailings directly into rivers, polluting the water, indicating that naturally available water sources may be unsafe for consumption or use. This severe water pollution directly affects household water sources and agricultural irrigation, posing significant health risks to the population (Global Initiative 25/06/2025). The energy crisis also further compounds WASH challenges, such as access to potable water, as water pumps require electricity.