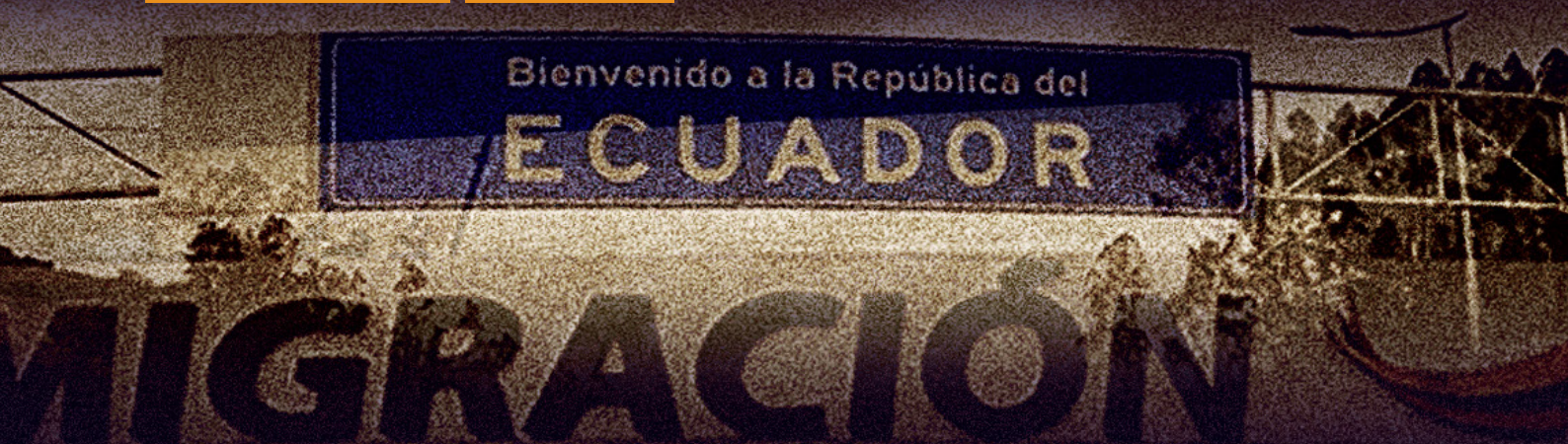


Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise

#TrendeAragua

#Tocorón



Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise

October 2023

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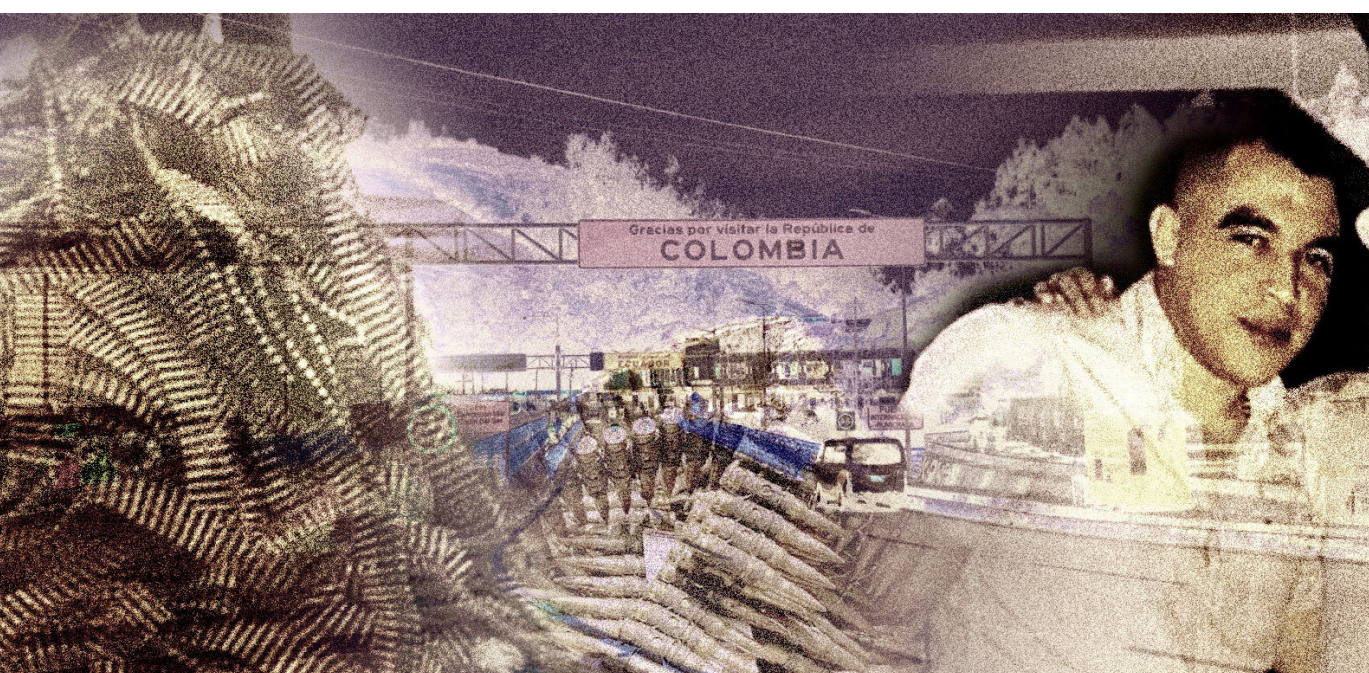


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1

Venezuela's Tren de Aragua Loses its Home



Tren de Aragua, Venezuela's most powerful home-grown criminal syndicate has just lost its home base, while its leadership is in the wind. A new, and potentially more dangerous, chapter has begun in its criminal evolution.

On September 20, 2023, 11,000 police and soldiers surrounded and then took control of Tocarón prison in Aragua state. The stated aim of the operation was to “dismantle and put an end to organized crime gangs and other criminal networks operating from the Tocarón Penitentiary,” according to a [government **communique**](#) that never mentioned Tren de Aragua by name. The result was the eviction of the gang's leadership from their private fortress. But Tocarón was not only the headquarters of Venezuela's most notorious gang, it was also the nerve center of a criminal network that stretches to the Southern tip of South America.

As news filtered out that Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias “Niño Guerrero,” and other top gang leaders had slipped away before the operation -- likely thanks to a tip-off, or perhaps even a negotiated exit -- it became clear that no “dismantling” had taken place. But it was the end of an era in which the gang could operate with impunity from within the protection of the prison walls as it built a transnational criminal empire off the backs of Venezuela’s seven million migrants.

Tren de Aragua must now evolve to survive, not only in Venezuela, but also in Colombia, Peru, Chile, and possibly beyond. And its future may be shaped as much by its criminal diaspora as by events in Venezuela.

The Prison Break

Tren de Aragua started as a prison gang confined within the walls of Tocarón. But in the space of a decade, it has become one of the most rapidly growing security threats in South America.

The group in its current form began to take shape inside Tocarón under the leadership of Niño Guerrero. Its influence grew thanks to the unofficial government policy of [devolving](#) power in Venezuela’s violent and uncontrollable prisons to gang bosses known as *pranes*.

“The government decided to essentially do nothing, and deliver the jails to the prisoners,” Roberto Briceño León, the director of the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV) [told](#) InSight Crime in 2018.

This policy was instituted by a new prison ministry created in 2011 and led by [Iris Varela](#), a diehard loyalist of then-President Hugo Chávez. As the pran of Tocarón, Niño Guerrero successfully [leveraged](#) this new government strategy, as well as alleged links to prominent politicians including Varela, to turn the prison into his base of operations.

As its power grew within Tocarón, Tren de Aragua began to establish cells and co-opt smaller gangs on the outside. It began to project its power beyond the prison walls and throughout the state of Aragua, where the prison is located.

However, Aragua represented just the first phase in the group’s national expansion. Currently, Tren de Aragua maintains a presence, either directly or through links with satellite gangs, in at least six of Venezuela’s 24 states, according to InSight Crime’s monitoring and investigations.

This geographical spread was accompanied by an expansion into a broad

range of criminal economies. What began with the simple extortion of prison inmates evolved into a diverse criminal portfolio, including everything from gold mining to cybercrime.

Those leading the expansion had direct ties to Tocarón. High-ranking members of the group were **dispatched** as emissaries once they left the prison, and alliances were forged with local crime bosses incarcerated in Tocarón, according to testimonies of residents, social leaders, and former prison guards, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. Former prisoners were also deployed as manpower and shock troops in zones around the country as the Tren established new outposts.

As would later be the case for the group's transnational network, Tren de Aragua's structure and operations within Venezuela varied based on local conditions and criminal opportunities. However, even when operators in the domestic network acted with some level of autonomy, they ultimately answered to Niño Guerrero and the leadership in Tocarón, former prison guards and investigators in Venezuela told InSight Crime.

A Criminal Migration

While Tren de Aragua was growing in strength, Venezuela was sinking into crisis. Its economy was in a tailspin, and the government responded to popular unrest with violent repression and growing authoritarianism. Venezuelans began to flee the country in an unprecedented mass migration. And the Tren went with them.

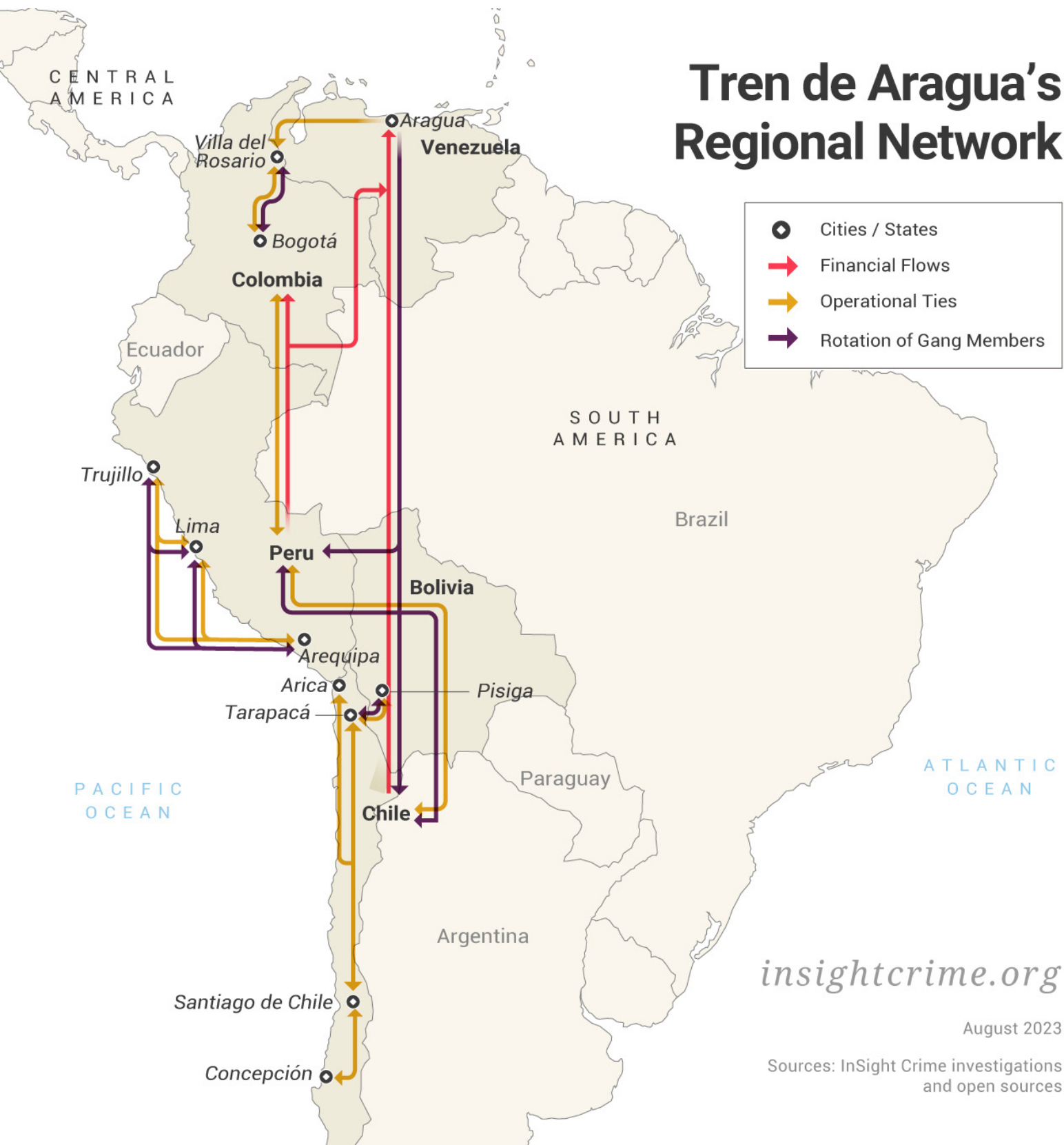
The first reports of the group's presence outside of Venezuela emerged in 2018 in neighboring Colombia -- the first stop and the most common end destination for many Venezuelan migrants. As detailed in the second part of this investigation, there have since been signs of Tren de Aragua's presence in the top regional destinations for Venezuelan migrants, with the gang laying down roots in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, and reports of their appearance in Ecuador, Brazil, and Bolivia.

While this expansion likely began as an opportunistic response to the criminal opportunities created by the migrant crisis, it has since evolved, becoming more organized and coordinated as the network developed.

In each country, Tren de Aragua cells have formed in reaction to the local context, and its regional growth has been neither uniform nor homogenous. But while each cell may specialize in a specific criminal economy based on local conditions, InSight Crime interviews with high-ranking security officials and prosecutors, as well as judicial documents, show that most share the same basic modus operandi and pyramid-type structure, in which there is clear leadership.

“They have different people in each city to carry out their activities,” explained a source from the Attorney General’s Office Against Organized Crime in Arequipa, Peru, who asked to speak anonymously, “But that doesn’t imply that the different cells don’t work together. They definitely do.”

Coordination between these cells is necessary to manage transnational criminal economies, such as migrant smuggling and human trafficking, which are explored in the third chapter of this series, while there are also movements of personnel between cells.



Law enforcement and journalistic investigations across South America have shown that the cells form an integrated network with direct operational and financial ties to Tren de Aragua leaders ensconced in Tocarón.

In Peru, another source from the Attorney General's Office who asked to remain anonymous due to open cases against the group, said investigations have shown that the leaders of the four active cells identified in Peru were all previously imprisoned in Tocarón, and that they were sent abroad under orders from the gang leadership.

"They left with instructions," he said. "They came on behalf of the Tren."

The gang has even received replacement leaders sent from Tocarón after other lieutenants have been arrested, according to Peruvian prosecutors and officials in the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Directorate of the Peruvian National Police (Dirección Contra la Trata y Tráfico Ilícito de Migrantes de la Policía Nacional Peruana - PNP).

As personnel traveled in one direction from Tocarón, money from different cells has moved in the opposite direction. Interviews with the Peruvian homicide investigations chief Colonel Víctor Revoredo officials from the Attorney General's Office Against Organized Crime in Arequipa as well as [reports](#) from Chilean authorities, show that cells abroad make payments directly to the organization in Venezuela.

The End of Tocarón: Decline or Evolution?

Transnational expansion allowed the Tocarón-based leaders to project power and secure wealth in ways that once seemed unimaginable for a humble prison gang. But it may have had a role to play in the group's loss of its fortress.

Several experts have suggested the international outcry over the gang's violent spread across the region was a factor in the Venezuelan government's decision to move against it.

"I believe one of the reasons behind the taking of Tocarón is because there was an intervention on the behalf of the different governments, asking the Venezuelan government to act," said Carlos Nieto Palma, general coordinator of Venezuelan prisons watchdog A Window to Freedom (Una Ventana a la Libertad).

The loss of Tocarón not only means the loss of a headquarters and operating base, it also means the loss of the protection and near-total impunity that allowed Niño Guerrero and his cohorts to build such a vast network.

Without these advantages, the capacity of centralized leadership to coordinate disparate cells located across the region could be impacted.

If the transnational network is disrupted, there is a risk that local cells firmly entrenched in host countries could react by evolving instead of disappearing. The most likely outcome in such a scenario is that the cells would remain as autonomous local gangs, less dangerous in terms of national security, but still a serious threat in their areas of influence.

Recent police investigations in Concepción, Chile, meanwhile point to another direction such an evolution could take. According to the investigation, a local cell is charging copycats to use its name as part of a “franchise.” This model, similar to the one [used](#) by paramilitary successor groups in Colombia, would allow the group to receive income from satellite cells without having to provide initial funds, protection, or manpower. It would increase the gang’s reach and capacity by using the franchises as criminal contractors and surrogates.

Faced with increasingly intense security operations in host countries, another possibility is that large-scale arrests of Tren de Aragua members would offer an opportunity for the group to return to its roots as a prison gang, but this time in host nations.

Given its experience not only in controlling prisons but also using its control of prisons to project power and build networks on the outside, the gang could feasibly use the setbacks of arrests to cement its position in the national criminal landscape. The risk of this has already been made clear by reports of Tren de Aragua members organizing in prisons in Colombia, while concerns about this possibility have led to prisoner transfers to high-security jails in Peru and Chile.

“Their interest in controlling prisons, that’s just one of the latent risks we have. But we’re prepared,” Colonel Revoredo told InSight Crime.

However, another possibility remains. Instead of orphaning Tren de Aragua’s transnational cells, the taking of Tocarón may increase their importance to the organization.

Tren de Aragua’s loss of Tocarón implies the loss of income, not only from the extortion of inmates, but also from the activities run from within the prison walls, which range from microtrafficking to contraband. The transnational cells could help replace this, especially if Niño Guerrero demands an increased tribute to make up for the shortfall. In this way, the regional network could play a key role in helping the gang rebuild.

But more pressingly, since Niño Guerrero was declared Venezuela’s most wanted criminal shortly after the raid, every country where the gang has taken root now represents a potential escape route for Tren de Aragua’s once untouchable leader.

Wherever Niño Guerrero and the other gang leaders land, they will no longer have the option of running operations from the safe distance of their fortified headquarters, and instead may now be forced to take more direct control of operations both in Venezuelan and beyond. While this may test their leadership capabilities, it could also energize elements of the gang into further expansion and violence.

2

Three Stages in the Construction of Tren de Aragua's Transnational Empire



“Tour operators” offering trips to Bogotá, Medellín, and even as far afield as Ecuador and Peru, swarm anyone stepping off the Simón Bolívar International Bridge connecting Venezuela with Colombia. Street hustlers offer everything for the passing migrant, even ready with scissors to buy your hair in case you need a bit of extra money for the journey ahead.

For tens of thousands of migrants every year, this is their first step in fleeing Venezuela -- and their journeys have become a big business. But everyone who wants a piece of that business, including the migrants themselves, must pay for the right.

“These people arrived alongside the migratory flows, so they took advantage of the migrants,” explained a resident of La Parada, the first town many migrants pass through in Colombia, speaking in a strained voice, just quiet enough so the neighbors could not hear.

“These people” refers to the notorious [Tren de Aragua](#), the Venezuelan gang whose rapid transnational expansion has raised alarm across South America.

For Tren de Aragua, taking control of La Parada was just the first step. In the five years since it first appeared here, the gang has built a far-reaching regional network, establishing a permanent presence in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with further reports of their presence in Ecuador, Brazil, and Bolivia.

This rapid expansion came largely on the backs of the nearly 8 million desperate Venezuelans who have fled their country since 2015 looking for a better life. Whereas the world looked at this mass migration and saw a humanitarian crisis, Tren de Aragua saw a business opportunity, and it took full advantage.

Exploration: Following the Migration Flows

The first reports of Tren de Aragua’s expansion outside of Venezuela appeared in 2018. This coincided with the first peak of the Venezuelan migrant crisis, when over 1 million people were [leaving](#) the country each year. In this initial wave of mass migration, huge numbers of Venezuelans headed to Colombia, Peru, and Chile, and these same countries have become the epicenters of Tren de Aragua’s international expansion.

In each of these countries, Tren de Aragua’s expansion has followed a followed a three-step process. First comes the exploration of new territories. Then there is the penetration of the local underworld. And finally comes the consolidation of the cell’s local presence.

The exploration phase begins when the gang arrives in new areas that are either border crossings, hotspots along migration routes, or urban centers with large Venezuelan diasporas.

In Colombia, it began in and around La Parada, but soon spread to the Colombian capital, Bogotá, the city with the largest Venezuelan diaspora.

As Venezuelan migrants headed further south, so did Tren de Aragua. Soon the group had set up cells in several Peruvian cities with large diasporas: Lima, Arequipa, and Trujillo. Next came Chile, where the gang first moved into the northern border towns of Arica and Tarapacá, then later into the cities of Santiago and Concepción.

Phases of Tren de Aragua's International Expansion

 1 Exploration Phase Tren de Aragua exploits migrants and maintains a low profile.	Conditions needed: Location is along migration route or has large diaspora population. Demand for human smuggling exceeds existing networks' capacity.	Criminal economies:  Migrant smuggling  Extorting migrants and diaspora communities  Sexual exploitation of migrant women
 2 Penetration Phase Tren de Aragua enters local criminal economies and may clash with rival gangs.	Area has relatively low levels of gang violence. Criminal economies are plentiful or have low barrier to entry.	 Extortion  Micro-trafficking  Human trafficking for sexual exploitation  Loan sharking  Kidnapping
 3 Consolidation Phase: Tren de Aragua develops sophisticated money laundering schemes, corrupts local security forces, and may subsume rival gangs.	Security forces and local officials can be corrupted. Rival gangs are weak enough to be overpowered.	 Money laundering

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Sources: InSight Crime investigations and open sources

“These are cities where there’s a lot of economic movement, where money flows, so that’s where they establish themselves. That’s what they call the plaza, where there’s money,” explained General Luis Jesús Flores Solís, the head of the Peruvian National Police’s Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Directorate (Dirección Contra la Trata y Tráfico Ilícito de Migrantes de la Policía Nacional Peruana - PNP).

During the exploration phase, the gang's arrival in these places was likely opportunistic rather than guided by a strategic masterplan. And the opportunity they were seeking to exploit came in the form of their fellow Venezuelans.

Controlling migration routes and Venezuelan migrant populations offered lucrative income sources in the form of migrant smuggling, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, and extorting or robbing diaspora communities and migrants in transit. The members of the Tren were predators swimming in a sea of migrants, looking for any opportunities to rob or exploit.

Moving among migrants also allowed Tren de Aragua to maintain a low profile, as while Venezuelans know and fear the group, migrants are less likely to report crimes out of fear of repercussions such as deportation, or a lack of trust in local authorities.

Penetration: Wielding Violence and Fear

Between 2020 and 2022, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration rates began to slow, although demand for human smuggling services rose as borders slammed shut. Tren de Aragua cells that had already been established along migration routes moved from exploration into the penetration phase. They identified local criminal economies unrelated to migration that they could exploit, and they attacked any competition or potential rivals.

The gang's capacity to move into this next phase was determined by local conditions. These included not only the presence of criminal economies with low barriers to entry, but also factors such as relatively low murder rates. Low violence levels increased the impact when the gang used highly publicized acts of brutality and murder to terrorize both the population and potential competitors into submission.

One migrant in northern Chile, who spoke to InSight Crime anonymously for fear of reprisals, highlighted the fear that Tren de Aragua struck into the population.

“There are houses where they did horrible things. Torture and homicides. I’ve heard they buried or burned people alive,” she said.

Tren de Aragua capitalized on this fear to move into new criminal economies such as extorting local businesses and sex workers, loan sharking, and drug dealing. They published videos of brutal assassinations of sex workers who refused to pay extortion fees and **threatened** extortion victims with grenades in Peru. And they allegedly dumped dismembered bodies on street corners in Bogotá.

In some cases, they all but eradicated the competition.

Tren de Aragua's Regional Presence and Criminal Economies (2023)

PRESENCE

- Exploration phase
- Penetration phase
- Consolidation phase

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES

- Extortion
- Kidnapping
- Migrant Smuggling
- Human Trafficking
- Contraband
- Micro-trafficking
- Cybercrime
- Black Markets
- Robberies
- Illegal Mining
- Loan Sharking
- Small-scale Drug Trafficking



“There are no more Peruvian pimps [in Lima]. Why? Because [Tren de Aragua] killed them,” General Flores told InSight Crime. “Nobody wants to mess with them thanks to their extreme violence.”

Consolidation: Setting Down Roots

As Tren de Aragua cells cemented control over local criminal economies, they also established their financial base and built criminal structures required to make their operations sustainable and resilient, entering the consolidation phase.

In this phase, the gang has sought to infiltrate the state through corruption networks; to build increasingly sophisticated money laundering operations; and to form alliances with, recruit, or assimilate other criminal actors operating in the area.

The group’s consolidation has been most evident in Peru and Chile, where it has set up transnational financial operations.

Chilean police have [identified](#) cells laundering money by purchasing motorcycles and other vehicles, which they then rent out to migrants and informal food delivery workers. The cells then transfer some of this laundered money back to Venezuela via Bitcoin and Western Union payments, among other modalities.

Multiple Peruvian security forces and government officials also reported to InSight Crime that some of laundered money earned in Peru is sent back to the leadership in Venezuela. Security officials, most of whom asked to speak to InSight Crime anonymously, reported finding examples of cells using Western Union transfers, shell companies, and by forcing the family members of the gang’s victims in Venezuela to receive payments in their bank accounts.

“They have different methods, and they’re constantly improving their modus operandi to send money to Venezuela,” General Flores said.

There are indications that the gang may have entered the consolidation phase in Colombian cities as well, primarily through corrupting police officials.

As early as October 2022, there were [reports](#) of police working with Tren de Aragua in Bogotá’s Kennedy neighborhood. Months later in early 2023, officials [arrested](#) several police officers allegedly working with the gang in Villa del Rosario, the municipality where La Parada is located in the border department of Norte de Santander.

Residents of La Parada, who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity, said they could not be sure whether the police stationed in the area were corrupt or whether they were just outgunned by Tren de Aragua.

“I believe that the police know [what Tren de Aragua is doing]. The police are on their side,” said one of the residents, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Another, though, pointed to a short concrete wall surrounding the front porch of his house, remembering a time that alleged members of Tren de Aragua were involved in a shootout in the neighborhood.

“There were two officers on a motorcycle patrol, they hid right here,” he said. “What were they going to do? There were six people with a rifle, and they were just two police with a pistol.”

A Stalled Expansion

Although Tren de Aragua has successfully moved through the three phases in Peru, Chile, and Colombia, its efforts to expand in some regions have been limited or even repelled completely by criminal competition.

Tren de Aragua’s expansion in the region around La Parada spurred **violent clashes** with the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). While for now these clashes seem to have died down, it is clear the gang is not capable of militarily challenging the heavily armed, well-trained, and experienced ELN, limiting its expansion options in a region dominated by the rebels.

In Bogotá too, Tren de Aragua has confronted entrenched local gangs, and while it has managed to carve out a space for itself, opposition and competition from local gangs has curbed its potential for growth.

Perhaps its biggest failure, however, came in Peru, and the port city El Callao, which has long been **violently disputed** by gangs due to its **role** as a transnational cocaine shipment point.

There, the gang tried and failed to force its way in, according to a source in the PNP’s Special Investigative Brigade Against Foreign Crime (Brigada Especial de Investigación Contra la Criminalidad Extranjera), who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the record.

Tren de Aragua “have entered El Callao, but they were forced out, because let me tell you, [the gangs in El Callao] are on the same level. They’re hot-blooded,” he said.

Tren de Aragua's Cover Has Been Blown

Criminal rivals are not the only enemies pushing back against Tren de Aragua's transnational expansion. The gang is also increasingly facing off against local security forces.

In the initial stages of its expansion, Tren de Aragua was frequently able to pass through the exploration phase and into the penetration phase before local authorities were even aware of its presence. However, its heavily publicized use of violence has since made it a high-priority target for governments across the region.

The first operations targeting Tren de Aragua in Colombia took place in La Parada with the [arrest](#) of eight alleged gang members in July 2019. In the following years, authorities arrested at least 23 more alleged members in the area, according to InSight Crime's media monitoring.

But the gang was not seen as a serious threat worthy of large-scale security operations until 2022, when authorities in Bogotá [arrested](#) at least 30 alleged gang members over the course of the year.

In Peru and Chile, the gang has been targeted with greater force and consistency. Peruvian authorities even carried out “mega-operations” in November and December 2022, [arresting](#) 30 Tren de Aragua members in Lima and [23 members](#) in Arequipa.

Chilean authorities similarly [carried out](#) several operations targeting the gang in 2022, with up to 40 alleged members brought before the court in Arica and several more arrests in Tarapacá. The arrests continued with dozens of alleged members and leaders detained in the first half of 2023 in [Santiago](#), [Tarapacá](#), and [Concepción](#).

Despite the sustained operations targeting Tren de Aragua outside of Venezuela, the gang's cells have proven resilient, and for now their operations continue in the regions where they have consolidated.

“With these people, you cut off one arm and two more grow,” said a source from the Peruvian Attorney General's Office, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

Reports of new cells also continue to surface, with news stories and official investigations flagging potential cells in the cities of Chimbote and Piura in Peru, and Barranquilla, Ipiales, Cali, and Bucaramanga in Colombia.

However, authorities suspect some of these may be copycat groups seeking to capitalize on Tren de Aragua's growing infamy. Even if these are genuine cells, there is little to suggest they have successfully moved beyond the exploration phase, and the dizzying pace of the group's initial expansion appears to have slowed.

Not only is Tren de Aragua now being confronted both by criminal rivals and the security forces, but at the same time the conditions that permitted its expansion are changing. Venezuelan migration in South America has fallen, with many Venezuelans now instead heading north towards the United States. High levels of competition from powerful organized crime groups along these routes that already [profit from well-established migration flows](#) will likely limit their chance to replicate their South American successes along the road northwards.

Back home in Venezuela, meanwhile, Tren de Aragua's stronghold and headquarters of Tocarón prison has [been raided](#) and ostensibly [taken over by the Venezuelan government](#). The ground has shifted beneath Tren de Aragua's feet, and now it remains to be seen whether it can establish another safe haven to run and plan operations, allowing its transnational criminal empire to continue to expand, or whether it will be forced into retrenchment and decline.

3

Tren de Aragua's Criminal Portfolio: Adapt or Die



“PEOPLE ARE NOT MERCHANDISE,” reads a billboard at the main boarding crossing from Colombia to Ecuador. Yet that is exactly how Venezuelan migrants are treated by Tren de Aragua.

Venezuela’s most notorious gang has built a criminal empire stretching from Venezuela to Chile by taking advantage of desperate migrants, first through migrant smuggling on a scale never before seen in South America, and then by building organized, integrated, multinational sex trafficking networks.

As the gang’s income and regional presence have grown, its criminal portfolio has diversified. InSight Crime investigations have uncovered evidence that today the group is involved in at least 12 criminal economies in at least five countries.

Migrant Smuggling: The Taking of the Trochas

Tren de Aragua's first steps into migrant smuggling came at the single most important bottleneck of migration routes for Venezuelans -- the border between Norte de Santander in Colombia and Táchira in Venezuela.

Here, the gang took control of informal border crossings, known as *trochas*, charging migrants a fee to cross. As its territorial control grew, it began extorting people smuggling networks that used the crossings.

Such extortion was business as usual for the border zone, where *trochas* have long been controlled by armed groups. But when Tren de Aragua first arrived in 2018, the scale of that business was anything but usual.

Venezuela's economy was collapsing, and the response by its government was ever more repression of its population. People were desperate to escape, but their main route to do so -- into Colombia -- was sealed off by border closures.

Over 3 million Venezuelans fled the country from 2017 to 2018, many of them across the *trochas* into the Colombian department of Norte de Santander. This surge of migrants not only led to burgeoning extortion revenues but also an unprecedented demand for people smuggling services.

Sensing opportunity amid the desperation, Tren de Aragua began to provide its own transportation services to migrants. And as the migrants moved through Colombia into countries like Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile, Tren de Aragua's migrant smuggling business moved with them, expanding in sophistication and scope at every step.

Migrants using these services, security forces, public officials, and civil society groups working with the migrant population all describe a similar pattern along these routes: Tren de Aragua offers package deals in which they typically provide transportation, accommodation, and food for the entire journey.

"They provided us with a hotel for the whole day, including lunch. They put eight of us in a room to bathe," explained a migrant who traveled from Ecuador to Colombia using Tren de Aragua's smuggling services. "Later they sent a car to pick us up."

In some areas, Tren de Aragua also directly controls the infrastructure used by traveling migrants. Residents of La Parada, in Norte de Santander, told InSight Crime that Tren de Aragua controls the *pagadiarios*, low-cost housing commonly used by migrants, charging them between US\$1-2 per day. In Chile meanwhile, an investigation by the Attorney General's Office [revealed](#) how the gang allegedly purchased buses through a front company in order to transport migrants and drugs.

Although it is unclear when the gang made the leap from extortion to providing multi-leg, multi-country smuggling packages, it is clear these operations were boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when lockdowns prompted border closures across the region, **driving** more migrants to use smugglers. Even as borders have reopened, many migrants choose to continue paying smugglers like Tren de Aragua because they **view** migration officials and security forces in Venezuela and other countries as corrupt and untrustworthy.

“As soon as you get out of the car in Cúcuta, they present themselves as Tren de Aragua,” explained the woman who returned to Venezuela using Tren de Aragua’s migrant smuggling services. “They say they provide services to those crossing the bridge and promise that you won’t have to pay anything to the National Guard.”

Human Trafficking: Blurring the Line Between Smuggling and Exploitation

The expansion of Tren de Aragua’s migrant smuggling business also gave the group a competitive advantage in human trafficking for sexual exploitation, which requires many of the same elements: transportation, accommodation, transnational connections, and a vulnerable population to exploit.

By bringing their experience and capacity to bear on a criminal economy commonly run by small, loose-knit, decentralized networks with little armed or territorial presence, Tren de Aragua has been able to establish sex trafficking networks on a scale, and with a reach, that few other criminal actors have achieved within South America.

Much like with the gang’s human smuggling operations, authorities in Chile, Colombia, and Peru told InSight Crime that Tren de Aragua participates in the entire process, from identifying and recruiting victims to transporting and exploiting them.

The route toward sexual exploitation usually begins online. Many women and girls are lured by false job offers abroad. These may be posted on social media or arrive directly, with the targets contacted by other women -- many of whom may also be victims of human trafficking. Others are deceived by a tactic known as *enamoramiento* (falling in love), where a member of Tren de Aragua entraps them by pretending to be their boyfriend.

How Venezuelan Women Are Exploited by Tren de Aragua



August 2023

Sources: InSight Crime investigations and open sources

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Once their victims have been convinced to move to another country or accept the job offer, other members of the group arrange transport and accommodation in transit countries. To do this, they often use the same logistics and infrastructure as migrant smuggling, according to judicial documents obtained by InSight Crime that contain testimony from trafficking survivors.

The documents describe how the journeys are coordinated by “asesores” (advisors).

“[The asesor] is the person who does all the paperwork, buys the tickets, the food, and accompanies the girls throughout the journey,” reads one case file.

At this point, many still believe they are traveling to a legitimate job. However, upon arrival, the victims are often informed they have a large debt with the group and must pay it off by providing sexual services or recruiting other victims, according to security forces, judicial officials, and nongovernmental sources consulted by InSight Crime.

Women are then **exploited** in traditional prostitution venues, such as bars and brothels, or they are exploited online, with the group running pornographic webcam operations, and using messaging apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat to arrange “escort” services and to post explicit material.

Those who try to break free are often killed, and the killings publicized. Judicial documents and audiovisual materials show how Tren de Aragua scares other women into compliance by circulating videos and images of these murders on social media and sending them to survivors with threats and warnings, revictimizing the women in the videos and making gender-based violence an instrument of control.

“Peru doesn’t have organizations that are as violent as in Colombia or Ecuador, so it’s a huge market, enormous. And exploiting women, well, that’s their specialty,” a source from the Peruvian Attorney General’s Office told InSight Crime anonymously as she didn’t have authorization to speak on the record.

Going Local: The Economies That Show Entrenchment

Tren de Aragua’s exploitation of migrants in both smuggling and trafficking has provided the financial base for its expansion across South America. But as its cells have penetrated underworlds in their host countries, they have looked to take control of local, more sustainable local sources of income.

These cells begin by looking for low-hanging fruit: criminal economies that have little competition and low barriers to entry.

In many regions, their first step has been to take over the local sex trade.

Sex workers are highly vulnerable due to the stigma and criminalization of sex work, as well as the lack of protection provided by authorities. Venezuelan sex workers are often even more vulnerable thanks to their economic situation, lack of a local community, and sometimes illegal migration status. Tren de Aragua cells often start targeting the most vulnerable – Venezuelan sex workers – then expand operations to include locals as well.

Residents and human rights workers in the Colombian border town of La Parada told InSight Crime that sex workers there must have permission from Tren de Aragua to work in the area, and that the gang controls and profits from all aspects of the sex trade. Many of these women suffer the same kind of violence that Tren de Aragua employs with its human trafficking victims and feel they have nowhere to turn for protection.

“Once they gain women’s trust, they do a kind of study, asking who your mother is, who your family is,” explained a human rights worker in Cúcuta, who asked to speak anonymously for fear of reprisals from the gang. “Then, when they want to exploit women, they threaten their mothers, saying they know where she lives.”

As Tren de Aragua has become more established, it has expanded into more generalized extortion. Authorities in Colombia and Peru told InSight Crime that the group extorts a range of businesses like bus companies, restaurants, shops, construction sites, and bars.

In the Peruvian cities of Lima and Arequipa, Tren de Aragua cells have also moved into loan sharking, locally referred to as *gota a gota* (drop by drop). In these rackets, the gang provides informal loans with exorbitant interest rates to victims who cannot access traditional bank loans and feel they have no other options.

Peru’s *gota a gota* markets were traditionally controlled by Colombian gangs or loose networks, but Tren de Aragua has suc retail drug sales. Throughout the region, the gang sells a variety of drugs directly to consumers, including marijuana, cocaine, ketamine, MDMA, and the synthetic drug known as *tusi*.

In Chile, Tren de Aragua has been reported to use domestic buses, to smuggle both migrants and wholesale quantities of drugs.

The gang has also been reported to deploy the “*hormiga*” (ant) method of using multiple individuals to move small quantities across a border. To do this, they often **force** migrants to move packages that are typically 1 kilogram or less of drugs, across the border from Bolivia into Chile, and -- according to public officials and non-governmental organizations serving migrants in the area -- the border between Ipiales, Colombia, and Tulcán, Ecuador.

There are also some indications that the group is moving into the small-scale production of some drugs. A Peruvian National Police (Policía Nacional Peruana – PNP) investigation **discovered** that one Tren de Aragua cell had its own facility to produce *tusi*. While *tusi* is the common name for the drug 2CB, what is sold in Latin America typically **does not contain** any 2CB and is a mix of other synthetic drugs dyed pink, making it relatively simple to produce. Another investigation in Chile led to a small **seizure** of coca base and the precursor chemicals used in the production of cocaine.

Could Tren de Aragua Become a Drug Trafficking Organization?

The size and nature of drug seizures made against Tren de Aragua suggest that the drugs were likely intended to supply the gang's own local drug sales networks. But the gang's control over movement corridors and border crossing and growing financial clout raises the possibility of it taking the leap into transnational drug trafficking.

For the moment, though, that seems a distant prospect. There is little evidence so far that it has the criminal connections, logistical capacity, or state penetration required to move large shipments of drugs for transnational networks.

"They're never going to get into large-scale trafficking. Why not? Because the cartels will come and run circles around them. Forget it," scoffed Jorge Chávez Cotrina, the national coordinator of Peru's Specialized Prosecutor's Office Against Organized Crime.

The patterns evident in Tren de Aragua's construction of its criminal portfolio to this point suggest it will similarly be limited in any attempts to move into the most lucrative transnational criminal economies, despite its regional expansion.

The gang has seen the most success in economies where it has faced little competition, such as migrant smuggling and human trafficking, or where the key to success is crude violence, as with extortion, rather than knowledge, experience, connections, control of infrastructure, or up-front capital.

"[Tren de Aragua] is not involved in everything, they go where they see the most opportunity," explained General Luis Jesús Flores Solís, the head of the PNP's Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Directorate (Dirección Contra la Trata y Tráfico Ilícito de Migrantes).

With the loss of its home base, the prison of Tocarón in Aragua state, and the fact that the Tren leadership is now on the outside, it is likely there will be a quantum shift in the direction of Venezuela's most powerful criminal structure, which may now be forced to adapt from being a prison gang to a federation of transnational cells.

All eyes, both in law enforcement and the underworld, are on Hector Guerrero Flores, alias "Niño Guerrero, the leader of the gang, and his key lieutenants. Deprived of their comfortable operating base and fortress in Tocarón prison, they are likely to get more directly involved in the day-to-day operations of the gangs, in Venezuelan and abroad.

The gang has suffered a blow to its income streams as extortion within Tocarón which all prisoners had to pay to Niño Guerrero, known as “la causa,” has now disappeared. This was worth millions of dollars a year, and the Tren leadership will have to make up this money by finding new streams of income.

Tren de Aragua will either adapt to the new conditions, find alternative revenue streams and a new command and control system, or risk breaking up into a loosely aligned criminal federation.



InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions - as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource - to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

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