



Extortion by gangs and police in Venezuela creates an environment of insecurity.

News Extortion

Venezuela Security Policy: Combating Gang and Police-Driven Extortion

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*

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Extortion pervades nearly all levels of Venezuelan society, sowing greater fear as it becomes more violent. The repercussions of not paying extortion are severe: grenades thrown at businesses, assassinations, forced displacement, and threats of arrest. The societal and economic costs of these extortion schemes are also profound. Locals have lost faith in security forces' willingness and capacity to protect them, while economic growth is stymied by the monthly extortion costs. This fosters an environment of insecurity, prompting increased migration.

The western state of Zulia has become infamous for shockingly **violent attacks** on individuals and businesses. In 2022, eight people were killed in extortion schemes in the state, while, in the first seven months of 2023, 17 people were killed in grenade and gun attacks connected to extortion, according to data **compiled** by the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV).

Despite this rapidly increasing violence, victims rarely make formal reports, making it nearly impossible to find reliable nationwide data on the crime. This reticence to denounce extortion is fed by the perception that members of the security forces are **complicit** in, or even responsible for, these schemes. This silence further empowers extortionists, both gangs and police.

In Apure, another western state that borders Colombia, local investigators **estimate** that nearly 75% of agricultural producers are victims of extortion. “Business owners don’t have a life of their own anymore. Even national security forces are extorting us,” lamented a social leader in Apure, who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. “We have nothing, no security now.”

Faced with rising insecurity and a loss of income, many Venezuelans **choose** to flee the country after facing extortion. Other countries in the region have seen extortion **lead to more migration**, but the unique mix of a years-long economic crisis, an authoritarian state, and extortionists acting with impunity, has made the impact on Venezuelan migration even more notable.

Below, InSight Crime explores opportunities to address the complex dynamics that have arisen in Venezuela, including both short-term mitigation tactics and long-term political shifts.

Empower Communities and the Private Sector

Extortion is rife across many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Weak security force presence or even **systems of criminal governance** are all too common, leaving communities vulnerable to predatory illegal groups. However, these same communities have often increased resistance to criminal demands themselves.

Some of these local initiatives include programs to prevent young people from joining gangs, education campaigns, independent data collecting and reporting mechanisms, applications to identify phone numbers linked to extortion, and community building, among others. While these strategies have **seen limited success** in areas such as Central America and Mexico, Venezuela’s political climate makes it particularly difficult for NGOs and other civil society organizations to step in and fill this void without help from, and indeed sometimes in the face of hindrance by, state elements.

Free press and civil society have been greatly **weakened** in recent years as President Nicolás Maduro’s government has launched both direct and indirect attacks on their operations. “If an organization starts to say ... ‘we’re going to generate alternative mechanisms to report extortion,’ then you yourself get called a *pitiyanqui* [little Yankee, or US lackey] who is working with the empire, and all of those things,” an OVV investigator, speaking on condition of anonymity, explained to InSight Crime.

SEE ALSO: [*Venezuelan Extortion Gangs Exploiting Instagram to Amplify Threats*](#)

However, even a response as simple as communities informally sharing experiences and information can lessen the social impacts of extortion. Extortionists thrive on fear and isolation, sometimes even building a form of extortion-

based criminal governance that further engenders communities' compliance, as **described** in a 2021 report written by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

The private sector can also play a role in limiting gang-based extortion schemes. In 2013, El Salvador's sugar cane industry **created** a program to equip and provide logistical support to the National Civil Police (Policia Nacional Civil – PNC). The program is ongoing and has led to a **decline** in the cost of extortion to these businesses, according to a 2022 US Agency for International Development (USAID) report.

While the program in El Salvador has shown some success, private companies funding police logistics also run the risk of privatizing a public good — security — and turning police into a private militia.

This is a situation that may already be developing in Venezuela. A business owner in Zulia, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, reported that at least one of the biggest fishing companies in the municipality of La Cañada de Urdaneta pays the smallest extortion “*vacunas*” (“vaccines,” a common way of describing extortion payments), in part because they have hired the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) and police to protect them. According to him, “their beach is militarized. How are you going to mess with them?”

Invest in Police Reform and Target Corruption

Corruption in security forces, prisons, and throughout almost every organ of government, has become **institutionalized**. In many cases, this corruption **presents itself** in the form of extortion schemes.

An OVV representative in the state of Lara told InSight Crime that most extortions in the state come from the police. In Caracas, police **forced** the **El Koki gang** — which regularly extorted residents — out of its stronghold only to **continue extorting** residents themselves, according to a Connectas journalistic investigation.

With government salaries paid in ever-devaluing bolívares, officials need secondary incomes to survive. Citing low salaries, a former police officer in Miranda state, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime that “Politics forced us to get involved in this [extortion].” Journalists, investigators, and politicians across the country agreed that low salaries and poor training have contributed to security forces' growing role in extortion.

Security forces extort civilians in two primary ways. In some cases, they act in the same way as extortion gangs, visiting businesses and demanding “protection fees.” They may also accuse agricultural businesses of using stores of gasoline or diesel for illegal purposes, demanding a fee that can reach as high as \$3,000 to \$5,000 per official, according to the OVV investigator.

Just as common, they set up roadblocks where both commercial transporters and individuals have to pay “tolls” to pass. “Gangs extort, but officials involved in organized crime set up these roadblocks and started to blackmail people if they don't have all their papers in order,” described a resident of Guárico state, who did not want to be named for security reasons.

The high level of corruption is near-impossible to root out without comprehensive police reform, something which the government is unlikely to implement, given that its **latest attempts** at reform appear to lean more to the construction of a police state rather than addressing corruption and impunity.

A public safety expert in Venezuela consulted by InSight Crime highlighted that offering a competitive wage and improving training would be a key point in reforming police, an unlikely occurrence in a state teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

SEE ALSO: [How Grenades Became a Common Part of Venezuela's Criminal Arsenal](#)

Cut Off International Operations and Money Flows

Some leaders of Venezuelan extortion gangs have fled abroad to escape pressure from security forces or to spend their money abroad, most often but not exclusively in Colombia. Recently, the notorious gang leader, Guillermo Rafael Boscán Bracho, alias “Yiyi,” was **arrested** in Argentina while his gang continued to extort businesses in Zulia.

Meanwhile, the gangs they lead continue to operate in the country. When these gangsters flee the country, Venezuelan police typically have arrest warrants in their name, but foreign authorities do not have access to that information.

“These days, in terms of authorities getting information [from Venezuela], it’s like a black hole, there’s no information,” said a member of Chile’s security forces in late 2022. This sentiment was shared by authorities interviewed by InSight Crime in Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia during 2023.

Improving information sharing would help other governments in the region track and capture Venezuelan gang leaders operating abroad. Venezuela has made some small steps in that direction after the **invasion** of Tocarón prison, which previously housed the **Tren de Aragua** gang. When the gang’s leader **escaped** prior to the taking of Tocarón, Maduro reported that the government was coordinating with the governments of Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Ecuador to capture him. Days later, however, a Chilean prosecutor **told** the press that his office had still received no responses to information requests about the gang.

Regional allies and the United States can increase pressure to improve information sharing about these leaders as part of ongoing negotiations to loosen sanctions on Venezuela, among other initiatives.

It is important to note, however, that a kingpin strategy of focusing on leaders alone will not be enough to halt Venezuelan groups’ activities, as new leaders easily arise and gangs can **fracture** resulting in yet more violence.

Increased cooperation with international financial platforms could also target and help track gangs’ extortion income. Experts and victims in Venezuela have reported to InSight Crime that extortionists often **demand** payments

in dollars via international platforms such as Zelle.

Extortion has been just one of many factors leading to the mass exodus of more than 7 million Venezuelans. Lowering its impact on civilians and business owners could play a key role in limiting the push factors that lead so many Venezuelans to flee their country. However, local initiatives to fight corruption and extortion will find their capacity to do so very limited, so long as elements of the state remain complicit feeding the development of criminal governance systems in different regions of the country.

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