

**CONFLICT WATCHLIST 2026 REPORT**

Pressure rises on Ecuador's government to rein in escalating gang violence

Spreading criminal activity, developments in neighboring Colombia, and US attention on drug trafficking will affect Noboa's ability to curb rising violence.

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Military personnel and inmates at Ecuador's Manabi N4 Detention Center, also known as El Rodeo Prison, in Portoviejo, Manabi province, on 5 June 2024. Photo by Gerardo Menoscal/AFP via Getty Images.





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ACLED audio

Pressure rises on Ecuador's government to rein in escalating gang violence



10 min

By the numbers

From 1 January to 28 November 2025:

- Gang violence resulted in the death of **over 3,600** people in Ecuador.
- ACLED records **42%** more reported fatalities from gang violence compared to the first 11 months of 2024.
- **71%** of the population was exposed to violence in 2025.

In 2025, Ecuador is set to record the highest homicide rate in the whole of Latin America for the third consecutive year, breaking its own record.¹ President Daniel Noboa's approach — which is anchored on the declaration of an internal armed conflict — appears to have failed to curb violence carried out by gangs vying for the control of illicit economies such as extortion, drug trafficking, and illegal gold mining.

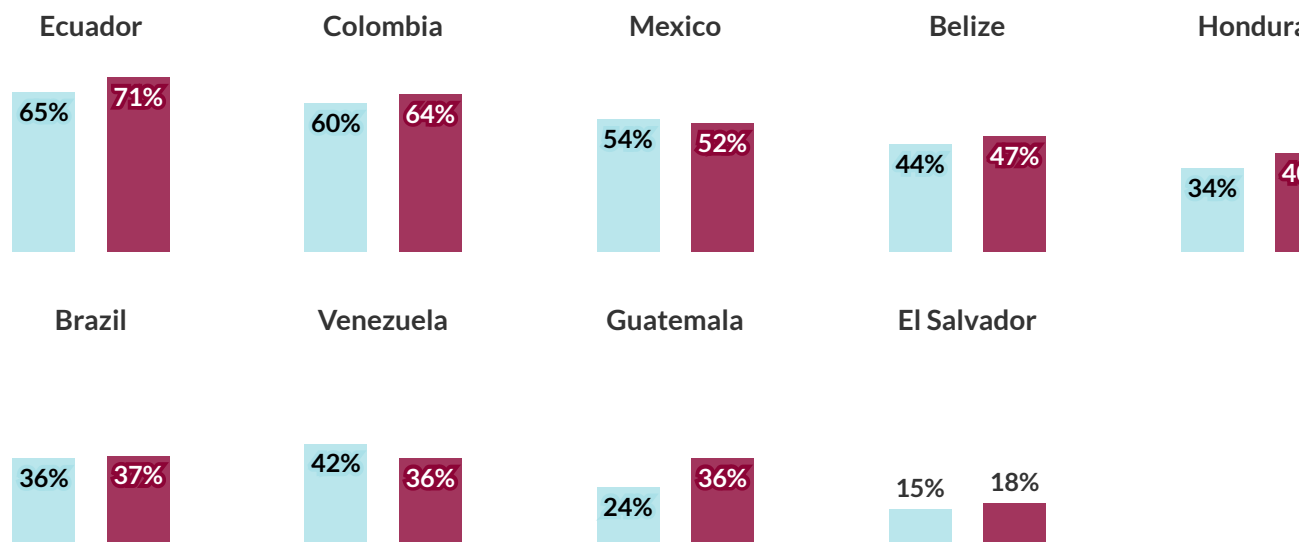
The escalation of violence has affected a growing share of Ecuador's population. More than 70% of the country's 18 million inhabitants were exposed to organized crime violence in 2025, more than any other country in Latin America (*see visual below*). Once a safe haven for Venezuelans and Colombians fleeing conflict and human rights abuses, Ecuador has turned into an inhospitable country for its own citizens. Since 2021, around 132,000 people have been displaced internally due to violence, and over 400,000 — or more than 2% — have left the country.²

Percentage of the total population exposed to violence in Latin America per country*



2024 – 2025**

2024 2025



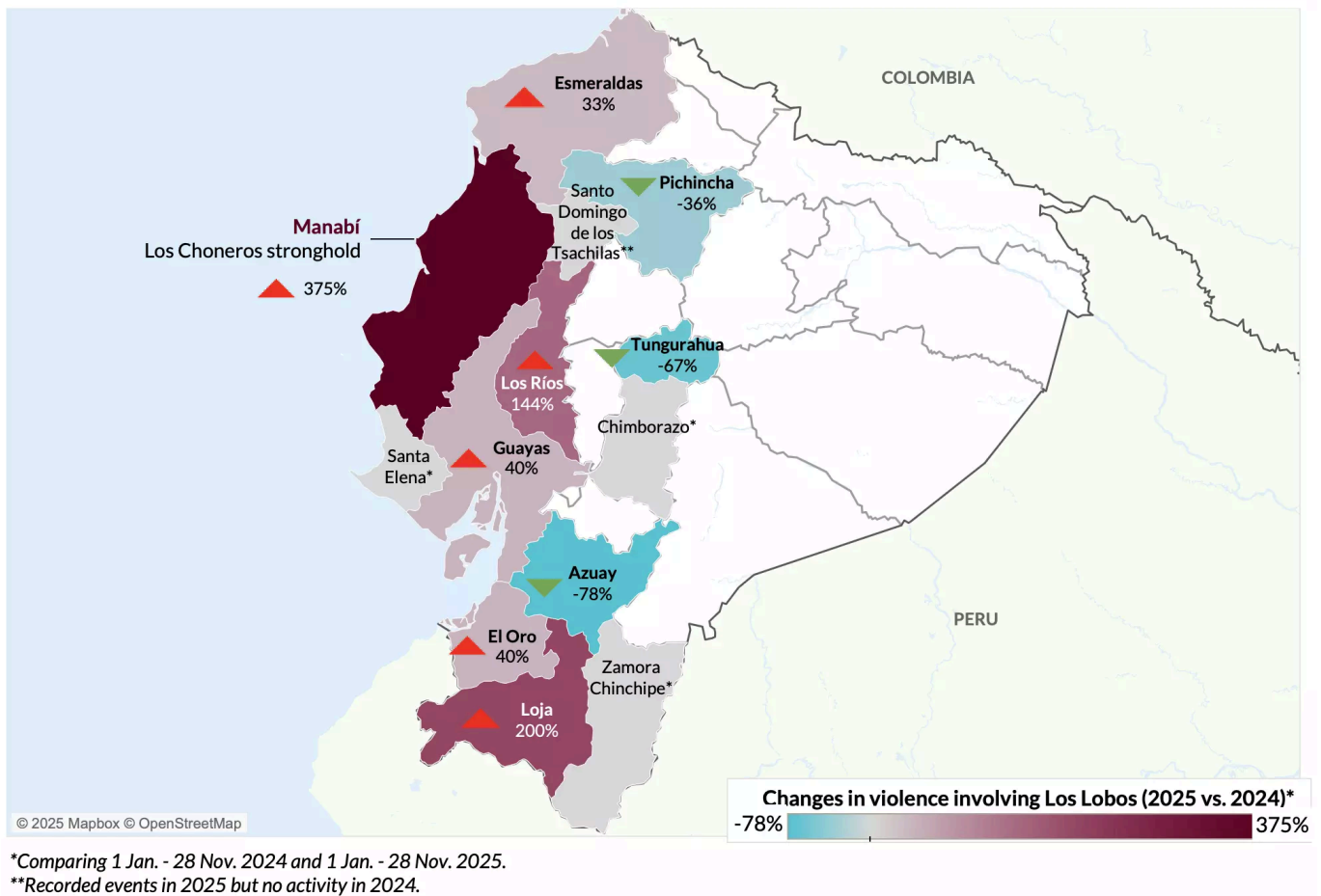
*Includes Colombia and the eight countries for which ACLED systematically tracks gang violence.

** Comparing 1 Jan. - 28 Nov. 2024 and 1 Jan. - 28 Nov. 2025.

A key driver of the ongoing violent escalation is the competition between the Los Lobos and Los Choneros gangs. Once the most powerful organized crime syndicate in Ecuador, Los Choneros were weakened by the arrest of their leader, José Adolfo Macías Villamar, who was extradited to the United States in July 2025.³ Los Lobos have taken advantage of the Los Choneros' vulnerability to take over territories that serve as strategic routes for drug trafficking and gold exports, sparking a turf war with severe consequences (*see map below*). Violence has especially surged in Los Ríos and Manabí provinces, Los Choneros' stronghold along the coast. But it did not stop there: The Los Lobos' incursion in rival territory also precipitated conflict with the Los R gang, an ally of Los Choneros in Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas.

Shifting geography of Los Lobos' turf wars

2025 vs. 2024*



A second factor behind Ecuador's security crisis is [growing gang fragmentation](#), triggered by the capture, killing, or exile of gang leaders, which fuels internal frictions among factions battling for leadership. The Los Lobos gang has been torn by an internecine struggle with its Sao Box faction over the control of illegal gold mining activities in El Oro and surrounding provinces.⁴ Both inter- and intra-gang disputes often originate in prisons — which act as gangs' operational centers — before spilling into the streets. Prison massacres and deadly gang clashes contributed to a 42% increase in reported fatalities in the first 11 months of 2025, compared to the same period in 2024. Thirdly, Ecuador's growing relevance in the regional drug trade and the transnational connections of organized crime groups further complicate the picture. As cocaine production continues to increase, Ecuador is becoming an ever more strategic transshipment ramp, with Ecuadorian gangs spreading their networks across the region and beyond.⁵ Conversely, Colombian armed groups are expanding their presence in Ecuador. This has prompted Noboa to label two dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Comuneros del Sur, a National Liberation Army splinter group, as active enemies in the internal armed conflict.⁶

Meanwhile, Noboa has faced the constraints of his strategy. The deployment of soldiers on the streets and in prisons has stretched the army's capacity beyond its limits.⁷ The Supreme Court has

blocked the legislation he tried to pass, which proposed stiffened penalties for gang-related crimes and shielding security forces accused of committing abuses from prosecution. To circumvent the judiciary's oversight, he proposed rewriting the constitution, but, on 16 November, Ecuadorians rejected his proposals to create a Constituent Assembly and reverse an existing ban on the installation of foreign military bases.

2026 will be a decisive year for Noboa

The president faces a wave of violent crime that shows no signs of subsiding, with reduced political capital and growing expectations. Failing to achieve concrete security results could damage his public image domestically and abroad, weakening his government ahead of the 2027 local elections.

Unless an organized crime group manages to establish hegemony or the government takes control of prisons and establishes a more permanent presence in gang-ridden communities, violence is likely to continue rising in 2026 and will possibly spread to other provinces. That said, there are no signs that gang turf wars will subside next year. Even though weakened, the Los Choneros gang still holds significant power in several parts of the country, and it will be challenging for Los Lobos to dismantle the social and institutional web it has sewn, particularly in the Manabí province. For its part, Los Lobos may also suffer from further internal struggles after the arrest of its leader in Spain in mid-November.⁸

These struggles will likely play out in the streets and in prisons, despite the government's efforts to improve the penitentiary system with the construction of a new maximum security prison in Santa Elena province, where it has started to send the most dangerous criminals.⁹ In fact, gang members could resist transfers to the new prison. This could prompt gang mutinies, while criminal activities may further spread to the communities close to the new detention center. In addition, the country will soon start the process that will lead to the February 2027 local elections. This is likely to catalyze [violence against political figures](#), as gangs attempt to impede the election of officials who are deemed hostile or believed to be in cahoots with rivals, [as happened in 2023](#).

Meanwhile, political and security developments in neighboring countries will also shape the evolution of Ecuador's security crisis. In Colombia, President Gustavo Petro is hoping to reach final agreements with some armed groups before the end of his term in August 2026, while stepping up military pressure against armed actors that have shown little commitment to advancing the peace talks launched as part of his [Total Peace](#) strategy. Petro is working on reaching deals with Comuneros del Sur and the National Coordinator of the Bolivarian Army FARC dissidents — both of which operate in the southern departments of Nariño and Putumayo. Even in the slight chance that this happens, however, the results of Petro's Total Peace plan risk being too meager for this policy

to be continued by his successor, increasing the likelihood that any upcoming administration will adopt a more hardline approach to the conflict.

Developments in the presence and actions of armed groups in southern Colombia are likely to reverberate on the other side of the border, particularly in the Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos provinces, where the network of relations between groups could be altered. For its part, Peru — which is also experiencing a deterioration in security — will also elect a new president in April 2026. The policies implemented by the new government, particularly those aimed at curbing the smuggling of illegally mined gold and weapons to Ecuador, will play a role in stemming or fostering gangs' access to firearms and financial resources.

Additionally, US policies will also influence what happens next in Ecuador. The [US military buildup in the Caribbean](#) and the multiple strikes against what it alleges are drug-smuggling vessels may temporarily reduce maritime trafficking activities in the Caribbean, as long as the deployment lasts. However, drug trafficking organizations may divert their activities to the Pacific, where US forces have targeted a few vessels off the Colombian and Mexican coasts but do not have a significant

Ecuador ranks among the top 10 countries with the most intense violence in the world.



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Footnotes

- 1 [Renato Rivera, "Ecuador's criminal crisis," Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 22 September 2025](#)
- 2 [Defensoría del Pueblo, "Internal Displacement in Ecuador," 31 July 2025 \(Spanish\); Francisca Vigaud-Walsh, "Ecuador at a Crossroads: The Intersection of Violence, Migration, and Displacement," Center for Engagement and Advocacy in the Americas, 17 December 2024](#)
- 3 Online interview with Glaeldys González Salanche, a Southern Andes analyst with International Crisis Group, ACLED, 14 November 2025; [Helen Sullivan, "Powerful Ecuador drug lord 'Fito' extradited to US," BBC, 21 July 2025](#)
- 4 [Héctor Ríos Morales, "Deadly Riots in Ecuador Prison Leaves More Than 30 Inmates Dead, 27 by Asphyxiation," Latin Times, 15 November 2025](#)
- 5 [The Latin America Post, "Latin America Battles Narcos Container Hacks as Insiders Sell Routes," 25 August 2025; International Crisis Group, "Paradise Lost? Ecuador's Battle with Organised Crime," 12 November 2025](#)
- 6 [Bram Ebus, "The State of Coca," Amazon Underworld, 19 August 2025; Joshua Collins, "Ecuador declares 'war' on Colombian guerrilla groups following deadly ambush," Pirate Wire Services, 16 May 2025](#)
- 7 [Ecuavisa, "The Armed Forces withdrew from control of eight of the 19 prisons they had overseen for more than a year," 13 August 2025 \(Spanish\)](#)
- 8 Online interview with Renato Rivera, senior analyst at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, ACLED, 17 November 2025; [Rocío Muñoz-Ledo and Ana María Cañizares, "Alleged leader of Ecuadorian drug trafficking gang Los Lobos arrested in Spain," CNN, 17 November 2025](#)
- 9 [Reuters, "Ecuador transfers 300 high-risk inmates to new maximum-security prison," 11 November 2025](#)
- 10 [Mario Alexis González, "Trump Effect: Ecuador Registers the Lowest Levels of Migration Since 2017," Primicias, 11 August 2025 \(Spanish\)](#)

KEYWORD

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