

Venezuela Tren de Aragua

Tren de Aragua

by *InSight Crime*

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Tren de Aragua is Venezuela's **most powerful** homegrown criminal actor and the only Venezuelan gang that has successfully projected its power abroad. It has grown from a prison gang limited to the state of Aragua, to a transnational threat with a wide criminal portfolio.

The group has thrived thanks to long periods of **impunity** fostered by the government of President Nicolás Maduro. In addition, it has increased its power and presence by establishing alliances with and recruiting small criminal gangs in key territories of Venezuela and introducing cells in other South American countries.

This **transnational expansion** came on the backs of Venezuelan migrants fleeing the country. From Tocarón prison in Aragua, the gang oversaw and profited from cells established in at least three other South American countries. However, in September 2023, 11,000 Venezuelan police and military personnel, backed by armored vehicles, **stormed** Tocarón to seemingly take control of what had, until then, been Tren de Aragua's center of operations. Despite the blow of losing Tocarón, the gang's leadership **escaped**, and its transnational cells continue to operate.

History

Tren de Aragua was born in the Tocarón prison in the state of Aragua. The group's name, which roughly translates to the Aragua Train, may have originated from a labor union working on a railway project through the state which was never finished. But Héctor Rustherford Guerrero Flores, alias "**Niño Guerrero**," turned Tren de Aragua into what it is today during his imprisonment in Tocarón.

Under Niño Guerrero's leadership, Tocarón became one of the country's **most notorious** prisons, in large part due to the Venezuelan government's **unofficial policy** of handing control of some prisons, including Tocarón, over to crime bosses known as *pranes*. This freedom and the gang's criminal income allowed for the **construction** of a zoo, swimming pool, playground, restaurant, and nightclub within the prison.

With the gang's control firmly cemented within the prison, Tren de Aragua began expanding its influence. It **started** with the nearby San Vicente neighborhood, where it established strict social control and even **received** resources and support from the government via its charitable wing known as "Fundación Somos El Barrio JK."

Some criminal gangs already operating in Aragua established non-aggression pacts with the gang, among them **Tren del Llano**. However, after Tren del Llano's leader **was killed** in 2016, Tren de Aragua took over its territories in Aragua and part of Guárico state, according to police sources who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of their safety.

In the years that followed, the gang expanded its network to other states in Venezuela through alliances with smaller gangs, eventually building a presence in at least five other states. During this process, it expanded its criminal portfolio in Venezuela to include extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, migrant smuggling, **contraband**, illegal mining, retail drug trafficking, cybercrime, and theft.

Tren de Aragua's expansion **turned transnational** around 2018, when the gang attempted to **establish itself** on the Venezuela-Colombia border between the Venezuelan state of Táchira and the Colombian department of Norte de Santander. There, it clashed with major Colombian criminal groups, including the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – **ELN**) and the Gaitanistas (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – **AGC**). The groups fought for control of clandestine border crossings, known as *trochas*, which are home to a variety of criminal economies, including the smuggling of drugs, contraband, and migrants.

Tren de Aragua carved out a niche for itself in the Colombian border town of La Parada, where many Venezuelan migrants fleeing their country first arrive in Colombia. At this point, the Venezuelan exodus was in full swing, and Tren de Aragua **saw an opportunity** in the desperation of its compatriots. While larger Colombian groups focused on drug trafficking, Tren de Aragua began to exploit Venezuelan migrants systematically, charging them extortion fees, smuggling them into and throughout Colombia, and taking control of various nodes of the human trafficking for sexual exploitation market.

Between 2018 and 2023, Tren de Aragua built a transnational criminal network, setting up cells in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with further reports of a sporadic presence in Ecuador, Bolivia, and **Brazil**.

The group expanded **following** Venezuelan migration flows, initially staying under the radar by only targeting Venezuelan migrants as it increased its presence in border crossings and urban areas where Venezuelan migrants congregate.

As cells became more established, they **moved into** local criminal economies, employing eye-catching, targeted violence to force out local gangs and establish themselves as a serious threat. In addition to extortion and migrant smuggling, Tren de Aragua cells abroad control loan sharking (also referred to as *gota a gota*, or “drop by drop”), retail drug trafficking, kidnapping, **small-scale international drug trafficking**, human trafficking, and robberies. Each cell specializes in different activities, based on local conditions.

However, as the gang’s **use of violence** abroad has **rung** regional alarm bells, authorities across South America now have Tren de Aragua firmly in their crosshairs. Venezuela’s government finally retook control of Tocarón in September 2023, depriving the gang of its historic stronghold, while security forces in Chile, Peru, and Colombia have **carried out** “mega-operations” targeting the gang since 2022.

Leadership

The leader of the gang is Héctor Rustherford Guerrero Flores, alias “Niño Guerrero,” who led the group from Tocarón prison until September 2023. He escaped before the operation, with Venezuelan civil society **reporting** that he was warned ahead of time. His location remains unknown.

According to records from Venezuela’s Supreme Court of Justice, Guerrero started his criminal career in 2005, when he murdered a police officer in Aragua. He was first imprisoned in Tocarón in 2010 but **escaped** two years later.

His recapture and return to Tocarón in 2013 led Guerrero to consolidate Tren de Aragua alongside other criminals, who became his most trusted lieutenants. These included Larry Amaury Álvarez, alias “Larry Changa;” Kenferson Sevilla Arteaga, alias “El Flipper;” and Yohan José Guerrero, alias “**Johan Petrica**.” The latter has been accused of maintaining ties with Tren de Aragua and leading a powerful illegal gold mining gang in Las Claritas, Bolívar state, known as the **Las Claritas Sindicato**. Some reports suggest that Niño Guerrero may be hiding with Petrica in Las Claritas following the invasion of Tocarón.

Reports from security forces in Peru, Chile, and Colombia suggest that despite the geographic spread of the gang, it has maintained a hierarchical structure, with Niño Guerrero calling the shots. Judicial documents show how several Tren de Aragua lieutenants have been dispatched to cells across the region, some of whom even appear to rotate between cells in multiple countries.

Geography

Tren de Aragua’s operations center was previously located in Tocarón prison, in the state of Aragua. The gang is also present in at least five other Venezuelan states: Carabobo, Sucre, Bolívar, Guárico, and Lara.

It remains unclear where the group's new nucleus will be following the September 2023 invasion of Tocarón. However, there is no indication that the gang has stopped operating in Venezuela.

Outside of Venezuela, Tren de Aragua has established permanent cells in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with reports of its activities in Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

These activities are often concentrated in border areas with clandestine border crossings regularly used by Venezuelan migrants, such as the Venezuela-Colombia border between Táchira and Norte de Santander, the Peru-Chile border, and the Bolivia-Chile border. The gang has also established cells in urban zones with large Venezuelan migrant populations, including **Bogotá**, Colombia; Lima, Peru; and Santiago, Chile.

Allies and Enemies

Tren de Aragua maintains numerous links with organized crime and prison-based groups, both in Venezuela and in other countries, with which it has established pacts of non-aggression and even alliances to share criminal income. One such prison gang was located in the Trujillo Judicial Confinement Center, dominated by Álvaro Enrique Montilla Briceño, alias "El Loro." This prison was **taken over** by security forces just over a month after officials stormed Tocarón.

In addition, Tren de Aragua allegedly recruited and financed a small criminal gang in Lara state, called the "**El Santanita**" gang, to commit kidnappings and extortion.

A 2021 report from Brazil stated that Tren de Aragua members had been jailed in the northern state of Roraima, near Venezuela, and were working with Brazil's largest criminal group, the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – **PCC**), claims **repeated** by a 2022 academic investigation, although the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear.

Tren de Aragua has clashed with multiple groups, including the ELN, for control of border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia. Local officials and security forces across the region have highlighted the gang's willingness to use targeted violence to force out local gangs.

The gang's relationship with Venezuelan security forces and government officials has been complex. On the one hand, multiple sources interviewed by InSight Crime have pointed out that the group has corrupted local and regional officials. Its growth was also driven by the state's unofficial devolution of power to the *pranes* and the impunity it enjoyed within Tocarón. Even following the government invasion of Tocarón, its relationship with officials remains murky. It has lost its stronghold, but appears to have received advanced warning, and no high-ranking gang members were captured.

Prospects

Tren de Aragua's expansion across South America was the first time a Venezuelan gang managed to project itself internationally. It has become a threat to regional security, and dismantling it will not be easy.

However, its international spread appears to have slowed, and the loss of its operational base in Tócoron prison could disrupt its transnational operations. What's more, security forces across the region are pumping resources into targeting the gang's cells, with over 100 alleged members arrested in 2022 and 2023 by Peruvian, Chilean, and Colombian officials. These arrests, while weakening the gang outside of prison, have the potential to bring the group back to its roots and **spread** through foreign prisons.

The mass migration that allowed for Tren de Aragua's expansion is also slowing and evolving. There was little criminal infrastructure in South America prepared for the number of Venezuelan migrants who traveled across the continent between 2018 and 2022, allowing Tren de Aragua to step in and claim the lion's share of the profits.

Now, however, Venezuelans are increasingly traveling north to the United States, crossing through Colombia and Central America. This is decreasing the migrant-centered income in Tren de Aragua's existing territory. With **human smuggling** and **trafficking** along the northern route already controlled by powerful gangs, Tren de Aragua is not likely to be able to expand north as easily as it did in South America.

Reports of new cells continue to surface in South America, although officials **suggest** that many of these are copycat groups seeking to take advantage of Tren de Aragua's notoriety. It remains to be seen whether Tren de Aragua will maintain its existing network, continue to grow, or if it will fall into decline.