

News Venezuela

Official Uniforms Flood Venezuela's Black Markets

by **Venezuela Investigative Unit**

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Police arrested a vendor illegally selling police uniforms to criminals.

A striking number of security force uniforms are appearing on **Venezuela's** illicit markets, becoming favored garb for criminals to commit crimes in competition with officials who also routinely commit abuses while on duty.

Authorities **opened an investigation** into multiple vendors illegally selling uniforms belonging to **Venezuela's** criminal investigation unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC) from within Gran Bazar shopping mall in the western state of Zulia at the end of October. Criminals have donned CICPC uniforms to carry out extortion, robbery, and arms trafficking operations over recent years.

“If I come across a checkpoint in the middle of the night, how do I know if they’re real officials or just someone who bought these uniforms,” read **one comment** under the CICPC director’s Instagram post announcing the results of the Zulian operation.

This *modus operandi* goes far beyond the state of Zulia or the CICPC. An analysis of InSight Crime’s **Venezuela** news monitoring over the last four years showed 50 reported cases of criminals impersonating local and national authorities across 14 **Venezuelan** states.

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Venezuelan criminals, including some of the country's most dangerous gangs, have used this tactic to commit extortion, kidnapping, robbery, murder, arms trafficking, and drug trafficking. A CICPC [raid](#) in June 2022 dismantled a group dedicated to illegally selling military uniforms to gangs in the infamous [Cota 905 neighborhood](#) of Caracas, once home to the [Koki gang](#) and now its descendants.

Other notable examples include the [Adriancito extortion gang](#) in Zulia and Josué Ángel Santana, [alias "El Santanita,"](#) one of [Tren de Aragua's](#) top lieutenants, whose operatives have been caught impersonating police on various occasions.

In many cases, corrupt security officials themselves provide criminals with uniforms in exchange for payment or as part of a criminal alliance. In others, vendors steal the uniforms to sell to criminals or produce near-identical replicas.

InSight Crime Analysis

While criminals regularly use police uniforms to carry out their crimes across Latin America, rampant corruption amidst Venezuela's security forces has driven this *modus operandi* to a new extreme.

There have been notable cases of criminals posing as police around the region, including in [Honduras](#), [El Salvador](#), and [Mexico](#). But in Venezuela, there is another side to this story, with Venezuelan officials themselves routinely committing crimes like demanding [extortion](#) payments while in uniform.

"The criminals didn't invent this business model, the police themselves did," Jorge Govea Cabrera, the coordinator for the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV) in Zulia, told InSight Crime. "It is so common that now we are seeing a mutation where the criminals themselves are passing for police in order to extort, to rob, to kidnap. It's ingenious — the criminals are competing with security forces for criminal profits."

SEE ALSO : [More than 500 Venezuela Security Officials Involved in Extortion, Kidnappings](#)

Keymer Ávila, professor of criminology at the Institute of Criminal Sciences of the Central University of Venezuela, told InSight Crime that he hasn't seen evidence of a rise in criminals impersonating police and warned that relying on news media reports can distort reality. The focus, he said, should be on the security apparatus, which has ballooned out of control in recent years thanks to a [recruitment push](#) that has not seen a matching increase in resources.

"Venezuela is currently a police state, but a chaotic and fragmented one. Officials have their own agendas and needs, which they satisfy at their own discretion and without limits," Ávila told InSight Crime.

Recruitment of unqualified candidates, lack of oversight, and low pay — as low as \$15-40 for uniformed police officers — have created an environment where criminality among security forces runs rampant, experts told InSight

Crime.

According to them, even if criminals are impersonating police, the fault lies with the security apparatus.

“The manufacture, distribution, and marketing of security force uniforms should be a state monopoly or, failing that, subject to strict institutional controls,” Ávila said. “**Venezuela** has lost that. This has generated a whole range of illicit practices, whether carried out directly by officers or in cooperation and alliance with third parties.”

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