

Ecuador's criminal crisis

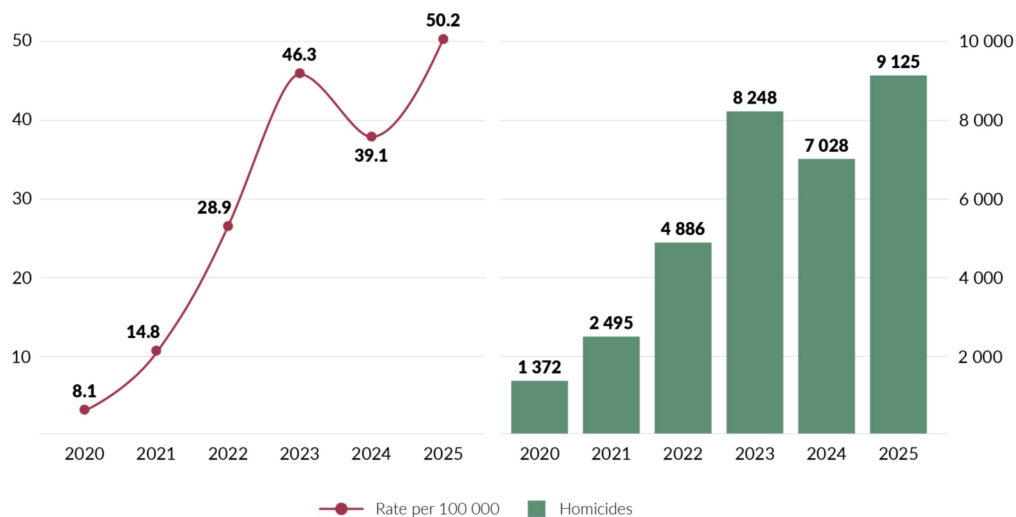
The fragmentation of criminal groups has driven Ecuador into a new cycle of violence

William Joffre Alcívar Bautista, known as 'Negro Willy', rose to lead the Ecuadorian gang Los Tiguerones while serving as a prison guard. After relocating to Spain in September 2023, he allegedly continued orchestrating the gang's criminal operations from abroad, including a brazen [attack](#) on a live television station in Guayaquil in January 2024. Spanish authorities raided his residence and [arrested him](#) in October 2024 on terrorism charges related to the televised assault. His arrest sparked violent internal warfare that fractured Los Tiguerones into competing factions.

The case of 'Negro Willy' and Los Tiguerones is one example of a broader pattern: the absence of leadership within Ecuador's main criminal organizations has triggered skyrocketing levels of violence as competing gang factions vie for control of the illicit economy. Following a 14 per cent fall in intentional homicides between 2023 and 2024 in Ecuador, projections for 2025 estimate around 9 100 deaths – a 40 per cent increase, equivalent to a rate of nearly 50 per 100 000 inhabitants.

This trend, which would continue to make Ecuador the country with the highest homicide rate in Latin America, is driven by divisions within criminal groups resulting from the arrest, murder or extradition of their leaders. At the same time, the diversification of lucrative illicit markets, including extortion, kidnapping for ransom, the transportation and storage of illicit drugs, and illegal mining, has ensured the gangs' profitability.

The surge in violence caused by such fragmentation is nothing new in Ecuador. Following the split of the gang Los Choneros after their leader was assassinated in 2020, the country experienced an [earlier wave of violence](#) involving what amounted to an open war for control of several prisons and major illicit markets. However, the current wave shows a more dispersed and volatile pattern, with the emergence of new criminal groups lacking solid hierarchical structures, which is leading to more frequent and unpredictable acts of violence.



Homicides in Ecuador, 2020–2025. Source: Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador

The domino effect

This second wave has been shaped by three recent incidents: the arrest of ‘Negro Willy’; the [assassination](#) of Benjamín Camacho, alias ‘Ben 10’, leader of the gang Los Chone Killers, in December 2024; and the July 2025 [extradition](#) to the US of Los Choneros leader José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias ‘Fito’. The elimination of these bosses has created internal factionalism in the gangs and intensified conflict over access to and control of illicit economies, in particular cocaine trafficking.

The province of Guayas has become the epicentre of this criminal reconfiguration. Since late 2024, marginalized neighbourhoods in Guayaquil, the province’s capital, have experienced an increase in homicides driven by the recruitment of minors into gangs, the use of explosives and vying for control over strategic access points to the city’s ports. In Durán, a city with an astronomically high homicide rate of 140 per 100 000 inhabitants, the fracturing of Los Chone Killers has fuelled a rise in intentional homicides among young people.

Against this backdrop, the extradition of ‘Fito’ in July 2025 weakened Los Choneros, sparking a series of revenge massacres, power struggles and targeted killings, particularly in the port city of [Manta](#). Although the leader’s removal from the country partially dismantled the group’s criminal governance in certain areas and compromised its internal cohesion, it remains to be seen what impact his absence will have on the criminal ecosystem.

New alliances

But the problem is not all about division. The latest fractures within criminal groups have also given rise to new alliances. The arrest of ‘Negro Willy’ [split](#) Los Tiguerones into two groups: Los Fénix and Los Igualitos. The former maintain ties with Las Águilas (a faction of Los Choneros), while the latter have strengthened links with the Los Lobos gang – a process similar to the [alliances](#) formed after a string of [prison massacres](#) in 2021, when Los Choneros splintered into various rival groups. This ultimately led to the creation of the Nueva Generación alliance, uniting Los Tiguerones, Los Lobos and Los Chone Killers into a single criminal network.

Similarly, Camacho’s killing triggered the division of Los Chone Killers into at least five factions. At least two of these are aligned with Los Lobos, a gang seeking to enforce a monopoly on drug trafficking and illegal mining.

CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION	FRAGMENTED GROUP	ALLIANCES
Los Tiguerones	Los Igualitos	Los Lobos
	Los Fénix	Las Águilas (Los Choneros faction)
Los Chone Killers	Faction 1: led by 'Negro Tulio'	Los Lobos
	Faction 2: led by 'Bob Marley'	Los Lobos
	Faction 3: led by 'Gato Celi'	Undetermined
	Factions 4 and 5: undetermined leadership	Undetermined
Los Lobos	Box BMW	Factions of Los Chone Killers and Los Igualitos

Factions and alliances of Ecuador’s main criminal groups.

Looking ahead

The volatile criminal landscape that has emerged from these leadership vacuums and organizational schisms presents multiple potential trajectories for Ecuador’s security landscape. Although fragmentation has driven homicide rates to unprecedented levels, the ultimate direction of this violence will largely depend on how these power struggles resolve. Three primary scenarios are likely to shape the country’s criminal ecosystem through 2026.

Firstly, in June 2025, Spain [granted](#) Ecuador a three-month deadline to extradite ‘Negro Willy’, provided that his human rights are guaranteed. His potential extradition remains uncertain but if it happens, his return to Ecuador could trigger an increase in violent acts inside prisons, especially among Los Igualitos and Los Fénix, driven by Willy’s interest in carrying out an ‘internal cleansing’ of Los Tiguerones. Such disputes could spill over into the streets. His potential extradition comes at a time when Ecuador lacks the capacity to prevent prison massacres, as Daniel Noboa’s government is focusing on building ‘[mega prisons](#)’ while seeking to reduce administrative costs.

The second scenario hinges on the strengthening of alliances among Los Lobos, Los Igualitos and Los Chone Killers, which may lead to a partial reduction in levels of armed violence in some areas of the provinces of Los Ríos, Guayas and Manabí by late 2025. This consolidation would reinforce Los Lobos’ territorial and logistical control, strengthen drug trafficking routes and extend the group’s dominance into illegal mining and extortion, temporarily lowering levels of armed violence as a result of the group’s dominance.

Thirdly, the struggle over criminal leadership will directly affect the security of community leaders, who play a crucial role in containing organized crime in urban environments. The

constant turnover of criminal leaders will force the renegotiation of previous agreements, thereby exposing communities to accusations of collaborating with rival factions. This scenario increases the risk of community leaders being kidnapped or assassinated.

Understanding these potential pathways is crucial for policymakers and security analysts as Ecuador navigates this critical juncture. The interconnected nature of these criminal networks suggests that developments in one organization will have cascading effects across Ecuador's security landscape. Ultimately, the country's ability to break the cycle of violence generated by fragmentation and reconsolidation will depend on addressing not only the immediate symptoms of violence, but also the underlying structural factors that enable criminal governance to flourish.

