



2.2. Security issues

After a decade of deepening political and economic instability, combined with pervasive corruption and an increasingly authoritarian government with controversial international alliances, conditions became highly favourable for the expansion of organised crime.[526](#) As a result, Venezuela has evolved not only into a major transit route for global cocaine trafficking but also into a hub for a wide range of illicit activities,[527](#) including extortion, kidnappings, illegal mining, and drug trafficking.[528](#) Institutions do not apply the Law against Kidnapping and Extortion.[529](#) According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the removal of Maduro would not undo Venezuela's role as a major hub for transnational organised crime, since illicit economies are deeply embedded in state structures.[530](#) Venezuela's illicit economies accounted for more than 16 % of GDP in 2024.[531](#)

According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV, Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia), the principal driver behind the country's decline in violence is not improved living conditions or effective public-safety policy, but rather the collapse of criminal opportunities brought about by economic contraction and widespread poverty.[532](#) As the economy has shrunk, viable activity has become concentrated in a handful of resilient sectors (e.g., technology, food production, and mining) and criminal groups have redirected their operations toward these same areas.[533](#) The same source further indicated that emigration driven by poverty, stagnant wages, and deteriorating public services is reshaping crime dynamics in three significant ways.[534](#) First, some criminals are migrating due to reduced opportunities at home or in search of higher rewards abroad; second, the mass departure of young people, historically the primary victims and perpetrators of violent and territorial crime, has altered the demographic landscape; third, a new youth cohort is emerging to fill the economic and criminal gaps left behind, with some being recruited by major criminal groups as enforcers, while others turn to petty theft, which has become more profitable under dollarisation.[535](#) This shift has resulted in more injuries, even as lethal violence remains comparatively low.[536](#)

Extortion is widespread in Venezuela and is carried out by a range of actors, from state officials to criminal groups.[537](#) Although the exact number of cases is unknown, there is a broad perception among the population that extortion is increasing.[538](#) A report by Transparencia Venezuela identified several key sources of extortion, along with common types, methods, and targets:

State security forces – Types: protection fees, payments to avoid fabricated accusations or arbitrary detention; methods: checkpoints, identity checks, threats; targets: citizens, businesses, transport operators.

Armed groups – Types: territorial taxes, roadblocks, kidnapping for ransom; methods: patrols, checkpoints, forced contributions; targets: communities, traders, migrants.

Prison gangs – Types: payments for protection, control of goods and services inside and outside prisons; methods: inmate networks, intermediaries, coercion; targets: detainees, visitors, vendors.

Criminal organisations – Types: commercial taxes, transport levies, protection rackets; methods: collection points, threats, violence; targets: businesses, transport workers, informal sector.[539](#)

On 12 March 2026, the national association of farm producers reported a series of violent attacks against Venezuelan farmers to the Prosecutor's Office, including the murder of a farmer in Guárico, the arson of agricultural machinery, and extortion by organised criminal groups, warning that these incidents are endangering national food security.[540](#) In April 2026, the Scientific, Penal and Criminalistic Investigation Service Corps (CICPC, Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas) arrested a member of Los Negritos de San Vicente, a gang based in Aragua state accused of extorting dozens of local businesses.[541](#) Sources indicated that as Venezuela's economic crisis has reduced domestic criminal opportunities and purchasing power, Venezuelan gangs have increasingly expanded their extortion operations into other Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Colombia.[542](#) SWI swissinfo reported that the groups that remain in Venezuela continue to extort residents in the country's poorest neighbourhoods 'without mercy', and that authorities seldom intervene, or, when they do, their actions typically have no meaningful consequences.[543](#)

Sources indicated that extortion by security forces typically involved detaining individuals on the street or at checkpoints and demanding payment in exchange for not fabricating a violation or infraction that would expose the victim to an uncertain and potentially prolonged process within the justice system.[544](#) Briceño-León explained that, when an individual refuses to pay an extortion fee to a state security official, false charges are typically filed against the victim and brought before a tribunal, where the person becomes vulnerable to further extortion by multiple actors, including judges, attorneys, and prosecutors. Faced with this prospect, victims often choose to reach an agreement with the security official to avoid escalation. The profiles most frequently targeted for extortion by state security forces are 'vulnerable' individuals, such as young people and older adults, whose relatives are perceived as able to pay amounts that may reach up to 4 000 USD.[545](#) InSight Crime reported that amounts can reach up to 10 000, although through 'negotiations' they can be lowered to as low as 2 000 USD.[546](#) Another common profile includes people in 'vulnerable' situations, such as parents detained at checkpoints while on their way to collect their children from school, who opt to pay immediately to avoid fabricated charges and ensure they arrive on time.[547](#) Regarding extortion by criminal groups, sources indicated that if a payment is not made, criminals usually carry out retaliations, including the destruction of property, theft of merchandise, attacks,[548](#) or kidnapping.[549](#)

Briceño-Leon and Amaya indicated that, based on their knowledge, people moving to another city to avoid extortion have not been targeted for that reason.[550](#)

Assistance to victims of extortion, particularly from state authorities and the justice system, is minimal.[551](#) Amaya explained that assistance from authorities is unlikely because the criminal group carrying out the extortion has political influence or political affiliation with the local authority, and complaints against officials have rarely resulted in prosecutions.[552](#) State efforts to combat extortion remain severely constrained due to pervasive corruption and the collusion of state actors at multiple levels of government with criminal organisations.[553](#) InSight Crime indicated that '[s]ome 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'.[554](#) The de facto dollarisation of the economy has further incentivised criminal groups to shift from robberies and theft to more lucrative forms of extortion.[555](#) InSight Crime also reported that, in a context of high corruption and institutional fragility, some public servants engage in bribery and extortion to advance files within the public administration, practices that criminal groups then exploit by impersonating or supplanting officials to carry out extortion schemes.[556](#)

Reliable statistics on violent deaths in the country are difficult to obtain, as the government does not publish official data and several local NGOs that previously monitored violence have been shut down.[557](#) OVV estimated that 6 884 violent deaths occurred in 2024; including 1 554 homicides, 767 police-related violent deaths, and 4 563 deaths classified as 'under investigation', a category marked by limited institutional transparency.[558](#) OVV calculated an overall rate of 26.2 violent deaths per 100 000 inhabitants for 2024.[559](#) The five most violent federal entities in 2024 were Aragua (58.8 violent deaths per 100 000 inhabitants), Distrito Capital (48.2), La Guaira (34.7), Miranda (34.6), and Bolívar (34.2).[560](#) Regionally, Venezuela was the second most violent country in Latin America in 2024, behind Ecuador (38.8) and over Colombia (25.4) and Honduras (25.3).[561](#) For 2023, OVV reported 6 973 violent deaths, including 4 064 classified as 'deaths under investigation', 1 956 as 'homicides', and 953 as police-related violent deaths.[562](#) The violent death rate for 2023 was 26.8 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants.[563](#)

Criminal activity in the mining sector is extensive, particularly in the states of Bolívar and Amazonas, where a diverse range of criminal organisations operate amid weak regulation and collusion with state security forces.[564](#) Armed actors present in these areas include Colombian groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN, Ejército Nacional de Liberación)[565](#) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) dissidents;[566](#) *colectivos*;[567](#) and *pranes* and *sindicatos*, which, according to International Crisis Group, are also collectively known as *sistemas* in mining areas in Bolívar.[568](#) Illegal mining has resulted in mass displacement of Indigenous communities, severe environmental degradation, and, in the Guayana region, the emergence of a major malaria hotspot.[569](#)

Indigenous communities face discrimination, exploitation, and extortion by armed groups, alongside sex trafficking and land seizures linked to illegal mining, all of which have gravely damaged the natural resources on which they depend.[570](#) Criminal groups controlling the mines impose arbitrary rules, and workers who disobey face harsh punishment; accidents are frequent, and child labour is widespread.[571](#) These groups also extend their control beyond the mining sites, where sexual exploitation and human trafficking are common in surrounding settlements.

Members of the armed forces have reportedly appropriated some mines for personal gain, charging workers 'taxes' to extract minerals or forcing them to sell at below-market prices.⁵⁷³ State security forces also establish checkpoints to collect payments from miners and Colombian guerrilla groups, such as in Yapacana, Amazonas state.⁵⁷⁴ International Crisis Group reported that many miners and local residents view Venezuelan security forces as predatory.⁵⁷⁵ The same source also reported on allegations that SEBIN personnel have transported high-ranking guerrilla members in official vehicles, and that ELN fighters pass through GNB checkpoints without interference.⁵⁷⁶ Additional allegations suggest that security forces provide Colombian armed groups with advance information on upcoming military operations.⁵⁷⁷

Informal mines are frequently taken over by military units for their own profit, often through violent operations.⁵⁷⁸ International Crisis Group indicated that in one instance, soldiers beat and detained displaced miners in harsh conditions; in another, during a 2023 operation, military-grade weapons were used, turning mining pits into battle zones, causing fatalities, and forcing many wounded miners to flee to Puerto Inírida, Colombia.⁵⁷⁹

Drug trafficking remains highly prevalent in Venezuela, particularly along its borders with Colombia and Brazil and across the Atlantic coast.⁵⁸⁰ The vast Amazon region is difficult to police, and Brazilian authorities have criticised weak control over river routes and airspace in both Colombia and Venezuela.⁵⁸¹ Small aircraft frequently depart from the Orinoco region and from illegal airstrips in Amazonas, while semi-submersible vessels constructed in Guyana transport narcotics down the Orinoco River to larger ships operating in international waters.⁵⁸²

Insight Crime provides a map from May 2025 indicating the presence of criminal groups in the 'Mining Arch' and Essequibo:

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Map 1: Criminal presence in Venezuela's Mining Arch and Essequibo, May 2025.⁵⁸³

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