

Latin America Watch

Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities



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Joseph Bouchard

Joseph Bouchard specialises in crime and geopolitics in the Americas, particularly political violence and foreign interference in South America. He spent some time studying political violence and geopolitics in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Bolivia, and covered the ongoing protests in Ecuador and Peru. Originally from Quebec City, Canada, he graduated with a BA in International Relations and Latin American Studies from the University of British Columbia, and is a student in the Master of International Affairs program at Carleton University. He is looking to pursue a PhD studying political violence in South America and dedicating his career to furthering hemispheric security.



About the Analysts

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Axel is a recent graduate of a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Sciences Po Toulouse (France). His professional experiences in Brazil and Mexico have allowed him to acquire an in-depth knowledge of contemporary issues in the Latin American region, particularly in the field of security (transnational crime, cartel violence) and politics (Brazilian foreign policy, Brazilian politics).



Belén García Gavilanes

Belen has 5+ years of experience in strategic communications, development and corporate affairs, mainly in third sector organisations. She has a MSc in Media, Communications and Development from LSE, and is currently pursuing a MSc in Social Science Research Methods at Cardiff University. Her interests are: gender equality, biodiversity conservation and sustainability.



Juan David Pérez

Juan David is an MPA (UCL), Lawyer (Universidad de los Andes), and Trilingual (Spanish, English & French) professional with six years of experience leading social projects in non-profit and public organisations in Latin America. His research covers drug regulation, criminality, and poverty in Latin America. His Master's dissertation analysed the relationship between organised crime and drug regulation in seventeen Latin American countries. Juan David now works as a policy analyst in the Justice Division of the National Planning Department (DNP) in Colombia.



Abstract¹

According to 2023 data, all but one of the [top 20](#) cities in the world with the highest homicide rate are located in the Americas. Medium and large cities in the Americas, particularly in Latin America, have been plagued by high violent crime rates, in part due to their high concentration of drug-trafficking organisations and other transnational criminal syndicates responsible for producing and transiting illicit goods to the rest of the world. Despite this common preponderance for organised crime and violence, cities in Latin America often vary in type and commonality of specific crimes, and in their transnational criminal profiles. The *Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities* report (referred to here as “The Report”) attempts to establish the history, demographics, specificity, scope, and trends of violent crime in a select group of four cities in the region. The cities chosen to be studied were selected due to their prominent violent crime statistical profile, as well as their strategic significance for transnational organised crime. Geographical, demographic, and linguistic diversity was included to dilute the statistical sample and highlight trends and distinctions. The goal of the report was to detail the context and quantitative and qualitative reality of crime in different urban centres in Latin America, to help inform policy makers and analysts at all levels, and to further understanding on the topic through data and case studies.

¹ Cover photo from *Along Dusty Roads*.



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Introduction

Latin America is often well-known for its high levels of violence, especially within urban areas. The [top](#) 20 cities with the highest homicides rate in the world are all located in Latin America apart from one. As a result, we deemed it relevant and necessary to analyse violent crime in Latin America's cities.

The main aim of this report is to inform policy makers and analysts about urban crime within the region through an array of case studies . This report analyses four specific urban areas in the region which include:



This report gives an overview of the political and criminal history of each city by comparing trends over the past years. In addition to this, we present an analysis of the illicit economy in each area whilst also providing analysis on the activities and influence of criminal organisations.

To complete our analysis, we analysed data presented within different new articles, openly available data by governments and departments of justice, as well as data by non-governmental organisations and think tanks such as InSight Crime and Igarapé Institute as well as data presented by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.



Guayaquil, Ecuador (Belén García Gavilanes)

Criminal and Political History of the City

During the last few years, Ecuador has faced rising rates of prison violence and contract killings. According to [InSight Crime](#), Ecuador had the second-highest growth in homicides rate in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020. In 2021, [more than 340 people died inside prisons](#) due to violent riots between rival gangs that continue to dispute territories for illicit activities; [190](#) of those deaths took place during the riots at Litoral Penitentiary in Guayaquil.

The province of Guayas and its capital Guayaquil play an important role in the national economy, [representing over 20 percent of Ecuador's gross domestic product](#) (GDP). Guayaquil is the main port and the second largest city in Ecuador with over [2,644 million people \(2017 data\)](#). Its strategic location paired with deep socioeconomic inequalities have made Guayaquil one of the centres for organised crime nationally. However, in the last couple of years, [this issue has also spiralled in Esmeraldas Province](#), located on the border with Colombia.

Security Trends

Five main gangs operate in Guayaquil, disputing territory within the state as well as throughout the country:

- [Los Choneros](#) is the biggest gang in Ecuador ([20 000 members](#)), born in the 90s in Chone, a town in Manabi Province. However, they operate throughout most of the country, especially on the Coast, including Guayas Province. They are involved in drug trafficking, contract killing, and other criminal activities. In 2020, their leader "[Rasquiña](#)" was murdered, which triggered a series of riots and rivalries between gangs.



- [Los Lobos](#) is the second biggest gang in Ecuador, with at least 8 000 members inside the prison system. This gang worked together with *Los Choneros*. However, their relationship ended after Rasquiña's death and they disputed territories to control drug trafficking routes and other illicit activities.
- [Los Tiguerones](#) is a gang born from *Los Choneros*. Their leader is William Jofre Alcívar Bautista, alias Commander Willy, who was a former prison guide. This gang fights for power against *Los Lagartos*, *Chone killers* and *Los Lobos* within the biggest prisons of Ecuador. *Los Tiguerones* have gained strength through drug trafficking.
- [Los Lagartos](#) is a prison gang that started working as hitmen for other criminal bands. They work in Guasmo, one of the most violent areas located in the south of Guayaquil. Their leader is Carlos Mantilla Cevallos, alias Choclo, who was detained in 2012 due to homicide. They are considered one of the most dangerous gangs in the country and are the rivals of *Los Choneros*.
- The [Chone Killers](#) is a gang dedicated to drug trafficking, contract killings, robberies, and assaults. Its origin comes from *Los Ñetas*, a Puerto Rican narco-gang. Their leaders are the siblings Terry Israel Camacho, known as *El Trompudo*, and Antonio Benjamin Camacho, known as *Ben 10*.

The ties with international cartels and the divisions caused after Rasquiña's death have strengthened new alliances. According to [InSight Crime](#), *Chone Killers*, *Los Tiguerones*, and *Los Lobos* have turned against *Los Choneros* and formed a new structure called *Nueva Generación*, as a reference to their drug trafficking alliance to Mexico's *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*.

After multiple riots, in November 2021, Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso [announced a national agreement](#) to face the penitentiary crisis. This included the constitution of a [Commission for Penitentiary Dialogue and Pacification](#), responsible for creating a strategy focused on human rights to prevent, control, and respond to prison violence. However, members of the Commission ended up having disagreements and two of them resigned in the



process. Their [report](#) highlighted the lack of policies for labour reinsertion, inmate extortion, and lack of basic human rights, among other issues.

In 2022, after the report was presented, [videos started circulating on social media](#) claiming an alleged peace promise from a few gangs. Members of *Los Lobos*, *Los Tiguerones*, *Los Lagartos*, *Mafia 18 Tiburones*, *Los Duendes* and *Latin King* gangs appeared inside the prisons promising a ceasefire. Nonetheless, there [were more killings](#) a few months after the announcement.

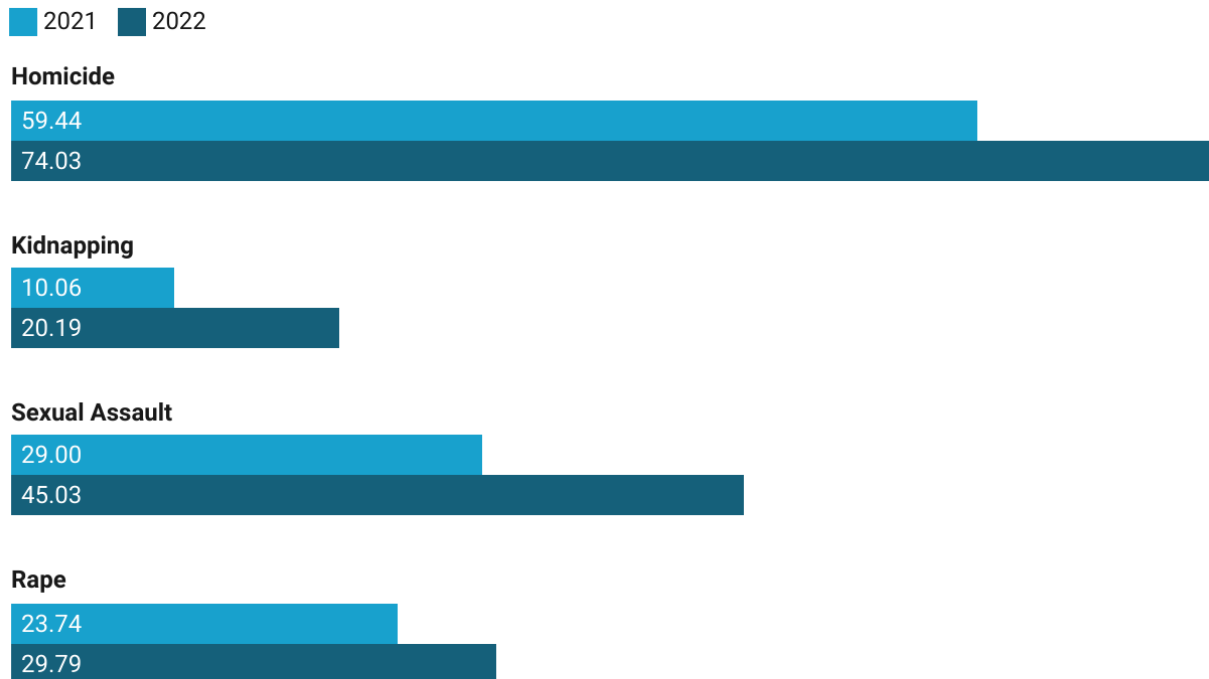
The Data

Gang disputes are also reflected outside the prison massacres. As seen below, there has been an increase in different crimes in Guayaquil between the years 2021-2022. The rate of homicide rose by 25 percent, kidnapping by 100 percent, sexual assault by 55 percent and rape by 25 percent during this period. However, these figures may not be a true reflection of reality. According to [Fundación ALDEA](#), an independent civil society organisation that maps feminicides in Ecuador, in 2021 there were [67 femicides caused by organised crime](#) and in 2022 the number rose to [157](#). These numbers show the impact that gangs can have on femicides. Furthermore, Guayas Province remains among the ones with the highest number of femicides nationally (78 in 2021 and 93 in 2022) during the last two years.



Types of Crime in Guayaquil

(Per 100,000 individuals)



Rate per 1,000 inhabitants

Chart: Belén García - London Política • Source: Fiscalía General del Estado • Created with Datawrapper

The graph above shows that 2022 had the highest rate of robbery (vehicles, people, cash, property and other goods). Even though there is no data for the last four months, by August, Guayaquil had already reached 81 percent of armed robberies reported in the previous year. The month of December is usually the most unsafe month due to the holiday season. However, the month with the most robberies so far has been June 2022.

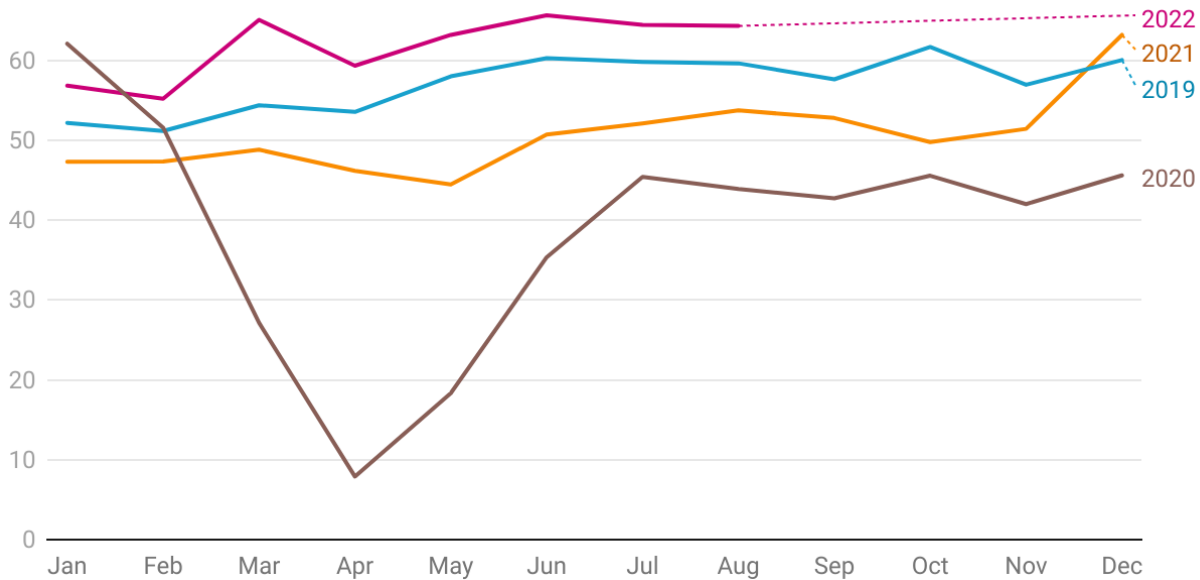
[According to the police](#), drug trafficking impacts other types of crime and felonies, which could be one of the possible explanations for the spike in robberies in the city during 2022. It is possible to distinguish that 2019 is the second year with the most robberies and 2020 had a considerable decrease due to lockdown. Therefore, there is not a continuous growth in robbery



throughout the years and there may be other explanations that influence criminal behaviour in Guayaquil.

Robbery in Guayaquil

(Per 100,000 individuals)



*2022 data only includes months Jan-Aug

Chart: Belén García - London Política • Source: Fiscalía General del Estado • Created with Datawrapper

Rate of unreported crime

According to the [2011 Official Survey of Safety Perception](#), the rate of criminal reporting to police depends upon the type of crime committed, as shown in the table below. The highest ones are car theft (84.5 percent) followed by kidnapping (48.9 percent). Both of these crimes need to be reported for the police to act. However, mugging is among the lowest ones because of its commonality and difficulty to find the perpetrator. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that 30 percent of the people who did not report a crime said that they do not trust the judicial system, 18.54 percent do not trust the police and 13.61 percent said they did not have time to report. This signals an overall scepticism about the effectiveness of the public system to guarantee security to their citizens.



Crime report

% of crime report according to its type

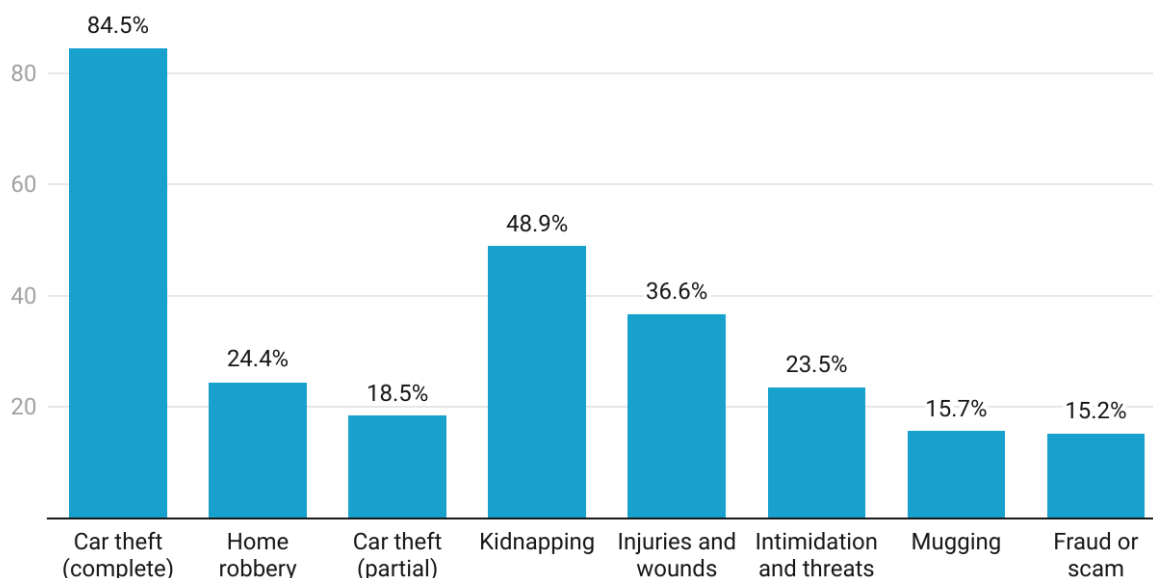


Chart: Belén García - London Política • Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (2011) • Created with Datawrapper

There are other crimes that may not be reflected in the charts, such as extortions. Gang extortions have become common in Guayaquil and other large cities in Ecuador. The modality known as “[vaccines](#)”, which consists in asking for regular payments in exchange for protection, has threatened especially the livelihoods of small and medium business owners. Furthermore, it has also affected children and sex workers. These extortionists can be part of significant gangs as well as common offenders. Until August 2022, Guayaquil was the city with the highest rate of extortion reported in the country ([474 cases and 2479 cases of intimidation](#)).

Conclusion

Ecuador has become a [centre for drug trade](#) and witnessed a continuous rise in imprisonment ([11 000 in 2009 compared to 40 000 in 2021](#)), making it a target for local and international gang



operations. Organised crime has also permeated public institutions, such as [Ecuador's Navy](#), which is suspected of collaborating with criminal gangs by providing arms or selling information.

The [recent local elections](#) can be a reflection of the people's discontent regarding how Guayaquil has been managed. For the first time in 31 years, a left-wing mayor has been elected ([Aguiles Álvarez](#), *Revolución Ciudadana's* candidate) with 40 percent of the votes. Furthermore, the [negative referendum results](#) regarding the possible extradition of Ecuadorians involved in organised crime, limit the national government's plan to tackle crime. Therefore, it is unlikely that the wave of violence and crime inflicted upon Guayaquil will decrease soon, which poses significant challenges for the coming mayor and the current national government.



Natal, Brazil (Axel Aubry)

Political and Criminal History of the City

Criminal activities in the state of Rio Grande do Norte are organised around the interactions between prisons and the streets, enabled by the use of mobile phones inside penitentiaries and by corruption schemes involving prison staff. In Brazil, “factions” are criminal and political communities that originated from prisons and expanded beyond, developing specific ways of perpetrating crimes and generating profit while building criminal networks.

The state of Rio Grande do Norte and its capital city, Natal, are characterised by a process of intense rivalry between two factions: the *Sindicato do Crime do Rio Grande do Norte* (SDC) and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). The [PCC](#) is the largest and most powerful criminal organisation in Brazil. The criminal group emerged in São Paulo in the early 1990s and was formed by prisoners as self-protection groups. The PCC has a presence throughout Brazil, but also internationally (South America, Europe, and China). The SDC emerged in March 2013 as a reaction to the control exercised by the PCC over drug-trafficking activities. The faction's strategy consists of co-opting members of the PCC within prisons, but also in selling drugs at low cost in the state of Rio Grande do Norte.

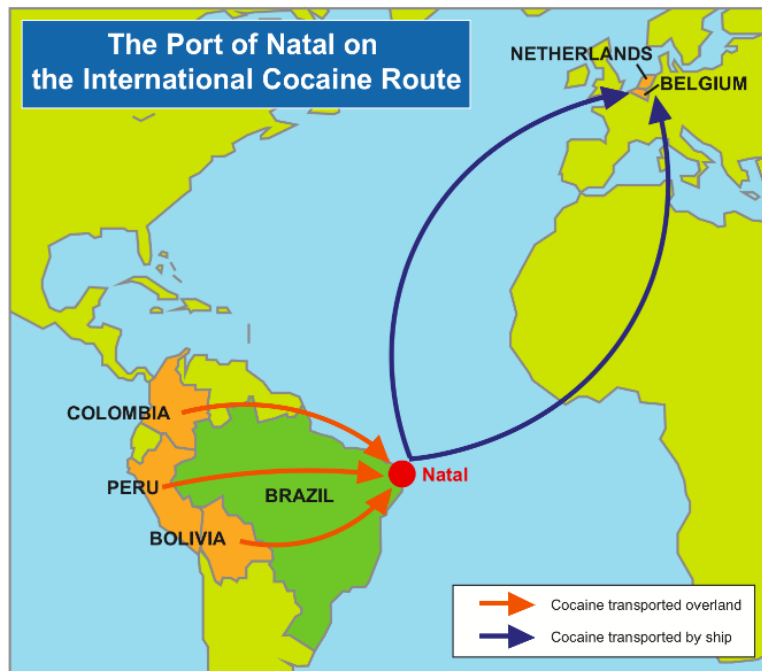
The conflict between the two criminal groups has resulted in violent events, as evidenced by the [Alcaçuz prison riot](#) in January 2017, which led to the death of at least 27 inmates. This incident induced a restructuring of organised crime in the state of Rio Grande do Norte and an increase in urban violence in Natal. For that reason, Natal became the eighth most violent city in the world, and [the first in Brazil in 2016](#). The years 2017 and 2018 were particularly lethal due to the [dispute between the two factions](#), as evidenced by incidents of unprecedented violence



reported by the local press, such as homicides, torture, [dismemberments](#), [beheadings](#), and [discoveries of corpses](#).

Since 2018, the SDC has been standing out as the main faction controlling Natal, relegating its rival, the PCC, to the interior of the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Indeed, the criminal organisation has consolidated itself by [massively recruiting](#) young men in disadvantaged urban areas of Natal and by invading PCC-controlled neighbourhoods, notably [Mosquito, Japão, and Beira Rio](#). The PCC nevertheless maintains a strong presence in the capital and is currently pursuing its project to expand and control international drug-trafficking routes. The risk of confrontation between the two factions, particularly within prisons, thus remains latent.

Illicit Economy and Criminal Activity in Natal



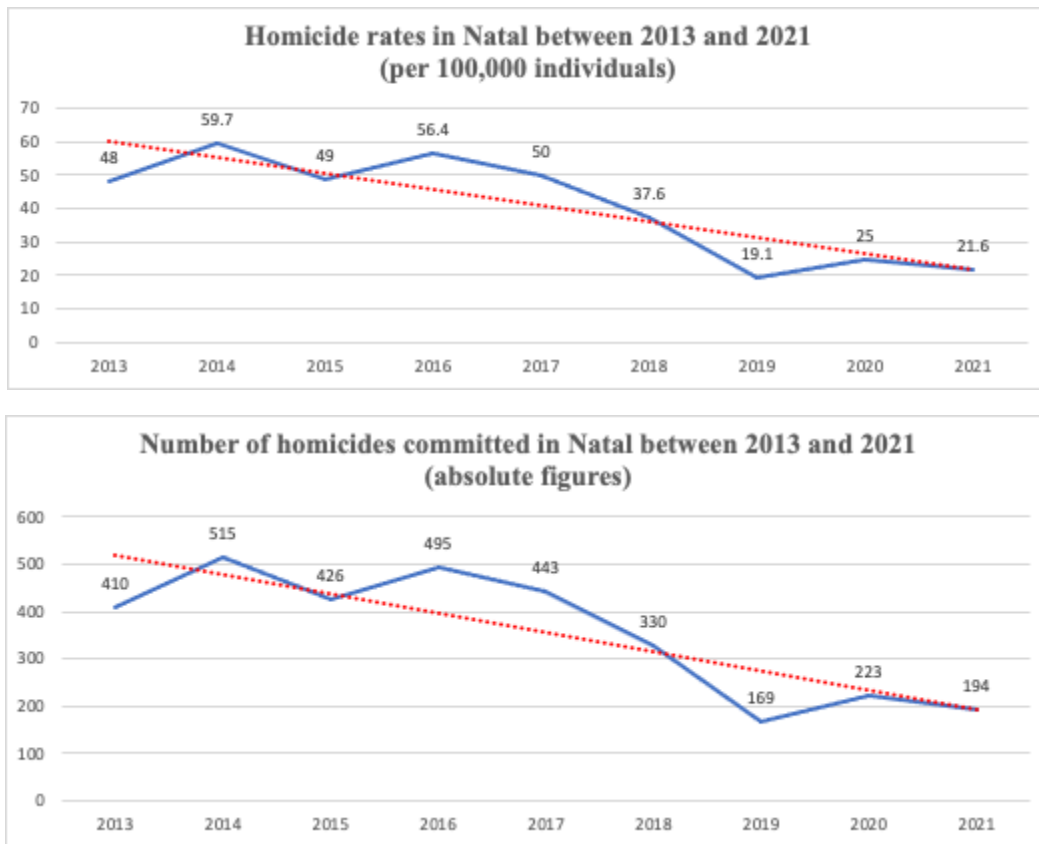
Map: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Created with Adobe Illustrator

The port of Natal became a [major entry and egress point for drugs in Brazil](#) (see map above). It receives cocaine mainly by truck, but also, to a lesser extent, by plane and boat, from neighbouring countries, mainly Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru. Drugs leaving in containers head to



Belgium and the Netherlands. This trend was confirmed by the [seizure of 11 kilos of cocaine](#) in January 2023. Several factors contribute to making Natal a [strategic point for international drug trafficking](#). The city constitutes the closest Brazilian state capital to Europe and its port facilities allow more drugs to be transported by boat than by air, with a lower amount of risk. Moreover, there was no [technology to scan containers](#) leaving the port until 2020.

Security trends in Natal



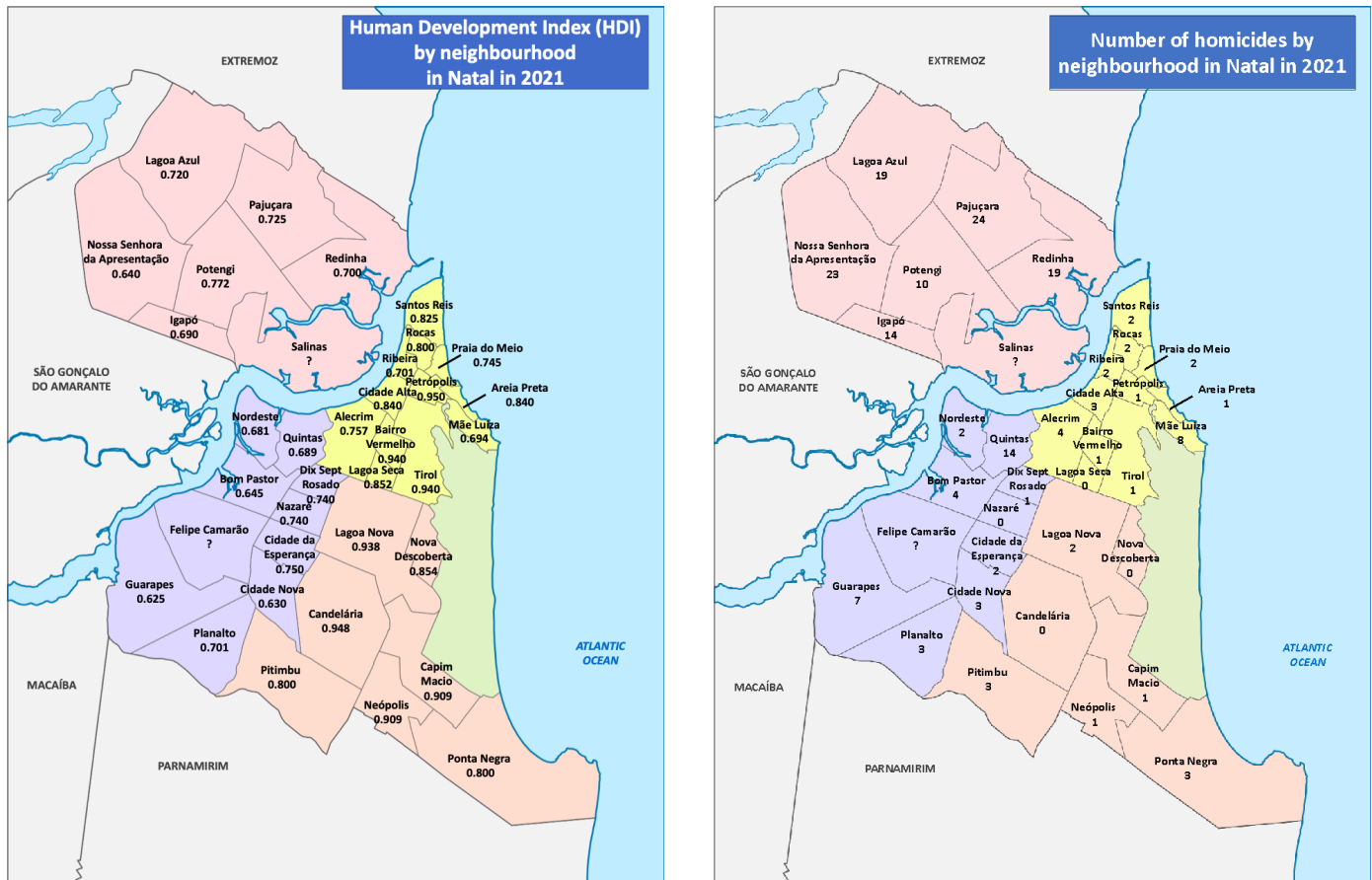
Charts: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Source: Observatório da Violência do RN (2022) · Created with Excel

In recent years, we have witnessed a downward trend in the number of homicides committed in Natal. Thus, between 2013 and 2021, the number of murders decreased by 53 percent. 2014 was the deadliest year, with 515 murders recorded in the capital. While Natal was the 6th most lethal Brazilian capital in 2013, it ranked 13th in 2021. This downward trend corresponds in part



to a reduction in the intensity of the factional rivalry in Natal, with the strategic withdrawal of the PCC from the city.

Homicides related to factional warfare are characterised by “[cycles of revenge](#)”, that is, the death of one or more members of a faction tends to systematically lead to retaliation by the rival faction. This logic of “cycles of revenge” can also be observed in cases of killings targeting the police. Indeed, in the late 2010s, for every police officer assassinated, [around 10 to 15](#) people were murdered within the peripheries of Natal, whether or not they were linked to a faction.



Maps: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Source: Observatório da Violência do RN (2022) · Created with Adobe Illustrator

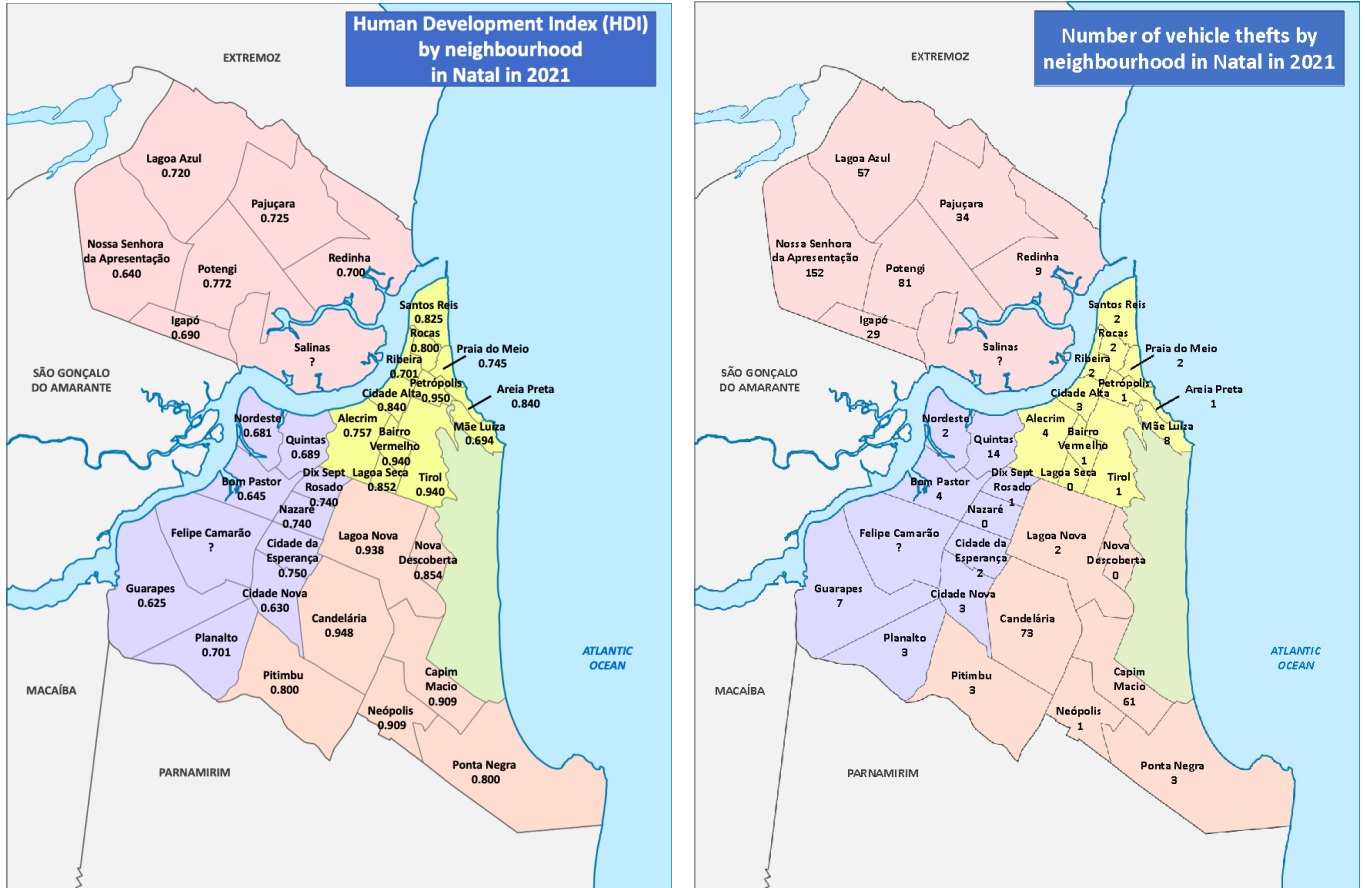
According to a [study](#) by Brazilian geographer Pedro Henrique Oliveira de Freitas on violent, lethal, and intentional crimes (CVLI) recorded in Natal in 2019 and 2020, violence tends to be



concentrated in the Northern and Western administrative regions of the city. In these areas, young people are more likely to be victims of violent deaths, as evidenced by the short distances recorded between CVLIs and educational facilities and squares. Indeed, for many young people with no prospects of a decent entry into the labour market, with a low level of education, and coming from economically and socially vulnerable environments, insertion into criminal networks constitutes a [means of survival, social recognition, and identity construction](#). In the Southern and Eastern parts of Natal, crimes remain more isolated and tend to occur in smaller numbers. The social isolation caused by the pandemic did not interfere with the distribution of homicides in the city space. [Pedro Henrique Oliveira de Freitas](#) found a correlation between socio-spatial segregation and CVLIs. Territorial exclusion seems therefore to provide a fertile ground for the spread of urban violence. This is also confirmed by the two maps below, drawn using the data from the *Observatório da Segurança Pública de Natal*. Nossa Senhora da Apresentação and Lagoa Azul are the neighbourhoods that recorded the most homicides in 2021 (23 and 19 respectively). They are also part of the least developed areas of the city, with HDIs of 0.640 and 0.720 respectively.



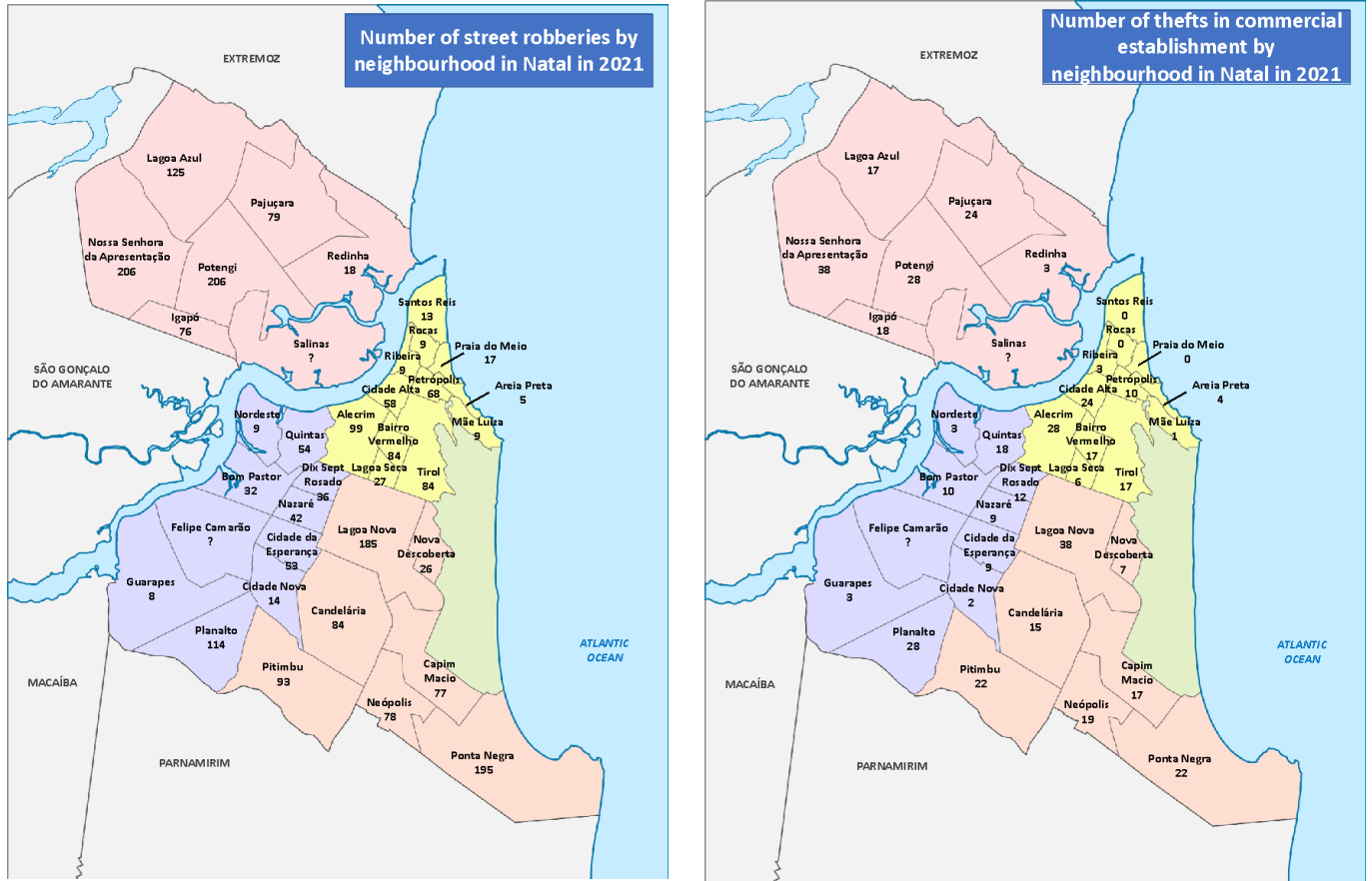
Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities



Maps: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Source: Observatório da Violência do RN (2022) · Created with Adobe Illustrator

A [study](#) by the Brazilian sociologist Sáskia Sandrinelli Guedes de Araújo Lima Hermes on vehicle thefts also supports this reality. According to the sociological study, the richest part of the population in Natal can afford to pay for car insurance, to protect their vehicles inside closed condominiums, buildings and paid car parks, and is therefore less affected by vehicle thefts. On the other hand, those with fewer resources have to park on the street for longer periods of time and in places with more precarious security conditions. If we look at the two maps below, we can also note such a positive relationship between the level of development by neighbourhood and the number of vehicles thefts, which concentrate in Northern Natal.

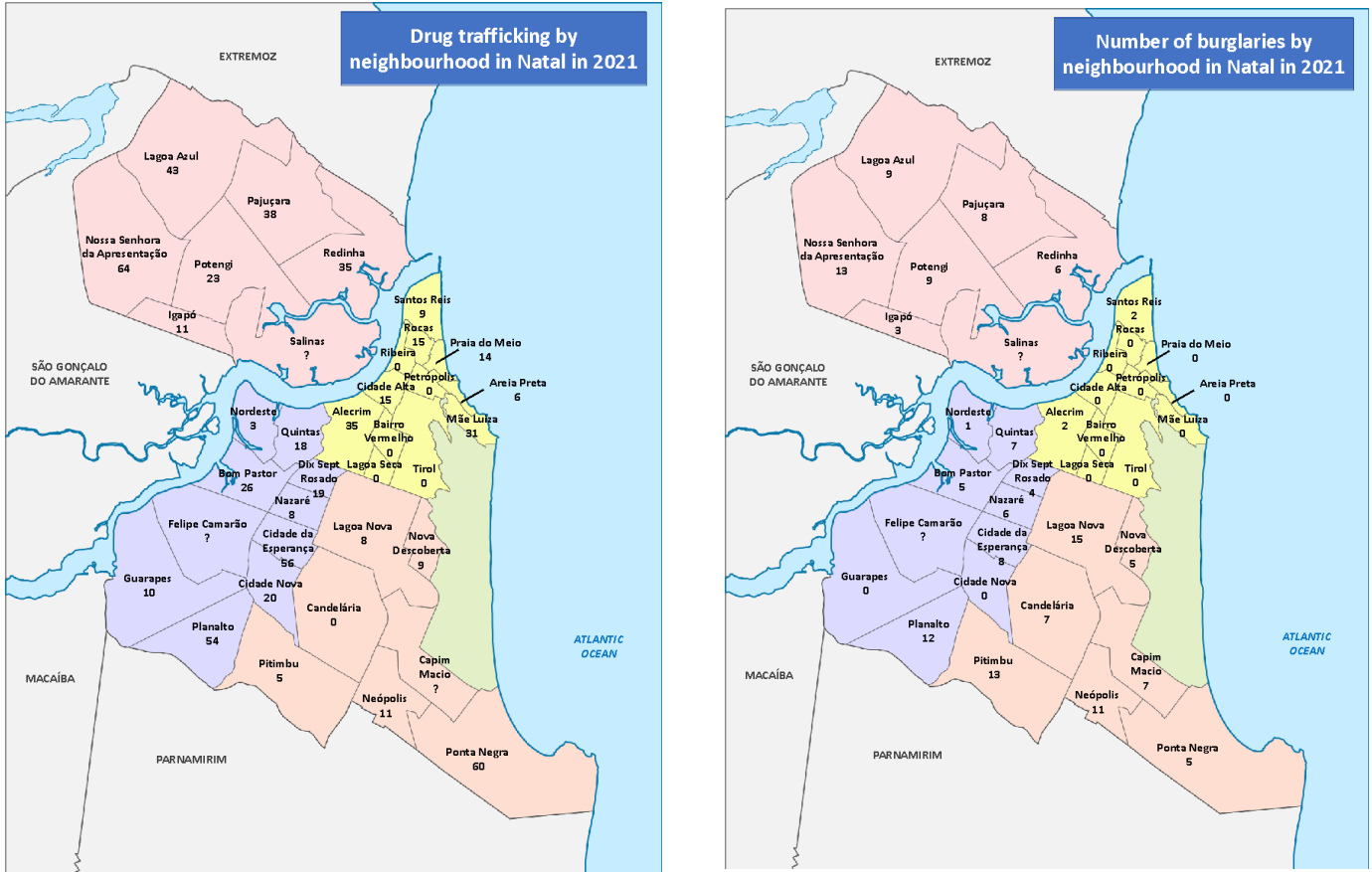




Maps: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Source: Observatório da Violência do RN (2022) · Created with Adobe Illustrator

[Sáskia Sandrinelli Guedes de Araújo Lima Hermes](#)'s analysis in terms of inequalities seems to be applicable to other types of crime, such as street robberies, thefts in commercial establishment, burglaries and drug trafficking cases (*see maps below*). For instance, closed residential condominiums, some of them high-luxury, are located in the Eastern part (and to a lesser extent in Southern part) of the port. Closed residences often have a high level of protection against the risks from the outside world (24-hour guard service, monitoring cameras, barbed wire etc.). As a result, some neighbourhoods in the Eastern part of Natal did not record any burglaries in 2021.





Maps: Axel Aubry - London Politica · Source: Observatório da Violência do RN (2022) · Created with Adobe Illustrator

Conclusion

- 1) The port of Natal constitutes a strategic point on the cocaine route from Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela) to the European consumer market (Belgium, the Netherlands). Control over drug trafficking activities has been stirring up a fierce rivalry between the SDC and PCC factions, although the SDC has tended to maintain near-complete control of the city in recent years.
- 2) Violent crimes in Natal are mostly linked to factional warfare and affect primarily young people from lower-class homes. If the SDC were to lose its grip on drug-related activities in the port, further violent factional clashes could occur, signifying an increase in urban violence, as observed in 2016.



- 3) Homicides, vehicle thefts, street robberies, thefts in commercial establishments, burglaries, and drug trafficking cases tend to concentrate in the Northern part (and to a lesser extent in the Western part) of Natal. The Northern and Western neighbourhoods also have the lowest human development indices. Such socio-spatial segregation results in inequalities in security.
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Cali, Colombia (Juan David Pérez)

Political and Criminal History of the City

Cali (Colombia) is a critical [hotspot](#) of crime in Colombia. It is not only considered one of the most important sites for drug trafficking in the country, but it has also become a strategic point for guerrilla groups that aim to gain control over the Pacific region - one of the most isolated and poverty-stricken regions of the country. Moreover, the city has become an [immigration point](#) for many citizens that were obliged to flee from rural areas - mainly caused by [guerrilla groups](#) such as FARC-EP and drug organisations like *Los Rastrojos* and *Los Urabeños*. Consequently, poverty, inequality, and informality have transformed it into a zone of social disparity, causing tension among wealthy and poor citizens and violent riots against the government.

This reality has transformed the city into a zone of constant conflict among many actors with particular interests in controlling the area. Naturally, crime numbers have surged dramatically in recent years. Understanding crime and the complex network of actors is crucial to counter violence in the city and diminish its effect in the future.

Demographics

Currently, Cali has a population of [2,227,642 inhabitants \(2018\)](#), making it the third most populated city in the country. Even though Cali and other suburbs contribute a significant share of the national GDP, the region is quite vulnerable. Poverty and inequality are highly present in the city. According to the [National Department of Statistics \(DANE\)](#), around 17 percent of Cali's population is unemployed, and 36 percent lack primary living conditions - considering the Multidimensional Poverty Index. Therefore, informality is mainly present in the city, where almost 48 percent of the population work in informal conditions.



Moreover, Cali's location is considered a [strategic point](#) for many actors, given its proximity to the main maritime port (Buenaventura) and the principal economic hubs of the country. Many guerrilla groups and drug cartels have incentives to control the area and its inhabitants. Consequently, many rural and poor citizens have been obliged to flee and take refuge in Cali - naturally without proper living conditions.

Cali is located in the Pacific region of the country, which has been characterised as the most underdeveloped in Colombia. Almost [30 percent](#) of the Pacific population lives in poverty. Its lack of infrastructure in public services such as sanitation, water management, energy, and public roads, among others, forced the Colombian government to create a unique plan to counter this problem back in 2016. The World Bank and the Inter American Development Bank granted several [financial loans](#) to help the government tackle this reality that concentrates mainly on Cali. The Pacific population fled to the main epicenters of the region, where Cali transformed into an important reception hub.

Security Trends

Since the beginning of the so-called "War on Drugs" in 1971, Colombian [drug organisations](#) such as the *Cártel de Cali* and the *Cártel del Norte del Valle* found an opportunity to profit and smuggle different kinds of illegal products via the United States and Europe. Since then, smuggling and violence have substantially surged in the city, consolidating Cali as the most [violent epicentre](#) of the country.

According to a recent [study](#) by InsightCrime, the city reported the highest number of homicides in 2021 - ahead of cities such as Bogotá and Medellín. To put this into context, Bogotá quadruples Cali in population and gathers the country's most significant share of economic activity; however, Cali is where the highest index of homicides is concentrated.



Given this prior context, [data gathered](#) by the Crime and Investigation Division of the Colombian National Police (DIJIN) can be used to determine the extent of crime in Cali and how it is compared with other main cities in the country.

Summary Data 2022

City	Population	Homicides	Theft	Sexual assault	Kidnapping	Assault
Cali	2,227,642	984	24009	1324	9	5085
Bogotá	7,412,566	1007	136307	7489	11	22777
Medellin	2,427,129	363	28326	2420	11	4737
Barranquilla	1,206,319	334	14993	483	2	2893

Summary data 2022 - Rate per 100,000 inhabitants

City	Homicides	Theft	Sexual assault	Kidnapping	Assault
Cali	44,2	1077,8	59,4	0,4	228,3
Bogotá	13,6	1838,9	101,0	0,1	307,3
Medellin	15,0	1167,1	99,7	0,5	195,2
Barranquilla	27,7	1242,9	40,0	0,2	239,8

Tables: Juan David Pérez - London Política · Source: Colombian National Police

As both tables describe, crime rates in the city are quite significant. However, homicide rates stand out above the others when compared with the other main cities. As the data depicts, Cali has, by far, the highest homicides rate per 100,000 inhabitants of the country, having 44.2 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The gap between the other cities such as Barranquilla (27.7) and Cúcuta (27) exceeds 20 percentage points, which indicates the problems experienced in Cali.



However, in recent years Cali has become [safer](#). According to recent data, since 2013, homicides are declining constantly. Although Cali is still considered the most violent city in the country, from 2013 to 2022, crime rates have decreased almost 50 percent. As the following table depicts, in 2013, almost 2,000 inhabitants were murdered in the city. Almost 10 years later, the figure has been reduced to about 1,000 murders per year.

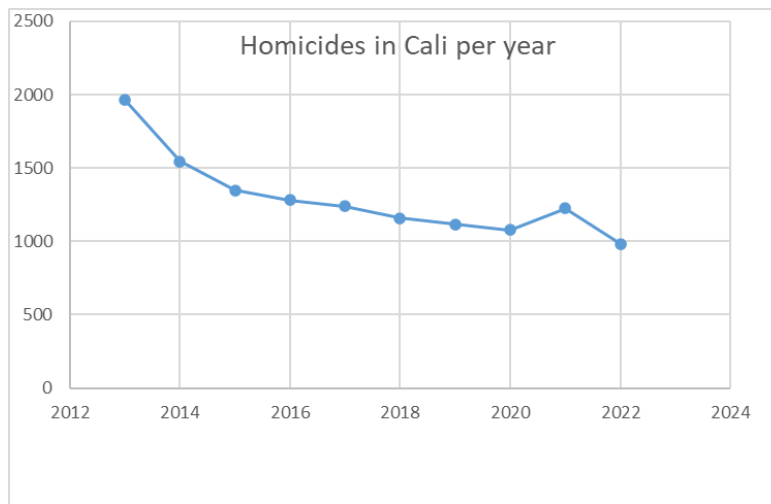


Chart: Juan David Pérez - London Política - Source: *Estadística Delictiva DIJIN* (2022)

Although crime rates in the city are still problematic, [policies](#) enacted by the local government in conjunction with the national police seem to have positively affected homicide rates over the years. By strengthening local power in isolated neighbourhoods, Cali authorities are regaining control of the population and are, as the data indicates, reducing crime rates in the city. Nonetheless, further investigation is needed to determine the exact cause of these hopeful results.

Rate of Unreported Crime

According to the [DANE](#), the rate of unreported crime at a national level is high. Considering the results of a recent national survey regarding security perception and crime commitment in the



country, at least 72 percent of victims fail to report crimes. Such a number is even higher in rural areas, where around 84 percent of victims decide not to report to the authorities.

The [survey](#) goes a step further by classifying the rate of unreported crime (hidden crime) for each type of crime (i.e. theft, homicide, kidnapping). Racketeering and cattle rustling have the highest unreported rates in the country (77 percent and 93.7 percent respectively), which might relate to the rate detected in rural areas. However, common robbery (theft) has the lowest unreported rate, at 66 percent. Unreported crime rates are high considering the number of crimes committed daily in the country, one of the highest in the region (26 per 100,000 inhabitants).

The national [survey](#) also created a ranking of hidden crime by city. Cali's rate of hidden crime is close to the national average (70 percent).

The City's Illicit Economy

There is limited quantitative information about Cali's illicit economy. Most of the data focuses on Colombia more broadly. According to the DANE, Cali possesses a significant share of illegal activities.

Moreover, [according to Global Financial Integrity](#), an NGO focusing on illicit financial flows, corruption, illicit trade and money laundering around the world, there is *"a gap of \$10.8 billion between the values reported by Colombia and those reported by all its trading partners (...)".* Considering [GFI's report](#), Colombia loses, at least, \$2.8 million on tax revenue annually, which comes from three primary sources in the illicit economy - illegal activities, tax evasion, and corruption). GFI also estimates yearly illicit activities of up to \$10.8 billion for Colombia, with Cali as one of its most prominent centres. More data should be made available on the topic.



Main Gangs

Many drug organisations compete in Cali to take over drug routes and supply chains. Additionally, guerrilla groups play a significant role in preserving the area and gaining political power in isolated parts of the Pacific region.

[Minor drug gangs](#) are mainly responsible for the city's share of criminality. Although the authorities have been unable to identify the perpetrators of crimes in most cases, different reports have rightfully noted that micro-trafficking and drug-trafficking groups are responsible for the high number of crimes. According to different [press reports](#), former second-command members of dissolved drug cartels are gathering up to expand their drug business. At least eight different drug gangs have been identified, though [their scope is still unclear](#).

Mexican organisations associated with the *Cártel de Sinaloa* have a presence in the city. The National Police has captured various cartel leaders related to Mexican cartels, especially the [Cártel de Sinaloa](#). In recent years, Mexican cartels, such as the *Cártel de Sinaloa* have been trying to increase their presence in the territory and gain control over the drug supply chains. According to [InSight Crime](#), the Mexican and Colombian cartels are increasing their cooperation to guarantee a constant flow of illegal products.

Conclusion

Cali is arguably the most dangerous major city in Colombia — every year, almost 1.000 people are murdered for different reasons. Although crime and homicide rates have plummeted significantly over the past ten years, there is still much progress to be made considering that homicide rates almost duplicate other cities¹.

According to criminal analysis websites, high crime rates are explained by different factors. Cali is located in a strategic region for many drug organisations, given its proximity to the main seaports and consolidated drug routes to Mexico and, most importantly, the United States.



Therefore, controlling the area could guarantee a safe flow of illegal activities and high revenues. Traditional drug cartels such as the *Cartel de Cali* and the *Cartel del Norte del Valle* have scattered into minor drug organisations that aim to control the area. Constant disputes over territory increase crime rates significantly. Finally, high rates of poverty and economic inequality worsen the outlook for the region, given that it creates incentives to strengthen the illegal market.



Norte de Santander, Colombia (Elin Roberts)

An overview of criminal activities in the capital

Cúcuta, also known as San José de Cúcuta, is the capital city of the department of Norte de Santander. It is located in the Northeast of Colombia and shares a border with Venezuela. In 2021, Cúcuta was [classified](#) as the fourth most dangerous city in Colombia and the forty-fourth most dangerous in the world.

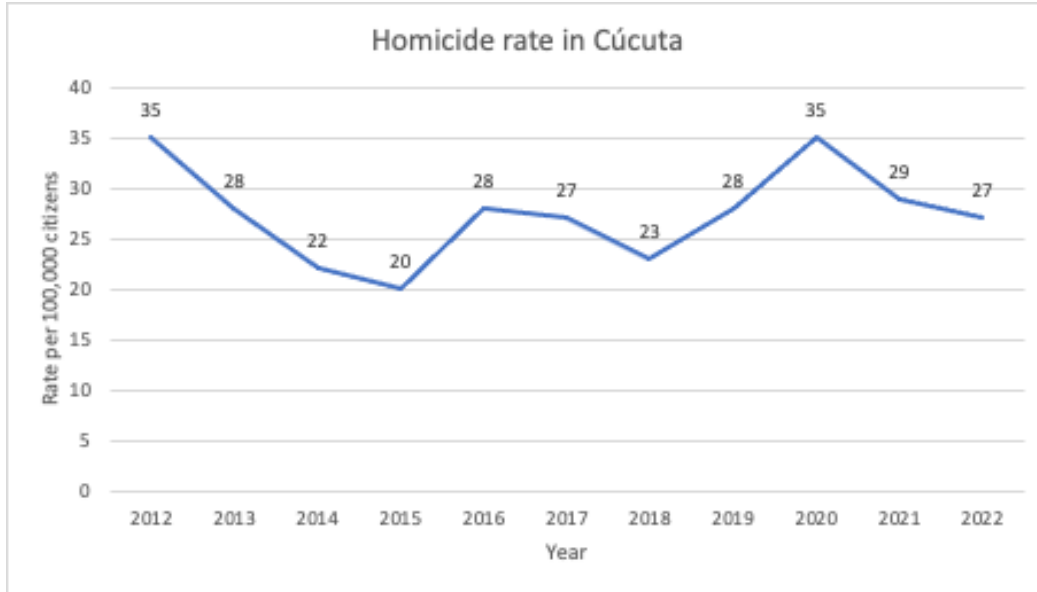
2023 began with a violent start in the city as a [massacre](#) took place in the area of Alfonso Gómez on the 9th of January where a woman and two men were assassinated. This was the first armed attack to take place in the city this year.

Despite the violent start to 2023, the [town hall](#) of Cúcuta recorded a notable decrease in the town's insecurity indices between January and June 2022 in comparison to the same period of 2021. Furthermore, [data](#) provided by the National Police of Colombia highlight a general slight decrease in crimes in 2022 compared to 2021, however we see a slight increase for kidnappings and thefts.

Looking at the homicide rate of the city (calculated as a rate per 100,000 citizens), the highest rates of 35 homicides per 100,000 citizens were seen in 2012 and in 2020 whilst the lowest rate was seen in 2015. Between 2020 and 2022 the homicide rate decreased from 35 to 27 per 100,000 citizens.

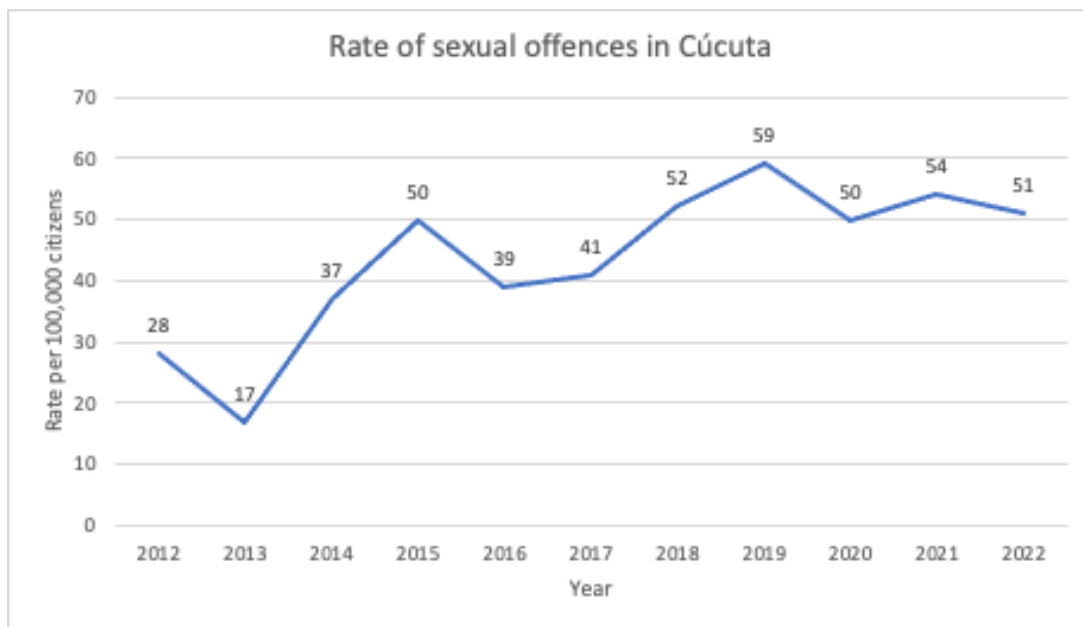


Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities



Graph created by Elin Roberts with [data](#) from the National Police of Colombia

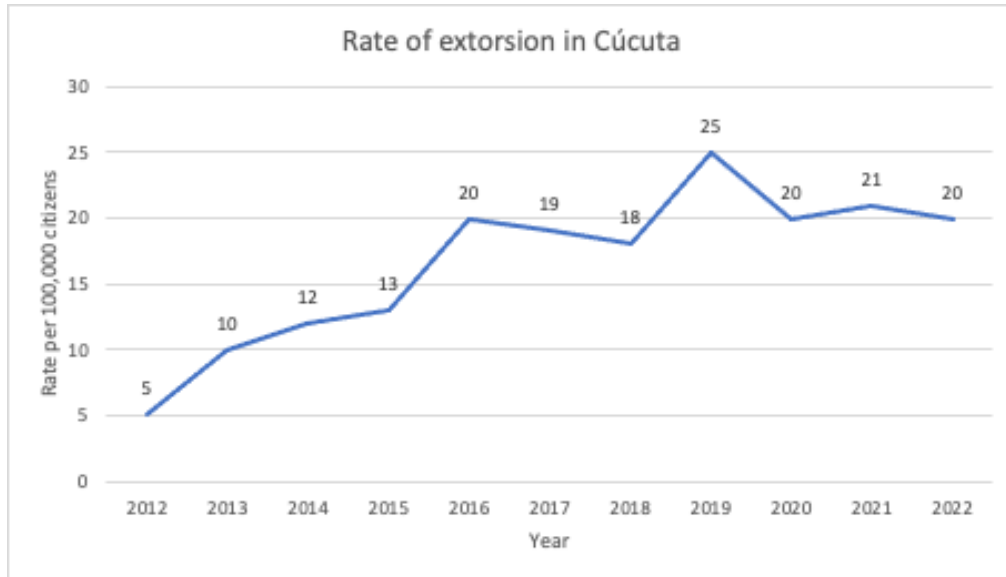
Contrary to the homicide rate of Cúcuta, the rate of sexual offences within the city has significantly increased in the period between 2012 and 2022. In 2012, the rate was 28 offences per 100,000 of the citizens which increased to 51 in 2022.



Graph created by Elin Roberts with [data](#) from the National Police of Colombia



In the period 2012-2022 the rate of extortion per 100,000 citizens has increased four-times in Cúcuta. The highest rate was 25 per 100,000 citizens seen in 2019, however, the rate decreased to 20 per 100,000 citizens in 2022.

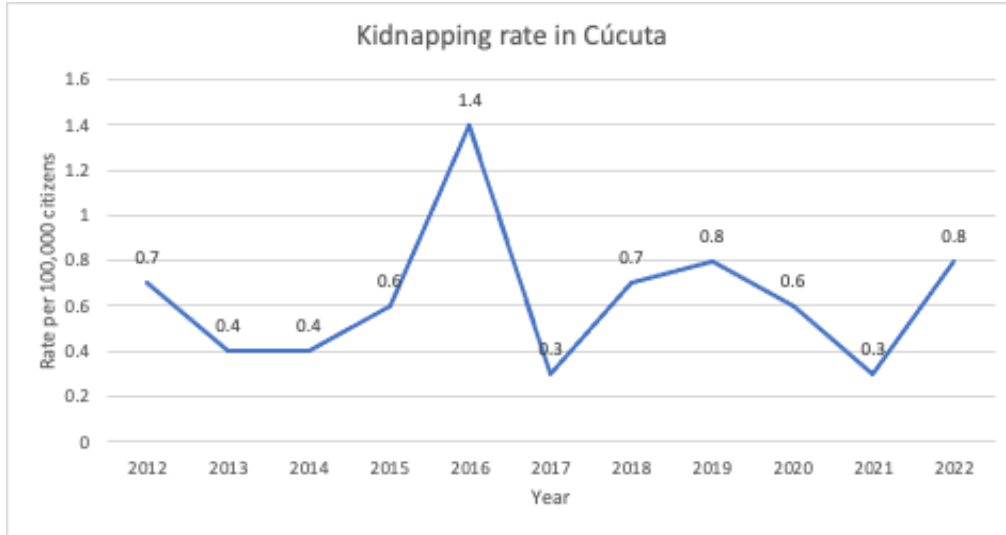


Graph created by Elin Roberts with [data](#) from the National Police of Colombia

The kidnapping rate in Cúcuta seems relatively low in comparison to the other crimes analysed, however, we must also consider the fact that many kidnappings are unreported - especially those of Venezuelan immigrants crossing into Colombia via the border near Cúcuta. The kidnapping rate peaked at 1.4 kidnappings per 100,000 citizens in 2016 which decreased to 0.3 in 2021. However, in 2022, the rate increased to 0.8.

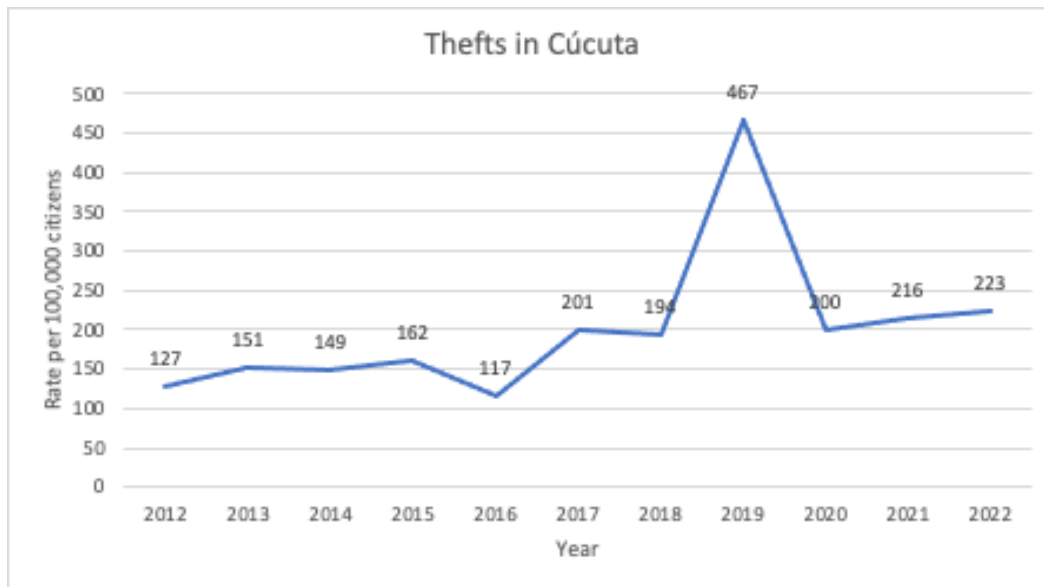


Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities



Graph created by Elin Roberts with [data](#) from the National Police of Colombia

The most seen crime in Cúcuta is thefts. High rates of theft have been seen in the city since 2012, however, the rate reached 467 thefts per 100,000 citizens in 2019 which decreased to 223 thefts in 2022.



Graph created by Elin Roberts with [data](#) from the National Police of Colombia



Despite the statistics that we have at hand, we must highlight that there is a lack of data when it comes to enforced disappearances within the border city. Here, we will define forced disappearances as the secret abductions or killings of individuals by government officials, criminal organisations, and other third-party groups. Norte de Santander, the department in which Cúcuta is the capital, is known as a hotspot for enforced disappearances carried out by criminal organisations. Members of the civil rights NGO, *Fundación Progresar*, [argue](#) that it is “easier to make someone disappear in this region than to kill them” as homicides end up in the news whilst forced disappearances are less likely to be noticed.

The authorities of Norte de Santander and the Missing Persons Search Unit (*La Unidad de Búsqueda para Personas Desparecidas*) [reported](#) an increase in the number of victims of enforced disappearances in 2022. Even though a peace agreement was signed between the government and the FARC-EP on the 1st of December 2016, enforced disappearances have continued to increase - something which many expected to decrease as a result of the peace treaty. Many of the disappearance cases are linked to the increasing number of Venezuelan migrants that have been crossing the border to Colombia.

Catatumbo: a hotspot for criminal organisations

The region of Catatumbo is located within the department of *Norte de Santander* and is comprised of the following municipalities: Ábrego, Convención, El Carmen, El Tarra, Hacarí, La Playa de Belén, Ocaña, San Calixto, Sardinata, Teorama y Tibú.

Catatumbo is known for being a [dangerous](#) region as it is on the border with Venezuela, which means that many criminal organisations and armed groups fight for control of the region to be able to control the movement of drugs between Colombia and Venezuela, as well as rents and extortion related to drug trafficking. The region is home to numerous criminal organisation groups that includes: the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Ejército Popular de Liberación



(EPL), Clan del Golfo, Gurpos Armados Pos-Farc (GAPF) Frente 33, and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

In 2022, [authorities](#) detected more than 200 primary production laboratories on the Colombian-Venezuelan border in Catatumbo. The finished product, cocaine, is usually transported to the Venezuelan town of Zulia before being transported to the Caribbean islands and Central America.

In the past few [years](#) the region has also faced challenges related to Venezuelan migration, deterioration of security, and the increasing power of armed groups. The region is well-known for being a drug producing zone. Despite this, there has been a lack of governmental strategy to deal with the above challenges.

According to the [Foundation of Peace and Reconciliation](#) (*Fundación Paz y Reconciliación - PARES*), war and conflicts have been ongoing in Cataumbo for over half a century which has continued since the beginning of oil exploitation, the period of *La Violencia* (the violence) with the bipartisanship, and armed conflicts with guerilla groups and paramilitary groups.

It is safe to say that the peace agreement of 2016 has not led to a decrease in violence in Catatumbo with residents continuing to call for peace today. The area continues to be highly dangerous. For instance, Gustavo Petro's campaign team was [attacked](#) in El Tarra during the presidential campaign in August 2022, hence the event was moved from El Tarra to Cúcuta. Furthermore, according to [SIPES](#), 23 incidents of violence per month took place in the first quarter of 2022 in Catatumbo. The violences seen included confrontations, ford disappearances, and homicides.

[PARES](#) highlights that the violence between criminal organisations are partly sustained as a result of the illicit economy which includes raising rents from the region's main economic



sectors (oil, beer, and chemicals), as well as the smuggling and cultivation of coca leaves which is later turned into cocaine. Not only do the criminal organisations profit, the cocaine producers and those who produce coca paste (usually poor farmers) can [earn](#) up to \$600,000 COP (colombian pesos) for each kilogram of coca paste produced. Each producer could be earning anything between \$1,800,000 COP and \$3,000,000 COP a month.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ([UNODC](#)), in 2020, Norte de Santander was the department that had the highest figures for hectares of coca cultivated in the country where 40,084 hectares was dedicated to the production of coca. 98.5 percent of these hectares were based in the region of Catatumbo. The municipality of Tibú, which forms part of Catatumbo and of the department of Norte de Santander, produced 13.5 percent of the national total of coca in 2020, which equates to 48 percent of coca production of Catatumbo. Coca production is concentrated in the Northeast of Norte de Santander in the regions between La Gabarra, Vetas de Oriente, and Filo Gringo.

2022 saw the [over-production](#) of cocaine in Catatumbo. This was a problem because on one hand, neither the ELN nor the FARC dissidents wanted to buy, and on the other hand, the Mexican cartels deemed it bad quality. Furthermore, difficulties in moving cocaine was attributed to the fact that many leaders of the guerilla organisations had been captured and the Venezuelan army had also destroyed a number of airstrips. In addition to this, the ELN halted its coca production and its flow of cocaine into Venezuela which has led the agricultures to source other illegal employment. Recent developments in Catatumbo have seen coca growers [moving away](#) from the plant in order to grow food such as Cassava (*Yuca*).

Conclusion

The area of Norte de Santander faces many challenges when it comes to crime and criminal organisations. On one hand, the city of Cúcuta is known as the fourth most dangerous city in



Colombia for its homicide rates as well as other crimes such as extortion and sexual attacks. On the other hand, the region of Catatumbo is a known hotspot for criminal organisations due to its proximity to the Colombian-Venezuelan border which is of great importance to the criminal economy. Despite the signing of the peace agreement with FARC in 2016, high levels of violence continue to be seen in Catatumbo with drug cartels fighting for dominance of the drug routes. In recent months, some cartels such as the ELN and FARC have tried to move away from drug production, however, it is unclear to which extent this will happen. Furthermore, the question of peace and security in Catatumbo and in the general department of Norte de Santander seem far from being resolved.



Conclusion

The *Violent Crime in Latin America's Cities* report, though small in scale but diverse in scope, looked to study the dynamics of violent crime in some of the most significant urban centres in the region. Four urban centres, namely Guayaquil (Ecuador), Cali (Colombia), Natal (Brazil), and the department of Norte de Santander (Colombia) were selected for study. An underlying finding of the report is the need for further study and data-gathering, especially on the behalf of police services and national justice departments. Still, preliminary public data was helpful in detailing various facets of violent crime, though data was often inconsistent between regions and countries, and lacked specificity in many cases. Non-governmental organisations and think tanks like InSight Crime and the Igarapé Institute often did a better job at gathering data on violent crime and transnational criminal organisations than their host governments. The report's findings are meant to help deepen policy and analytical understanding in the cities under study, as well as to establish broader trends in crime and policing in the region. Studies of the cities under examination should be renewed periodically to update trends and findings, while the survey should be extended to as many cities and areas as the data makes possible.



