

UNASUR
Union of South American Nations
Organized Crime

Overview

Organized crime is a major challenge in South America, with groups like cartels, gangs, and mafias carrying out illegal activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, and money laundering for profit. The issue is closely tied to the region's socioeconomic and political struggles, including poverty, weak institutions, and porous borders which make it easier for these networks to operate. Producing 70% of the world's cocaine, South America faces unique pressures from drug-related crime; Colombia alone accounts for more than 1000 tons of cocaine annually.¹ Transnational groups like the Sinaloa Cartel, Clan del Golfo, and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) dominate the drug trade and fuel violence across borders.² In Venezuela, illegal gold mining generates billions for armed groups, while human trafficking networks exploit migrants in countries like Brazil and Ecuador.³ These activities lead to government corruption, instability, a lack of public trust in officials and economic recession. Combating organized crime requires strong cooperation between countries, better law enforcement, and support for affected communities.

What is UNASUR?

Inspired by the European Union, The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was established in 2008.⁴ It is an intergovernmental organization that promotes regional integration and cooperation among South American countries. Its goals are for South American countries to collaborate politically, economically and culturally. In its short life, the union has had difficulty cooperating because of political division but has still managed to support infrastructure programs

¹ Pozzebon, Stefano. "Colombia's Drug Problem Is Worse than Ever. But It Has a Radical Solution." *CNN*, 22 Nov. 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/11/22/americas/colombia-coco-decriminalize-intl-latam/index.html.

² Phillips, Tom. "How a Brazilian Prison Gang Became an International Criminal Leviathan." *The Observer*, 11 Nov. 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/11/pcc-brazil-drug-trade-gang.

³ "Illegal Gold Is Booming in South America." *The Economist*, www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/11/09/illegal-gold-is-booming-in-south-america.

"Eight Latin American Countries Fighting Human Trafficking Together." *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*, www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2024/April/nine-latin-american-countries-fighting-human-trafficking-together.html

⁴ "UNASUR | South American Organization." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/UNASUR.

such as the IIRSA which increased South American connection between railroads, roads and energy networks. They have also played a role in mediating the 2010 Colombian-Venezuela crisis and the Paraguayan impeachment in 2012. They have supported the beginnings of a greener South America with Amazon rainforest preservation programs and a connected South American solar energy grid.

In the past, UNASUR has attempted to work through the organized crime crisis through promoting cooperation amongst national police forces, enhancing border control with surveillance technology and has worked with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to promote anti-drug efforts throughout the continent. However, these efforts have not been so successful due to a lack of funding and internal division.

A Brief History

Organized crime in South America has evolved over centuries, beginning with smuggling and piracy during the colonial period when European powers controlled valuable resources. In the 20th century, drug trafficking became a major focus of organized crime, especially in the Andean region. By the 1970s and 1980s, countries like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia became key producers of cocaine, with cartels such as the Medellín and Cali cartels, led by figures like Pablo Escobar, dominating the trade. In Brazil, urban criminal gangs like Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) grew powerful in the 1990s and 2000s, controlling drug distribution in cities and engaging in violent crimes such as kidnapping and extortion.⁵ By the 2000s, organized crime also spread into illegal mining, particularly in Venezuela, Brazil, and Peru, where criminal groups exploited gold mines and caused significant environmental damage. More recently, Mexican cartels like Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation have expanded their influence into South America, setting up trafficking routes and alliances with local groups. Human trafficking and arms smuggling have recently become major criminal enterprises in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. Despite efforts to fight these issues, poverty, corruption, and the high profits from illegal activities continue to fuel organized crime, posing serious challenges to security and development in the region.

⁵ De los Rios Hernández, Isabela . “How Drug Trafficking Has Kept Its Hold on Latin America.” *Harvard International Review*, 26 June 2024, hir.harvard.edu/knowledge-soil-politics-and-poverty-how-drug-trafficking-has-kept-its-hold-on-latin-america/.

Effects of Organized Crime on Society

Economic Impact

The economic impact of cartels in South America is immense, with the drug trade alone contributing billions of dollars to the illegal economy. In Colombia, during the peak of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1980s and 1990s, the cocaine trade was estimated to generate up to \$6 billion per year, costing the country about 1% of its GDP annually during this period. Because these crimes operate outside the legal economy, the government loses significant tax revenue. Similarly, illegal mining in Peru and Venezuela generates around \$3 billion and \$5 billion annually, respectively, but these profits bypass local economies and are not reinvested in communities. Wealth from organized crime rarely reaches the poor; in Venezuela, illegal mining creates jobs, however these jobs are often low-paying and exploitative. Additionally, the violence and instability caused by cartels discourage foreign investment, slowing down national development. In Brazil, criminal gangs like the PCC contribute to \$10 billion in economic losses annually, as businesses face extortion and the the government spends \$3 billion a year combating crime.⁶ This cycle of violence and economic exclusion perpetuates poverty, preventing growth and institutionalizing inequality in the region.

Social Impact

The social impact of cartels in South America is deeply felt through the breakdown of trust in government institutions, high levels of violence, and the exploitation of vulnerable populations. In countries like Colombia, where drug cartels and armed groups such as FARC have historically been in power, citizens often feel that authorities are either complicit or powerless.⁷ In the Tri-Border Area, the meeting of the borders between Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, organized crime groups thrive, the law enforcement is weak and government control is limited.⁸ Violence is a daily reality in many communities, especially in Brazil, where drug gangs instill fear through brutal turf wars. These high levels of violence result in widespread insecurity, particularly in urban areas, where residents live in constant fear of extortion, kidnappings, and

⁶ Aharonian, Aram. "The Drug Trade Is Taking over Latin America." *Pressenza*, 22 Sept. 2023, www.pressenza.com/2023/09/the-drug-trade-is-taking-over-latin-america/.

⁷ Britannica. "FARC | History & Peace Deal." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 Feb. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/FARC.

⁸ "A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers | Crisis Group." *Crisisgroup.org*, 17 July 2024, www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/south-america/brazil-colombia-peru/b51-three-border-problem.

gang-related violence.⁹ Cartels and criminal networks often exploit vulnerable populations for profit. In Peru and Venezuela, illegal mining operations have been linked to the forced labor of marginalized groups, including indigenous communities, while human trafficking rings of young women and children are prevalent in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia.

Political Impact

The political impact of cartels in South America is far-reaching, with corruption within governments and law enforcement severely undermining democracy. In countries like Colombia and Mexico, cartels have historically bribed government officials and law enforcement agents, allowing them to operate without fear of punishment. In Bolivia and Paraguay, criminal groups often exert influence over local politics with electoral fraud and bribes to ensure that those elected turn a blind eye to their activities.¹⁰ Regional leaders often have ties to cartels that they want to maintain for the security of their country or for personal economic gain. Many criminal groups hold so much power and money that they can de facto control the government by threatening leaders with violence. The persistent influence of cartels on politics weakens public trust, stifles reform, and creates an environment where illegal activities thrive at the expense of democracy.

Environmental Impact

The environmental impact of cartels and organized crime in South America is severe, with illegal activities such as mining, deforestation and animal poaching causing widespread damage. In Suriname and Guyana, illegal gold mining has devastated forests and polluted rivers with mercury, threatening local ecosystems and the health of indigenous communities.¹¹ In Peru, illegal mining in the Madre de Dios region has led to the deforestation of more than 100,000 hectares of Amazon rainforest, fueled by criminal networks exploiting weak enforcement.¹² In Chile, organized crime groups profit from illegal logging in Patagonia, smuggling timber out of

⁹ Faiola, Anthony. "Brazilian Gangs Take Turf Wars out of Slums." *Washington Post*, 15 Dec. 2002, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/15/brazilian-gangs-take-turf-wars-out-of-slums/c60c7790-c3e2-4eaa-9ad0-0475b3b4e740/.

¹⁰ Battle, Daniel. "How Organized Crime Warps Latin American Democracy | Hudson." *Www.hudson.org*, 28 Mar. 2024, www.hudson.org/democracy/how-organized-crime-warps-latin-american-democracy-daniel-battle.

¹¹ Kurylo, Benjamin. "The Environmental Impact of Illegal Mining in Latin America." *Earth.org*, 26 Apr. 2024, earth.org/the-environmental-impact-of-illegal-mining-in-latin-america/.

¹² Darlington, Shasta. "Illegal Mining, "Worse than at Any Other Time," Threatens Amazon, Study Finds." *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/world/americas/amazon-illegal-mining.html.

the region to supply black markets domestically and abroad.¹³ Wildlife poaching is also a major issue across the continent, often linked to the same criminal networks. With jaguars being hunted for their teeth, fur and bone in Bolivia and Suriname, widespread poaching of parrots, macaws, and turtles for the illegal pet trade in Brazil and Colombia and illegal fishing of sharks for their fins in Ecuador and Chile, these crimes deplete biodiversity and accelerate climate change.¹⁴ Across the region, these activities displace vulnerable populations, creating long-term harm to both communities and the environment.

Policies in Place

United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)

All Latin American countries are a part of UNTOC. Also known as the Palermo Convention, it is an international treaty adopted in 2000 to address the global threat of organized crime. It provides a framework for countries to collaborate in tackling crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and illegal arms trading. UNTOC requires member states to criminalize organized crime activities, international cooperation and seize any criminal assets found to weaken organized crime groups. It demands extradition, which means that countries must deliver criminals found hiding in their country back to their original country to be arrested.¹⁵

Militarization and Enhanced Policing

Brazil has deployed militarized police to tackle gangs such as PCC and Comando Vermelho in urban favelas (Brazilian slums). Similarly, Colombia uses its military extensively to dismantle cartels and guerrilla groups, combining ground forces with aerial surveillance. Peru has deployed military task forces to crack down on illegal mining in regions like Madre de Dios, targeting both equipment and personnel involved in these operations.¹⁶

¹³ Kurylo, Benjamin. "The Impact of Illegal Logging in Latin America | Earth.org." *Earth.org*, Earth.org, 23 July 2024, earth.org/the-devastating-impact-of-illegal-logging-in-latin-america/.

¹⁴ Guynup, Sharon. "The Growing Latin America-To-Asia Wildlife Crisis: Can Targeted Action Stop Illegal Trade in Time to Prevent Widespread Losses?" *ReVista*, 3 Feb. 2023, revista.drclas.harvard.edu/the-growing-latin-america-to-asia-wildlife-crisis-can-targeted-action-stop-illegal-trade-in-time-to-prevent-widespread-losses/.

¹⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime." *Unodc.org*, United Nations, 2000, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

¹⁶ Flores-Macías GA, Zarkin J. The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America. *Perspectives on Politics*. 2021;19(2):519-538.

International Cooperation

Columbia has deals with the United States to promote extradition of any criminals found on US land.¹⁷ Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay have joined efforts to combat smuggling and money laundering in the Tri-Border Area.¹⁸ Colombia and Ecuador work together on border security to intercept drug shipments, while Suriname and Guyana collaborate to counter illegal gold mining and trafficking.¹⁹ Guyana has also been addressing trafficking networks and illegal mining by reforming its police force and collaborating with NGOs to protect indigenous lands.²⁰

Community Initiatives

The El Salvadoran "Yo Cambio" program and the Colombian "Peace Over Time" program offers vocational training and mentorship to at-risk youth and prison inmates to prevent gang recruitment.²¹ Colombia also implements crop substitution programs to help farmers transition from coca cultivation to alternative crops like cacao and coffee.²² Brazil is experimenting with community policing initiatives like the Pacification Police Units to reduce violence and build trust in high-crime areas.²³ Additionally, Ecuador has invested in urban regeneration projects to reclaim spaces from gangs, and Bolivia supports cooperatives to help

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/militarization-of-law-enforcement-evidence-from-latin-america/03EE3B407BA25D8D2762A7ED3871060E>

¹⁷ Butt, Shelby. "A New Era for U.S.-Colombia Extradition Policy? Only Time Will Tell." *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 8 Oct. 2022,

www.jtl.columbia.edu/bulletin-blog/a-new-era-for-us-colombia-extradition-policy-only-time-will-tell.

¹⁸ "A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers | Crisis Group." *Crisisgroup.org*, 17 July 2024,

www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/south-america/brazil-colombia-peru/b51-three-border-problem.

¹⁹ "International Cooperation Score - the Organized Crime Index." *Ocindex.net*, 2023,

ocindex.net/crime/international_cooperation.

²⁰ For a Video about the WFN Whitley Award and how it is being used to protect a species of birds in Guyana: WFN. "Red Alert: Land and Fire Management to Protect Guyana's Red Siskins | Whitley Award." *Whitley Award*, May 2024, whitleyaward.org/winners/red-alert-land-and-fire-management-to-protect-rare-red-siskins-in-guyana/.

²¹ El Salvador's Yo Cambio:

Lozano, Francisco. "In El Salvador, Revolutionary Program Gives Inmates a Second Chance." *Latino Rebels*, 31 May 2019, www.latinorebels.com/2019/05/31/yocambio/.

Columbia's Peace Over Time: McKenzie, Victoria. "UNICEF Launches Peacebuilding Program for Colombia's Youth." *Colombia News | Colombia Reports*, 24 Apr. 2014, colombiareports.com/amp/unicef-colombia-develops-new-peacebuilding-program-youth/.

²² Pozzebon, Stefano. "Colombia's Drug Problem Is Worse than Ever. But It Has a Radical Solution." *CNN*, 22 Nov. 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/11/22/americas/colombia-coco-decriminalize-intl-latam/index.html.

²³ Richmond, Matthew. "The Pacification of Brazil's Urban Margins: How Police and Traffickers Co-Produce Insecurity." *LSE Latin America and Caribbean*, 3 Oct. 2019, blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2019/10/03/the-pacification-of-brazils-urban-margins-how-police-and-traffickers-co-produce-insecurity/.

former female criminals transition to legal work.²⁴ Programs like Argentina's NHAPTV and Chile's "Better Childhood" provide housing, counseling, and employment assistance to trafficking survivors.²⁵ These initiatives demonstrate the importance of local communal efforts to reduce organized crime and rebuild trust in affected communities.

Questions to Consider

1. How does organized crime affect my country's economy, and what sectors are most vulnerable to criminal influence (e.g., agriculture, mining, tourism)?
2. How has organized crime evolved in my country over the past few decades, and what factors have contributed to its rise? What are the root causes of organized crime in my country (e.g., poverty, lack of education, inequality, corruption)?
3. What are the main types of organized crime currently affecting my country (e.g., drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering), and how do they impact society?
4. What laws and regulations has my country enacted to combat organized crime, and how effective are these measures in practice? Are there notable weaknesses in the policies already in place?
5. How does my country's criminal justice system handle the prosecution of organized crime? Are there challenges related to impunity or political interference? If so, can reforms be made to combat alliances between organized crime groups and governments?
6. How does my country cooperate with other nations to combat transnational organized crime, and what international treaties (e.g., UNTOC) has it ratified to facilitate this cooperation?
7. What grassroots or community-based initiatives exist in my country to prevent organized crime? Are they effective?

²⁴ "Guayaquil's Urban Transformation, an Example for the Rest of Latin America." *Www.caf.com*, www.caf.com/en/currently/news/2018/05/guayaquil-s-urban-transformation-an-example-for-the-rest-of-latin-america/.

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²⁵ Chile's "Better Childhood": "Chile - United States Department of State." *United States Department of State*, 24 June 2024, www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/chile/.

Argentina's "NHPATV": "Argentina - United States Department of State." *United States Department of State*, 24 June 2024, www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/argentina/.

8. How can at risk communities, survivors, potential victims or ex-group members be protected in the battle against organized crime?
9. How does organized crime in my country contribute to environmental issues and what is being done to mitigate these impacts?
10. What role should richer countries play in supporting nations where organized crime is most prevalent, without infringing on their sovereignty?

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