



Data Against Fear: What the Numbers Say About Venezuelan Migrants and Crime in Ecuador

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Summary

Ecuador's sharp rise in violent crime has coincided with a major influx of Venezuelan migrants, fueling a public narrative that blames migrants for the country's deteriorating security. This policy note challenges that view using five years of official detention data disaggregated by nationality and migratory status. It finds that Venezuelans are consistently underrepresented in crime statistics—accounting for only 1.3 percent of detentions in 2024 despite comprising over 2.5 percent of the population—and are far less likely to be formally detained after apprehension. Most crimes involving Venezuelans are non-violent and economically motivated, with a large majority committed by individuals lacking regular legal status. While Venezuelan detainees are more likely to be found carrying weapons, geographic analysis of homicide data reveals that the provinces hit hardest by gang-related violence are not those with the highest concentration of homicides committed by Venezuelan migrant detainees. These findings suggest that migrant-related offenses are largely disconnected from Ecuador's structural security crisis. To devise and design all immigration policy solely through the lens of crime—particularly as part of broader efforts to combat gangs—is misguided and likely to be ineffective. Instead, policy should focus on migrant regularization, economic inclusion, and evidence-based public communication.

Introduction

Ecuador is navigating two overlapping crises: a dramatic surge in violent crime and one of the region's largest inflows of displaced Venezuelans. Since 2018, the number of Venezuelans in the country has jumped from just over 72,000 to [more than 440,000 by 2024](#)—around 2.5 percent

of Ecuador's population. Over the same period, [Ecuador's homicide rate has tripled](#), rising from 13.7 per 100,000 in 2021 to nearly 43 per 100,000 by 2023. The coincidence of these trends has fueled public anxiety and political rhetoric suggesting that Venezuelan migrants are, partially or entirely, to blame for rising crime. High-profile incidents—such as [isolated murders involving Venezuelan suspects](#)—have received extensive media coverage and, in some cases, [provoked xenophobic backlashes](#).

This note interrogates that narrative using detailed national data on police detentions (2019–2025), disaggregated by nationality and migratory status. The results point clearly in the opposite direction: Venezuelans account for registered detentions that are well below their population share. In 2024, for example, only about 1.3 percent of all detainees were Venezuelan, despite census data suggesting they made up more than double that share at the national level. Moreover, Venezuelans are significantly less likely to be formally detained once apprehended: only 10–15 percent of Venezuelan apprehensions result in detention, compared to 35–40 percent for Ecuadorians, throughout the years, suggesting that many incidents involving Venezuelans are minor or administrative in nature.

This pattern holds across the country. A subnational analysis of detention data by province shows that in most parts of Ecuador, Venezuelans are detained at rates below their share of the local population. The few provinces where Venezuelans appear overrepresented in detentions—such as Carchi or Azuay—tend to have small overall populations, high police presence, or border-control dynamics that might inflate numbers through minor infractions rather than serious crimes. By contrast, in provinces with the largest Venezuelan communities, like Pichincha and Guayas, detention shares roughly track or fall below population shares. Taken together, these spatial patterns reinforce that Venezuelan migrants are not a major driver of crime even at the local level, and that apparent “hot spots” often reflect enforcement intensity or visibility rather than elevated criminal activity.

This does not mean Venezuelans are uninvolved in crime altogether. The data reveal that when crimes by migrants occur, they are far more likely to be crimes against property (e.g., theft, robbery), drug-related offenses, or “crimes against the state” (e.g., immigration infractions). For instance, over 40 percent of crimes involving Venezuelans are property-related, compared to just 26 percent for the general population.

Crucially, most crimes involving Venezuelans are committed by individuals with irregular status. Between 2021 and 2025, the share of detained Venezuelans with regular migratory status never exceeded 12 percent, with most falling into undocumented and ambiguous (including unknown status) categories. This pattern aligns with broader research: exclusion from legal residency and formal employment increases both vulnerability to victimization and involvement in survival-driven crime.

At the same time, almost 10 percent of Venezuelan detainees are found carrying weapons, more than four times the rate among Ecuadorians. This suggests a worrying pattern, since it means that their offenses, even if often minor ones, can involve the threat—or perception—of violence.

Given this concerning pattern of weapon involvement, it becomes essential to determine whether these incidents are part of a broader violent dynamic. To investigate this, I focus on violent crimes—and in particular, on homicides, which are harder to manipulate than other crime categories that may be shaped by enforcement biases or media sensationalism. Unlike lesser offenses, homicides typically leave a body, a crime scene, and often a weapon—making them subject to automatic investigative procedures and much harder to underreport or misclassify.

Focusing on data of detainees because of homicides, this paper asks: Is there evidence supporting the idea that Venezuelan migrants are participating in the country's surge in gang-related killings, or are their offenses distinct and largely separate from the structural violence that has gripped Ecuador in recent years? I find little evidence of Venezuelans being part of gang-related violence when looking at the geographic distribution of these crimes. In particular, from 2019 to 2024, the highest homicide rates—over 60 per 100,000—were found in provinces like Guayas, Esmeraldas, and Manabí, all hotbeds of organized criminal activity. Yet Venezuelan involvement in homicides in these provinces is negligible. In fact, provinces with higher shares of Venezuelan-linked homicides are generally places with low overall homicide rates, suggesting that migrant-related violence operates through different mechanisms than gang warfare.

Taken together, I argue, these findings call for a strategic policy response grounded in evidence, not fear. Anti-migrant crackdowns that conflate mobility with criminality are unlikely to reduce crime and risk further marginalizing an already vulnerable population. Instead, Ecuador should double down on regularization efforts, remove barriers to labor market participation, and focus policing on the actual drivers of violence: the transnational drug-trafficking networks and mega-gangs operating across the country. Finally, shifting public perception will be key. Combating xenophobia and misinformation through evidence-based communication is essential to ensure that migration policy serves Ecuador's security and social cohesion, rather than undermining them.

Data sources

This report draws mainly on multiple official data sources from Ecuador that are anonymized and publicly available:

- **Police Detention Records (2019–2025):** Microdata on apprehensions and detentions was obtained from Ecuador's Interior Ministry website, covering the years 2019 through April 2025, accessible via Ecuador's national open data portal. The dataset includes

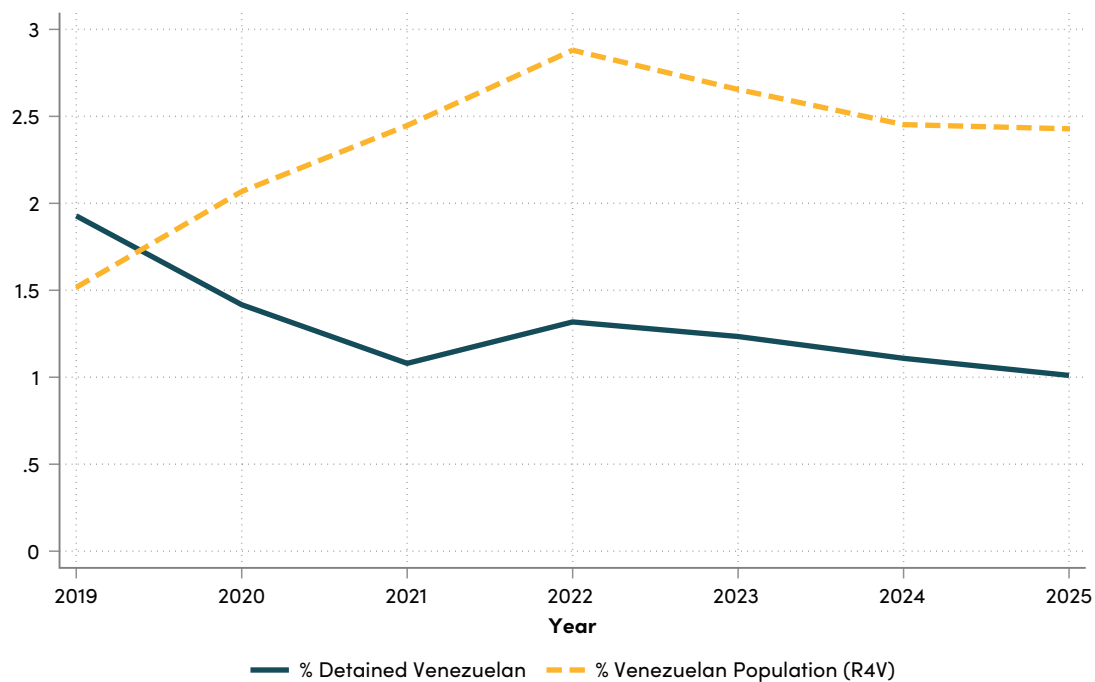
individual-level information on nationality, migratory status, geographic location, and legal classification (apprehended vs. detained).

- **2022 Population Census:** Population figures—including the number of Venezuelan nationals residing in Ecuador—were sourced from the 2022 Census of Population and Housing (*Censo de Población y Vivienda 2022*), conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC). Data by province and nationality were used to compute population shares and estimate proportional detention rates.

National trends

National-level data consistently show that Venezuelan migrants do not commit crimes at disproportionate rates. As illustrated in Figure 1, from 2019 through 2025, the percentage of all detainees in Ecuador who are Venezuelan hovered around 1 percent to 1.5 percent per year. For contrast, the figure also plots the share of Venezuelans in the population on a yearly basis, drawing on data from R4V (using mid-year figures). Overall, the share of crimes committed by Venezuelans fluctuates slightly but generally tracks below the Venezuelan share of the population. Simply put, the evidence does not support claims that Venezuelan immigrants are driving crime in Ecuador.

FIGURE 1. Share of Venezuelans among persons detained by police, Ecuador (2019–2025)



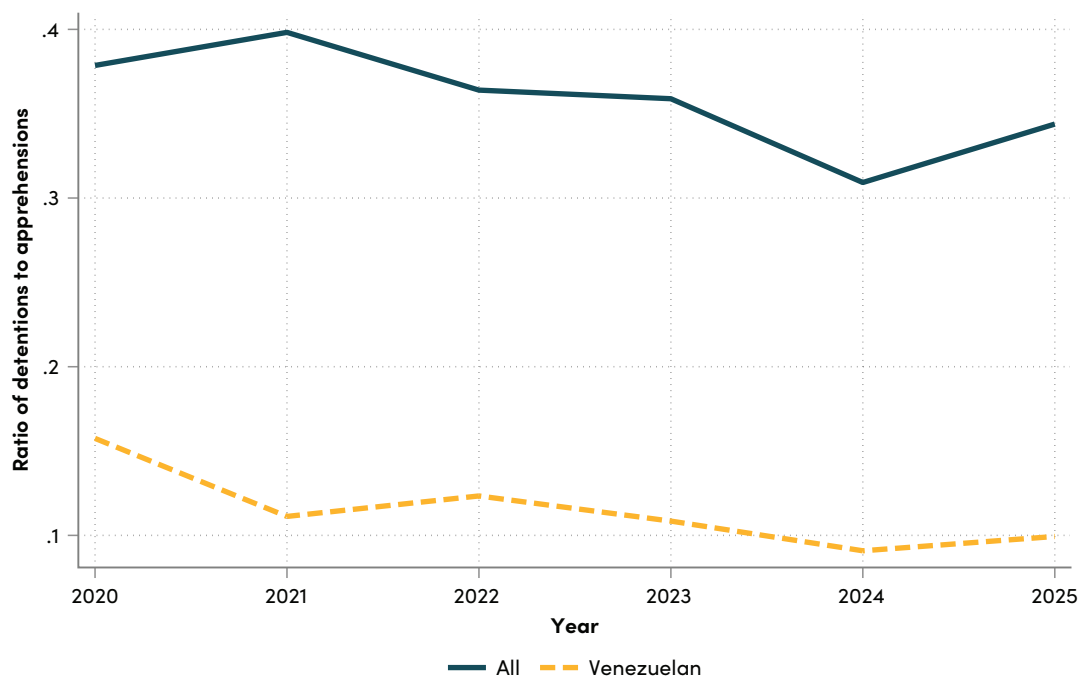
Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador; R4V Data.

This finding aligns with studies from other Latin American countries that host Venezuelan refugees. For instance, [research](#) covering Colombia, Peru, and Chile in 2019 found that Venezuelan immigrants commit substantially fewer crimes than natives relative to their population share. Ecuador appears to fit this regional pattern: migrants are, overall, at least as law-abiding as the host population.

The broader climate of suspicion and the public discourse that frames migrants as a threat may be shaping enforcement outcomes in more subtle ways. These dynamics appear to surface in the data. As shown in Figure 2, the ratio of individuals detained to those apprehended is significantly lower for Venezuelans than for the overall population—consistently around 10 percent to 15 percent, compared to 35 percent to 40 percent nationally. This suggests that many of the apprehensions involving Venezuelans do not lead to formal detention, likely because the offenses are less serious, unsubstantiated, or administrative in nature.

In this light, one possible interpretation is that some enforcement actions may reflect an overly aggressive posture toward migrants, influenced by political or societal pressures rather than actual threat levels. While not codified in policy, these practices risk reinforcing stigma and misallocating resources. The data serve as a reminder that poorly grounded narratives can have real operational consequences, and that durable security solutions require a clear distinction between immigration and crime control.

FIGURE 2. Detention-to-apprehension ratio by year: Venezuelans vs. total population



Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador.

Subnational variation in Venezuelan crime involvement

National averages can conceal local variations. In a few provinces, authorities and the public have reported concerns about migrant crime, sometimes due to specific incidents or higher migrant concentrations. To further understand patterns in Venezuelan involvement in crime, I examine subnational variation across Ecuador's provinces using three complementary indicators. These maps present annual averages from 2019 to 2025 to smooth year-to-year fluctuations and highlight consistent geographic trends.

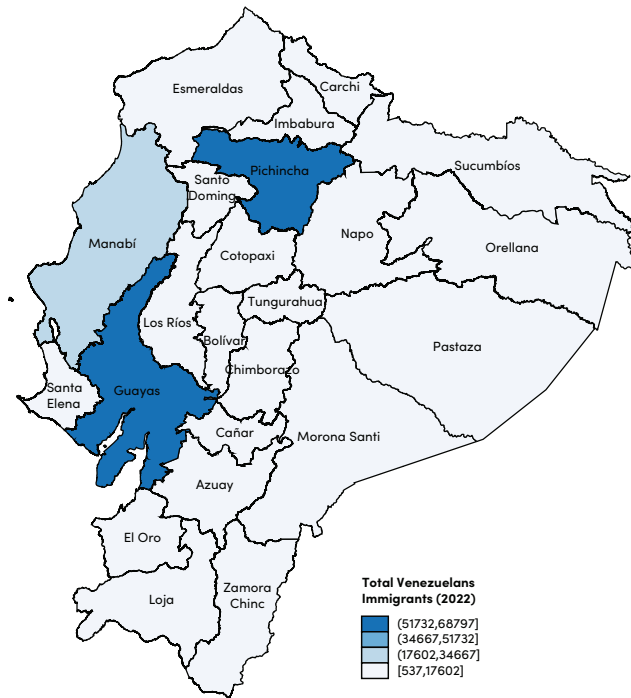
Figure 3a presents the geographic distribution of Venezuelan immigrants residing in Ecuador in 2022, based on census data (to the best of my knowledge, this is the most recent data estimating the Venezuelan population at the subnational level). Unsurprisingly, the highest concentrations are found in the country's two largest urban provinces—Pichincha and Guayas—as well as in Manabí, which also hosts a sizable Venezuelan population. These provinces are major economic hubs that offer more employment opportunities and access to services, making them natural destinations for migrant settlement.

By contrast, Figure 3b represents the share of total provincial detentions involving Venezuelans, averaged over 2019–2025. Here, besides Pichincha, provinces like Carchi, Imbabura, Azuay, and El Oro stand out, despite having comparatively smaller Venezuelan populations. This mismatch suggests that in certain border or transit provinces, Venezuelans may be disproportionately represented in detention statistics, possibly due to heightened police presence, migration controls, or greater visibility in smaller localities.

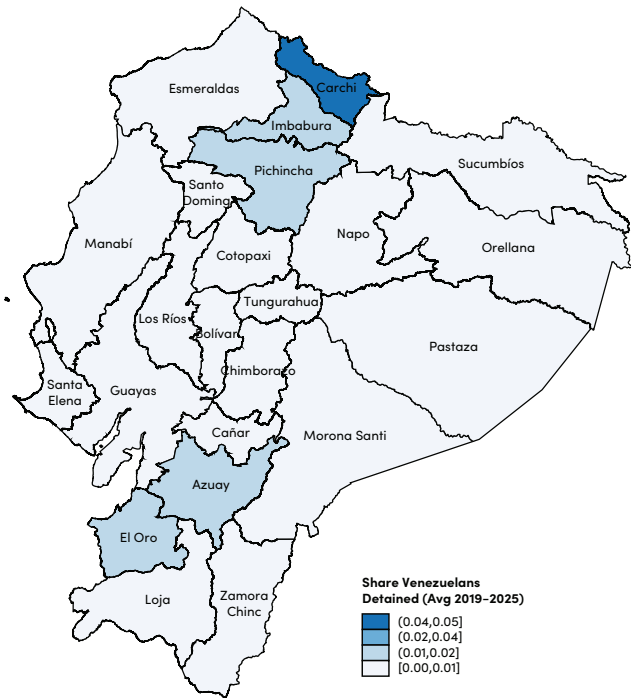
Taken together, these maps caution against drawing conclusions based solely on detention shares. Provinces with large migrant communities do not show correspondingly high detention rates, and provinces with high detention shares often host relatively few Venezuelans. This reinforces the argument that enforcement patterns may reflect visibility, policing intensity, or administrative dynamics more than actual criminal behavior. It also underscores the need for nuanced, proportional policy responses tailored to local contexts rather than sweeping national narratives.

FIGURE 3. Geographic distributions of Venezuelan population and Venezuelan detainees

A: Venezuelan immigrants by province (2022)



B: Venezuelan detainees as % of total (2019–2025)

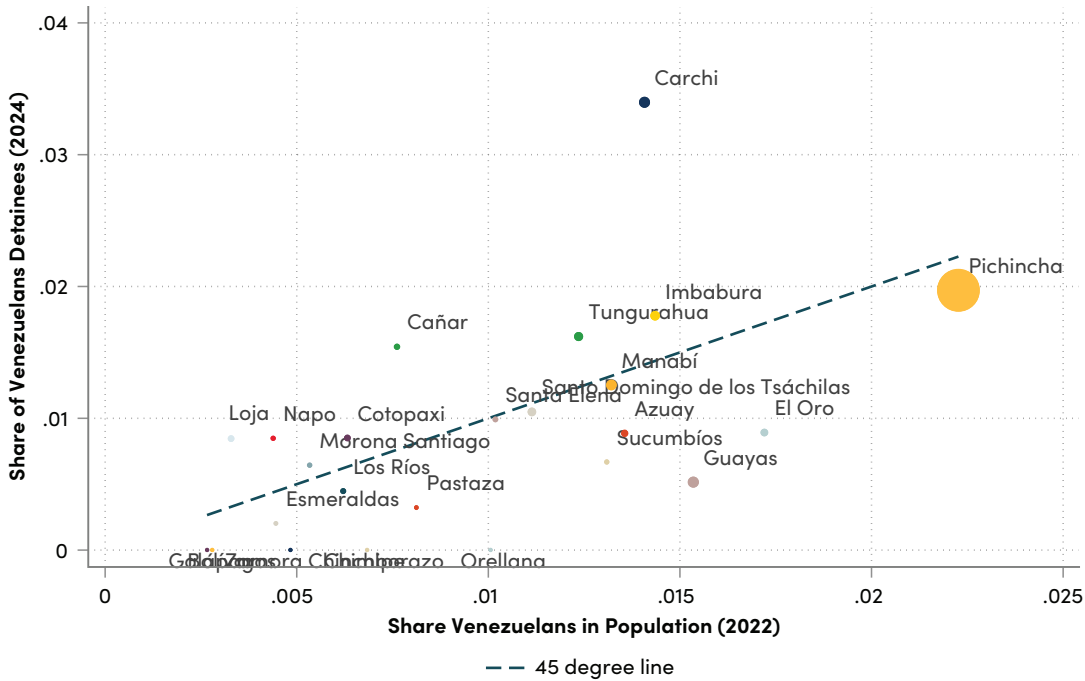


Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador; INEC 2022 Census.

It is important to emphasize, however, that a higher share of detentions involving Venezuelans in certain provinces does *not* in itself indicate a meaningful crime problem. These shares must be interpreted relative to the size of the local Venezuelan population. For instance, provinces like Carchi or Azuay may show elevated detention shares simply because their overall population is small and the migrant presence is more visible or more frequently policed.

To address this, Figure 4 presents a localized version of the national-level analysis introduced above. It plots the share of detainees in 2024 (the last year for which crime data is available for the totality of the year) who are Venezuelan against their share of the local population in each province, using 2022 Census data. Note that using the 2022 Census is likely an undercount given that the 2022 census reports only 231,686 Venezuelans in Ecuador for that year as compared to R4V, which places the figure closer to 500,000. Under that conservative comparison point, the dashed 45-degree line represents parity—points along this line indicate provinces where Venezuelans are detained in proportion to their presence in the population. Crucially, the size of each bubble reflects the total number of crimes committed by Venezuelans in that province.

FIGURE 4. Venezuelan population share vs. detention share by province



Note: Marker size is proportional to total number of Venezuelan detainees by province.
 Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador; INEC 2022 Census.

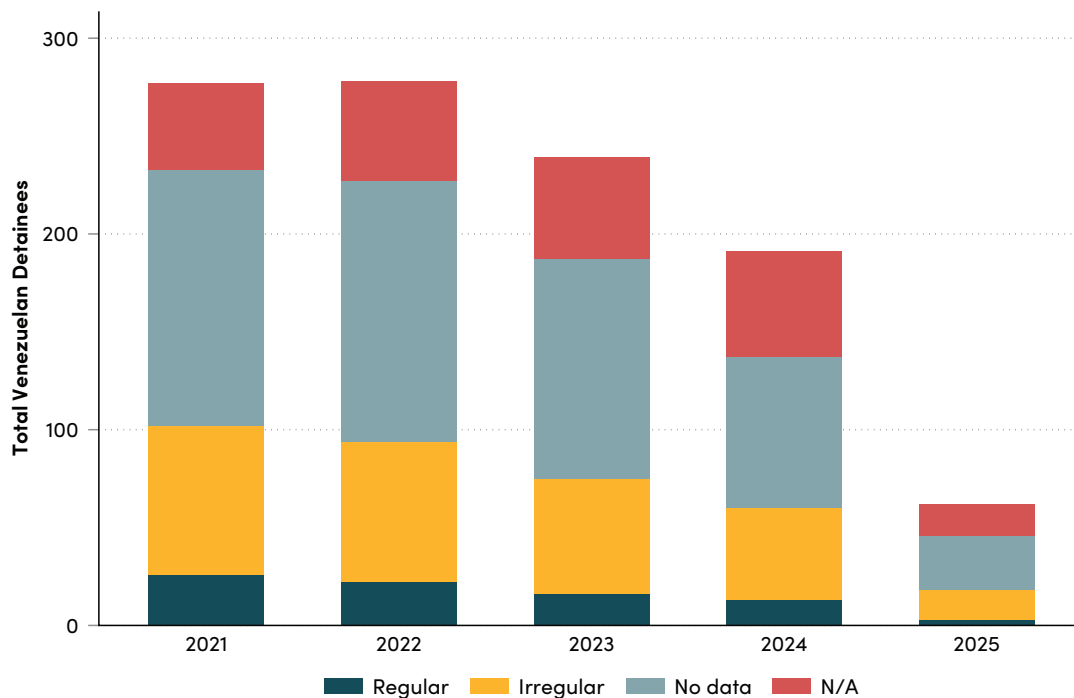
The figure shows clearly that most provinces fall *below* the parity line. This indicates that Venezuelans are generally detained at lower rates than would be expected based on their demographic footprint. Pichincha, the province with the largest number of reported crimes committed by Venezuelans, lies close to the parity line, showing a nearly proportional relationship between crime and population. Most localities above the parity line, as shown by the size of the bubbles, represent a negligible number of crimes by Venezuelans. In other words, even in provinces where Venezuelans appear overrepresented in detention data, the underlying crime numbers are low.

One notable outlier, however, is Carchi, a northern border province. Carchi’s data point sits way above the line, indicating that Venezuelans form a higher share of detentions than of the local population. This is consistent with Figure 3 and is likely tied to Carchi’s border location and enforcement dynamics. Carchi sees large transient migrant flows and intensive immigration policing; many Venezuelans detained there may be picked up for immigration infractions or minor offenses related to border crossing and survival strategies. Even so, the absolute numbers are very small. Apart from Carchi, only a handful of provinces show modest overrepresentation. In several provinces (e.g., Morona Santiago, Napo, Galápagos), no Venezuelan detentions were recorded in the latest data—despite migrants residing there.

An important question these data allow us to inquire about is to what extent the legal status of these immigrants is associated with crime as measured by detention data. Figure 5 illustrates the total number of Venezuelan detainees from 2021 to 2025, categorized by whether individuals were in regular status or irregular status (or whether there is no data to categorize them), as reported in the detainee data. It is striking that only a small fraction of detainees held regular migration status, and that this proportion has remained stable—and low—over time, never exceeding 12 percent and averaging about 7 percent over the years. Most detained individuals are recorded as being in irregular status or fall under ambiguous administrative categories, suggesting gaps in legal documentation and enforcement practices.

This pattern aligns with [findings from other contexts](#) showing that granting legal residency to undocumented migrants led to sizable reductions in crime, especially for economically motivated offenses. The Ecuadorian data points in the same direction and allows us to hypothesize that irregular status is not just a bureaucratic label, but rather a structural risk factor. Migrants without legal recognition are more likely to live in precarious conditions, face barriers to employment, and become either targets of police action or participants in survival-driven offenses. Accordingly, regularization should not be viewed merely as a migration management tool but as a critical crime prevention strategy that enhances public safety, not only based on this evidence but on the wider literature that has analyzed these patterns.

FIGURE 5. Venezuelan nationals detainees by migratory status



Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador.

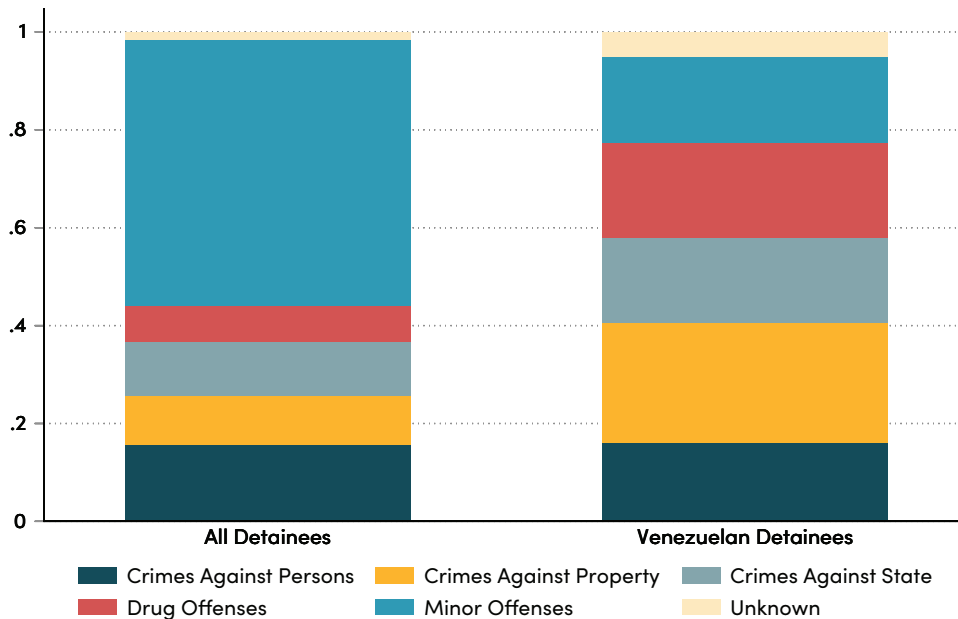
Common crime or gang violence?

While the overall propensity for crime among Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador is low, understanding the nature of the crimes that do occur is critical not only for accurate diagnosis, but also for designing effective policy responses—particularly given the rise in structural gang violence in recent years. Are the relatively few crimes involving Venezuelans primarily linked to the broader dynamics of organized crime, or are they better understood as isolated incidents of common criminality?

Figure 6 breaks down the composition of crimes by category, comparing the distribution of offenses committed by Venezuelan detainees and the overall population. The categories include crimes against persons (such as assault or homicide), crimes against property (such as robbery or theft), drug-related offenses, crimes against the state (including immigration or documentation infractions), minor offenses (typically administrative or low-severity), and unknown classifications.¹

Several notable patterns emerge. Venezuelans are significantly more represented in crimes against property, crimes against the state, and drug offenses—categories often associated with economic precarity and legal vulnerability. Together, these account for a much larger share of total crimes committed by Venezuelans than by non-Venezuelans. This contrasts sharply with the general population, where minor offenses dominate the criminal composition. The share of minor infractions among non-Venezuelans is nearly half, compared to less than a quarter for Venezuelans.

FIGURE 6. Reported type of crimes by detainees Venezuelan vs. overall population



Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador.

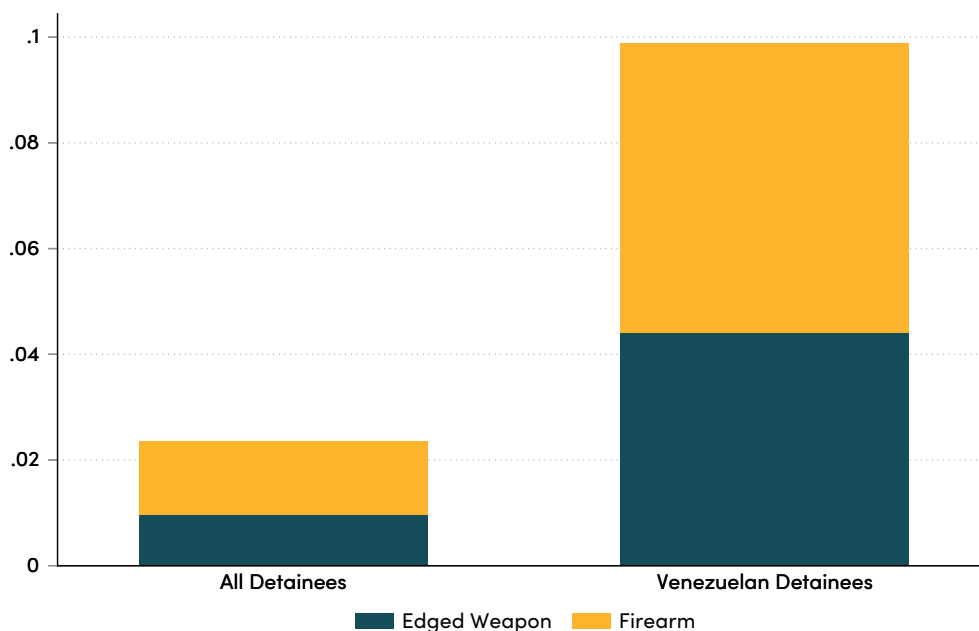
¹ The categorization of crime types into broader categories was supported by generative artificial intelligence, drawing on the descriptions provided in the original dataset. Full documentation of the classification process is available upon request.

It is also interesting to note the elevated share of “crimes against the state” by Venezuelan detainees, which could reflect the criminalization of migratory or documentation-related offenses, which may be administrative in nature but still appear in criminal records.

This pattern reinforces the importance of distinguishing between types of criminal behavior and their underlying causes. While Venezuelans are not more likely to commit crimes overall, when they do, their offenses often stem, one can hypothesize, from structural exclusion rather than organized criminal intent, it seems.

However, the data also reveals a concerning reality. Figure 7 plots the share of detentions involving edged weapons (such as knives) and firearms, broken down by nationality (with the omitted variable being “no weapon”). Overall, for Venezuelans, nearly 10 percent of detentions involved some form of weapon, with roughly 4.4 percent involving edged weapons and 5.5 percent involving firearms. For the overall population (non-Venezuelans), less than 2.5 percent of all detentions involved the use of a weapon, with just under 1 percent involving edged weapons and around 1.4 percent involving firearms. This means that although Venezuelans account for a small number of total crimes in Ecuador, those crimes are disproportionately more likely to involve the threat of violence—or at least the presence of a weapon.

FIGURE 7. Reported use of weapon by detainees Venezuelan vs. overall population



Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador.

Interpreting these patterns requires nuance. One possibility is that Venezuelan migrants—particularly those with irregular status (and thus excluded from formal labor markets and potentially better conditions)—are more vulnerable to participating in petty or opportunistic crimes that can escalate when weapons are present. Alternatively, police and judicial actors may respond more aggressively when weapons are involved, which could increase the likelihood of detention in such cases. Regardless of the mechanism, the elevated share of weapon-related offenses among Venezuelans warrants attention.

In the context of Ecuador, this observation raises an important policy and analytical question: does this greater prevalence of weapon use suggest a link between Venezuelan migrants and Ecuador's broader structural crime problem—namely, organized criminal violence? Or are these cases better understood as isolated acts of common crime, not tied to the country's gang dynamics?

In fact, recent reports have surfaced of Venezuelan-led criminal groups—most notably cells of the *Tren de Arauca*, a transnational gang originating in Venezuela—operating in Ecuador and engaging in extortion, contract killings, and kidnappings. At the same time, domestic mega-gangs—such as *Los Choneros*, *Los Lobos*, and their affiliates—have surfaced in the medias those driving the rise in crime as they are vying for control of drug routes in coordination with Mexican and Colombian cartels.

To probe these questions, we focus on homicides. Unlike other criminal offenses—which may be subject to underreporting, misclassification, or selective enforcement—homicides are much harder to ignore or manipulate in official records. A body, a weapon, and a crime scene are tangible and often trigger automatic investigative procedures. As a result, homicide records provide a more accurate lens through which to assess the presence and nature of violence, including whether migrants are playing any identifiable role in the rise of lethal organized crime.

In fact, there was a dramatic rise in homicide rates in Ecuador beginning around 2021, climbing from under 10 homicides per 100,000 to nearly 45 by 2023—a stark indication of the country's escalating security crisis. This broader surge in violence coincides with the emergence of powerful domestic and transnational criminal organizations and marks a major shift in Ecuador's public safety environment.

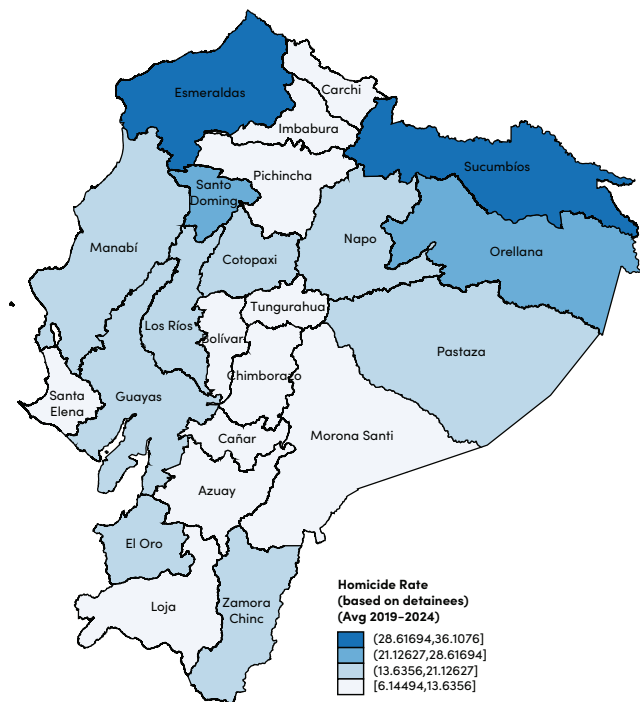
For this analysis, I still rely on detainee data but limit the sample to crimes categorized as homicides. While there is a stand-alone dataset on homicides provided by the Ecuadorian authorities, this one does not include the nationality of the suspect, and therefore we cannot use it to understand the patterns of homicides by Venezuelan immigrants. Figure 8 compares two important spatial dynamics of homicide in Ecuador between 2019 and 2024, based on detainee data. The map in

Panel (a) displays the total number of homicide detentions per 100,000 people by province for the same period (on average). The epicenters of Ecuador’s organized crime crisis—Guayas, Manabí, Esmeraldas, Los Ríos, and El Oro—show some of the highest total homicide counts. In contrast, Panel (b) shows the share of homicides in each province committed by Venezuelans (from the total of all homicides between 2019 and 2024). A striking pattern emerges: the provinces with the highest homicide rates overall are not the ones where Venezuelans are significantly involved. Provinces where Venezuelans make up a larger share of total homicides are not the focal points of the structural violence crisis.

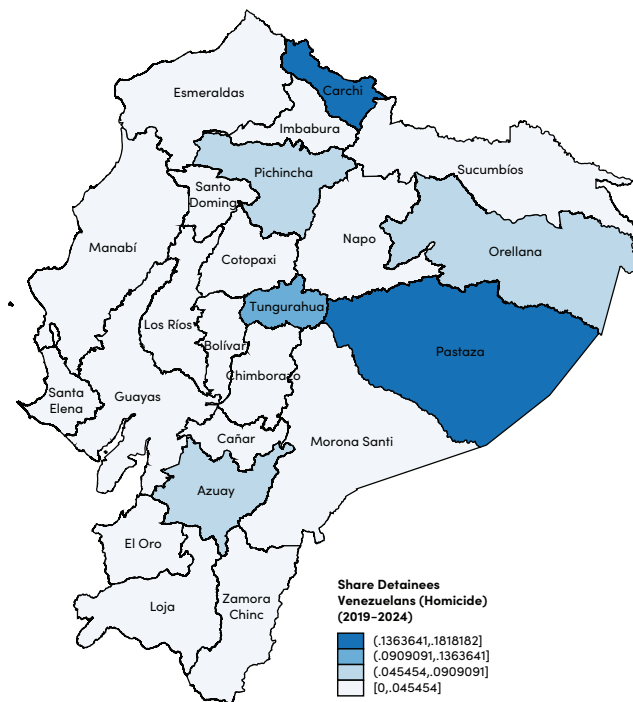
This spatial mismatch provides strong supporting evidence that Venezuelans are not embedded in the core dynamics of Ecuador’s organized criminal conflict. Their involvement in homicides, while real in certain localities, appears to stem from separate mechanisms. Together, these maps underscore the need for policy to differentiate between common crime and structural violence, and to avoid conflating migrant involvement in crime with the country’s broader security breakdown. Tailored, evidence-based interventions—centered on integration and protection—are more likely to succeed than security responses built on misperception.

FIGURE 8. Geographical distribution of homicides in Ecuador (2019–2024)

A: Total homicides per 100,000, based on police reports of detainees (average 2019–2024)



B: Share of homicides by Venezuelans detainees (of total 2019–2024)



Source: Datos Abiertos, Government of Ecuador; INEC 2022 Census.

Conclusion and policy implications

The evidence demonstrates that Venezuelan migrants are not driving the overall increase in crime rates in Ecuador. National and province-level data consistently show that Venezuelans commit crimes at a lower rate than their representation in the population would suggest.

However, this analysis does highlight an important nuance: although Venezuelans commit relatively fewer crimes, when they do offend, these crimes tend to be somewhat more violent or severe. Yet, crucially, the data strongly indicate that this violence is not systematically connected to organized crime or Ecuador's gang crisis.

Given these insights, the Ecuadorian government's policy response should be strategic and nuanced. Broad punitive measures against migrants, such as intensified policing or immigration crackdowns, could be misplaced and counterproductive. Such policies risk stigmatizing migrants further and pushing vulnerable groups deeper into precarious and possibly illicit survival strategies. Instead, a more effective and evidence-based approach would prioritize social integration measures, reducing the root vulnerabilities that underlie migrant involvement in crime.

Enhancing integration and economic inclusion

Central to mitigating crime involving Venezuelan migrants is improving their access to formal employment and legal residency. As shown in the data, irregular migratory status significantly increases vulnerability to crime involvement, particularly through exposure to economic precarity and exclusion. The government should therefore enhance and expand its migrant regularization programs, making them more accessible, affordable, and responsive. International donors and civil society can provide crucial support here, supplementing government resources and expertise, especially in creating scalable integration programs that offer clear pathways to formal employment.

Differentiating enforcement strategies

It is essential that law enforcement policies clearly differentiate between migrant-related common crimes and the organized violence stemming from gang activities. The battle against the rise of crime in Ecuador should remain focused on dismantling organized criminal structures primarily responsible for Ecuador's high homicide rates, where immigrants seem not to be playing a significant role. Of course, immigrant crime should also be addressed by authorities, but it requires a different strategy since the data suggest motivation for this criminal activity is essentially different. In this sense, law enforcement should address individual criminal behaviors without alienating entire migrant communities.

Combating misinformation and xenophobia

Public perceptions significantly shape both policy responses and social integration outcomes. Therefore, actively addressing misinformation and xenophobic narratives about Venezuelan migrants should be an integral component of Ecuador's policy strategy. Public awareness campaigns, proactive government messaging, and collaboration with media and civil society organizations are essential tools for reinforcing evidence-based narratives about migration and crime. These efforts should underscore that rather than posing a security threat, migrants can and do contribute positively to Ecuador's economy and society.

In sum, adopting these nuanced, evidence-informed policy measures will enable Ecuador to enhance public safety while promoting social cohesion. By treating Venezuelan migrants as partners in community-building rather than as security threats, Ecuador can leverage migration as a strength, aligning policy actions with humanitarian values and practical security considerations.

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