



As Criminal Violence Grows, Ecuadorians Escape Internally. A Government Stance on Displacement is Pending.

This fifth volume in our series on ‘Internal Displacement in the Context of Organised Criminal Violence’ looks at internal displacement from criminal group violence in Ecuador, describing this relatively new and little-discussed form of injustice affecting tens of thousands of Ecuadorians per year. With little government acknowledgement of the problem, the needs of people displaced by criminal gang violence remain under-resourced and unaddressed. Most affected people have little recourse, lacking knowledge of how and where to seek protections and solutions.

The initial five papers in this series draw on research by experts at the [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) of the Refugee Law Initiative (RLI), working collaboratively with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in relation to her [2025 Call for Inputs](#) on this theme.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in criminal actors and crime affecting [Ecuador](#). The activity of local criminal organisations soared at the turn of 2020, much of it connected to international drug cartels. As criminal activity grew in frequency and intensity, Ecuadorians as well as migrants and refugees were drawn into violence at levels never before experienced in Ecuador. [Criminal groups grew in number and size](#) and are

responsible for massacres in prisons, attacks with explosives, generalised extortion of businesses and individuals in their areas of influence, kidnapping, *sicariato* (contract killing), and eviction from sites coveted as operating posts in key urban enclaves. Increasingly, [children and adolescents are recruited](#) to assist and carry out violent acts.

Children are severely [affected by criminal violence](#), particularly in marginalised urban areas. Migrant and Afro-Ecuadorian adolescents and youth are particularly targeted by criminal groups to provide information, sell drugs or become the agents of threats and other crimes. Girls and adolescent women are recruited for sexual and other purposes in a post-pandemic context of [poverty and insufficient social services](#). An informer or lookout may be as young as eight. Adolescents are often “assigned” street jobs, including the carrying out of homicide, while senior gang members stay safely behind. Besides these [blatant forms of human trafficking](#), large numbers of children and adolescents die by violent homicide. [In 2023 alone, 770 children were killed, an increase of 640 percent in child deaths over the last four years.](#)

The predicaments of refugees and migrants are often dire, as many live in underprivileged areas where criminal groups have established themselves. They are frequent targets of extortion due to the precarity of their situation. Relying on weaker, more recently-established social safety networks, they are not simply victims of crime; [violence becomes an additional obstacle to their potential integration, thereby prolonging their displacement.](#)

In response to increased violence, the Ecuadorian government [declared a non-international armed conflict in early 2024](#) and several states of emergency. Police, as well as military forces, are charged with [fighting criminal organisations](#). One effect of these efforts was a drop in the homicide rate, with [the number of homicides in 2024 sixteen percent lower than the country’s historical high in 2023](#). However, [in January 2025, the numbers increased again. The perceived impunity of the criminal acts and a mistrust of institutions have created a sense of vulnerability among those affected by criminal violence.](#) Additionally, the

[“Malvinas” case](#), where a military intervention against adolescents is being investigated, adds to reports by human rights defenders on [violations since the conflict was declared](#).

In such a context, displacement occurs. A new survey by the NGO 3iSolution found that from January to December 2024, 82,876 people over fifteen years of age (910 people per 100,000) reported having been displaced by armed violence and insecurity in Ecuador. The majority of respondents are male (59%), and eleven percent are Venezuelan migrants. They are part of an approximately quarter of a million people who experienced internal displacement in Ecuador for various reasons in 2024, including 34,747 who fled interpersonal violence.

The reasons to flee are usually threats or actual violence by criminal groups. In the same report by 3iSolution, of those displaced by violence, thirty percent faced extortion, eleven percent sexual violence, seven percent appropriation of property, three percent homicide, and three percent forced recruitment. Whole families moved in forty-six percent of the cases. Thirty-eight percent of IDPs have been displaced multiple times. Fifty-five percent reported being displaced in groups of ten or more families. Forced movement is not exclusively internal; according to humanitarian actors consulted, a number of Ecuadorian community leaders and human rights defenders targeted by violence have been resettled abroad.

Reading the patterns

The first efforts to compile data on internal displacement or the [intention of movement](#) within Ecuador have been undertaken by humanitarian actors. [The locations with the highest homicide rates are in the coastal provinces](#), consistent with practitioners’ views that most displacement routes go from coastal cities to either other coastal locations or highland cities. There is also visible displacement from mining areas in the southern highlands and Amazon regions, where criminal groups engage in [extortion, money laundering and appropriation of informal gold mines](#).

Displacement patterns seem to vary in response to context and the shifting practices of criminal groups, who, in turn, undertake new activities or change locations when pressed by State forces, or after striking new or breaking old alliances.

According to another NGO study (not yet released), in 2024, coastal provinces plus northern highland provinces and Azuay in the south were simultaneously both expulsion and reception locations for at-risk groups. Generally, displaced persons initially seek to stay in their province of residence but consider a more distant destination if danger reappears.

Esmeraldas, in the northern coast, is among the provinces with high population turnover. Displacement was visible there since 2021; then, in early 2024, violence [dropped](#), as in [the rest of Ecuador](#), reportedly [due to the military crackdown](#), then fluctuated [depending on the presence of State forces](#). [The closing of businesses](#) is an early warning sign for population displacement as “protection fees” extorted from formal and informal entrepreneurs force many out of business. The impact extends to jobs, clients and supply chains.

Displaced people contacted by NGO informants in the last year share certain features: most leave due to menaces to their lives by criminal groups and seek to go undetected. Fear of child recruitment is one of the drivers; according to practitioners, some families send adolescent boys to stay with extended family and attend school in a different city.

People of all income levels prioritise security when selecting a destination. Highland cities, [with lower homicide rates](#), are often [chosen](#), and some universities enable enrolment options tailored for students from Coastal schools.

A new phenomenon

Ecuadorians generally don't understand or know how to navigate the challenges of displacement. Few displaced people have approached churches, social services or NGOs to seek help. Among the first to obtain assistance were Venezuelan migrants and Colombian refugees moving out of violent areas, as many know that NGOs often offer assistance

supported by external funding. Lacking knowledge and unable to access government resources, however, Ecuadorians generally receive no support and protection during displacement.

Displaced Ecuadorians usually seek shelter with extended family members who can support them for a short time. Some lodge temporarily at shelters run by municipalities or faith-based organisations, [which, in turn, are in need of support](#). Housing, work, health services (including mental health support), and school readmission are pressing needs, and generally remain unanswered. Discrimination by fellow Ecuadorians, who tend to conflate victims and perpetrators, complicate the search for jobs or housing.

Discussion of displacement in Ecuador is silenced by fear of persecution, with criminal groups present in several provinces.

No official stance

When internal displacement escalates due to violence, as happens in Ecuador (along with Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in recent years), [governments are bound by certain obligations](#) of [international law, particularly human rights](#). In addition to efforts undertaken to protect their populations and minimize the risk of displacement, [States must recognise displacement as a humanitarian issue](#).

However, the fact that thousands of civilians have been forced to move has not yet been acknowledged by the Ecuadorian government as of early 2025. Presidential Executive Decree 493 of January 2, 2025, which imposed the ninth state of emergency in a year in response to criminal violence, does not mention displacement or its numbers. It is expected that the issue may be addressed after Presidential elections to be held in April 2025 (the incumbent running for re-election). As the time of this writing, only the Office of the National Ombudsperson (*Defensoría del Pueblo del Ecuador*, the national human rights protection mechanism) had collected information on cases of internal displacement and carried out a study, in partnership with UNHCR. Initial findings show that among internally displaced people from areas with high crime rates, upon arrival

in host communities, 38.8% lodged with family or friends while 6.1% stayed in shelters. Only 57.7% of school-aged children resumed their education.

Meanwhile, [external migration](#) of Ecuadorians continues, with [violence and its economic effects as additional drivers](#). Along with deportation, emigration is widely discussed in the media, but there is no public awareness of internal displacement. An additional issue, the [rise in asylum requests filed by Ecuadorians abroad](#), has also gone unnoticed.

[Humanitarian actors hoping to respond have asked the Ecuadorian government and the international community to recognize the issue](#), which in turn would allow for a call for international assistance (albeit in a challenging funding context given [changes in US foreign aid](#)). The management of displacement in neighbouring Colombia and the north of Central America can be useful examples for the Ecuadorian State to [better address pending tasks](#): design national response mechanisms, allocate resources, coordinate local initiatives for assistance, include protection for displaced populations in government strategies, and train public servants to adapt social services to the needs of internally displaced persons. Ecuadorians also need to introduce the issue of internal displacement in legislation and public policies.

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This paper is part of the Researching Internal Displacement mini-series on 'Internal Displacement in the Context of Organised Criminal Violence'. The series draws on research by experts at the [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) of the RLI, working collaboratively with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in relation to her [2025 Call for Inputs](#) on this theme.

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