



#HomicideRound-up

# InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Round-Up



## Tabla de contenido

<b>1</b>	<b>South America</b> .....	6
	Ecuador .....	7
	Venezuela.....	9
	Colombia .....	11
	Guyana .....	13
	Brazil .....	14
	Uruguay .....	15
	Paraguay .....	16
	Suriname.....	17
	Chile .....	18
	Peru .....	19
	Argentina.....	20
	Bolivia.....	21
<b>2</b>	<b>Caribbean</b> .....	22
	St. Kitts and Nevis.....	23
	Jamaica.....	25
	St. Vincent and the Grenadines.....	26
	Turks and Caicos Islands.....	27
	St. Lucia .....	28
	Haiti .....	29
	Trinidad and Tobago .....	31
	The Bahamas .....	33
	Puerto Rico.....	34
	Dominican Republic .....	35
	Barbados .....	36

<b>3</b>	<b>Mexico and Central America</b> .....	37
	Honduras.....	38
	Mexico .....	40
	Belize.....	42
	Costa Rica .....	43
	Guatemala.....	45
	Panama .....	47
	Nicaragua .....	49
	El Salvador .....	50

# InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Round-Up

At least 117,492 people were murdered in Latin America and the Caribbean during 2023, putting the median homicide rate around 20 per 100,000 people. But homicide data in many countries is missing or unreliable, so the actual number is likely higher.

Here, InSight Crime dives into our yearly round-up, analyzing the organized crime dynamics behind the violence in each country of the region.

All homicides rates are per 100,000 people.



# 2023 Homicide Rates in Latin America and the Caribbean

HOMICIDE RATE (PER 100,000)



ST. KITTS AND NEVIS \_\_\_\_\_ 65.0  
 JAMAICA \_\_\_\_\_ 60.9

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES \_\_\_\_\_ 50.1

TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS \_\_\_\_\_ 46.6  
 ECUADOR \_\_\_\_\_ 44.5  
 ST. LUCIA \_\_\_\_\_ 41.7  
 HAITI \_\_\_\_\_ 40.9

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO \_\_\_\_\_ 37.6  
 HONDURAS \_\_\_\_\_ 31.1

THE BAHAMAS \_\_\_\_\_ 26.8  
 VENEZUELA \_\_\_\_\_ 26.8  
 COLOMBIA \_\_\_\_\_ 25.7  
 MEXICO \_\_\_\_\_ 23.3  
 BELIZE \_\_\_\_\_ 21.5

GUYANA \_\_\_\_\_ 19.7  
 BRAZIL \_\_\_\_\_ 18.7  
 COSTA RICA \_\_\_\_\_ 17.2  
 GUATEMALA \_\_\_\_\_ 16.7  
 PUERTO RICO \_\_\_\_\_ 14.4  
 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC \_\_\_\_\_ 11.5  
 PANAMA \_\_\_\_\_ 11.5  
 URUGUAY \_\_\_\_\_ 11.2

BARBADOS \_\_\_\_\_ 7.0  
 PARAGUAY \_\_\_\_\_ 6.2  
 NICARAGUA \_\_\_\_\_ 6.2  
 SURINAME \_\_\_\_\_ 4.9  
 CHILE \_\_\_\_\_ 4.5  
 PERU \_\_\_\_\_ 3.2  
 EL SALVADOR \_\_\_\_\_ 2.4

ARGENTINA \_\_\_\_\_ N/A  
 BOLIVIA \_\_\_\_\_ N/A

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# 1

## South America

With cocaine production soaring and high drug prices in Europe and other major consumer markets, criminal disputes over trafficking routes were the primary driver of violence in South America this year. Ecuador, in particular, had its most violent year on record, while trafficking groups continue to fight in Colombia, the world's biggest cocaine producer.

On the other hand, Paraguay, and Peru saw significant improvements in homicide rates despite their continuing roles as drug transit and production centers.

# Ecuador



*Soldier asks for calm after deadly clashes in a prison. Photo: Associated Press*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
44.5	+74.5%	8,008	18,001,000

Sources: Plan V and World Bank

Ecuador had the highest homicide rate of any country in Central or South America in 2023, as spiraling criminal violence pushed it up from 25.5 in 2022 to 44.5 — a 74.5% increase over the previous year.

The country's descent into chaos has been sudden, with the homicide rate increasing eightfold in just five years. But the explosion of violence has been decades in the making and is now driven by drug trafficking groups competing over strategic routes.

**Previous administrations'** heavy-handed approaches failed to curtail gangs. With mega-prisons filled to the brim, gangs began organizing behind bars, using violence to show their strength and take out those that stood in their way.

Violence continued in 2024, with gangs launching **several attacks**, including storming a live news broadcast, rioting in prisons, and attacking police. This wave of violence is a response to the new President Daniel Noboa's anti-crime plan, calling into question whether Noboa will be able to craft a **strategy** that will reign in Ecuador's gangs.

**Criminal Economies:** Cocaine | Extortion

**Criminal Groups:** Choneros | Lobos



# Venezuela



Graffiti outside the Military History Museum in Caracas. Photo: Laura Ávila

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>1</sup>
26.8	-33.7%	6,973	26,018,657

Sources: Venezuelan Violence Observatory

Violent deaths in Venezuela decreased by 25% in comparison to 2022 figures, [according](#) to data gathered by the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV). The OVV, a non-governmental organization that is widely considered to have the country’s most accurate homicide data, registered a total of 6,973 violent deaths. Of these, 1,956 were homicides committed by criminals, 953 were deaths caused during police intervention actions, and 4,064 were violent deaths whose cause and intentionality are under investigation.

<sup>1</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.

Although there were fewer violent deaths overall compared to 2022, the number of homicides increased by 3.2% in 2023. The highest numbers of murders were recorded in the states of Miranda with 279 victims, the Capital District with 223, and Zulia with 205 deaths. The number of small criminal structures fighting for territorial control and criminal proceeds from extortion in these three states has grown, resulting in more homicides. “There was a transition period where the majority of criminals left the country, leaving a vacuum, and a new generation of criminals exploiting those opportunities,” Roberto Briceño León, a sociologist and director of the OVV, told InSight Crime.

**Criminal Economies:** [Human Trafficking](#) | [Illegal Mining](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Tren de Aragua](#) | [Colectivos](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias ‘Niño Guerrero’](#) | [Yeico Masacre](#)

# Colombia



*Peace banner in the town of Guapi, Cauca, an area historically affected by armed conflict. Photo: Henry Shuldiner*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>2</sup>
25.7	-1.5%	13,432	52,264,591

Source: Colombia's National Police

The 13,432 homicides recorded by Colombia's National Police in 2023 gave the country a homicide rate of 25.7, down slightly from 26.1 in 2022.

In line with the trends observed in 2022, Putumayo (60.6) and Cauca (53.3) were two of the departments with the highest homicide rates in 2023. Notably, San Andrés y Providencia – home to drug trafficking groups and an **increasingly important** migrant smuggling route – stood out with a rate of 65.8, the highest in the nation and significantly higher than the previous year's figure of 45.1. Local **authorities** attribute the homicides primarily to revenge between family clans.

<sup>2</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.

In the department of Putumayo, on Colombia's border with Ecuador, armed confrontations between ex-FARC factions **remain** one of the main drivers of violence.

In Cauca, the Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central – **EMC**) of the ex-FARC mafia, have attacked state forces and civilians to exert control over illicit economies in the region.

**Criminal Economies:** [Human Trafficking](#) | [Cocaine](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [ELN](#) | [Gaitanistas - Gulf Clan](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Jobanis de Jesús Ávila Villadiego, alias 'Chiquito Malo'](#) | [Dairo Antonio Úsuga, alias 'Otoniel'](#)



# Guyana



Guyana's Public Prosecutor's Office. Photo: Douwe den Held

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
19.7	+30.2%	159	809,000

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs figures reported by local media and World Bank

Guyana's Police Force recorded 159 murders in 2023, compared to 122 the previous year, according to Ministry of Home Affairs figures reported by [local media](#). While this represented an 30% increase from 2022, it is unlikely that the murders are related to organized crime.

Most homicides in Guyana are [categorized](#) as either domestic (28.3%) or disorderly (49.1%), which are usually unplanned killings. Less than 20% of the murders in the first half of 2023 were categorized as robbery, execution, or of unknown cause – three categorizations that capture organized crime-related homicides.

**Criminal Economies:** [Illegal Mining](#) | [Timber Trafficking](#)

# Brazil



Authorities carry out an operation in the state of Bahia, one of the most lethal areas in Brazil in 2023. Photo: Bnews

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
18.1	+4.2%	39,033	215,303,000

Source: Ministry of Justice and Public Security and World Bank

Brazil saw a 4.2% increase in its homicide rate from 17.4 in 2022 to 18.1 in 2023, according to data from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

Brazil's main criminal groups, the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC) and the Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV), have continued to fight over territory and criminal economies, though they increasingly battle indirectly. The rival gangs often ally with and supply smaller groups that fight over trafficking routes and local drug dealing. This dynamic fueled violence between gangs and security forces in Brazil's northeastern state of Bahia, making it one of the [deadliest places in the country](#) in 2023.

**Criminal Economies:** Cocaine | Gold

**Criminal Groups:** First Capital Command – PCC | Red Command

**Criminal Personalities:** Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, alias 'Marcola' | Antônio Francisco Bonfim Lopes, alias 'Nem'



# Uruguay



Authorities carry out a police operation in the Villa Española neighborhood, in Montevideo, epicenter of homicides in Uruguay in 2023. Photo: Francisco Flores

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
11.2	+0.5%	382	3,444,263

Source: Ministry of the Interior

Uruguay closed out the year with 382 homicides, one less than 2022's total, putting its homicide rate at 11.2 for 2023.

Organized crime has become an increasingly salient topic in the country. Though down from a peak in 2018, homicides remain elevated, [driven mainly](#) by smaller, family clans fighting over territory. According to official data, half of all homicides were caused by score settling and conflict between criminal groups.

Experts have [criticized](#) the government's security strategy, which focuses on raiding retail drug dealers. This strategy causes groups to fractionalize, which often increases violence as a larger number of smaller groups fight to establish and control drug selling points.

**Criminal Economies:** [Microtrafficking](#) | [Money Laundering](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Sebastián Marset](#)

# Paraguay



*Tacumbú Prison, in Asunción, battlefield between the Rotela Clan and its main rival, the PCC. Photo: Jorge Sáenz, Associated Press*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
6.2	-22.2%	464	7,453,695

*Source: National Police of Paraguay*

Paraguay saw a significant reduction in its homicide rate compared to 2022, dropping from 8 to 6.2, according to data provided by the National Police. Despite its relatively low homicide rate, Paraguay saw several notable incidents of organized crime-related violence in 2023.

Perhaps the most significant event was the taking of Paraguay's largest prison by the Rotela Clan, the country's most powerful homegrown gang. Once a small family clan dedicated to small-time crack dealing, the Rotela Clan has violently expanded, killing rivals in their hometown of Asunción, and allegedly assassinating officials the gang could not corrupt.

**Criminal Economies:** [Contraband](#) | [Marijuana](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Rotela Clan](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Marcelo Fernando Pinheiro Veiga, alias 'Piloto'](#) | [Jarvis Chimenes Pavão, alias "The Drug Kingpin"](#)



# Suriname



Suriname's border with French Guiana, where smuggling is rampant. Photo: Douwe den Held

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
4.9	-37%	30	618,000

Source: Public Ministry of Suriname and World Bank

South America's smallest country [recorded](#) 30 murders between January and August 2023, only two fewer than the 32 homicides recorded in 2021. Although it is a major cocaine transit country, violence there is not as strongly linked to cocaine trafficking as in many other South American countries. In February 2024, Spanish authorities [intercepted](#) a record-breaking shipment of 8 tons of cocaine originating from Suriname. This marked the largest consignment from the South American country since at least 2018.

## Criminal Economies: Cocaine

# Chile



Police officers patrolling as part of Chile's "Streets Without Violence" plan to combat crime. Photo: Pura Noticia

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
4.5	-2.7%	893	19,960,889

Source: Chilean Investigative Police and World Bank

An uptick in homicides in 2022 provoked fears of encroaching transnational criminal groups. But Chile saw a 2.7% drop in the homicide rate in 2023, according to official statistics.

While the country consistently has one of the lowest homicide rates in the region, insecurity is a mounting **concern**. The **presence** of international criminal groups, such as Tren de Aragua, has sparked public fears about expanding organized crime in the country. Chile has a growing **illicit marijuana market**, and its many ports and porous borders along coca-producing regions have led to the development of **important trafficking routes**.

As a result of this geography, Chile's rugged northern region has seen the majority of the country's violence. But crime in that region is **dropping**. Meanwhile, in the capital, Santiago, there was a slight **increase** in homicides this year.

**Criminal Economies:** [Timber Trafficking](#) | [Marijuana](#)



# Peru



Police officers carry out an operation against Tren de Aragua in Lima. Photo: Crónica Policial

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
3.2	-27.2%	1,105	34,050,000

Source: Peru's National Death Information System and World Bank

Peru saw a substantial reduction in its homicide rate, dropping from 4.5 in 2022 to 3.2 in 2023.

Nevertheless, organized crime continues to be a significant driver of violence. Remnants of Peru's [Shining Path](#) insurgency [clashed](#) repeatedly with security forces throughout 2023, leaving both soldiers and guerillas dead. The fighting has mostly occurred in Peru's coca growing hub as the Shining Path tries to hold on to its primary income stream. But the government struck a blow to the group in November 2023 when it successfully arrested several key "senderistas."

Beyond its homegrown threats, transnational groups were behind some of Peru's violence in 2023, like [murders](#) near Peru's border with Colombia and Brazil, which are believed to be the result of fighting between Brazil's Red Command and smaller gangs aligned with the First Capital Command.

**Criminal Economies:** [Coca](#) | [Extortion](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Shining Path](#)

# Argentina



March to demand security in Rosario, a violent hotspot in Argentina. Photo: Sol Play 9.5

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
-	-	-	46,235,000

Source: World Bank

Argentina typically takes several months to release official crime data, and no reliable estimates were available at the time of publication, so once again, InSight Crime cannot include its homicide rate in our round-up.

Subnational data suggests little has changed in Argentina's criminal landscape. The drug trafficking hub of Rosario continues to be a [central point of violence](#). Homicides in the city dropped only marginally, and the overall levels remain elevated.

Violence and insecurity was a recurring topic during the 2023 presidential election, with new President Javier Milei promising to crack down on crime. But the policies [proposed](#) thus far by Milei and Security Minister Patricia Bullrich mostly rehash previously failed strategies.

**Criminal Economies:** [Microtrafficking](#) | [Extortion](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Monos](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Ariel Máximo Cantero](#), alias 'Guille'



# Bolivia



Special Force to Fight Crime (FELCC) facilities in El Alto. Photo: Erbol

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
-	-	-	12,224,000

Source: World Bank

InSight Crime was unable to obtain open data on homicides in Bolivia, and the government did not respond to requests for official statistics.

Though the country is one of the top three coca-producers in the world and wracked with poverty and corruption, Bolivia has historically had a rather low homicide rate, at least according to official numbers.

**Booming** cocaine production in Bolivia has not caused a noticeable increase in violence. Much of the drug trade in Bolivia is **dominated** by one group or clan, avoiding the competition over territory that has caused drug violence in other countries, such as Ecuador. But the First Capital Command and Red Command are increasingly **active** in Bolivia. If these transnational groups try to take over new territory, waves of violence may follow.

**Criminal Economies:** [Coca](#) | [Contraband](#)

## 2

# Caribbean

Many of the countries with this year's highest homicide rates can be found in the Caribbean. Awash with guns, local gangs fighting for control of cocaine and arms trafficking propel violence in many Caribbean nations, which are also regularly afflicted by natural disasters.

But the Caribbean's elevated rankings must be taken with a grain of salt. In countries with small populations, elevated homicide rates can be the result of isolated outbreaks of violence, rather than increases in organized crime activity.

And many countries made progress in 2023, significantly reducing their homicide rates — in part due to new security programs.

# St. Kitts and Nevis



Neighborhood with gang presence in St. Kitts and Nevis. Photo: Juliana Manjarrés

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
65	+184.1%	31	46,657

Source: Local media and World Bank

In 2023, St. Kitts and Nevis recorded 31 murders, a sharp increase compared to previous years. The sudden surge in homicides has thrust St. Kitts and Nevis back into the global spotlight, making it the country with the highest per capita murder rate in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Though concerning, it is worth noting that, in a country of less than 50,000 people, each murder substantially increases the homicide rate, as every case represents a relatively significant proportion of the population.

The government implemented the Alternative Lifestyle Pathway Program (ALPP) in 2019. This initiative offered training and financial support to both youth and adults entangled in legal conflicts, with a specific focus on assisting gang members.

Alongside COVID-19 restrictions, the ALPP contributed to maintaining the country's lowest homicide rates in a decade from 2019 to 2022. Since then, however, internal warfare within gangs and personal retaliations – sometimes linked to gang membership – have reignited violence in the country.

**Criminal Economies:** [Money Laundering](#) | [Arms Trafficking](#)



# Jamaica



A woman watches as alleged gang members step out of a police truck after arriving at court, in Kingston, Jamaica. Photo: Gilbert Bellamy, Reuters

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
60.9	-7.9%	1,393	2,287,000

Source: Local media and World Bank

Jamaica saw a 7.9% decrease in its homicide rate in 2023 compared to the previous year. This decline coincides with a **reduction** in gang-related murders, dropping from 80% of total murders in 2018 to 67% five years later. According to the police, these murders **encompassed** internal disputes, clashes between groups, and contract killings.

In 2023, the Counter Terrorism and Organized Crime Branch (CTOC) led anti-gang operations that resulted in at least 31 arrests of alleged members of the Clansman Gang, one of the top five criminal organizations on the island. The CTOC has been responsible for 800 murders since 2014, the Head of the Crime Portfolio, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Fitz Bailey, **told** local media.

In response to the growing quantity and availability of guns in recent years, Jamaica passed a new **firearms act** in November 2022, under which the first conviction took place in February 2023.

**Criminal Economies:** [Arms Trafficking](#) | [Cocaine](#)

# St. Vincent and the Grenadines



Central police station in Kingstown, St. Vincent. Source: Andrew Moore

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
50.1	+32%	52	103,698

Source: Local media and World Bank

In 2023, St. Vincent and the Grenadines reported a 32% increase in the homicide rate. Of the the 52 total homicides, 43 were committed with a firearm.

From 2012 to 2023, firearms consistently topped the list of most-used murder weapons. And since 2019, firearm murders have been on an upward trend, the Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force [reported](#).

An [influx](#) of illicit weapons and ammunition, mainly from the United States, is fueling this rise. To reduce the number of firearms, the country will launch a 90-day period of firearm [amnesty](#) on May 1, during which people in possession of illicit weapons and ammunition can turn them into the police without being prosecuted for them.

## Criminal Economies: [Arms Trafficking](#)



# Turks and Caicos Islands



Serious Crime Unit detectives of the Royal Turks and Caicos Islands Police Force conduct a raid. Photo: Royal Turks and Caicos Islands Police Force Facebook

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
46.6	-39.9%	23	49,309

Source: Local media

There were 23 homicides throughout the Turks and Caicos Islands during 2023, making its homicide rate 50, a 35.6% decrease from 2022's 77.6.

Authorities **blamed** the wave of violence in 2022 on arms and drug trafficking flowing throughout the Caribbean, fueling turf wars between rival gangs. Acting Commissioner of Police Rodney Adams said that the reduction in violence in 2023 was partly due to policies instituted in 2022. He **credited** the Anti-Gang Ordinance instituted that year for the arrests of several key gang members and major drug seizures during 2023.

The Turks and Caicos Islands' comparatively high homicide rates is partially explained by population. With only around 48,000 **residents**, even small increases in violence will result in a large jump in the nation's homicide rate.

**Criminal Economies:** [Arms Trafficking](#)

# St. Lucia



The town of Vieux Fort, one of the main hotspots of gang activity in St. Lucia. Photo: St. Lucia Loopnews

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
41.7	+4.2%	75	180,000

Source: Local media and World Bank

St. Lucia's homicide rate decreased from 42.3 in 2022 to 41.7 in 2023. Gang violence was the **main** driver of homicides in the country in 2023, constituting 49% of the reported cases.

The capital city of Castries and the southern town of Vieux Fort are two of the main hotspots of gang activity.

Territorial disputes, criminal economies, personal disputes among rival gang members, and vendettas were common instigators of violence. Easy access to US-manufactured weapons and the fragmentation of gangs also fueled homicides on the island in 2023.

**Criminal Economies:** [Arms Trafficking](#) | [Cocaine](#)



# Haiti



Haitians protest the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. Photo: Associated Press

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
40.9	+126%	4,789	11,709,046

Source: United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH)

Haiti saw a sharp rise in gang violence in 2023. Its homicide rate reached a staggering 40.9, a 126% increase from 2022, according to [data](#) from the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (Le Bureau intégré des Nations Unies en Haïti – BINUH).

Violence – in many forms – has been [spiraling out of control](#) since the assassination of Haiti’s President Jovenel Moïse in 2021. With the state unable to protect its citizens, vigilante groups began [extrajudicial killings](#) of alleged gang members.

In response to the increasing violence, the United Nations approved an international support mission to [reinforce](#) the Haitian National Police. But the force has been delayed, and [experts believe](#) the mission will do little to defeat organized crime.

The [deaths](#) of some of Haiti's top gang leaders may further destabilize the country as groups reorganize and use force to prove their continued strength. And the return of convicted former senator Guy Phillipe may [bring new instability](#) to Haiti's already fragile security landscape.

**Criminal Economies:** [Kidnapping](#) | [Arms Trafficking](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [400 Mawozo](#) | [G9 and Family](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Jimmy Chérizier, alias 'Barbecue'](#)

# Trinidad and Tobago



*Mourners pay their last respects to murdered gang leader Anthon Boney, alias “Boombay,” at his funeral service in the Laventille suburb of Port of Spain. Photo: Abraham Diaz*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
37.6	-4.5%	576	1,531,000

Source: Local media and World Bank

The homicide rate in Trinidad and Tobago fell 4.2% in 2023, after reaching the highest-ever number of murders the previous year. However, murders — most of which are related to gangs — continue to be a challenge in the Caribbean nation. Persistent gang clashes have normalized violence in Trinidad and Tobago’s poor urban neighborhoods, and individual murders trigger retaliatory acts, perpetuating cycles of violence. For example, in late October 2023, the Sixx and Rasta City gangs, two of Trinidad and Tobago’s largest criminal groups, [started](#) a wave of murders that would last for nearly two months.

Like other Caribbean countries, the availability of illicit weapons coming from the United States and Venezuela has propelled cyclic violence in Trinidad and Tobago. “Disputes that can be addressed with non-violent tools, end up being ‘solved’ with guns,” Raymond Ockille, the founder of the NGO REACH ‘N Inc., told InSight Crime.

**Criminal Economies:** [Arms Trafficking](#)



# The Bahamas



*Police Commissioner Clayton Fernander shares strategies to tackle gun violence in the country. Photo: The Tribune*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
26.8	-16.2%	110	410,000

Source: Local media and World Bank

The Bahamas experienced a 14% drop in homicides in 2023 compared to the previous year, with 110 cases, 25% of which were domestic, local media [reported](#).

Arms trafficking, however, continues to be an issue. The Royal Bahamas Police Force seized 276 guns between January and October 2023, Police Commissioner Clayton Fernander [reported](#) during a press conference. The total seizures for 2023 have not yet been released, so it is too soon to draw comparisons with the 370 firearms seized in 2022.

## Criminal Economies: [Arms Trafficking](#)

# Puerto Rico



Federal agents outside Rio Piedras Medical Center in San Juan await updates on injured colleagues rescued from Cabo Rojo, a key cocaine smuggling route from South America. Photo: Carlos Giusti, GFR Media via Associated

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
14.4	-17.2%	464	3,222,000

Source: Governor of Puerto Rico and World Bank

Despite a violent start to 2023, racking up 19 [homicides](#) in the first week, Puerto Rico reduced its annual homicide rate by 17.2% compared to 2022, ending the year with a rate of 14.4.

Much of Puerto Rico's violence is due to local bands fighting to control drug dealing points. The fighting often spills beyond rivals as bystanders are injured or killed by stray bullets. One shootout in February resulted in the death of a four-year-old and injuries to a nine- and a 10-year-old, who were struck by bullets while attending a birthday party, [according to El Vocero](#).

Puerto Rico, like many Caribbean islands, remains a strategic transit point for [arms trafficking](#), giving local gangs access to high-powered firearms.

**Criminal Economies:** [Arms Trafficking](#) | [Human Smuggling](#)

# Dominican Republic



*Specialized Land Border Security Corps (Cuerpo Especializado de Seguridad Fronteriza - CESFRONT) officers at the Dajabón bridge, on the border with Haiti. Photo: Douwe den Held*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>3</sup>
11.5	-12.9%	1,475	12,826,087

Source: National Police of the Dominican Republic

Despite being a primary cocaine **transit** country in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic did not see an increase in violence in 2023. On the contrary, the country reported a 7% decline in homicides compared to 2022.

Organized crime does not appear to be a major driver of violence in the Dominican Republic, as the largest share of cases (45.4%) are **related** to social conflict, and only 24.3% appear to be linked to delinquency. This figure is nearly half that of other Caribbean nations like St. Lucia, where 49% of the murders are linked to gangs.

## Criminal Economies: Cocaine | Arms Trafficking

<sup>3</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.



# Barbados



Coordinator Akil Daley launches the National Peace Program during a church service at Hope Church, Neils Plantation. Photo: Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
7	-53.3%	-	282,000

Source: The Barbados Police Service

The Barbados Police Service reported its lowest homicide rate in the past decade, reaching 7 cases per 100,000 in 2023. While authorities have not shared the exact number of homicides, local media recorded between 19 and 21 homicides in 2023.

A gang truce [brokered](#) between two prominent gangs in February contributed to the decline in murders last year. The implementation of crime prevention programs, such as the [National Peace Program](#), has also helped [forestall](#) violent incidents between gangs, by providing hard and soft skills training to parents, at-risk youth, and schools.

## Criminal Economies: [Arms Trafficking](#)



# 3

## Mexico and Central America

Honduras and El Salvador, which have often been the most violent countries in Central America, took similar approaches to security policy in 2023, with very different results.

Costa Rica struggled to control a rise in cocaine trafficking through the country's ports. Local groups fought to control territory — particularly in the port-province of Limón — contributing to a 41% rise in Costa Rica's homicide rate compared to 2022.

Meanwhile, Mexico continues to struggle with violence as criminal groups compete over fentanyl and human trafficking routes.

# Honduras



Authorities burn seized cocaine in Honduras. Photo: Associated Press

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>4</sup>
31.1	-13.0%	3,035	9,746,307

Sources: Honduran National Police

Though Honduras' homicide rate decreased 13% in 2023, the country remained extremely violent with a homicide rate of 31.1, compared to the regional median of 20.1.

Honduras spent 2023 under a state of emergency, trying to recreate the security gains of neighboring El Salvador. While President Xiomara Castro's heavy-handed approach has suspended rights and **focused** on hitting gangs in the country's most violent hotspots, the approach has made **scant progress** against organized crime.

<sup>4</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.

Violence has [spread](#) beyond the organized crime hubs of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, and extortion gangs are on the rise. Coca [cultivation](#) in the country has risen, leading to [violence](#) in departments like Colón, where trafficking and cultivation are concentrated.

The government's approach has strained the overcrowded prisons it already struggled to control. On June 20, scores of women were [slaughtered](#) in Honduras' National Women's Penitentiary for Social Adaptation (Penitenciaría Nacional Femenina de Adaptación Social – PNFAS) when members of [Barrio 18](#) attacked members of rival [MS13](#) and other unaffiliated individuals in the prison.

**Criminal Economies:** [Coca](#) | [Extortion](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Atlantic Cartel](#) | [Valles](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Juan Orlando Hernández](#) | [Juan Antonio 'Tony' Hernández Alvarado](#)

# Mexico



*Border crossing between the city of Piedras Negras, in Coahuila, and Eagle Pass, in Texas. Photo: Victoria Dittmar*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
23.3	-7.6%	29,675	127,504,000

*Sources: The Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection of Mexico and the World Bank*

It is no surprise that Mexico, home to several powerful criminal groups vying for control of fentanyl trafficking and human trafficking, had a relatively high homicide rate of 23.3.

The country's rate decreased by 7.6% compared to 2022. But experts [question](#) whether the 2023 data is undercounting homicides, saying Mexico's figures lack transparency about the numbers and metrics. As homicides have dropped, unknown causes of death have proportionally risen, while deaths due to other causes have remained steady.



It is unclear what the margin of error in the government's estimate of homicides is and how many of the unknown violent deaths were homicides as the government has not been transparent with the complete methodology, according to Samantha Pérez Dávila, an economist and public policy expert focused on organized crime in Mexico. Suicide levels and accident levels have not varied significantly over the years," she told InSight Crime. "While homicides are going down, events of undetermined intent are going up."

**Criminal Economies:** [Synthetic Drugs](#) | [Human Trafficking](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Jalisco Cartel New Generation \(CJNG\)](#) | [Gulf Cartel](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Chapitos](#)

# Belize



*Police Commissioner Chester Williams and his three deputies on a countrywide tour to reduce crime. Photo: Belize Police Department, Police Public Relations Facebook*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
21.5	-14.1%	87	405,000

Sources: Belize Crime Observatory and World Bank

Belize’s homicide rate declined 14.1%, from 25 in 2022 to 21.5 in 2023. The drop in violence has occurred despite the country’s ongoing struggles with drug trafficking.

Belize’s homicide rate has been decreasing for the last three years: in 2020, it was 33.5, which dropped to 29 in 2021, then to 25 in 2022.

Authorities credit the improvement to community initiatives, including education programs aimed at those most vulnerable to joining gangs.

**Criminal Economies:** [Illegal Tobacco](#) | [Microtrafficking](#)



# Costa Rica



*Port of Moín, a key hub for cocaine transport to Europe in the city of Limón. Photo: APM Terminals*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>5</sup>
17.2	41%	907	5,262,237

Sources: Costa Rica's Judicial Investigation Agency

The year 2023 was Costa Rica's deadliest on record, with 907 murders among a population of just over 5 million. Double and triple homicides also saw significant spikes, marking a 237.5% and 600% increase, respectively, when compared to the figures recorded in 2022.

Most of the violence is [related](#) to drug gangs fighting for control of important ports and drug routes. The port of Moín in the Caribbean province of Limón, a key hub for cocaine transport to Europe, has been the epicenter of violence.

<sup>5</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.

But law enforcement [operations](#) in Limón have [pushed](#) some cocaine flows to the Pacific coast provinces of Puntarenas and Guanacaste, causing spikes in violence in both states.

Official statistics show [seizures](#) of crack cocaine have increased by 16.6% in 2023, suggesting domestic drug consumption is rising, potentially exacerbating this sudden increase in murders.

Access to guns remains a challenge for citizen security. More than [65%](#) of the murders recorded in 2023 were committed with a firearm.

**Criminal Economies:** [Cocaine](#) | [Marijuana](#)

# Guatemala



*Jubilant Guatemalans take to the streets to celebrate Bernardo Arévalo's victory in the 2023 presidential elections, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Photo: Alex Papadovassilakis*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population <sup>6</sup>
16.7	-3.5%	2,944	17,628,743

Sources: Guatemalan National Civil Police

Guatemala saw a marginal drop in violence in 2023, recording 2,944 homicides, compared to 3,004 in 2022. Gun violence was responsible for 85% of the total homicides recorded during 2023 by Guatemala's General Subdirectorato of Operations.

One of the main entry points for illegal weapons is the Mexico-Guatemala border. The National Civil Police [captured](#) 27 people for arms trafficking and seized 30 weapons between January and mid-November 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Calculation based on the total homicides and homicide rate for 2023.

The departments posting the highest murder rate were Escuintla, Zacapa, and Izabal – three provinces where well-armed criminal groups vie for control of lucrative drug-smuggling routes.

The department of Guatemala recorded the highest number of murders, with 1,303 reported killings. Gangs have long held presence in urban areas in the capital department, including zones 6, 18, 21, and 24 of Guatemala City, Mixco, and Villa Nueva.

**Criminal Economies:** [Human Trafficking](#) | [Coca](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [CIACS](#)



# Panama



*Panama Canal, a maritime corridor used by criminal networks to move drug shipments. Photo: Mundo Marítimo*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
11.5	+ 0.2%	508	4,409,000

*Sources: Diario Crítica and World Bank*

Though massive amounts of cocaine continue to flow through Panama, the country has not seen an increase in overall violence. Panama's homicide rate held steady at 11.5 for 2023, the same as the year before.

While there have been spurts of [trafficking-related violence](#) in the past, the leveling-off of homicides in Panama may signal that trafficking groups have established an equilibrium.

But key leaders of two gangs, [Calor Calor](#) and [Bagdad](#), have recently been arrested. If the gangs look to reorganize under new leadership, the balance may be disrupted, leading to more violence. What is more, a [drought](#) in the Panama Canal has disrupted trafficking routes. As groups look to expand to new territory and establish alternatives, violence may surge.

**Criminal Economies:** [Cocaine](#) | [Human Smuggling](#)

**Criminal Groups:** [Bagdad](#) | [Calor Calor](#)

# Nicaragua



Police at the facilities of the newspaper, La Prensa, in Managua, one of the media outlets that has been attacked multiple times by Daniel Ortega's regime. Photo: The Guardian

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
6.2	-7.5%	-	6,948,000

Sources: Nicaraguan National Police and World Bank

Notorious for its lack of transparency, Nicaragua's official data are publicly unavailable, and InSight Crime's requests for data went unanswered. In a press conference, the National Police [announced](#) that Nicaragua closed out the year with a homicides rate of 6.2, slightly down from last year's 6.7.

It is difficult to analyze trends in Nicaraguan organized crime due to the scarcity of information. Repression of the press [took off](#) in 2021 when the Ortega regime began detaining journalists and raiding the offices of newspapers. The government deepened its crackdown in 2023, [shutting down](#) NGOs and [forcing journalists into exile](#).

**Criminal Economies:** [Cocaine](#) | [Money Laundering](#).

**Criminal Groups:** [Reñazcos](#) | [Tarzanes](#)

**Criminal Personalities:** [Amauri Carmona Morelos](#) | [Francisco Zeledon](#)



# El Salvador



*Port of La Unión, routinely used by cocaine smugglers moving drugs north in boats and submarines. Photo: Alicia Florez*

Homicide Rate	% Change	Total Homicides	Population
2.4	-69.2%	154	6,336,000

*Sources: Salvadoran National Civil Police and World Bank*

El Salvador registered the lowest homicide rate in Latin America in 2023, at 2.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, down from more than 100 murders per 100,000 people in 2015. The historic lows come as the Bukele government continues a ruthless crackdown against the MS13 and Barrio 18 street gangs. The government has [arrested](#) 70,000 people — over 1% of the country's population of 6.3 million — since the controversial crackdown began in early 2022, effectively wiping out gang activity in the process.



While Bukele's crackdown has decreased violence in El Salvador, some have [questioned](#) the 2023 homicide data. The Observatory of Human Rights of the Central American University says figures are highly underreported, and the criminologist Carlos Carcash emphasizes that figures do not include deaths of gang members and deaths at the hands of authorities.

**Criminal Groups:** [Barrio 18](#) | [MS13](#)

**Criminal Economies:** [Microtrafficking](#) | [Extortion](#)



InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions -- as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource -- to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

For more information, visit [insightcrime.org](https://insightcrime.org)