

## The escalation and impact of violence on children’s protection, education, and health in Esmeraldas and Guayas

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

#### Aim

This report examines the distinct impacts of escalating violence on children across Ecuador, with a particular focus on protection, education, and health in the provinces of Esmeraldas and Guayas. While violence affects children across much of the coastal region, these two provinces’ larger populations, urban dynamics, and availability of detailed crime data offer more concrete and accessible information than other provinces. The role of Esmeraldas and Guayas as hubs for organised crime and drug trafficking also makes them critical areas for targeted research and intervention. This report explores how these factors relate to the primary drivers of escalating violence and the unique dynamics of this issue within these provinces. Particular attention is paid to the challenges children face in terms of protection threats, disruptions to education, and risks to physical and mental health. By analysing how violence is shaping children’s safety, wellbeing, and future prospects, this report provides a nuanced understanding of the impacts of the crisis. This insight is vital to developing targeted humanitarian interventions that address specific risks and strengthen protective measures to support children and families in Esmeraldas, Guayas, and the wider context of provinces affected by escalating violence in Ecuador.

#### Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive desk review of 54 secondary sources, including national and local news outlets, UN reports, government entities, and government publications. This review was complemented by 13 key informant interviews with stakeholders, including representatives from the Ombudsman’s Office, humanitarian organisations, and government institutions. Interviews focused on the escalation of violence at the national and provincial levels to gain detailed insight into the national drivers of violence, localised dynamics of violence in the Esmeraldas and Guayas provinces, and the impact of violence on children.

Map 1. Ecuador’s provinces, highlighting Esmeraldas and Guayas and their respective administrative capitals



Source: ACAPS using data from HDX (accessed 04/12/2024)

## Limitations and information gaps

This report highlights several key limitations and information gaps affecting its depth of analysis. First, there is a lack of detailed, disaggregated data specifically addressing how organised crime and violence affect children, particularly in provinces such as Guayas and Esmeraldas, where children face heightened exposure to conflict. Second, updated statistics on child displacement, school disruptions, and healthcare access remain scarce, limiting understanding of the longer-term effects on children’s mental and physical health. Third, security constraints limit the direct collection of data in high-risk areas, making it necessary to rely more heavily on secondary sources, which may not fully capture local dynamics. And finally, inconsistent monitoring data on children’s association with criminal gangs leaves critical gaps in assessing child protection needs across Ecuador.

The term ‘**children**’ is used in this report to refer to people under the age of 18, although ACAPS recognises that members of this group may use different terms to describe themselves, such as adolescent, young person, or youth.

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## GENERAL CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Table 1. Demographic baseline indicators

INDICATOR	ESMERALDAS	GUAYAS	ECUADOR
Total population (2024 projection)	601,626	4,739,771	17,966,573
% of population under age 11	25	20	20
% of population between 12–17 years of age	14	11	11
Total urban student population (2023–2024)	93,400	966,256	3,205,342
Total rural student population (2023–2024)	69,691	99,731	997,456
Share of Ethnicity	Mestizo = 39.5 Afro-Ecuadorian = 53.8	Mestizo = 81 Afro-Ecuadorian = 5.4	Mestizo = 77.5 Afro-Ecuadorian = 4.8
Migrant population	9,511	100,234	425,045
% of population living in poverty based on unmet basic needs	63	39	40

Sources: INEC (accessed 29/11/2024); Censo Ecuador (accessed 29/11/2024); Ministry of Education (accessed 25/11/2024)

In Ecuador, escalating insecurity and violence have surged dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic, driven primarily by the growing influence of transnational criminal organisations and gangs competing for control of drug trafficking routes, particularly in coastal regions such as Guayas and Esmeraldas. For decades, Ecuador has been viewed as a regional haven for refugees and migrants, known for hosting one of the largest refugee populations in South America. International aid organisations operated there, primarily to assist migrants and asylum seekers (UNHCR accessed 01/11/2024). Rising levels of violence have transformed Ecuador's humanitarian landscape, with the International Rescue Committee ranking it among the world's most severe and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crises (IRC 14/12/2023).

The roots of Ecuador's current escalation in violence and insecurity can be traced back to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created economic pressure on its inhabitants and increased rates of multidimensional poverty in the country, from 35.7% on a national level in 2019 to 39.6% in 2021 (INEC 2021). Unemployment rates mirror this trend, reaching a peak of 5.2% in 2021, 1.3% higher than in 2018 (INEC accessed 04/12/2024). The pandemic also provided fertile ground for the strengthening of ties between provincial and transnational criminal gangs in Albania, Colombia, and Mexico (TNH 16/08/2023).

Since 2019, Ecuador's expanding role in the global cocaine trade has aggravated national and regional security issues, driving competition between criminal gangs seeking to control lucrative routes and ports, fuelling violence and instability in the region. Drug seizures indicate a significant rise in cocaine trafficking to Europe via Ecuador, with Guayaquil – Ecuador's largest port – in Guayas serving as a key transit point. Esmeraldas, with its extensive coastline and ports, attracts drug trafficking from neighbouring Colombia. This convergence of illicit activities, including illegal mining and migration, fuels inter-gang competition over these territories, further endangering civilians (UNODC 03/2023). Ecuador's role in the global cocaine trade has intensified competition among criminal gangs, fuelling violence that extends beyond drug trafficking into other illicit activities, such as land trafficking. In Durán, Guayas, the criminal ecosystem reflects this broader instability, with gangs exploiting vacant municipal lands in order to profit from illegal sales and eventual legalisation. These criminal gangs, often linked to corrupt officials, not only control land transactions but also use their territories for extortion, drug sales, and other criminal enterprises. This convergence of land and drug trafficking underscores the deepening overlap between Ecuador's territorial disputes and its broader security challenges, further threatening the safety and wellbeing of civilians (InSight Crime 06/09/2024).

Violent homicide rates soared in 2023, making Ecuador the country with the most homicides per capita in Latin America, rising from 13.7 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 25.9 in 2022. In 2023, the rate escalated further to about 45 per 100,000 inhabitants, marking an increase of more than 70% from the previous year (HRW 29/02/2024; UNICEF 15/01/2024; InSight Crime 21/02/2024). Over one-third of Ecuador's intentional homicides in 2024 have been concentrated in Zone 8, which includes cities strongly associated with insecurity and crime, including Durán, Guayaquil, and Samborondón, the latter of which has become a key port for international cocaine trade (PADF/OECE 02/09/2024). The increase in violence and insecurity in Guayas and Esmeraldas has had significant effect on many children's safety and wellbeing. Children living in areas of intensified violence are at increased risk of forced displacement or other protection threats, ranging from association with criminal gangs to sexual exploitation. The weakened security situation has also reduced access to education and healthcare and aggravated risks to children's mental health.

In January 2024, the escalation of violence led to the temporary closure of schools and a shift to online classes in Esmeraldas and Guayas, among other provinces, undermining school-based protection and children's right to education (La Hora 19/01/2024; UNICEF 15/01/2024). Some children are at heightened risk of the impacts of violence, particularly when it comes on top of existing systemic discrimination that reinforces stereotypes and social exclusion, as is the case for children from Afro-Ecuadorian communities (KII 16/10/2024).

## DRIVERS AND AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Ecuador's escalating violence stems from the combined effects of organised crime, transnational drug trafficking, a deteriorating prison system, militarisation, economic downturn since COVID-19, and climatic effects, including electricity shortages since September 2024.

### Economic decline

Ecuador's declining economic stability has increased children's vulnerability to protection threats, especially as criminal networks exploit worsening socioeconomic conditions to recruit children into gangs. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated an already fragile economy. Falling oil prices, Ecuador's primary export, had already weakened the market and, by 2020, the country's GDP declined by 7.5% as COVID-19 forced businesses to close and the population was placed under enforced lockdown (AJ 14/02/2024). Unemployment has since surged, disproportionately affecting youth who struggle to find work or social support. By the close of 2023, the Government had run up a fiscal deficit surpassing USD 5.8 billion, placing pressure on national liquidity. This financial strain led to payment delays totalling nearly USD 4.5 billion, affecting social security benefits, officials' salaries, and fees owed to government contractors (Ministry of Economy and Finance 18/12/2023).

Criminal gangs have taken advantage of these conditions, using economic desperation and reduced income-generating opportunities to expand their ranks (AJ 14/02/2024). The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic further reduced income-generating opportunities, pushing more residents across Guayas and Esmeraldas into extreme poverty, with Esmeraldas recording poverty indicators much higher than the national average (Table 2). For those attempting small businesses or formal work, gang extortion presents a significant barrier. Gangs impose a protection tax and even public transportation comes with added fees, limiting residents' access to work elsewhere. In this setting, financial desperation and economic constraints reinforce gang control, preventing families from escaping their influence (TNH 16/08/2023).

Table 2. Economic baseline indicators for analysed provinces and the country in 2022

INDICATOR	ESMERALDAS	GUAYAS	ECUADOR
Poverty rate	50%	20%	25%
Multidimensional poverty	60%	35%	38%
Unemployment rate	9%	3%	4%

Source: INEC (2022)

Esmeraldas, home to the largest Afro-Ecuadorian community in Ecuador (55.48% of the province's total population), experiences exceptionally high poverty rates compared with the national average (Secretariat for the Management and Development of Peoples and Nationalities accessed 23/10/2024). Despite Esmeraldas hosting critical infrastructure, including an oil refinery, the province receives minimal state investment, leading to limited opportunities and resources for its predominantly Afro-Ecuadorian population. With minimal opportunities, limited public services, scarce formal employment, and a high prevalence of informal work, the area presents conditions for extortion, money laundering, and other criminal activities to thrive. This socioeconomic marginalisation leaves the population of Esmeraldas especially vulnerable to the influence of criminal networks (KII 21/10/2024). While Guayas's poverty rate is lower overall, certain neighbourhoods and districts – such as those heavily affected by violence, including Guayaquil's Nueva Prosperina and Monte Sinai – do experience extreme poverty and are at risk of becoming hubs of gang recruitment or displacement.

### Militarisation in response to criminal gangs

On 9 January 2024, President Noboa declared an internal armed conflict against 22 criminal gangs, branding them 'terrorists' in response to escalating violence, including the takeover of a state-owned TV channel (ACAPS 21/03/2024; El Nuevo Ecuador 09/01/2024). This marked an intensification of militarisation in response to criminal gangs, which began in 2022 under President Lasso, who deployed over 9,000 troops to Esmeraldas, Guayas, and Manabí (Infodefensa 03/05/2022). Despite the State's claim of reduced killings, reports suggest that extortion and kidnappings have surged, and testimonies reveal human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, beatings, and degrading treatment by security forces (HRW 22/05/2024).

Militarisation affects all civilians, including children, as the military has been granted the right to stop, search, and detain any individuals they perceive as suspicious. Some communities, however, particularly children from these communities, are disproportionately targeted,

increasing their vulnerability to profiling, discrimination, and abuse in public spaces. Those targeted include people with gender-diverse expressions and Afro-Ecuadorians (KII 15/10/2024; CEPAL 30/09/2019; Presentes 14/01/2024). The latter face systemic racial discrimination, contributing to their greater poverty, vulnerability, and socioeconomic disadvantage, including worse access to employment, education, healthcare, and housing (CEPAL 07/2021). Clashes between security forces and criminal gangs escalate civilian casualties and deepen instability, leaving children and families trapped in cycles of insecurity and distrust in state institutions (HRW 22/05/2024).

### Climate and natural hazards

Ecuador's security crisis has been aggravated by climate events. In the first months of 2024, heavy rainfall from El Niño affected most of the country, causing floods, landslides, displacement, and infrastructure damage, with around 120,000 people and nearly 30,000 houses affected by flooding (ECHO 07/03/2024). Heavy rainfall in both Esmeraldas and Guayas caused landslides and overflows, resulting in road closures and flooded areas (ECU911 02/02/2024; Primicias 21/02/2024). Such conditions could further weaken economically vulnerable households, increasing their exposure to criminal gangs.

Since May, however, El Niño has caused drought, leading to lower water levels in reservoirs used for hydroelectric power generation, triggering an energy crisis (TNH 07/05/2024). Daily power cuts across the country have been increasing, aggravating existing socioeconomic challenges. As the country relies on hydroelectric plants for over 70% of its electricity, dwindling water levels have necessitated electricity service suspensions of 8–14 hours a day (AP 25/10/2024). Since mid-September, a rationing system has been in place, the most extreme cuts yet. One key informant noted that these blackouts, accompanied by violence, have led people to increasingly consider leaving the country (KII 11/10/2024). The accumulation of adverse factors, including insecurity, drought, and economic difficulties, could lead to an increase in migration.

There is a moderate probability (50–60%) that dryness could continue in the coming months (December to February, according to best-guess forecasts), as the arrival of La Niña is expected to bring below-average rainfall across the country coupled with high temperatures, especially in the Andean zone and on the coast, where Guayas and Esmeraldas are located, adding to the drought scenario communities currently face (ACAPS 18/09/2024; WMO accessed 28/11/2024; C3S accessed 28/11/2024). Alongside the impacts already mentioned, this dry weather could also affect food security, as January to March is the planting season for crops with high water requirements, such as rice, soybeans, and wheat (ACAPS accessed 28/11/2024). The resultant effect on crops could worsen food shortages, lead to rising prices, and generate widespread societal stress, potentially intensifying violence across the country, especially in economically vulnerable communities (Miller et al., 21/10/2021).

## THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY ON CHILDREN: INCREASED VULNERABILITY TO PROTECTION THREATS

### Increased risk of association with criminal gangs

Children associated with criminal gangs face the dual risk of being both subjected to violence and coerced into participating in violent acts. Criminal gangs engage children for various support tasks, including espionage, messengering, cooking, cleaning, and extortion. Boys specifically are gradually introduced to tasks involving heightened safety risks and violence, including killings and drugs and weapons trafficking (KII 11/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023; ChildFund et al. 01/2024). Children's involvement often intensifies through forced missions, including homicides and armed confrontations, which also signify their growing integration and status within the criminal group (KII 04/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023). In the province of Guayas, a numbering system that denotes gang members' rank, with ranking dependent on experience and power within the group, actively encourages child gang members to engage in increasingly violent acts.

In Guayaquil, Guayas, a key informant observed that authorities had discovered training centres for boys run by criminal gangs. These facilities serve as recruitment and training grounds, equipping boys with the skills needed to fulfil their roles (KII 04/10/2024). Boys are typically prepared for combat roles; they are trained, armed, and expected to participate in combat and often exposed to direct violence, leading to physical injury and even death (KII 16/10/2024). In Esmeraldas, boys as young as eight receive combat training in preparation to carry out homicide. This early exposure to violence is aggravated by social exclusion and a lack of supportive public policies, which can reinforce cycles of violence, as children respond to marginalisation and limited opportunities through aggression (K15/10/2024; Primicias 28/10/2022). Girls associated with gangs are used for domestic roles but are also at particular risk of sexual abuse and exploitation (KII 22/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023). For more on this, see the later section on gender-based violence (GBV).

When recruiting children, criminal gangs primarily target the socially excluded, particularly children without parental support or those living on the streets, although children with families are also targeted (KII 18/10/2024). Children are typically coerced into joining through offers of either money or material objects – such as toys, mobile phones, or motorcycles – as well as by threats against them and their families (KII 11/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023). In Esmeraldas, criminal gangs directly pressure families into sanctioning their children's association, using threats and coercion to exploit families' vulnerabilities, particularly those in impoverished or insecure areas (KII 11/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024). In some instances, families see their children's involvement in organised crime as an acceptable means

of survival, as they bring in money or goods for the household, illustrating the desperate economic circumstances many families face (KII 04/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023). Key informants also stated that criminal gangs encourage children's drug use in order to gain control and coerce them into distributing for the group, particularly in Esmeraldas (KII 04/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024).

Criminal gangs can also appeal to children by providing a sense of belonging and community. Some criminal gangs even organise parties and celebrations to build social cohesion (KII 11/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024). In Guayaquil, criminal gangs have been observed forcibly evicting families from their homes and rewarding adolescents within their ranks by 'gifting' them these properties. This practice not only reinforces the influence of criminal gangs but also creates a cycle of dependency and loyalty among youth, as there are tangible incentives for involvement in illegal activities (KII 04/10/2024). It is important to note that there are significant information gaps regarding how criminal gangs approach children, as limited sources of information are available to triangulate findings, underscoring the need for further research. The information available, however, suggests a multilayered approach that combines material incentives with emotional manipulation, creating a sophisticated grooming system exploiting children's economic vulnerabilities and psychological needs.

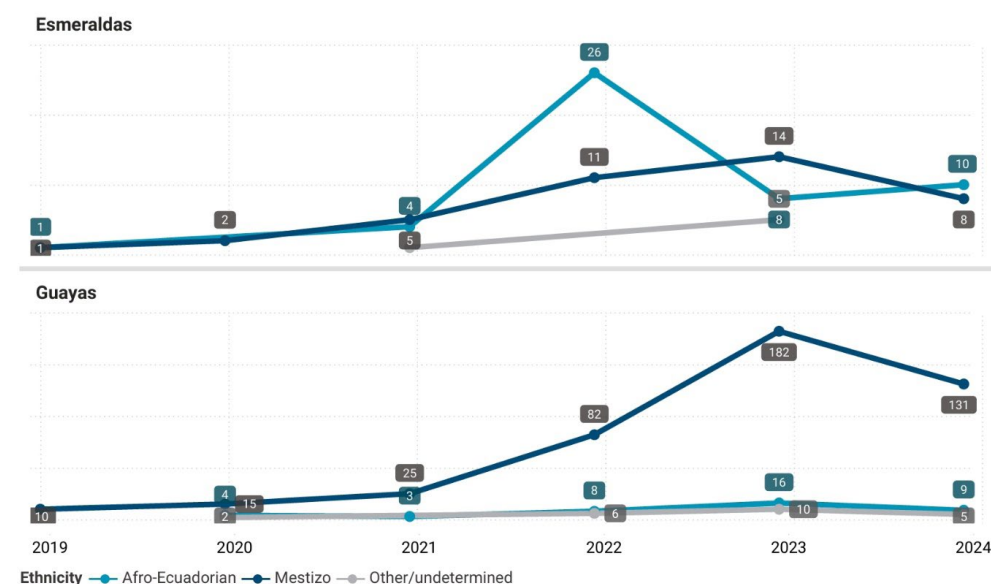
Colombian non-state armed groups (NSAGs), which have a longstanding presence in the northern border region, including Esmeraldas, also recruit children on both sides of the border. The historic and evolving presence of NSAGs and organised crime illustrates the entrenched and multifaceted nature of child recruitment in the region (ChildFund unpublished). In areas such as San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas, along the border with Colombia, in recent years there has been an increase in child recruitment by Colombian NSAGs (KII 04/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024).

Some groups of children are at heightened risk of association with criminal gangs and NSAGs. Factors including discrimination, lack of access to basic healthcare and education, high poverty rates, and climate-related emergencies increase the risk of child recruitment in Afro-Ecuadorian communities (KII 04/10/2024; KII 11/10/2024; KII 16/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024 a; KII 21/10/2024 b). In Esmeraldas, where 55.48% of the population identifies as Afro-Ecuadorian, Afro-Ecuadorian children are particularly vulnerable to violence, including heightened risk of homicide and gang violence, creating an urgent need for protective measures for at-risk children (Secretariat for the Management and Development of Peoples and Nationalities accessed 23/10/2024). Migrant and refugee children, particularly those in economically vulnerable situations, also face a higher risk of association with criminal gangs. Many migrant and refugee parents have limited or sporadic job opportunities and struggle to provide consistent economic stability, often living day-to-day or in temporary housing. This economic instability and precarious living can increase children's likelihood of being targeted by gangs looking to exploit such vulnerabilities (ChildFund et al. 01/2024).

## Increased risk of homicide

The increase in the homicide rate among children since the recent escalation in violence reflects the increasingly perilous environment for children in Guayas and Esmeraldas, where public spaces are often sites of gang confrontation and retaliatory violence (PADF/OECE 02/09/2024). The homicide rate for children, up to the age of 18, has increased by an alarming 640% since 2019, before COVID-19, and is linked to organised crime drug trade (UNICEF 15/01/2024; InSight Crime 21/02/2024).

Figure 1. Yearly total of violent homicides among children (1–17 years of age) by ethnicity in Guayas and Esmeraldas between 2019 and September 2024



Source: Ministry of the Interior (28/11/2024)

In the first three months of 2024, Ecuador reported 127 intentional homicides of individuals aged 15–19 years, equivalent to the total number of children and adolescents killed in 2019. The highest number of incidents was reported in Guayas (57% of cases), while Esmeraldas ranked fourth (7% of cases). Most cases were linked to criminal activities, with 86% of the victims being boys (OSQ accessed 26/11/2024; PADF/OECE 02/09/2024).

While specific data linking children's association with criminal gangs to homicide rates is lacking, reports indicate that association with criminal gangs exposes children to higher risks of violence and fatal outcomes (ChildFund et al. 01/2024). As shown in the graphic below, Afro-Ecuadorian children face disproportionately high vulnerability to homicide, as data reveals consistently elevated rates of violent deaths among this group as compared to others.

In Esmeraldas, as demonstrated in the above graph, homicide rates of Afro-Ecuadorian children rose six-fold from 2021–2022.

### Increased safety risks of children in detention and incarceration

The increase in violence, subsequent militarisation, and children's engagement with criminal gangs put children at heightened risk of temporary detention and incarceration. The rising rate of child arrests in Ecuador highlights a concerning trend. Between January and mid-October 2024, 3,086 children were detained, nearly double the number from the same period in 2023 (1,889) and 2022 (1,610) (EFE 28/11/2024). There is limited data, however, on the number of detained children with links to criminal gangs (KII 21/10/2024). Juvenile detention centres in Ecuador face significant challenges, including overcrowding, insufficient food, and safety concerns, particularly in facilities in Esmeraldas and Guayaquil (Ecuavisa 14/08/2024).

Increased militarisation in Esmeraldas in 2024 has resulted in increased reports of human rights abuses against children, including torture and forced disappearances (KII 22/10/2024; PlanV 16/01/2024). Civil society organisations have highlighted incidents in which children as young as 13 have been detained during police raids and, in some cases, accused or even convicted of terrorism, with Afro-Ecuadorian children disproportionately affected (KII 23/10/2024; KII 22/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024; FGE 05/02/2024).

### Increased risk of gender-based violence

When reflecting on the provinces of Guayas and Esmeraldas, key informants observed that escalating violence and criminal gangs' increased powerbase appear to have increased children's risks of GBV, particularly girls. As previously noted, girls associated with criminal gangs experience sexual and labour exploitation and child trafficking. Particularly at informal border crossings, the absence of security increases girls' vulnerability to exploitation, trafficking, and violence, aggravating their risks during migration (NRC 12/09/2023).

In Guayas and Esmeraldas, criminal gangs' recruitment of girls is linked to sexual and labour exploitation. Girls are more typically used for domestic tasks, to recruit boys, or for other forms of sexual exploitation (KII 28/10/2024). Criminal gangs force girls into sexual exploitation, subjecting them to rape and assault while coercively labelling them 'girlfriends' or 'wives' to

disguise the abuse (KII 22/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023). In Guayaquil, for example, there was a case in which a high-ranking leader of a criminal gang selected girls between 12–15 years of age from different neighbourhoods for this purpose (CDH 31/08/2023). According to a key informant, more cases of girls' recruitment are emerging. This shift highlights a trend in which girls are not only abused sexually but also relegated to domestic and servile tasks within criminal gangs, exposing them to multiple other forms of abuse and exploitation (KII 11/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024).

One key informant observed that girls' involvement with members of criminal gangs, often through coercion or exploitation, can result in their families receiving some perceived 'protections', whether in the form of increased security or economic support (KII 22/10/2024). In Guayas, despite knowing the dangers, many families are forced to rely on this arrangement for economic survival (CDH 31/08/2023). In one case, a 14-year-old girl refused to engage in a sexual relationship with a leader of a criminal gang, resulting in him threatening to forcibly displace the community if she did not comply and then shooting and injuring her (CDH 31/08/2023). Several key informants noted that girls sexually exploited by criminal gangs are at heightened risk of early pregnancy and its associated impacts, including impeded access to education and increased health risks, particularly in light of the shortage of health personnel in Esmeraldas, which limits girls' access to timely sexual and reproductive health and pre and postnatal services (KII 15/10/2024; KII 22/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024; CDH 31/08/2023).

Child trafficking in Ecuador encompasses various exploitative purposes, with sexual exploitation being primary, particularly in coastal areas such as Esmeraldas and Guayas, where unregulated brothels exist (KII 18/10/2024). Between January–November 2024, 794 cases of human trafficking were reported in Ecuador, with children making up an alarming 88% of survivors. The majority of trafficking incidents have been linked to destinations in the United States (64%) and within Guayas province (7%). While the total number of survivors was evenly distributed by gender, analysis of specific cases reveals a troubling trend: among the 24 identified survivors of sexual and labour exploitation, 96% were girls, highlighting their heightened vulnerability to these forms of abuse (OSQ accessed 26/11/2024).

Escalating violence has aggravated prejudice, discrimination, and violence against LGBTQ+ youth. A key informant commented that, since the emergency declaration in January 2024, violence linked to discrimination and oppression of the LGBTQ+ community has appeared on social media, with images often showing police and military officials subjecting detained adolescents to degrading treatment (KII 15/10/2024). This targeted hostility not only significantly threatens the wellbeing of survivors but also reinforces discriminatory systems, making safe, inclusive spaces even more inaccessible for LGBTQ+ communities facing social stigma (KII 15/10/2024). Another key informant reported cases of police and military officers using sexual violence against boys and LGBTQ+ children in Esmeraldas as a display of power (KII 28/10/2024).

Migrant and refugee girls are at higher risk of and exposure to various forms of GBV, including sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and gender-based labour exploitation as a result of education interruptions, family responsibilities (including caregiving), and uncertain migration processes. This instability increases migrant and refugee girls' vulnerability to GBV, leaving adolescents at greater risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by individuals or gangs (ChildFund et al. 01/2024; KII 15/10/2024; CEPAL 30/09/2019; Presentes 14/01/2024).

### Increased risk of forced displacement

Displaced populations often move within the same province, or to neighbouring ones, seeking safety and access to basic services. Children in Esmeraldas and Guayas are at heightened risk of forced displacement as a result of escalating insecurity and violence. Forced displacement is widespread across coastal provinces, with Esmeraldas recording the second highest rate nationwide at 1,103 per 100,000 inhabitants and Guayas following with 366 per 100,000 (unpublished 3iS 31/10/2024). Causes of forced displacement include extortion, gang conflict, and threats of violence, with at least 40% of displaced individuals experiencing extortion and violent events triggering all cases (UNHCR 01/07/2024; unpublished 3iS 31/10/2024).

In Guayas, organised crime displaces families, as criminal gangs expand drug networks or push people out of their homes for gang members to inhabit (Primicias 24/02/2024). Since the beginning of 2024, in Guayaquil's Nueva Prosperina district, extortion has displaced 5,000 families, with many fleeing to areas such as Santo Domingo (Primicias 24/02/2024; KII 23/10/2024). Extortion in Durán and Monte Sinai further drives low-income families to displace (SWI 07/08/2024; KII 23/10/2024). Criminal gangs impose extortion payments under the pretence of providing protection. Those who refuse to pay face severe threats, including violence, family harm, or explosive attacks, often leading to forced displacement. Criminal gangs frequently repurpose abandoned properties as bases for illicit activities, such as for storing drugs, weapons, or kidnapped individuals (SWI 07/08/2024). Families with children face additional pressures, as fear of children's recruitment into criminal gangs heightens the urgency to flee, prompting many parents to send children to live with relatives in more secure areas (KII 22/10/2024; KII 23/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024). In Esmeraldas, a key informant observed that extortion and gang threats force families to flee within the province or to areas such as Imbabura and Cuenca (KII 22/10/2024).

Forced displacement in Guayas and Esmeraldas significantly affects children, disrupting education and increasing the risk of mental health challenges resulting from instability and a lack of belonging. Many displaced children face difficulties re-enrolling in school, as there are insufficient teachers and resources; 34% of families in Guayas report challenges securing school placements for their children, particularly among Venezuelan migrants and refugees (KII 24/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024, GTRM 24/10/2024). Displaced children are also at increased risk of exploitation, including child labour, as parents' loss of livelihood after displacement means that children often need to support their families (KII 22/10/2024; ChildFund et al. 01/2024).

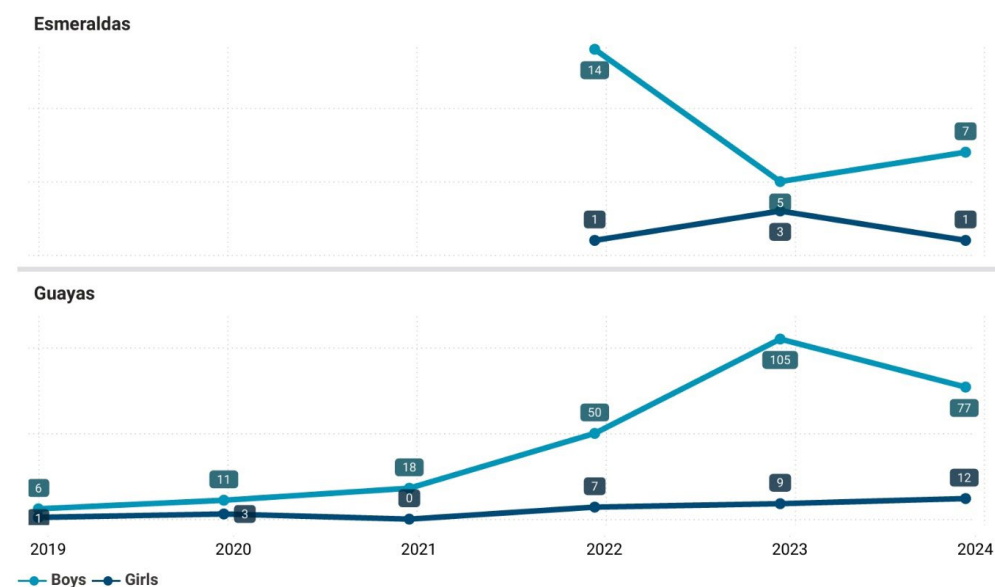
Displaced children are exposed to social exclusion, xenophobia, and GBV, further heightening the risk of isolation and psychological stress, undermining their safety, integration, and development (GTRM/R4V 01/09/2023).

## REDUCED ACCESS TO EDUCATION

### Impeded access to school

The recent escalation in violence across Ecuador has severely affected children's access to school, particularly in the two target provinces. Students face multiple risks affecting their ability to attend school, specifically when transiting between home and school (HWR 12/03/2024; CNN 06/02/2024). These dangers include the risk of exposure to homicide, threats, recruitment, extortion in the form of forced payments, and GBV. Between January–September of 2024, boy students were disproportionately the victims of violent homicide, accounting for 86% of student homicide victims in Guayas and 88% in Esmeraldas (Ministry of the Interior 28/11/2024).

Figure 2. Yearly total of violent homicides among students aged 5–17 in Guayas and Esmeraldas between 2019 and September 2024.



Source: Ministry of the Interior (28/11/2024)



In response to increasing violence, Ecuador's national authorities have implemented security measures affecting school access, such as temporary school closures. In January 2024, for instance, following the declaration of internal armed conflict, schools were temporarily closed and classes shifted to online learning (La Hora 19/01/2024). Students in cities such as Durán and Guayaquil had already been attending remote classes since September 2023, a result of heightened insecurity, affecting over 39,000 students (HWR 12/03/2024; Primicias 24/09/2023).

### Unequal access to online learning

Virtual learning presents additional challenges for students from low-income families, mirroring those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 pandemic-driven shift to virtual education severely affected economically vulnerable students across Ecuador, with 70% struggling to access classes as a result of limited internet access, lack of devices, or lack of financial resources (UNICEF/ECU 27/10/2022; El País 16/06/2020). In this context, many children left school permanently, increasing their susceptibility to association with criminal gangs. Outside the education system, children are more exposed to risks and often offered financial incentives by criminal gangs. Such incentives particularly appeal to children facing economic hardship and limited employment opportunities. The financial compensation provided by gangs further discourages children from returning to school (KII 15/10/2024; World Vision 22/05/2024; KAS 07/06/2024).

In Guayas and Esmeraldas, the move towards more remote learning to mitigate the safety risks associated with escalating violence also comes in the middle of an electricity crisis, which further impedes children's access to online learning. The electricity crisis has also affected students' access to in-person education, particularly those attending classes in the afternoon and evenings. Access to a stable internet connection remains a primary challenge for all students, however, with schools offering night education shifting from in-person instruction to virtual platforms, creating additional constraints for low-income families (La Hora 14/10/2024). It is important to highlight that children from the most economically vulnerable communities are generally the ones attending night classes, as many of these students engage in economic activities during the day.

### Increased risk of dropping out of school

Although quantitative data on the direct link between increased violence and school attendance in Ecuador remains limited, multiple sources indicate that students in Guayas and Esmeraldas are either recruited by criminal gangs or forced to drop out to avoid exposure to violence, which affects them both inside and outside the classroom (ChildFund 06/2024; JRS 02/2024; PSC 03/09/2023; KII 04/10/2024). Exposure to and witnessing violence in

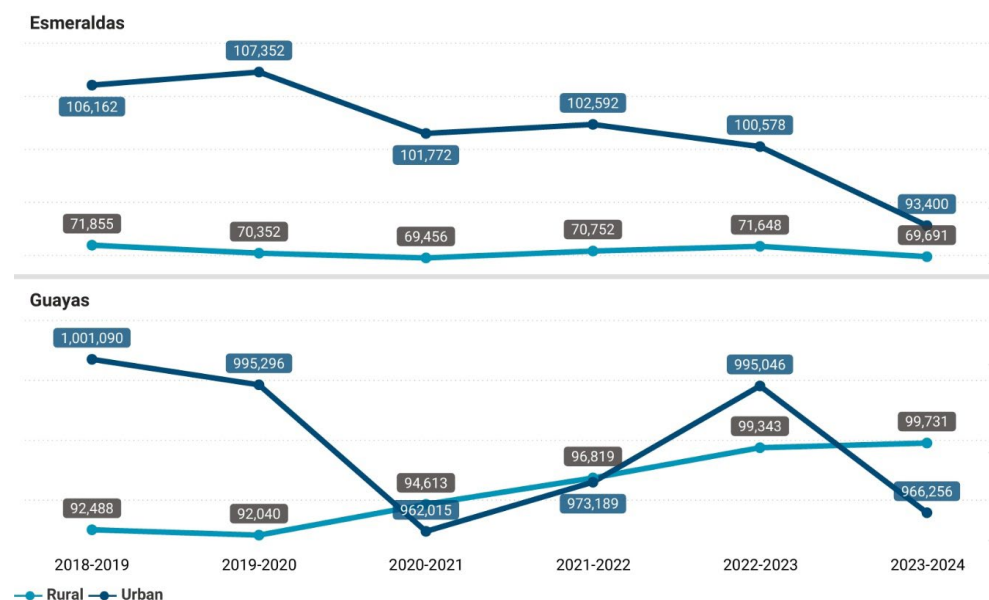
their neighbourhoods, school surroundings, and on the way to school – such as on public transportation – significantly disrupts school attendance. Many children miss classes because of fear, trauma, or feelings of insecurity, leading to declining attendance rates and an increased risk of school dropout (ChildFund 06/2024; UNICEF 15/01/2024; KII 10/10/2024). Key informants also noted that girls may drop out of school as a result of violence, as some caregivers choose to withdraw daughters to prevent them being targeted for sexual exploitation when travelling to and from school (KII 18/10/2024; KII 10/10/2024).

Escalating violence in Ecuador also aggravates pre-existing factors that increase the risk of school dropout, including limited access, economic constraints, the perceived low value of education, lack of interest, poor academic performance, health issues, early pregnancy, and family obligations (Loaiza Maldonado et al. 06/06/2023; Posligua E. 02/08/2019).

In Esmeraldas, total enrolment dropped by 15,000 students between the 2018–2019 and 2023–2024 school years, representing an 8.4% decrease. This decline, which parallels escalating violence, translates to a loss of approximately 12,700 students (12%) in urban schools and 2,100 (3%) in rural schools. Dropout rates are particularly high from middle school (ages 12–14), with boys being most affected, experiencing an estimated 58% dropout rate (PSC 03/09/2023). Some families have relocated to cities in other provinces, such as Cuenca and Ibarra, to protect their children, although those with limited resources remain exposed to violence and recruitment by criminal gangs (KII 22/10/2024; PSC 03/09/2023). A report underscores this challenge: “Recruitment... becomes an alley without exit, as not all families have the [economic] capacity of leaving their territories”, highlighting the compounded impact of violence on education and protection risks (PSC 03/09/2023). Quantitative data for these migration patterns remains unavailable.

Similarly, Guayas also experienced a reduction in enrolment, with 27,500 students withdrawing between the 2018–2019 and 2023–2024 school years, equating to a 2.5% drop (Ministry of Education accessed 25/11/2024). The presence of criminal gangs in cities, including Guayaquil, has led some parents to keep their children out of school because of safety concerns (KII 10/10/2024). Reports indicate instances in which criminal gangs have also coerced students into dropping out by threatening those who resist recruitment (ChildFund 06/2024). There are contrasting trends within the province of Guayas, however, as rural enrolments increased by 7,200 students (8%) while urban areas saw a significant loss of 35,000 students (3%). For Guayas, analysis by planning zones reveals that Zone 8 experienced the decline in all areas, with 30,400 fewer students enrolled. Conversely, Zone 5 registered 9,100 new enrolments (Ministry of Education accessed 25/11/2024). While these provincial figures align closely with the national average reduction in enrolment (6%), they also highlight the disproportionate vulnerability of students in areas experiencing heightened violence (Ministry of Education accessed 25/11/2024; PADF/OECO 02/09/2024). Urban areas where criminal gangs exert significant influence face the most severe enrolment losses.

Figure 3. Annual student enrolment in urban and rural schools in Esmeraldas and Guayas



Source: Ministry of Education (accessed 29/11/2024)

One key informant observed that extortion can also affect children's school attendance, as household finances are destabilised by forced payments, compelling caregivers to withdraw children from school in order to involve them in economic activities (KII 18/10/2024).

Sexual violence is also a possible driver of school dropout. Although information on the link between violence and early pregnancy in Ecuador remains limited, key informants observed that pregnancy is one possible impact of sexual violence against and exploitation of girls. Pregnancy is also a significant driver of school dropout among girls in Esmeraldas and Guayas, as they are forced to assume maternal responsibilities, hindering their ability to continue school (KII 10/10/2024; KII 23/10/2024). In Esmeraldas, 81% of hospital visits by girls aged 12–17 in 2022 were related to pre and postnatal care, compared to 50% in Guayas and 43% at the national level (UNICEF accessed 30/10/2024 a; UNICEF accessed 30/10/2024 b; UNICEF accessed 04/12/2024).

Although all children in insecure areas are at risk of school dropout, migrant and refugee children are at heightened risk (UNHCR 20/03/2024). In Esmeraldas, the majority of migrant and refugee students are Colombian nationals (56%), while Venezuelans constitute the largest group (80%) in Guayas. Between the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 academic years, both provinces experienced notable declines in migrant and refugee student enrolment. In Esmeraldas, Colombian student enrolment decreased by 24%, from 1,171 to 887 students. In Guayas, Venezuelan enrolment declined by 4.5%, from 15,200 to 14,554 students (Ministry of Education accessed 25/11/2024; PADF/OECO 02/09/2024). Although there is no comprehensive data showing exactly why migrant and refugee children are leaving school, reports suggest that declining enrolment is linked to both internal and external displacement, which, as previously noted, is often driven by escalating violence and compounded by heightened, longstanding risks of xenophobia and economic deprivation. These challenges underscore the vulnerability of migrant and refugee students in accessing education, despite Ecuador's inclusive policy, which grants all children school access regardless of nationality or documentation status. This gap in policy implementation reveals how progressive legislation alone cannot overcome the systemic barriers at-risk populations face (UNHCR 20/03/2024; UNHCR accessed 01/11/2024).

### Increased exposure to criminal gangs in and around schools

School facilities play a key role in the influence criminal gangs exert on students, with several key informants suggesting that schools cannot be considered safe spaces for children (KII 22/10/2024; KII 10/10/2024). Schools are often used by criminal gangs to expand their influence and engage in illegal activities, primarily through enticing students to participate in small-scale drug dealing and fostering addiction as a means to exert further control (Ministry of Government 21/09/2015; KII 22/10/2024; KII 10/10/2024). A key informant explained that recruitment often occurs through either the influence of students already in criminal gangs or external gang members' presence near school facilities, enticing students (KII 10/10/2024).

In Durán, Guayas, criminal gangs exploit students to distribute and sell drugs on school property, providing free samples to attract new consumers. A significant portion of the income generated by these gangs in Durán comes from the sale of drugs, such as marijuana, heroin, and cocaine. Alongside exposing children to drugs, the presence of criminal gangs around schools also increases safety risks for children, teachers, and caregivers, with robbery, abduction, and extortion occurring near school exits (InSight Crime 26/09/2024). One key informant noted that, in Esmeraldas, some school directors have requested that authorities build higher walls around schools to prevent psychoactive substances from being sold (KII 21/10/2024). Another key informant reported that criminal gangs also threaten members of organisations working on student drug prevention (KII 21/10/2024).

## The impact of escalating violence on teachers and reduced access to quality education and school-based psychosocial support

In the context of escalating violence in Esmeraldas and Guayas, criminal gang attacks on teachers and school personnel are increasingly concerning and diverse, including threats, extortion, and homicide (UNICEF 15/01/2024). During the 2023–2024 school year, the Educator Network of Ecuador reported 140 teacher relocation requests in Esmeraldas, Guayas, and Manabí, citing death threats and extortion as the primary reason (Ecuavisa 30/04/2024; La Nación 01/05/2024; El Educador 31/05/2024). National authorities often contest such relocation requests, however, rejecting requests if teachers cannot demonstrate a high level of personal risk (KII 24/10/2024; Ecuavisa 30/04/2024). This procedural delay aggravates the protection risks teachers face.

In Guayas, criminal gangs extort teachers for around USD 100–200 to allow them to continue teaching. When payments are not made or teachers report incidents to authorities, it can result in forced resignations or death threats (CNN 06/02/2024). In Esmeraldas, one key informant observed that teachers are experiencing mental health issues from the emotional toll of pervasive violence (KII 21/10/2024). In both provinces, additional forms of violence include extortion and pressure on teachers to pass students who do not attend classes, a demand often enforced by criminal gang members or students affiliated with these groups (KII 23/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024; CNN 06/02/2024). Such interference in educational activities not only undermines the quality of education but also affects students' mental health, as teachers working under intimidation may have reduced bandwidth to provide psychological support (KII 23/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024; CNN 06/02/2024).

## HEALTH

### Reduced access to healthcare as a result of insecurity and staff shortages

Since 2020, the healthcare sector in Ecuador has become increasingly vulnerable to criminal gang violence, increasing children's risk of exposure when accessing healthcare. Criminal gangs frequently target hospitals, resulting in incidents such as the violent homicide of patients, hostage-taking of healthcare workers, and violent retaliation inside medical facilities (La Vanguardia 12/02/2020; El País 12/03/2023; TA 14/12/2024; KII 15/10/2024). Children already at risk from criminal gang violence face further danger when seeking treatment, as healthcare facilities are no longer safe spaces (BBC 28/11/2022; KII 15/10/2024). Hospitals treating gang-related injuries often become targets for retaliation, endangering staff and patients and disrupting services (SWI 03/08/2024). In response, the Government implemented

the Código Plata protocol in 2022, enabling rapid alerts during violent attacks or when any risk of violence is detected (TA 14/12/2024; Primicias 08/08/2023). Violence persists, however, with 1,868 incidents reported in 2023, predominantly in Esmeraldas, Guayas, and Manabí. In the first quarter of 2024, Guayaquil's hospitals reported several fatalities and attacks (MSP 16/01/2024; TA 10/06/2024; Primicias 09/01/2024).

Violence, extortion, and threats have driven healthcare workers to abandon their posts, further reducing access to care for already underserved communities. According to the Ecuadorian Government, Esmeraldas has just 16.4 medical personnel per 10,000 inhabitants, while Guayas fares slightly better at 22.9 per 10,000 (Extra 14/04/2023; INEC 12/2022; KII 28/10/2024). Threats and extortion aggravate challenges, leaving communities, including children, with even less access to critical healthcare (INEC 10/2023; KII 28/10/2024).

Healthcare systems in areas particularly prone to violence, such as Monte Sinai Hospital in Guayaquil, are overwhelmed by rising admissions for gang-related injuries, delaying care for others, including children (Primicias 17/08/2024). This surge has been aggravated by the closure of health facilities as a result of staff safety concerns. By 2023, at least nine of the 114 health facilities in Guayas had been shut down by attacks and staff extortion, straining the remaining healthcare infrastructure (Gobierno de Ecuador 30/09/2023).

### Worsening maternal and newborn health outcomes

Although all pregnant women and girls face heightened risks during pregnancy if unable to access timely pre and postnatal care, girls in particular face increased health risks as a result of their physical immaturity. Babies born to either women or girls are also at risk of worsening health outcomes if they do not have adequate access to healthcare. Insecurity in affected areas of Guayas and Esmeraldas directly contributes to disparities in maternal and child outcomes (INEC 06/2024; Youtopia 19/08/2024). Escalating violence has led to facility closures and staff shortages, severely limiting access to essential services, including those for children, such as prenatal and paediatric care (KII 12/10/2024; El Universo 30/03/2023; BBC 16/01/2024). Insecurity in these provinces directly contributes to higher maternal and perinatal mortality. Violence disrupts healthcare services, drives personnel shortages, and affects medical supply chains. Pregnant women and girls face inconsistent care, increasing risks of complications during pregnancy and delivery (KII 21/10/2024). These factors collectively aggravate maternal and perinatal health disparities.

In 2023, Esmeraldas and Guayas reported the highest neonatal mortality rates in Ecuador, at 6.36 and 5.17 per 1,000 live births, surpassing the national average of 4.2 (MSP 31/01/2024). Maternal mortality rates in these provinces were also higher, with Esmeraldas at 3.9 and Guayas at 3.6 per 10,000 live births, compared to the national average of 2.7 (MSP 05/01/2024).

These disparities reflect an already inadequate healthcare infrastructure even more stressed by the impact of violence. One key informant noted that criminal gang activity, including threats and extortion, has forced many healthcare workers to abandon their posts, worsening access to prenatal services (KII 21/10/2024). This comes alongside existing barriers, including high transportation costs, facility closures, and limited specialist availability, which hinder maternal care in rural areas.

### Increased risk of children's deteriorating mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Violence in Ecuador has significantly affected children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. According to the Institute of Neurosciences of Guayaquil in Guayas, the rise in violence and insecurity, marked by incidents such as the use of explosive devices and threats of extortion, has been accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress – such as anxiety and acute stress as a result of uncertainty about the future – among the population (El Comercio 15/11/2022; KII 21/10/2024). For children, exposure to violence and an insecure environment during key developmental stages increases their vulnerability to severe mental health impacts in both childhood and later in life (Piñeros-Ortiz et al. 22/09/2021; KII 15/10/2024). Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and sleeping and eating disorders are among the potential consequences of growing up in a violent environment (UN 2020). By 2023, a survey of children in Ecuador from 6–18 years of age conducted by World Vision found that 20% exhibited symptoms of depression or anxiety (World Vision 30/06/2023). Although this data does not identify specific causes, and there is limited information on the effects of violence on mental health in Ecuador, key informants expressed that the current climate of violence is likely playing a significant role in the emergence of these symptoms (KII 16/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024). According to several key informants and sources, children in Guayas and Esmeraldas frequently exhibit signs of depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (El Hilo 09/02/2024; KII 15/10/2024; KII 21/10/2024).

For children associated with criminal gangs, mental health data is even scarcer. Studies from other contexts with documented cases of children associated with criminal gangs emphasise, however, that indoctrination, exposure to violence, sexual violence, substance use, and normalisation of violence can lead to complex trauma, which often requires treatment (KAS 07/06/2024; UN 2020). The lack of government support systems for children released from criminal gangs means these children are at risk of re-victimisation and face challenges reintegrating into their communities (KII 15/11/2024).

The presence of criminal gangs in schools also aggravates children's mental health risks. While schools should be safe, secure spaces where children's psychosocial wellbeing is supported, threats, recruitment risks, and violence, including classmate homicides, in Guayas and Esmeraldas undermine the protective nature of schools (Diab et al. 15/08/2018; CNN

06/02/2024; KII 21/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024). The state of emergency, leading to school closures and virtual classes, further deprives children of these essential spaces, including access to supportive adults, the normalcy of routine, and referral pathways for specialised mental healthcare (KII 15/11/2024; GTRM/R4V 01/09/2023; UNICEF 09/04/2024).

While escalating violence has notable impacts on children, risks to mental health and wellbeing are also aggravated by other contextual crises, such as the energy and economic crises, compounding the violent context. Curfews confine families at home, where stress from economic hardship, energy shortages, and violence heightens the risk of family violence (El Hilo 09/02/2024). Similar patterns have been observed in other conflict settings (Catani et al. 02/05/2008). In the home, a key informant noted that exposure to televised violence, such as the interruption of a television network by criminal gangs in January 2024, also heightens anxiety and fear among children (KII 10/10/2024). Migrant and refugee children face additional challenges, including economic struggles as a result of workplace closures and increased discrimination and xenophobia, further affecting their mental health and wellbeing (GTRM/R4V 01/09/2023).

These findings highlight the complex situation of child and adolescent wellbeing in Guayas and Esmeraldas, particularly given the critical shortage of health professionals (KII 16/10/2024; UNICEF 16/01/2024). In the two provinces, lack of sufficient personnel means hospital services are in crisis; key informants observed that the scarcity of mental health professionals leaves children with limited coping resources and support networks (KII 10/10/2024; KII 28/10/2024). A survey conducted by World Vision found that 95% of children and adolescents expressed the need for greater psychological and psychosocial support resources in their communities (World Vision 30/06/2023).