

Escalation of violence and anticipated humanitarian impacts in Manabí

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

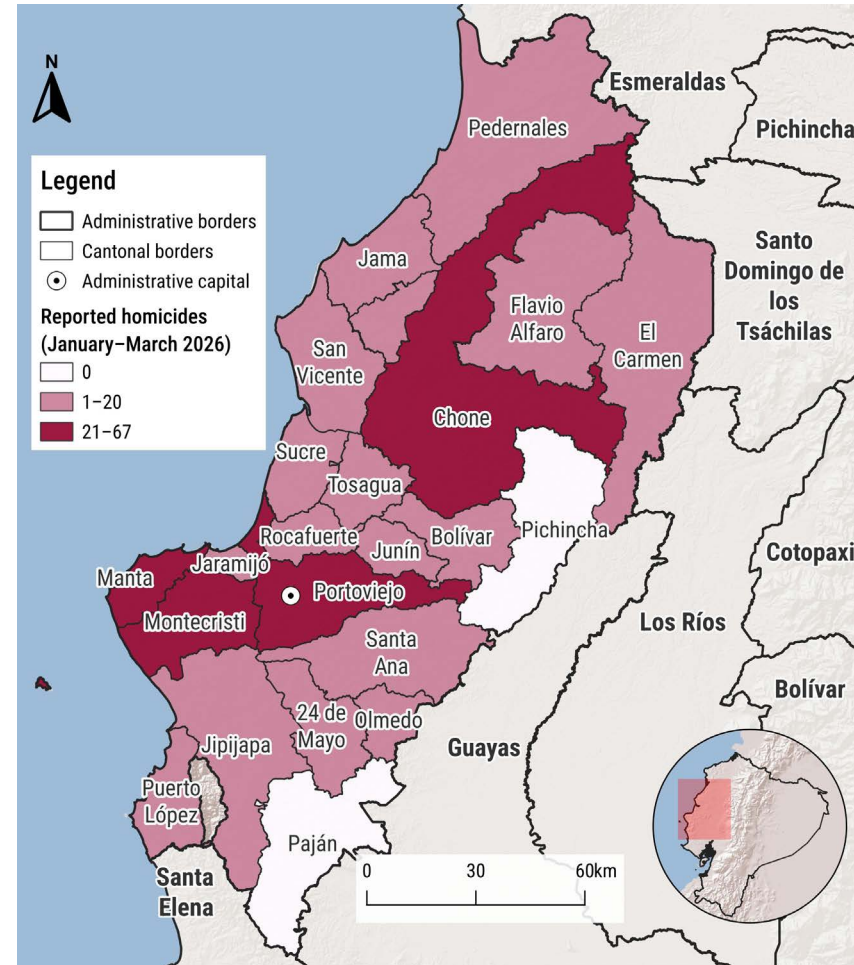
Between January–April 2026, Manabí recorded 386 homicides, accounting for 12.9% of the national total. While this marks a slight deceleration from the peak of late 2025 (474 homicides between September–December), it follows a severe 51% year-on-year surge in 2025 (from 884 to 1,335) (FGE accessed 13/04/2026). Instead of a de-escalation, this trajectory signals that violence is consolidating at sustained high levels and involves distinct tactics: targeted killings and home invasions aimed at specific rivals, alongside mass-casualty attacks used to intimidate the population (Expreso 02/04/2026; Primicias 26/01/2026).

By April 2026, Manabí’s most affected cantons include Manta (105 cases), Portoviejo (79), and Montecristi (35), indicating persistent hotspots of violence, as these cantons were already among the four with the highest number of homicides in 2025 in the province (FGE accessed 13/04/2026). In the short term, violence is highly likely to remain concentrated in these strategic hubs as organised crime groups (OCGs) focus on entrenching their control.

The escalation in lethality and coordination is reflected in a series of recent mass-casualty incidents across the province. Between December 2025 and February 2026, violence intensified in traditional hotspots, such as Manta, and expanded into previously less affected coastal and inland cantons, such as Jama and San Vicente (Primicias 01/01/2026; El Comercio 10/02/2026; Extra 23/02/2026). This points to a strategic expansion as OCGs seek to secure alternative logistical and maritime routes.

In January 2026 alone, at least four simultaneous attacks in Manta and Montecristi left eight people dead in less than three hours (Primicias 26/01/2026). The synchronisation of these events indicates OCGs’ high operational capacity in the province. Additional incidents resulted in at least 18 homicides across multiple locations within a 24-hour period (CNN 12/01/2026). Instead of isolated events, this pattern of repeated, high-lethality attacks indicates advanced planning capabilities and a consolidated command structure within these groups.

Map 1. Homicides in manabí (January–March 2026)



Sources: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 23/04/2026); FGE (accessed 13/04/2026)

Disclaimer: OCHA administrative boundaries have been used to produce this map (OCHA accessed 23/04/2026). The boundaries, names, and designations shown do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by ACAPS.

This escalation in violence is likely to drive further displacement in Manabí. Households are increasingly fleeing as a result of two main triggers: direct exposure to targeted killings in active hotspots and anticipatory flight in surrounding areas driven by the growing fear of violence. Available evidence indicates that Manabí is simultaneously a province of origin and destination for displaced populations. These bidirectional movements increase the complexity of the crisis, often resulting in repeated or secondary displacement (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025).

Violence is expanding beyond urban centres into more peripheral and rural cantons, where security presence is minimal and the authorities lack protection resources. As a result, displacement is becoming more dispersed and less visible; movements occur in smaller, less monitored locations, which complicates needs identification and limits humanitarian response coverage (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025). The lack of systematic monitoring mechanisms continues to limit the registration of affected populations, and the dispersed pattern of movement increases protection risks, including unassisted displacement, exposure to exploitation, and severe gaps in service access.

Control over Manabí's strategic transit and export hubs for transnational drug trafficking is becoming increasingly contested, as intensified territorial and logistical competition among OCGs over ports, maritime routes, and local distribution nodes drives increasing levels of lethal violence and territorial disputes (El Diario 04/04/2026). In response, recurrent states of emergency – most recently in December 2025 – have led to increased military deployment, facilitating largescale security operations and movement restrictions. By pressuring leadership structures and disrupting established strongholds, these measures are likely to displace OCG activity, increase fragmentation, and trigger further violence (InSight Crime 31/03/2026; France 24 01/01/2026).

While violence expands territorially across the province, Manta remains a key epicentre (Primicias 18/01/2026). Within the city, clashes between OCGs are highly concentrated in specific northern and central coastal neighbourhoods. This clustering in coastal areas is likely to contribute to localised displacement and access constraints for humanitarian responders (KII 20/04/2026).

Recent flooding and emerging localised drought are occurring sequentially over time, though their geographic impacts overlap in some areas. These combined climate shocks are primarily disrupting agricultural and fishing livelihoods, while also severely limiting access to water and healthcare (El Diario 07/04/2026; UNHCR 26/03/2026). As livelihoods deteriorate, households facing severe income gaps are increasingly forced to rely on informal economies or unregulated loans controlled by OCGs to meet basic needs. This financial dependence quickly translates into unmanageable debt, allowing OCGs to use coercion as a direct tool of recruitment, exploitation, and extortion.

Significant information gaps, driven by access constraints, the sensitive nature of reporting, and fear of retaliation, persist for key protection risks. Specifically, the true prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), the full scale of localised displacement, and the exact boundaries of OCG territorial control remain major analytical blind spots. This combined underreporting constrains the ability to anticipate shifts in violence patterns and access restrictions, making it difficult for humanitarian responders to target assistance and prioritise high-risk areas, increasing the likelihood of delayed interventions and targeting errors in the coming months.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Anticipated scope and scale	3
Drivers of the crisis.....	3
Compounding/aggravating factors	3
Impacts (current and anticipated)	4
Humanitarian response.	8

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

In response to recent state militarisation, OCGs in Manabí are moving their operations and dispersing into peripheral communities. This tactical shift is expanding the geographic scope of violence beyond traditional inter-gang disputes over illegal economies. As state operations intensify and disrupt established strongholds, violence is likely to shift toward peripheral cantons with limited state presence and enforcement capacity (KII 20/04/2026; InSight Crime 21/01/2025). As a result, OCGs will likely adapt and relocate to maintain their extortion and intimidation networks, increasingly targeting maritime routes and artisanal fishers (El Diario 04/04/2026; Machala Móvil 06/04/2026).

As OCGs consolidate territorial control and residents lose safe livelihood options, the resulting surge in extortion and targeted killings is expected to accelerate forced displacement to other provinces.

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Illegal economies and OCG fragmentation

The expansion of illegal economies, particularly drug trafficking, is a primary driver of violence in Manabí. As the province consolidates its role as a strategic maritime corridor connecting cocaine flows from Colombia to Central America and the US, OCGs increasingly resort to high-lethality violence, specifically the elimination of rivals, to secure control over these lucrative trafficking routes and logistics chains (Machala Móvil 06/04/2026; InSight Crime 21/01/2025).

This strategic value is likely to increase OCG competition over logistical control of routes, territorial control of ports, and revenue extraction through distribution networks. High-volume drug seizures in early 2026 across Ecuador suggest sustained levels of activity, where operations – including transport payments and the use of local businesses for laundering or storage – increase the risk of forced labour and exploitation (Machala Móvil 06/04/2026; El Diario 04/04/2026; InSight Crime 31/03/2026).

Arrests of key leaders are fragmenting OCGs in Manabí and disrupting command structures, leading to violence as factions compete for territorial and economic control (Primicias 18/01/2026). This process has increased the frequency and geographic spread of incidents. Over the next three to six months (May-November 2026), violence is likely to disperse into new areas as factions compete for trafficking routes and revenue.

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Militarisation and OCG tactical adaptations

Recurrent states of emergency and largescale military deployments are prompting OCGs to decentralise operations and embed within civilian areas. This tactical shift involves relocating activities and increasing operational dispersion (Primicias 18/01/2026; ED 16/01/2026). In highly militarised cantons such as Manta and Portoviejo, OCGs may be relocating activities to residential areas to avoid military patrols, potentially increasing civilian exposure to protection risks, specifically coercion and crossfire (KII 20/04/2026). These risks are further compounded by two distinct factors: state-mandated curfews and self-imposed restrictions stemming from fear of OCG violence. Together, these factors prevent residents from leaving their neighbourhoods, using key transit routes, and relocating when violence escalates, while also severing access to essential services, including healthcare, markets, and humanitarian assistance (InSight Crime 31/03/2026; El Comercio 03/03/2026).

Prison systems in Ecuador are widely functioning as hubs for OCG recruitment and coordination (InSight Crime 31/03/2026; ICG 12/11/2025). Large-scale arrests during state security operations may inadvertently reinforce these networks, as prisons receive an influx of detainees, expanding the pool available for OCG recruitment and enabling groups to establish new leadership structures or form new factions. Over the next three to six months, these dynamics are expected to increase the frequency and unpredictability of violent incidents, with violence potentially shifting toward peripheral and rural areas, heightening community exposure to protection threats and targeted attacks (InSight Crime 31/03/2026; KII 26/02/2026).

Pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities

Poverty and underemployment limit households' ability to absorb economic shocks, while gaps in health, education, and market access push communities into illegal economies. In peripheral cantons where state presence is limited and income alternatives are scarce, this financial dependency increases exposure to OCG coercion, extortion, and recruitment (ACLEDA 03/06/2025; El Comercio 04/03/2026). As violence expands into these already economically precarious areas, local support networks are likely to weaken, leaving communities with fewer resources to cope and further complicating the humanitarian response.

Climate and natural hazards

By May 2026, El Niño–Southern Oscillation-neutral conditions were present and likely to persist throughout April–June in Ecuador. El Niño is projected to emerge from mid-2026, potentially increasing rainfall in coastal areas – including Manabí – toward the end of the year (NOAA 04/05/2026).

The residual impact of severe flooding and landslides between January–March 2026 continues to compound access constraints, disrupt livelihoods, and displace communities. These events affected over 80,000 people across Ecuador, with Manabí among the most affected provinces. The hardest-hit cantons – Chone, Flavio Alfaro, Manta, Portoviejo, and Sucre – share a pattern of high flood exposure compounded by pre-existing deficits in WASH infrastructure (OCHA 16/03/2026; El Comercio 14/03/2026; Ecuavisa 03/03/2026). Crucially, these areas geographically overlap with the primary hubs of OCG violence. As such, extensive damage to homes, water treatment plants, and road networks is expected to compound existing access constraints and increase population exposure to protection threats over the next three to six months. This compounding effect will likely disrupt humanitarian access through damaged road networks, insecurity along supply routes, and logistical constraints. The resulting loss of livelihoods, reduced market access, and increased costs of basic goods are expected to heighten exposure to exploitation, displacement, and GBV.

In cantons not directly affected by flooding, localised water scarcity since early April 2026 has started affecting livestock, creating geographically distinct but temporally overlapping climate shocks across the province. To cope, agricultural households are increasingly resorting to the distress sale of animals and unregulated indebtedness – mechanisms that erode productive assets and risk entrenching debt cycles, deepening households' long-term economic vulnerability (El Diario 04/04/2026 and 07/04/2026). As agricultural livelihoods deteriorate, OCG recruitment and exploitation may emerge as one of the only available coping options for economically vulnerable households.

IMPACTS (CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED)

Protection

Escalating violence in Manabí is expected to heighten protection risks over the coming months, including recruitment, displacement, and GBV, as OCGs consolidate territorial control through extortion, intimidation, and community-level surveillance (Primicias 24/01/2026). Violence is increasingly occurring within private and community spaces, heightening civilian exposure to targeted killings and intimidation. Recent incidents in cantons such as Manta and Jipijapa show a pattern of armed incursions into homes and attacks during social gatherings (Expreso 02/04/2026; Primicias 26/01/2026). This shift reduces the relative safety of residential settings, limiting residents' ability to seek refuge within their own communities and reflecting the use of violence as a tool of intimidation.

OCG fragmentation and territorial disputes are driving increasingly extreme acts of violence that appear intended to instil fear, such as the January 2026 public display of five severed heads on a beach in Puerto López accompanied by threatening messages (CNN 12/01/2026). Such violence deters reporting and increases compliance among affected communities.

In urban centres such as Manta and Portoviejo, OCGs have installed surveillance systems – nearly 200 cameras mapped between 2025 and early 2026, of which at least 135 remain active – to monitor communities and security forces in real time (Primicias 24/01/2026). This level of surveillance is likely to deepen coercive control, with observable effects including restricted movement between neighbourhoods,

reduced presence in public spaces, and barriers to reporting incidents or seeking assistance. As communities become aware of being monitored, fear of retaliation discourages engagement with security forces and humanitarian organisations. According to an interviewee, communities report reduced trust in authorities, fear of abuse, and barriers to accessing state or humanitarian support (KII 20/04/2026).

Recent trends in threats, extortion, and extortion-related kidnappings further reflect the consolidation of OCG control. Between January–April 2026, Manabí recorded 716 cases of threats, 234 cases of extortion, and 12 extortion-related kidnappings, with the highest concentration in Manta and Portoviejo (FGE accessed 17/04/2026). This follows already elevated levels between September–December 2025, when 794 threats, 312 extortion cases, and 10 extortion-related kidnappings were reported (FGE accessed 17/04/2026). Additional data from emergency call records also indicates an upward trend, with 41 extortion-related reports in December 2025 and 57 in January 2026 (ECU911 accessed 22/04/2026 a; ECU911 accessed 22/04/2026 b).

High homicide rates and socioeconomic precarity drive a simultaneous outflow from violence-affected cantons and inflows to urban centres, creating a dual displacement dynamic across Manabí. While cantons such as Pedernales experience consistent population loss, others – such as Manta – serve as both transit and destination points for people fleeing violence in Esmeraldas, Guayas, and El Oro (KII 20/04/2026; UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025).

In the absence of formal displacement response mechanisms, displaced populations largely rely on hosting arrangements with family and acquaintances. This places additional strain on already at-risk households, reducing their ability to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and access to health services and increasing protection risks for both displaced and host populations. Data on displacement remains limited, though an interviewee pointed to an increase since 2024. The absence of formal monitoring systems and a clear regulatory framework restricts visibility and response capacity, leading to significant underreporting (KII 20/04/2026).

Children and adolescents face increased risks of OCG recruitment, particularly in marginalised and underserved communities in which state presence and access to services remain limited. In these areas, criminal groups exert control over communities through coercion, threats, and economic incentives, enabling the systematic recruitment of young people (KII 20/04/2026). Data from the first quarter of

2026 underscores this trend: 16 crimes involving minors were recorded in Manabí between January–March, representing a 60% increase compared to the same period in 2025 (MDI accessed 29/04/2026). In March 2026, a 13-year-old was involved in a targeted killing (Primicias 18/03/2026).

OCGs are increasingly targeting adolescents to carry out extortion and other high-risk activities, exploiting them via cash payments or access to drugs as incentives (Panorama Ecuador 17/02/2026; UNICEF 06/2025). The deterioration of livelihoods and scarce income-generating options are primary drivers for OCG recruitment across multiple age groups. Beyond the targeting of minors, young adults face increasing pressure as financial incentives and material benefits become one of the few viable survival strategies among displaced populations, migrants, and refugees, whose lack of legal status and limited support networks further increase their exposure to coercion and exploitation (KII 20/04/2026).

The penal system's perceived limitations, including existing legal frameworks for minors and the rapid release of individuals accused of crimes, are likely also reducing deterrence. These factors may enable OCGs to continue recruiting adolescents at relatively low risk (Panorama Ecuador 17/02/2026; ICG 12/11/2025).

Women and girls face heightened exposure to violence, including GBV and exploitation, in areas with a strong OCG presence, as territorial dominance and service gaps create specific protection risks (KII 20/04/2026; ACAPS 16/04/2026; OCHA 24/02/2026). Manabí recorded 11 femicides between 1 January and 15 March 2026, following a sharp increase from 39 cases in 2024 (when the province ranked second nationwide) to 70 in 2025 (ALDEA accessed 20/04/2026). Available information suggests that continued insecurity and OCG presence may contribute to sustained levels of GBV. Threats and fear of retaliation discourage survivors from reporting incidents, while insecurity and limited service availability constrain access to safe assistance (KII 20/04/2026; KII 20/02/2026; KII 06/02/2026).

In tourist hubs such as Manta, patterns of sexual exploitation – particularly affecting girls and adolescents – are linked to OCG control over informal economies and entertainment sectors, facilitating coercive and transactional exploitation (KII 20/04/2026). Women and girls, especially migrants and refugees, are expected to face compounded risks as a result of their irregular status, limited access to services, and reduced protection networks, increasing exposure to coercion and exploitation

(KII 20/04/2026). GBV risks are likely to remain high in affected areas. Survivors face multiple barriers to reporting, including fear of retaliation, stigma, irregular migration status, and limited availability of safe and confidential services, which also constrain access to assistance.

Livelihoods and food security

Livelihoods in Manabí, particularly fishing, agriculture, and small-scale commerce, are under mounting pressure from the combined impact of recurring extortion, insecurity, and climate-related crop losses. In 2025, Manabí recorded the highest underemployment rate nationwide at 28.5%, an increase from 2024 that directly contrasts with the national downward trend (INEC accessed 29/04/2026). This baseline of inadequate income and precarious working hours limits household coping capacities. As traditional economic activities become less viable, affected populations face a higher risk of being forced into OCG-linked survival strategies, such as coercive exploitation or recruitment.

Beyond direct violence, OCG interference in legitimate supply chains, particularly through the extortion of transporters and local businesses, is eroding the profitability of legal income-generating activities by imposing extortion fees, disrupting transport routes, and forcing additional operational costs. This economic change pushes households toward coping strategies with potentially harmful effects, including reliance on high-interest informal loans, use of unsafe transport routes for goods, and reducing food consumption (Ecuavisa 06/04/2026; UNHCR 29/10/2025).

These disruptions directly affect food security in two ways. First, recurrent extortion forces producers to prioritise personal safety over output, leading to reduced fishing outings and temporary land abandonment, decreasing local food availability (ACAPS 11/08/2025). Second, purchasing power and liquidity are reduced as extortion costs along the supply chain are passed to consumers through higher prices. Coastal communities face particular livelihood risks, as more than half the population depends on fishing as their primary source of income (Primicias 05/04/2026; IPC 07/11/2024). These impacts on food security and livelihoods are further aggravated by climate-related hazards, which periodically affect transport infrastructure, isolate provinces and cantons, and disrupt agricultural production and market supply, all while reducing incomes in at-risk communities (IPC 07/11/2024, WB 29/04/2026)

By mid-April 2026, a prolonged dry season threatened up to 77% of Manabí's corn crops, primarily in Tosagua (Ecuavisa 16/04/2026). Instead of a brief seasonal shock, this great loss is expected to have a sustained impact, restricting household income and local food availability until the next harvest cycle.

The escalation of OCG extortion and coercive activities is reducing the profitability of legal fishing. Artisanal fishers are being coerced into paying extortion fees, joining OCGs, or being economically pressured to transport drugs, while significantly increased payments of USD 60,000–100,000 per trip serve as coercive incentives among households facing limited alternatives (Machala Móvil 06/04/2026; Primicias 05/04/2026).

The deterioration of livelihoods directly affects food security and nutrition, as diminishing purchasing power forces households to reduce overall food consumption and rely on cheaper, less nutritious diets. While recent data is unavailable, figures from October 2024 to March 2025 highlight significantly high pre-existing vulnerabilities in access to food: 36% of Manabí's population (over 617,000 people) faced Stressed (IPC Phase 2) levels of food insecurity and 19% (nearly 326,000 people) faced Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or above levels (IPC 04/06/2025).

In cantons heavily dependent on purchased water, such as Jaramijó, diminishing income is likely to force households into critical expenditure trade-offs (Primicias 05/04/2026). Families may be compelled to choose between reducing food purchases to afford safe drinking water or relying on unsafe water sources to maintain their food intake. Both coping strategies increase the risk of malnutrition: reduced dietary intake lowers baseline nutrition and exposure to unsafe water increases the risk of waterborne diseases, which prevent nutrient absorption. These compounding factors are expected to disproportionately affect populations with limited access to basic services, legal support, and livelihoods, such as displaced, migrant, and refugee populations.

Health and WASH

The escalation of armed violence restricts medical supply chains and staff mobility, compromising the capacity of the health system in Manabí. This situation worsens when climate-driven disease outbreaks demand greater response capacity. The convergence between the health system's capacity and greater demand aggravates severe pre-existing vulnerabilities: by late 2025, the province's nine hospitals were already experiencing up to 75% medicine scarcity in several facilities, salary delays for medical staff, and reduced operational capacity (El Universo 22/08/2025; Ministry of Public Health 08/01/2025). Entering the 2026 escalation of violence with these pre-existing deficits in staffing, medical supplies, and infrastructure, the health sector's capacity to absorb current trauma cases and projected disease surges remains severely constrained.

If violence continues to escalate, a likely increase in trauma-related cases, including gunshot injuries, risks further overwhelming already strained services. Simultaneously, the system must manage a high epidemiological burden, particularly from vector-borne diseases: by late April 2026, Manabí recorded the third-highest dengue incidence rate nationwide (125.8 cases per 100,000 inhabitants) (Ministry of Public Health 25/04/2026). This sustained prevalence, aggravated by recent flooding and poor drainage that expand vector-breeding sites, severely limits the sector's capacity to respond to additional disease outbreaks. Disrupted WASH infrastructure, including compromised water sources and inadequate sanitation facilities, combined with overcrowded living conditions also create a scenario that facilitates the transmission of waterborne and respiratory illnesses, as evidenced by reported cases of leptospirosis and typhoid (IFRC 28/03/2026).

Escalating violence may shift already scarce medical resources from routine and preventative care toward emergency trauma response. This shift is expected to increase preventable morbidity and drive the health system toward reduced routine care and the disruption of other services in the short term, especially in high-risk urban areas. Insecurity in cantons such as Manta actively restricts medical access, delaying ambulance mobility and critical emergency care (IFRC 28/03/2026).

Mental health needs in Manabí are likely to increase over the next three to six months as sustained exposure to violence, fear, and social fragmentation remains high. This is reflected in heightened fear among communities, with people increasingly

avoiding leaving their homes, sending children to school, or seeking healthcare. This avoidance is aggravated by specific security incidents such as targeted killings inside hospital facilities in Manta, deterring care-seeking (KII 20/04/2026; Expreso 02/08/2024).

Access to specialised medical care and community-based psychosocial support is severely restricted, particularly in cantons experiencing high violence, such as Manta. Targeted threats and extortion are driving a growing outflow of medical specialists from the province, while remaining staff increasingly refuse high-risk trauma cases (KII 20/04/2026). This situation is likely to translate into concrete community-level deterioration, such as prolonged school absenteeism among children exposed to violence, withdrawal from communal and public spaces out of fear and unaddressed psychological distress, and the progressive disruption of daily economic activities as affected individuals lose functional capacity.

While recent comprehensive figures are unavailable, 2024 data highlight the severe structural deficits underpinning Manabí's current WASH crisis: at that time, only 64.4% of households had access to basic sanitation and just 52.2% were connected to sewerage systems (UNICEF accessed 13/04/2026; UNICEF 06/2023). These foundational gaps were further compounded in 2025, when water deficit and supply interruption affected at least 12 cantons – including Manta, Montecristi, and Portoviejo – leaving some peripheral households without reliable access for up to eight months (Primicias 03/01/2025; El Diario 09/03/2025). As these deep-rooted infrastructural vulnerabilities increasingly intersect with 2026 climate shocks, WASH conditions in Manabí are projected to deteriorate further, with declining coverage of piped water access, degraded water quality resulting from poorly maintained treatment infrastructure, and reduced physical access to safe water and sanitation services, particularly in rural areas and peripheral urban neighbourhoods already facing chronic shortages (Primicias 03/01/2025; El Universo 09/03/2026).

Education

Rising violence and the persistence of OCGs in Manabí are contributing to increasing risks within school environments, particularly affecting safety, supervision, and physical access to educational spaces. In Manta, Pedernales, and Portoviejo, these dynamics are leading to school dropouts and child recruitment. OCGs are continuously targeting children at increasingly younger ages through coercive recruitment mechanisms, with some cases taking place within and around educational spaces (Primicias 18/03/2026; Panorama Ecuador 17/02/2026). While structural factors specific to Manabí – such as child labour, poverty linked to fishing and agricultural informality, limited connectivity, and restricted access to technology in rural and coastal areas – create baseline vulnerabilities, escalating violence is likely to act as a key compounding driver of educational disruption in 2026, accelerating dropout rates and increasing children’s exposure to recruitment (El Diario 12/05/2025; UNICEF 06/2023).

A growing shift toward remote learning and increased student dropout in Manabí has been identified, especially in cantons where insecurity has intensified. In Portoviejo and Manta, some schools have already transitioned to virtual classes in response to security threats, and there are many reports of recruitment within educational settings in Pedernales (KII 20/04/2026). Extortion of teachers has forced many educators to relocate to rural areas of Manabí, away from OCG-controlled areas, contributing to teacher shortages that directly disrupt educational services and reduce access for students in affected communities (La Marea 18/06/2025). These dynamics are likely to deepen inequalities in access to education, particularly for students without connectivity or safe learning environments at home, often in rural areas.

In both urban and rural areas, fear of crossfire and the presence of invisible borders (informal territorial divisions that restrict movement between neighbourhoods) are likely to increasingly prevent children from attending school. This risk is further aggravated in rural areas, where students must travel long distances through insecure zones and deteriorating infrastructure, and where flooding and road damage are likely to further disrupt safe access routes to schools. This is true not only in Manabí, but also in the cantons of Guayaquil, Huaquillas, and Machala (El Diario 12/05/2025; NRC 26/06/2025; WB 29/04/2026). Educational attendance rates and progressions are

expected to decline, as repeated absences and prolonged disruptions increase the likelihood of permanent dropout, particularly among children already exposed to OCGs, reinforcing pathways into child labour and recruitment.

This trend is occurring in a context of increasing violence affecting children and adolescents, with homicides among those aged 0–17 in Manabí rising from 4.14% of total deaths in 2024 to 5.19% in 2025. This indicates children’s growing exposure to lethal violence, with fear and mobility restrictions further affecting school attendance and heightening protection risks, instead of serving as a direct measure of educational outcomes (MDI accessed 23/04/2026).

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Humanitarian constraints

OCG territorial control alongside military operations in Manabí are likely to further deteriorate over the next three to six months of 2026 as armed violence continues, increasing operational constraints and the risk of restricted humanitarian access. Urban hotspots such as Manta, Pedernales, and Portoviejo are particularly at risk because of curfews, a climate of fear, and OCGs’ de facto territorial boundaries (OCHA 24/02/2026).

OCGs’ deep embedding within communities through control mechanisms is likely to further entrench fear of retaliation, social surveillance, and coercion, reducing communities’ willingness to interact with humanitarian organisations. Communities under OCG influence may reject outside intervention altogether as a result of fear reprisals or an active refusal to engage, resulting in increased underreporting, limited access for needs assessments, and widening data gaps. These limitations extend directly to protection risks assessments, as issues such as recruitment and exploitation often require indirect programming approaches – such as art-based activities and psychosocial methodologies – to enable safe community engagement and support information collection (KII 20/04/2026; OCHA 24/02/2026). As a result, populations in high-risk areas are likely to face increasing protection risks caused by growing OCG control, with reduced ability to access services, seek assistance, or safely report protection concerns.

Funding and response capacity

Humanitarian response capacity is unlikely to meet increasing needs, especially in protection and livelihoods, resulting in reduced geographic coverage and fewer available services in high-risk areas. By February 2026, only 11% of the USD 65.1 million funding required for Ecuador had been secured, constraining the scale and sustainability of interventions, particularly for protection and assistance for refugees and displaced people (IFRC 28/03/2026; UNHCR 26/03/2026).

In Manabí, recent response efforts to address rising needs include the activation of a Provincial Response Plan and emergency shelters providing basic services (IFRC 28/03/2026). Global funding cuts have already reduced the presence of humanitarian organisations in the province, however, creating a capacity gap in specialised protection services, particularly those for migrants and refugees (KII 20/04/2026). These services are essential for obtaining legal status, which enables access to basic services, formal employment, and humanitarian assistance (KII 20/04/2026; UNHCR 26/03/2026). The reduction of specialised protection services is likely to limit individuals' ability to regularise their status, leading to exclusion from basic services and livelihoods and increasing exposure to exploitation and other protection risks, including recruitment and use, displacement, and GBV.

These impacts are expected to be more severe for displaced, migrant, and refugee populations, who are more reliant on these services because of their lack of support networks and pre-existing barriers, such as lack of legal status, to accessing rights. There is also limited information on the scale and coverage of responses addressing livelihoods and food security in 2025–2026, highlighting an information gap on the response instead of a confirmed absence of interventions.

Access to information

Where access is restricted, fear-driven underreporting compounds data gaps, making it harder for humanitarian responders to assess needs and prioritise interventions (KII 20/04/2026; UNHCR 28/04/2026).

Key information gaps remain regarding the scale and location of displacements, kidnappings, GVB, and OCG territorial control, directly affecting decision-making in terms of targeting and prioritisation. These gaps are likely to lead to incomplete assessments, misallocation of resources, and delays in response, as needs in high-risk or inaccessible areas remain under-identified because of fear of retaliation and restricted reporting mechanisms. As a result, emerging needs may be identified late, and assistance may not reach those most in need.