Peru's Crime Surge: Gangs and State Response

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By Belen Bringas

Summary:

Peru faces a major security crisis driven by organized crime, gang extortion, and rising violence. Militarized responses and punitive laws, such as lowering the age of criminal responsibility, have proven ineffective. Root causes include state corruption, drug trafficking, illegal mining, and insti-

tutional weakness. Without structural reform and prevention measures, violence is likely to escalate further.

Text:

16 bus drivers were murdered as a result of gang extortion, triggering a massive transportation strike on April 11th. Around 20,000 buses and public transport units halted operations across Lima, with 460 private transport companies joining in, paralyzing the city's main form of mobility. The strike protested the recent surge in crime, particularly gang-related extortion. Schools and universities closed, and the government encouraged remote work for the duration of the strike, which was the fifth one in the last seven months (El País).

Organized crime has not only targeted bus drivers and transport companies but also small businesses such as bodegas. More recently, cumbia folklore singer Paul Flores from Armonía 10 was murdered after a concert. He and the band had previously received threats from a gang demanding large amounts of money as protection. His death pushed the Boluarte administration to declare a state of emergency in the regions of Lima and Callao (BBC Mundo), deploying military forces to patrol the streets. A similar strategy was used in 2024 and 2023, yielding little long-term impact on crime rates.

Official data illustrates the alarming scale of the problem. According to the Police Complaint System (SIDPOL), homicide reports in 2024 reached 7.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, a 115% increase from 3.5 in 2019. Even more striking is the rise in extortion reports, which soared to 64.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2024, a 438% increase from just 12 in 2019. Data from the National Death Registry (SINADEF) confirm this trend: the homicide rate climbed from 3.5 in 2019 to 6.1 in 2024, showing a 74% increase. Some departments have seen even steeper climbs: Madre de Dios (21.4), Tumbes (14.8), La Libertad (13.1), Ica (8.1), and Piura (5.5) per 100,000 inhabitants. Public concern mirrors this reality. A 2024 survey by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics revealed that 45% of the population viewed criminality as one of the country's biggest problems, with corruption following as the second biggest issue. (ComexPerú)

The root causes of this crisis go beyond police numbers. According to Interior Minister Juan Santiváñez, 14,220 extortion complaints were filed between January and August 2024 alone. (CIPER Chile) In the first four months of 2025, extortion complaints in Lima alone reached 3,757, according to the National Citizen Security Observatory of the Ministry of the Interior (Mininter). (El Comercio)

There are several factors backing this surge in crime. Notoriously, Peru is one of the world's largest coca leaf producers, alongside Colombia and Bolivia, which allows narco-trafficking to finance criminal organizations. Illegal mining is another rising issue that fuels these mafias, creating a channel for money laundering to continue their extortion and contract killing operations. These organizations seem to work with impunity, as the biggest

enabler is institutional corruption itself. Organized crime is infiltrated in the country's own judicial institutions, allowing them to run rampant with minimal resistance. The lack of accountability of the Peruvian state makes the government's efforts appear ineffective. (CIPER Chile)

Dina Boluarte's militarized approach is not only reactive but unsustainable in the long term, as it fails to address the underlying causes of organized crime, such as the failure to track illicit financial flows, a corrupt judicial system, and lack of prevention programs. Countries like Mexico and Brazil have experienced similar crises and proved that military deployment does little to combat organized crime and weakens the rule of law. (CIPER Chile)

In May 2025, the government took another controversial step by enacting Law 32330, which modifies the Penal Code and the Adolescent Criminal Responsibility Code to make 16- and 17-year-olds criminally responsible for serious offenses such as homicide, extortion, and rape. This law was pushed by Congress as a way to fight against youth involvement in organized crime. (RPP) However, this measure caused immediate backlash from the Defensoría del Pueblo (Ombudsman's Office), which filed a lawsuit before the Constitutional Court, arguing that Law 32330 violates the American Convention on Human Rights and is incompatible with Peru's constitutional framework. They aim for the law to be overturned domestically before having to take it to international courts. (RPP)

In conclusion, Peru's current security crisis is the result of deeply rooted structural issues, including state corruption, weak institutions, and the economic power of organized crime. Without comprehensive reforms, crime will only continue to escalate.