The Transnational Engine of Tren de Aragua

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3 Main Points

RQ: How did Tren de Aragua use Venezuela's crisis and migrant routes to move from a prison gang to a transnational network?Argument: Its expansion stems from the interaction of state fragility, mass displacement, and diversified criminal markets.Conclusion: TdA shows a new franchise-style, poly-criminal model that policing alone cannot contain.

About the Authors

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Latin America has often been dubbed as the most violent region in the world (Albarracín, 2023; COPLA, 2016), citing the levels of crime and the extent of violence appropriated by criminal actors. This has created a context of instability and uncertainty, further encouraging populations directly impacted to look to alternative opportunities that are safer and more stable. In parts of Latin America, it is the organised crime itself that has created or exacerbated humanitarian crises, as the extremely high levels of homicide and other violent crime have caused major population displacements (Humanitarian outcomes, 2021, p.8). According to a 2021 report from the International Crisis Group, Honduras and El Salvador have an estimated 833,600 people displaced in large part by criminal violence (ICG, 2021). The resulting humanitarian crisis becomes a pressing question for the management of forced migration and displacement, law enforcement, and citizen security, particularly when organised crime groups (OCGs) are at the helm steering the crisis. This article seeks to outline how Tren De Aragua appropriated the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela to transform from a prison-based gang into a diversified transnational criminal network.

Defining Organised Crime

As organised crime (OC) fluctuates across time and space, it remains a challenge to pin down a precise definition that is applicable throughout history and in every context. The United Nations has attempted to provide a working definition, approaching OC as an "enterprise ... that [rationally] works to profit from illicit activities" whose existence is "maintain[ed] through corruption [...], intimidation, threats or force to protect its operations" (UNODC, 2018). The 2000 Palermo Convention goes beyond this working definition, identifying serious crime and the groups that partake in such criminal activity, noting the involvement of three or more persons, the aim to commit at least one serious crime, and the aim of gaining financial or material benefit (UNODC, 2004, p.5).

Academia has gone beyond this and has attempted to bring nuance to this understanding of OC by approaching it as an economic, political, cultural, and social phenomenon (cf. Von Lampe, 2015). These approaches have highlighted the role of class struggle as marginalised social groups respond to an oppressive regime (cf. Pearce, 1976; Woodiwiss, 2001), identified various organisational designs, notably the use of a hierarchical structure implying social ties and labour division (cf. Abadinsky, 2013; Fijnaut et al, 1998; Godson, 2003), the importance of territorial control (cf. Santoro, 2022), and the context of the types of criminal or illicit activities that the groups partake in (cf. Von Lampe, 2015). Each framing brings its own refinement and analysis, but fails to fully capture the exact breadth and scope that OC may manifest as.

The World Bank (2025, p.79) underlined the issue of the lack of a standardised definition of crime at a regional level in Latin America, further complicated by the federal systems with multiple penal codes in a single country. Observations suggest that organised crime groups (OCGs) increasingly have a fragmented structure and participate in a diverse set of criminal activities, particularly when territorial control is an important feature of the local criminal landscape (Paúl, 2024). Uribe Ruan (2021) notes that OC in Latin America remains quite abstract as a construct, as crime is typically committed by disorganised, fragmented and unstable groups that make up networks spread throughout the region. Albarracín (2023) observes that this flexible approach focused on the activities rather than the structure allows for the use of a broader source selection and an analysis of OCGs that is ultimately shaped by the angle adopted, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of OC.

Theoretical Framework

Criminology has traditionally approached studying and understanding crime as a function of an actor's behaviour, a structural phenomenon, or the factors that influence it. Few theories have tried to approach it in a multifaceted way as Routine Activity Theory has (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The theory proposes the criminal actor, location, and lack of protection for the target victim as key factors that inform the prediction and prevention of crime. Becker's (1963) Outsider Theory, building on labelling theory, complements this multifaceted approach, suggesting that individuals may mold themselves to the expectations of being labelled as an 'offender' for breaking an established group social norm. Mailey's (2024) report on the 2023 Sudan conflict highlights the link between arms trafficking and the humanitarian crisis, with the latter being fueled by the instability and insecurity of illicit networks and commoditised violence. Geneva Solutions reports that organised crime often generates hunger, poverty and displacement in already vulnerable communities, affecting the delivery of humanitarian assistance to in-need populations (Dupraz-Dobias, 2023).

The perspective of a lack of protection for vulnerable populations has been a central aspect of organised crime studies. Gambetta (1993) outlines the offer of private protection as a defining entrepreneurial characteristic of OCGs. Specifically, the notion of the "mafia" arose as an alternative protection provider when the state is unable to maintain a monopoly of protection, ie. lacking the ability to protect the population (Santoro, 2022).

An important notion to understand here is the concept of polycriminality, how various criminal markets eventually overlap (USAID, 2020). A prime example often cited is the overlap between smuggling routes and human-trafficking, or migrant smuggling, routes (UNODC, 2024). Understanding polycriminality is central to the understanding of organised criminal actors as being inherently economic as material gain acts as a core incentive for criminal activities (Abadinsky, 2013; Finckenauer, 2005; Varese, 2001; Wang, 2017). This is motivated not only by a profit-oriented mindset, but

also the need to spread risks and to adapt to new markets, much like a legal firm (Global Organised Crime Index, 2025). Ultimately, criminal actors are especially flexible, operate at a transnational level, and are no longer limited to a single criminal market.

Polycriminality marks a shift in the criminal landscape, noting a sophistication not seen before. The rise of "third-generation gangs" shows a shift from the market-based business operations of "second-generation gangs" by expanding informal political and social influence and aiming to operate at a global level (Sullivan, 2007). Such groups become transnational by connecting communities facing the shared challenge of a "disintegrating social structure" in intricate networks that establish a distinct community culture (Sullivan, 2006, p.492-3). Such networks, often built on cultural or national identities, have played a key role in ensuring the transnational nature of modern OCGs, particularly in Latin America (Garzón et al, 2013; Zaitch, 2002).

Historical Context

Tren de Aragua does not emerge in a vacuum; it condenses centuries of Latin American illicit economies into a single criminal entity. Since the colonial era, the region has been characterized by smuggling, human trafficking, and illicit mining of gold and silver, resulting in parallel marketplaces reliant on corruption and private violence. Smugglers, local elites, and crown officials conspired to evade the quinto real (royal fifth) tax, while pirates and corsairs functioned as tolerated intermediates when it aligned with imperial goals (Lane, 1998). Post-independence, Latin American republics exhibited budgetary and military frailty, characterized by restricted territorial control and powerful regional caudillos, which facilitated ongoing banditry, local warlordism, and private protection economies to thrive (Centeno, 2002).

In the late twentieth century, cocaine altered this landscape. Colombian and later Mexican cartels set up vertically integrated systems to control production, trafficking routes, and wholesale distribution. Brazilian prison-based groups like Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) displayed how prisons could become centers of criminal governance (Lessing, 2021, p.854-873). The region transitioned from a limited number of cartels to a fragmented landscape of poly-criminal organisations controlling various territories and populations. Tren de Aragua (TdA) is a product of this evolution. It takes on colonial patterns of collusion and modern trends of diversification and prison-based power, but it also adds something new: it is built around the mass migration and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and spreads outward through transnational mobility (Rísquez, 2023; Pérez Guadalupe et al., 2025).

From Construction Site to Prison Kingdom

Tren de Aragua (TdA) started out as a failed infrastructure project. The Venezuelan government started building an ambitious railway in Aragua state in the late 2000s. Around these construction sites, workers and union

representatives started to steal materials, extort contractors, and modify the hiring process. Rísquez (2023) explains how this environment of predatory unionism and petty racketeering led to what would later be called "Tren de Aragua," or "the train" of Aragua. The Aragua Penitentiary Center, also known as Tocorón prison, is where the gang's logic changed when key members of these rackets were arrested.

Inside Tocorón, the conditions were ideal for criminals to come together. After deadly riots in 2011, the Chávez government unofficially gave the pranes, or inmate bosses, the power to keep order inside the prison. In exchange for less open violence, the state gave up control of daily life. Pranes were in charge of food distribution, access to weapons, visiting rights, and settling disputes (InSight Crime, 2025). Tocorón became a semi-autonomous enclave where the state kept the walls but lost its power. In this setting, Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, also known as "Niño Guerrero," became the most powerful pran; already found guilty of murder and drug trafficking. He set up a strict hierarchy and a system of internal taxation called la causa, which required each prisoner to pay for protection and basic services (Rísquez, 2023). Non-payment led to punishments that were staged, starting with beatings and going up to gunshots and execution; creating an atmosphere of fear and obedience.

Tren de Aragua turned Tocorón into a "prison kingdom" by taking resources from prisoners and using money from extortion and trafficking outside of prison. Investigations by journalists and NGOs found that the prison even had restaurants, nightclubs, a swimming pool, a zoo, a baseball field, and shops (Radford & Buschschlüter, 2023). All of these were paid for by inmates and run by gangs. Families of gang members lived inside, and security guards took orders from the prisoners. Tocorón served as Guerrero's headquarters, safe haven, and symbol of impunity all at the same time. Most importantly, TdA was not confined to the prison walls. The gang did things that looked like charity work in nearby communities through the front group Somos El Barrio JK. They gave out food, sponsored events, and set their own rules (Pérez Guadalupe et al., 2025). In areas where the Venezuelan government was largely absent, the gang took over as the alternative authority, settling arguments, punishing "bad" behavior, and taxing business activity. What started as a predatory union racket grew into a hybrid criminal-political actor rooted in a prison extending tentacles into other parts of society within a decade.

In September 2023, the Maduro government sent about 11,000 soldiers and police to Tocorón to "retake it" as part of "Operation Guaicaipuro" (McDermott, 2023). Authorities found recreational facilities, stockpiles of rifles, grenades, heavy weapons, advanced communication systems, and tunnels connecting the prison to the outside world. But just before this situation happened, the "Niño Guerrero" and dozens of his top lieutenants got away. This raid sped up a process that was already going on: moving away from its original prison hub and relying more on its network of external cells. It did

not break up the group; but it made it act more like a transnational franchise and less like a prison-based hierarchy.

A Diversified Criminal Portfolio

By the time the police raided Tocorón, Tren de Aragua had a wide range of criminal activities. Extortion was still a main and steady source of income. In Venezuela, the gang charged businesses in areas it controlled. Outside of Venezuela, it went after small shops, street vendors, and transportation companies. For instance, in Peru, complaints of extortion went from about 3,000 in 2018 to more than 21,000 by 2024 (Pérez Guadalupe et al., 2025). While this cannot be blamed only on TdA, Peruvian police and prosecutors consistently point to Venezuelan gangs linked to TdA as the main cause of the new wave of extortion.

The gang also specialises in contract killings (sicariato) and kidnappings. In many host countries, police reports show that professionalized murders, which often involve dismemberment or displaying bodies in public, have increased since TdA-linked cells arrived (InSight Crime, 2025). Such acts generate income through paid hits and signal dominance to rivals and communities.

TdA is also a major player in the business of human smuggling. The group charges migrants to cross the border between Colombia and Venezuela and through routes like the Darién Gap. When debts cannot be paid, smuggling often turns into trafficking. Migrants who are unable to pay their full fees are forced to work as drug couriers, lookouts, or in forced labor; women are especially forced into sex work. In Rísquez (2023) formulation, the gang has switched the merchandise from drugs to people.

The gang's systematic use of human trafficking and sexual exploitation is more distinctive. TdA has built networks for prostitution and trafficking that follow Venezuelans who have moved to other countries. Investigations into a TdA group in Lima called "Los Gallegos" revealed a structured system of debt bondage: women from Venezuela, Colombia, or Ecuador were recruited with promises of legal work, then forced into prostitution to pay off travel "debts," facing nightly quotas and punitive fines (Pérez Guadalupe et al., 2025). Police suspected that one Lima-based cell made more than $1 million a year from sexual exploitation. In Chile and Colombia, where Venezuelan women and children are more likely to be victims of trafficking, similar patterns have been seen (UNODC, 2024).

Beyond these headline activities, TdA displays marked criminal entrepreneurship. It has gotten into baseball academies in Venezuela, where it demands a cut of young players' MLB signing bonuses and threatens to kill anyone who refuses to pay up (Ferré-Sadurní & Marcius, 2024). In the south, the gang is involved in illegal gold mining, extorting miners or controlling pits alongside or against other armed actors. In migrant-receiving cities, it practises loansharking (gota a gota), giving micro-loans to vendors and mototaxi drivers at very high interest rates that are enforced through violence. There is also growing proof that younger recruits are using their

digital skills to commit cybercrime and financial fraud, like stealing phones, taking over accounts, and running online scams.

Across these markets, the gang's modus operandi combines extreme but instrumental brutality with strategic flexibility. Dismemberments, corpses in bags, and filmed executions are all ways to scare people and competitors. Yet TdA usually prefers co-optation to long-term war. When it moves into new areas, it offers rival groups a chance to join its network. Violence is more of a way to control the market and demonstrate territory than an end in itself.

Exploiting Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis

Tren de Aragua's transnationalization is both a result of and a response to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Since 2015, about 7.9 million Venezuelans have left the country and about 6.7 million of them are still in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNHCR, 2024). This mass migration has led to crowded diasporic corridors and dangerous migrant settlements. The crisis was a push and pull factor for the gang. The economy's collapse made "extortable" wealth at home less valuable. Businesses went out of business, wages fell, and the amount of money made from kidnapping went down. To keep making money and running the business, TdA "followed the people." As Venezuelans moved to Colombia, Peru, Chile, and other places, the gang found new markets in those countries that paid in dollars and took advantage of the migrants' vulnerabilities.

Migrants provide cover, manpower, and victims. TdA operatives can get into host countries as regular refugees because border crossings are often chaotic and identity checks are few and far between. Young Venezuelan men who are unemployed and looked down upon are easy targets for recruitment, especially if they have ties to gangs or prison culture. At the same time, undocumented immigrants who work informally are easy targets for extortion and coercion because they are afraid of the police, often lack legal literacy, and have weak social networks. Women and LGBTQ+ migrants are at greater risk of being exploited by TdA networks, which explains their overrepresentation among trafficking victims (UNODC, 2024; Pérez Guadalupe et al., 2025).

This combination creates a criminal diaspora within a migrant diaspora. While the vast majority of Venezuelan migrants adhere to the law, the conduct of a small segment influences public perception and policy. High-profile crimes associated with Venezuelan gangs in Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia have exacerbated xenophobic narratives equating "Venezuelan" with "dangerous." In the United States, the TdA gang has been referenced in political discourse to justify large-scale deportations and strict asylum procedures, even when evidence of gang affiliation is limited (Ferré-Sadurní & Marcius, 2024). This politicized framing can lead to collective punishment and hinder integration efforts, ultimately expanding the pool of individuals susceptible to recruitment and exploitation.

In conclusion, Tren de Aragua crystallises a broader transformation in Latin American organised crime: from monolithic, drug-centric cartels to flexible, poly-criminal networks that operate through dispersed cells and franchised "brands." Simultaneously, it elucidates the crime-migration nexus, demonstrating how prison-derived organisations can extend their influence beyond national boundaries by infiltrating humanitarian corridors and susceptible diasporic populations. Further, this case warns that narrow security responses are not only insufficient but potentially counterproductive if they are not accompanied by institutional change, migrant protection, and social policy that address the governance, inequality, and protection gaps on which such organisations thrive.

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