The Venezuela Organized Crime Top 10
Venezuela's organized crime groups and networks have evolved rapidly over the last decade, exploiting social and police crises that have wracked the country while benefiting from a criminally corrupt government that has turned Venezuela into a mafia state.

These groups can be found the length and breadth of the country: the border with Colombia is home to binational guerrilla groups, mining gangs known as sindicatos have taken root in the gold-rich regions of the south and east, drug trafficking networks have taken control of the routes and dispatch points in the north, and urban centers around the country are controlled by predatory, well-armed gangs.

In order to track these groups and assess the security threat they pose, InSight Crime has developed a methodology to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Using data collected from over three years of investigations — including hundreds of interviews, on the ground field work, and daily media monitoring — we gave each of Venezuela’s criminal groups a ranking based on 38 indicators in ten key areas: structure, leadership, identity, economic strength, penetration of the state, military capacity, use of violence, criminal alliances, territorial reach, and criminal governance.

The Yeico Masacre Gang

Yeico Masacre’s gang has evolved from a cell of one of the oldest mafias in the state of Zulia -- the Meleán -- into one of the most dangerous extortion gangs in one of the most populous and economically important states in the country.

The gang, led by Erick Alberto Parra Mendoza, alias “Yeico Masacre,” benefits from a cohesion bordering on a cult of personality. The group’s members identify themselves as the Yeico Masacre Armed Group (Grupo Armado Yeico Masacre – GAYM) and sport weapons and bulletproof vests bearing GAYM insignia. It has grown in power in recent years thanks to a willingness to use and publicize extreme violence to intimidate extortion victims and rivals, giving it an edge in Zulia’s chaotic criminal landscape.

These tactics have won Yeico Masacre’s gang few friends, however. The gang has no known allies in the criminal world nor amongst elements of the state, for whom Yeico himself is a top target. Meanwhile, the group’s cohesion revolves around a single leader, with no recognized successor, meaning that it is likely to fragment or disintegrate if Yeico is killed.

Yeico Masacre’s gang has benefited from a lack of cooperation between Venezuelan and Colombian security forces, operating with impunity on both sides of the border. Binational security cooperation could weaken or destroy the gang in 2023, especially as Yeico himself is believed to be hiding out in Colombia, according to current and former security forces officials, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

Read the full profile here.
The Wilexis Gang

The gang led by Wilexis Acevedo, alias “Wilexis,” has spent nearly a decade fighting its way to the top of the criminal hierarchy in Petare, a vast district on the outskirts of Caracas that is plagued by poverty and insecurity but rich in criminal opportunity.

The Wilexis gang has proven itself capable of confronting criminal rivals and resisting security forces operations. But while it owes its dominance to its use of violence against such rivals, the key to its longevity has been the group’s social control and system of criminal governance, which has seen it ingratiate itself into the daily lives of residents by providing essential goods, regulating social life, and acting as a counterbalance to abusive police that operate in the area.

The gang leverages its territorial presence to control criminal economies such as extortion, kidnapping, and micro-trafficking, although there is no sign it has been able to expand beyond such predatory crimes into more lucrative activities. While it is heavily armed, the gang is largely composed of young, untrained recruits. It is also reliant on its powerful and charismatic leader for coherence and solidity, leaving it vulnerable should Wilexis be killed or captured.

Throughout 2022, the Wilexis gang was able to expand its territory in Petare, according to local residents and political leaders, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. The expansion took place despite the gang coming under fire from both criminal rivals and sporadic police operations. While it is currently well-positioned, this could change if the government decides to escalate operations targeting the group.

Read the full profile here. ◄
Tren de Guayana

Tren de Guayana is one of the oldest sindicatos in the state of Bolívar, evolving from an urban gang dedicated to extortion to a group that controls territory and gold mines in the mineral-rich municipalities of Roscio and El Callao.

Tren de Guayana is a heavily armed and extremely violent gang with a significant military capacity. It has over a decade of criminal experience under largely stable leadership, during which time it has often operated with relative impunity thanks to its alleged relationships with local security forces and local politicians.

However, the gang’s potential is limited by its highly localized area of operations and its economic reliance on its control of gold mines. Furthermore, the gang’s relations with the state, and the impunity it enjoyed as a result, has recently been thrown into question.

The Venezuelan military launched operations in Bolívar in late October 2022, directly targeting Tren de Guayana, with officials highlighting numerous arrests and seizures affecting the group. If these operations are sustained in 2023, the gang may find itself in a precarious position.

Read the full profile here.
The Carlos Capa Gang

The gang founded by Deiber Johan González, alias “Carlos Capa,” has positioned itself as the most powerful criminal actor among the many predatory gangs operating in the Valles del Tuy region of the north-central state of Miranda.

The Carlos Capa gang has access to heavy weaponry and has shown itself willing to use extreme violence against rivals, security forces, and civilians. The key to its rise, though, can be found in how it has exerted social control over local communities, especially in the isolated mountainous areas where the gang has established rural camps. There, members can retreat from security operations safe in the knowledge that the local community -- whether out of fear or dependence -- will protect them.

The group is also strengthened by its years of experience, solid hierarchical structure, and diverse criminal portfolio, which ranges from kidnapping and extortion schemes to controlling the distribution of subsidized food.

However, the group operates in a relatively small territory and has shown little ambition to expand, build criminal alliances, or penetrate the state outside of that area. It is only capable of mounting unsophisticated military operations, and largely relies on individual acts of predatory crime for income.

Although the Carlos Capa gang has so far proved resilient to repeated efforts to target its leadership and operations, it is now firmly in the sights of the Venezuelan state, which in September 2022 launched a large scale security operation to combat the group. While Capa again escaped, questions remain over how long it can resist such pressure.

Read the full profile here.
The R Organization (Organización R – OR) is a sindicato based in the Sifontes municipality of the eastern state of Bolívar. Since at least 2019, it has expanded its presence in the gold mines surrounding the town of Tumeremo, controlling and profiting from illegal mining activities.

While the OR collects extortion fees from informal miners, it has also billed itself as a defender of those same miners, using the resulting acceptance it has gained from local communities to cement its criminal governance. Along with its use of violence and military capacity, this has helped it sustain its territorial reach, taking on both security forces and rival gangs in its efforts to take over more mines.

The gang’s strong criminal governance is both a boon and a risk as it has made the group highly localized and dependent on income from illegal mining. This means that -- if it were forced out of the mining region -- it would be greatly weakened and could struggle to maintain operations.

This may be what the Maduro government hopes to achieve through recent security operations. Since late October 2022, military officials have launched highly publicized actions targeting alleged members and infrastructure of the R Organization. It remains to be seen, however, whether the military will be able to hold Tumeremo or if the OR will return when the pressure eases.

Read the full profile [here](https://insightcrime.org).
The Bolivarian Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación – FBL), also known as the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (Las Fuerzas Patrióticas de Liberación Nacional – FPLN) or by the nickname the “Boliches,” is a Venezuelan origin guerrilla group founded in the 1980s. For the past two decades, it has acted as a defender of the “Bolivarian Revolution,” launched by former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

The FBL is a highly ideological group with nearly three decades of operational experience. Its strength lies in its marriage of arms and politics. Through its political wing, the Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Current (Corriente Revolucionaria Bolívar y Zamora – CRBZ), the group has secured important government positions from municipal mayor’s offices to National Assembly representatives.

The group’s political work has helped its armed wing combine criminal and political governance and secure control of criminal activities on a local level, while also striking up powerful political alliances on a national level.

However, the FBL does not have the anywhere near the size or military capacity of its guerrilla cousins the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and the ex-FARC mafia, nor does it control an extensive
portfolio of criminal activities or territory. The fact that it shares territories with guerrillas of Colombian origin guerrillas has limited its potential for growth as an armed group.

Despite these limitations and some tensions with state actors and other guerrilla groups, the FBL’s successful hybrid model combining political and armed wings mean it is set to remain a significant threat in its areas of operations for the foreseeable future.

Read the full profile [here](#)
Las Claritas Sindicato

Las Claritas Sindicato is one of the oldest and most established mining in the state of Bolívar. It is also known by the aliases of its leaders, Juan Gabriel Rivas Núñez, alias “Juancho,” and Yohan José Romero, alias “Johan Petrica.”

The group has established a criminal fiefdom in the heartland of Bolívar’s gold mining region. In the areas of Las Claritas and Kilómetro 88, it regulates social and economic life, and leverages this position into vast criminal earnings by controlling and “taxing” every step in the gold supply chain, from extraction to sale.

In its early days, the group rose up thanks to protection from the administration of former Governor Francisco Rangel Gómez, according to testimonies by security forces whistleblowers. While there is little hard evidence to support the widespread rumors that such state alliances continue today, the group is one of a select few that has yet to be targeted in any of the multiple security operations against Bolivar’s sindicatos.

The group has also avoided the damaging confrontations with rival groups that have weakened many other sindicatos, instead, striking non-aggression pacts with others operating in the area.

Las Claritas Sindicato is heavily dependent on one criminal resource in a relatively small territory, but while this limits the group’s capacity to expand beyond its current form, it has so far shown little ambition to move beyond the lucrative local gold trade and its core territories.
While major security forces deployments in late 2022 suggest the Maduro government is launching renewed efforts to bring the gold trade under state control, Las Claritas Sindicato was once again notably not a target. As long as this remains the case, then the group is likely to continue as the most powerful criminal actor in Bolívar.

Read the full profile here
Acacio Medina Front

The Acacio Medina Front is a guerrilla group that in 2016 broke away from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) during the rebel group’s peace process with the Colombian government. Since its split from the FARC, it has based most of its forces and operations in Venezuela, and today is the most powerful faction of the ex-FARC Mafia remaining in the country.

Battle hardened by years of fighting an insurgency, the Acacio Medina Front is highly organized, commanded by experienced leaders, and its fighters are well-trained and heavily armed. Based in the southeastern state of Amazonas, the group has used its control of cross-border movement corridors and isolated territories in the Amazon region to build a lucrative criminal business based on illegal gold mining and controlling drug trafficking routes.

In regions under its control, it has established sophisticated forms of criminal governance, setting itself up as the de facto authority; providing justice, basic services, and security while also imposing its own “taxes.” It has also established close relations with actors in both the local security forces and allegedly with state-level political actors in Amazonas, which protect and facilitate its operations.

Although its territorial reach is relatively limited, the Acacio Medina Front’s willingness to concentrate on core territories and criminal activities instead of launching an expansion campaign has allowed it stay out of the conflicts and rivalries that have undermined other ex-FARC Mafia factions.
If the Acacio Medina Front can continue to manage relations with the Venezuelan state and avoid conflict with the only armed group that could threaten its position in Amazonas -- the ELN -- then the path is clear for it to strengthen its grip over one of the most profitable criminal fiefdoms in Venezuela.

See the full profile here
Tren de Aragua has grown from a local prison gang into the most powerful homegrown criminal group in Venezuela and a true transnational security threat.

Today, Tren de Aragua is a sophisticated structure composed of numerous cells and networks coordinated by the central leadership group headed by Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias “Niño Guerrero.”

Its leadership is based in Tocorón prison, although they are not confined to the prison and can come and go freely, according to multiple sources, including security officials and former gang members, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. Inside, the state has withdrawn and allows the group to control internal criminal economies and tightly regulate every aspect of prison life. The prison is also used as a base of operations to coordinate regional criminal activities on the outside, managing extortion, kidnapping, robbery, micro-trafficking, and even cybercrime rackets from the inside.

Near Tocorón, Tren de Aragua has also built up a criminal fiefdom in the sprawling district of San Vicente, where it has ejected security forces and controls all aspects of community life through the facade of a social foundation. Cells and allies of the gang have spread throughout the state, making it the dominant criminal actor in Aragua.

It is Tren de Aragua’s expansion outside of its home state, however, that has set it apart from other groups of Venezuelan origin.
Using a mixture of violence and alliances, it has seized territory in some of the most strategically important criminal real estate in Venezuela. Furthermore, the group has pioneered using the Venezuelan migrant crisis to expand transnationally, exploiting migrants and the Venezuelan diaspora to set up operations in Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. This geographical expansion at home and abroad has facilitated an economic expansion into activities such as human trafficking, people smuggling, and small-scale drug trafficking.

Tren de Aragua’s access to high-powered weaponry and willingness to use violence make it a formidable foe for any rival, legal or criminal, and it has shown itself capable of sustaining conflicts even against powerful enemies. However, it does not have the military training or experience of armed groups such as the ELN or the ex-FARC mafia. Furthermore, it has yet to secure control of or even play a significant role in the most lucrative criminal economies, such as the transnational drug trade.

Although local cells of Tren de Aragua both in Venezuela and internationally have been left vulnerable to attacks from criminal rivals and security forces, the broader network coordinated from Tocorón looks set to continue to dominate the Venezuelan gang landscape.

Read the full profile here.
The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) is a guerrilla group founded in 1964 as a Colombian Marxist-Leninist insurgency. In recent years, it has evolved into a binational armed group that also controls extensive territories and criminal economies in Venezuela and has acted as a paramilitary force in support of the Chavista government.

The ELN is one the largest armed groups in Venezuela, with over 1,000 fighters stationed in the country, according to the estimates of the Colombian military, in addition to far-reaching support networks embedded in the civilian population. InSight Crime has registered a permanent ELN presence in 40 municipalities in eight states, more than any other criminal network or armed group in Venezuela.

The rebels are highly organized and cohesive. At least two and likely more of their five-person Central Command (Comando Central – COCE) leadership group is based in Venezuela, along with three of the eight semi-autonomous War Fronts that make up their guerrilla army.

Battled hardened by over half a century of civil conflict in Colombia, these War Fronts have access to high-grade weaponry and their fighters have the training and experience to use it effectively. They have proven themselves capable of both mounting sophisticated targeted attacks and maintaining sustained armed confrontations against formidable enemies.

The ELN controls extensive and lucrative criminal economies in Venezuela, with contraband smuggling, drug trafficking, and illegal mining their biggest earners. Profits from these economies are laundered in Venezuela through investments in local businesses and real estate.
In the areas dominated by the ELN, the guerrillas have replicated the social-political-military model developed in Colombia, providing goods, services, and economic opportunities to communities, as well as imposing parallel taxation and justice systems.

The ELN’s main advantage lies in its ties to the Venezuelan state. On a local level, they have coopted local governments, and built close economic and military ties to security forces. There is also substantial evidence that the guerrillas’ political connections in Venezuela run right to the top.

The ELN are currently involved in peace talks with the Colombian government, with Venezuela acting as a facilitator and guarantor. But if the talks fail, or the Venezuela-based forces break away from the process, then the guerrillas are well-positioned to remain the most powerful armed group in Venezuela for years to come.

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

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