



ProLAC



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# Internal Displacement and Other Situations of Violence in Contexts of Organized Crime in Latin America – Protection Monitoring Report

Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico



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## Prologue

*The following text was written by **Paula Gaviria Betancur**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. Her reflections represent an independent contribution to the analysis and positions of the ProLAC Initiative.*

Forced internal displacement in Latin America has become an open wound that cuts across borders, communities and generations. In countries such as Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico—the focus of this study developed by the ProLAC Initiative—thousands of families are forced to leave their homes not only because of direct violence, but also due to coercion and the fear imposed by the expansion of criminal economies, at times in the face of the inability or complicity of state and private actors. Even those who are not displaced live with a constant sense of vulnerability.

Given this reality, moving towards appropriate legal frameworks is an urgent and unavoidable priority. Legal recognition and the creation of registration and support mechanisms not only make displaced persons visible but also pave the way for comprehensive protection policies. These public policies must guarantee immediate humanitarian assistance, the restitution of rights, reparations, and the achievement of lasting solutions. Internal displacement, including that which occurs in the context of organized crime, must be a central issue on the public and human rights agenda in the region.

Civil society has an irreplaceable role in this process. Documenting, supporting, demanding, and monitoring compliance with state obligations are actions that build citizenship, strengthen collective memory, and improve accountability. International cooperation, in turn, can be a strategic ally in strengthening local capacities and promoting comprehensive responses that address the structural causes of displacement.

This study is, ultimately, an invitation to confront an often-silenced tragedy and to collectively assume the responsibility of transforming displacement into justice and hope, in order to build a better future.

## 1. Main Findings

Data collection was carried out in four countries: Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. 56 % of all monitored households that experienced a protection threat reported having been internally displaced. In 70 % of these cases, organized criminal groups were identified as the main perpetrators. These data show that forced internal displacement is one of the most severe consequences of criminal activity in the countries analyzed.



In the countries analyzed, forced internal displacement is closely linked to forced eviction and the extraction of natural resources. Complaints document the collaboration between private companies — including megaprojects and mining companies —, state authorities and organized crime groups to expel communities and secure control of strategic territories. In Honduras, for example, 37% of the displaced households reported having been forcibly evicted from their land, and in seven out of 10 cases organized crime was identified as responsible. While this pattern of eviction for extractive purposes is also found in Mexico and Guatemala, in Ecuador displacement is additionally driven by the territorial control exercised by criminal groups linked to drug trafficking and international cartels.

The forced recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents is a widespread practice in the countries analyzed. However, in many cases these minors are criminalized and treated as if they were responsible for criminal acts, rather than being recognized as victims and as persons entitled to special protection. This situation limits their access to adequate protection measures and to comprehensive reparations, while revealing profound gaps in national child protection systems.



In the case of girls, adolescent girls and young women, the recruitment, use, and exploitation by criminal groups is closely linked to sexual and gender-based violence, as well as to sexual exploitation.

Extortion has a devastating impact on the livelihoods and safety of families. In Mexico, criminal groups seek to control local economies, taking over key productive sectors such as avocado and lime cultivation. In Ecuador, some families face simultaneous extortion demands from different criminal groups. This recurring practice not only undermines local economies, but also triggers multiple displacements, affecting both local communities and refugees and migrants who are already in vulnerable situations.



In Honduras and Ecuador, high levels of intimidation were reported among the monitored population, with rates of 50 % and 46 % respectively. In Ecuador, this threat affects Afro-descendant men between the ages of 18 and 35 in a particularly severe way, with seven out of 10 reporting having been victims of intimidation.

The phenomenon of multiple displacement is particularly concerning. In Ecuador, three out of 10 displaced families experienced a second displacement, while in Guatemala and Honduras the figure was two out of 10. For 28 % of the displaced population, relocating to other areas within the country does not guarantee effective access to rights or protection. In most cases, these secondary movements are driven by ongoing insecurity linked to widespread violence and the presence of criminal groups.



Displacement within these countries does not guarantee safety. The perception of risk persists: 88 % of displaced persons believe they could face some form of risk in their new environment. In addition, many families are stigmatized for coming from areas controlled by criminal groups, which limits their access to basic services, generates discrimination and perpetuates cycles of exclusion and violence.

Return to areas of origin is not a viable option for most displaced households. 95 % report that they would face risks if they returned, and seven out of 10 fear for their lives. Only 2% are considering returning, while 12 % do not know what decision to make, and 11 % are considering seeking protection in another country.

State responses to internal displacement in the countries analyzed are insufficient and uneven. Honduras is the only country with a national law specifically addressing internal displacement; however, the law lacks implementation of regulations and a budget, which limits its application. Guatemala shows early progress toward adopting a law, while Mexico does not have a national legal framework that addresses this issue in a comprehensive manner. In Ecuador, the Organic Law on Human Mobility does not regulate internal forced displacement in a specific and comprehensive way, leaving a legal gap that prevents an effective state response to the current violence crisis.



## About ProLAC

ProLAC is a regional information management initiative, created by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), with support from the European Union. In collaboration with national and international humanitarian organizations, ProLAC offers a harmonized protection monitoring system in Latin America and the Caribbean. This system provides solid evidence to strengthen protection and humanitarian responses, promoting more effective and efficient interventions at the regional, national, and local levels. To learn more about the ProLAC Initiative or to view our interactive dashboard, please visit: [prolac.live](https://prolac.live).

## 2. Methodology of the Analysis

This report analyzes internal displacement and other situations of violence in the context of organized criminal groups or organized criminality in Latin America. The analysis is based on the results collected through the ProLAC harmonized protection monitoring system, using the Protection Analytical Framework (PAF)<sup>1</sup> of the Global Protection Cluster (GPC). The analysis focuses on four countries: Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Ecuador, and examines the factors driving forced displacement, its relationship with organized criminal groups, as well as the protection threats linked to other situations of violence that emerge in the context of internal displacement.

Haiti and Colombia were not included in this report due to reasons related to methodology and approach. In the case of Haiti, the ProLAC Initiative does not currently carry out protection monitoring in the country. In Colombia, although the displacement situation is significant, the country has a relatively robust legal framework for assisting the victims, which sets it apart from the other contexts analyzed. In addition, priority was given to countries with lower regional and international visibility, where the impacts of criminal violence and displacement tend to be less documented and recognized.

### Definitions

The analysis of internal displacement in this report is grounded in the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which define **internally displaced persons** as individuals or groups of persons who have been forced or obligated to flee or leave their home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of — or in order to avoid the effects of — armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, human rights violations, or natural or human-made disasters, without crossing an internationally recognized state border.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Guiding Principles identify armed conflict and natural disasters as causes of displacement, this analysis focuses exclusively on internal displacement linked to organized crime. For this purpose, the definition of **organized criminal groups (OCGs)** is adopted as a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Global Protection Cluster. *Protection Analytical Framework*. Available: <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/field-support/Protection-Analytical-Framework>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (1998). Available: <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2004). *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and The Protocols Thereto*. Available: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>

Within ProLAC's protection monitoring framework, the analysis was carried out by analyzing protection threats perpetrated by "criminal groups", the term used in the household survey and equivalent to organized criminal groups. In countries such as Honduras and Guatemala, key informants referred to "*maras*" and gangs when mentioning organized criminal groups.

The report also uses the category of "other situations of violence"<sup>4</sup> to describe the contexts observed in the four countries analyzed. According to the definition of the International Committee of the Red Cross, this category covers contexts in which violence is perpetrated collectively but remains below the threshold of armed conflict. These situations are characterized by violence carried out by one or several groups composed of a significant number of people. These situations include acts of violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups whose violent actions create humanitarian consequences, as seen in the four countries analyzed.

## Scope of the Report

The data used for this report's analysis was collected between **July 1 and October 31, 2025**. The following organizations participated in data collection: Cáritas Ecuador through the EuroPana consortium; International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Mexico and Guatemala; the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Mexico; the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and Ecuador; Misión Scalabriniana in Ecuador; and Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción (DHIA) in Mexico. Data collection was conducted in four countries, in diverse areas, including Ecuador (Azuay, Carchi, El Oro, Esmeraldas, Guayas, Manabí, Pichincha and Sucumbíos), Honduras (Cortés and Francisco Morazán), Guatemala (Guatemala City, Huehuetenango and San Marcos) and Mexico (Chiapas, Chihuahua, Mexico City and Veracruz).

The quantitative information used in this report comes from the ProLAC household survey, conducted in the areas mentioned above. In total, 835 households were surveyed, representing 2,642 persons identified as internally displaced persons or persons affected by other situations of

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<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (2014). The International Committee of the Red Cross' Role in Situations of Violence Below the Threshold of Armed Conflict. Available:

<https://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2015/CP34563EPRESENTATION.pdf>

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-review-of-the-red-cross/article/abs/international-committee-of-the-red-crosss-icrcs-role-in-situations-of-violence-below-the-threshold-of-armed-conflict/64183418A12D456A04D7BB59529547D5>

violence (OSV)<sup>5</sup>, including those who, in the Ecuadorian context, are recognized as affected by an “internal conflict”.<sup>6</sup>

The qualitative information includes 47 interviews with key informants and nine focus group discussions carried out by the teams in each country and by the ProLAC regional team. To complement and validate the trends observed in the primary sources, the analysis also reviewed the legal frameworks related to internal displacement, as well as secondary sources from the four countries analyzed. These include academic reports, and documents from international cooperation and civil society, as well as media articles.



Illustration 1: Countries where data for the report were collected

<sup>5</sup> Persons/communities affected by an internal conflict or generalized violence, but who do not displace either within or outside their place of origin or habitual residence.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the categorization of “internal conflict” reflects a unilateral declaration made by the President of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, in January 2024. Therefore, the use of the term “internal conflict” in this report reflects the way in which some interviewees self-identify or are classified in relation to President Noboa’s declaration and the current security context, without implying any legal or technical validation of the concept. See, for example: BBC News Mundo. (10 January 2024). *Ecuador: What does it mean for President Noboa to declare an “internal armed conflict” against criminal gangs?* BBC, available: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c3gy2zz03dpo>; Human Rights Watch. (22 May 2024). *Letter to President Noboa on “internal armed conflict” and human rights violations in Ecuador* Available: <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2024/05/22/carta-al-presidente-noboa-sobre-conflicto-armado-interno-y-violaciones-de-derechos>; El País. (9 January 2024). *Daniel Noboa declares an internal armed conflict in Ecuador after an armed commando stormed a television station live on air.* Available: <https://elpais.com/america/2024-01-09/daniel-noboa-declara-un-conflicto-armado-interno-en-ecuador-tras-la-irrupcion-en-directo-de-un-comando-armado-en-un-canal-de-television.html>

Table 1: Data collected during the reporting period (July to October 2025)

Countries	Quantitative Information		Qualitative Information	
	Surveyed Households	Surveyed Persons	Focus Groups	Interviews with Key Informants
Ecuador	508	1817	7	22
Guatemala	119	397	0	3
Honduras	139	285	1	11
Mexico	69	143	1	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>821</b>	<b>2584</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>47</b>

To view the interactive dashboard with the quantitative results from this period and other data from the ProLAC Initiative, visit the website: <https://prolac.live/>

## Limitations

The analysis presented in this report faces several methodological limitations. First, the sample used is based on convenience, meaning it derives from the persons identified through the protection program activities implemented by ProLAC partners. For this reason, the results are not necessarily statistically representative. In addition, the territorial presence of ProLAC partners varies across the countries and areas where information is collected, which affects the coverage and depth of the data. For example, in Guatemala, budget constraints among partners limited the collection of a significant amount of quantitative and qualitative information. Finally, although the analysis seeks to explore the causes and effects of protection risks, the available information does not allow for the establishment of causal relationships or the identification of variables. The primary objective of the analysis is to identify plausible explanations that can guide the targeting of public policies and protection and humanitarian assistance programs directed at internally displaced persons and those living in contexts of generalized violence.

### 3. Regional Overview of Forced Displacement and Criminal Violence

According to the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Paula Gaviria Betancur, organized criminal activity has become one of the fastest-growing drivers of internal displacement worldwide. In 2024, at least 1.2 million new displacements were recorded, more than double the figure from the previous year.<sup>7</sup> In Latin America, 9.7 million persons were internally displaced by the end of 2024, representing approximately 12% of the global total. Most of these persons, 9.5 million, were displaced because of conflict and violence.<sup>8</sup>

In the region, these internal displacements have become increasingly linked to actions of organized criminal groups (OCGs). Although this trend has long been present in Central America—particularly in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala—, in recent years it has expanded to other areas, including Ecuador, where similar dynamics are now observed.<sup>9</sup> According to data from the *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, in 2024 more than 80,000 persons in Ecuador reported having been displaced to avoid armed violence and insecurity.<sup>10</sup>

In Guatemala, the internal armed conflict that lasted from 1966 to 1996, led to the displacement of thousands of families. However, over the past decade, internal displacement has become increasingly linked to drug trafficking activities and to criminal groups, such as *maras* and gangs in the country.<sup>11</sup> In Mexico, levels of internal displacement are also high: in 2023, estimates of persons forcibly displaced by violence and crime ranged from 400,000 to more than 1,000,000.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not persons are displaced as a result of the illicit activities and violence perpetrated by OCGs, the population in Latin America is increasingly exposed to significant risks arising from their actions. The *Global Study on Homicide* revealed that the Americas face the highest per-capita risk of criminal violence worldwide. Of the 700,000 global deaths attributed to organized crime between 2015 and 2021, most occurred in this region. Honduras and Mexico recorded the highest

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<sup>7</sup> OHCHR (2025). Internal Displacement in the Context of Organized Criminal Activity. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5946-internal-displacement-context-organized-criminal-activity>

<sup>8</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2025). Global Report on Internal Displacement. Available: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/>

<sup>9</sup> Researching Internal Displacement (2025). Criminal Groups and Internal Displacement: What lessons can we learn from Central America ten years later? Available: [https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short\\_pieces/grupos-criminales-y-desplazamiento-interno-que-lecciones-podemos-aprender-de-centroamerica-diez-anos-despues/](https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short_pieces/grupos-criminales-y-desplazamiento-interno-que-lecciones-podemos-aprender-de-centroamerica-diez-anos-despues/)

<sup>10</sup> Researching Internal Displacement (2025). As violence escalates, Ecuadorians flee internally: Government stance on displacement pending. Available: [https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short\\_pieces/mientras-crece-la-violencia-los-ecuatorianos-escapan-internamente-pendiente-postura-del-gobierno-sobre-el-desplazamiento/](https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short_pieces/mientras-crece-la-violencia-los-ecuatorianos-escapan-internamente-pendiente-postura-del-gobierno-sobre-el-desplazamiento/)

<sup>11</sup> ECAP (2022). Diagnóstico sobre desplazamiento forzado. Disponible en: <https://ecapguatemala.org.gt/diagnostico-sobre-desplazamiento-forzado/>

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR (2024). Internally Displaced People Factsheet, Mexico. Available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/unhcr-mexico-internally-displaced-people-idps-fact-sheet-august-2024>

homicide rates in the region, with 38.3 and 28.2 victims per 100,000 habitants, respectively.<sup>13</sup> In Ecuador, during the first half of 2025, 4,619 intentional homicides were recorded, representing a 47% increase compared with the same period in 2024. This figure constitutes the highest number of homicides recorded in a six-month period in the country's recent history.<sup>14</sup>

According to the most recent *Organized Crime Index*, Central America ranks first globally in the prevalence of extortion and the collection of "protection" payments. Environmental crimes are also widespread across the continent, placing South America second worldwide in offences related to non-renewable resources, such as illegal gold mining.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these observed patterns, systematic and comparable data on internal displacement specifically attributable to the activities of the OCGs remain limited. Of the four countries analyzed, only Honduras officially recognizes internal displacement and has a national legal framework, although it has not yet been implemented. In Mexico, in the absence of federal legislation, some states have developed regulations that partially address this phenomenon. Ecuador, for its part, shows progress towards the development of public policies aimed at regulating internal displacement. However, in all cases there continues to be limited availability of solid evidence on the scale of displacement—in terms of the number of persons affected and the specific causes—which contributes to making it invisible and hinders an understanding of the impacts associated with criminal violence.

Finally, in the countries analyzed, most responses to the needs of internally displaced persons have been led by civil society organizations, NGOs and United Nations agencies, while the participation of government authorities has been limited.<sup>16</sup> However, at the beginning of 2025, the United States government announced the termination of USAID funding and of humanitarian financing, a decision that affected not only the entire region, but the entire world. In Latin America, this led to a significant reduction in the resources available to international and local organizations in the region.<sup>17</sup> These cuts have already had concrete effects: protection programs have been reduced, field monitoring capacity has diminished, and assistance mechanisms have been suspended or reconfigured. As a result, the already limited opportunities to access existing durable solutions have become further restricted.

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<sup>13</sup> UNODC (2023). Global Study on Homicide. Disponible: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/Global\\_study\\_on\\_homicide\\_2023\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/Global_study_on_homicide_2023_web.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime (OECO). Semiannual Bulletin of Intentional Homicides in Ecuador: January-June 2025. Available: <https://oeco.padf.org/boletin-semesteral-de-homicidios-intencionales-en-ecuador-semester-2025/#:~:text=Incremento%20de%20homicidios%20en%20el,la%20historia%20reciente%20de%20Ecuador.>

<sup>15</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023). Global Organized Crime Index. Available: <https://ocindex.net/report/2023/04-continental-overview.html>

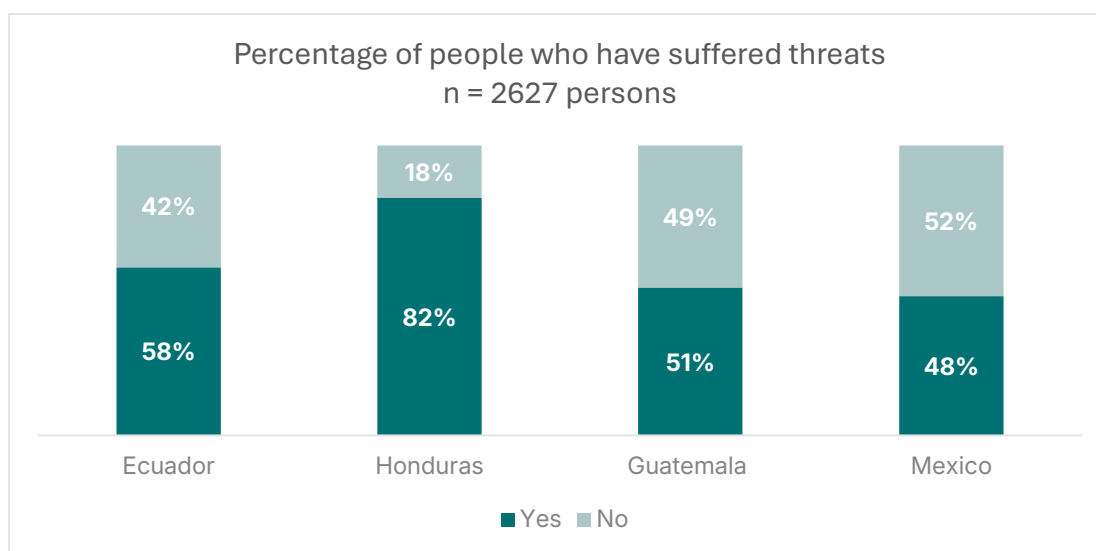
<sup>16</sup> Researching Internal Displacement (2025). Criminal groups and internal displacement: What lessons can we learn from Central America ten years on? Available: [https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short\\_pieces/criminal-groups-and-internal-displacement-what-lessons-can-we-learn-from-central-america-ten-years-on/](https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short_pieces/criminal-groups-and-internal-displacement-what-lessons-can-we-learn-from-central-america-ten-years-on/)

<sup>17</sup> WOLA (2025). Trump's Pause of U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America: An "America Last" Policy. Available: <https://www.wola.org/analysis/trumps-pause-of-u-s-foreign-assistance-to-latin-america-an-america-last-policy/>

## 4. Protection Threats and Risks in Contexts of Organized Crime

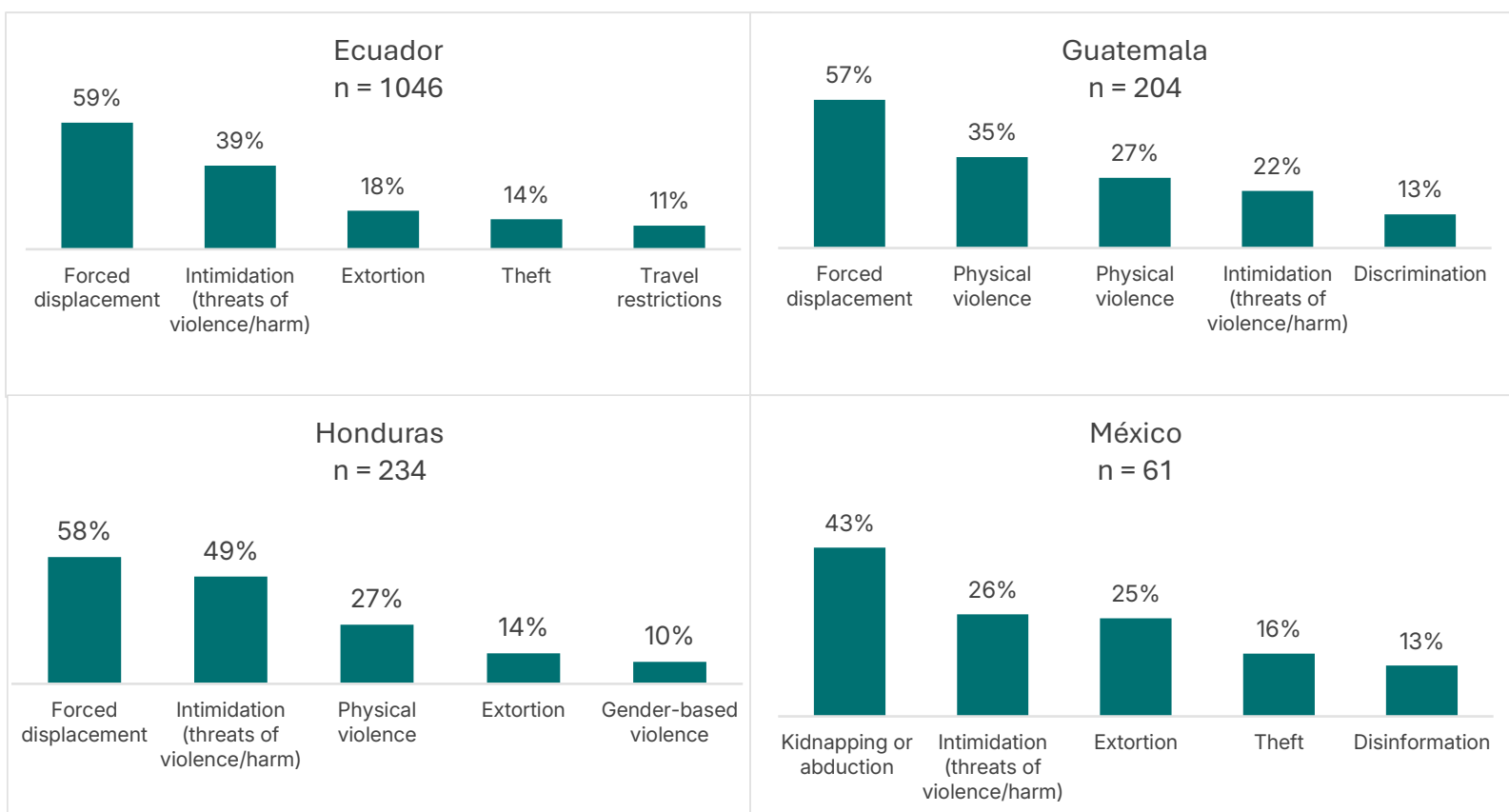
Persons and communities face multiple protection threats and risks that affect their safety, wellbeing, and access to essential rights and services. **59 % of monitored households reported having experienced one or more protection threats**, although this proportion varies across the countries analyzed, as shown in Graph 1. Dynamics of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation expose the population to forced internal displacement, while those who remain in their communities continue to face various human rights violations.

Graph 1: Internally displaced persons and persons in other situations of violence who have experienced protection threats



Among the most frequent protection threats are internal displacement, intimidation and extortion. Of the total households that reported having experienced a threat, 38 % stated that they suffered acts of intimidation, including threats to forced recruitment, extortion and kidnapping. Likewise, **56 % of households reported having been displaced, and of these, 70 % attributed their displacement to the actions of OCGs.** These data show that **forced internal displacement constitutes one of the main consequences of the dynamics of violence within the monitored territories**, and that OCGs are the primary sources of protection threats for the civilian population.

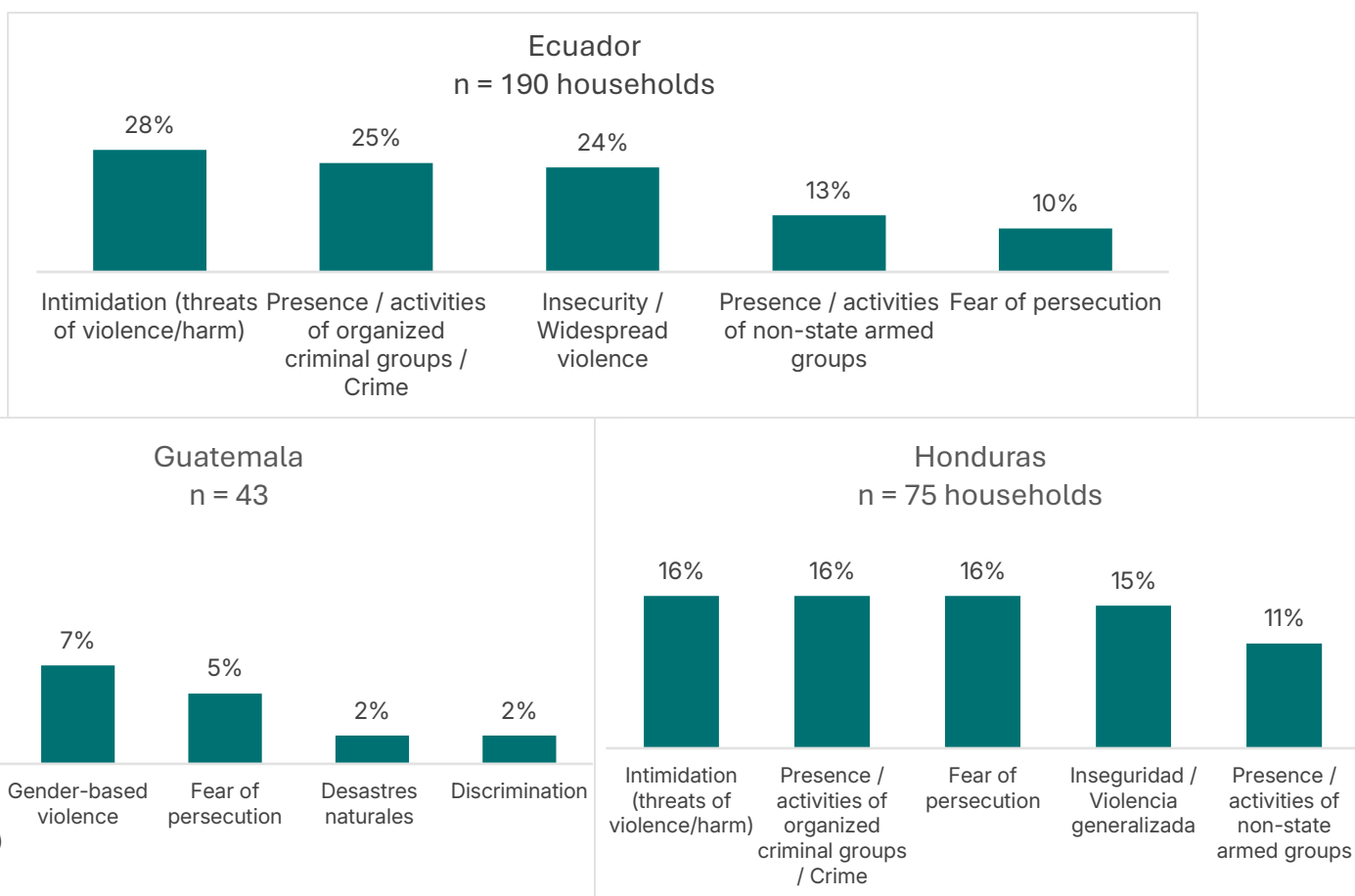
Graph 2: Types of protection threats experienced by internally displaced persons and persons in other situations of violence, by country



## 4.1. Protection Risk: Forced Internal Displacement

When analyzing the reasons behind the forced internal displacement reported by 56 % of surveyed households, intimidation, the presence and activities of organized criminal groups, insecurity and generalized violence are the predominant factors in Ecuador and Honduras.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Guatemala, in addition to these factors, gender-based violence also stands out as a reason for displacement.

Graph 3: Main reasons for internal displacement according to country of analysis<sup>19</sup>



<sup>18</sup> Non-state armed groups (NSAGs): Non-state armed groups are those that, with different structures and denominations, participate directly in an armed conflict using force in military actions, with the intention of causing harm to the enemy. These armed groups and their members are obligated to respect and apply the basic rules of International Humanitarian Law. Spanish Red Cross. International Humanitarian Law Study Center. Available: <https://www2.cruzroja.es/web/centro-de-estudios-de-derecho-internacional-humanitario/sabias-que/el-dih-deben-aplicarlo-tambien-los-grupos-armados-no-estatales>

<sup>19</sup> The graph for Mexico is not found due to the low availability of information on internally displaced persons in that country.

The analysis of qualitative information made it possible to examine the causes of internal displacement in greater depth, revealing specific patterns of violence and coercion in the different locations where data were collected. In this regard, the main protection threats identified were:

- 1) Forced eviction
- 2) Recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents by organized criminal groups
- 3) Forced recruitment of adults (over 18 years of age)
- 4) Extortion

### 4.1.1. Forced eviction

*“There is something that goes beyond what we normally consider organized crime activities. In particular, the involvement of organized crime in the extraction of natural resources.” – Interview with Key Informant, Regional.*

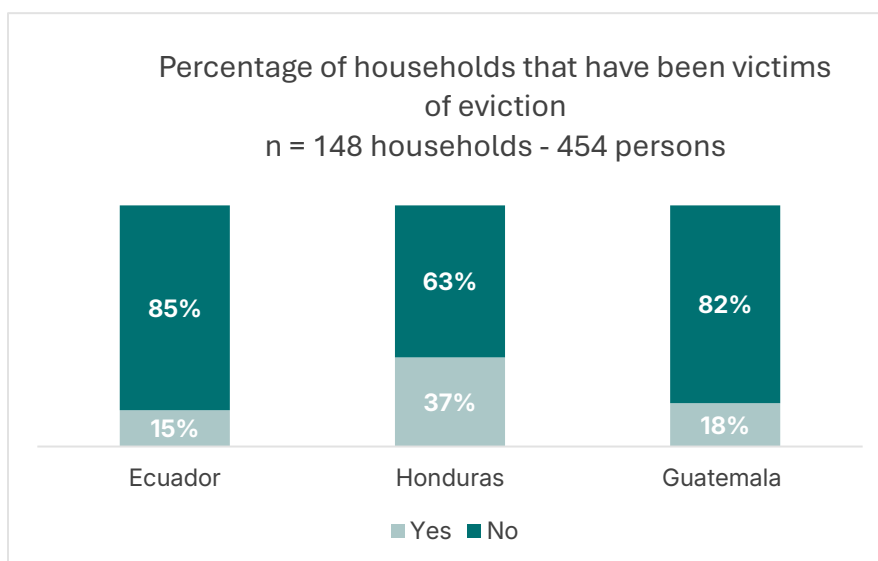
Forced eviction<sup>20</sup> is a threat closely linked to displacement. Most persons who reported having been victims of this practice also indicated that they had experienced internal displacement. According to data from the household survey, **18 % of the monitored population had been affected by forced eviction, and in half of these cases, criminal groups were identified as the main perpetrators.** This threat is directly related to economic interests, including the exploitation of natural resources, the execution of megaprojects, and the development of illicit activities. Although organized crime was most frequently identified as responsible for this threat, several key informants interviewed pointed to possible links between criminal groups, private companies and government entities.

Forced eviction is particularly prominent in Honduras, where 37 % of households reported having been evicted (see Graph 4). 71 % of households identified OCGs as the main perpetrators.

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<sup>20</sup> “Forced evictions consists of obligating persons, families or communities to leave their homes or land they occupy, whether permanently or temporarily, without offering them appropriate legal or other forms of protection, nor allowing them to access such protection. Protection monitoring may include situations involving the actions of armed and paramilitary groups, or where discriminatory laws and practices exist.” Global Protection Cluster (2023). Explanatory note on protection risks. Available: <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1006/policy-and-guidance/standard-operating-procedures/protection-risk-theft-extortion>

Graph 4: Households that experienced forced eviction



The analysis allowed for the identification of at least three modalities through which different actors operate to dispossess communities of their land and property. The first modality involves private companies, particularly those in the agro-industrial sector – such as sugarcane production, African palm, and mining – that turn to OCGs to intimidate communities and force their displacement in order to gain control over areas or territories of interest. Cases have also been documented in which companies interested in the extraction of natural resources – such as water reserves, lagoons used for shrimp and fish farming, or sugarcane production - or in implementing megaprojects have been reported to hire hitmen to facilitate the expulsion of populations from their property.<sup>21</sup>

*“Once [persons] are displaced, the mining companies themselves enter and begin extracting or exploiting all these resources, with the backing or collusion of the criminal groups that enabled it.”*  
- Interview with Key Informant, Mexico.

Second, direct interest was identified among criminal groups in specific areas designated for marijuana cultivation and the installation of clandestine laboratories to produce synthetic drugs. These groups subject communities to various forms of intimidation, seeking their cooperation. When this is not achieved, they resort to destroying land and property, forcing people to abandon their territories.<sup>22</sup> In some cases, victims are coerced into signing property deeds, allowing perpetrators to obtain formal ownership of the land and assets.

<sup>21</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

<sup>22</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Third, criminal groups show interest in strategic territories, such as those near ports, mountains and borders, that facilitate micro-trafficking and drug trafficking activities. Likewise, territorial expansion and control respond to the need to diversify and amplify their sources of income, leading them to settle in areas where local economic activities generate significant profits. An example of this is the production of timber, avocados and limes in Mexico, where a high number of families have been evicted or face the risk of being evicted from their lands. Once families are forced to leave, criminal groups take control to capture the economic gains from commercializing these products.<sup>23</sup> Families who are evicted from their land often experience other protection threats, as shown in Graph 5.

Forced eviction has profound impacts on rural communities and Indigenous Peoples, due to their close connection to the land, which extends far beyond a means of livelihood. In the case of Indigenous Peoples, key informants highlighted the particularly severe effects on social disintegration and the loss of connection with the territory as an irreparable harm.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the difficulties these communities face in reclaiming or having their land restored, the criminalization of their leaders<sup>25</sup> and the persistent stigmatization and discrimination due to their ethnic identity all contribute to perpetuating impunity.

*“It is inconceivable that Indigenous People should have land. Indigenous People are meant to be servants. The root of this is discrimination, racism. We are not recognized as legal persons. We are not subjects of law and therefore, we are not political subjects. The stigma is: ‘Ah, you’re a criminal!’”*  
– Interview with Key Informant, Guatemala.

Human rights defenders, environmental and land defenders; community leaders and traditional authorities who oppose the implementation of megaprojects in their territories are also frequently exposed to death threats, harassment, and other forms of violence. In many cases, these persons are forced to move, but they do so in areas near their communities of origin to continue fighting in defense of their territories.<sup>26</sup>

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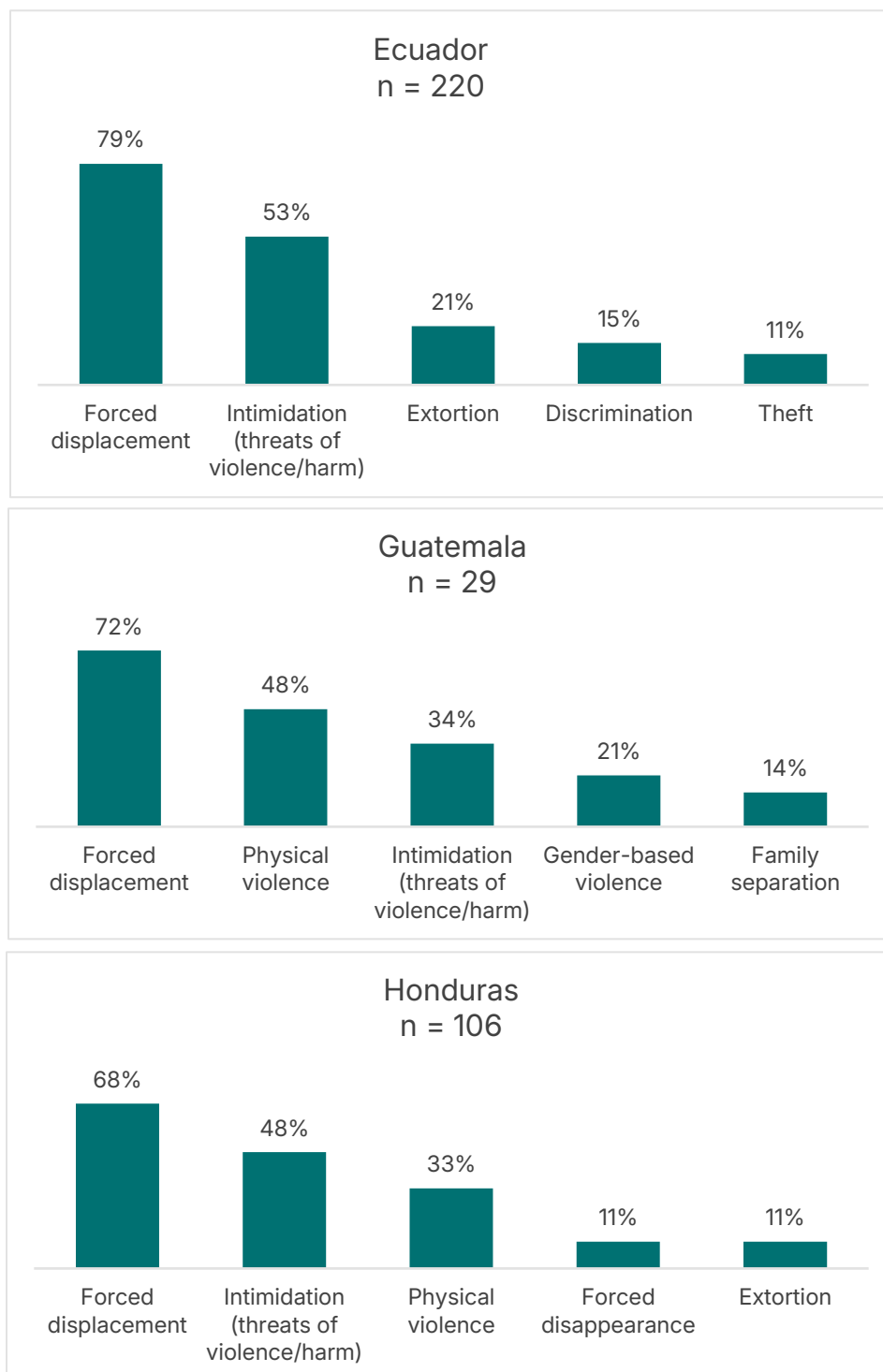
<sup>23</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Honduras and Mexico.

<sup>24</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Guatemala.

<sup>25</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Guatemala.

<sup>26</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Graph 5: Type of threats experienced by persons who have been victims of forced eviction, by country analyzed



#### 4.1.2. Recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents by organized criminal groups<sup>27</sup>

*"What we used to see a lot, or at least the cases that came from there, were family units experiencing issues with the children because criminal groups wanted to capture children and adolescents and recruit them."  
– Interview with Key Informant, Guatemala*

The recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents by OCGs is one of the main threats identified in the areas where protection monitoring is implemented. According to key informants in the four countries analyzed, children and adolescents with the highest level of exposure to being linked or coerced by these groups are between 13 and 17 years of age. Most are children and adolescents living in areas of severe economic precariousness, with a strong presence and control exercised by criminal groups. Recruitment, use, and exploitation occur for different purposes, determined by factors such as age, gender and the specific context of each location.

Key informants also noted that some of the activities for which adolescent men are often forced or coerced include transporting weapons or drugs, delivering leaflets containing extortion threats, guarding points of drug-sale, and even being trained as hitmen.

*"In most of the groups detained for kidnapping offences there is one or two minors, including among those who participate as hitmen, the youngest I have seen was 14 years old." - Interview with Key Informant, Mexico*

Additionally, qualitative information shows that the threat of **recruitment is closely linked to sexual exploitation, particularly in the case of girls and adolescent women, who are assigned roles and tasks of a sexual nature**. Unlike boys and adolescent men, they are frequently used as means to attract their peers. In Ecuador, for example, one of the strategies identified for this purpose involves "parties": gatherings financed by criminal groups where a few previously recruited adolescent women invite female classmates and friends from their school environment. These settings facilitate recruitment for sexual purposes by exposing the girls directly to members of criminal groups.<sup>28</sup>

This form of recruitment constitutes a type of internal trafficking with the purpose of sexual exploitation and is part of broader strategies of recruitment and exploitation of adolescents by

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<sup>27</sup> "Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities." The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007). For more information: [https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/publications/Paris\\_Principles\\_SP.pdf](https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/publications/Paris_Principles_SP.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant. Ecuador, Manta.

criminal groups. Recruitment takes place in schools, social and community settings, where adolescents face intimidation, threats of kidnapping, violence, reprisals against their families, and even killings when they refuse to join these groups, according to reports from a variety of key informants.

It is worth noting that communities - including teachers and administrators - have limited possibilities to report these cases. This is due to several reasons: on the one hand, distrust of state authorities, particularly police forces, stemming from the perception of possible links or collusion with criminal groups, as well as fear of reprisals. On the other hand, lack of awareness around what constitutes the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents influences reporting, as reflected in the language used by the communities, who often downplay or soften the phenomenon by using terms such as "invitation" instead of recognizing it as a form of forced coercion.

*"School-aged youth, such as the boy who was invited [i.e., subjected to an attempted recruitment] to work in mining, although not forcibly, but this still generates fear of being coerced."*

*– Interview with Key Informant, Ecuador.*

Communities and authorities often attribute a degree of responsibility to children and adolescents for being recruited, rather than recognizing them as victims of a serious violation of their rights. This is largely related to the limitations in how the phenomenon of recruitment, use and exploitation of children and adolescents is addressed in the monitored countries.

Although legal frameworks exist in all four countries that could be applied to recruitment, there are persisting regulatory and implementation gaps that hinder an effective response focused on protecting the rights of children and adolescents affected by this threat.

In the case of Mexico, legal and regulatory instruments exist that could be applied to cases of recruitment. However, the recruitment, use, and exploitation of minors is not classified as a crime, which hinders the prosecution of perpetrators. This lack of regulations contributes to the criminalization of adolescents, who are frequently treated as perpetrators of crimes, rather than receiving protection and reparations as victims.

In Ecuador, although the current legal framework prohibits the recruitment and use of children and adolescents, significant challenges remain in recognizing recruited adolescents as victims. A worrying example occurred in June of this year, when members of the National Democratic Action

party presented a legislative proposal that would allow adolescents to be tried as adults, in violation of both the Ecuadorian Constitution and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>29</sup>

In Honduras, the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents is recognized as a victimizing act under the Law on Internal Forced Displacement. However, the regulations necessary for its implementation have not yet been finalized, and therefore, clear mechanisms to guarantee its effective application are lacking.

In Guatemala, the recruitment of children and adolescents, particularly those between the ages of eight and 13 has prompted concern. According to reports from the Attorney General's Office of the country, between January 1 and March 31, there were 45 alerts related to the recruitment of children and adolescents by criminal groups.<sup>30</sup> In response to this growing phenomenon, the National Congress approved the Decree Against Gangs in October 2025,<sup>31</sup> which includes reforms to the Law Against Organized Crime and the Penal Code, thereby classifying and penalizing the recruitment of children and adolescents as a crime.<sup>32</sup>

The recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents has serious consequences at both the individual and family levels. This threat is one of the factors that drives families to flee their places of origin in search of protection. Furthermore, it causes family separation: of the total displaced households, 13 % reported that not all members fled together.

Similarly, families affected by armed conflict or other situations of violence face family separation as they try to safeguard the integrity of their children. In many cases, they choose to send them to other cities under the care of relatives to prevent their recruitment by criminal groups. The mechanisms adopted to address this threat include children and adolescents shifting to online education<sup>33</sup> or dropping out of school. Of the total children and adolescents displaced, 24 % of school-aged children do not attend school.

Although these measures aim to reduce the risk of recruitment, they generate profound social and psychosocial impacts, by isolating children and adolescents and limiting their opportunities to

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<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch (2025). Ecuador: Public Integrity Law Endangers Children. Reforms Fail to Protect Victims of Recruitment, Violate International Standards. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/27/ecuador-public-integrity-law-endangers-children>

<sup>30</sup> Office of the Attorney General. Recruitment by criminal groups affects the life plans of children and adolescents. Available: <https://pgn.gob.gt/2025/06/reclutamiento-por-grupos-delictivos-afecta-el-proyecto-de-vida-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes/>

<sup>31</sup> Decree 11-25. Law for the frontal fight against criminal groups or transnational criminal and terrorist organizations known as Maras or Gangs. (2025). Congress of the Republic of Guatemala. Available: [https://www.congreso.gob.gt/noticias\\_congreso/14666/2025/4#:~:text=El%20Decreto%2011%2D2025%20contempla,terroristas%20denominadas%20maras%20o%20pandillas.](https://www.congreso.gob.gt/noticias_congreso/14666/2025/4#:~:text=El%20Decreto%2011%2D2025%20contempla,terroristas%20denominadas%20maras%20o%20pandillas.)

<sup>32</sup> Maldonado, J and Peña, Y (2025). Decree approved against maras and gangs with reforms to the Law Against Organized Crime and the Penal Code. En la Hora. Available: <https://lahora.gt/nacionales/jmaldonado/2025/10/21/aprueban-decreto-contra-maras-y-pandillas-con-reformas-a-la-ley-contra-la-delincuencia-organizada-y-el-codigo-penal/>

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Key Informant (2025), Manta, Ecuador.

participate in safe spaces. This situation is exacerbated in contexts where the criminalization of adolescents is prevalent and access to protection services is limited.

### 4.1.3. Forced recruitment (over 18 years of age)

Forced recruitment<sup>34</sup> is a threat not only to children and adolescents, but also to young adults, especially men between the ages of 18 and 23. According to key informants interviewed in the four countries, intimidation is closely linked to forced recruitment. Many young adults are subjected to intimidation and coercion into engaging in illicit activities, such as the transportation and/or sale of drugs, particularly in mining areas and territories that are strategic for drug micro-trafficking and trafficking.

According to data obtained from the household survey, **45 % of men between the ages of 18 and 35 reached by the monitoring, reported having been victims of intimidation by criminal groups.** The magnitude of this threat varies among the countries analyzed: in Ecuador and Honduras, five out of 10 men in this age group reported having been victims of intimidation; in Mexico, the proportion reaches three out of 10, and in Guatemala, two out of 10.

*“They are told that if they don't join, they will be killed, and that has happened. They are easy targets for criminal groups because they are seen as potential recruits and are relentlessly pressured.”*  
– Interview with Key Informant, Ecuador.

In countries like Ecuador, where monitoring reached the Afro-descendant population, intimidation reaches **69% among Afro-descendant men ages 18 to 35.** This finding demonstrates the high exposure to violence associated with factors of age, gender and ethnicity.

As in the case of the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents, the roles assigned to young persons and adults within the criminal structure vary according to gender. Although many women are used in tasks such as drug distribution, key informants interviewed agree on the high level of risk to which they are exposed when their involvement with criminal groups occurs through their partners – active members of these organizations – or when women are handed over to leaders of these structures.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “This protection risk refers to all situations in which a person is compelled to serve in the forces of a hostile power, by means of coercion, threats or other means. The forced recruitment is prohibited by the Hague regulations, the third and fourth Geneva Convention, repeated in the list of war crimes in the Statute of the International Criminal Court and according to Rule 95 of the ICRC’s Customary International Humanitarian Law Study is considered a specific type of forced labour that is prohibited in international armed conflicts.” Global Protection Cluster (2023). Explanatory note on protection risks. Available: <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/1001/policy-and-guidance/tool-kit/protection-risk-forced-recruitment-and>

<sup>35</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

*“There are women, for example, whose partners have joined maras and gangs, and somehow get her involved. So, there comes a time when she must decide to leave, right? Before they are killed, they must displace internally.” -Interview with Key Informant, Honduras.*

Likewise, communities subjected to this extreme control by criminal groups face strong pressure to "collaborate," whether by lending their homes to store weapons, for drug cultivation, acting as informants, or other activities. Transport workers, taxi drivers, health staff, and legal professionals may be forced to provide services to members of criminal groups, placing their own integrity and that of their families at risk.<sup>36</sup> It is essential to highlight that the communities' forced participation in the activities of criminal groups is often a coping mechanism to avoid violent reprisals and internal displacement.

Recruitment has a profound impact on both individuals and communities, as it is often accompanied by stigma and discriminatory practices against those fleeing contexts of violence, usually in impoverished areas. These persons and communities are frequently criminalized and stigmatized by being unjustly labelled as criminals. Even those who are forced to displace internally to escape threats of recruitment and violence face new threats in host communities. In many cases, they are stigmatized for having fled areas classified as violent and associated with criminal groups.

One in 10 people reported experiencing discrimination. Of this total, three out of 10 belong to populations with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). In 56 % of the cases, the host community was identified as the main perpetrator. These patterns reflect how the consequences of forced recruitment transcend the individual sphere, erode the social and community fabric, and deepen structural forms of discrimination and racism that particularly affect certain ethnic and social groups.

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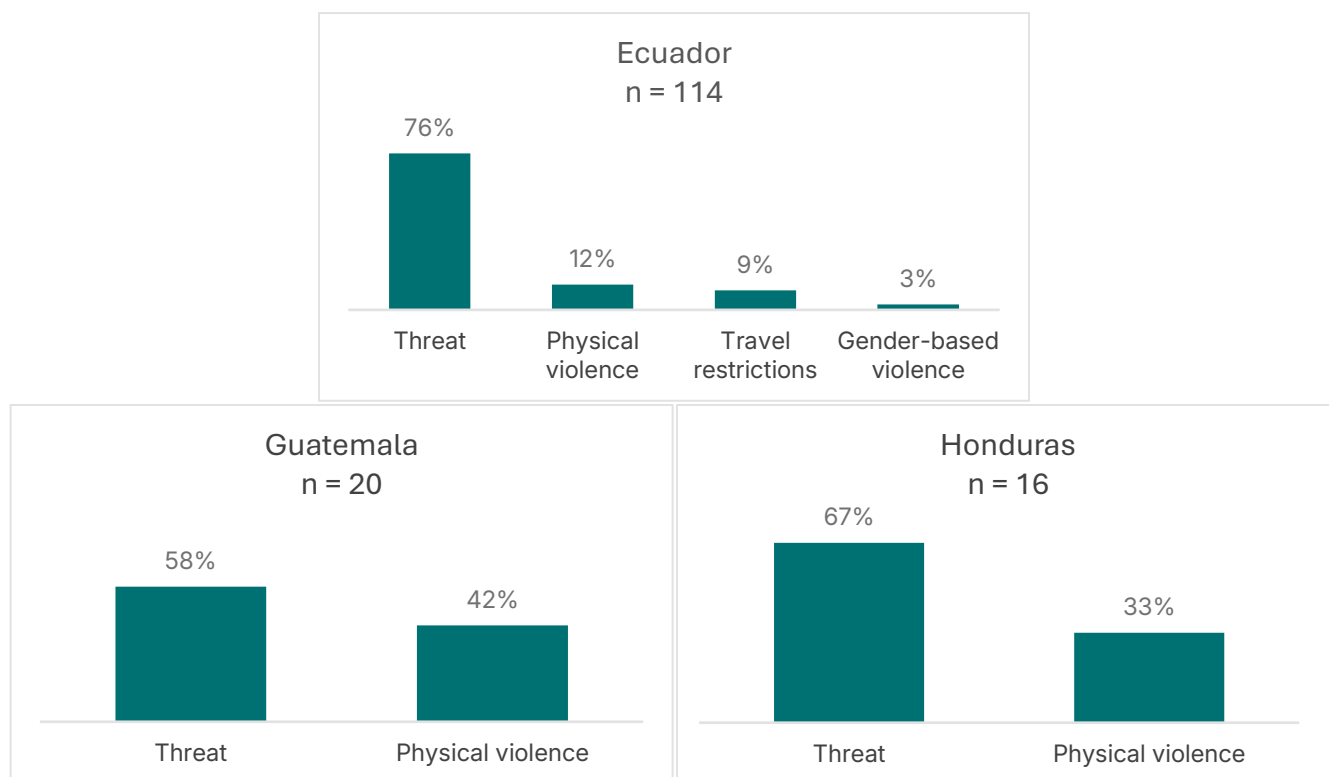
<sup>36</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Honduras and Mexico.

#### 4.1.4. Extortion

Known in the region by various names, “vacuna”, “cuota”, “cobro de piso”, “impuesto de guerra” or “la renta”, extortion represents one of the main protection risks in the four countries analyzed. According to the household survey, **25 % of the internally displaced population reported having been a victim of extortion by OCGs** during the past year.

This practice is often accompanied by other threats, including intimidation, threats of physical assault, death threats, and the kidnapping of family members, especially children. In Mexico and Ecuador, key informants highlighted the close relationship between kidnapping and extortion, noting that, in many cases, kidnapping is used as a coercive strategy to ensure compliance with the payments demanded by criminal groups.<sup>37</sup>

Graph 6: Protection threats that occur alongside extortion



<sup>37</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Although many persons are forced to endure these threats and make the payments demanded by OCGs, others are unable to meet the periodic quotas imposed, which triggers an escalation of violence against them or their relatives, forcing them to displace.<sup>38</sup>

*“Or they simply leave a note saying ‘you have so many hours to leave or you must give me this much every Friday’...And this happens in many communities here. There are places where people leave out of fear and abandon everything.”*  
– Interview with Key Informant, Honduras.

Qualitative data show that OCGs recruit and use children and adolescents from those same communities to participate in extortion activities. This threat appears in urban or peri-urban areas in Central America and Ecuador, as well as in several states in Mexico, mainly affecting entrepreneurs and owners of local businesses – both large and small. Among the sectors most frequently mentioned by key informants are transport workers, shop owners, food stalls, and restaurants. In Ecuador, some families become victims of simultaneous extortion by several criminal groups.<sup>39</sup>

Extortion not only affects the ability to work and keep a business operating but also restricts free movement in certain areas. In some cases, persons who are displaced to other communities or neighborhoods require the accompaniment of local residents to avoid the risk of being extorted or pursued, reflecting the territorial control exerted by criminal groups.<sup>40</sup>

In Guatemala and Honduras, the extortions identified are mainly perpetrated by criminal groups, such as *maras* and gangs, which control the neighborhoods.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Guatemala, so-called “imitators” were also mentioned: individuals who pose as members of these criminal structures to demand illegal payments.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in these two countries and in Mexico, various key informants indicated that extortion severely limits the families' ability to start their own businesses, affecting their capacity to generate income. This situation is exacerbated by the weak presence of the State in areas marked by economic precariousness, which increases the population's vulnerability and their exposure to criminal groups that control local economic activities.

*“If you have a restaurant, a shop, anything you have to sell, a business, you have to pay a fee to organized crime, and they set the time periods and amounts.”*  
– Interview with Key Informant, Mexico

Extortion affects nationals, as well as refugees and migrants in the countries analyzed. According to quantitative data, 82 % of internally displaced persons who reported having been victims of

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<sup>38</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Guatemala City, Guatemala.

<sup>39</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Manta, Ecuador.

<sup>40</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Machala, Ecuador.

<sup>41</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

<sup>42</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Guatemala City, Guatemala.

extortion by OCGs were nationals of the country where the incident occurred; 9 % were Venezuelan nationals, 8 % were Colombian nationals, and 1 % held dual nationality.

In all these cases, the impacts of extortion are both economic and psychosocial, as it entails the loss of businesses, livelihoods, and contact with their support networks. In an effort to avoid being located by OCGs, many persons choose to reduce contact with their social environment.

According to protection monitoring data, extortion is a recurring cause of multiple displacements. Despite efforts to avoid this threat, whether by displacing between cities or even between neighborhoods within the same locality, some victims continue to face extortion at their new location.<sup>43</sup>

According to the surveys, **23 % of households that experienced extortion reported having undergone more than one internal displacement.** Moreover, **63 % of internally displaced persons expressed fear of being extorted again in their current location**, showing a high level of exposure despite efforts made to find greater safety.

*“In my case, I had to close my butcher shop because they [OCGs] started charging me vacunas and, when I didn't pay, they threatened me. We feel that we left a violent place only to arrive in a more violent city, here [at this new location] we have already moved twice from one neighborhood to another due to the threats.”*

– Interview with Key Informant, Ecuador

Even though extortion is classified as a criminal offence in each of the countries analyzed, institutional capacities to prevent it and respond effectively remain limited, which hinders efforts to address this threat and prevent internal displacement. Lack of trust in the authorities, perceptions of collusion with criminal groups, together with fear of reprisals<sup>44</sup> and the ineffectiveness of security mechanisms—which address the offence in isolation, ignoring its link to criminal groups<sup>45</sup> - discourage reporting. As a result, many persons are unwilling to report and are forced to move in an attempt to protect themselves and their families.

## 5. Profiles and Effects of Forced Internal Displacement

Internal displacement constitutes a protection risk and is a direct consequence of the violence and control exercised by OCGs, affecting a variety of population groups. Among the persons displaced

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<sup>43</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Quito, Ecuador.

<sup>44</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

<sup>45</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Guatemala City, Guatemala.

by the activities of these groups, 39 % were children and adolescents, present in more than half of displaced households (59%). The above suggests that internal displacement involves mostly family movements rather than individual movements. Furthermore, a quarter of displaced households were single-parent households (28%), of which almost all (85%) were headed by women. 68 % of single-parent households reported intimidation, a proportion 18 percentage points higher than that of other households. Likewise, households headed by women reported a high risk of experiencing threats of violence or harm.

**In the case of Ecuador, 28 % of households that reported internal displacement included at least one refugee or migrant, mainly of Colombian or Venezuelan nationality.** In Guatemala, this proportion was 5 %, with Salvadoran and Venezuelan nationals within the displaced households. This composition poses additional barriers to accessing services and exercising rights.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, 31 % of the displaced persons surveyed were between 18 and 35 years of age. 53 % of this group identified as women, 47 % as men, and 6 % as persons with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and/or sexual characteristics (SOGIESC).

The data show **that men reported having experienced physical violence in a higher proportion than women** (19% versus 7%, respectively). In Honduras, this difference is even more pronounced: 26 % of men indicated having been victims of physical violence, compared to 11 % of women. Among the persons with diverse SOGIESC, more than half reported having suffered intimidation, mainly those who identified as men.

In Ecuador, 54 % of Afro-descendant persons —men and women between 18 and 59 years of age, of Ecuadorian and Colombian nationality—reported having suffered intimidation, a figure 10 percentage points higher than that reported among persons who identified as mestizo or without ethnic affiliation. This trend is also reflected in the qualitative findings. In Ecuador, for example, Afro-descendant persons of Ecuadorian<sup>47</sup> and Colombian nationality mentioned having been approached in an intimidating manner by criminal groups after being mistaken for members of rival gangs because of their skin color,<sup>48</sup> which shows how racial stereotypes can heighten the risk of aggression and internal displacement.

In addition to the consequences described in the previous sections, forced internal displacement generates multiple and often prolonged impacts. This situation is aggravated by the limited possibilities of accessing justice and protection in contexts marked by the presence and activities of OCGs, as well as by the lack of official and national recognition of internal displacement as a phenomenon in the countries analyzed. As a result, many internally displaced persons fleeing organized crime are forced to live in hiding to avoid being located. However, the possible links

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<sup>46</sup> ProLAC (2025). Regional Protection Monitoring Report. Available: <https://prolac.live/informes-de-proteccion/>

<sup>47</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Manta, Ecuador.

<sup>48</sup> ProLAC (2025). Focal Group Discussion, Manta, Ecuador.

between OCGs and some authorities, as well as their infiltration into territories and communities,<sup>49</sup> make the attempt to remain concealed a constant and high-risk challenge.

From a psychosocial perspective, the coping strategies adopted by internally displaced persons — such as changing phone numbers, deleting social media accounts and starting from scratch in a new area of the country — can lead to self-isolation and limit contact with their support networks. This tendency towards isolation is evident: only three out of 10 displaced households relied on their support networks, while many others showed a marked reluctance to leave their new homes or make any movements that were not strictly necessary. According to monitoring data, seven out of 10 households reported having hid, half restricted their daily movement, and slightly more than one third changed their daily habits. Likewise, one third of the displaced population stopped generating income or reported feeling discouraged about seeking employment in the host location.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, internally displaced persons who try to seek support from family members or friends located in other parts of the country are not always able to obtain it. In some cases, their own family members or close acquaintances are reluctant to provide help for fear of reprisals or being identified by the OCGs. Likewise, host communities often receive internally displaced persons with distrust and fear, as they are frequently perceived as being linked to OCGs or as a potential risk of attracting conflict or threats to those communities<sup>51</sup> (see Section 4.1.2 Forced Recruitment of Persons Over 18 Years Old).

*“Undoubtedly, in Honduras people relied on social capital, which is why they travelled across the country looking for friends and relatives who could host them. However, sometimes they were denied accommodation because people were so afraid to receive even their own relatives or friends in their homes, knowing they had been forced to flee from gang violence.”*  
– Interview with Key Informant regarding Mexico and Honduras.

In general terms, internally displaced persons mentioned facing multiple obstacles to access shelter, livelihoods, and education. In particular, internally displaced children and adolescents often experience significant interruptions in their education. In some cases, difficulties in transferring school records, or fear of doing so because OCGs might learn of their movements and hinder the full enjoyment of their right to education.<sup>52</sup>

Among the surveyed households with **school-aged children and adolescents who have been victims of forced displacement, 20 % reported that their children and adolescents did not**

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<sup>49</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Tulcan, Ecuador.

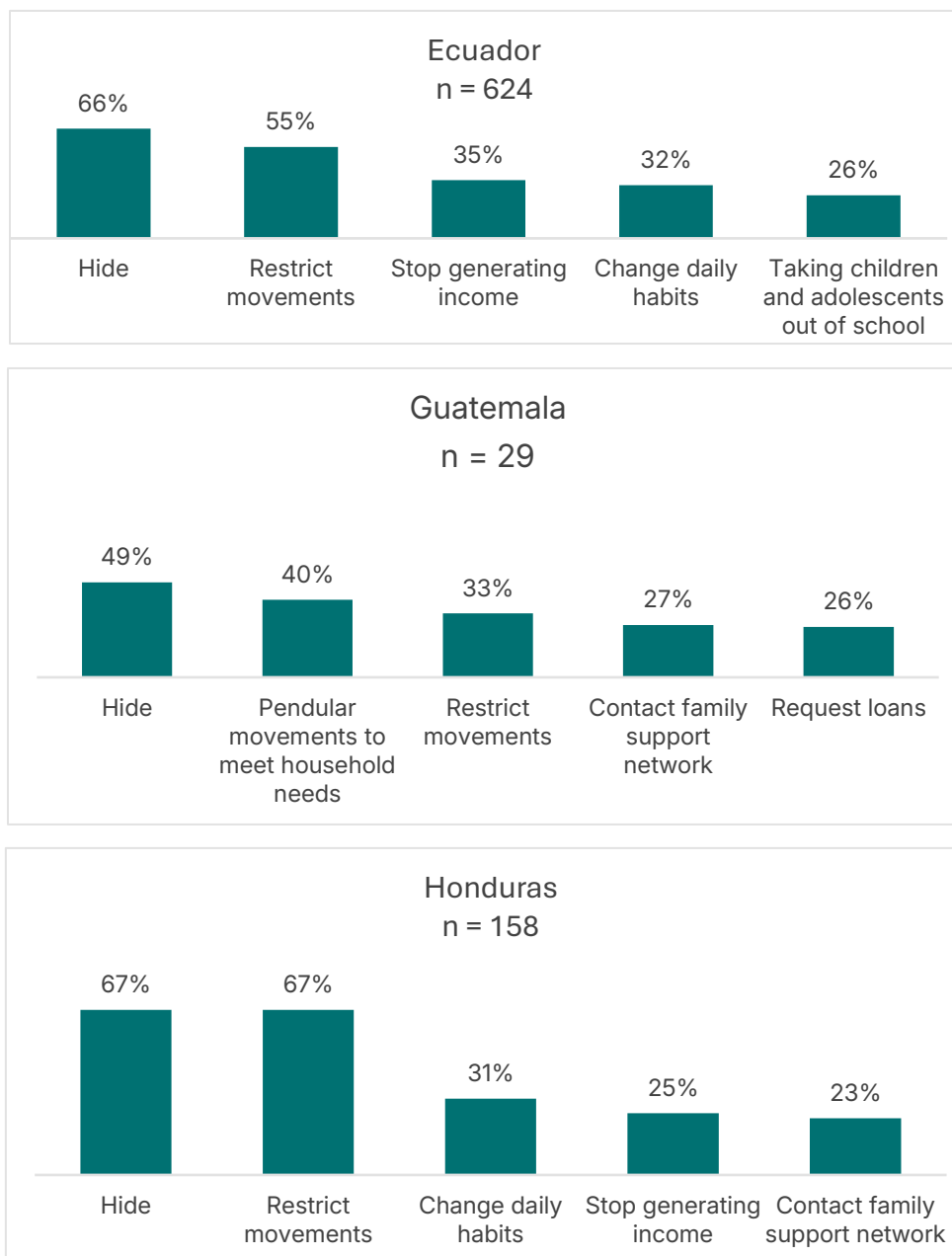
<sup>50</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Honduras and Mexico.

<sup>51</sup> ProLAC (2025). Focus Group Discussion, Tulcan, Ecuador.

<sup>52</sup> ProLAC (2025). Interview with Key Informant, Choluteca and Ocotepeque, Honduras.

**attend school.** This proportion nearly doubles that observed in the households that had not been affected by internal displacement (12%).

Graphs 7: Adaptation measures for internally displaced persons by country



## 6. Challenges to Safe Return, Relocation, and Reintegration

In their efforts to seek safety and protection, internally displaced persons are often forced to undertake multiple displacements. In Ecuador, 32 % of the displaced population carried out secondary movements; in Guatemala, 21 %; and in Honduras, 16 %. For just over a quarter of the displaced population (28 %), relocating to other areas of the country does not guarantee effective access to rights or protection. In most cases, the reasons for these secondary displacements are linked to insecurity and generalized violence, the presence and activities of OCGs, as well as intimidation.

Additionally, many displaced households perceive high levels of risk in their immediate surroundings. In Ecuador, 92 % of households believe they could experience some form of risk, and half of them fear being victimized again by extortion or intimidation. In Honduras, 69 % of households express perceptions of risk, and one third reported fear of discrimination or physical violence. In Guatemala, 58 % of displaced households believe they may face risks in the new host location, mainly linked to extortion (four out of 10 households) and the possibility of a new internal displacement (two out of 10 households).

Unfortunately, safe returns are not a viable option for most internally displaced persons. Of all households that reported having been displaced due to the actions of OCGs, **95 % indicated that they would face some type of risk if they had to return to their place of origin.** Among these, seven out of 10 mentioned risks to their lives, four referred to insecurity or generalized violence, and three identified intimidation and the activities of OCGs as the main risks.

In this context of lack of protection and uncertainty, internally displaced persons express reservations about their future. Although 65 % indicated their intention to remain in their current location over the next year, 12 % reported not knowing what they will do, 10 % stated an intention to move to another country in the coming year, and only 2 % expressed an intention to return to their place of origin.

It is worth noting that, although civil society and international cooperation actors had some capacity to support resettlement processes – both internal and at a third country –, the recent financial cuts to humanitarian aid and the suspension of resettlement programs to the United States<sup>53</sup> as of January 2025 led to the closure of several programs and organizations. As a result, around 15,000 persons in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, who had previously been identified as eligible for resettlement, mainly to the United States, lost access to international protection mechanisms, despite facing highly vulnerable conditions.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The White House (2025). Presidential Action: Realigning the US Refugee Admission Programs. Available: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/>

<sup>54</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council (June 2025). *Suspension of the Resettlement Program in the North of Central America*, Briefing Note.

Key informants in Guatemala and Honduras expressed concern about this new context, which offers very limited capacity to provide solutions, whether on the part of the State, civil society or international cooperation. This situation is particularly alarming given that several countries continue to receive deported or returned persons, many of whom may have been previously affected by internal displacement and remain exposed to risks if they return to their place of origin.<sup>55</sup>

## 7. Legal Frameworks and Protection Gaps in Relation to Internal Displacement

At a national level, significant gaps persist in the institutional response and in the definition of durable solutions that ensure the safety and dignity of internally displaced persons. These gaps directly affect the possibility of safe return to their places of origin, integration into current host communities, or relocation to other areas of the country. In the four countries analyzed, normative developments on internal displacement clearly show unequal progress. Honduras shows the highest level of legislative progress, while Mexico has achieved some legislative advancements at the state level. Guatemala and Ecuador have promoted certain initiatives aimed at strengthening the institutional response; however, these have not yet resulted in the adoption of public policies or specific regulatory frameworks on internal displacement. Despite differing levels of recognition, all four countries face common budgetary and technical challenges in operationalizing an institutional response by the State.

### Ecuador

Although Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador expressly prohibits arbitrary displacement and recognizes the right of displaced persons to receive protection and emergency humanitarian assistance, the country still lacks a specific legal and public policy framework that comprehensively regulates and ensures assistance, protection and durable solutions for internally displaced persons.<sup>56</sup> The government's response has focused mainly on security measures, such as the repeated declaration of states of emergency<sup>57</sup> and the proclamation of an internal armed conflict in 2024 by the President of the country.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Swiss Info (2025). Guatemala receives the first flight from USA with deportees from another country. Available: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/guatemala-recibe-un-primer-vuelo-de-eeuu-con-deportados-de-otro-pa%C3%ADs/90160361>

<sup>56</sup> The Republic of Ecuador. Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, Article 42 (1998). Available: [https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/LOTAIP/2017/DIJU/octubre/LA2\\_OCT\\_DIJU\\_Constitucion.pdf](https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/LOTAIP/2017/DIJU/octubre/LA2_OCT_DIJU_Constitucion.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> Radio Pichincha. Noboa has accumulated 11 states of emergency in 16 months of his transitional government (2025). Disponible: <https://www.radiopichincha.com/noboa-acumula-estados-excepcion-gobierno-transicion/>

<sup>58</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador. Decree 111. Available: [https://www.comunicacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Decreto\\_Ejecutivo\\_No.\\_111\\_20240009145200\\_20240009145207.pdf](https://www.comunicacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Decreto_Ejecutivo_No._111_20240009145200_20240009145207.pdf)

In the judicial sphere, some actions have been registered that may represent a first step towards the recognition, approach and response to the internal displacement phenomenon. The most notable is the judicial decision to grant precautionary measures to the displaced families of the Socio Vivienda community in Guayaquil, following the murder of 22 persons on March 6, 2025; an event that caused the forced displacement of 316 persons who abandoned their homes.<sup>59</sup> The court order focused on creating an inter-institutional group tasked with developing, within six months, a mechanism for assisting the displaced persons from that community.

Additionally, inter-agency and institutional initiatives aimed at collecting information on displaced persons have been identified. The Working Group for Refugees and Migrants (WGRM), made up of civil society organizations, NGOs and United Nations agencies, together with the Ombudsperson's Office, developed a form to register displaced persons affected by the Socio Vivienda case.<sup>60</sup> This effort complements the WGRM's actions to understand internal displacement in El Oro province, Ecuador.

## Guatemala

Guatemala lacks a legal framework that officially recognizes internal displacement. As a result, there are no public policies or specific institutional mechanisms for its prevention, protection or assistance.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, the Guatemalan State has taken some steps towards recognizing this phenomenon. In September 2025, the National Institute of Statistics presented, for the first time, data on internal displacement, collected as part of the 2023 National Survey of Living Conditions.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, in September 2023, Bill 6292 was introduced, titled "Law on the Prevention, Protection, and Comprehensive Assistance of Persons in a Situation of Internal Displacement" drafted with the support of the Working Group on Internal Displacement, composed of multiple civil society organizations and international organizations.<sup>62</sup> The bill seeks to formally recognize forced displacement caused by both violence and natural disasters, establish prevention and protection policies, and create a national registry of displaced persons. Civil society and international

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<sup>59</sup> Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (2025). Report on forced displacement in Socio Vivienda – version 20.05.2025. Available: <https://www.cdh.org.ec/informes/657-reporte-sobre-desplazamiento-forzado-en-socio-vivienda.html>

<sup>60</sup> Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (2025). Report on forced displacement in Socio Vivienda – version 20.05.2025. Available: <https://www.cdh.org.ec/informes/657-reporte-sobre-desplazamiento-forzado-en-socio-vivienda.html>

<sup>61</sup> National Statistics Institute Guatemala (2025). INE and UNHCR presented data on internal displacement in Guatemala. Available: <https://www.ine.gob.gt/2025/09/04/el-ine-y-acnur-presentaron-datos-sobre-desplazamiento-interno-en-guatemala/>

<sup>62</sup> American Friends Service Committee, Centre for Justice and International Law, Cristosal, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP), National Table for Migration (MENAMIG), Jesuit Network with Migrants Guatemala, ACTuando Juntas Jotay Program, Institute for Research in Socio Humanistic Sciences of the Vice-Rectorate for Research and Interinstitutional Commission for the Protection of Forcibly Displaced Persons - CIPPDEF- drafted by the Rafael Landívar University.

organizations continue to advocate for its approval; however, as of the end of 2025, Guatemala still lacks a legal framework or a public policy response in this regard.

## Honduras

Honduras stands out as the only country - of the four analyzed in the region - that has enacted a specific national law: the Law for the Prevention, Assistance, and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons,<sup>63</sup> approved in December 2022 and entering into force in March 2023. Among the most relevant elements contained in the law are: the National Response System for Displacement, composed of the institutions responsible for guaranteeing the rights and protection of persons; the Municipal Units for the Assistance and Protection of Displaced Persons in municipalities with the highest rates of displacement; the creation of the Interinstitutional Commission for the Protection of Forcibly Displaced Persons (CIPPDEF, in Spanish), as the highest decision-making body, chaired by the Presidency and with the Technical Secretariat for Human Rights; and the creation of the Registry of Abandoned and Dispossessed Property. It also includes definitions of the types of humanitarian assistance, their components and duration, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid for three months, extendable for another three months in cases of heightened vulnerability.

However, the regulation of the law, as well as the fund responsible for managing public resources for the assistance of displaced persons, is still pending, thus blocking its effective implementation.<sup>64</sup> In practice, and in coordination with some authorities, the response continues to rely heavily on UNHCR, NRC, ICRC, and other national and international humanitarian organizations,<sup>65</sup> whose capacity to provide assistance has been drastically reduced due to funding cuts.

## Mexico

In Mexico, there have been efforts to recognize internal forced displacement and to establish a federal regulatory framework. Between 1998 and 2020, nine legislative proposals were submitted but not approved,<sup>66</sup> which has kept the response fragmented and dependent on state and local initiatives. The most recent proposal dates from 2020, when the Chamber of Deputies approved

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<sup>63</sup> La Gaceta (2023). Honduras: Decree No. 154-2022 - Law for the prevention, assistance and protection of internally displaced persons. Available: <https://www.refworld.org/es/leg/legis/pleg/2022/es/134672>

<sup>64</sup> World Visión (2023). Civil society organisations state their position on the approval and entry into force of the law on the prevention, assistance and protection of internally displaced persons. Available: <https://www.worldvision.hn/blog/las-organizaciones-de-la-sociedad-civil-se-pronuncian-sobre-la-aprobaci%C3%B3n-y-entrada-en-vigor-de-la-ley-de-prevenci%C3%B3n-y-protecci%C3%B3n-de-las-personas-des-1681405254877>

<sup>65</sup> ACNUR (2023). Honduras: The Law for the Prevention, Assistance and Protection in Honduras and the work of UNHCR. Available: <https://www.refworld.org/es/leg/comlegnal/acnur/2023/es/148531>

<sup>66</sup> Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights. Forced internal displacement in Mexico. Available: <https://desplazamiento.cmdpdh.org/marco-normativo/>

the General Law to Prevent, Address and Comprehensively Repair Internal Forced Displacement, which, however, has still not been reviewed by the Senate at the time of writing this report.<sup>67</sup> In the criminal sphere, forced displacement is classified as a crime in the Federal Criminal Code, added to Article 287 Bis. Nonetheless, this provision has not yet been effectively implemented.

Additionally, three existing laws refer to internal displacement: the General Education Law, the Social Assistance Law, and the General Victims' Law. However, the absence of specific federal regulations has led to the creation of other types of initiatives to establish a framework for assistance. The principal one is the Protocol for Responding to Cases of Displacement, published by the Executive Commission for Victim Assistance in 2021. This protocol assigns municipalities the role of first responders, defining responsibilities for immediate assistance, the pursuit of durable solutions, the reception of reports and the National Victims' Registry. Nonetheless, the protocol is not being fully implemented and faces significant challenges due to the lack of a specific budget to ensure its operation.

At the state level, Chiapas, Guerrero, Sinaloa, Zacatecas, and Oaxaca have enacted specific laws aimed at addressing internal displacement. Likewise, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Oaxaca have classified arbitrary displacement as a crime, and have promoted coordination spaces in Chiapas, Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Sinaloa.<sup>68</sup>

In the public policy sphere, the 2020-2024 National Human Rights Program incorporated forced internal displacement as a priority, including actions on awareness-raising, legal frameworks, risk analysis, comprehensive assistance, participation of displaced persons, training for officials, and the creation of a registry. Likewise, the 2025-2030 National Development Plan included the concept of internal displacement in its Transverse Axis 3: The rights of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities, highlighting the impacts suffered by these communities as a result of displacement, and the need to define specific actions for their assistance.

Several institutions have promoted actions aimed at making the phenomenon of forced displacement more visible, most notably the characterization studies carried out in the states Chihuahua (2023), Sonora, and Guerrero. In parallel, efforts have been made to strengthen inter-institutional coordination through the reform of the Consultative Council on Migration Policy, and the incorporation of the Working Group on Internal Forced Displacement (GT-DFI, in Spanish).

However, the lack of a national legal recognition of internal displacement has significant consequences. On the one hand, many displaced persons do not identify as such, which makes it difficult for them to seek support and contributes to the invisibility of the phenomenon. In Ecuador, for example, focus groups and interviews with key informants revealed that many affected

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<sup>67</sup> UNHCR (2024). Internal Displacement. Mexico. Available: <https://www.acnur.org/mx/desplazamiento-interno>

<sup>68</sup> UNHCR. Internal Displacement. Legislation on internal displacement. Available: <https://www.acnur.org/mx/desplazamiento-interno>

persons interpret their displacement as a 'forced' or 'preventive migration' due to insecurity or extortion, without acknowledging their conditions as internally displaced persons.

## 8. Recommendations

### To State Entities

- **Recognize and protect internally displaced persons**, including those affected by displacement caused by OCGs, ensuring their access to humanitarian assistance, protection justice, and reparations, in accordance with the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*.
- Acknowledge that in many contexts the territorial control exerted by criminal groups prevents the return of internally displaced persons from being a safe option. Therefore, it is necessary to **strengthen both local integration and relocation** to other areas of the country that offer conditions of safety and protection.
- **Strengthen the comprehensive presence of the State** in territories where the population faces a high risk of displacement, through the coordinated provision of justice, health, education, and social programs that ensure protection and well-being.

### To States with Internal Displacement Laws

- **Actively involve civil society organizations**, international organizations, and displaced populations in the development of regulations for existing laws and legal frameworks, ensuring their appropriate implementation.
- **Collect and analyze data on internal forced displacement** at the department/state and national levels, including the reasons for displacement, and disaggregate information by age, gender and other diversity factors to better understand the causes of the risk and its distinct effects on different population groups.
- **Establish mechanisms that facilitate the integration of internally displaced persons** and their access to public systems, especially the education and health sectors, minimizing documentation requirements or background checks on places of origin that may represent risks or barriers to access for displaced persons.
- **Implement protection programs and responses for children and adolescents** that prioritize reparations as victims. Ensure the criminalization of the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents, and facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators.
- **Develop awareness campaigns that mitigate the stigmatization and discrimination** experienced by internally displaced persons, with special attention to young persons.
- **Ensure that internally displaced persons have effective access** to housing, education, livelihoods, documentation and basic services in host communities and resettlement areas within the same country.

### To States without Internal Displacement Laws

- **Consider adopting and promulgating laws and regulations that recognize and protect internally displaced persons**, in accordance with the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*.
- **Prioritize collaborating with civil society** to advance the official national recognition of forced displacement through legal frameworks and response systems.
- **Continue promoting spaces aimed at characterizing internal displacement** and identify the capacities of collaborators to offer effective responses. These spaces may include consultations, working groups, and interagency and civil society coordination forums.

## To United Nations Agencies and Humanitarian Organizations

- **Maintain and strengthen coordination and collaboration** with civil society organizations, humanitarian organizations and States with the purpose of generating evidence, advocating for the rights of internally displaced persons, providing comprehensive protection, and integrating into host communities.
- **Contribute to State efforts to collect and analyze data** on forced internal displacement, including information on the priority needs and protection of displaced persons.
- **Coordinate joint campaigns with state institutions** to inform internally displaced persons and those at risk of displacement about their rights and available protection mechanisms, providing support for timely access to essential services.
- **Strengthen the capacities of state officials** in the design and implementation of protocols and referral pathways for internally displaced persons.

## To Donors

- **Provide funding that is timely, predictable, multi-year and as direct as possible** for non-governmental and civil society organizations working on the protection of internally displaced persons or those at risk of displacement.
- **Promote the official recognition of internal displacement** through technical discussions, bilateral cooperation, and sharing best practices, while respecting State sovereignty.
- **Promote and finance joint initiatives for protection analysis** and evidence-gathering on the risks and dynamics of internal displacement in contexts of organized crime, encouraging coordination among civil society organizations, humanitarian agencies, and collaboration with States to strengthen differentiated, evidence-based responses.
- **Allocate specific financial resources** to reinforce responses to the risk of internal forced displacement in the region.
- **Promote the mobilization of new donors** to support the response to the protection crisis in Latin America, particularly in view of the gaps created by the suspension of funding from the United States.

## ProLAC Partners Participating in this Report

**Cáritas Pastoral Social Ecuador.** Through our work, we encourage, support, and propose ways to accompany those facing various situations of injustice and social exclusion in the country. Together with migrant communities, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, and civil society organizations, we are building an Ecuador that grows in unity and promotes justice and human dignity.

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** responds to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, helping to restore the health, safety, education, economic well-being, and empowerment of people devastated by conflict and disaster. Founded in 1933 at the initiative of Albert Einstein, the IRC works in more than 40 countries and 28 cities across the United States, helping people survive, regain control of their future, and strengthen their communities. To learn more, visit [www.rescue.org](http://www.rescue.org) and follow IRC on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. In Latin America, IRC is present in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru.

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** is a private humanitarian organization founded in 1956. DRC works in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities to ensure a dignified life for refugees, the displaced, and displacement-affected people. In Latin America, DRC is present in Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, addressing the complex challenges posed by mixed migration flows and internal displacement dynamics. DRC provides vital assistance to refugees, migrants, persons affected by conflict and host communities through a comprehensive humanitarian response focused on the most vulnerable persons and communities affected by conflict and displacement in the Americas.

The **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** is an independent humanitarian organization that supports persons forced to flee. It protects displaced persons and supports them as they build a new future. NRC began its efforts after World War II and now works in both new and protracted crisis in 35 countries. Around 15,000 humanitarian workers are employed by NRC. In Latin America and the Caribbean, NRC is present in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Haiti. NRC specializes in five areas: information and legal assistance, protection from violence, education, water, sanitation and hygiene, food security and livelihoods. It also advocates for persons forced to flee, promoting and defending the rights and dignity of displaced persons in local communities, with national governments and internationally.

**Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción (DHIA)** is an organization focused on the comprehensive defense and restitution of human rights for persons in contexts of human mobility. We are based in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico.

**EuroPana** is a regional program managed by the consortium formed by Cáritas Germany and Cáritas Switzerland, which implements actions through nine strategic partners in five intervention

countries: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Peru. These partners work to promote solidarity, well-being, and protection of rights of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of violence. They lead comprehensive, sustainable, and tailored humanitarian responses to local needs, actively contributing to building inclusive and resilient societies.

**Misión Scalabriniana** is part of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Borromeo Scalabrinian, founded 130 ago and present in 27 countries. In Ecuador, the Scalabrinian Mission has been present for 32 years, working alongside migrants, refugees, displaced persons, returnees, and members of the local community living in vulnerable conditions.



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