



2.1.2. Megabandas

Venezuela is home to numerous *megabandas*, defined as large, heavily armed criminal organisations typically comprising between 100 and 1 000 members.[406](#) These groups engage in a wide range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and contract killings.[407](#) Approximately nineteen *megabandas* have been identified nationwide, among them the Tren de Aragua, the Coqui organisation based in the Cota 905 neighbourhood of Caracas, the Tren del Llano, the Wuilexis group in Petare,[408](#) and the Carlos Capa organisation in Miranda.[409](#)

The origins of *megabandas* vary among sources. News source El Debate indicated that *megabandas* emerged out of government-backed 'Peace Zones' and Bolivarian circles, structures originally created to suppress protests but which later evolved into autonomous armed groups that now pose a significant threat to the state. [410](#) Casla Institute indicated that *megabandas*, which usually have the word "'tren'" (or 'train') as part of their name, originated around 2006, when existing criminal groups embedded themselves in pro-government railway unions to obtain benefits and extort workers; as they accumulated power, they began stealing materials and diverting state resources. When corruption halted the flow of funds, these groups had already evolved into heavily armed mega-gangs with territorial control and expanded into high-profit criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms smuggling.[411](#) El Nacional similarly reported that over time, these organisations have developed characteristics resembling insurgent or even terrorist entities, including the use of high-powered weapons, territorial control, regulation of community life, and the assumption of functions typically carried out by state institutions.[412](#) *Megabandas* apply principles associated with irregular warfare, such as blending into the civilian population, relying on local communities for protection, and building support networks through coercion or selective assistance.[413](#) These tactics make them difficult to identify and dismantle, and in many areas they have effectively become the de facto local government.[414](#)

Tren de Aragua is widely regarded as Venezuela's most powerful homegrown criminal organisation.[415](#) Although authorities announced in July 2024 that the group had been dismantled, including the shutdown of its command centre in Tocarón Prison, Lara state,[416](#) multiple sources reported that Tren de Aragua and other *megabandas* continue to operate across the country.[417](#) Tren de Aragua is accused of crimes including express kidnappings, extortion,[418](#) bribery of public officials, killings,[419](#) human smuggling, illegal mining, violent robbery, and money laundering.[420](#) Tren de Aragua disputes the control of informal border crossings with Colombia with the ELN.[421](#)

Tren de Aragua has diversified its criminal portfolio and expanded beyond Venezuela, aided by large-scale emigration.⁴²² Cells have been identified in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with sporadic presence in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil.⁴²³ Additional activity has been reported in the US, Mexico, Panama, Bolivia, and Spain.⁴²⁴ According to Transparencia Venezuela, Tren de Aragua has attempted to establish operations in Spain involving migrant exploitation, human trafficking, and extortion.⁴²⁵ In March 2024, the brother of the group's leader, 'Niño Guerrero', was detained in Barcelona and later extradited to Venezuela; he was reportedly attempting to build and expand the gang's criminal structure in Europe.⁴²⁶ Sources also reported that, in February 2024, former Venezuelan Lieutenant Ronald Ojeda, who fled Venezuela in 2017 and received asylum in Chile, was kidnapped and killed in Santiago de Chile by members of Tren de Aragua; his killing was reportedly ordered by Diosdado Cabello.⁴²⁷ In February 2025, the US designated Tren de Aragua as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organization' (FTO).⁴²⁸ Alleged members have been detained in the United States and transferred to El Salvador.⁴²⁹

Estimates of the group's size vary widely, from 'hundreds' to 'several thousand' recruits, reportedly under the command of Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, known as 'Niño Guerrero', and the organisation is widely recognised for its 'extreme violence'.⁴³⁰ Transparencia Venezuela estimates that Tren de Aragua has approximately 4 000 members.⁴³¹

According to Transparencia Venezuela, the group's internal structure is headed by the *pran* (top leader in prison), followed by lieutenants who act as his 'ministers'.⁴³² Beneath them are the *luceros de la alta*, closest to the leadership, and the *luceros de la baja*, who interact more directly with the general prison population.⁴³³ The *escuderos* serve as the *pran*'s protectors, while the *gariteros* are responsible for surveillance.⁴³⁴ Outside Venezuela, Tren de Aragua has adopted more 'flexible', network-based organisational models, with each cell managing its own criminal activities while maintaining coordination to avoid conflict and maximise profits.⁴³⁵ The command structure inside Venezuela, however, continues to set the terms of alliances with local gangs abroad and provides resources such as weapons, money, and contacts, retaining the capacity to issue orders.⁴³⁶

Branches of Tren de Aragua adapt to local conflict dynamics.⁴³⁷ In Brazil, the group collaborates with and provides services to the country's largest criminal organisation, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC).⁴³⁸ In Colombia, by contrast, Tren de Aragua has faced resistance from established armed actors, including the ELN, FARC dissident groups, and the AGC.⁴³⁹

Tren del Llano is one of the first *megabandas* emerging in Venezuela and currently operates in the area straddling the border between Guárico and Miranda states.⁴⁴⁰ Following the killing of one of its leaders by state forces in 2021, the group withdrew from Sucre state.⁴⁴¹ Tren del Llano reportedly refused to align itself with the Maduro government and instead negotiated an agreement with Tren de Aragua to respect each other's territories.⁴⁴² The gang's primary activity is the extortion of merchants and agricultural producers in the region.⁴⁴³ Sources reported that seven members of the Tren del Llano were killed during a police operation in Guárico State. The cell was accused of carrying out kidnappings and extortion targeting farm owners and businesses in the area.⁴⁴⁴

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