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EU-LAC Partnership on justice and security

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CORRIDOR: HOW THE UNDERWORLD LINKS CRIMINAL NETWORKS TO EUROPE

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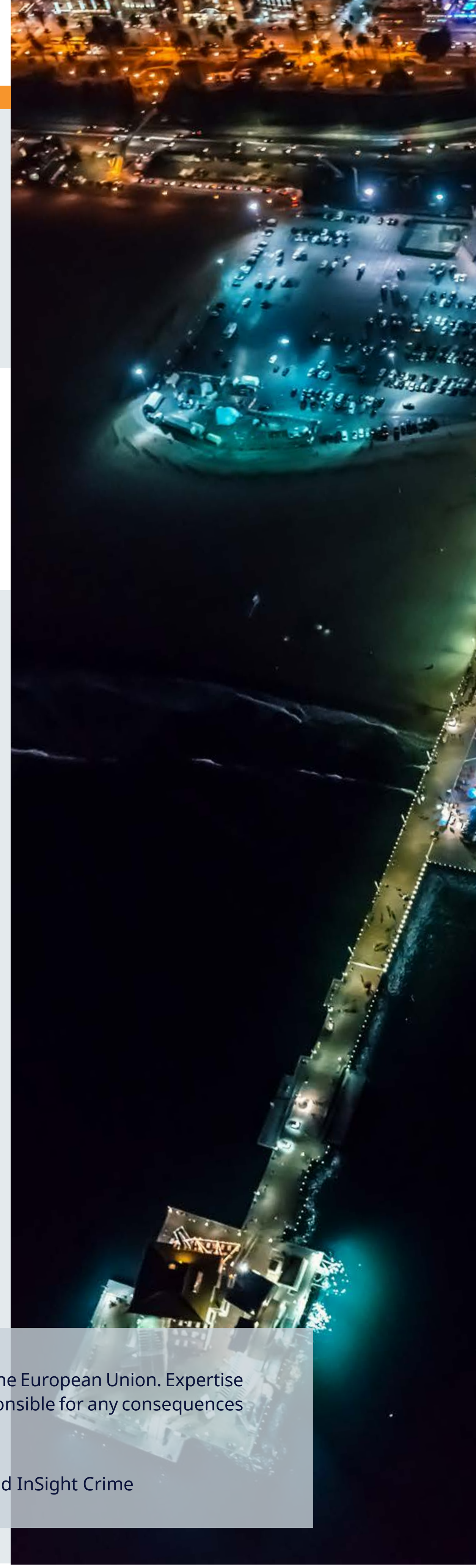

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INTRODUCTION: MULTI-FACETED CRIMINAL DYNAMICS IN SOUTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA

Wedged between South American cocaine producers and Mexican and Central American distributors, Central America occupies a pivotal node in the global cocaine supply chain—and, equally, in the illicit ecosystems of timber and wildlife trafficking, and money laundering. Long oriented toward the United States, the corridor has grown steadily more vital as a conduit for shipments now reaching Europe and beyond.

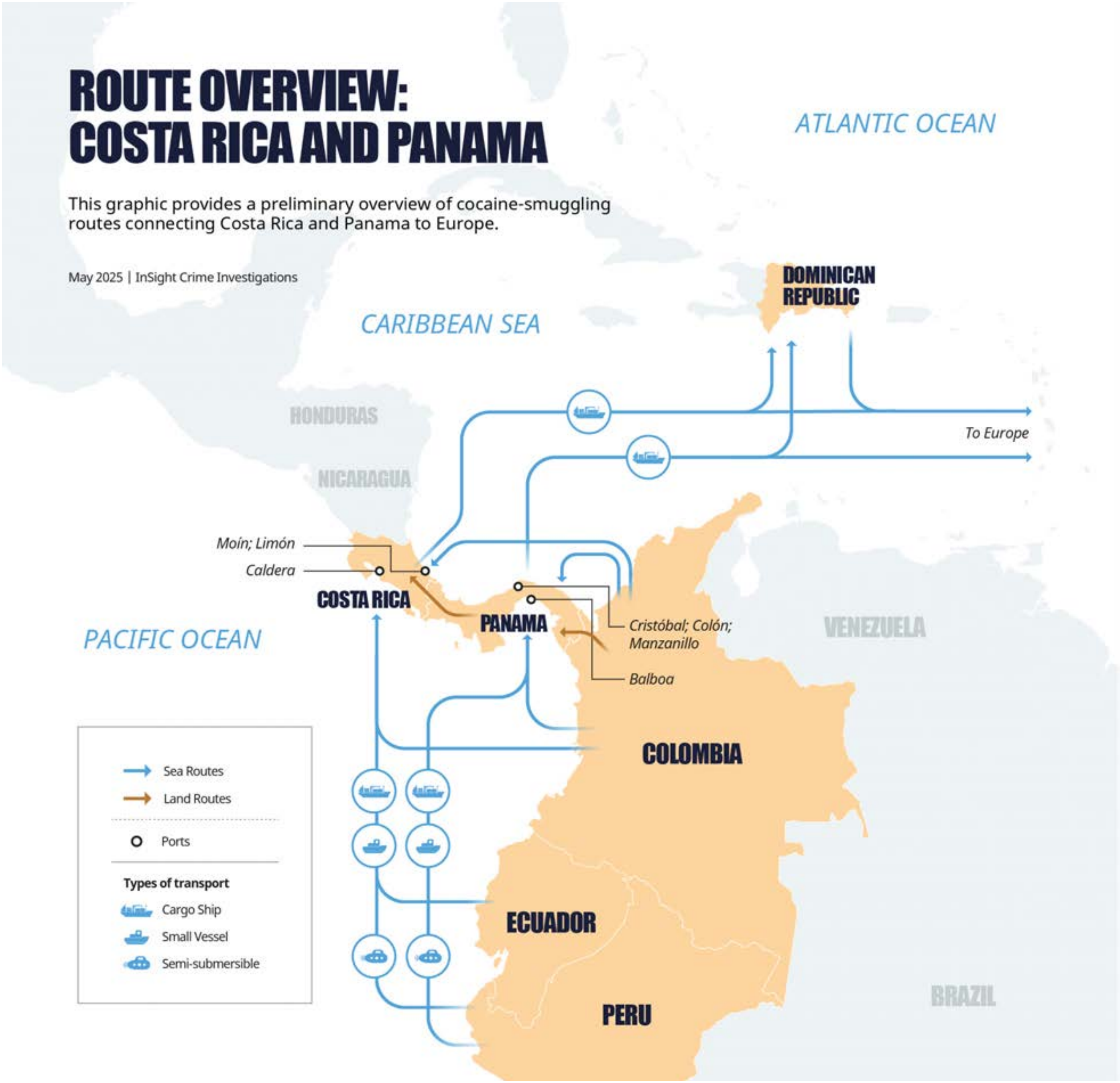
The corridor took shape in the 1980s, when Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) began moving cocaine north through Central America en route to the United States. At the time, Panama operated as a logistics hub under the protection of former dictator Manuel Noriega, while Costa Rica functioned as a passive transit zone with limited involvement from local actors.

The fall of Noriega and the fragmentation of major Colombian DTOs in the 1990s allowed Mexican, European, and Central American traffickers to expand their role in regional supply chains. Although Europe remained a secondary market for years, it has become increasingly attractive—particularly since the 2010s—because of higher prices and growing demand. This shift has reoriented trafficking flows toward commercial shipping lanes linking ports in Panama and Costa Rica directly to European markets. Furthermore, rising gold prices since the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted criminal networks operating across both countries to diversify into illegal gold mining — and, more broadly, into a range of environmental crimes: wildlife and timber trafficking, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Current smuggling operations rely on a subcontracted model, in which Central American networks manage the logistical backbone of the trade—receiving shipments, storing illicit goods, and coordinating their movement through port systems. This role has allowed local actors to consolidate control over key nodes in the supply chain.

In Panama, criminal groups exploit the country's position as a global shipping hub. The Panama Canal provides dual-ocean access, allowing traffickers to move high-volume shipments between Pacific and Atlantic routes. Domestic gangs have infiltrated ports in Colón and Panama City to conceal cocaine (and timber) within legitimate cargo bound for Europe.

Costa Rica has followed a similar trajectory, with local gangs expanding their role in the cocaine pipeline, although environmental crimes already had an important place in the country's criminal dynamics even before drug-related violence exploded in 2023. Some networks now negotiate directly with Colombian suppliers and



corrupt public officials. The opening of the Moín container terminal in Limón in 2019 accelerated this shift, increasing container traffic on the Caribbean coast and strengthening direct trade links to major European ports.

Both Panama and Costa Rica now rank among the most important departure points for cocaine seized in Europe. Competition for control of ports and coastal landing zones has fueled violence between criminal groups—particularly in Costa Rica, where drug-related disputes have driven homicides to record levels.

Despite sustained law enforcement pressure and record seizures, cocaine flows to Europe have continued. Trafficking networks have adapted by refining concealment methods within containerized trade and leveraging corruption to protect operations.

This report analyses how the corridor has become a key logistics hub for supplying European markets with cocaine and other illicit goods.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Central American corridor is a critical launch point for cocaine shipments to Europe, reflecting shifting global demand and the continuing role of containerized trafficking. Smuggling across the region is driven by sophisticated local networks, which have exploited their control over access to ports to gain greater autonomy in the trafficking of drugs, gold, timber and other illicit goods. The following are takeaways based on this report:

- **Container shipping is the backbone of the Central America–Europe cocaine corridor**. The scale of container traffic creates a trade-off between security and trade efficiency in hubs like Colón and Limón, limiting intensive inspection. Criminal groups exploit this constraint by flooding cargo streams with cocaine, absorbing seizures as an operational cost and routinely adapting concealment methods to outpace enforcement.

- **Local drug gangs are gaining autonomy in the cocaine supply chain**. Groups such as Bagdad and the Cartel del Caribe Sur have leveraged rising drug flows and control over port access to climb the criminal ladder, seeking to move from service provision into shipment coordination and partial ownership roles.

- **Lower barriers to entry are expanding participation in the cocaine trade**. The abundance of cocaine has enabled opportunists with shipping contacts—often outside traditional criminal organizations—to enter the trade by inserting small consignments into legitimate container flows.

- **Competition for export routes drives violence in both Panama and Costa Rica**. Colón, one of Panama's most violent cities, reflects a long-standing pattern of sustained gang competition over port infrastructure and transshipment routes. Costa Rica had long remained outside this dynamic, but expanded EU-linked traffic through Limón has rapidly turned the city into an epicenter of drug-related violence, upending the country's relative stability. Criminal groups use the same routes to transport drugs, timber, wildlife, and gold, as well as similar methods for money laundering.

- **Corruption as an enabler.** Recent high-profile arrests—including a former security minister accused of links to major trafficking networks—point to deepening penetration of Costa Rica's state institutions, which had long stood out in Central America for their relative resilience to corruption. In Panama, corruption is systematic but concentrated at lower levels, particularly through the infiltration of police, customs, and port authorities in hubs such as Colón.

- **The Colón Free Zone (CFZ) is an epicenter of trade-based money laundering in the region**. One of the world's largest duty-free trade areas, the CFZ enables criminal networks to convert drug proceeds into commercial goods through bulk commodity purchases, invoicing manipulation, and re-export schemes. Despite regulatory reforms, it is believed that it remains a persistent laundering node within regional trade circuits.

- **Environmental crime is gaining importance as a source of illicit income**. Illegal mining and timber trafficking are reshaping criminal dynamics along the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and in the Darien region—including areas of Panama inhabited by Indigenous communities. Low risk, a lack of specific regulations, and the intermingling of illegal and legal mining hinder criminal investigations and facilitate the conversion of illicit criminal assets into legitimate ones through legal mining, agricultural businesses, or the corruption of public officials.

- **Polycriminality—primarily among larger criminal groups—is a key characteristic of criminal dynamics in Costa Rica and Panama**. The interconnection between drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, illegal mining, money laundering, and contract killings is common in both countries.

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CRIMINAL DYNAMICS IN SOUTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Costa Rica and Panama share a structural vulnerability rooted in geography: extensive and difficult-to-monitor coastlines, world-class port infrastructure, and proximity to Colombian production zones render them indispensable nodes in a trafficking corridor whose volumes have expanded in lockstep with rising European demand for cocaine and timber, and record coca cultivation in the Andean region.

Institutional corruption has accelerated criminal consolidation in both countries: Panama's trafficking networks systematically compromise customs agents, port security officials, and police, while Costa Rica's 2025 exposure of a former security minister coordinating a regional narco-network revealed the extent to which state penetration has reached the highest echelons of government.

However, violence trajectories diverge meaningfully. While Panama's dominant factions prioritize logistical control over territorial expansion, resulting in comparatively targeted violence; Costa Rica experienced a sharp escalation in homicide rates as competing networks contest control of port access points in Limón and increasingly, Puntarenas.

CRIMINAL NETWORKS

While both Panama and Costa Rica function as pivotal transhipment hubs in the international cocaine trade, as well as relevant centres for environmental crime and money laundering, the criminal architectures underpinning each country's role in the supply chain diverge in significant structural and operational aspects.

Panama's criminal landscape is dominated by two entrenched domestic factions—

Bagdad and Calor Calor— whose origins as street gangs in the 1990s belie their current sophistication as service-oriented syndicates capable of coordinating multi-ton cocaine shipments through some of Latin America's busiest port infrastructure. Costa Rica, by contrast, has produced a more fragmented ecosystem of between 100 and 300 criminal groups, the majority of them small-scale distributors, though a handful—most notably the Cartel del Caribe Sur— have consolidated sufficient operational capacity to conduct transatlantic trafficking independently.

Where Panama's dominant factions have institutionalized this service model — renting logistical access to foreign drug trafficking organizations in exchange for profit-sharing arrangements— Costa Rica's emerging organizations have shown a greater appetite for vertical integration, cultivating direct sourcing relationships with Colombian producers in Nariño and Cauca. The Colombian Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), also known as the Gaitanistas or Clan del Golfo, constitutes the dominant foreign actor in both jurisdictions, though its operational modalities differ: in Panama, it exercises near-total control over the Darien corridor and subcontracts Panamanian gangs to manage logistics, while in Costa Rica it functions primarily as a supplier, dispatching cocaine to domestic networks that assume responsibility for onward distribution.

Mexican cartels —principally the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco New Generation (CJNG)— operate through emissary-based models in both countries, dispatching representatives to coordinate shipments rather than establishing permanent cells, though Costa Rica has emerged as an increasingly important refuelling and logistics node for aerial routes linking South America to Mexico. This dynamic was observed in previous analysis of criminal dynamics in the Southern Caribbean Corridor, produced by EL PACCTO 2.0, InSight Crime, CARICOM IMPACS, the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), the French Public Prosecutor's Office in Martinique and FRONTEX.[1]

European actors —including Italian mafias such as the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra and Flemish and Dutch criminal networks, as well as Balkan groups— maintain a more consistent, if still transient, presence in Costa Rica, where brokers travel to coordinate container contamination for Atlantic-bound shipments. Their footprint, however, remains comparatively indirect, with negotiations more commonly conducted with Colombia suppliers upstream.

KEY TRAFFICKING CORRIDORS

The Pacific and Atlantic corridors connect at various points in Panama and Costa Rica. Illicit goods arriving at the ports of Caldera or Balboa, on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and Panama, respectively, are transported by land, sea, or rail—in the case of Panama—to Caribbean-Atlantic coastal areas near the ports of Limón-Moín in Costa Rica and Manzanillo or Colón in Panama, where they await the right moment to be loaded into containers bound for Europe and other countries.

1 Reina Tortosa, M., Lottefier, J.-L., McDermott, J., Jones, M., Budeanu, R., & Camberou, P. (2026). Criminal Networks and Routes from the Caribbean to Europe: a deep-dive into cocaine trafficking and other illicit activities. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18385156

CARIBBEAN-ATLANTIC COAST

On the Caribbean-Atlantic flank, both Panama and Costa Rica function as structurally complementary nodes within the same transnational corridor, channelling shipments originating primarily from Colombia's Gulf of Urabá and Gulf of Morrosquillo toward Europe.

Colombian drug trafficking organisations, particularly the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces, coordinate the departure of go-fast boats from Caribbean coastal departure points, offloading cocaine on secluded beaches and coastal inlets in Panama's Atlantic provinces of Guna Yala, Bocas del Toro and Colón, as well as on Costa Rica's Limón coastline. The same routes are used for timber and gold trafficking—mainly connecting Colombia with the Indigenous province of Guna Yala— as well as for migrant smuggling.

The port of Colón, anchored by major terminals such as Cristóbal, the Manzanillo International Terminal, and the Colón Container Terminal, serves as Panama's primary Atlantic export hub, accounting for more than 200 tons of cocaine seized between 2020 and 2025 and acting as the principal launchpad for Europe-bound container shipments.

Costa Rica's port of Moín operates as a structurally analogous node on the Atlantic side, consistently ranking among the leading departure points for cocaine seized at European seaports and recording more than 50 tons of outbound shipments between January 2019 and June 2024, according to European Union Drug Agency (EUDA) data. Moín is also used for environmental crime, mainly timber and wildlife trafficking, although on a far smaller scale.

Despite surging interdiction volumes — nearly 100 tons seized in Panama in 2025 and 46.5 tons in Costa Rica the same year — structural vulnerabilities including corruption of customs agents and port officials, the high volume of container traffic, and the dollarized financial environment in Panama continue to sustain the Caribbean corridor as one of the most productive cocaine supply chains in the transatlantic trade.

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PACIFIC COAST

The Pacific corridor accounts for approximately 70 percent of cocaine entering Costa Rica, with the country's Pacific province of Puntarenas emerging as a focal point for trafficking groups that shifted operations westward in late 2024 to evade intensified interdiction on the Caribbean side, illustrating the adaptive routing behavior common to both corridors.

In Panama, Pacific-side arrivals funnel cocaine toward Panama City before it is transferred to the Atlantic coast via the Panama Canal, its adjacent road infrastructure, and the Colón rail link, a unique logistical capability, makes Panama uniquely positioned to arbitrage between ocean basins and render shipments accessible to both US and Europe-bound trafficking routes.

Ecuador's Pacific ports, particularly Guayaquil, represent the most significant upstream contamination point for container shipments transiting Panama's Pacific entry points, with multiple interceptions in Panamanian and Costa Rican ports revealing cocaine concealed in containers of Ecuadorian origin bound for European destinations including Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands.

Semi-submersible vessels, while primarily associated with long-range voyages toward Mexico rather than direct deliveries to Costa Rica or Panama, nonetheless surface in both countries' interdiction records, signaling the presence of higher-volume, more technologically sophisticated trafficking flows passing through the same regional maritime environment.

Criminal convergence in the Pacific corridor extends beyond drug trafficking to encompass illegal gold mining, timber trafficking, and migrant smuggling, all of which exploit the same remote coastal and jungle geography used for cocaine movement: in Costa Rica's Corcovado area, drug trafficking networks simultaneously engage in illegal mining as a money-laundering vehicle, while Panama's Darien serves as the geographic nexus where cocaine, gold, timber, and irregular migration flows intersect under the control of overlapping criminal actors.

The overland dimension of the Pacific and Central American route —running cocaine north along the Pan-American Highway from Panama through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala before reaching Mexican distribution networks— underscores that these countries function not merely as maritime transshipment points but as integral segments of a continuous land bridge that connects South American production to North American and European consumer markets, both via Mexican intermediaries and Atlantic rerouting.

METHODS USED BY CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Criminal networks use a wide variety of methods to traffic illicit goods through Central America, although there are significant differences both among criminal groups and between the Pacific and Atlantic-Caribbean corridors.

- **Cargo containers**. Traffickers operating in both corridors exploit the containerized shipping of legal agricultural and food commodities —including pineapples, frozen yucca, and refined salt— to conceal cocaine loads bound for major European entry points such as Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Algeciras, with shipments also increasingly directed toward secondary EU ports in Finland, Bulgaria, and Slovenia to reduce detection risk.
- **Go-fast boats** constitute the primary vector for the initial leg of cocaine transshipment from Colombia to both Panama and Costa Rica. Despite their structural vulnerability to aerial and maritime surveillance, go-fast boats remain operationally indispensable because they are inexpensive, widely available, and capable of exploiting the extensive unmonitored coastlines of both countries.
- **Semi-submersible vessels** represent the most technologically sophisticated maritime smuggling method documented in the Central American corridor, capable of transporting multi-ton cocaine loads over extended oceanic distances with a significantly reduced radar and visual signature compared to conventional surface vessels. Although there have been some interdictions of semi-submersibles in Costa Rica and Panama, these vessels are primarily oriented toward long-haul routes to Guatemala, Mexico, the US, Europe, or even Oceania.
- **Fishing boats and inter-island transports** occupy a structurally ambiguous position in the Central American cocaine trade: their ubiquity in coastal waters, legitimate operational profile, and routine contact with remote shorelines render them both an ideal cover for drug transport and a vehicle through which criminal networks recruit or coerce coastal fishing communities into the trafficking supply chain. At the same time, fishing vessels are also used to refuel go-fast boats or semi-submersibles on the high seas, transport other illicit goods, and engage in unregulated activities such as illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing.
- **Yachts and other pleasure craft** are particularly suited to Pacific coastal operations, where the geography of Costa Rica and Panama offers numerous private anchorages, sport-fishing marinas and offshore island clusters that provide cover for at-sea transfers between larger supply vessels and smaller coastal craft, without necessitating contact with formal port infrastructure. Furthermore, pleasure craft also serve as a vector for the movement of cash, weapons, and other contraband alongside cocaine, taking advantage of the fact that private maritime vessels receive limited scrutiny from customs and coast guard authorities.
- **Commercial aviation** serves as a supplementary trafficking channel for cocaine and wildlife in the Central American corridor, primarily facilitating the movement of low-volume, high-value shipments and human couriers toward European consumer markets, with Costa Rica's status as a major international tourism hub providing the structural cover that makes this method operationally viable.

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica has long served as a transshipment point for cocaine, though its role has evolved alongside shifting global trade routes and drug demand. Colombian DTOs began routing cocaine through the country in the 1980s, primarily to supply the United States.

For decades, Costa Rica functioned largely as a passive transit zone. Drugs moved through its territory with limited involvement from local actors and relatively little violence. This dynamic shifted in the 2010s as cocaine production in South America increased and European demand expanded. Rising volumes passing through Costa Rica, the growth of a domestic market, and the emergence of Limón as a key node in Europe-bound trafficking combined to create incentives for local actors to engage more directly in the trade.

As profits increased, Costa Rica's criminal groups expanded their territorial control over local markets and export routes, becoming both more sophisticated and violent. Homicide rates have risen sharply in recent years, reaching record levels as authorities struggle to contain turf wars between drug gangs.

The expansion of drug trafficking has also strained Costa Rica's political institutions, long viewed as a model of resilience against organized crime in a region marked by corruption. In 2025, authorities exposed one of the country's most significant drug-related corruption scandals, involving a former security minister accused of collaborating with traffickers throughout Latin America.

Costa Rica's strategic value in the drug trade rests on its geography and

HOW COSTA RICA'S CRIMINAL NETWORKS GAINED AUTONOMY IN THE DRUG TRADE

PHASE 1
1990s

Costa Rican fishermen provide fuel to foreign drug traffickers seeking to avoid landfall in Costa Rica.

PHASE 2
2000s

As the volume of cocaine moving through Costa Rica increases, local groups begin providing logistics, transport, and storage services to foreign DTOs.

Foreign DTOs begin paying Costa Rican partners in cocaine.

PHASE 3
2010s

Costa Rica becomes a major distribution center for cocaine bound for Europe and the US. Smaller gangs become involved in international drug trafficking.

As domestic consumption rises, local groups become more organized and use violence to expand and protect territories.

PHASE 4
2020s

Production boom in South America leads to a cocaine surplus, allowing local groups to acquire more of the drug for the same cost.

Competition for local and export drug markets intensifies, fueling escalating violence.

April 2026 | Source: InSight Crime interviews; Costa Rica State of the Nation Program.

infrastructure. Its extensive Pacific and Caribbean coastlines are difficult to monitor, particularly in the absence of a standing military, while its Atlantic ports provide direct access to major EU entry points.

Between January 2019 and June 2024, the country ranked fourth among the leading departure points for cocaine seized at European seaports, accounting for more than 50 tons, according to EUDA data.[2] The port of Moín has consistently featured as a significant source of shipments bound for major EU hubs such as Antwerp.

Cocaine seizures in Costa Rica peaked in 2020, when authorities confiscated a record 47.1 tons. They then declined slightly before rising sharply in 2025, when authorities seized 46.5 tons—an increase of 72.4% compared with 2024.[3]

2 European Union Drug Agency, "Seaports: monitoring the EU's floodgates for illicit drugs," 25 June, 2025.

3 UNODC, "World Drug Report 2025: Drug Trafficking & Cultivation, Drug Seizures," 2026; Costa Rican Drug Institute (Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas), "Boletines Estadísticos," 2024-5.

CRIMINAL NETWORKS

DOMESTIC ACTORS

Once passive players in the cocaine trade, Costa Rica's criminal networks have become more numerous and sophisticated as domestic consumption and transnational smuggling have grown. Authorities estimate that there are now between 100 and 300 criminal gangs in Costa Rica. Most of these are small groups involved in low-level drug distribution, though some have amalgamated into larger organizations capable of coordinating transatlantic cocaine shipments.

This shift began in the 2000s, when transnational DTOs moving cocaine through Costa Rica began paying local networks in product rather than cash in exchange for transport and storage services. Local groups then sold part of these payments domestically, expanding their territorial control as consumption increased through the 2010s.[4]

As these groups grew, competition intensified. Clashes over territory and trafficking routes have driven a sharp increase in violence, transforming Costa Rica from a self-proclaimed "safe haven" into one of Central America's most violent countries. In 2023, the country recorded 907 homicides—a rate of 17.3 per 100,000 inhabitants—the highest figure on record.[5] Violence has also become more targeted and gruesome, with contract killings, scalpings, and dismemberment linked to disputes between criminal groups.

Limón has emerged as an epicenter of violence, as gangs compete for control of local retail points, known as "bunkers," and access to port infrastructure. Violence has also spread to other areas, including the Pacific port of Puntarenas, where traffickers have shifted some operations in response to increased enforcement pressure in the Caribbean.

Within this landscape, a handful of drug networks have absorbed smaller groups, forming larger and more cohesive structures capable of dominating cocaine export routes along the Caribbean coast.

4 Costa Rica State of the Nation Program, "Seguridad ciudadana y violencia homicida," 2024.

5 Juliana Manjarrés and Christopher Newton, "InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Round-Up," InSight Crime, 21 February 2024.

MAJOR DRUG NETWORKS IN COSTA RICA

CARTEL DEL CARIBE SUR

The Cartel of Caribe Sur is considered the country's main distributor of marijuana and cocaine. The group was hard hit by arrests and counternarcotics operations in 2025, though it appears to remain active in the drug trade.

Territorial Presence

Operates along Costa Rica's Atlantic and Pacific coastline, with a significant presence in Limón.

Criminal Economies

- Domestic and international drug smuggling
- Contracted assassinations
- Arms trafficking

Leaders

Luis Manuel Picado Grijalba
Alias "Shock"
Jailed in the United Kingdom

Kevin Picado Grijalba
Alias "Noni"
Detained in Costa Rica

Tony Peña Russell
Alleged leader of an independent network of hitmen, hired to assassinate rival gang leaders.

Source: insightcrime.org

Cartel del Caribe Sur

The Cartel del Caribe Sur is considered Costa Rica's first transnational criminal organization. Before its emergence, the country's criminal landscape consisted of fragmented groups that cooperated loosely to facilitate cocaine shipments through the Caribbean coast.

This dynamic shifted when Costa Rican drug trafficker Luis Manuel Picado Grijalba, alias "Shock," sought to consolidate control over trafficking routes in Limón. He built a more centralized structure by recruiting traffickers and enforcers, laying the foundations for a so-called "mega-cartel" capable of coordinating both domestic operations and international shipments. Prominent allies included Gilbert Bell Fernández, alias "Macho Coca," and Edwin López Vega, alias "Pecho de Rata," both of whom operated their own trafficking infrastructure in Limón and joined forces with Picado Grijalba.

Another key figure in this expansion was Tony Peña Russell, alias "Negro," "La T," or "Tony," who led an armed wing based in Limón's Atlántida neighborhood.[6]

6 José Adelio Murillo, "Peña Russell fungía como el brazo armado del Cártel del Caribe Sur: se les vincula con 78 asesinatos," CR Hoy, 4 November 2025.

This group of hitmen targeted leaders of rival groups that resisted consolidation, eliminating competitors and asserting control over trafficking routes to Europe and the United States.

The group maintains direct links with DTOs in Colombia, particularly in Nariño and Cauca.[7] These relationships allow it to source large quantities of cocaine directly from suppliers, bypassing intermediaries and strengthening the group's position within the transnational supply chain.

7 Deborah Bonello and Ana Flores, "What's Behind Costa Rica's 'First' Transnational Criminal Organization?," InSight Crime, 21 November 2025; US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean's Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network," 22 January 2026.

The network mainly transports cocaine via maritime routes to Costa Rica, offloading shipments at Pacific landing points such as Osa, Puerto Jiménez, and Golfito.[8] It then moves the drugs to warehouses in Puntarenas and central Costa Rica, including the capital San José, which serve for storage and local distribution.[9]

The group operates multiple export routes. It uses small vessels to move shipments north to other Central American countries, with drugs bound for the United States. The network also leverages its territorial control in Limón to infiltrate ports and send cocaine to Europe and the US.[10]

The group has faced a series of recent setbacks, beginning with the arrest of Picado Grijalba in London in December 2024. His brother, Jordie Picado Grijalba, alias "Noni," assumed leadership but was arrested in Costa Rica in August 2025. Later that year, authorities launched a major operation targeting the network in Limón and San José, resulting in dozens of arrests and the seizure of drugs and assets.[11] While some Costa Rican officials have claimed the organization was dismantled, some reporting suggests that elements of the network continue to operate.[12]

8 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean's Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network," 22 January 2026.
9 Juan Fernando Lara Salas, "Alianzas en Colombia catapultaron al Cartel del Caribe Sur, según OFAC," La Nación, 23 January 2026.
10 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean's Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network," 22 January 2026.
11 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean's Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network," 22 January 2026.
12 Deborah Bonello and Ana Flores, "What's Behind Costa Rica's 'First' Transnational Criminal Organization?," InSight Crime, 21 November 2025.

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MAJOR DRUG NETWORKS IN COSTA RICA

LA "H"

Originally from the Olancho department in the Honduras, la "H" has become one of the most prominent drug transshipment networks in Costa Rica. Operating mostly out of Limón, the group's links teams of Nicaraguan and Costa Rican facilitators to handle drug shipments moving along the Caribbean coast.

Territorial Presence

The group has disputed territory with the Cartel del Caribe Sur in Limón.

Criminal Economies

- International Drug Trafficking
- Money Laundering

Leaders

Humberto Neftalí Rodríguez Wood
Honduran national arrested in Texas in 2024

Source: insightcrime.org

La "H"

Originating in Honduras, La "H" (also known as "Los Olanchos" or "Olancheros") has become a major player in the transshipment of cocaine through Costa Rica. The group competes with other networks, including the Cartel del Caribe Sur, for control of strategic trafficking corridors.

La "H" operates a tiered structure in which Honduran leaders oversee shipments, recruiting facilitators from Nicaragua and Costa Rica to manage on-the-ground logistics. These local substructures handle overland transport, storage, access to firearms, and container contamination in Costa Rica.

The group negotiates directly with Colombia's AGC to source cocaine. The network receives drug loads transported by speedboats from Colombia's Caribbean coast and moves them to the port of Moín, its main operational hub.[13] Shipments are stored before dispatch to the United States and Europe. The group also uses speedboats to move cocaine north toward Honduras.

Although the network's Honduran leaders are not directly involved in drug shipments, they sometimes enter Costa Rican territory posing as refugees from

13 José Adelio Murillo, ""La H": Violentos episodios involucran a la banda detrás del más reciente tiroteo en Limón," CR Hoy, 17 March 2025; Natalia Vargas, "Así terminó el líder de 'La H', banda que desató la guerra por los puertos de Limón," La Nación, 21 October 2025.

Nicaragua. This tactic limits the ability of Costa Rican authorities to access personal identifiers held in foreign records, including photographs, fingerprints, and biographical details such as place of birth and country of residence, making them more difficult to trace.

Though the group's alleged leader, Humberto Neftalí Rodríguez Wood, was arrested in Texas in late 2024, La "H" continues to operate in Costa Rica. Some of the network's second-tier leaders have stepped up, with figures such as Ronald Desmond Bonwon Bodden, alias "Manillo" or "Ratón," managing operations from neighboring countries such as Nicaragua.

Diablo

Alejandro Arias Monge, alias "Diablo," is one of Costa Rica's most wanted fugitives. The alleged drug trafficker faces arrest warrants in Costa Rica and the United States for drug trafficking, homicide, and money laundering. The DEA and Costa Rican authorities have identified criminal cells linked to Arias Monge in all seven provinces of Costa Rica.[14]

Diablo leads a transnational criminal organization that sources cocaine in Colombia and moves shipments from Costa Rica to the United States via Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. While most flows appear directed to the US, Diablo's networks have also collaborated with DTOs and corrupt officials involved in cocaine shipments to Europe via the port of Moín.

This includes Cartel del Caribe Sur affiliates Edwin López Vega and Gilbert Bell Fernández, both sanctioned by the US Treasury for their role in trafficking drugs in Limón.[15] Costa Rican authorities also say the group has secured part of its drug supply through links with the Cartel del Caribe Sur.[16]

Diablo's network also collaborated with former Costa Rican minister of public security, Celso Gamboa Sánchez. US prosecutors accuse Gamboa of selling sensitive information to leading traffickers—including Diablo—and bribing state officials to facilitate cocaine shipments from Colombia through Costa Rica to the United States and Europe.[17] US authorities have also identified the former minister as the coordinator of a regional drug trafficking network tied to Colombia's AGC and Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel.

Gamboa's arrest and subsequent US extradition in 2025 marked one of Costa Rica's most high-profile drug-related corruption cases, underscoring the extent to which organized crime has penetrated state institutions.

Smaller Networks

Alongside established trafficking groups, Costa Rica houses smaller, less visible networks of individuals working within the shipping industry who exploit professional access to move cocaine to Europe. These groups are discreet and can be as small as five members, often falling below the threshold for systematic profiling by authorities. They typically purchase smaller quantities of cocaine (often 20–30 kilograms) from local sources such as fishermen, then use industry contacts and front companies to insert these shipments into Europe-bound container cargo.

COLOMBIAN GROUPS

Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC)

The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), also known as the Gaitanistas or Clan del Golfo, operates drug routes through Costa Rica, leveraging its control of maritime corridors between Colombia and Central America. As one of the main suppliers of cocaine to Europe, the group is well positioned to exploit Costa Rica's growing role as a transshipment hub.

The AGC moves cocaine from Colombia to Costa Rica's Pacific coast using speedboats and fishing vessels. Shipments are then transported across the country to the Caribbean coast, where they are integrated into containerized cargo for onward shipment to Europe. Rather than establishing a permanent presence in Central America, the group collaborates with criminal actors in Panama, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, including La "H," to coordinate supply and logistics.[18]

14 US Department of State, "Alejandro Arias-Monge," Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program, 30 April 2025.

15 SwissInfo, "EE.UU. pone en evidencia a red de narcotráfico que incluye a un exministro en Costa Rica," 18 August 2025; US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Notorious Costa Rican Narcotraffickers," 18 August 2025.

16 José Adelio Murillo, "Cartel del Caribe Sur comandado por 'Shock' y 'Noni' abastecía de droga a Diablo, criminal más buscado del país," CR Hoy, 4 November 2025.

17 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Notorious Costa Rican Narcotraffickers," 18 August 2025.

18 Álvaro Sánchez, "(VIDEO) Investigaciones revelan vínculos de mafia italiana en envíos de droga desde Costa Rica a Europa," CR Hoy, 24 December 2025.

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MEXICAN GROUPS

Prominent Mexican criminal groups use Costa Rica as a transshipment point for cocaine moving north through Central America. Rather than establishing a sustained presence, they typically subcontract local logistics networks to move shipments from Costa Rica into Mexico. While their primary focus rests on supplying the US market, there are also signs of involvement in EU-bound shipments.

Jalisco New Generation Cartel

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG) has been a major player in the expansion of Costa Rica as a hub for EU-bound trafficking, according to press reports from Costa Rica.[19] The group coordinates shipments from Colombia and Ecuador using speedboats, semi-submersibles, and small aircraft. Once in Costa Rica, operators linked to the CJNG recruit local facilitators to contaminate container shipments, which are then sent across the Atlantic to Europe. In November 2025, Spanish police dismantled a suspected CJNG faction operating in Spain linked to a cocaine shipment sent from Costa Rica inside a container of industrial machinery.[20]

Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel also uses Costa Rica as a transshipment point for cocaine moving to the United States via land, maritime, and aerial routes. In April 2025, authorities seized 840 kilograms of cocaine and more than $12,000 aboard a yacht in Quepos, Puntarenas, linked to the organization.[21] In addition, the group has reportedly used Costa Rica as a stopover for small aircraft originating in Colombia and Ecuador, which refuel before continuing on to Mexico and the US.[22] In 2025, three Costa Ricans were arrested on suspicion of providing fuel and security at clandestine airstrips in Guanacaste.[23]

There is no clear evidence of the Sinaloa Cartel's involvement in EU-bound cocaine shipments via Costa Rica, though authorities in France and Spain have dismantled criminal networks with suspected ties to the group.

EUROPEAN ACTORS

European criminal actors do not appear to maintain a consistent operational presence in Costa Rica. Rather, they rely on local actors with knowledge of port operations and control over smuggling routes. Nonetheless, their efforts to meet growing demand in Europe have contributed to Costa Rica's emergence as a transshipment hub.

European brokers, including French, Balkan, Hungarian, Italian, and Dutch traffickers, travel to Costa Rica to coordinate transatlantic shipments.

Italian Mafias

Italian criminal networks have used Costa Rica as a transshipment point for cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines, often operating alongside groups such as the CJNG and the AGC[24] and South American suppliers to coordinate cocaine shipments, at times working with local facilitators.

Groups such as the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra have been linked to the transit of cocaine from Costa Rica to Europe.[25] In 2020, authorities arrested a member of the 'Ndrangheta Bellocco clan in Costa Rica. The faction imported South American cocaine into Italy by sea, including shipments originating from Costa Rica, relying on operatives who traveled to supplier countries to coordinate logistics.[26]

Balkan Mafias

Balkan criminal groups have also been linked to cocaine trafficking through Costa Rica, though they do not appear to maintain a permanent presence in the country. In 2019, Interpol's "Operation Familia" dismantled a Balkan network involved in large-scale cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe using private aircraft. Parallel investigations identified connections between the group and criminal associates operating across multiple countries, including Costa Rica.[27]

19 Ibid.
20 Juana Viudez, "Authorities dismantle Jalisco New Generation Cartel's 'office' in Spain," El País, 18 November 2025.
21 Daniel Córdoba, "Ticos daban combustible a aeronaves del Cartel de Sinaloa que salían desde Colombia y Ecuador," CR Hoy, 9 April 2026.
22 Ibid
23 Daniel Córdoba, "Ticos daban combustible a aeronaves del Cartel de Sinaloa que salían desde Colombia y Ecuador," CR Hoy, 9 April 2026; SwissInfo, "Decomisan en Costa Rica 400 kilos de cocaína vinculados al cartel de Sinaloa," 11 December 2025.
24 Álvaro Sánchez, "Investigaciones revelan vínculos de mafia italiana en envíos de droga desde Costa Rica a Europa," CR Hoy, 24 December 2025.
25 James Bargent, "Salvatore Ponzo and the Italian Mafia's Infiltration of Costa Rica," InSight Crime, 6 October 2020; Álvaro Sánchez, "Investigaciones revelan vínculos de mafia italiana en envíos de droga desde Costa Rica a Europa," CR Hoy, 24 December 2025.
26 Interpol, "Fugitives arrested in I-CAN global anti-mafia operation," 23 July 2020.
27 Europol, "Balkan cartel trafficking cocaine around the globe in private planes busted," 25 July 2019.

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES: DRUG TRAFFICKING CORRIDORS

ROUTES FROM SOUTH AMERICA TO COSTA RICA

Cocaine shipments from South America primarily reach Costa Rica via Pacific and Caribbean maritime routes. Traffickers exploit the country's extensive coastline to access remote landing sites, from where drugs are transported inland along riverine and overland corridors.

South American DTOs use go-fast boats, fishing vessels, and cargo ships to move cocaine to Costa Rica via Caribbean and Pacific shipping lanes.[28] For EU-bound shipments, traffickers often favor Caribbean routes arriving in Limón, as the city's ports offer direct access to transatlantic shipping lanes.

Caribbean Maritime Route

On the Caribbean side, cocaine is primarily transported via go-fast boats departing from Colombia and coordinated by Colombian DTOs. The Limón province serves as a key landing point on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast and is connected to the Tortuguero canal system, a network of waterways running through the Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge to the Nicaraguan border. These channels are used to move drug shipments inland.[29]

Cocaine typically arrives in small vessels, particularly go-fast boats that offload cocaine on secluded beaches close to Limón's ports. When these boats are intercepted or pursued by authorities, traffickers often jettison cargo to avoid seizure, leaving cocaine packages adrift in coastal waters. This has given rise to a secondary dynamic in which local fishermen retrieve floating packages and bring them ashore. These are then sold to intermediaries who coordinate shipment to European markets. Some maritime dumping may be deliberate, with traffickers relying on currents and tides to carry packages toward the Costa Rican coastline, though this practice remains difficult to verify.

Pacific Maritime Route

Fishing vessels and go-fast boats are the primary methods used to transport cocaine from the South American Pacific to Costa Rica.[30] Colombian criminal organizations often orchestrate these shipments. The Pacific corridor accounts for roughly 70% of cocaine entering Costa Rica. Along the country's Pacific coastline, dense mangrove ecosystems linked to riverine networks provide cover for cocaine deliveries and inland movement, complicating interdiction efforts.[31]

Traffickers have also used semi-submersibles to move cocaine north via Pacific waters, though these vessels are usually traveling to Mexico and do not make stop-offs in Costa Rica. In 2024, Costa Rican authorities intercepted a semi-submersible vessel carrying 2 tons of cocaine, though this type of seizure is uncommon.[32]

The Pacific province of Puntarenas became a focal point for cocaine seizures in late 2024, as trafficking groups shifted operations to the area to avoid interdiction

28 Álvaro Sánchez, "Investigaciones revelan vínculos de mafia italiana en envíos de droga desde Costa Rica a Europa," CR Hoy, 24 December 2025.
29 María Fernanda Ramírez, "Port of Limón Has Become Costa Rica's Drug Trafficking Epicenter," InSight Crime, 15 April 2020.

30 Maria Abi-Habib, "How a Tourist Paradise Became a Drug-Trafficking Magnet," New York Times, 15 September 2024, Reuters, "Costa Rica seizes 4.3 tons of Colombian cocaine, 2nd-biggest bust in its history," 18 July 2021.
31 Ibid.
32 AFP Español, "Costa Rica intercepta semisumergible con dos toneladas de cocaína," YouTube, 12 August 2024.

efforts in the Caribbean.[33] The Guanacaste province has also been identified as an arrival point for cocaine shipments sent to beaches and coastal inlets.[34]

Cocaine is also smuggled within legitimate cargo on container ships sent from the South American Pacific to Costa Rican ports, such as Caldera and Moín, before onward shipment to Europe. Notable seizures include a 780-kilogram shipment of cocaine hidden in refined salt shipped from Cartagena to Moín. Authorities have also intercepted contaminated cargo sent from Ecuador to Costa Rica, including over 1 ton of cocaine seized at Moín on a freight ship bound for Finland.[35]

Air Routes

Traffickers also use aircraft to smuggle drugs, cash, and weapons into Costa Rica, with illegal flights departing from Colombia and Venezuela. Drug planes typically land on clandestine airstrips in Costa Rica’s Caribbean provinces, though these sites have also been identified in the Pacific region and south of the country. In some cases, those piloting drug planes offload cocaine offshore to be collected by local fishermen.

Smuggling also occurs via commercial aviation. At Juan Santamaría International Airport in San José, authorities regularly intercept low-volume shipments—typically under 100 kilograms—on international flights. Human couriers are also used to conceal cocaine internally or within luggage.[36] Costa Rica’s status as a major tourism hub facilitates this activity, with traffickers exploiting direct flights to European destinations, including Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In addition to its three international airports, the country counts with more than 106 registered airstrips nationwide, serving primarily private aviation, tourism and agricultural purposes.[37] More than 60 of these are officially registered in the Pacific provinces of Guanacaste and Puntarenas alone. These airstrips typically consist of open-space runways with limited or no security facilities, creating conditions conducive to illicit air trafficking activities, including domestic movements or regional transit.

Land Routes

Criminal groups also exploit Central America’s road network to smuggle smaller quantities—usually under 1 ton of cocaine—into Costa Rica via its southern border with Panama. Traffickers conceal drugs in the hidden compartments of trucks, cars, and even ambulances to avoid detection. Once across the border, most cocaine is stored in warehouses throughout Costa Rica before being driven to ports for onward shipment.[38] A small proportion remains for local consumption.

ROUTES FROM COSTA RICA TO EUROPE

From coastal entry points and the southern border with Panama, cocaine destined for Europe is moved towards key export hubs, particularly the ports of Limón and Moín. Maritime shipments are transported

33 Marina Cavalari, Alicia Florez, Juliana Manjarrés, and Christopher Newton, “InSight Crime’s 2024 Cocaine Seizure Round-Up,” InSight Crime, 7 May 2025.
34 Tico Times, “US Bases Proposed in Limón, Puntarenas and Guanacaste to Target Drug Traffickers,” 26 February 2026.
35 Mauricio León, “Decomisan más de una tonelada de cocaína oculta dentro de contenedor que iba hacia Finlandia,” CR Hoy, 6 May 2025.
36 Daniel Quesada Artavia, “Trasiego de drogas vía aérea: Qué entra y sale del aeropuerto Juan Santamaría?” Costa Rica Attorney General’s Office, 22 November 2022.
37 Cobano Airport, “AEROPUERTOS Y AERÓDROMOS DE COSTA RICA”, 15 January 2023
38 US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean’s Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network,” 22 January 2026.

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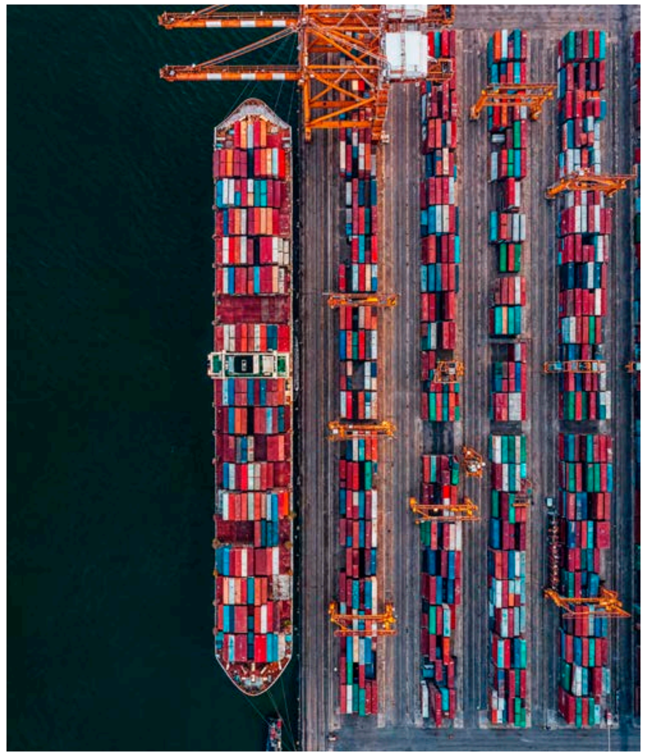


inland before reaching storage sites such as warehouses and farms or continuing overland directly to shipping ports.

Reception Points

Cocaine shipments sent from or transiting via Costa Rica arrive at ports across Europe, with primary destinations including the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Germany.[39]

Traffickers often target major logistics hubs handling high volumes of Latin American imports. For example, Algeciras serves as an entry point because of its role in fruit imports from the region. In late 2025, Spanish authorities seized more than 2 tons of cocaine concealed in a pineapple shipment from Costa Rica at the port.[40]

A 2025 Interpol operation targeting a drug network moving cocaine via Costa Rica resulted in the seizure of 5.4 tons across multiple countries, including Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and the Netherlands.[41] The case illustrated how networks distribute shipments across several entry points to reduce risk.

Traffickers have also pivoted toward secondary European ports that may place less scrutiny on drug loads sent from or via Costa Rica. In May 2025, for instance, authorities seized over 1 ton of cocaine at Moín in a container originating from Ecuador and bound for Finland, as well as a smaller shipment destined for Bulgaria.[42]

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Although Costa Rica has become an important transshipment point for EU-bound cocaine, significant flows continue to move toward the United States—the historical end market. Shipments bound for the US transit through Costa Rica via both land and maritime routes. On land, criminal groups use freight trucks and vehicles with hidden compartments to move cocaine north along the Pan-American Highway into Nicaragua, continuing through Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala before reaching Mexico. From there, Mexican criminal organizations take control of overland corridors to transport cocaine into the United States for distribution. For maritime shipments, traffickers use fishing vessels and other small boats to move cocaine north along lightly monitored coastal waters. These loads often make temporary stops in remote coastal areas for storage before continuing by sea or overland toward Mexico, where Mexican DTOs integrate them into existing trafficking networks.

39 Álvaro Sánchez, “Investigaciones revelan vínculos de mafia italiana en envíos de droga desde Costa Rica a Europa,” CR Hoy, 24 December 2025; Europol, “Frozen yucca, hidden cocaine: drug route from Costa Rica to Europe dismantled,” 12 June 2025.
40 Tico Times, “Cocaine Seizure in Spain Traces Back to Costa Rican Pineapples,” 31 December 2025.
41 Europol, “Frozen yucca, hidden cocaine: drug route from Costa Rica to Europe dismantled,” 12 June 2025
42 SwissInfo, “Costa Rica decomisa 50 kilos de cocaína oculta en contenedor con destino a Bulgaria,” 16 March 2025; Mauricio León, “Decomisan más de una tonelada de cocaína oculta dentro de contenedor que iba hacia Finlandia,” CR Hoy, 6 May 2025.

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES: ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

Costa Rican organized criminal networks take an active part in illegal mining, deforestation and illegal timber trafficking, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing and pollution, although operations remain smaller in scale compared to those in the Amazonia.

Illegal mining is concentrated in two main areas. On the one hand, along the Costa Rica–Nicaragua border, particularly in areas such as Crucitas in the San Carlos province. Miners extract gold through trenches, tunnels, and open pits in forested and mountainous terrain, contributing to deforestation and environmental contamination. Rising global gold prices —which surpassed US $5,200 per troy ounce in February 2026— have coincided with reports of expansion and the use of more advanced extraction techniques in northern Costa Rica.[43]

On the other hand, important illegal mining activity has been reported in the Corcovado National Park area in the southern Puntarenas province. In these zones, networks involved in drug trafficking—which use remote beaches and jungle paths for cocaine smuggling—also engage in illegal mining, using it as a mechanism to launder illicit proceeds.[44] Profits from drug trafficking have enabled local miners, often from low-income communities, to invest in improved equipment such as metal detectors and satellite phones.

The overlap is not accidental. Drug trafficking profits have been reinvested into mining equipment —including metal detectors, hydraulic pumps and satellite communications— while gold serves in turn as a vehicle for laundering narco-proceeds back into the formal economy.

Illegal deforestation represents a structural problem in Costa Rica with deep economic and institutional roots. In July 2025, Costa Rican authorities launched a National Traceability System to track timber through the entire production chain and verify that its origin is legal and sustainable.[45] The system was designed to address a serious and widespread logging crisis, with particularly acute impacts documented in the biological corridors connecting Braulio Carrillo National Park to the Caribbean lowlands — a zone of exceptional ecological value that has faced sustained pressure from agricultural expansion and illegal extraction. Between 2023 and 2024, SINAC's own complaint processing system received more than 7,200 environmental crime reports in a single year, with illegal logging accounting for the largest single category at 2,600 complaints.[46] Yet complaints rarely translate into formal investigations, and even more rarely into convictions, pointing to a persistent gap between reported violations and institutional response.

According to Environmental Prosecutor Luis Diego Hernández, the primary structural driver of deforestation is the expansion of monoculture agriculture — pineapple, banana, and palm plantations — which displaces smallholders and pushes illegal loggers deeper into primary forest zones as the agricultural frontier advances. This dynamic is particularly visible in the Sarapiquí region, where community outrage over illegal logging intensified in early 2026, and where the overlap between agro-industrial expansion, land grabbing, and organized criminal activity in timber extraction has become increasingly difficult to disentangle.

As in Panama, the timber species most sought after and trafficked by international timber-smuggling networks is cocobolo (Dalbergia retusa), whose market value can reach between USD 30,000 and USD 40,000 per shipping container. Identification is relatively straightforward once the wood has been freshly cut, as it exhibits a highly distinctive reddish coloration. However, criminal groups often allow the timber to dry for several weeks so that it loses some of this coloration—at least on the surface. The characteristic color reappears once the wood is cut and processed.

Illegal deforestation in Costa Rica has also been linked to illicit cattle trafficking, which organised crime groups have exploited as a money-laundering mechanism. Between 2019 and 2024, the Judicial Investigation Police (OIJ) seized more than 3,700 head of cattle with a combined estimated value of ₡2,084 million (approximately USD 4.5 million). A case investigated in 2023 illustrated the capacity of a single criminal network to launder approximately USD 1.5 million through the acquisition, breeding, and sale of livestock.[47] In February 2026, the Costa Rican Institute on Drugs (ICD) presented two legislative reform proposals before the Legislative Assembly, seeking to address the legal loopholes that have enabled criminal organisations to exploit the livestock sector for illicit financial gain.[48]

Costa Rica is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, and its conservation policies are among the strongest globally. Nevertheless, law enforcement and judicial authorities face a chronic shortage of resources for investigating both domestic and international wildlife trafficking. Scarlet macaws (Ara macao) and great green macaws (Ara ambiguus), poison dart frogs (family Dendrobatidae), blue morpho butterflies (Morpho helenor narcissus), Central American squirrel monkeys (Saimiri oerstedii), and jewel scarab beetles (Chrysina spp.) are among the more than 1,000 wild animals illegally removed from Costa Rica each year, although the actual figure is believed to be considerably higher.[49]

A portion of the international trafficking of insects and wildlife—primarily live specimens, although preserved specimens are also encountered—takes place by air through Juan Santamaría International Airport. Shipments are concealed in carry-on luggage or strapped to the bodies of human couriers, a method most commonly used for transporting live birds and eggs. According to the Costa Rican Public Prosecutor's Office, a single carry-on suitcase may contain between 3,000 and 5,000 insects. Individual specimens can be sold for between USD 7 and USD 20 in the United States, Canada, or Europe.[50]

Corruption is a key element in the chain that links and facilitates environmental crime with criminal groups and their international networks. Despite Costa Rica's reputation as a regional leader in environmental conservation —with over 25% of its territory under protected status— the agencies responsible for enforcing environmental law, investigating and prosecuting environmental offences operate with limited resources, low salaries, limited oversight and isolation at

43 Yeryis Salas, "Minería ilegal se especializó y se expandió afuera de Crucitas, alertó Mario Zamora a diputados," La Nación, 16 February 2026.
44 Parker Asmann, "Cocaine and Gold: The Battle to Protect Costa Rica's Corcovado National Park," InSight Crime, 15 April 2026.
45 Tico Times, "Costa Rica Launches Traceability System to Tackle illegal logging", 24 July 2025.
46 Tico Times, "Costa Rica Faces Growing Outrage Over Illegal Logging in Sarapiquí", 11 April 2026.
47 Mundoacr, "El ganado y el lavado de dinero en Costa Rica", July 14, 2025.
48 Vinicio Chacón Soto, "ICD pide aprobar dos leyes para controlar mejor el lavado de dinero:»se movieron millones de dólares» en trasiego de ganado sin justificación", Seminario Universidad, February 26, 2026
49 Costa Rican Public Prosecutor's Office, "More than 1,000 wild animals are trafficked each year in Costa Rica", Judicial News, March 4, 2026.
50 Mariana Valladares, "Illegal Trade and Plundering of Insects: How Common Is It and How Does It Affect the Environment?", Teletica, June 1, 2026.

local level, conditions that create perfect ecosystems for corruption and criminal infiltration. For instance, the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC)—which is responsible for managning protected areas including the Corcovado National park and the Crucitas corridor—has faced repeated internal investigations into ranger complicity with illegal miners and wildlife traffickers, with officers allegedly accepting payments to ignore extraction activity or tip off criminal networks ahead of operations.[51]

In August 2025, the Comptroller General's Office published a damning audit of SINAC, report DFOE-SOS-IAD-00004-2025, which found that 81% of the forestry permits analyzed in 2024 failed to comply with at least one mandatory legal requirement, and 83% presented deficiencies in technical controls or document management.[52]

51 Juan Fernando Lara Salas, "Fiscalía alerta de posible corrupción en Sinac por irregularidades en centros privados de manejo de vida silvestre", La Nación, 1 Octobre 2020.

TRAFFICKING ROUTES AND HOTSPOTS

Crucitas and the northern zone. Illegally extracted gold is often moved into Nicaragua, where it is sold through intermediaries linked to foreign buyers, including Chinese companies, which can also be seen in different parts of the Amazonia —notably Suriname and Peru— to provide equipment to local miners and to launder illegal gold. These flows are facilitated by weak enforcement capacity in remote border regions and limited cross-border coordination between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, which criminal groups exploit to sustain both extraction and export operations.[53]

Southern Pacific and Osa Peninsula. Illegally extracted gold, as well as wildlife and timber, also moves southward into Panama before entering international commodity chains. Although routes may change once in Panama. Timber goes to the Atlantic coast while wildlife can exit Panama via its international airport or also through Pacific and Atlantic ports.

Airports and coastal Ports (Limón and Puntarenas). Wildlife tends to flow through San José's Juan Santamaría International Airport and the port of Limón, cancelled in cargo containers or carried by individual couriers for alive wildlife. Wildlife commodities ultimately end up in Europe —primarily Germany and the Czech Republic— as well as Asian and US markets.

52 Tico Times, "Costa Rica Faces Growing Outrage Over Illegal Logging in Sarapiquí", 11 April 2026.
53 Yeryis Salas, "Minería ilegal se especializó y se expandió afuera de Crucitas, alertó Mario Zamora a diputados," La Nación, 16 February 2026; Álvaro Murillo, "Illegal gold mining is rampant on Nicaragua-Costa Rica border, fueled by China's voracious appetite," El País, 18 March 2026.

PANAMA

Panama's criminal landscape is controlled by two dominant domestic factions: Bagdad and Calor Calor. Both emerged as street gangs in the 1990s and 2000s and evolved into sophisticated criminal syndicates, with an estimated 180 smaller gangs operating under their umbrella. Rather than engaging in ideological rivalries, both groups are almost exclusively focused on controlling cocaine transshipment routes through Panama's major ports, particularly in Panama City and Colón. They do this by building extensive corruption networks spanning fishermen, shipping company employees, cargo handlers, customs officials, and port security—renting these logistical services to foreign drug trafficking organizations in exchange for profit, and in some cases gaining partial ownership of shipments or expanding their own international reach into Europe and other key destinations. Criminal networks also engage in money laundering, migrant smuggling and environmental crimes—mainly deforestation, timber trafficking and illegal gold mining. However, these last two criminal enterprises depend on local and specialized criminal groups and individuals.

Foreign criminal networks also operate in Panama. The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces (AGC), also named Clan del Golfo, are the dominant foreign actor, controlling the Darien Gap and key Caribbean and Pacific ports that serve as launch points for cocaine entering Panama. Rather than establishing a permanent presence, the AGC operates through a subcontracting model, delegating logistics to Panamanian gangs while occasionally sending emissaries to oversee operations. Smaller Colombian groups, including the ELN and FARC dissidents, also use Pacific coastal routes to move cocaine through Panama, including shipments transiting the Panama Canal toward Europe.

Mexican and European actors play a more indirect role. The Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) dispatch emissaries to Panama to coordinate shipments rather than establishing permanent cells, relying on the same local logistics networks pioneered largely by the Sinaloa Cartel since the 1990s. European criminal organizations are even more removed from Panamanian operations—they typically negotiate cocaine purchases directly with Colombian suppliers or via brokers, and are more commonly found operating in South America than in Panama itself. That said, cocaine brokers of various nationalities do travel to Panama to coordinate container contamination for European-bound shipments, and isolated cases suggest some direct ties between Panamanian actors and European distribution networks are beginning to emerge.

Criminal convergence in Panama is of the utmost importance. Proceeds from human trafficking in Panama are frequently laundered through the country's banking sector, contraband connects Panama logistically with Latin America and Asia, and environmental crimes serve as additional money-laundering vehicles for drug trafficking.[54] Criminal networks use similar routes for trafficking drugs, timber, gold, and migrants—the latter primarily through the Darien.

Panama plays a pivotal role in the global cocaine trade, particularly in supplying Europe. Its geography and infrastructure make it uniquely suited for transnational trafficking. The country borders Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer, and sits at the crossroads of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. With the Panama Canal linking both coasts and several of Latin America's busiest ports, Panama offers ideal conditions for dispatching multi-ton cocaine shipments across the Atlantic.

Panama's role as a transit hub dates back to the 1980s, when Colombia's Medellín and Cali cartels began moving cocaine shipments through the country en route to the United States. The country also served as a meeting point and money laundering hub for Colombian and Galician traffickers, whose partnership solidified the nascent cocaine pipeline to Europe. This was made possible by the complicity of then-dictator Manuel Noriega, who provided political protection and refuge for drug lords and their families.[55]

Noriega's downfall following the 1989 US invasion of Panama, coupled with the collapse of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the mid-1990s, fractured the regional criminal panorama. New Colombian actors quickly filled the vacuum, joined by Mexican cartels and European mafias capable of distributing cocaine worldwide. Domestic gangs in Panama also began to emerge as facilitators for the larger groups, providing logistical services such as storage, transport, and port infiltration.

For much of Panama's history in the drug trade, the United States was the primary destination for cocaine transiting the country. Over time, however, Europe has gained importance as a consumer market, offering higher wholesale prices and steadily growing demand.

Panama has become one of the main launchpads for these flows. Its ports handle millions of containers annually, with hundreds of direct and indirect shipping routes to Europe. The Panama Canal further amplifies the country's value, allowing traffickers to shift cocaine shipments between Pacific and Atlantic routes with ease.

Authorities in Panama have seized record volumes of drugs, confiscating almost 100 tons of cocaine in 2025—a figure among the highest worldwide.[56] The increase has coincided with a production boom in Colombia and an intensifying appetite for cocaine in Europe.

Despite record seizures, Panamanian authorities have struggled to dismantle the networks behind the trade. Traffickers exploit the country's dollarized economy and role as an international banking and trade hub to launder illicit funds. Corruption further undermines enforcement: traffickers routinely bribe police, customs agents, and port officials to ensure the safe passage of drugs.

CRIMINAL NETWORKS

DOMESTIC ACTORS

Panama's criminal landscape is dominated by two rival factions: Bagdad and Calor Calor. Both began as modest youth gangs in the 1990s and 2000s but have evolved into powerful criminal syndicates capable of absorbing smaller gangs and partnering with some of Latin America's most powerful drug trafficking organizations.

Despite their dominance, relatively little is known about the hierarchy or membership of either group. Although Bagdad and Calor Calor are the largest criminal groups, Gang HP also play a relevant role in the Panamanian criminal landscape. Still, it is believed that most street gangs in Panama—of which there are an estimated 180—operate under the umbrella of either Badgad or Calor Calor.[57]

Operationally, the two factions are nearly indistinguishable. It is believed that both are laser-focused on controlling cocaine transshipment routes that link Panama to international markets, mirroring the service-oriented nature of their homeland. When they do engage in violence or other crimes, it is typically in defense of these drug routes, not the result of ideological rivalries or a desire to diversify their criminal portfolio.

As a result, both factions primarily seek control of territory around major shipping ports, particularly in Panama City and Colón. They have also cultivated extensive networks of collaborators to access transatlantic smuggling routes. This starts with residents of coastal communities and fishermen who collect and store cocaine shipments from South America in safehouses. The gangs then work with shipping company employees to locate containers for contamination and bribe freight drivers and cargo handlers to move drugs into the ports and load designated shipments. The gangs also exploit contacts within customs, police, and port security to source information on anti-drug operations, including which containers will be inspected.

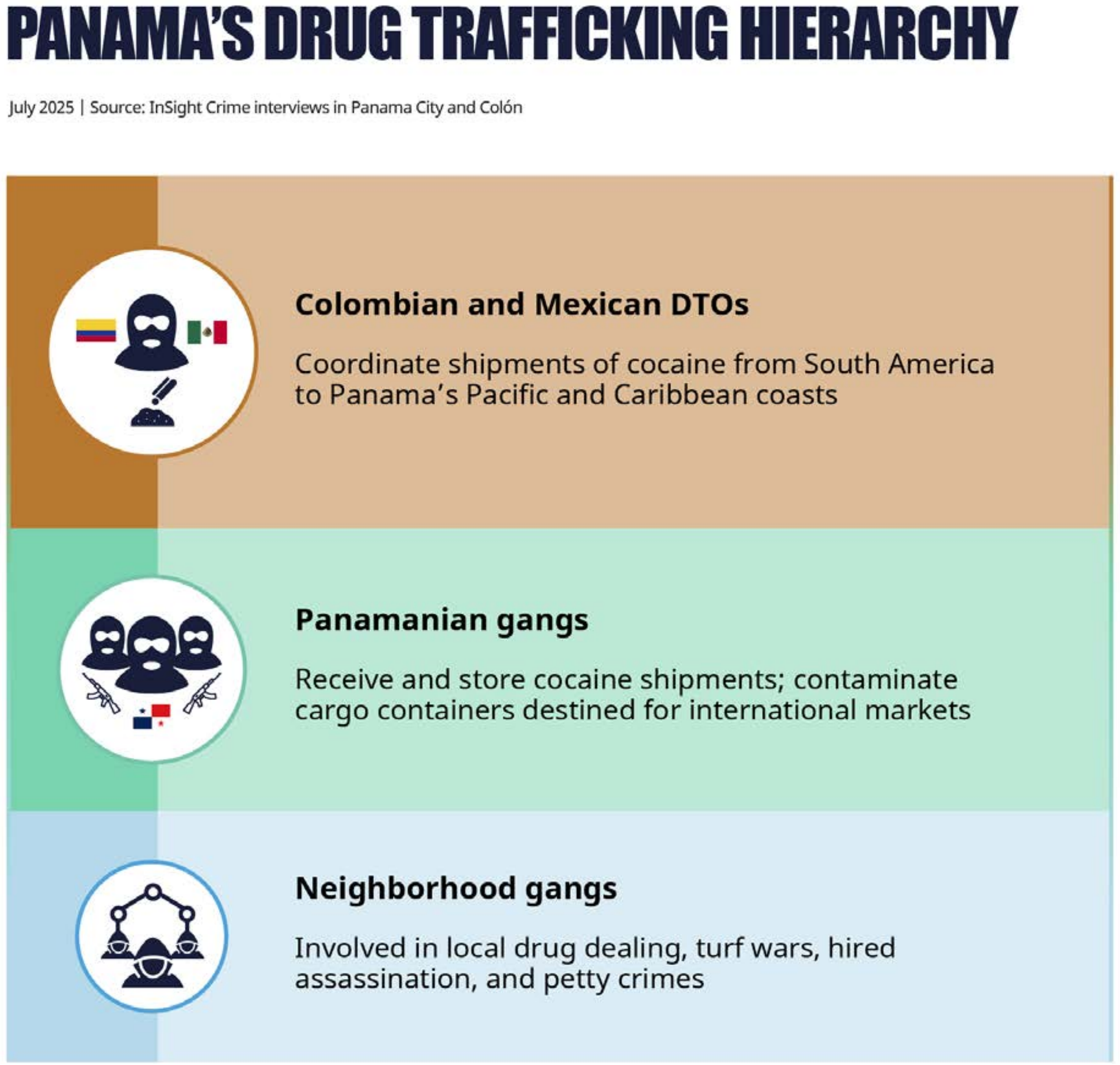
Maintaining these networks allows the gangs to rent transshipment services to transnational DTOs moving vast quantities of cocaine via Panama's shipping industry. Today, the two factions serve as the main points of contact for Colombian and Mexican DTOs moving cocaine from Panama to Europe, the United States, and beyond. This relationship has allowed

54 Global Organized Crime Index (2025), Crime at a crossroads, "Panama profile".

55 Arnulfo Barroso, "Noriega refugió a Pablo Escobar", Panamá América, 31 May 2017.

56 Seizure data from Panama's National Institute of Forensic Sciences.

57 Saydie Gonzalez, "Más de 150 pandillas operan a nivel nacional: menores de 25 años son las principales víctimas," TVN, 5 June 2025.



some Panamanian gang members to rise within international trafficking circuits, in some cases becoming partial owners of drug shipments or traveling abroad to conduct business in Europe and Dubai.

Bagdad

Bagdad emerged in the 1990s as part of a gang alliance known as the Soviet Union (Unión Soviética), which brought together three gangs based in Panama City: Bagdad, the Pentagon (El Pentágono), and Killed or be Killed (Matar o Morir – MOM).[58]

58 Kenneth Mira, Alexandra Sosa, Eduardo Camaño, "Bandas juveniles, alternativa de supervivencia en edades de 14 a 16 años, corregimiento de Chorrillo, provincia de Panamá," Revista Semilla Científica, no. 3, (2022), pp. 399–426.

The gang cut its teeth in the drug trade by hijacking cocaine shipments passing through Panama—a practice known as *tumbe*. As its influence expanded, Bagdad shifted from thief to facilitator, transitioning from drug heists to logistics operations.

Drug profits have been used to establish a presence in key logistical hubs and coastal areas in Panama City and Colón, in addition to border provinces such as Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí. The gang has also recruited smaller gangs to widen its access to export routes and fortify its logistical infrastructure. Bagdad has also demonstrated its ability to corrupt port workers and law enforcement officials, who help facilitate drug operations and shield members from arrest.[59]

Colombian and Mexican DTOs subcontract Bagdad to manage the Panama leg of international cocaine-smuggling operations. This relationship has allowed Bagdad to expand its international reach, a trend highlighted by arrests of its members in Europe. The gang's alleged leader, Jaime Powell Rodríguez, alias "Yunya," was arrested in Spain in February 2023 on suspicion of laundering drug money with contraband gold sent from Panama.[60] Rodríguez, who allegedly coordinated cocaine shipments from Panama to Europe, had previously been arrested in Dubai in 2018[61] but was freed the following year after being extradited to Panama.[62]

The gang has also maintained an operations base in neighboring Costa Rica, where one of the group's founders and main leaders was arrested in 2023, according to press and academic reports.[63] Internal rifts stemming from disputes over drug shipments and attempts to form offshoots have splintered the gang.[64]

Calor Calor

As with Badgad, little is known about Calor Calor's beginnings. According to law enforcement, Calor Calor was formed inside La Joyita prison—a notorious detention center near Panama City—when inmates opposed to Bagdad united under a new banner. Other sources offer a broader account, claiming that rivals of the Soviet Union coalition, which once included Bagdad, came together to resist extortion and drug theft.[65]

Over time, Calor Calor has become an indispensable service provider for transnational DTOs moving cocaine through Panama, particularly shipments bound for Europe and the United States. The gang is Bagdad's only serious competitor for control of transshipment routes, especially those passing through major ports and coastal areas where drug shipments arrive.

One of Calor Calor's alleged leaders, Eduardo Macea Alonzo, alias "Marshall," rose to power in Colón and reportedly established control of transshipment routes to Europe via the city's ports while maintaining ties to both police and judicial officials.[66] (He was arrested in 2019 and has since been sentenced to 15 years in prison for gang-related offenses.[67])

HP Gang

Originating in the eastern part of the country between 2016 and 2017, little is known about the internal structure of the criminal group "Humildad y Pureza" (HP Gang). The gang is responsible for a significant portion of the homicides in the country's capital and have connections with and support from criminal actors, primarily Colombian and Mexican.

Its expansion into logistics, money

59 Anastasia Austin, "Can DEA Dismantle Panama's Top Gang?," InSight Crime, 26 April 2021.
60 Panama Attorney General's Office, "Ordenan la detención provisional con fines de extradición alias 'Yunya'," 22 February 2023; El País, "Cae en Madrid el jefe del cartel de Bagdad, que blanqueaba con lingotes de oro los beneficios de la cocaína," 23 February 2023.
61 Guadalupe León Barría, "Detienen en Dubái a colonense que se dedicaba al tráfico de droga a Europa," La Estrella de Panamá, 25 June 2018.
62 EFE, "Pedirán extradición de panameño detenido en España para procesarlo en Panamá," 23 February 2023.
63 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Anuario 2015 de la seguridad regional en América Latina y el Caribe," December 2015; EFE, "Costa Rica extradita a EEUU al narcotraficante panameño «Cholo Chorrillo»," 2 March 2023.
64 Anastasia Austin, "Rift in Bagdad Crime Syndicate Fueling Violence in Panama," InSight Crime, 8 June 2020.

65 Kenneth Mira, Alexandra Sosa, Eduardo Camaño, "Bandas juveniles, alternativa de supervivencia en edades de 14 a 16 años, corregimiento de Chorrillo, provincia de Panamá," Revista Semilla Científica, no. 3, (2022), pp. 399–426.
66 La Prensa, "Marshall, capo de la ciudad de Colón, busca salir de Punta Coco," 21 March 2019.
67 Panama Attorney General's Office, "Condenan a alias Marshall a 15 años de prisión por posesión agravada de drogas," 3 August 2022.

laundering, and operations across much of the country has led to a shift in how the group is classified, evolving from a gang into a broader criminal network connecting criminal structures in Colombia—primarily the AGC—with routes to Mexico.

HP is linked to homicides, small-scale drug trafficking, extortion, logistics for drug trafficking, money laundering, and the settling of scores.[68]

Although there have been several arrests of members of the HP criminal group in recent years, the alleged leader of the HP Gang, Carlos Roberto Aguilar Becerra, remains a fugitive.

COLOMBIAN ACTORS

Successive generations of Colombian DTOs have used Panama as a transshipment point for cocaine, thanks to its proximity to Colombia's coca-growing regions and the wealth of international shipping routes offered by its ports.

To move cocaine through the country, Colombian groups finance Panamanian gangs that receive and store shipments arriving from Colombia before coordinating their departure from Panamanian ports. Part of this effort involves bribing port workers responsible for security and loading shipping containers, in addition to customs authorities charged with inspecting cargo for suspect items.

The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC)

The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC), also known as the Gaitanistas or Clan del Golfo, is one of Colombia's most powerful drug trafficking organizations, controlling much of the cross-border cocaine economy between Colombia and Panama.[69] The group participates in every stage of the supply chain, from coca cultivation and cocaine hydrochloride production to international distribution.

The Gulf of Urabá, straddling the departments of Antioquia and Chocó, serves as the AGC's operational base. The group controls the Darien Gap, securing access to the border with Panama and both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.[70]

On the Atlantic side, the AGC controls nearly the entire northern trafficking corridor. It maintains a strong presence in strategic ports such as Turbo, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, La Guajira, and in the Gulf of Morrosquillo, between the departments of Córdoba and Sucre. These serve as key launch points for maritime cocaine shipments headed for Central America and the Caribbean. On the Pacific coast, particularly in Chocó, the group controls long stretches of the coastline, providing access to maritime routes reaching Mexico, Central America, and even Australia.[71]

Rather than establishing a permanent presence in Panama, the AGC operates through a subcontracting model. The group hires Panamanian gangs to handle logistics, including receiving shipments, storing them, and contaminating cargo bound for European ports. This arrangement mirrors the hybrid network structure the AGC employs in Colombia, where it often delegates criminal operations to affiliated cells.[72] Emissaries are sometimes sent from Colombia to oversee critical stages of the operation.

The AGC has also consolidated its influence in Panama by corrupting local security forces. In 2021, Panamanian officials arrested over 50 people tied to the AGC, including five police officers. At the time, the police said the group was responsible for more than half of all cocaine shipments passing through the country. The AGC has also laundered drug proceeds through companies registered in Panama. In Operation Fisher, authorities dismantled a criminal network tied to the group and seized $10 million in cash near Colón.[73]

Colombian police believe the AGC's trafficking networks span 28 countries across four continents. Beyond routes to the United States, the group has sent cocaine shipments to Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Ireland, England, Italy, Albania, and Ukraine. Their reach now includes Australia and Asian countries such as Iran, China, and the United Arab Emirates.[74]

To reach these markets, the AGC negotiates directly with international trafficking syndicates. Italian mafias—including the Camorra, 'Ndrangheta, and Cosa Nostra—have operatives in Colombia who coordinate container shipments, ensure quality control, and manage departure schedules. Recent arrests, including those of Emanuele "Dollarino" Gregorini in Cartagena and Gustavo Nocella in Medellín, underscore the Italian mafia's extensive involvement in AGC-led exports.[75] The AGC also works with Balkan criminal groups, particularly Albanian mafias, to deliver cocaine to Europe and facilitate the reverse flow of arms into Colombia.[76]

In addition to drug trafficking, the AGC profits from migrant smuggling through the Darien Gap. It exerts near-total control over land-based smuggling routes in the Darien and coastal towns in Colombia such as Necolí and Turbo, which have long served as departure points for migrant boats. The group earns money by extorting formal and informal businesses involved in the trade, including boat operators and jungle guides. This practice continues, although migrant flows have declined sharply in 2025 following changes in US immigration policy.

The group is also involved in gold trafficking in Panama, leveraging its territorial control in border zones to move illegal gold into Panama, where it can be laundered into legitimate supply chains and sent to Europe. Alternatively, gold-based trading serves to launder illicit funds from drug trafficking.[77]

Other Colombian criminal groups

Although the AGC dominates the cocaine-smuggling corridor between Colombia and Panama, several other Colombian DTOs also operate routes through the Central American smuggling corridor.

This includes prominent groups such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and dissidents of the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas

68 Critica, "One of the HP members was killed on the street. Meet the feared gang from the East," 11 May 2026.

69 InSight Crime, "Mapping the AGC's Migrant Smuggling Network Across Colombia's Darién Gap," June 2024; Lara Loaiza, "Raids Reveal Gaitanistas' Grasp Reaches Panama," InSight Crime, 6 December 2021.

70 InSight Crime, "Gaitanistas – Gulf Clan," 18 March 2025.

71 Javier Patiño C, "El Clan del Golfo: Historia y estructura de uno de los grupos criminales más temidos de Colombia," Cambio, 22 October 2024.

72 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) o Clan del Golfo y las disputas con los denominados Caparros: Reconfiguración actual del conflicto armado en el Bajo Cauca antioqueño y sur de Córdoba," August 2022.

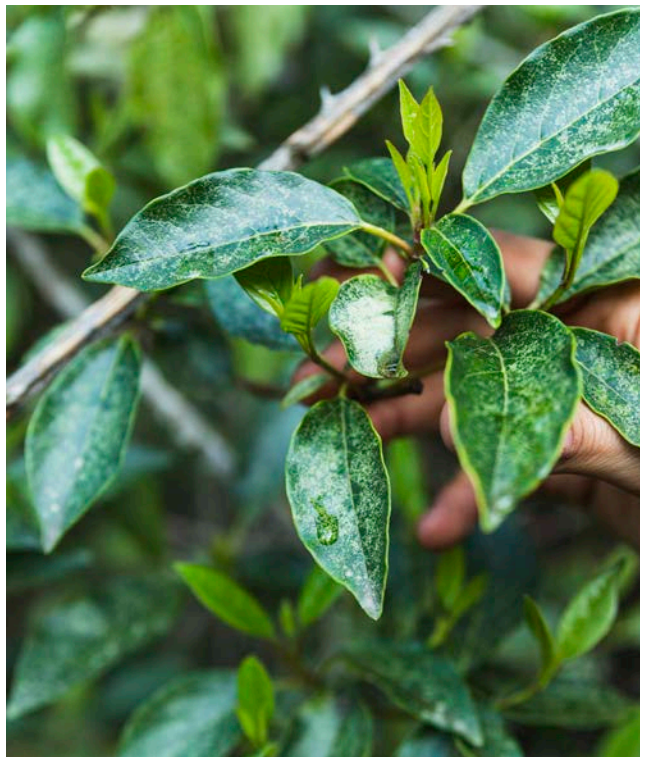
73 DW, "Incautan en Panamá USD 9,9 millones ligados a Clan del Golfo," 3 December 2021.

74 Associated Press, "Clan del Golfo envía droga a 28 países en alianza con mafias," 3 November 2021.

75 Diego Stacey, "Los tentáculos de la mafia italiana en Colombia: cocaína a menor costo y negocios con el Clan del Golfo," El Pais, 5 April 2025.

76 El Espectador, "Cae en Barranquilla Admir Tutaj, quien estaría al servicio de la mafia albanesa," 24 August 2024.

77 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Free trade zones and illicit gold flows in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2022.



Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC). Both control river routes along Colombia's Pacific coast.[78] These serve as departure points for cocaine shipments transported in go-fast boats, semi-submersibles, and other small vessels to Central America and Mexico.

In 2022, Colombian and Panamanian authorities dismantled a suspected trafficking ring linked to FARC dissidents that allegedly coordinated shipments from Colombia's department of Chocó to islands off Panama's Pacific coast, eventually destined for Europe.[79]

These groups have also gained access to Colombia's largest Pacific port, Buenaventura,[80] allowing them to move drugs to Europe through commercial cargo routes—some of which transit the Panama Canal en route to Europe.

78 InSight Crime, "Criminal Dynamics and Drug Trafficking in Buenaventura," 2024.
79 EFE, "Desmantelan una red de narcos de las disidencias de las FARC en Colombia y Panamá," 24 May 2022.
80 InSight Crime, "Criminal Dynamics and Drug Trafficking in Buenaventura," 2024.

MEXICAN ACTORS

Mexican drug trafficking organizations have long used Panama as a transit point for cocaine bound for the United States. Much like their Colombian counterparts, Mexican DTOs subcontract Panamanian logistics networks to move cocaine through Panama. These groups typically dispatch emissaries to oversee shipments in partnership with local actors instead of establishing permanent cells in the country.

Central America serves as a crucial bridge between Mexican criminal groups and cocaine producers in Colombia. Mexican DTOs are often obliged to smuggle drugs through Panama, usually overland in trucks or at sea in small boats, to reach neighboring Costa Rica or countries further north, such as Honduras and Guatemala.

The Sinaloa Cartel, which has been active in Panama since at least the 1990s, helped pioneer the subcontracting model that prevails in Central America today. The group finances cocaine transshipment logistics in Panama. Panamanian authorities have arrested alleged Sinaloa emissaries operating in the country, including some with links to former Colombian guerrilla groups.[81] The group has also relied on Mexican brokers to negotiate with guerrilla factions and coordinate shipments via Panama.[82]

The Sinaloa Cartel's main rival, the CJNG, has also dispatched emissaries to Panama to coordinate drug shipments, according to US prosecutors.[83]

81 James Bargent, "Sinaloa Cartel, FARC Network Dismantled in Panama," InSight Crime, 5 November 2015; Mimi Yagoub, "Sinaloa Cell Captured in Panama; Local Gangs Step Up Power," InSight Crime, 22 March 2016.
82 Zeta, "Un matrimonio de mexicanos es acusado por Panamá de ser enlace entre el Cártel de Sinaloa y las FARC," 15 August 2017.
83 United States Department of Justice, "Michoacan trafficker captured in Panama sent to US prison," 2 August 2023.

The extent to which Mexican criminal groups participate in European-bound cocaine shipments from Panama is difficult to assess. There are no documented cases of seizures in Europe linked to shipments from Panama involving Mexican cartels, nor evidence of direct links between Mexican emissaries and European brokers operating in Panama or elsewhere. Nevertheless, groups like the Sinaloa Cartel maintain the local contacts needed to move illicit products through Panama's ports. And there are examples of large-scale cocaine shipments sent from Mexico to Europe via Panama's ports as recently as August 2025.[84]

EUROPEAN ACTORS

There is no clear evidence of an established presence of European mafias in Panama. European criminal groups often negotiate cocaine shipments directly with Colombian suppliers or via brokers, bypassing Panamanian gangs. This may help explain why European traffickers are more commonly found operating in South American countries than in transit hubs like Panama.

Still, cocaine brokers—whether European, Colombian, or Mexican—travel to Panama to meet with the logistics networks responsible for contaminating cargo containers bound for Europe.

There are also signs that international trafficking networks distributing cocaine in Europe have established direct ties with Panamanian actors. In 2022, for instance, a Panamanian citizen was arrested in Dubai on suspicion of shipping cocaine from the port of Manzanillo to Spain to supply to a group of European drug rings.[85] Such cases remain uncommon.

84 Panama National Police [@policiadepanama], *Durante acciones operativas en un puerto del Atlántico, incautamos 1,488 paquetes de presunta droga dentro de un contenedor, procedente de México y destino final Bélgica,* posted to X, 6 August 2025.

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES: DRUG TRAFFICKING CORRIDORS

Panama functions almost exclusively as a transit nation in the cocaine pipeline to Europe. The country has no tradition of coca cultivation or cocaine production, nor is it home to a significant consumer market for the drug. Instead, its role as a global logistics hub makes it a critical asset to drug traffickers moving cocaine around the world.

Hundreds of commercial shipping routes link Panama to cocaine-producing countries in South America and consumer markets in Europe, the United States, and beyond. Its proximity to Colombia, the world's largest producer of cocaine, guarantees a steady supply of cocaine flows through Panamanian territory en route to global consumers.

ROUTES FROM SOUTH AMERICA TO PANAMA

Most cocaine enters Panama from neighboring Colombia, with drug traffickers exploiting maritime smuggling routes in both Caribbean and Pacific waters to move shipments between the two countries.

Caribbean Route

Colombian DTOs source cocaine from coca-growing regions in northern Colombia. The bulk of production occurs in the departments of Norte de Santander and Bolívar, in addition to Bajo Cauca, a subregion of Antioquia. From there, cocaine is transported by land to the Caribbean coast. Shipments mainly leave

85 Douwe den Held, "Was a Super Cartel Really Controlling Europe's Drug Trade?," InSight Crime, 29 November 2022.

Colombia from the Gulf of Urabá—a coastal region straddling the departments of Antioquia and Chocó—and the Gulf of Morrosquillo, located in the departments of Córdoba and Sucre. Criminal groups use go-fast boats to ferry cocaine to Panama, offloading shipments on beaches and coastal inlets in the Atlantic provinces of Guna Yala, Colón, and Bocas del Toro.

Panamanian authorities have also intercepted semi-submersible vessels on this route, though such cases are less common.[86]

Most semi-submersibles departing from the Gulf of Urabá in Colombia are not bound for Panama. Rather, they aim to reach countries closer to Mexico and the United States, such as Honduras and Guatemala. These vessels are difficult to detect, as traffickers often paint them in camouflage to blend with their ocean surroundings.

Pacific Route

The Pacific route follows a similar pattern, with drug traffickers using go-fast boats to move cocaine from the Colombian departments of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño to Panama's southern coast. Panamanian authorities have also intercepted semi-submersible vessels along this route, though these boats are usually bound for Guatemala and Mexico.

Traffickers also exploit commercial shipping routes, enabling larger shipments from ports in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

Criminal groups identify freight routes that will transit through Panama en route to Europe and stash drug loads in shipping containers. Guayaquil represents a major source of contaminated shipping containers.

Land Routes

The land border between Panama and Colombia runs through the remote Darien region, a dense expanse of rainforest crisscrossed by informal trails used to smuggle drugs, cash, and migrants. In recent years, Colombian criminal groups have exploited migrant flows to move cocaine through the Darien using human couriers. Yet the quantities of cocaine moved along this route are minimal compared to maritime shipping lanes, and far fewer couriers are available as migration through the area has declined following the enactment of stricter US border controls in 2025.

ROUTES FROM PANAMA TO EUROPE

Cocaine shipments from South America often land in Panama on remote beaches, coastal inlets, and small islands. Sometimes, drugs are offloaded at sea and collected by nearby fishermen. On the Atlantic side, loads are usually destined for the Caribbean provinces of Guna Yala, Colón, and Bocas del Toro. From there, criminal groups move drugs by land and sea to ports in Colón.

Colón is a strategic part of the cocaine pipeline to Europe. The city is home to Panama's main Atlantic ports: Cristóbal, the Manzanillo International Terminal (MIT), and the Colón Container Terminal (CCT). More drugs were seized in Colón than in any other department between 2020 and 2025, with authorities confiscating over 200 tons.[87]

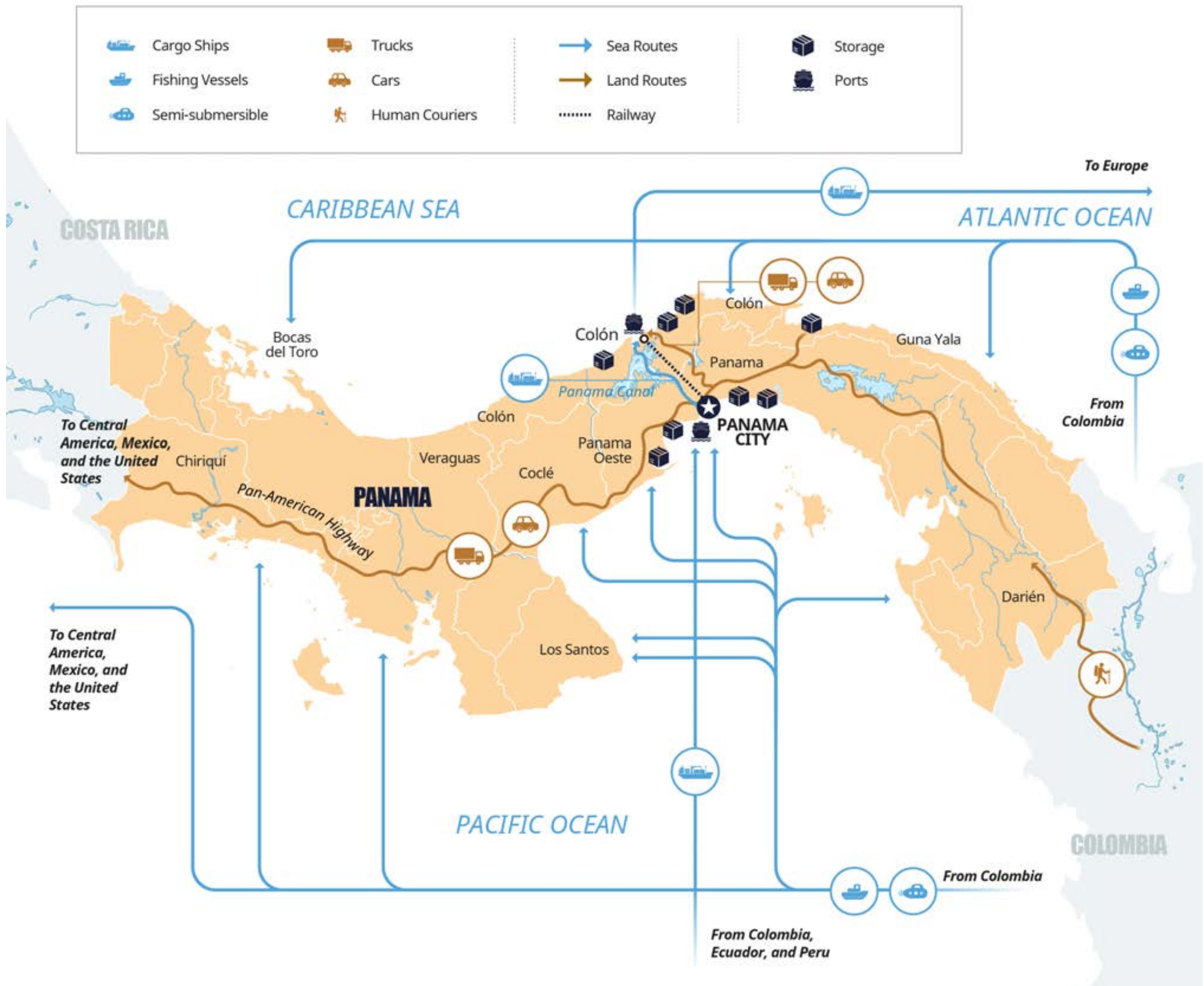
86 General Command of the Colombian Armed Forces, "Armada de Colombia y Senan de Panamá incautaron 5 toneladas de Cocaína," 20 February 2020; EFE, "Incautan en Panamá 625 paquetes de presunta cocaína en un semisumergible," 11 August 2022.

87 Panama Ministry of Public Security, "Informes Preliminares de Incautación de Drogas," n.d.

EL PACCTO 2.0

DRUG TRAFFICKING ROUTES IN PANAMA

September 2025 | Source: InSight Crime investigations



Local gangs in Colón specialize in receiving and storing cocaine shipments arriving from South America. In some cases, the gangs pay coastal dwellers to safeguard the drugs before onward shipment.

On the Pacific side, cocaine is mainly offloaded in the southern provinces of Panama, Panama Oeste, Coclé, Los Santos, and Darién, all within the Gulf of Panama. The province of Panama Oeste recorded the country's second-highest drug seizure total between 2020 and 2025, with 142 tons seized.[88] From these landing points, traffickers move cocaine by land and sea to Panama City, where it can be transported to Colón via the Panama Canal and its adjacent road and rail links.

RECEPTION POINTS

Panama's Atlantic ports offer hundreds of direct and indirect shipping routes to Europe, allowing criminal groups to deliver cocaine to almost any EU member state. Historically, large volumes of cocaine have moved to the EU's busiest container ports, including Antwerp (Belgium), Rotterdam (the Netherlands), and Algeciras (Spain).

88 Panama Ministry of Public Security, "Informes Preliminares de Incautación de Drogas," n.d.

Between 2018 and 2021, Colón ranked as the eighth most significant point of origin for cocaine seized in Belgium, accounting for nearly 16 tons, according to EUDA data.[89] Authorities in Colón have also intercepted multi-hundred-kilogram shipments of cocaine bound for the Netherlands and Spain.

These three countries still represent the main gateway to Europe for cocaine transiting Panama. But arrivals have diversified in response to tighter security at ports in Northern Europe, with recent seizures exposing cocaine routes between Panama and countries like Italy,[90] Portugal,[91] Russia,[92] France,[93] Germany,[94] Slovenia,[95] Sweden,[96] and Denmark.[97]

Once in Europe, criminal networks infiltrate ports to extract cocaine from cargo containers. The extraction method depends on how the shipment was contaminated. With rip-on/rip-off, the most common method for shipments loaded in Panama, so-called "clearers" enter the port to remove cocaine from legitimate cargo before the importer collects it, replacing the container seal to avoid detection.[98]

89 European Union Drugs Agency, "Europe and the global cocaine trade," 2022.
90 Colombian National Police, "Cooperación internacional permitió la incautación de 600 kilos de cocaína en Panamá," 18 January 2021.
91 Yelina Pérez Sánchez, "Decomisan 750 paquetes de presunta droga en un puerto panameño," La Estrella, 14 July 2024.
92 Attorney General's Office, [@PGN_PANAMA], *#Decomiso | La Fiscalía de Drogas de Colón y Guna Yala, en diligencia de allanamiento y registro a un contenedor proveniente de Ecuador, ubica 920 paquetes de presunta droga que tenía como destino Rusia*, Post, X, 20 April 2024.
93 Santiago Arrieta, "Hallan 400 kilos de cocaína dentro de un contenedor en puerto del Pacífico en Panamá," La República, 19 August 2025.
94 Primicias, "Cocaína valorada en más de USD 86 millones salió desde Ecuador con destino a Alemania," 5 August 2025.
95 La Estrella, "Panamá incauta 1.901 paquetes de presunta cocaína con destino a Eslovenia," 15 August 2022.
96 Panama National Police, "Policía incauta 410 paquetes con droga en un puerto," 15 October 2024.
97 Panama Ministry of Public Security [@MinSegPma], *#Colón | Mediante acciones operativas en un puerto de la provincia, unidades policiales capturan a una persona que custodiaba 696 paquetes con droga que estaban ocultos en un contenedor. La carga era proveniente de Seattle, Estados Unidos con destino a Dinamarca. #SinTregua*, Post, X, 2 April 2024.
98 María Fernanda Ramírez, "Container Shipping: Cocaine Hide and Seek," InSight Crime, 8 February 2021.

If retrieval inside the port is not feasible—such as when cocaine is hidden within the container's structure or buried deep inside legitimate goods—traffickers wait until the container leaves the port before extracting the shipment. In both scenarios, criminal groups rely on complicit port staff and freight drivers to access contaminated cargo.[99]

There are also signs that criminal groups are seeking to bypass port security by offloading cocaine from container ships into waters off the coast of Spain and Portugal.[100] Smaller vessels then collect the shipments and transport them to landing points in Western Europe. This appears to be an emerging trend, not specifically linked to Panama or Central America.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Beyond Europe, Panama has long served as a transit point for drug shipments bound for Mexico and the United States. The Pan-American Highway connects Panama to the rest of Central America, allowing cocaine to be moved north by freight trucks and private vehicles through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala before reaching Mexico and the United States.

There is also some cocaine trafficking by air from Panama to Europe, though the volumes are minuscule compared to maritime smuggling. Drug traffickers use air cargo and human couriers departing from Panama's Tocumen International Airport to reach destinations across Europe.[101]

99 María Fernanda Ramírez, "Container Shipping: Cocaine Hide and Seek," InSight Crime, 8 February 2021.
100 Reuters, "Spain seizes 30 tons of cocaine in record European haul, detains 23 crew," 8 May 2026.
101 DW, "Panamá desmantela red que traficó drogas hacia Europa," 2 September 2021.

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES: MONEY LAUNDERING

Panama's role as a hub for international trade and finance has made it a prime target for drug traffickers looking to launder cocaine proceeds. Criminal groups typically disguise dirty money within legitimate private-sector transactions or route it through intricate webs of shell companies. These schemes are aided by Panama's dollarized economy, which eliminates currency exchange controls and facilitates the movement of drug money through the financial system.

The extent of financial crimes was laid bare by the Panama Papers, a media investigation published in 2016 that exposed how Panamanian and offshore companies were used to launder illicit funds, including prominent Mexican drug traffickers such as Rafael Caro Quintero and individuals linked to the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG).[102] The international backlash following the Panama Papers prompted reforms, including tougher regulations on financial transparency, stricter due diligence requirements, and enhanced reporting of suspicious banking activity. In 2023, Panama was removed from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list.[103] Still, it is believed that it remains relatively easy to open companies, and criminal groups have adapted by breaking up payments into smaller transfers to avoid detection.

Panama is also home to the Colón Free Zone (CFZ)—one of the largest duty-free trade areas in the world. Its loose oversight has made it a focal point for trade-based money laundering. Criminal networks use drug profits to purchase cheap, high-volume goods—often counterfeit—which they then export across Latin America. Selling these goods in legitimate markets launders the illicit capital. Alternatively, traffickers may manipulate invoices—overvaluing or undervaluing purchases—to make illegal profits appear as regular business expenses, among other tactics.

Multiple private sector sources believe the CFZ remains a hub for money laundering, despite efforts to improve oversight and oblige companies to report suspicious trade activity. This includes gold-based money laundering, whereby transactions involving illegal gold—predominantly jewelry—serve to launder the proceeds of illicit trafficking.[104]

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES: ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

Because of the Panama Canal's logistical capabilities and its proximity to countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Peru—where criminal networks specializing in environmental crimes are more sophisticated—Panama has become a node for transnational environmental crime, functioning simultaneously as a source, transit, and destination country.

The Darien Gap—a 106-kilometer stretch of dense jungle where the Pan-American Highway ends—is the central geographic enabler of environmental crime, providing cover for drug traffickers, migrant smugglers, illegal loggers, miners, and cattle ranchers operating in parallel criminal ecosystems.

Illegal gold mining is a lucrative criminal activity connected to money laundering, as it allows gold of illicit origin to be introduced into the legitimate economy.

102 Elyssa Pachico, "Panama Papers Highlight How LatAm's Elites Hide Wealth," InSight Crime, 4 April 2016.
103 Elida Moreno and Valentine Hilaire, "Panama exits financial crime watchdog FATF's gray list," Reuters, 27 October 2023.

104 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Free trade zones and illicit gold flows in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2022.

The main hotspots for illegal gold mining are the Darien, Guna Yala, and Colón Provinces. Investigations and operations into illegal gold mining have exposed child labour, human trafficking, and mercury contamination.[105]

Panama also functions as a transit country for illegal gold, most of which originates in Colombia, Venezuela, and Peru. Smuggled gold often follows existing routes controlled by major Colombian DTOs, with small vessels moving gold from Colombian Caribbean coastal towns to remote beaches in Panama.[106]

Illegal mining of other natural resources has also increased substantially in recent years. In particular, since the closure of a copper mine operated by First Quantum Minerals Ltd., the number of illegal mining sites in and around the Cobre Panama rainforest has risen by 317 percent, from 60 sites in 2023 to 250 in 2024.[107]

Illegal timber, meanwhile, is mainly sourced from the Darien region and shipped from Colón to global markets. Traffickers target high-value species like *cocobolo* (Dalbergia retusa), prized for luxury furniture.[108] Timber exports move in containers, though given the size of logs, traffickers cannot employ the same methods used to conceal drug shipments.

Given the distinctive color of cocobolo wood and how easily it can be identified visually, criminal groups tend to let it dry for a certain period of time to prevent forestry and customs authorities from easily identifying it. The routes used for its illicit shipment to Europe can vary depending on the level of pressure from law enforcement, customs, and judicial authorities. Direct routes via containers have been identified to ports such as Algeciras, Valencia, and Rotterdam, as well as to ports in West Africa where the wood is temporarily stored before being shipped onward to Europe along the African Atlantic coast. Asian countries are also final destinations for cocobolo wood, which is used in the production of luxury goods—mainly furniture, car interiors, and yachts.

As their primary modus operandi, criminal groups use local and Indigenous communities as a legal front for acquiring and receiving light and heavy machinery used for illegal mining and deforestation. This adds a layer of complexity to investigations into the actual destination and use of the acquired machinery and the criminal group behind it.[109] Criminal groups also use these communities to more easily reach jungle areas with the help of people who are familiar with the geography and weather conditions in one of the densest jungles on the planet.

105 Interpol, "Americas: Environmental crime operation leads to 225 arrests, identifies hundreds more suspects", 25 October 2025.
106 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Free trade zones and illicit gold flows in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2022.
107 Bloomberg News, "Illegal mining soars near First Quantum's idled Panama mine", 13 August 2024.
108 Juan Diego Cárdenas, "Panama Struggles to Fight Timber Trafficking in Forests and Ports," InSight Crime, 4 April 2022.

109 Mimi Yagoub, "Which Colombian Crime Group Run Illegal Mining in Panama?" InSight Crime 16 November 2016.

SPECIFIC FOCUS: PORT CHOKEPOINTS

The trafficking of illicit goods such as drugs or timber between Costa Rica, Panama, and Europe or other final destinations occurs primarily by sea via containers, as they are difficult to inspect, can carry larger loads than other modes of transport, and remain relatively inexpensive compared to air transport.

Port infrastructure such as the Moín Container Terminal, the Port of Limón, and the Port of Caldera, all in Costa Rica, or the Manzanillo International Terminal, the Port of Cristóbal, and the Colón Container Terminal, all in Panama, facilitate the trafficking of both legal and illicit goods originating from, transiting through, or destined for Panama or Costa Rica. Criminal groups systematically seek to infiltrate and control certain key points within the ports to facilitate the contamination of containers.

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica's ports play a pivotal role in the cocaine pipeline to Europe, as criminal groups leverage the country's export infrastructure to meet growing demand in European markets.

Costa Rica operates three main ports: Limón and Moín on the Caribbean coast and Caldera on the Pacific. Traffickers lean heavily on Caribbean ports—particularly the APM Terminals Moín Seaport, which opened in 2019—to move cocaine to Europe via direct shipping lanes.[110]

Authorities have seized more cocaine at APM Terminals than at any other Costa Rican port since 2019, with seizures peaking at 11.7 tons in 2020.[111] In 2024, authorities seized 3.61 tons at Moín, compared to just 0.2 tons at Caldera,[112] highlighting the Caribbean's pivotal role in drug transshipment. EUDA data reinforces this trend: between 2018 and 2021, traffickers used Moín more than any other terminal to ship cocaine to Belgian ports.[113]

Before the opening of APM Terminals, traffickers mainly smuggled smaller quantities of cocaine through the adjacent, state-operated port in Limón, with flows largely directed toward the United States. The launch of the new terminal in 2019 shifted this dynamic by increasing both the volume and frequency of container traffic to Europe, creating new opportunities for large-scale trafficking. The terminal's container flows—1.2 million TEU annually—provide significant cover for traffickers moving cocaine within legitimate exports, such as pineapples, bananas, yuca, and plantains. Operated by the Danish shipping company Maersk, Moín offers direct shipments between Costa Rica and Northern Europe, reducing the need for transshipment.

110 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions One of the Caribbean's Largest Narcotics Traffickers and His Network," 22 January 2026..
111 Costa Rican Drug Control Police and Ministry of Public Security, "Decomisos de drogas en terminales portuarias, 2019-2024."
112 Costa Rican Drug Control Police and Ministry of Public Security, "Decomisos de drogas en terminales portuarias, 2019-2024."
113 European Union Drugs Agency, "Europe and the global cocaine trade," updated 6 May 2022.

CONTAMINATION OUTSIDE PORTS

Criminal groups use several methods to contaminate containers before they reach port facilities. Container contamination outside ports was particularly widespread before Costa Rican authorities began routinely scanning EU-bound cargo passing through Moín.

Common methods include tampering with legitimate cargo at the point of origin, such as farms or export processing plants. Traffickers often select containers carrying dry or perishable goods, which are less likely to face delays or intensive inspections at port. Alternatively, criminal groups may load cocaine into legitimate cargo during transit. Truck drivers transporting containers often collaborate with criminal groups, stopping at prearranged locations where contamination occurs.

Costa Rican authorities have identified a range of concealment techniques within cargo. These include hiding cocaine within or beneath wooden pallets, attaching packages to the underside of fruit boxes, embedding them in frozen goods, or placing them inside fruit and vegetables. More sophisticated approaches involve chemical processes that integrate cocaine into export products. In one case, a criminal network concealed cocaine within frozen yuca powder to transport it from Colombia via Costa Rica to Europe, exploiting the product's density and color to evade detection.[114]

114 Europol, "Frozen yucca, hidden cocaine: drug route from Costa Rica to Europe dismantled," 12 June 2025.

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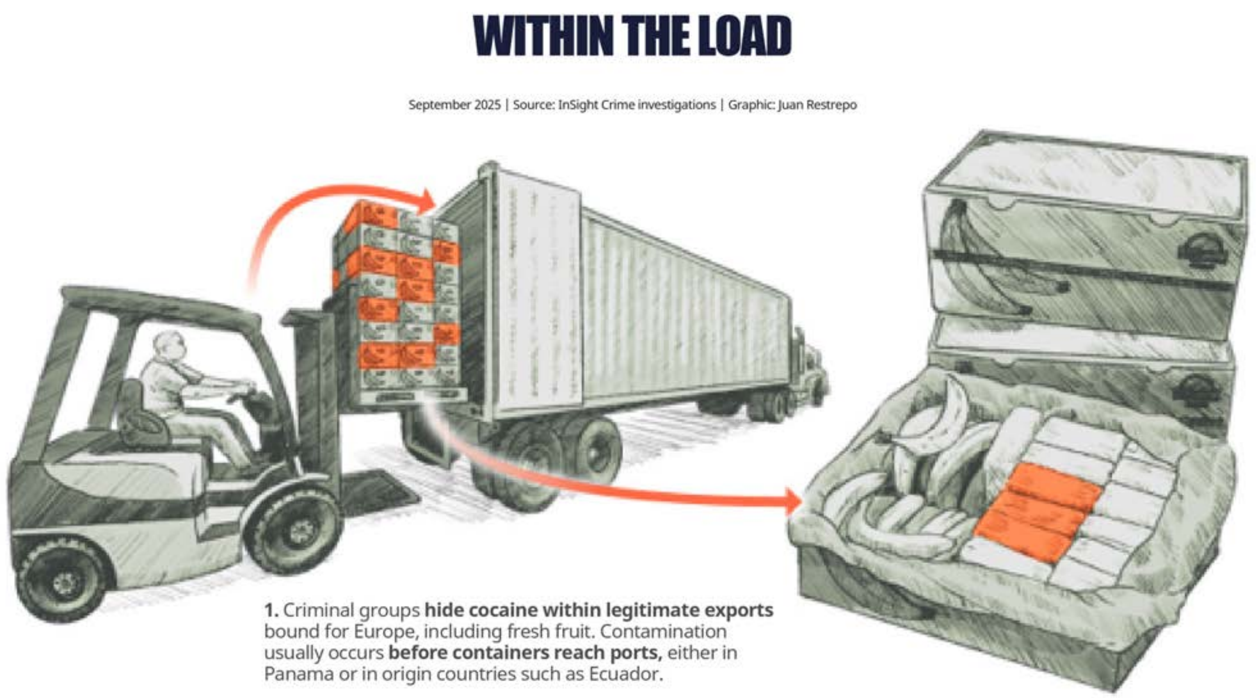


Once containers reach port facilities, traffickers rely on complicit monitoring staff to move shipments through security checks and scanners without proper scrutiny. In other cases, traffickers avoid scans altogether by substituting containers; operators queue a contaminated unit for inspection but send a clean container through the scanner instead, using fake documents to ensure the container proceeds to the shipping yard. Other reports suggest truck drivers have deliberately disabled scanners by crashing into them to create temporary gaps in inspection capacity and allow contaminated containers to pass unchecked.

As part of a crackdown on EU-bound smuggling, the Costa Rican government has pledged to scan all cargo shipments moving in and out of the country, while also introducing additional equipment and deploying security forces to supervise port security. The government has also introduced AI-assisted scanners at Moín and Caldera.[115] While these measures have improved detection, enforcement remains inconsistent.[116]

CONTAMINATION WITHIN PORTS

As security controls have tightened, traffickers have increasingly shifted towards contaminating containers within port facilities, allowing them to bypass external inspections altogether. Within ports, criminal groups identify suitable containers—often those carrying dry or easily replaceable goods—after they have been scanned and cleared security. Traffickers then introduce cocaine into the port and contaminate the selected containers.

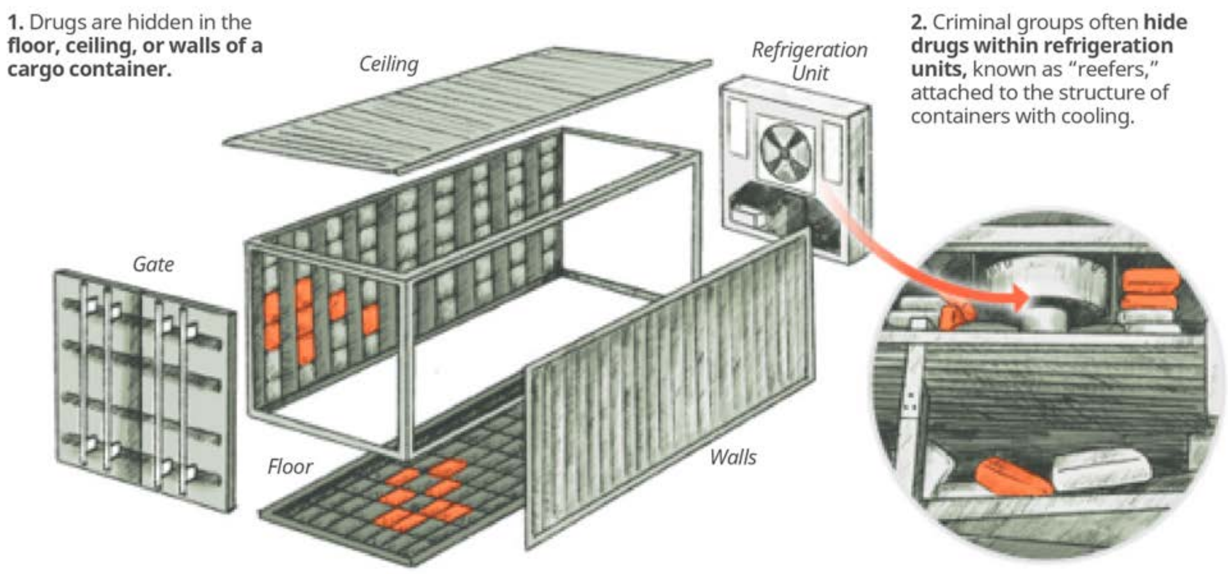
The most common technique is "rip-on/rip-off," in which complicit port workers break

115 Tico Times, "Costa Rica deploys AI port scanners to fight drug trafficking," 25 September 2025.
116 SwissInfo, "Costa Rica comienza plan para escanear todos los contenedores y evitar narcotráfico," 13 July 2023.

WITHIN THE CONTAINER STRUCTURE

September 2025 | Source: InSight Crime investigations | Graphic: Juan Restrepo

This type of contamination occurs both inside ports and when containers are stored at warehouses prior to shipping.



a container's original seal, insert cocaine into legitimate cargo, and reseal it with a replica to avoid detection.[117] This method allows traffickers to exploit legitimate supply chains without the knowledge of exporters or importers. Video evidence, including footage reported by Costa Rican authorities, points to the involvement of dock personnel in facilitating these operations.

In 2020, all cocaine seized at EU seaports from shipments originating in Limón had been inserted using rip-on/rip-off techniques. The method also accounted for a significant share of seizures linked to Moín-bound shipments to Belgium, far exceeding other forms of container contamination.[118]

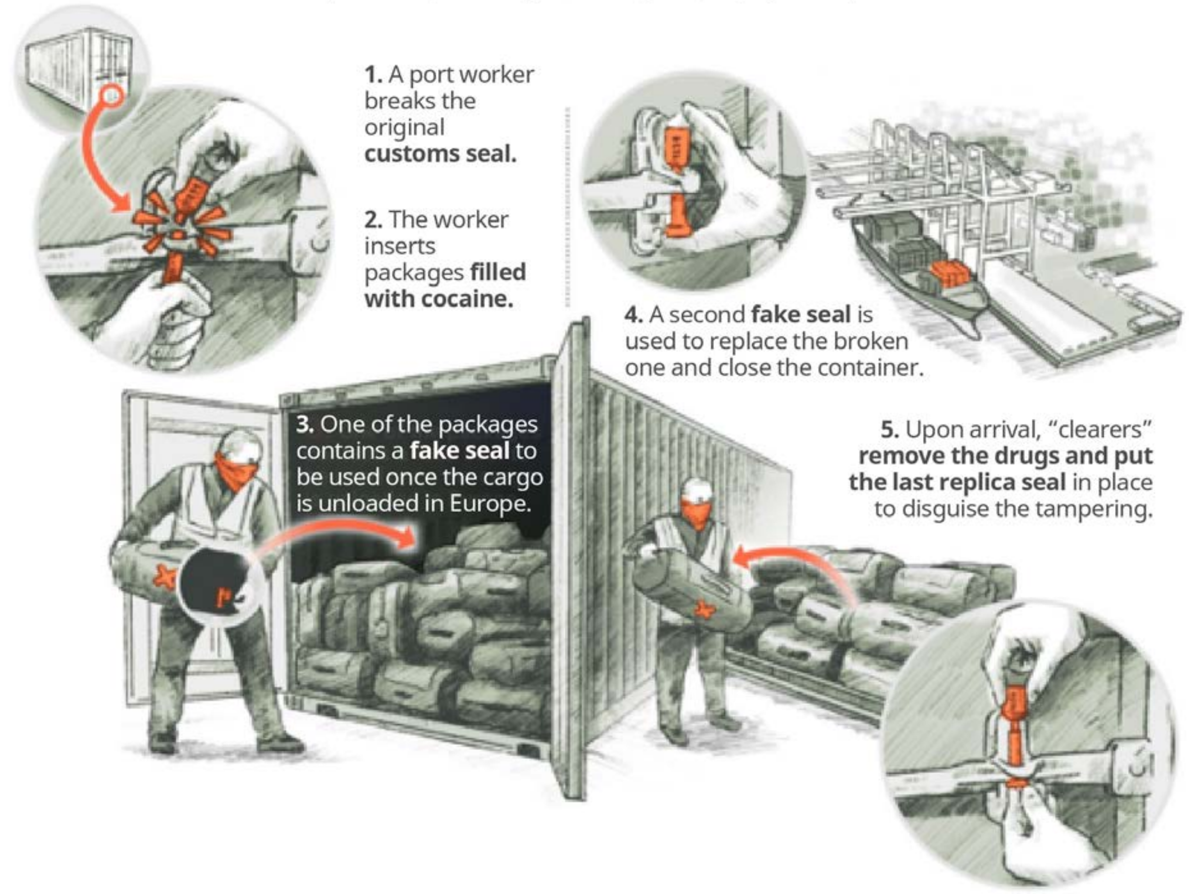
Smugglers also conceal smaller quantities in a container's external refrigeration unit, known as a "reefer." Those involved in these operations frequently work for companies providing services to APM Terminals, allowing traffickers to exploit insider access. Contamination typically occurs in locations where port security controls are weak, particularly in areas lacking video surveillance.

In-port contamination relies on broad networks of complicit actors, including cargo handlers, truck drivers, and other port personnel operating beyond initial security checkpoints. Criminal groups leverage insider access to identify vulnerabilities and execute operations, although maintaining these networks increases operational costs.

117 Tico Times, "Cocaine Seizure in Spain Traces Back to Costa Rican Pineapples," 31 December 2025.
118 European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), "Europe and the global cocaine trade", last updated 6 May 2022.

RIP-ON/RIP-OFF

September 2025 | Source: InSight Crime investigations | Graphic: Juan Restrepo



PANAMA

Between January 2019 and June 2024, Panama was the sixth-largest origin country worldwide for cocaine destined for EU seaports, accounting for 43.7 tons of the drug, according to EUDA data.

CONTAMINATION WITHIN PORTS

The most common method used to contaminate cargo in Panama is the "rip-on/rip-off" technique,119 in which traffickers tamper with containers awaiting shipment unbeknownst to the sender or recipient.

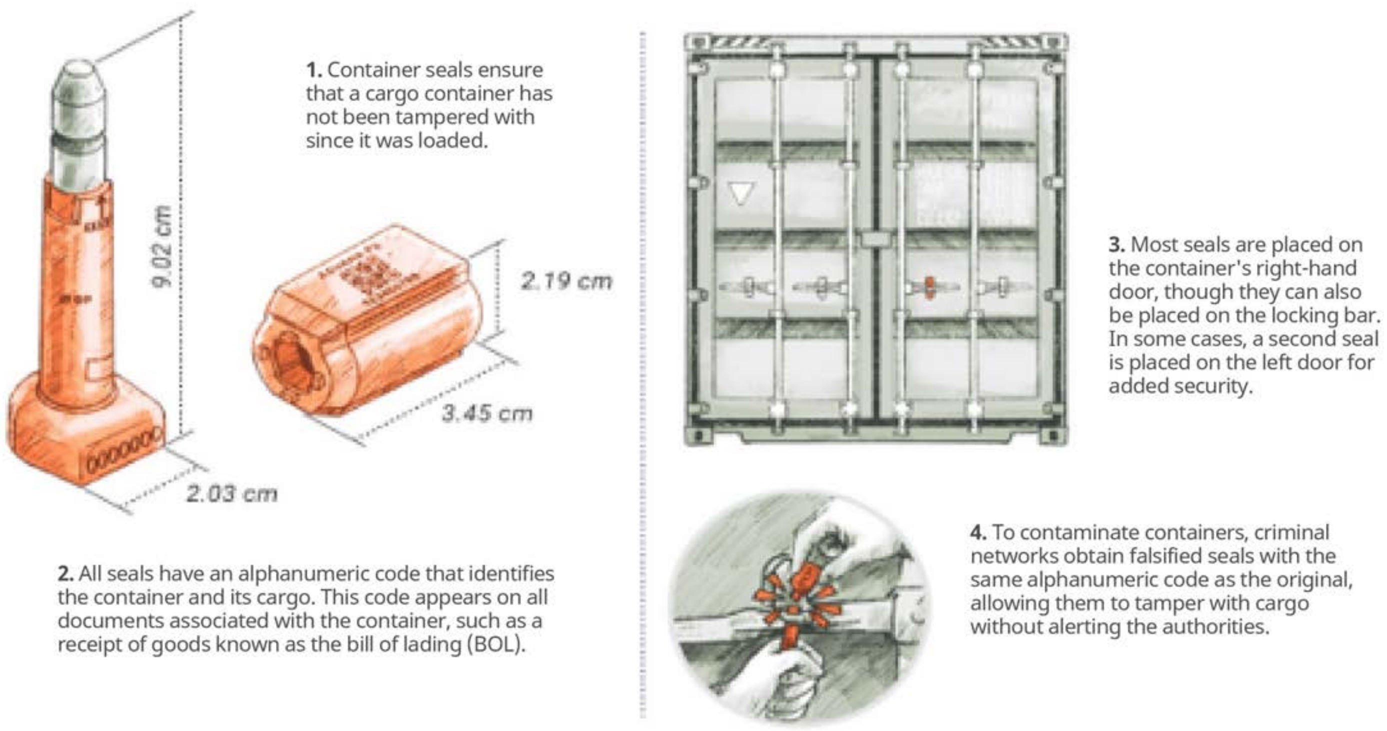
Complicit port staff then locate a designated container and load it with bags carrying cocaine. This typically requires port workers to break the container's unique seal, which is replaced with a counterfeit replica upon closing. A second fake seal is left inside the container, ready to be used once the load is extracted in Europe.

This method is designed to evade port control, as both the loading and unloading occur within the container yard, avoiding inspections at the port gates. It is also fast—contamination can occur in a matter of minutes, often shortly before the container is set to depart.

119 Between 2018 and 2021, all the cocaine seized at Belgian ports in shipments from Colón used the rip-on/rip-off method, according to EUDA data.

CONTAINER SEALS

September 2025 | Source: InSight Crime investigations | Graphic: Juan Restrepo



Another common tactic sees criminal groups hide cocaine bricks inside a container's external refrigeration unit, or "reefer." Traffickers limit themselves to hiding around 50 packages of cocaine, each weighing around a kilogram, to avoid overloading the refrigeration system and activating an alarm. This method also relies on cargo handlers and maintenance workers who can access reefers once containers are stored in the yard, bypassing initial security checks.

To move drugs into the port, traffickers bribe freight drivers to hide cocaine in trucks and drive it into the container yard. Criminal groups may also bribe security personnel responsible for inspecting trucks, smuggle in drugs using private vehicles, or simply toss bags filled with cocaine over the port's perimeter fence.

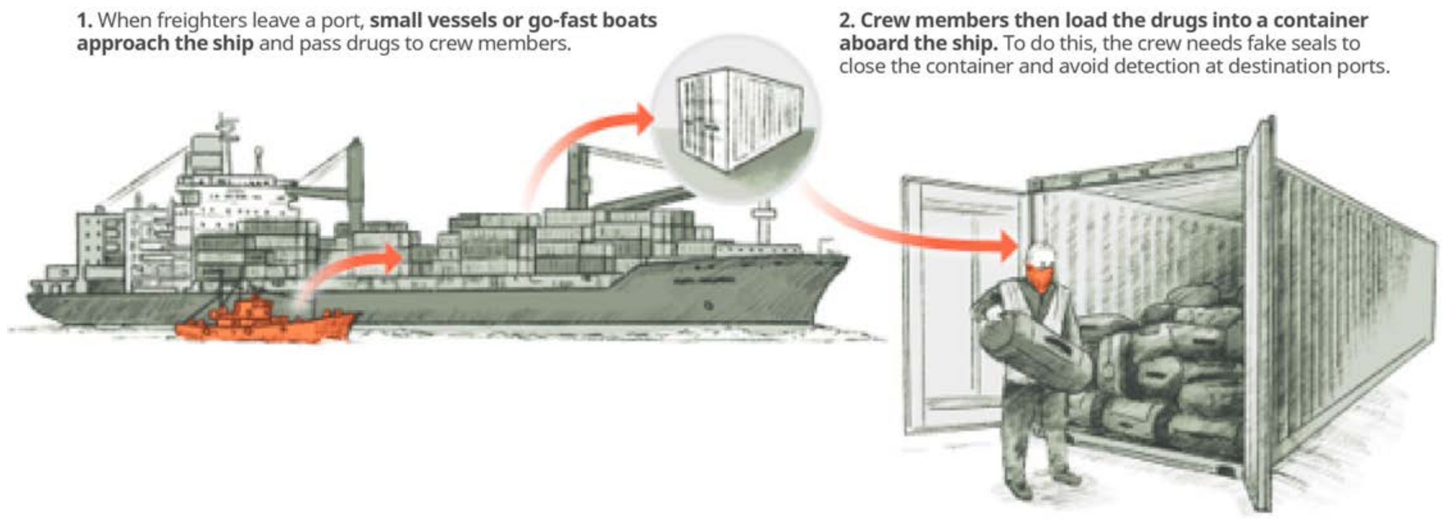
CONTAMINATION OUTSIDE PORTS

When contamination occurs outside the ports, traffickers hide drugs within empty containers stored at warehouses—inside their walls, ceilings, floors, doors, or refrigeration units. Once contaminated, the container is filled with legitimate cargo and driven to a port for export. This method often requires collusion with exporters or officials operating scanning equipment at Panamanian ports.

In rarer cases, traffickers infuse cocaine into liquids, such as coffee and gasoline, which are then transported as legitimate cargo. Authorities struggle to detect this type of concealment using conventional scanners.

DROP OFF

September 2025 | Source: InSight Crime investigations | Graphic: Juan Restrepo



Containers are also contaminated while in transit between ports. This is particularly common in Panama, where cargo arriving at Pacific ports is transported by rail or highway to Colón on the Atlantic coast via rail or highway. Criminal groups intercept containers during transit and hide drugs either within the cargo or inside the container's structure. Shipping routes linking Panama to countries involved in the cocaine trade—such as Ecuador and Colombia—are considered especially high-risk, meaning cargo is routinely offloaded for inspection. Increasingly, traffickers seek to avoid detection by routing containers to Panama via countries deemed less risky, such as Guatemala.

In many cases, containers sent from Pacific ports in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru have already been contaminated before reaching Panama. These shipments often cross the Panama Canal without docking in Panama, leaving Panamanian authorities with little opportunity or incentive to halt suspected drug loads. Drugs sent from South America are routinely concealed within legitimate exports such as fresh fruit or construction materials—including scrap metal.

Another method, known as "drop off," takes place once cargo ships have already set sail for Europe. In these cases, criminal networks approach the vessels in go-fasts, bribing crew members to conceal cocaine inside containers. The drugs can also be attached to the ship's underwater structure.

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CONCLUSIONS

The Southern Central American corridor has evolved into one of the most strategically significant criminal dynamics connecting Latin America with Europe. Costa Rica and Panama function as critical logistical nodes where geographic location, extensive maritime infrastructure, high volumes of international trade, and proximity to South American create opportunities for transnational criminal actors to operate across multiple illicit markets. While the structure and sophistication of criminal groups differ between the two countries, both have become deeply integrated into transnational criminal supply chains that extend far beyond the region.

A defining characteristic of the corridor is the growing professionalization of local criminal networks. Domestic actors increasingly perform specialized logistical functions, including transportation, storage, cargo manipulation, facilitation of financial transactions, and access to strategic infrastructure. These capabilities have allowed local groups to move beyond purely subordinate roles and become indispensable partners for foreign criminal organizations. Colombian, Mexican, European, and Balkan criminal actors continue to maintain influence in the corridor, but their operations increasingly rely on local networks that control access to routes, ports, coastal landing areas, and transportation infrastructure.

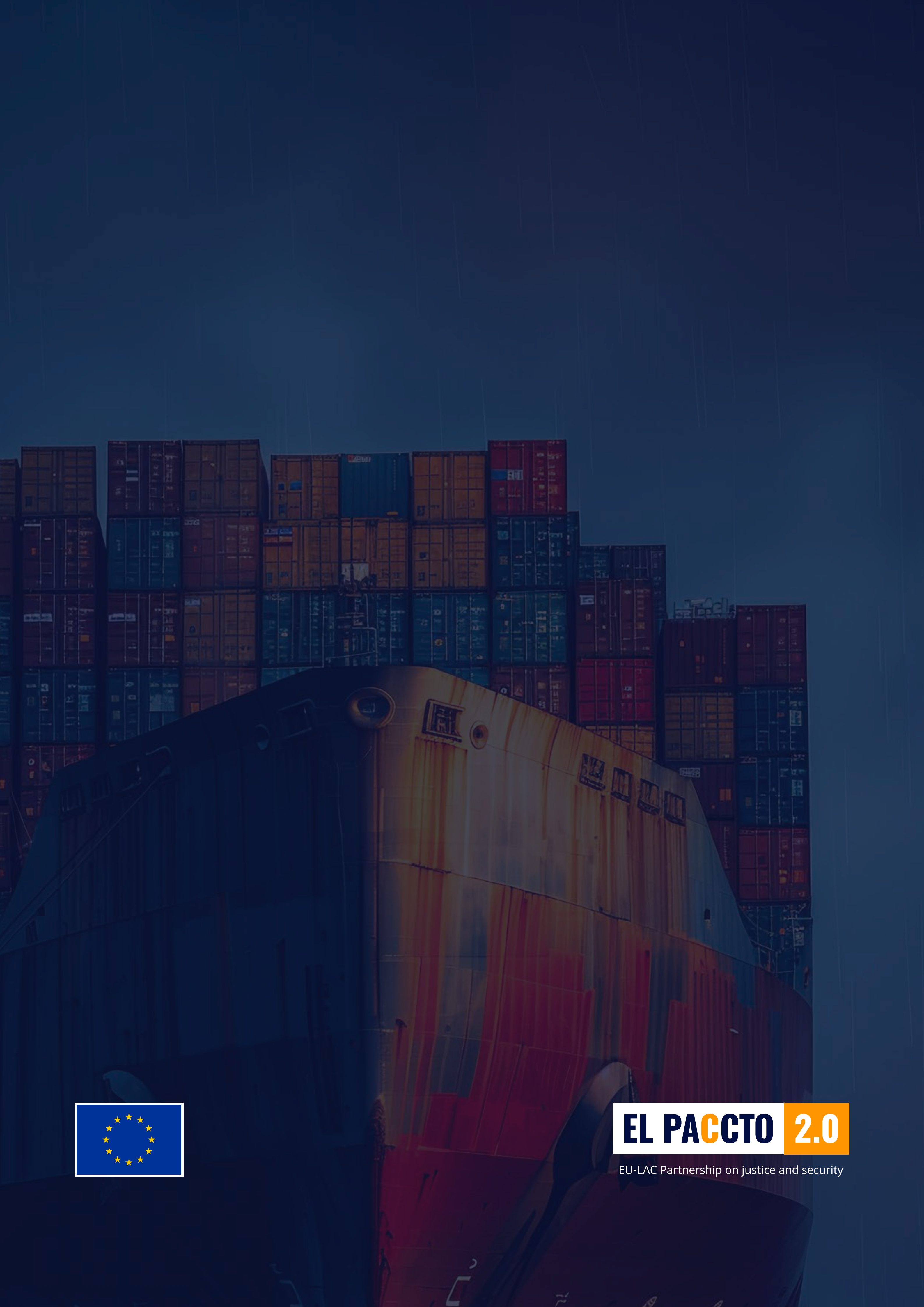
The corridor's strategic value stems from the convergence of maritime, land, and air routes that connect the Pacific and Atlantic basins. Panama's canal system, port complexes, and interoceanic transport infrastructure provide unique opportunities for criminal actors to move illicit commodities between coastlines and toward international markets. Costa Rica complements these dynamics through its extensive coastlines, commercial ports, tourism infrastructure and direct trade connections with Europe. The same routes and logistical infrastructure are routinely exploited for multiple criminal activities, including drug trafficking, environmental crimes, migrant smuggling, illicit financial flows, contraband, and other forms of organized crime.

Polycriminality has become a defining feature of criminal activity throughout the corridor. Criminal groups increasingly diversify their portfolios, using common routes, facilitators, corruption networks, and financial mechanisms to support multiple illicit economies simultaneously. Environmental crimes, particularly illegal mining, timber trafficking, and wildlife trafficking, have become increasingly interconnected with broader criminal structures that used to be mainly focused on drugs, serving both as revenue-generating activities and as mechanisms for laundering illicit proceeds. This convergence complicates judicial and law enforcement responses and requires a more integrated understanding of organized crime dynamics.

Corruption remains one of the most significant enabling factors across the corridor. Criminal actors continue to exploit vulnerabilities within customs administrations, law enforcement agencies, port operations, regulatory institutions, and local government structures. The ability to corrupt or co-opt strategic actors significantly reduces operational risks and facilitates the movement of illicit commodities through legitimate commercial systems. As criminal organizations become more sophisticated, corruption increasingly functions as a strategic investment rather than an opportunistic practice.

The findings of this report demonstrate that addressing organized crime in the Southern Central American corridor requires approaches that extend beyond interdiction and enforcement alone. Effective responses must prioritize intelligence sharing, financial investigations, anti-corruption measures, and enhanced cooperation between Latin American and European authorities. Particular attention should be directed toward protecting critical transportation infrastructure, strengthening oversight of commercial supply chains, and improving the capacity to identify criminal convergence across different illicit markets.

As criminal networks continue to adapt to judicial and enforcement pressure, and shifting market conditions, the Central American corridor is likely to remain a key component of transnational criminal activity connecting the Americas and Europe. Sustained international cooperation, combined with a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected nature of criminal economies, will be essential to reducing the influence of these networks and protecting the integrity of regional and international trade corridors.



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