

**SEPTEMBER 2023**

# **Soldiers and Prisons: Reflections on Military Interventions in the Latin American and Caribbean Prison System**

By William H. Godnick and Iñaki Aguerreche



**WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER  
FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES**

*National Defense University*

**Cover concept:** A group of gang members incarcerated in the prison of Quezaltepeque, in El Salvador, on September 4, 2020.

**Credit:** JOSE CABEZAS (REUTERS)

**Editor-in-Chief:** Dr. Patrick Paterson

**Layout Design:** Editorial Team

# **Soldiers and Prisons: Reflections on Military Interventions in the Latin American and Caribbean Prison System**

**By William H. Godnick and Iñaki Aguerreche**



**WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER  
FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES**

**PERRY CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPER  
SEPTEMBER 2023**

# **Soldiers and Prisons: Reflections on Military Interventions in the Latin American and Caribbean Prison System<sup>1</sup>**

By William H. Godnick and Iñaki Aguerreche

## ***About the Authors:***

William Godnick is a Professor at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. He was the public security program coordinator at the United Nations Regional Center for Peace, Disarmament, and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean from 2009 - 2016. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom.

Iñaki Aguerreche holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Buenos Aires. He was a research assistant at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies from January to May 2022.

## ***Introduction***

In May 2022, forty inmates were killed and several dozen injured in a prison riot in northern Ecuador.<sup>2</sup> This tragedy was only the latest in a series of deadly clashes between inmates of rival gangs in the country, resulting in more than three hundred deaths cumulatively including horrific acts of violence involving bladed weapons, firearms, explosives, and beheadings.<sup>3</sup> In this scenario, the Ecuadorian government decided to extend a state of exception to mobilize the national police and armed forces to establish order where the agency responsible for security could not. Primarily, the military forces have provided perimeter security to prison facilities but, in some cases, have entered prisons to confront violent inmates and support the police in re-establishing order.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a translation of book chapter published in Spanish, 'Soldados y Cárceles: Reflexiones sobre intervenciones militares en el sistema penitenciario de América Latina y el Caribe,' in Daira Arana y Omar Avilés, Eds. *Fuerza Pública en América Latina: Sus Retos y Buenas Prácticas a la Luz de la Democracia y los Derechos Humanos*, University of Guadalajara Press, 2022.

Thanks to Research Assistant Chase Boone for his work on the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar López, 'Decenas de muertos en motín penitenciario en Ecuador,' *The New York Times*, 9 May 2022. <https://nytimes.com/es/2022/05/09/espanol/ecuador-motin-carcel.html>

<sup>3</sup> 'CIDH hará recomendaciones a Ecuador tras crisis carcelaria que deja más de 300 muertos,' *Semana.com*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/cidh-hara-recomendaciones-a-ecuador-tras-crisis-carcelaria-que-deja-mas-de-300-muertos/202149/>

Since 2013, various governments of the Republic of Honduras began a process of significant militarization of the prison system in response to extreme gang violence, including gun violence in prisons and the practice of co-governance of the facilities between gang leaders and corrupt prison officials. Eventually, the Honduran government opted to use the new security force under the control of the armed forces called the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) to incarcerate dangerous individuals, provide perimeter security, and take a more proactive role in prison administration throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> This prison security policy must be analyzed in the broader context of the militarization of public security in the country, with some actors emphasizing its contribution to the reduction of homicidal armed violence in the country and others criticizing its impact on human rights and democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, in June 2022, an internal riot in a Colombian prison caused a fire that left more than fifty dead, reflecting conditions of vulnerability and criminality very similar to those experienced in neighboring Ecuador.<sup>6</sup> However, there was no military intervention in this case. The National Police, a civilian force with limited military capabilities under the Ministry of Defense, provided assistance to the prison guards.

The cases of military intervention in Ecuadorian, Honduran, and Colombian prisons are very different, as will be seen later in this report. Nevertheless, they are not the only cases in Latin America and the Caribbean. Armed forces as institutions are trained to confront enemies on the battlefield, and their use in prisons may be necessary for specific situations but also constitutes risks and costs. This paper aims to analyze situations where Latin American and Caribbean states have used their armed forces to respond to violence in the prison system, particularly where the combination of excessive overcrowding, institutional mismanagement, and criminal gang dynamics causes violent riots to get out of control.

Of course, in an ideal world, military forces would never have to intervene in prisons outside the realm of military justice. This report seeks to understand better the contexts where governments decide that they have no other option but to deploy soldiers to prisons. How do these interventions work in time and space? What are the tasks undertaken by the military in these contexts? It is difficult to analyze this effort without first understanding the notion of securitization and placing it in the context of the militarization of public security in certain Latin American and Caribbean countries.

<sup>4</sup> R. Evan Ellis, *A Pariah State, or Innovative Solutions to Organized Crime Deserving U.S. Support*, U.S. War Army Press, 2016. : <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/422>

<sup>5</sup> Washington Office on Latin America y la Universidad Autónoma de Honduras, *The Role of the Armed Forces in Public Security in Honduras*, WOLA y UNAH, Agosto 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Juan Quesada, 'Masacre entre rejas en Colombia,' *El País*, 2 July 2022. <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/elecciones-presidenciales/2022-07-02/masacre-entre-rejas-en-colombia-habia-algun-que-otro-apunaleo-pero-la-mayoria-se-quemaron-vivos.html>





**Photo:** Prison security provided by the military in many Latin American countries is part of a broader militarization of public security in the region.

**Photo Credit:** Stock image from Pixabay.

According to scholar Michael Williams from the University of Ottawa in Canada, securitization is an intersubjective process that can be identified as a real and tangible action or simply a discursive one. It consists of labeling an issue of public interest as an existential threat to governance, thereby justifying emergency measures outside the normal channels, either in political or public policy terms.<sup>7</sup> The most extreme form of securitization is militarization because it requires using the military instrument, the most lethal instrument of the State, to perform tasks outside its standard mandate. In itself, securitization is neither good nor bad. In specific contexts, different governments may need to militarize aspects of public health in periods of crisis, for instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

David Pion-Berlin from the University of California-Riverside has developed criteria for assigning new and non-traditional tasks to the military, depending on the nature of the job and the strengths of the military institutions.<sup>8</sup> Strengths include national geographic coverage; pre-existing assets (equipment, weapons, and soldiers); diverse capabilities (land, sea, air, cyber, space, etc.) including engineering and logistics; and a vertical chain of command. Case studies in Mexico suggest that these capabilities are better suited to neutralize the top cartel kingpins than they are to provide citizen security to the general population.

<sup>7</sup> Michael C. Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,' *International Studies Quarterly*, No 47, 2023, pp. 511-531.

<sup>8</sup> David Pion-Berlin, *Military Missions in Democratic Latin America*, New York, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2016.

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the peace processes in Central America and greater democratization in Latin America with less emphasis on 'national security' doctrines led to hope for the withdrawal of the armed forces from internal security and the consolidation of civilian police models. Such hope was exemplified in the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, which promoted civilian management of military forces and, at the same time, encouraged the creation and consolidation of civilian police forces.<sup>9</sup> With some exceptions in the Southern Cone of South America, governments could never meet these aspirations. Although there were advances in the civilian leadership of the armed forces, using military forces to support or, to some extent, replace struggling police forces became the norm. The reasons here are numerous and include the rise of organized crime and drug trafficking, the growth of youth gangs, and general public concerns about citizen insecurity.

Flores-Macias and Zarkin take note of this reality and elaborate a typology to classify the different forms of militarization of public security: non-militarized police, militarized police, paramilitary police (gendarmerie style), and lightly or heavily constabularized military.<sup>10</sup> They categorize Latin American countries as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Militarization of Policing in Latin America**

<b>Non-Militarized Police</b>	Argentina (provincial police forces) Costa Rica Panama (Nacional Police) Uruguay
<b>Militarized Police</b>	Panama (National Border Service)
<b>Paramilitary Police</b>	Argentina (Government/Naval Prefecture) Chile (Carabineros)
<b>Constabularized Militaries (slightly)</b>	Brazil Bolivia Ecuador Paraguay Peru
<b>Constabularized Militaries (highly)</b>	Colombia Ecuador El Salvador Guatemala Honduras Mexico Nicaragua Dominican Republic Venezuela

*Source: Elaborated by the authors with data from Flores-Macias and Zarkin 2021.*

<sup>9</sup> The full text of the Treaty can be found at: <https://www.oas.org/csh/english/doccc&t%20cenam.asp>

<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Flores-Macias and Jessica Zarkin, 'The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America. *Perspective on Politics*, Vol. 19:2, June 2021, pp. 519-538.



**Photo:** Riot police agents group and approach to negotiate with an inmate's delegate during a rebellion at the Alcacuz Penitentiary Center near Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil on January 16, 2017.

**Photo credit:** ANDRESSA ANHOLETE/AFP via Getty Images

The authors believe that further analysis of the country cases in Table 1 will generate additional nuances to consider how to classify different police and military forces. There may be greater diversity in the types of forces within a country. However, this typology adequately captures the general security environment and the main approach of Latin American governments to crime and insecurity. The Flores-Macias and Zarkin typology will be a helpful input when elaborating a typology of the different types of military intervention in prison systems. In this paper, the authors focus on the militarization of the security response in prison contexts, what Flores-Macias and Zarkin call a constabularized military.

Military interventions, or lack thereof, in prison contexts occur in spaces with high levels of crime and insecurity. In many cases, they are "spaces for negotiation that function based on the collective organization and participation of the incarcerated population, establishing forms of self- or co-government."<sup>11</sup> The purpose here is not to support or condemn military interventions but to understand them better and see the costs and benefits of implementing them, including from a human rights perspective.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Bracco et al., '¿Motines o acciones colectivas de reclamo? Discursos mediáticos durante el COVID-19 sobre el sistema peruano y las personas reclusas,' *Perspectiva de la comunicación*, 2021, pp.169-203.



The report continues with a summary of the prison situation in Latin America, followed by a review of international standards on maintaining order and using force in prison systems. The following section summarizes a two-year media monitoring effort of all identified cases of prison riots in Latin America and the Caribbean to better understand the dynamics of imprisonment, rights violations, violence, and criminal activities. This effort provides a deeper understanding of the contexts in which certain states militarize prison systems. Finally, this paper ends by elaborating a new conceptual framework, a typology, so to speak, to understand the involvement of the armed forces in prison systems.

### ***Summary of the prison situation in Latin America and the Caribbean***

A complex and long-standing duality characterizes the prison situation in Latin America. On the one hand, the design and development of detention centers represent serious human rights violations. On the other hand, the interactions of human communities in these spaces produce and reproduce unparalleled dynamics of crime and violence. The documentary series broadcast by Netflix, where the exonerated British ex-convict Raphael Rowe visits prisons around the world - including Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Paraguay, and Mexico - presents this complex dual reality of a density of criminal activity often in subhuman conditions of survival.<sup>12</sup>

Some academics say the contemporary incarceration system is a forgotten part of the chain of criminal justice, especially in Latin America. The system's punitive approach tends to dehumanize those deprived of their liberty instead of rehabilitating them, especially prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>13</sup> Implementing the different iron fist laws against gangs in Central America during the last twenty years or against drug trafficking (major and minor) in South America and the Caribbean has contributed to this exponential increase in incarceration throughout the Western Hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, police capacity to detain, arrest and incarcerate people, mainly young and poor men, far exceeds the capacity of judicial systems to prosecute and, in the case of culpability, issue sentences. This situation results in overcrowding in precarious infrastructure and the 'warehousing' of many people in pre-trial detention.

A review of the World Prison Brief database, a Birkbeck College, University of London project, provides a glimpse into the rights violations faced by prisoners in Latin America and the Caribbean from the perspective of both overcrowding and due process (see Table 2). Between 2000 and 2020, only the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, and Jamaica reduced their prison populations. The rest of the region has gone in the opposite direction, with countries such as Cuba and El Salvador reporting prison populations of over 500 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the prison population grew 330 percent in Ecuador.

<sup>12</sup> See Netflix *Inside the World's Toughest Prisons* - <https://www.netflix.com/title/80116922>

<sup>13</sup> Silveo Coneo, 'Prisión perpetua y dignidad humana,' *Política Criminal*, Vol. 11:1, July 2016, pp. 1-20.

<sup>14</sup> Jeannette Aguilar, *Las políticas de seguridad pública en El Salvador, 2003-2018*, San Salvador, Fundación Heinrich Boll, January 2019.

Most countries in the region report excessive overcrowding, with Haiti (454 percent), Guatemala (357 percent), and Bolivia (264 percent) being the most extreme cases. These extreme levels of overcrowding deny the human dignity of prisoners, generate interpersonal conflicts and violence, and increase the spread of disease. Maria Luisa Romero et al. documented the negative consequences of overcrowding in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it exacerbates other problems in the prison sector.<sup>15</sup> As will be noted in a later section of this paper, one of the main reasons behind violent riots during the period studied was the demand by prisoners and their families for better prison conditions or the release of inmates as a humanitarian and public health measure during the pandemic.

In terms of due process, one of the most negative pathologies is the overuse of the legal practice of pre-trial detention, that is, the deprivation of liberty while the accused awaits trial or sentencing, leaving many people, even innocent people, in a situation of vulnerability. In eight of the region's countries, more than half of the prison population is awaiting trial, with countries such as Haiti, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago being the most extreme cases, with over 60 percent of their prison population stuck in this legal situation.

Regarding gender, women are a small minority of the prison population. In the region, only Guatemala reports a female population above ten percent, suggesting a different gender dynamic in that country that requires further study. As a child and human rights measure, many governments in the region establish separate systems for minors in conflict with the law to avoid their contact with and exploitation by adult prisoners. However, this is not universal, with countries such as Bolivia and Guatemala reporting that fourteen percent and seven percent of their prison populations are minors, possibly 'adolescents'.

A final aspect of the information accessed in the World Prison Brief database that deserves mention is the incarceration of foreign nationals. On the one hand, it highlights the regional and transnational criminal dynamics of organized crime and/or irregular migration, primarily related to drug trafficking. On the other hand, it highlights another factor of vulnerability, being that foreigners suffer discrimination and possess fewer rights than the host country's citizenry in the prison system. In this context, there is a relatively high proportion of foreign prisoners in the English-speaking Caribbean countries, Costa Rica and Panama. Costa Rica is an interesting case in that it receives many migrants from Nicaragua fleeing political instability, some of whom end up in the Costa Rica prisons.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Luisa Romero et al., *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Prison Policy in Latin America*, Washington, D.C., Diálogo Interamericano, April 2021. <https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-prison-policy-in-latin-america/>

**Table 2: Prison Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean (last year available)\***

<b>Country</b>	<b>Rate per 100,000 (2000)</b>	<b>Rate per 100,000 (year)</b>	<b>% Capacity Overcrowding</b>	<b>% Remand in custody</b>	<b>% Women</b>	<b>% Minors**</b>	<b>% Foreigners</b>
1. Antigua & Barbuda	218	321(2018)	159	43	6	<1	31
2. Argentina	151	230 (2018)	113	45	4	NA	5
3. Bahamas	470	460 (2018)	162	37	3	NA	NA
4. Barbados	527	319 (2016)	62	55	3	6	14
5. Belize	310	258 (2021)	53	37	3	2	13
6. Bolivia	95	158 (2018)	264	64	7	14	3
7. Brazil	132	354 (2018)	147	29	5	NA	<1
8. Chile	115	115 (2020)	91	38	8	<1	3
9. Colombia	130	193 (2020)	120	24	7	NA	1
10. Costa Rica	193	395 (2018)	120	20	4	<1	15
11. Cuba	387	510 (2012)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
12. Dominica	307	289 (2016)	73	44	1	<1	7
13. Dominican Republic	173	238 (2018)	183	60	3	2	8
14. Ecuador	64	213 (2020)	109	39	7	2	8
15. El Salvador	132	572 (2020)	136	23	7	NA	1
16. Granada	324	414 (2018)	184	20	2	1	3
17. Guatemala	62	142 (2020)	357	49	12	7	3
18. Guyana	205	239 (2020)	127	46	3	<1	2
19. Haiti	49	94 (2020)	454	82	4	2	NA
20. Honduras	175	213 (2018)	196	54	6	3	<1
21. Jamaica	178	138 (2015)	87	23	4	5	<1
22. Mexico	156	169 (2020)	105	41	6	4	1
23. Nicaragua	128	138 (2016)	177	21	5	<1	3
24. Panama	283	416 (2020)	143	35	5	NA	10
25. Paraguay	160	194 (2020)	170	71	5	1	4
26. Peru	107	277 (2020)	212	39	5	NA	3
27. Saint Kitts and Nevis	300	424 (2016)	144	31	3	7	2
28. Saint Lucia	241	274 (2019)	97	71	3	1	3
29. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	375	426 (2018)	80	24	3	3	4
30. Surinam	120	197 (2013)	75	50	3	6	20
31. Trinidad and Tobago	365	258 (2014)	82	60	3	2	1
32. Uruguay	135	372 (2020)	131	22	6	NA	3

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors with data from *World Prison Brief*,

<https://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief-data>

*\*Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.*

*\*\*Most prison systems are not responsible for the custody of juveniles violating the law.*

Conversely, in many Latin American and Caribbean societies, it is challenging to achieve public support for more significant investment in the prison system and prisoner rehabilitation when these objectives compete with the many social and economic needs of 'good' law-abiding citizens. It is especially difficult to garner support when considerable amounts of the incarcerated have committed violent crimes. One of the most repeated clichés is that prisons are schools for delinquency where prisoners come out with doctorates in criminality. This phenomenon is due to the various expressions of the abuse of power and perverse transformations within and links to common and organized crime documented in the region's prisons.<sup>16</sup>

Researchers Steven Dudley and James Bargent have identified a diverse collection of gangs in Latin American prisons, including internal, ideological, drug traffickers, maras, and those linked to the armed forces and police.<sup>17</sup> Each of these groups has distinct logics of violence and criminality that generate crime, rivalries, and conflictive relationships that frequently result in brawls and riots. One of the debates is whether it is convenient to separate rival gangs into separate wards or facilities to prevent violent brawls and riots or whether these actions contribute to the consolidation of power and criminal activities within the same system. This debate remains unresolved. What is clear, and will become more evident in the following paragraphs, is that the Latin American prison system is a time bomb of human rights, crime, and violence. Profound reforms are necessary for prison systems to become rehabilitative institutions, not just punitive ones. In the meantime, without these reforms, there will be crime, violence, and riots inside prisons, and it is essential to think about how to manage them better from a security and human rights perspective.

### ***Relevant international standards***

It is important to note that this study focuses primarily on the contexts and events of criminality, violence, and riots among inmates that lead governments to involve military forces in the prison system to generate security conditions and re-establish order. Of course, there are cases where guards and other security agents exercise lethal and non-lethal violence against incarcerated persons. However, these events occur less frequently than violence between rival gangs and individuals.

In other words, this paper starts from the premise that the leading human rights violation in the prison system that most generates insecurity and violence is not lethal violence by the authorities but systemic conditions. However, these two phenomena are not disconnected. The main concern is that these systemic conditions generating violence and criminality are unlikely to be universally resolved in the short term. The pressures to use military forces in response to crises will persist. Therefore, it is important to understand international standards and their compatibility with military involvement in various aspects of prison systems.

<sup>16</sup> Javier Brandoli, 'Las cárceles del infierno en América Latina,' *El Mundo*, 7 January 2017. <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2017/01/07/5866897e46163fc55e8b4595.html>

<sup>17</sup> Steven Dudley and James Bargent, *El dilema de las prisiones: incubadoras del crimen organizado en América Latina*, Insight Crime, September 2017. <https://es.insightcrime.org/images/PDFs/2017/El-dilema-de-las-prisiones-incubadoras-del-crimen-organizado-en-Latinoamerica.pdf>



In this regard, reviewing the standards known as the Nelson Mandela Rules or the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners is relevant.<sup>18</sup> The Mandela Rules cover various areas related to the management of the prison system, from staff training, the inherent dignity of persons deprived of their liberty, conditions and health care, vulnerable groups, complaints and inspections, discipline and sanctions, access to legal representation, and processes for investigating cruel treatment, torture, and deaths in the prison system.

Rule 37 of the Mandela Rules "encourages prisons to use, to the extent possible, conflict prevention, mediation or other alternative dispute mechanisms to avoid disciplinary offenses and resolve conflicts."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, most prison systems have deficits in staffing, resources, and methods to prevent conflict, especially violent conflict. At the same time, it is unclear whether these techniques would be sufficient to resolve conflicts between rival gangs in environments with intense criminal dynamics. Rules 48 and 49 of the same law speak of the need to avoid physical coercion and leave the use of lethal weapons as the last option. However, in many of the cases reviewed in the next section of this document, violent riots involve inmates with access to bladed weapons and firearms, and the security officers involved need protective measures against any possible aggression.

Rules 74 to 82 of the Mandela Rules deal with the various aspects of prison staff training from leadership, medical, and security staff. Although greater compliance with these rules does not impact the underlying social and judicial issues, a more significant investment in staff could likely help prevent corruption and complicity, improve the prisons' ability to preserve the inmates' human dignity, and resolve conflicts, ultimately reducing the need to resort to police or military forces.

Finally, Rule 112 of the Mandela Rules speaks of the need to separate prisoners awaiting trial from other convicted prisoners. Most prison systems in Latin America fail to implement this rule, resulting in overcrowding that violates rights and generates conflictive, criminal, and violent dynamics. International jurisprudence is limited in terms of the right to self-defense of persons incarcerated in situations of interpersonal violence or violent group conflicts. However, there is some legal support for the self-defense of persons deprived of their liberty when the authorities cannot guarantee their security and physical integrity.<sup>20</sup> This scenario is common in Latin America and the Caribbean, where smuggling of all kinds, including access to firearms, is also common.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Naciones Unidas, *Reglas Mínimas de las Naciones Unidas para el Tratamiento de Reclusos*, Resolución 70/175, Asamblea General, 17 December 2015. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson\\_Mandela\\_Rules-S-ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-S-ebook.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Anders Kaye, 'Dangerous Places: The Right to Self-Defense in Prison and Prison Conditions in Jurisprudence'. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 1996, pp 710.

<sup>21</sup> Yailé Loíaza, 'Cómo ingresan las armas que usan los presos en las cárceles Ecuador,' *Infobae*, 4 October 2021. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2021/10/04/como-ingresan-las-armas-que-usan-los-presos-en-las-carceles-de-ecuador/>

More specifically related to the preservation of internal order in prison systems are the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. Both documents consider the possibility that the military may perform enforcement functions. The Code of Conduct establishes as an extreme measure of last resort the use of firearms (Art. 3C). At the same time, the Basic Principles in its treatment of the surveillance of persons in custody or detention calls for avoiding the use of force except in exceptional cases and not to use firearms except in situations of self-defense or defense of third parties (Art. 15 and 16). Both documents are essential inputs but appear to contemplate more closely the interactions of security agents with individuals in the process of being detained and transported rather than the collective situations of violence and reclusion documented in the following section.<sup>22</sup>



**Photo:** The documentary series broadcasted by Netflix, where the exonerated British ex-convict Raphael Rowe visits prisons around the world - including Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Paraguay, and Mexico - presents this complex dual reality of a density of criminal activity often in subhuman conditions of survival.

**Photo credit:** Netflix

<sup>22</sup> Naciones Unidas, *Código de conducta para funcionarios encargados de hacer cumplir la ley*, Asamblea General, Resolución 4/169, 17 December 1979, and *Principios Básicos sobre el Empleo de la Fuerza y de Armas de Fuego por los Funcionarios Encargados de Hacer Cumplir la Ley*, Octavo Congreso de las Naciones Unidas sobre la Prevención del Delito y Tratamiento del Delincuente, 7 September 1990.

### ***Riot analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean (2020 - 2021)***

To better understand the phenomenon of prison riots in Latin America and the cases where military forces intervened, a media monitoring survey was conducted using a combination of search parameters from Google's news function and obtaining newspaper reports from all regional countries through the Latin American Network Information Center portal from the University of Texas.<sup>23</sup> To avoid leaving out cases, the general search parameters 'riot' and 'prison' were used to develop a content analysis. In each case, the authors sought to determine if there were deaths, the presence of firearms and known transnational organized crime groups (Central American maras, Mexican cartels, Colombian cartels, and armed groups, the two main Brazilian criminal gangs, etc.), and a military intervention. The time frame for analysis was limited to twenty-four months beginning January 1, 2020, and ending December 31, 2021. Summaries of all cases can be found in Appendix 1, including a link to the original source article.

It is important to mention some caveats on media analysis. First, the sample does not represent the universe of riots in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, it probably captures the majority of cases of violent riots. Second, the information obtained from the newspaper articles represents preliminary data about the events. Therefore, it may err in the attribution of definitive responsibilities for acts of violence and/or other reported elements. Third, the fact that the two years covered coincide with the onset and evolution of the pandemic may impact the number and nature of riots identified.

In total, sixty-six cases of riots with some degree of violence were identified during the period studied, with Brazil (11), Argentina (10), and Ecuador (10) reporting the highest number of events. In Central America, Honduras reported the highest number of events (5). All four cases occur in contexts of overcrowding between 109 percent and 196 percent, but there are cases with much more severe overcrowding, yet interestingly these prisons reported fewer riots.

In at least fourteen of the reported cases, the riots stemmed from protests within prisons related to conditions in the face of the pandemic that included excessive overcrowding to prevent contagion, lack of health care, and restrictions on family visits. Most of these cases occurred during the pandemic's first year, suggesting that prison authorities adapted somewhat to the circumstances.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/news/>



To differentiate the severity of violence, the deaths associated with riots were divided into three categories: 1-10 deaths, 10-20 deaths, and more than 20 deaths. Peru reported the highest number of cases, with between one and ten deaths (3), while Ecuador is the country with the most cases of between ten and twenty deaths (3) and more than twenty deaths (4). In the sample, Mexico reported one case of a riot with between ten and twenty deaths, and Venezuela was the only other case during the period studied with a riot that generated more than twenty deaths. Ecuador and Peru report a percentage of inmates awaiting trial at thirty-nine percent, a high figure but far from being the most problematic cases in the region (see Table 2).

Very few cases mentioned gangs and organized crime by name. In Brazil and Paraguay, the First Capital Command and the Red Command (CV or Comando Vermelho) were mentioned in association with some riots. In Honduras and Guatemala, the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara Barrio-18 were identified. In the case of Ecuador, the presence of criminal gangs and possible links with Mexican cartels was mentioned on several occasions, but without specifying internationally known groups.



**Photo:** Members of the Military Police of Public Order stand guard as inmates sit in the yard at Tamara prison after the Honduras Armed Forces took over the control of the prisons nationwide as part of the "Fe y Esperanza" operation, on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, Honduras June 26, 2023.

**Photo credit:** REUTERS/Fredy Rodriguez



A potential explanatory factor in the case of Ecuador is the identification of the presence of firearms inside prison facilities (5 cases). Only Honduras comes close to that number of cases with a proven presence of firearms (4). It is also interesting to note that both Ecuador (7) and Honduras (5) are the two countries with the highest frequency of military presence in response to riots. Other countries with at least one case of military presence are Guyana, Peru, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela.

A review of the cases reported in the media suggests that the vast majority of deaths are inmates killed by other inmates with bladed weapons and firearms, with cases of asphyxiation due to fires being a particular factor in the cases where more than twenty inmates died. Moreover, it appears that intra-prison violence is an inherent phenomenon in riots.

**Table 3: Riot Analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean (January 2020 - December 2021)**

Country	Number of Riots	1 – 10 deaths (cases)	10 – 20 deaths (cases)	>20 deaths (cases)	Presence of firearms in the hands of inmates	Presence of Transnational Organized Crime	Military Intervention
Argentina	10	2					
Belize	1	1					
Bolivia	4				1		
Brazil	10	1				1	
Chile	1						
Colombia	2			1			
Costa Rica	2	1					
Dominican Republic	2						1
Ecuador	10	2	3	4	5		7
Guatemala	2	1				2	
Guyana	2	1					1
Haiti	1	1					
Honduras	5	2			4		5
Mexico	3	2	1		1		
Paraguay	1	1				1	
Peru	5	3					1
Trinidad + Tobago	1						1
Uruguay	1						
Venezuela	3	1		1	1		1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>17</b>

*Source: See Appendix 1*

### *A new typology for military intervention in prison systems*

There is no specific evidence that the presence of military forces in the prison system itself increases conditions of violence. More likely, the military presence reflects pre-existing high levels of violence and insecurity. At the same time, the complicity of prison system personnel in criminal acts and corruption, which sometimes includes police officers, is another critical point that leads to the militarization of some aspects of the system. In this section, the intention is not to pass a definitive judgment on military interventions but to categorize them and think more about the medium and long-term implications for the armed forces, the rule of law, and human rights in the prison system.

Military involvement in the prison system is an extreme act in democratic societies. Military forces generally carry rifles and are trained to kill the enemy in the context of war under the parameters of international humanitarian law and the laws of armed conflict. Police and correctional officers are trained to use force progressively and as a last resort under the precepts of international human rights law. Tasking soldiers to provide security in prisons presents risks to the performance and reputation of the force and diverts them from their traditional tasks of being a deterrent force and guarantor of national sovereignty.

However, politicians often view the armed forces as 'super police' with vertical chains of command, more lethal weapons, and more forceful doctrines. When police and other civilian security forces are incapable or insufficient in the face of prison riots, it is understandable that they take advantage of the military's capabilities and public confidence compared to all other institutions in Latin American and Caribbean countries.<sup>24</sup> The authors have elaborated a typology of the use of the military instrument for security in prison systems with four categories: (1) absence of military presence; (2) temporary perimeter security; (3) temporary interior intervention; and (4) active presence.

Absence of military presence - Normally, prison security will be the responsibility of a separate security agency (prison service) or civilian police. This dynamic remains the status quo in most Latin American and Caribbean countries. Furthermore, even in countries with some military presence in prison security, the ultimate goal is to return to this status. Notably, the crisis of riots and lethal violence experienced in Colombia's prisons in 2023 (mentioned in the introduction) have not resulted in military intervention, and it could be because of certain levels of militarization of the national police itself and its ability to support the guards without the need to call in soldiers.

<sup>24</sup> See Noam Lupu et al., *El Barómetro de las Américas 2021: Project, El Pulso de la Democracia*, Vanderbilt University, [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapopab2021/2021\\_LAPOP\\_AmericasBarometer\\_2021\\_Pulse\\_of\\_Democracy\\_SPA.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapopab2021/2021_LAPOP_AmericasBarometer_2021_Pulse_of_Democracy_SPA.pdf)

*Temporary perimeter security* - This military operation consists of providing perimeter security to prisons. It can often go unnoticed as an additional measure in a violent eventuality. The paradigmatic case is Brazil, often in the news in this context, to prevent the escape of prisoners and possible attempts by criminal gangs, engaged in an internal/external dynamics, to free their colleagues using violence, making this perimeter look like a combat zone.<sup>25</sup> However, military personnel do not replace civilian security authorities in these cases. Here it is interesting to note that Flores-Macias and Zarkin categorize the public security system in Brazil as a lightly constabularized military (See Table 1).

*Temporary interior intervention* - This type of intervention is probably the most common, along with perimeter security. The paradigmatic case here is Ecuador, where military forces have been used for various operations in response to out-of-control riots in prisons. Generally, they are contingents of soldiers deployed to solve a specific problem in coordination with the penitentiary service and the national police. A particularity of this type of intervention is its temporality. Almost all military interventions in Ecuador's penitentiary system occurred around a declaration of a state of emergency. The decree clarifies that the armed forces will coordinate with the penitentiary service and the national police but may establish guidelines to achieve the objective.<sup>26</sup> In Table 1, Flores-Macias and Zarkin categorize Ecuador as a country with a lightly constabularized military.

In a subsequent report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Ecuadorian penitentiary authority stated that the military forces in prisons are restricted to actions controlling illicit weapons, are only allowed in specific sectors accompanied by police, and cannot enter the wards.<sup>27</sup> The risk, in this case, is that the interventions become more frequent and quasi-permanent, given the persistence of the prison problem in Ecuador. In 2022 and 2023, there were two additional riots/massacres in Ecuador where the country's armed forces were called in to intervene.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Lessing y Graham Denyer. 'Legitimacy in Criminal Governance: Managing a Drug Empire from Behind Bars,' *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113:2, 2019, pp. 584-606.

<sup>26</sup> Gobierno de la República del Ecuador, *Decreto Ejecutivo* 210/2021, Quito, 29 September 2021, and Diego Puente, 'Guillermo Lasso declara Estado de excepción en las cárceles,' *El Comercio*, 29 September 2021. <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/lasso-estado-excepcion-carceles-masacre.html>

<sup>27</sup> Comisión Interamericana de los Derechos Humanos, *Personas Privadas de Liberta en Ecuador*, Washington, D.C., CIDH, 2022.

*Active Presence* - The case of Honduras is where military forces began providing security for prisons in San Pedro Sula and Honduras in 2014 but subsequently expanded to the prison system throughout the entire country. Gradually, the external and internal security of the country's prisons passed to the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), an entity explicitly created to respond to gangs and organized crime to fill the gaps left by a corrupt and insufficient police force in the face of the country's violence and criminality.<sup>28</sup> Another entity coordinated by the armed forces, the National Inter-Institutional Security Force, is in charge of inmate transfers and transportation. Although the prison authorities continue to perform administrative tasks, the presence and influence of the armed forces are notable and omnipresent and the most profound of all the cases studied in the Latin American region. In Table 1, Flores-Macias and Zarkin classify Honduras as a country with a heavily constabularized military.

Currently, more than one thousand soldiers and members of the PMOP provide security and perform other tasks in Honduras' thirty prisons.<sup>29</sup> In 2022, after assuming the country's presidency, President Xiomara Castro set a ten-month deadline to demilitarize prisons and curb violence within the system.<sup>30</sup> Although it is unclear whether this process will reduce violence, some experts indicate that prison security remains precarious. Knives and firearms persist, and prison facilities fail to meet international standards.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 'Militares y Policías de Honduras comienzan a tomar el control de los centros penitenciarios,' *El Heraldo*, 19 December 2019, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/carceles-honduras-inp-inami-centros-penitenciarios-soldados-seguridad-fusina-FCLP1342997>

<sup>29</sup> Maria Celeste Maradiaga, 'Desmilitarización en cárceles comienza a paso lento y sin garantías de detener violencia,' *Contra Corriente*, 12 April 2022, <https://contracorriente.red/2022/04/12/desmilitarizacion-en-carceles-comienza-a-paso-lento-y-sin-garantias-de-detener-violencia/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional, *Con militarización del sistema penitenciario, Honduras incumple estándares internacionales de derechos humanos en materia penitenciaria*, Washington, D.C, CEJIL, 2019, <https://cejil.org/comunicado-de-prensa/con-militarizacion-del-sistema-penitenciario-honduras-incumple-estandares-internacionales-de-derechos-humanos-en-materia-penitenciaria/>



## *Conclusions*

The authors of this report want to clarify that the problem of prisons in Latin America and the Caribbean is two-fold. In one direction, all the human rights violations caused by a precarious penitentiary system and a criminal justice policy that overburdens these often sub-human centers without creating real conditions for rehabilitation. In the other direction, and as part of a vicious cycle, these spaces bring together experienced criminals with other vulnerable individuals, creating perverse systems of economic and criminal relationships and incentives. In many cases, prison security institutions and police forces have not been able to respond to the violence and criminality that emerge from these spaces. The governments that have used the armed forces in other public security tasks often choose to designate prison security tasks to the military in the three categories established in the previous section: temporary perimeter security, temporary interior intervention, and active presence.

Although human rights institutions criticize the use of the military in the region's prisons, the evidence does not show that soldiers are more likely to violate inmates' rights or have used more lethal force than civilian security agents. Politicians may see military intervention as necessary in time and space. However, critics are correct in that it does not solve the underlying problems: social and criminal policies that overburden the justice system, underinvestment in prison infrastructure sufficient to meet minimum international standards, and security sector reforms that make military involvement in prisons unnecessary.

Even so, it is evident that some countries, in the short term, will continue to employ their military forces in security tasks in prisons. In the volatile environment the region is experiencing, some additional countries may decide to do the same. In this context, military and civilian authorities should take into account the following considerations:

- All military personnel deployed to prisons must have adequate equipment and weaponry to protect themselves and use force if necessary in closed spaces and in line with international standards on human rights and the use of force. Ideally, military forces are only used for temporary perimeter security in emergencies under the concept of concentric rings of security where civilian authorities are in charge of the inner rings.
- It is necessary to examine the functionality of policies that separate inmates by gang or criminal group to determine whether it reduces violent acts or strengthens criminal logic within prisons. Subsequent decisions should be based on evidence and not on the leaders' preferences within the prisons.

- It is necessary to review the policies for the confinement of persons incarcerated under pre-trial detention and, to the extent possible, separate them from the general population to prevent the abuse of persons not yet convicted and with greater possibilities of rehabilitation.
- In the context of the pandemic, overcrowding has further highlighted the precariousness of the prison system and the need to consider releasing non-violent inmates temporarily or reducing sentences for humanitarian reasons. Measures in this regard may contribute to inmate health conditions and public health and alleviate some of the pressure of overcrowding.

The substantive tasks ahead to create more humane prison and rehabilitation systems are arduous and long-term. There are too few advocates advocating for the rights of this population and their families. Overcrowding and riots are consequences of long-standing social, economic, and justice policies and will not be solved overnight. In these contexts, military intervention in the prison system with civilian forces will have to be more like medical personnel administering antibiotics than firefighters putting out fires, thus buying time and space for the root causes to be comprehensively addressed.

## Appendix 1

### Prison riots in Latin America and the Caribbean (2020 - 2021)

1. MEXICO (January 1, 2020) - ‘Mexico prison riot leaves 16 inmates dead.’<sup>32</sup>  
In a brawl between inmates, 16 people were killed by firearms and bladed weapons. Authorities seized four firearms after re-establishing order.
2. BOLIVIA (February 13, 2020) - ‘Riot reported in El Abra prison.’<sup>33</sup>  
Inmates of El Abra prison in the city of Cochabamba rioted, demanding the presence of human rights institutions and the media. The incident occurred after an alleged escape attempt and a raid that resulted in the seizure of six grenades, bladed weapons, and drugs in the maximum-security section.
3. BRAZIL (February 13, 2020) - ‘Tension between factions causes riot inside penitentiary.’<sup>34</sup>  
Tensions between the First Capital Command and Red Command gangs resulted in a riot and the intervention of an elite group from the prison service using smoke grenades. There was significant material destruction in the event, and the inmates of the Red Command gang were transferred to another facility.
4. BRAZIL (March 13, 2020) - ‘Riot in Monagua CPP leaves policeman injured.’<sup>35</sup>  
Following the breakdown of a pact between criminal factions in prison, a police officer was injured when he attempted to respond to the scuffle. The penitentiary police union made a public appeal about the lack of sufficient personnel to maintain order in the prisons.
5. TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO (March 17, 2020) - ‘Presos intentan fugarse durante el motín de COVID-19’  
Two hundred fifty inmates attempted to escape prison, complaining about the risk of COVID-19 infection. Two guards were injured in the process, which ended with an arson attack on the prison roof. Police and military forces intervened to restore order and recapture the escaped inmates.
6. PERU (March 18, 2020) - ‘Prison riot in Piura: Inmates protest for fear of coronavirus.’<sup>36</sup>  
There was a riot in a prison in northern Peru to protest the sanitary conditions during the coronavirus pandemic. The riot broke out in four wards, and the national police had to intervene to support the guards in restoring order.
7. COLOMBIA (March 21, 2021) - ‘At least 23 dead, dozens injured in Colombian prison riot amid pandemic.’<sup>37</sup>  
In a confusing context where prisoners demanded measures to prevent the coronavirus and a possible escape attempt in a facility that housed 5,000 people, 23 prisoners were killed, and 83 more were injured without further explanation as to how they were killed and injured. Two prison guards were injured. The municipal ombudsman's office attempted to negotiate

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2020-01-01/motin-en-carcel-de-mexico-deja-16-presos-muertos>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/cochabamba/20200213/reportan-motin-penal-abra>

<sup>34</sup> <https://diariodegoias.com.br/tensao-entre-faccoes-causa-tumulto-em-penitenciaria-no-interior-de-sp/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.sifuspesp.org.br/noticias/7377-tumulto-no-cpp-de-mongagua-deixa-policia-penal-ferido>

<sup>36</sup> <https://diariocorreio.pe/edicion/piura/motin-en-penal-rio-seco-de-piura-presos-protestan-por-temor-al-coronavirus-covid-19-video-noticia/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-03-22/al-menos-23-muertos-y-decenas-de-heridos-en-un-motin-carcelario-en-colombia-en-medio-de-la-pandemia.html>

between inmates and authorities without success. Initial reports did not indicate whether the guards or the prisoners caused the deaths and injuries.

8. PERU (March 23, 2020) - 'Peruvian prison riot leaves at least two dead and 17 wounded.'<sup>38</sup>  
Two people were killed and 17 injured in a prison riot when prisoners protested against the lack of pandemic measures in a prison in the country's north. The prisoners took several staff members hostage, prompting a police response to rescue them and the intervention of the army to surround the facility.
9. ARGENTINA (April 24, 2020) - 'Riot in Devoto prison to demand release from prison in response to coronavirus pandemic'<sup>39</sup>  
Police and fire units had to respond to a riot in a prison housing more than 1,600 people where inmates were demanding release from jail to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The prisoners took over the roof until order was restored and filmed their actions using cell phones.
10. PERU (April 29, 2020) - 'Death toll rises to nine in Peruvian prison riot following protests.'<sup>40</sup>  
Nine people were killed, and two more were injured in a riot in one of Peru's main prisons. Additionally, 60 guards and five police officers were injured in the clashes. The riot followed a protest over prison conditions in the face of the pandemic.
11. PERU (April 30, 2020) - 'Coronavirus in Peru: prison riot in Chiclayo leaves two inmates dead.'<sup>41</sup>  
Two inmates were stabbed to death during a prison riot due to a lack of hygiene products. Guards from the National Penitentiary Institute intervened to restore order.
12. VENEZUELA (May 1, 2020) - 'Venezuela prison riot leaves at least 46 dead.'<sup>42</sup>  
A total of 46 people were killed and 75 wounded in a prison riot in which conflicting accounts mention an escape attempt and an effort by prisoners' relatives to bring food on site. The riot involved bladed weapons as well as firearms and explosives. A knife wounded a prison director, and a soldier was wounded by grenade shrapnel. The deaths were the result of armed clashes between officials and prisoners.
13. BRAZIL (May 2, 2020) - 'A hostage-taking riot in Manaus demands improvements in response to the coronavirus.'<sup>43</sup>  
Prisoners in an Amazonian city took seven guards hostage. Family visits were suspended for two months during the pandemic, and the prisoners demanded improved sanitary conditions. The state Military Police was mobilized to negotiate the release of the hostages. In 2017, 56 prisoners died, and 200 escaped from the same penitentiary.

---

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200324/4877949080/un-motin-en-una-carcel-de-peru-deja-al-menos-2-muertos-y-17-heridos.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.cronista.com/economia-politica/Motin-en-la-carcel-de-Devoto-en-reclamo-de-excarcelaciones-ante-la-pandemia-de-coronavirus-20200424-0056.html>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/se-eleva-a-nueve-el-numero-de-muertos-por-un-motin-en-una-carcel-peruana-tras-protestas/20000013-4233222>

<sup>41</sup> <https://elcomercio.pe/peru/lambayeque/coronavirus-en-peru-violento-motin-en-penal-de-chiclayo-deja-dos-presos-muertos-videos-nnpp-noticia/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-motin-muertos-idESKBN22E09F>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202005/458847-motin-toma-de-rehenes-brasil-coronavirus.html>



14. PERU (May 19, 2020) - 'Prison riot over coronavirus fear leaves 14 injured in Peru.'<sup>44</sup>  
In a riot unleashed by fear of the new coronavirus in southern Peru, four people were injured among prisoners and correctional officers. The prison housed 450 people in a place with a capacity of 78. The INPE said that the inmates "rioted to be considered among the beneficiary population of the rules for the dismantling of prisons" due to the spread of coronavirus in the facilities.
15. COSTA RICA (May 26, 2020) - 'Escape attempt in La Reforma left one dead and five injured.'<sup>45</sup>  
A human avalanche occurred in a confusing context in a Costa Rican prison, resulting in the death of one inmate and five injured. When control was re-established, authorities found 32 bladed weapons.
16. GUYANA (July 12, 2020) - 'Guyana: 15 injured in prison riot.'<sup>46</sup>  
Fifteen prisoners were injured after a fire caused by a prison riot. The Defense Forces had to be called in to support the interventions of the police and prison guards.
17. ARGENTINA (July 16, 2020) - 'Prisoners riot in Jujuy jail due to alleged cases of coronavirus inside the prison.'<sup>47</sup>  
Inmates rioted from the roofs of a prison, burning mattresses and demanding better sanitary conditions in the context of the pandemic. The police intervened with rubber bullets, and two inmates were killed, although the cause of their deaths was not determined at the time. The prisoners ended the riot after communicating prison conditions to a local judge.
18. BOLIVIA (July 27, 2020) - 'Bolivian prison riot after the death of three inmates suspected of having COVID-19.'<sup>48</sup>  
Inmates climbed on the prison roof and set fire to some items in the city of Cochabamba in response to the death of three inmates due to COVID-19. Anti-riot police intervened to re-establish order.
19. GUYANA (September 20, 2020) - 'Two deaths in a Guyanese prison riot in the capital city'  
Prison guards killed two inmates and injured five more in a confrontation in the context of a riot and a possible escape attempt from prison in Guyana. The prisoners demanded better sanitary conditions in the context of the pandemic, overcrowding, and excessive detention times under pre-trial detention. It was the second prison riot in recent months.
20. COSTA RICA (October 5, 2020) - 'Prison riot sends two police officers to hospital.'<sup>49</sup>  
Three inmates and two policemen were injured in a violent riot in a Costa Rican prison when the guards tried to carry out a head count of the inmates. They were attacked with stones and sharp objects. Simultaneously, an unauthorized drone attempted to enter the prison space.

---

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.france24.com/es/20200519-un-mot%C3%ADn-carcelario-por-temor-al-coronavirus-deja-14-heridos-en-per%C3%BA>

<sup>45</sup> <https://costoricamedios.cr/2020/05/26/intento-de-motin-en-la-reforma-dejo-un-interno-muerto-y-cinco-mas-heridos/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.dw.com/es/guyana-quince-reclusos-heridos-en-amenamiento-en-una-c%C3%A1rcel/a-54150536>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/sociedad/policiales/2020/07/16/presos-de-una-carcel-de-jujuy-realizan-un-motin-por-supuestos-casos-de-coronavirus-dentro-del-penal/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.france24.com/es/20200727-mot%C3%ADn-en-c%C3%A1rcel-de-bolivia-tras-muerte-de-tres-reos-con-sospecha-de-covid-19>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.diarioextra.com/Noticia/detalle/430386/motines-en-c-rce-mandan-dos-polic-as-al-hospital>

21. BELIZE (October 13, 2020) - '1 Prisoner is Fatally Shot During Uprising.'<sup>50</sup>  
More than 100 inmates rioted against five guards in a Belizean prison. They were demanding better conditions in the context of the pandemic. One inmate was shot and killed by guards in the incident.
22. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC (November 4, 2020) - 'Riot in Azua prison leaves four inmates injured.'<sup>51</sup>  
Rubber bullets injured four inmates during a riot in a Dominican prison.
23. ECUADOR (December 6, 2020) - 'Jail riot leaves six dead and seven injured.'<sup>52</sup>  
Six prisoners died, and seven were injured during a prison riot in the coastal city of Esmeraldas. Members of the National Police and the Armed Forces participated in efforts to control the riot and restore order.
24. BRAZIL (December 7, 2020) - 'Inmates burn mattresses and cause riots at MAFRA regional prison.'<sup>53</sup>  
Inmates at Santa Catarina prison burned mattresses in the unit's courtyard during a fight between two groups of prisoners. Prison guards intervened to put out the fire.
25. VENEZUELA (January 2, 2021) - 'We are starving: riot in Touyito prison continues this Saturday.'<sup>54</sup>  
Inmates in a Venezuelan prison set fire to sections of the prison and climbed to the roof in an act of rioting and protest against the authorities. The prisoners and their families claimed that the guards were reselling the food provided by their relatives.
26. CHILE (January 30, 2021) - 'Inmate's death provoked riot and demonstrations in San Miguel women's prison.'<sup>55</sup>  
Heavy riots broke out in a women's prison when a female inmate died due to a lack of medical attention. According to the relatives, the guards used excessive force to repress the riot.
27. ARGENTINA (February 11, 2021) - 'They did not let him go to an uncle's wake, and everything ended in a riot in Roca.'<sup>56</sup>  
A riot broke out in an Argentinean prison when an inmate's request for release was denied, resulting in burning mattresses and destroying property. The Rio Negro Provincial Penitentiary Service intervened to contain the riot, and four guards were injured.

---

<sup>50</sup> <https://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/209888>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.diariolibre.com/actualidad/sucesos/motin-en-carcel-15-de-azua-deja-cuatro-reclusos-heridos-JE22404278>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.dw.com/es/mot%C3%ADn-en-c%C3%A1rcel-ecuatoriana-deja-seis-muertos-y-siete-heridos/a-55841390>

<sup>53</sup> <https://ndmais.com.br/seguranca/policia/detentos-queimam-colchoes-e-causam-tumulto-em-presidio-regional-de-mafra/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/nos-estamos-muriendo-de-hambre-continua-el-motin-en-la-carcel-de-tocuyito-este-sabado/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.24horas.cl/nacional/muerte-de-una-interna-provoco-motin-y-manifestaciones-en-carcel-de-mujeres-de-san-miguel-5165962>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.rionegro.com.ar/no-lo-dejaron-ir-al-velorio-de-un-tio-y-todo-termino-en-un-motin-en-roca-1685681/>

28. PARAGUAY (February 17, 2021) - 'Riot in Paraguay's largest prison leaves seven dead.'<sup>57</sup> Seven people were killed, including three beheaded in a riot in Paraguay's main prison. Nineteen guards were taken hostage. National Police riot forces moved in to respond to the violence. There is speculation that there was a confrontation between inmates from a local gang and others affiliated with Brazil's First Capital Command. Relatives claimed the riot arose from poor facility conditions and prison staff abuse.

29-32. ECUADOR (February 23, 2021) - 'Four simultaneous riots leave at least 79 dead in Ecuador's jails.'<sup>58</sup>

At least 79 people were killed and eight injured in a series of simultaneous riots in four prisons in Ecuador. The clashes were allegedly between criminal gangs. The Armed Forces were called in to support prison authorities and police in a mechanism called the Unified Command Post. Firearms were found in the prison among the prisoners' belongings.

33. ARGENTINA (February 26, 2021) - 'Riots, fires and protests in the wards of Roca's Prison 2.'<sup>59</sup>

The Special Penitentiary Intervention Corps had to intervene in four wards of an Argentinean prison after a riot. No one was injured. The prisoners were protesting against the suspension of family visits due to the pandemic.

34. HAITI (February 26, 2021) - 'Eight dead following prison riot, including warden.'<sup>60</sup> Seven people, including the facility director, were killed in an attempted escape from a prison on the capital city's outskirts. Shooters attacked the facility to free the inmates. Some inmates were recaptured, while an undetermined number managed to escape. The prison is known for housing government opponents and a high level of overcrowding.

35. BRAZIL (March 7, 2021) - 'Inmates hospitalized after Magé prison riot.'<sup>61</sup> Inmates in a Brazilian prison started a riot and set fire to mattresses, injuring five. The prison administration's Tactical Intervention Group was activated to restore order.

36. HONDURAS (9 March 2021) - 'Two dead, several injured during riot in Prison Syria.'<sup>62</sup> Two dead and several wounded in a riot in a Honduran prison. Neighbors heard gunshots coming from the prison.

37. ARGENTINA (March 16, 2021) - 'Riot at the Third Police Station: detainees set fire to a mattress and confronted police officers.'<sup>63</sup>

A riot occurred after a drug seizure in a prison in southern Argentina. The riot culminated in a fire and local police had to intervene to restore order.

---

<sup>57</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-02-17/un-motin-en-la-carcel-mas-grande-de-paraguay-deja-siete-muertos-tres-de-ellos-por-decapitacion.html>

<sup>58</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-02-24/tres-motines-simultaneos-dejan-al-menos-75-muertos-en-carceles-de-ecuador.html>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.rionegro.com.ar/motin-fuego-y-protestas-en-los-pabellones-del-penal-2-de-roca-1706604/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20210226-haiti-muertos-motin-carcel-director>

<sup>61</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2021/07/03/presos-sao-hospitalizados-apos-tumulto-em-presidio-de-mage.ghtml>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.elchubut.com.ar/policiales/2021-03-09/dos-muertos-y-varios-heridos-deja-amoto-inamiento-en-carcel-de-siria/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.elchubut.com.ar/policiales/2021-3-16-20-35-0-motin-en-la-comisaria-tercera-detenedos-prendieron-fuego-un-colchon-y-enfrentaron-a-los-efectivos>

- <sup>70</sup> <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/internacional/20210623/motin-carcel-mexicana-deja-6-muertos-11849181>

46. VENEZUELA (July 1, 2021) - 'Two prisoners dead and one wounded in Turen jail.'<sup>71</sup>  
Two inmates died, and another was injured in a temporary police detention center riot. The inmates were demanding that their legal proceedings be expedited.
47. BRAZIL (July 2, 2021) - 'Five injured after Magé prison riot.'<sup>72</sup>  
Five prisoners were injured in a riot involving the burning of mattresses. Rio de Janeiro Military Police assisted prison authorities by providing outside security.
48. HONDURAS (July 17, 2021) 'Honduras: Prison shooting leaves at least five dead'  
In a gun battle at a maximum-security prison in Honduras, five people were killed and many more injured. According to authorities, it was a confrontation between Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gang members.
49. ECUADOR (July 21, 2021) - 'Riots leave at least 18 dead in Cotopaxi and Guayaquil prisons.'<sup>73</sup>  
Ten inmates died in one Ecuadorian prison and eight in another during simultaneous riots where gangs clashed. Nine police officers were injured in both places to restore order.
50. ARGENTINA (July 26, 2021) - 'One prisoner dead and another seriously injured after a riot in General Pico City Hall.'<sup>74</sup>  
A riot in the interior of Argentina left one prisoner dead and another seriously injured after a fight between inmates from different prison wards. A policeman was temporarily taken hostage in a failed escape attempt. The prisoner's cause of death was not disclosed.
51. HONDURAS (August 7, 2021) - 'New riot in Prison Syria leaves three inmates injured.'<sup>75</sup>  
Two inmates were injured in a riot in a prison with constant problems of violence.
52. GUATEMALA (August 12, 2021) - 'Prisoners riot in Guatemala and detain 18 guards.'<sup>76</sup>  
Members of the Barrio 18 gang took 18 prison guards hostage in Guatemala, including the prison warden. The prisoners' grievances were not clearly communicated. Guatemala's prison system reports 370% overcrowding.
53. MEXICO (August 20, 2021) - 'Guerrero prison riot leaves one dead, seven injured.'<sup>77</sup>  
A riot caused a fire in a Mexican prison, leaving one dead and several injured. The riot was a response to a fight between inmates.
54. BOLIVIA (August 24, 2021) - 'San Pedro prison inmates riot to demand equal rights due to Jeanine Añez's privileges.'<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.elnacional.com/venezuela/sucesos/dos-presos-muertos-y-un-herido-tras-motin-en-calabozos-de-turen/>

<sup>72</sup> <https://noticias.r7.com/rio-de-janeiro/cinco-pessoas-ficam-feridas-apos-rebeliao-em-presidio-de-mage-03072021>

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/20-heridos-amotinamiento-carcel-cotopaxi.html>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.eldiariodelapampa.com.ar/la-pampa/18080-varios-heridos-tras-un-motin-en-la-alcaldia-de-pico>

<sup>75</sup> <https://tiempo.hn/nuevo-amotinamiento-carcel-de-siria-sabado/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://tiempo.hn/nuevo-amotinamiento-carcel-de-siria-sabado/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2021/08/20/motin-en-penal-de-guerrero-dejo-un-muerto-y-siete-heridos/>

<sup>78</sup> [https://eldeber.com.bo/pais/protesta-de-reos-de-san-pedro-deriva-en-pedidos-contrasupuestos-privilegios-de-la-expresidenta-anez\\_244446](https://eldeber.com.bo/pais/protesta-de-reos-de-san-pedro-deriva-en-pedidos-contrasupuestos-privilegios-de-la-expresidenta-anez_244446)

Prisoners in two Bolivian prisons, one for men and one for women, rioted and demanded better conditions and benefits for family visits. Police had to intervene to prevent inmates from escaping.

55. BRAZIL (August 31, 2021) - 'Inmates break fences, walls and objects during the rebellion at Garahuns Funase'<sup>79</sup>

Inmates in a Brazilian prison broke walls, fences, and prison infrastructure in an escape attempt. Military police managed to contain the riot and recaptured an escaped inmate.

56. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC (September 4, 2021) - 'Authorities report 13 inmates injured in Cotui prison riot.'<sup>80</sup>

Authorities reported 13 inmates injured with bladed weapons in a riot in the Dominican Republic. The riot began during a transfer of four inmates. The army was called in to provide perimeter security for the facility while the police re-established order inside.

57. BRAZIL (September 11, 2021) - 'After the death of an inmate, a riot takes place during an inspection at the Guaribara prison in Paraíba.'<sup>81</sup>

Inmates in a Brazilian prison rioted during a police investigation into the death of an inmate. Police managed to restore order.

58. ARGENTINA (September 22, 2021) - 'Riot in Roca prison: tense atmosphere with burning tires.'<sup>82</sup>

Inmates of an Argentinean prison rioted by taking over the facilities' reception while relatives burned tires outside. Prison authorities had to call the police to restore order.

59. ECUADOR (September 29, 2021) - 'More than 115 dead in gang fight in Guayaquil prison.'<sup>83</sup>

A fight between Ecuadorean gangs allegedly backed by Mexican cartels left 115 dead, some of them decapitated and mutilated in Guayaquil, Ecuador. There were also detonations of explosives and the use of firearms in the chaos. More than 400 uniformed police entered the prison to restore order while the armed forces provided external security.

60. URUGUAY (October 8, 2021) - 'Prisoners riot in Uruguay to protest the firing of prison employee.'<sup>84</sup>

Ten prisoners were injured by rubber bullets and tear gas fired by prison security in Uruguay. Twenty-five inmates rioted over a misunderstanding of the alleged firing of a facility official.

61. ARGENTINA (October 23, 2021) - 'Riot in Corrientes, at least four wounded.'<sup>85</sup>

Four prison guards were injured during a riot by inmates demanding better benefits for family visits.

---

<sup>79</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/pe/caruaru-regiao/noticia/2021/08/31/internos-quebram-portoes-paredes-e-objetos-durante-rebeliao-na-funase-de-garanhuns.ghml>

<sup>80</sup> <https://listindiario.com/la-republica/2021/09/04/686845/autoridades-informan-fueron-13-los-privados-de-libertad-heridos-en-motin-en-carcel-de-cotui>

<sup>81</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/pb/paraiba/noticia/2021/09/11/apos-morte-de-detento-tumulto-e-registrado-durante-vistoria-no-presidio-de-guarabira-na-paraiba.ghml>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.rionegro.com.ar/motin-en-el-penal-de-roca-tenso-clima-con-quema-de-neumaticos-1970470/>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202109/570059-motin-carcel-ecuador-muertos.html>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2021/10/08/presos-se-amotinaron-en-uruguay-para-reclamar-por-el-despido-de-un-empleado-de-la-carcel/>

<sup>85</sup> [https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/motin-corrientes-4-heridos-hacer-guerra-ultimo-0\\_IIsSwzCz5.html](https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/motin-corrientes-4-heridos-hacer-guerra-ultimo-0_IIsSwzCz5.html)



62. ECUADOR (October 26, 2021) - ‘New riot in coastal penitentiary wave, one inmate and one officer injured.’<sup>86</sup>  
An inmate and a prison official were injured in a confrontation between inmates. The National Police and the Armed Forces entered the prison to re-establish order and carry out an operation to search for weapons.
63. BRAZIL (November 4, 2021) - ‘Prison riot leaves 12 inmates wounded in Minas Gerais.’<sup>87</sup>  
A prison riot left 12 inmates injured. The burning of a mattress caused a fire leaving five inmates critically injured.
64. ARGENTINA (November 11, 2021) - ‘Mendoza: Inmates held two prison inmates hostage for more than nine hours.’<sup>88</sup>  
Before the transfer to the maximum-security sector, four prisoners, supported by family members, detained two prison guards. They demanded better rights within the prison. No one was injured.
65. ECUADOR (November 12, 2021) ‘Ecuador: new massacre in Guayaquil prison leaves about 68 dead.’  
The Attorney General's Office announced the death of 68 prisoners in Guayaquil's main prison. A power vacuum caused the riot following the release of the leader of the Tiguerones gang. After the incident the Armed Forces were called in to reinforce the prison's perimeter security.
66. COLOMBIA (December 29, 2021) - ‘Mocoa prison riot due to overcrowding conditions.’<sup>89</sup>  
Prisoners rioted in a jail in southern Colombia, claiming overcrowding. Previously, this prison registered an escape attempt due to the same conditions.

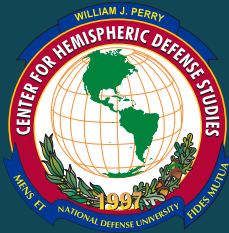
---

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.eldiario.ec/actualidad/ecuador/nuevo-motin-en-la-penitenciaria-del-litoral-hay-un-reo-y-un-agente-herido/>

<sup>87</sup> <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2021-11/tumulto-em-presidio-deixa-12-presos-feridos-em-minas-gerais>

<sup>88</sup> [https://www.clarin.com/policiales/mendoza-presos-mantuvieron-rehenes-penitenciarios-horas\\_0-4JZDmCz6.html](https://www.clarin.com/policiales/mendoza-presos-mantuvieron-rehenes-penitenciarios-horas_0-4JZDmCz6.html)

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.elspectador.com/colombia/mas-regiones/motin-en-la-carcel-municipal-de-mocoa-por-condiciones-de-hacinamiento/>



**WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER  
FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES**  
National Defense University  
Abraham Lincoln Hall  
260 5th Ave. Bldg. 64  
Washington, DC 20319-5066