

**“El Tren de Aragua:
The Little-Known Transnational Gang From
Venezuela that Could”**

by

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Abstract:

The El Tren de Aragua or Aragua Train is a little-known transnational gang from Venezuela that formed from a corrupt railway labor union in Aragua from 2007 through 2010. The gang evolved into a Venezuelan prison gang and spread into the streets from there. They are active in Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru. Recently members for El Tren de Aragua have been arrested in Chicago, Florida, and Texas coming in with the wave of undocumented immigrants from Venezuela that has entered the United States. This paper provides a gang threat analysis or profile of the history, structure, and function of the gang over the years. Particular attention is provided to the political and ideological leanings which have included fighting with police but displacing well-established guerilla group territory through heavy weapon usage.

Introduction:

What is El Tren de Aragua? El Tren de Aragua is a transnational gang that originated in Venezuela. The gang’s operations have expanded all over Central and South America. El Tren de Aragua is following migration patterns and expanding into the United States. (Virgin, 2024) According to DHS (2024):

“Transnational gangs are criminal organizations that operate across international borders. Transnational gangs take advantage of differences in legal jurisdictions and law enforcement capabilities to avoid detection and prosecution, making it more difficult for authorities to investigate their illegal activity.”

DHS (2024) stated that:

“Transnational gangs operate illegal businesses and are involved in various crimes to fund and grow their criminal enterprises. They focus on increasing their market

share by decreasing other gangs' power and reach. This competition often leads to violence between gangs and against the communities where these gangs operate." El Tren de Aragua began as an offshoot of a corrupt railway construction union in around 2009-2010 in the Venezuelan state of Aragua. They took bribes in their construction work. The work was never completed. The gang expanded into other criminal activities. (Sanhueza, 2022; Romo, Morillo, & Weffer, 2024) Venezuela is divided into 23 states. El Tren de Aragua began in the state of Aragua. According to Risquez (2023), El Tren de Aragua operates in eleven of the twenty-eight states. El Tren de Aragua is involved in illegal gold mining operations in the state of Bolivar.

Tocoron Prison, Venezuela:

When you commit crimes you often find yourself in prison. Many El Tren de Aragua members were imprisoned at Tocoron Prison where they took over the prison. Radford and Buschlurer (2023) reported that:

"The jail doubled up as the headquarters of the Tren de Aragua, Venezuela's most powerful transnational gang. From the jail, Tren de Aragua ruled a criminal enterprise spanning several Latin American countries and reaching as far as Chile. The gang fitted the prison out with all kinds of facilities, such as games rooms and a small zoo complete with flamingos and an ostrich."

Radford and Buschlurer (2023) reported that in September 2023 the government acted and stated that:

"Venezuela says it has regained control of a notorious jail, which had been under the control of the powerful Tren de Aragua criminal gang. Some 11,000 security personnel were deployed to Tocorón prison, which had been run by inmates for years. Prisoners were able to roam freely inside the penitentiary, which had hotel-like facilities including a pool, nightclub, and a mini zoo."

Who is the leader of El Tren de Aragua?

The leader of El Tren de Aragua is acknowledged to be Hector Rustenford Gurrero Flores aka "El Nin'õ." Gurrero was an inmate at Tocoron prison and ran the operations of the gang from there. In 2023 when the Venezuelan government recaptured the prison, Gurrero escaped and is still at large. (Radford & Buschlurer, 2023)

Hector Rustenford Gurrero Flores was born on December 2, 1983, in Maracay, Aragua state, Venezuela.

InSightCrime (2024) reported that:

"According to Venezuelan Supreme Court records from September 3, 2005, Niño Guerrero killed an Aragua police officer, which put him on the radar of the authorities."

Since that time Gurrero has been accused of several more murders and a host of other crimes.

Expansion of El Tren de Aragua:

Under Guerrero's leadership, El Tren de Aragua began to expand, first in Venezuela. InSightCrime (2024) found that:

"Today, Tren de Aragua's power extends across Venezuela, where it controls gold mines in the state of Bolívar, drug corridors on the Caribbean coast, and part of the clandestine border crossings, also known as trochas, through which thousands of migrants cross the border with Colombia. But the group has also positioned in other countries in the region such as Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia."

Structure of El Tren de Aragua:

According to InSightCrime (2024):

"In addition to the support that Niño Guerrero receives from Petrica in the Bolívar mining fields, the leadership of the Tren de Aragua also includes Larry Amaury Álvarez, alias "Larry Changa," who is presumed to have migrated to Chile to coordinate the group's activities at the international level. Below the main leaders are the lieutenants, locally known as "luceros." In this list of Guerrero's subordinates and trusted men, Wilmer Perez Castillo, alias "Wilmer Guayabal", José Santana, alias "Santanita", José Alvarado, alias "Goyo Chevrolet", and a man identified as Kleiverson or alias "Flipper" who manages part of the group's operations through campaigns in the Somos el Barrio JK Foundation, a pseudo-social community organization, stand out."

El Tren de Aragua: Venezuela:

TDA originated in Venezuela. While they originally mainly engaged in acts of corruption or fraud, TDA has expanded their criminal activities extensively. According to Rísquez's findings, the transnational mega-gang has a "portfolio of crimes."

"Some are the traditional crimes you find in a criminal organization, such as extortion, contract killings and drug trafficking," she explains. While others are not so common, such as their involvement in sports activities, more precisely in the deals of Venezuelan baseball players who sign for major league clubs in the United States. Investigations indicate that they are shadow partners in several training academies, and that they charge a large percentage for each contract." (El País, 2023)

Singer (2023) noted that:

"One of the ways Tren de Aragua made money was by using Facebook Marketplace to lure people interested in buying cheap cars. Unfortunately, when the buyers arrived to buy the car, they were robbed and sometimes murdered."

The Economist (2023) found that El Tren de Aragua earned money by human trafficking saying:

"Its main earner is the movement of people. Mr. Guerrero built his empire by exploiting many of the nearly 8m Venezuelans who left the country in the past decade, as hyperinflation and dictatorship took hold. The syndicate has industrialized human trafficking on a scale not seen before in South America..."

Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) found that:

“The outflow of refugees and migrants from Venezuela is the largest displacement crisis in the world, with almost 7.7 million migrants and refugees as of August 2023.”

Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) observed that:

“In search of the American dream, record numbers of migrants have also reached the U.S.-Mexico border, with 262,633 Venezuelans having crossed just in 2023, up from 189,520 in 2022. The root causes that generated this unprecedented flow of migrants and refugees, including democratic breakdown, repression, and a lack of basic human rights, remain unchanged in Venezuela. There is also a deep economic crisis driven by devastating policies and a kleptocracy that has characterized the political landscape during the last 20 years.”

Citing the findings of Venezuelan investigative journalist Ronna Risquez, The Clinic stated:

“Unlike other groups, the Tren de Aragua does not need to have armed men in all countries. They may be capable of committing atrocious violence against their enemies, like some that have occurred in Chile, but that is not something that characterizes them. Most of its members look and act like anyone else, but they are capable of joining any criminal activity that they consider may bring some income: from drug trafficking, to the sexual exploitation of women, to extortion and murder.

They dedicate themselves to everything, without any problem,” (The Clinic, 2022)

Risquez (2023) observed that El Tren de Aragua has expanded its operations from Venezuela to: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and the United States.

El Tren de Aragua: Bolivia

El Tren de Aragua has expanded to Bolivia. Bolivia is a major drug producing country. Reporting about TdA, Paredes (2022) said:

“This mafia took over northern Chile and is dedicated to the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation as its main source of income, even more than drug and arms trafficking. In Bolivia there is a small group that operates mainly on the border with Chile, but there are emissaries that recruit the same Venezuelan and Colombian women in cities such as Santa Cruz de la Sierra, La Paz, Cochabamba and Oruro. In drug trafficking they are dedicated to the synthetic drug business.”

El Tren de Aragua: Brazil

El Tren de Aragua has begun to expand to neighboring Brazil. InSightCrime (2019) stated that:

“Members of Venezuela’s large and dangerous Tren de Aragua gang are actively trying to expand their group’s influence in the Brazilian prisons where they are incarcerated.

In early September, Roraima State Security Secretary Olivan Júnior warned that Tren de Aragua members had been engaged in drug, arms and human trafficking in the Brazilian city of Pacaraima, on the border with Venezuela’s state of Bolívar,”

Romo, Morrillo and Weffer(2024) stated that:

“By 2015, a former Venezuelan law enforcement official told CNN, ‘They were already in their prime.’ That year they forged an alliance with Primeiro Comando da Capital, a Brazilian criminal organization. It was only a matter of time before they would extend their tentacles throughout South America.”

El Tren de Aragua: Chile

In a Chilean news report interviewing Risquez (2022)

“When did the Aragua Train arrive in Chile? – There is evidence of some leaders of the Aragua Train in Chile since 2018. Some may have been part of a group of people who were traveling or perhaps with false documents, but they entered legally in some cases.-Who is it? – “El Estrella”, for example, one of the bosses identified in Chile and arrested in the first operation carried out by the Chilean police in March. I understand that he entered legally and that at some point he had permission to live in Chile. There is another one, a very important boss who entered Chile legally and apparently also left Chile legally when the Chilean authorities began to investigate him, and he realizes that they are investigating him. This boss traveled on a plane, on a commercial airline from Santiago de Chile to Colombia.”

“There is also drug trafficking, one of the most important drugs that has been identified in the organization’s trafficking is ketamine, it is called tusi or pink cocaine. In addition, they have dedicated themselves to extorting merchants, in the terminals, in businesses to control the mobility of Venezuelan migrants at bus passenger stations. And they launder money, they have established some businesses - mainly food - to launder money. In summary, the Aragua Train found a space in Chile to carry out sexual exploitation, traffic tusi, launder money and extort merchants.” (The Clinic, 2022)

In their interview with Risquez, The Clinic went on to report:

“What is the Aragua Train doing here in Chile? – They are like a kind of coyotes that in some cases do charge for passing migrants, but they also charge for migrants who pass, even if they do not help them, and they do it precisely against the Venezuelan migrants who, as I told you, are their first victims. Then, the sexual exploitation of Venezuelan women, which not only takes them to Chile, but has taken them to other countries in the region. That is one of the activities that generates income for this organization and that they have implemented in Chile apparently quite strongly. It was an activity that was not common in Chile, and what I understand is that the Aragua Train grabbed a kind of niche that no criminal group had, and they have managed to have this presence of Venezuelan women who are sexually exploited by them in several locations in Chile.” (the Clinic, 2022)

El Tren de Aragua: Medellin, Columbia

Colombia borders Venezuela. Many of the refugees from Venezuela travel through Columbia when they leave Venezuela. Romo, Morrillo and Weffer (2024) found that:

“In Colombia, Tren de Aragua, and a rival guerrilla group known as the National Liberation Army (ELN), “operate sex trafficking networks in the border town of Villa del Rosario in the Norte de Santander department.”

Romo, Morrillo and Weffer (2024) also found that:

“These groups exploit Venezuelan migrants and internally displaced Colombians in sex trafficking and take advantage of economic vulnerabilities and subject them to debt bondage,” according to the US State Department 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report about Colombia. Police in the region say the organization has victimized thousands through extortion, drug and human trafficking, kidnapping and murder.”

Bodies of El Tren de Aragua victims were stuffed into garbage bags on the streets of Columbia. (El Pais, 2023)

El Tren de Aragua: Ecuador

Ecuavisa (2023) reported that:

“As Molina remembers, the first mark left by this gang in Ecuador occurred two years ago, on November 17, 2020. In Carchi, in an operation, the Police dismantled a criminal organization that they identified as El Tren de Aragua , made up of Venezuelan citizens who extorted and also engaged in illicit human trafficking. They intended to control the Tulcán buses, details the publication on the institution’s website; as a result, nine men were detained.”

Ecuavisa (2023) went on to say:

“One of the most recent events took place in December 2022, when a businesswoman from Manta was rescued after being kidnapped for 22 days. Regarding her captors, at the press conference it was revealed that the Venezuelan gang would be behind the incident.

Patricio Almendáriz, police chief of the Manabí subzone, said that the kidnappers identified themselves as part of El Tren de Aragua. At the time, Almendáriz clarified to Ecuavisa.com that it had not been possible to “have indications that they are part of that organization, but that is how they identified themselves, we cannot eliminate it either because there may be some link.”

El Tren de Aragua: México

Vargas (2023) observed that large numbers of immigrants from Venezuela were traveling through Mexico to get to the United States. Mexican authorities have been alerted to look for members of El Tren de Aragua among the surges of immigrants traveling northward. Mexico has not reported TDA members as committing any crimes there. TDA seems to be using Mexico as a pass through state to get to the United States. Members of El Tren de Aragua have been captured in Texas. (Virgin,2024)

El Tren de Aragua: Panamá:

Due to its location, many well established human trafficking routes pass through Panama enroute to the United States. Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) stated

that:.

“The challenges faced by the 7,710,887 displaced Venezuelans throughout the world, and the stories of so many of them moving throughout the Americas demonstrates the danger they are in—especially when they attempt to cross the harrowing Darién Gap. This 575,000 hectares of jungle between Panama and Colombia has become one of the Western Hemisphere’s most pressing focal points of the crisis. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), migrants are exposed to “multiple human rights violations, including sexual violence, murders, disappearances, trafficking, robbery and intimidation by organized criminal groups.”

Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) further observed that:.

“Despite this life-threatening journey—which can take almost 10 days—the numbers, as reported by Panamanian authorities, have gone up exponentially, from the almost unthinkable record of nearly 250,000 in 2022 to more than 330,000 in 2023.”

El Tren de Aragua is heavily involved in trafficking humans from Venezuela and Colombia through Panama. Panama is increasing its efforts to combat human trafficking in their country. In 2008, Panama’s government enacted Law 26 to strengthen the penalties for human trafficking. (Risquez, 2023)

El Tren de Aragua: Peru

La Republica (2022) reported that:

“On July 19, the National Police of Peru captured four alleged members of the dangerous Tren de Aragua gang, whose members are dispersed throughout several Latin American countries. The operation was carried out in the district of La Victoria and mobilized a large number of agents.”

La Republica (2022) also reported that:

“In the area, four suspects were arrested, three women and one man, on the tenth floor. ‘Weapons, drugs, notebooks with women’s names and amounts of money have been found, and the word ‘kill her’ could even be read as if it were an order. These subjects ran the clandestine prostitute in our city,’ said the PNP in Latina.”

El Tren de Aragua: Texas

Texas is a focal point for illegal border crossings into the United States. Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) found that between 2022 and 2023 452,153 illegal immigrants from Venezuela crossed the border into the United States. Virgin (2024) reported that:

“The FBI in El Paso shared with FoxSA that across the border some 38 members were arrested in fiscal year 2023. Kimberly Carrillo is a special agent with the FBI in El Paso who tells us this criminal organization like others has evolved and has taken advantage of communities and migrants around them.”

Virgin (2024) observed that:

“El Tren de Aragua members with higher ranks have been found to have tattoos of MK47 and crowns like the one worn by the Queen of England.”

The local Texas authorities have been overwhelmed by this massive flow of illegal immigrants. These illegal immigrants have to be housed, fed, provided medical care and schooling for their children. In an attempt to ease the burden on the taxpayers of Texas, Governor Abbott began a policy of bussing illegal immigrants to various cities in the United States. Governor Abbott's office stated in a press release dated January 12, 2024 that Texas had bussed:

“Over 12,500 migrants to Washington, D.C. since April 2022

Over 37,100 migrants to New York City since August 2022

Over 30,800 migrants to Chicago since August 2022

Over 3,400 migrants to Philadelphia since November 2022

Over 15,700 migrants to Denver since May 18

Over 1,500 migrants to Los Angeles since June 14”

This has had the unintended consequence of spreading TDA members across the country along with the illegal immigrant population.

According to Salinas and Salotra (2024) :

“Gov. Greg Abbott has declared the Venezuelan gang a foreign terrorist organization and asked the Department of Public Safety to create a strike team targeting them.”

El Tren de Aragua: New York

The bussing operations from Texas sent 37,100 immigrants to New York City. (Abbott, 2024) On 06/09/24, Romo, Morillo and Weffer reported that:

“In New York, police say Bernardo Raul Castro-Mata, a 19-year-old from Venezuela, shot two police officers last week. Castro-Mata entered the country illegally last July, a member of Immigration and Customs Enforcement told CNN. The Venezuelan has tattoos associated with Tren de Aragua – which court documents for a suspected gang member in Georgia describe as five-pointed crowns, five-pointed stars and teardrops – the New York Police Department told CNN. Castro-Mata had no prior arrests but is a suspect in several robberies in Queens.”

NEW YORK (Tribune News Service) (2024) reported that:

“A migrant accused of shooting and wounding two NYPD cops in Queens told authorities firing at police was “common practice” back home in Venezuela — although he claimed he didn't mean to open fire, prosecutors said Wednesday. Bernardo Raul Castro Mata, who prosecutors say shot the officers after being caught zipping the wrong way down a one-way Queens street on a scooter back on June 3, admitted to authorities he is a member of the violent Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua.” (Banchariva & Tracy, 2024)

TDA members quickly developed new tactics to facilitate their criminal operations in New York City. On 02/12/24, Vincent Kaplan, Celona & Miller (2024) reported that

El Tren de Aragua gang members were committing robberies using mopeds in NYC traffic. The robber would seize a purse or a phone and use the phone to drain the victim's bank account.

In the dense traffic of New York City, mopeds and scooters can drive in between cars and on sidewalks. NYPD cars are much slower to follow in city traffic. Mopeds and scooters are much faster than an NYPD officer on foot. NYPD horse patrol units could have some advantage in this type of pursuit.

However, NYPD did apprehend the scooter robbers. According to Marino and Fitz-Gibbon (2024):

“The fugitive ringleader of an interstate migrant moped gang that wreaked havoc in the Big Apple was busted by NYPD cops in the Bronx after three months on the lam, The Post has learned. Police said a migrant moped gang terrorized the five boroughs last year, staging gunpoint robberies and sending the proceeds to cohorts in Florida.”

“Victor Parra, 30, a bigwig in the ruthless crew that peddled stolen goods from the five boroughs to cohorts in Florida – and to contacts in South America, was nabbed riding a moped without a helmet last week and is now in custody, law enforcement sources said Monday. The scooter had Texas plates, according to the sources.”

McCarty & Fitz-Gibbon (2024) stated that the New York National Guard troops that had been tasked with processing new immigrants had been directed to look for El Tren de Aragua tattoos among the Venezuelan immigrants they were processing.

El Tren de Aragua: Illinois

Texas sent over 30,800 illegal immigrants to Chicago. (Abbott, 2024) Reyes (2024) reported that:

“At least one member of the Tren de Aragua gang has been arrested in the Chicago area. Edwin Camejo, 27, was arrested on Dec. 11, 2023, in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood after an operation in which more than a dozen police officers participated. Camejo was arrested for allegedly selling cocaine to an undercover officer three times. McCarthy explained that an operation like this requires an individual to sell drugs in a certain amount to create a serious crime. Camejo's report says he has no arrest warrants and is not on parole, but he is a member of the Tren de Aragua.”

El Tren de Aragua: Florida

Ortiz (2024) reported that:

“Police accused Hernandez-Montero and Yurwin Salazar-Maita, 23, of killing 43-year-old José Luis Sánchez Valera after he was lured by women and abducted from the parking lot of La Quinta Inn & Suites in late November. The Doral resident was found dead the next day, Nov. 28, with his hands and feet bound in the backseat of a 2018 Toyota 4Runner.”

Ortiz (2024) also said:

“Like his alleged accomplice, Hernandez-Montero is charged with first-degree murder, armed home invasion, carjacking and kidnapping. Hernandez-Montero and Salazar-Maita have been denied bail, remaining jailed at Miami-Dade County’s Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center and Metrowest Detention Center respectively.”

Ortiz (2024) went on to say:

“According to police reports, Salazar-Maita is a member of the Tren de Aragua, the infamous gang that has been terrorizing citizens of the South American country for more than a decade. Sánchez Valera’s abduction, carjacking, home invasion and murder is the first documented instance of a crime committed in South Florida by a member of the gang known for its size and wanton use of violence.”

El Tren de Aragua: Georgia

Laken Riley was a 22 year old nursing student attending Augusta University. On 02/22/24 Riley went out for a jog. She was attacked and murdered on the jogging path in Oconee Forest Park. (Cavallier, 2024) Illegal Venezuelan immigrant, José Antonio Ibarra, 26, was arrested for the murder. (Cavallier, 2024) Ibarra’s brother, also an illegal Venezuelan immigrant, is a known member of El Tren de Aragua.

El Tren De Aragua: Wisconsin

According to Sikma (2024) in Watertown, Wis.:

“A suspected member of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua was arrested for allegedly brutalizing a woman and her daughter in a tiny Wisconsin town — and hometown GOP Rep. David Van Orden said it was only “a matter of time” before tragedy struck thanks to the Biden-Harris administration’s open-border policies. Alejandro Jose Coronel Zarate, 26, cuffed late last week, is accused of sexually and physically assaulting a woman “under particularly brutal circumstances,” holding the woman and daughter against their will and “over the course of a period of time sexually and physically assaulting them both,” Prairie du Chien Police Chief Kyle Teynor said in Monday press conference. The latest incident also resulted in the injury of the victim’s minor child, police said.

After initially saying Zarate was “suspected” of having an affiliation with Tren de Aragua, the violent gang that’s been wreaking havoc across the nation, police said Monday they are “more confident now” about Zarate’s ties to the transnational gang based on their investigations.”

What About Colorado?

In Aurora, Colorado armed TDA members have been terrorizing apartment residents. According to Ventura and Johnson (2024):

“In Aurora, Colorado gang members have been linked to violent incidents at several apartment complexes. Surveillance video at those dwellings shows some alleged gang members carrying assault rifles. Local police have responded to numerous

cases where residents were victims of armed robberies and home invasions.” In addition, TDA members had been involved in shootings in Aurora. Nixon and Dixon Azuaje-Perez were arrested by Aurora Police in relation to a July 28th shooting on charges of evidence tampering. They were released on \$1,000 bond. (Baehr, 2024)

Summary

El Tren de Aragua (TdA) has grown from a corrupt railway union in Venezuela into a transnational gang whose operations cover Central and South America. Operating in small groups, TDA has begun to enter the United States through their involvement in human trafficking. TDA is very adaptable and has a short learning curve for new criminal operations. TDA quickly adapts their tactics to local situations. They are a known danger to law enforcement. This gang is a growing threat.

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