



Illegality and Violence in the Amazon

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About Amazon 2030

The **Amazon 2030** project is a Brazilian research initiative with the purpose of developing an action plan for the Brazilian Amazon. Our objective is to achieve conditions for a higher standard of economical and human development in the region, and to achieve a sustainable use of natural resources by 2030.

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Keywords

environmental crimes; deforestation; illegality; violence; homicides; Amazon

Executive Summary

This report analyzes the evolution of violence in the Legal Amazon over the last 20 years, focusing on the relationship between violent events or homicides and illegal activities related to environmental crimes. The region, which had relatively low levels of violence until the late 1990s, has become one of the most violent in the country in recent years. Putting it into perspective, if it were a country, in 1999 the Amazon would occupy the 26th position among the highest homicide rates in the world (according to the Health Metrics and Evaluation ranking). In 2017, the region would occupy the 4th position in this same ranking, behind only El Salvador, Venezuela, and Honduras.

Three illegal activities related to environmental crimes stand out as factors that help to explain the expressive growth of violence in the region: the irregular occupation of land and the illegal exploitation of timber and gold. These three illegal activities guide most of the discussion in this report. The report discusses how changes in the regulation of these three markets, and in the monitoring and punishment mechanisms available to the State, affected the incentives for illegality and, consequently, the prevalence of violence in the region.

From an analytical point of view, the perspective adopted suggests that these different types of illegal exploitation of natural resources are connected by common issues, which condition both the presence of illegal activities and the violence associated with them: definition of ownership rights, monitoring capacity and incentives (both public and private), and enforcement capacity (institutional and political). On the one hand, the occurrence of valuable natural resources in places that can be exploited for profit stimulates economic activity, which can bring about violence if this exploitation takes place on the fringes of legality (if ownership rights—public or private—are not well defined or guaranteed). On the other hand, a strong and present State is essential so that areas with valuable natural resources are monitored, public lands are protected, and private property rights are guaranteed, thus preventing the occurrence of illegal activities and the violence associated with them. The combination of these factors determines the State's ability to enforce regulation in a given area and, consequently, the occurrence of illegality and violence. In other words, strict regulations in environmental terms, in the presence of a strong and active state, can be very effective in preserving resources and minimizing the occurrence of illegal activities. But stringent regulations, combined with an absent state and low capacity, can generate illegal competition for natural resources, bringing with it the perverse consequences typically associated with illegality.

In quantitative terms, the statistical analysis focused on small municipalities—with less than 100,000 inhabitants—in the region indicates “excessive violence” that corresponds to a total of 12,160 homicide deaths in the 20 years between 1999 and 2019 (compared to municipalities from other regions of the country). This number—almost twice the total number of deaths in the Gaza-Israel conflict since 2008—corresponds to the total number of lives that would have been saved if the region's small municipalities had maintained, over the last 20 years, homicide rates similar to those observed in small municipalities in the rest of Brazil (6,247 people died in the Gaza-Israel conflict since 2008, according to data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). A relatively small number of municipalities at greater risk of illegal activities associated with land grabbing and illegal extraction of timber and gold are responsible, on average, for 70% of this “excessive violence”.

The present study also discusses the region's growing role in international drug trafficking routes and analyzes its influence on the most recent dynamics of violence in the Amazon. This new risk is dissociated from the environmental issues historically typical of the region but can interact with them in determining the local dynamics of violence. The proximity of traditionally coca-producing areas—in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru—has always placed the Amazon on the route of international trafficking, but changes in repressive policies in Brazil itself and in other countries, and a growing presence of national criminal factions in the region, reinforce the idea of a greater role in recent years.

In fact, the statistical analysis indicates that municipalities at risk of environmental crimes become less relevant in explaining the “excessive violence” in the region in the last five years of the period studied. This is not because these municipalities have become less violent, but because high levels of violence are becoming much more common in the region.

Part of this pattern seems to stem from the growing role that the region has been assuming in the international drug trade, with municipalities located on waterways and roads used by the drug trafficking registering exceptional increases in violence. But even this finding cannot explain most of the recent behavior. The generalization of high levels of violence probably reflects a generalization of illegality as well, possibly influenced by the loosening of environmental crime control mechanisms observed in recent years, and perhaps by the expansion of the influence of trafficking to areas beyond its transport routes. The recent dynamics only increase the regulatory and monitoring challenges to be faced in the future.

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