

# Narco-Violence, Schooling, and the Early Childhood Stakes for Ecuador's Children

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## Abstract

Behind the unprecedented migration of Ecuadorian families to U.S. cities, and growing anti-immigration rhetoric, lies violence that penetrates homes, communities, and schools. As narco-violence increases in Ecuadorian neighborhoods, this essay presents how it has become an ecological force shaping Ecuadorian children's development, schooling, and families' decisions to migrate. Organized crime threatens educational systems by recruiting children and normalizing threats and extortion against teachers and families, resulting in displacement and chronic stress that travels across borders. I contend that early childhood education and care cannot be separated from security and political economy, while critiquing the U.S. "border crisis" framings that ignore upstream harms while compounding trauma through detention and legal precarity. The essay urges local government investments: trauma-informed training and counseling for educators across borders, safe routes and response protocols, peace education in early childhood, and psychosocial protection. I highlight how cross-border policy re-shapes children's lives in powerful and often unrecognized ways.

## Introduction

A few months ago, while riding the subway in New York City, I encountered a familiar scene. An Indigenous Ecuadorian woman, with a baby tucked snugly in a scarf on her back, made her way through the train car selling pre-packaged candies and chocolates in Spanish. Instantly, I was taken back to my childhood in Ecuador, where street vending often blurred with caregiving and survival.

As anti-immigration rhetoric and attacks intensify in the United States, and as child abuse cases such as five-year-old Ecuadorian Liam Conejo Ramos's detention (Yan & Alvarez, 2026) dominated media coverage, it becomes easy to overlook the conditions that make families perceive "risking everything" as rational or even necessary. In recent years, Ecuador has experienced its largest wave of outward migration in recent history. Since January 2021, U.S. Border Patrol has arrested Ecuadorians approximately 350,000 times, while Panama recorded more than 100,000 Ecuadorians crossing the dangerous Darién Gap during the same period, many accompanied by young children (Spagat, 2024). These "encounters" tend to reduce human beings to mere figures and do not account for the realities of children and families.

As an Ecuadorian teacher-educator who lives in NYC and often works with teachers and children who have been displaced from their country of origin, I continue to struggle with the ways in which the so-called "border crisis" and accompanying rhetoric reduce the lived realities of many young people who experience violence as an everyday condition of their development. For children in Ecuador in particular, and even those Ecuadorian children who immigrate to the United States in search of education and a safe life, violence functions as a developmental condition that shapes families' trajectories, and ultimately impacts the capacities of schools and systems of early childhood education to serve as safe spaces where they can thrive.

## **What is Happening in Ecuador?**

A decade ago, UNICEF identified violence as the principal challenge facing children and adolescents in Ecuador, noting that it occurs in the spaces where children should be safest: home, school, and community. UNICEF Ecuador (2016) reported that nearly 40% of children experienced violent treatment and felt unsafe on public transportation. The report also highlighted the uneven distribution of violence, illustrating Ecuador's racialized and territorial inequalities. Violence most intensely affected children ages 5 to 11 in rural areas (42% compared to 36% in urban areas) and was most prevalent among Afro-Ecuadorian and Indigenous children.

Although economic crises have historically influenced Ecuadorian migration, the most recent wave is consistently described by migrants and international reports as a response to increasing violence, particularly the spread of narco-violence and organized criminal control (UNE, 2024). These ubiquitous conditions of "insecurity" directly affect children's daily lives and shape family decisions about schooling, employment, mobility, and community belonging. Early childhood teachers working with these children are also deeply affected by this environment of insecurity.

## **Organized Crime Enters Schools**

Ecuador's public education spending contracted in 2018, reaching only 3.04% of GDP. Oviedo (2025) links this contraction to conditions that worsened educational exclusion, including pandemic-era online schooling that pushed students out when families lacked connectivity, devices, or digital competence, especially in rural areas. The situation for early childhood education as a system is even more disastrous, with only 22% of all children under six attending a public early childhood program (Mavrides Calderon & Lasso, 2025). In a perfect storm, as access to education and investment declined, organized crime power increased, fueled by poverty and corruption, resulting in the overall weakening of justice and security institutions. (Moncada, 2013; Oviedo, 2025)

The consequences of these patterns are evident among those students not attending school. In 2025, 450,000 children and adolescents ages 3–17 were not enrolled in any of Ecuador's approximately 16,000 schools, primarily due to poverty, insecurity, or lack of access (UNICEF Ecuador, 2016). These children are at increased risk of recruitment by organized crime (Clases a distancia en 12 planteles, 2023). Oviedo (2025) contends that criminal organizations act as a "pole of attraction" for children in marginalized neighborhoods by using coercion and the promise of income, food, belonging, and protection to create an economy of "care" that is, in reality, a recruitment mechanism.

## **Teachers' Lives**

Threats and extortion have become routine and public aspects of educators' working conditions (Oviedo, 2025). On June 11, 2025, Ecuador's largest union, the Unión Nacional de Educadores, publicly called for urgent government action in response to escalating extortion and threats against teachers, attributed to organized crime (UNE, 2024). An early childhood teacher in Manabí, a zone particularly affected by narco gang violence, shared in a recent survey: "Te juegas la vida al ir al trabajo. No es una metáfora. Cambiamos de ruta cada semana. Si ven que 'no colaboras,' te marcan."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond individual testimonies, organizations such as Human Rights Watch (La Puente, 2024) document the risks faced by teachers with increasing detail. ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project, 2024) reports on high-crime areas describe escalating attacks on

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<sup>1</sup> "You gamble with your life going to work. This is not a metaphor. We change routes every week. If you don't "collaborate" they will mark you."

teachers and school personnel including threats, extortion, and murder. During the 2023–2024 school year, Ecuador's Educator Network reported 140 teacher relocation requests, primarily due to death threats and extortion. The same report notes that teachers in the province of Guayas may be extorted for approximately USD 100 to 200 to “allow them to continue teaching,” and that such intimidation diminishes teachers' capacity to provide psychological support to students (UNE, 2024).

In areas where organized crime has overtaken entire neighborhoods, schools have become sites of forced displacement, with students and teachers seeking transfers or leaving to avoid recruitment, intimidation, and extortion (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025). An early childhood and care teacher surveyed by the author confided:

La violencia no entra con pistola; entra con el miedo. Un niño falta dos días y nadie sabe si se mudó, si lo escondieron, si lo ‘llevaron. Y tú sigues pasando lista.<sup>2</sup>

In early childhood education and care, where consistency, attachment, and predictable routines are essential, such disruption undermines the relational infrastructure necessary for learning and healing. Even within classrooms, teachers in narco-controlled areas report changes in their teaching: “Yo enseño a leer, pero también enseño a sobrevivir: dónde sentarse, cuándo callarse, cómo salir rápido. Y aun así, no alcanza.”<sup>3</sup>

In the face of these threats, teachers and families were forced to relocate to safer areas. If they cannot move, they send children to live with relatives, pull children from school, avoid public spaces, reduce mobility, or stay inside. ACAPS (2024) describes how extortion, gang conflict, and threats drive forced displacement, noting that in Guayaquil's Nueva Prosperina district, extortion has displaced 5,000 families since the beginning of 2024. The report additionally emphasizes how the fear of recruitment of their children prompts many parents to send them to live with relatives in more secure areas or flee to the United States. Reports (Spagat, 2024) make the linkage explicit by describing communities where extortion becomes “part of everyday life,” pushing families toward costly, dangerous routes north out of Ecuador. The ecological harm for young children includes chronic stress, insecurity, disrupted attachments, and institutional breakdown. These injuries travel with children long after the border crossing.

The crisis in Ecuadorian education extends beyond violence. It also reflects a persistent dissonance between policy rhetoric and actual implementation. Early childhood systems cannot be separated from broader political upheaval and narco-violence. While Mavrides Calderon and Lasso (2025) note that policy discourse often articulates sophisticated visions of developmentally appropriate practice, the reality is characterized by scarcity, overcrowding, and a reliance on custodial care. Such conditions are incompatible with safety, learning, or trauma-sensitive practice. When organized crime pressures schools, early childhood institutions are doubly vulnerable. Since they are already under-resourced, they lack the capacity and support to react effectively to crises.

### **What Would “Positive Change” Look Like?**

Recognizing that narco-violence is a systemic transnational issue, I argue that early childhood systems can serve as protective factors even amid severe insecurity, if governments and international actors are committed to funding and supporting children's development. Some ideas could include:

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<sup>2</sup> “The violence doesn't enter the door with a gun, it enters with fear. Sometimes a child is absent for two days and no one knows whether he has moved out, is being hidden or has been taken? And you just have to continue taking attendance.”

<sup>3</sup> “I teach [them] how to read, but also how to survive: where to sit, when to be quiet, and when to run fast. Even with that, it is not enough”

### **Trauma and Psychosocial Supports**

UNICEF (2024) has long noted that violence can have lifelong consequences and explicitly recommended strengthening teachers' capacities through training in prevention and conflict mediation. In the current context, that recommendation must be expanded to include trauma-informed professional learning, paired with ongoing psychosocial support for teachers. ACAPS (2024) reports that teachers are experiencing mental health impacts from the mental toll of pervasive violence; asking teachers to "be resilient" without support is not a plan. It amounts to abandonment.

As such, teacher training should encompass trauma literacy, de-escalation techniques, classroom co-regulation strategies, and clear referral protocols. Support systems for teachers must include confidential counseling, peer-support networks, and time allocated for self-care, and, most importantly, compensation that matches these new skills.

### **Schools and Early Childhood and Care Settings are "Safe Havens"**

The Norwegian Refugee Council's (2025) framing is blunt and correct: schools must be safe havens, free from threats that force flight. "Safe Schools" extends beyond physical security. In early childhood, safety also means predictability, relational warmth, and protection from coercive control. UNICEF's 2024 statement on supporting safe school planning and psychosocial services points to a multisector approach: safety, mental health, education, and child protection must be coordinated rather than siloed. Practically, there should be protected routes to school, implementing rapid-response protocols for threats to ensure that the responsibility does not fall solely on individual teachers.

### **Peace Education Begins in Early Childhood**

If violence is saturating the home, school, and community, then "peace education" is imperative. This includes social-emotional learning grounded in community realities, conflict resolution, restorative practices, and culturally grounded collective care. Shah et al. (2016)'s framing of peace education encourages the prevention and implementation of research on early childhood socioemotional development. Particularly, children need explicit scaffolding in empathy, nonviolent communication, and a sense of belonging, especially when broader systems are modeling coercion, intimidation, and terror. Examples include common socio-emotional learning (SEL) strategies (Durlak et al., 2011): actively modeling perspective-taking, teaching emotion and feelings language in culturally and age-appropriate ways, modeling conflict resolution without aggression, and establishing inclusive classroom rituals (like morning meetings) that communicate safety, recognition, and membership.

### **Violence Response Must be Funded Like Malnutrition Response**

Ecuador's early childhood policy history (Mavrides Calderon & Lasso, 2025) has frequently prioritized measurable health outcomes such as nutrition, which is important but insufficient. Psychosocial supports must not remain secondary. Government and nonprofit funding should support both nutrition and protection or mental health infrastructures at comparable scales, as both are critical to shaping population-level development and educational trajectories.

### **What the Subway Hides and What Early Childhood Work Must Name**

The subway vendor's baby and the detention of Liam Conejo by ICE are visible reminders of a world in which children become collateral damage. Migration is the

outcome; less apparent are the long-term consequences that young children carry, often silently, into their learning, attachment, and sense of belonging.

These consequences manifest in U.S. classrooms as withdrawal, hypervigilance, interrupted schooling, and chronic stress resulting from ongoing legal uncertainty (Abbott et al., 2025; American Immigration Council, 2018; Mares & Ziersch, 2024). These conditions necessitate trauma-informed, relationally grounded pedagogy. As a teacher educator, I view it as a professional responsibility to prepare teachers to demonstrate compassion and to implement strategies such as co-regulation, predictable routines, restorative classroom practices, and referral pathways, thereby enabling schools to serve as stabilizing microsystems.

Beyond those committed to children, we must also name the ecological effects of the U.S. immigration policy (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021). It is not “outside” children’s development; it is part of the macrosystem and exosystem that can either buffer harm or compound it. In no uncertain terms, policies that expose children to detention, family separation, and prolonged precarious legal statuses (Dell’Orto, 2024) are developmentally damaging and should be avoided, not as a matter of political preference, but as a matter of child abuse (Linton et al., 2017). The call for “positive change” must include the United States. The U.S. government should not further victimize immigrant children by treating them as deterrence tools, through detention, coercive separations, or systems that push children to handle legal processes without meaningful protection (Dell’Orto, 2024). Given the refusal of the federal government to function as a protective layer in children’s ecology, local governments must safeguard stable school enrollment; expand school-based mental health services and newcomer supports; ensure access to qualified legal representation for children; and resource community organizations so that safety, counseling, housing stability, and education are coordinated rather than fragmented (Abbott et al., 2025).

If early childhood care and education is to be treated as a public responsibility, neither Ecuador nor the United States can delegate protection solely to individual teachers or mothers carrying infants. The task ahead is to build genuine safe havens in schools in both Ecuador and the United States, so that children and their families do not need to cross borders to find safety and so that those who do, such as Liam Conejo Ramos, are met with compassion and care rather than additional harm.

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