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Tren de Aragua Is the Latest Transnational Criminal Organization to Establish Itself in the U.S.

Simon Hankinson and Erin Schniederjan

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Biden–Harris Administration’s open-border policies and feckless law enforcement have allowed transnational criminal gangs to set up shop in the U.S.

One such gang, Tren de Aragua, is a known criminal organization whose actions threaten the lives and well-being of Americans in many parts of the country.

TdA engages in activities such as theft rings, human smuggling and trafficking, gender-based violence, money laundering, and illicit drug trafficking.

During the past few years, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have been released or paroled into the United States, allowed to stay in Temporary Protected Status, or just slipped in without being encountered by authorities (the “gotaways”). Blending among them are hundreds of members of Tren de Aragua (TdA), which, like all migrant gangs, begins by preying on its own countrymen.

In June 2024, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials said there were already over 100 ongoing immigration or criminal investigations linked to Tren de Aragua members—and the number can only have grown since.¹ In July, the Treasury Department designated Tren de Aragua as a significant Transnational Criminal Organization, saying the gang was “expanding throughout the Western Hemisphere and engaging in diverse criminal activities,

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such as human smuggling and trafficking, gender-based violence, money laundering, and illicit drug trafficking.”² In September, Texas Governor Greg Abbott (R) designated Tren de Aragua as a foreign terrorist organization “with thousands of members across the globe, who operate a sweeping criminal enterprise that traffics human beings for sex, smuggles drugs and weapons, and tortures and dismembers victims.”³

Background

Tren de Aragua began in the Tocarón prison in the Venezuelan state of Aragua and has since expanded in that country and the Americas.⁴ They reportedly are present in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and now the United States. TdA expanded its network by creating alliances with other gangs and moved into areas following the pattern of Venezuelan migration into the U.S.

Meanwhile in Caracas—despite the governments of former President Hugo Chávez and current President Nicolás Maduro having ruined the economy and allowing corruption and crime to flourish—the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence reported a 25 percent *drop* in violent deaths from 2021 to 2022.⁵ It is not implausible to postulate a link to Venezuela’s export of thousands of young criminals, many to the U.S.

The Tren de Aragua is a serious threat that echoes the arrival of the Salvadoran gang MS-13,⁶ which made its way into the U.S. illegally in the 1980s. Since then, MS-13 has been involved in crime and violence throughout the U.S. Mark Morgan, former Acting Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, notes the parallel:

I supervised an MS-13 gang task force in the early 2000s fighting against one of the most violent, prolific, transnational gangs that has terrorized our nation for the past two and a half decades. Although MS-13 remains at the top of the list of the 50-plus different gangs from across the globe attempting to illegally enter our borders, the Biden-Harris Administration has intentionally provided the pathway for what could become MS-13 2.0. This is a gang whose propensity for violence and ruthlessness is well documented. TdA is expanding its criminal operations like a slow growing cancer across our nation and unleashing a preventable wave of crime that will be with us for decades.⁷

It is not always evident or reported when criminal suspects are connected with Tren de Aragua, but the following are some incidents indicating the growing scope of their presence in the U.S.

TdA's Impact Across the United States

Athens, Georgia. In February 2024, Venezuelan Jose Ibarra was arrested and accused of killing nursing student Laken Riley. According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, both Ibarra and his brother, Diego, were members of Tren de Aragua. Both brothers were caught entering the U.S. illegally at the southern border and then released by DHS.⁸

Chicago, Illinois. In Chicago, Fox News reported on a robbery, with footage showing four alleged members of Tren de Aragua robbing a man on a Chicago train.⁹

Dallas, Texas. In September, Dallas police said Tren De Aragua had established themselves in a North Dallas apartment complex.¹⁰ Social media videos on Twitter/X showed them beating a man in a parking lot.¹¹ In July, Dallas Police designated The Oaks apartments as a “habitual crime property.”¹² Locals report that Venezuelan illegal aliens are working illegally with food delivery and ride-share apps using stolen or rented accounts. Neighbors report street racing, violence, and gunfire in the area, which is home to around 20,000 Venezuelans.

Denver, Colorado. Tren de Aragua members have reportedly taken over several apartment complexes in Aurora, which is located outside Denver.¹³ Despite Aurora City Council passing a resolution stating that it will not provide resources to migrants brought in from neighboring cities, the federal government has been paying millions of dollars to non-governmental organizations that work with the Denver government to send and house thousands of illegal aliens, including those in the affected apartment blocks.¹⁴

On September 29, police in Aurora, Colorado, arrested Roiberth Daniel Mora-Marquez,¹⁵ a known Tren de Aragua member. He was wanted for assault and kidnapping. After he was arrested on April 17, he posted \$20,000 bail but failed to show up in court, leading to a warrant for his arrest.

In September, Fox News' Bill Melugin reported that the four TdA members who had been arrested by Aurora police in connection with a shooting/attempted murder committed in July were illegal aliens caught and then released at the border by the Biden-Harris DHS.¹⁶ Jhonnardy Jose Pacheco-Chirino, Jhonnarty De Jesus Pacheco-Chirinos, Nixon Jose Azuaje Perez, and Dixon Jose Azuaje Perez all were apprehended by the Border Patrol in Texas during the past two years and almost immediately released, with only Notices to Appear in immigration court months later.¹⁷

In August, TdA member Jean Torres-Roman¹⁸ was arrested in Las Cruces, New Mexico, for a violent Denver jewelry store robbery committed in June.¹⁹ The rest of his crew is still running free. Not only was Torres-Roman

released at the border by DHS instead of being detained (as required by law), but he failed to appear for a court date after being released on bail on a weapons charge.

El Paso, Texas. In El Paso, reporters and local authorities have seen Tren de Aragua tattoos in migrant shelters and hotels.²⁰ Police have been called nearly 700 times to the Gateway Hotel, which has been virtually taken over by the TdA as a transit house, according to the *New York Post*.²¹ Surveillance footage in the hotel showed what appeared to be illegal alien men walking around or partying with knives, guns, and drugs. Local police confirmed that Tren de Aragua members use the city as a way-stop to northern U.S. cities. “We discovered several Venezuelans have the tattoo identifiers of Tren de Aragua,” one policeman told local television station KVIA.²²

On September 27, Estefania Primera,²³ also known as “La Barbie” (@estefaniaprimera), was arrested outside Sacred Heart Church in El Paso, Texas. The church provides assistance and shelter to newly arrived illegal immigrants. Primera is a known Tren de Aragua gang member,²⁴ and she has been accused of running a sex-trafficking operation out of the notorious Gateway Hotel in El Paso.²⁵ When arrested, she was with her five young children. One witness who claims to be a victim of sex trafficking has said that Primera is a “madam” who traffics women into the U.S. and manages their work as prostitutes. Primera crossed the border illegally near El Paso in August 2023. Like thousands of others from all over the world, every week, she was released with a Notice to Appear despite DHS having no idea what her criminal or other records were in Venezuela. Unlike most released aliens, Primera was made to wear a GPS monitor under ICE’s Alternatives to Detention program.²⁶ However, not long after her release, Primera cut off the monitor. This, alone, did not trigger her arrest. TdA is connected to trafficking and prostitution rings²⁷ in California, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.

New York, New York. Venezuelan and suspected Tren de Aragua gang member Daniel Hernandez Martinez has been arrested, then released, *eight times* on 14 separate charges in New York City.²⁸ The House Judiciary Committee reported that according to his DHS record, he has committed “at least 22 criminal offenses” since sneaking into the U.S. at some point after 2023.

New York City Police estimate that 75 percent of Midtown arrests for assault, robbery, and domestic violence involve illegal immigrants, although they did not estimate what percentages were from various countries.²⁹ Given their methods and organization, it is not improbable that members

of several organized theft rings in the New York area are also connected to Tren de Aragua. In June, Venezuelan illegal alien Bernardo Castro Mata, suspected in several “snatch and grab” robberies in Queens, shot two policemen.³⁰ Mata had been caught and released at the border and was living at the time at a city-funded migrant shelter.

In February, Venezuelans Luis Pacheco Tovar and Alvaro Martinez were arrested after a domestic violence complaint. Pacheco Tovar ran a ring of illegal aliens who stole purses, jewelry, and clothes.³¹ He and four others were charged in March with armed robberies and a stabbing in Bergen County, New Jersey.³² Another Venezuelan, Victor Parra, was arrested for running a ring that stole cellphones to hack and rob victims’ bank accounts. Parra’s ring was linked to 62 cases of theft in New York.³³

San Antonio, Texas. In August, Homeland Security Investigations and San Antonio Police arrested several suspects—at least one believed to be connected to Tren de Aragua—on suspicion of human sex trafficking.³⁴

Houston, Texas. This June, Houston police arrested Venezuelan illegal aliens Johan Jose Rangel Martinez and Franklin Jose Pena Ramos for the murder of 12-year-old Jocelyn Nungaray.³⁵ Both had been caught and released at the Texas border a few months earlier and given Notices to Appear. Both were also given GPS ankle monitors³⁶ under ICE’s Alternatives to Detention program, which one of the illegal aliens removed after Nungaray’s murder. Investigators now believe that Martinez Rangel and Pena may be connected to Tren de Aragua.³⁷

The Tip of the Iceberg?

There are many other instances of crimes committed by young men from Venezuela. It is plausible that they have connections to Tren de Aragua or other violent gangs that are not always evident to U.S. law enforcement even after arrest. For example:

Washington, D.C. Like other U.S. cities, Washington has seen an influx of young men from Latin America, a mix of those paroled, released into removal proceedings, and entering without inspection. Some, including Venezuelans known as “motorizados,” now work for delivery services. Many of the delivery mopeds are uninsured, unregistered, and driven by unlicensed illegal aliens.³⁸ They reportedly use borrowed or rented accounts with the delivery companies, which risks compromising the personal information of customers. According to the Washington Department of Motor Vehicles, moped registrations increased from 54 in 2022 to 143 in 2023, not counting those with missing tags.³⁹

Conclusion

The mass release and parole of inadmissible aliens with no credible vetting of their pasts allow for the worst criminals to easily enter the U.S. and destroy Americans' lives. Now Americans have to endure another violent, transnational gang due to the Biden–Harris Administration's open-border policies and deliberately feckless law enforcement.

Simon Hankinson is Senior Research Fellow in the Border Security and Immigration Center at The Heritage Foundation. **Erin Schniederjan** is Research Assistant for Homeland Security and Asian Studies in the Border Security and Immigration Center.

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