

DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE AMAZON

FINDINGS FROM THE 2023 AND 2024 STUDIES



United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime



NATIONAL SECRETARIAT
FOR DRUG POLICIES AND
ASSET MANAGEMENT

MINISTRY OF
JUSTICE AND
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Esplanada dos Ministérios, Bloco T, Palácio da Justiça - Edifício Sede. Brasília – DF. CEP: 70064-900.

Digital version available at: www.cdasc.org.br/publicacoes

Suggested citation: CDESC – CENTRO DE ESTUDOS SOBRE DROGAS E DESENVOLVIMENTO SOCIAL COMUNITÁRIO. **Drug Trafficking in the Amazon - Findings from the 2023 and 2024 Studies**. Brasília: SENAD/MJSP; PNUD; UNODC, 2025.

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PREFACE

The **Center for Studies on Drugs and Community Social Development (CDESC)**¹ is an initiative dedicated to supporting the development of evidence-based drug policies in Brazil. It was established through a collaboration between the National Secretariat for Drug Policies and Asset Management of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (SENAD/MJSP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Through research and targeted actions, CDESC delves into various facets of drug policies, seeking to foster innovative and inclusive policies, particularly for communities in vulnerable

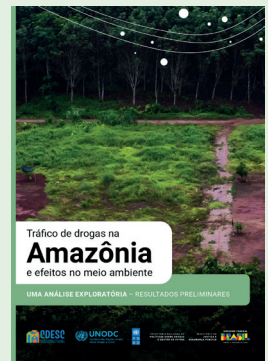
situations. Moreover, one of CDESC's key research priorities is **"Monitoring Drug Trends in the Amazon"**, which explores the dynamics of drug trafficking and its intersection between environmental degradation and the social and economic vulnerabilities of the region. Considering the Amazon's dual role as both a transit hub for illicit activities and an ecologically critical area, understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective, long-term responses.

This summary presents two studies conducted within this research agenda, as outlined below:



Drug Trafficking in the Amazon: Initial Findings, published in 2023, aims to analyze the key dynamics of organized crime involved in drug trafficking across the Brazilian Amazon. The study investigates the evolving structure of these organizations, the logistical routes used for drug transportation and the broader regional implications of their activities.

Drug trafficking in the Amazon and its effects on the environment: An Exploratory Analysis, released in 2024, examines how the convergence of drug trafficking and other criminal activities contributes to environmental degradation and increases social vulnerabilities in the Amazon. By analyzing data on drug seizures, deforestation and illegal airstrips, the study highlights the effects of organized crime on natural resources and on the local communities within these regions.



This work is grounded in the international legal framework on drugs, established by the three United Nations Drug Conventions (1961, 1971, 1988). Together with international human rights treaties and other relevant instruments, these conventions form the cornerstone of global drug control policy. Moreover, the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) establishes comprehensive protocols designed to curb transnational criminal activities. The UNODC acts as the custodian of these Conventions, supporting the Member States in their implementation.

More specifically, the critical importance of this research agenda is underscored by the 2022 and 2023 editions of UNODC World Drug Report, which examined pivotal issues such as deforestation, drug trafficking and the convergence of organized crime in the Amazon region (UNODC, 2022, 2023a). Furthermore, CDESC's studies, reflecting SENAD's commitment to this agenda and directly inspired by these findings, aims to further advance these discussions, thereby enhancing our understanding of the region's challenges.

¹ For more information about CDESC, visit: < <https://cdesc.org.br/sobre-o-cdesc/> >

CONTEXT

Before exploring the key findings of the two studies on drug trafficking on the Brazilian Amazon, it is **important to provide contextual data** that illustrates the complexities of researching this issue in the region.

Brazil has relatively high violence rates, above the global average. For comparison purposes, the rate of victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 population in Europe is 2.2, while

in Brazil it is 21.3 (more than nine times higher). This is considerably higher than in the region in which Brazil it is located, as in the Americas the number is 15 victims per the same population proportion for the year 2021 (UNODC, 2023b). Within Brazil, the reality in the North region (where most of the Brazilian Amazon is located) stands out even more in this negative aspect, having recorded a rate of 32.1 victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 population in 2020 (Ipea, 2023).

Amazon Forest

BIGGEST rainforest in the world

8.5 million km² (5.1 in Brazil)

8 South American countries* share the Amazon Rainforest

62% of the Amazon is located within Brazil

59.93% is the area of Amazon in Brazil's territory

42% of the Brazilian Amazon consists of Protected Areas



* There are eight countries along with French Guiana, an overseas region of France. Sources: IBGE (2022) / RAISG (2023)

Population - Brazilian Amazon

29.8 million

people live in the Legal Amazon**

867.900

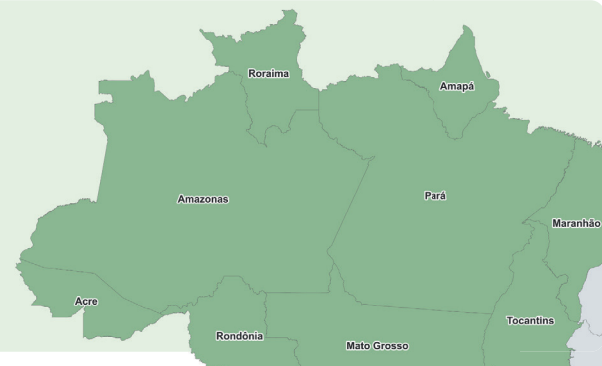
thousand people living in the Legal Amazon are Indigenous

180

ethnicities

46.2%

of the population in the Legal Amazon is living in poverty



** The Brazilian State established, in 1953, the normative that defines the "Legal Amazon" through Federal Law No. 1,806. More than just a geographical concept, this classification represents a political definition that provides the State with a framework for action in this area (PÊGO, 2018). According to the IBGE, the area encompasses 772 Brazilian municipalities. For further information, see: <<https://www.ibge.gov.br/geociencias/cartas-e-mapas/mapas-regionais/15819-amazonia-legal.html>>.

Sources: IBGE (2022) / Society, Population and Nature Institute

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

Drug trafficking in the Amazon: initial findings (2023)



The dynamics of criminal organizations in the state of **Amazonas** have shown **instability**, which may have influenced the increase in homicides in the region.

In 2022, the Amazon region had a **proportionally higher volume of cocaine seizures compared to the rest of Brazil**.



Rivers serve as one of the most primary **transportation methods** for drug trafficking.

Colombian-origin Skunk has been predominant in the region.



The Legal Amazon **has emerged as a significant drug trafficking corridor**, with routes leading to the state of Pará. In Pará, part of the drug supply is distributed domestically, across Brazil and part is exported internationally through the state's ports.

There is growing evidence of **convergence between different types of criminal activities**, including the **shared use of infrastructure** between groups engaged in **illegal mining** and drug trafficking.



Drug trafficking in the Amazon and its environmental impact: an exploratory analysis (2024)



The study examines **variations in deforestation and drug seizures in the Legal Amazon** from 2022 to 2023, highlighting significant fluctuations.

The combined analysis of drug seizures, deforestation and illegal airstrips underscores the growing pressure faced by Indigenous territories in both states.



Data analysis offers insights into the evolving dynamics of organized crime and illicit activities carried out in the states of **Amazonas** and **Pará**. By mapping drug seizures across cities and integrating information on deforestation, illegal airstrips and Indigenous and Quilombola (Afro-Brazilian descent) territories, the study provides a clearer picture of the criminal dynamics in these areas.

In **Amazonas**, **cocaine seizures are primarily concentrated near the state capital**, while **cannabis seizures are more common in the northern region**. **Deforestation** is occurring near state borders and **around Indigenous territories**. Notably, the capital's airport recorded the largest seizure of cannabis at airports in Brazil in 2023, with a total of 367 kg destined for national routes.



Pará has the **second-highest number of illegal airstrips in the Legal Amazon**. These airstrips, **often found near Indigenous territories**, serve as logistical hubs for drug trafficking. In 2022, nearly 3 tons of cocaine were seized at the capital's port, **reinforcing the state's role as a transit point for international drug exports**.

DIFFERENT METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Drug Trafficking in the Amazon: Initial Findings (2023)

The 2023 study adopted a mixed-method approach with quantitative and qualitative data collection, using specialized techniques to track drug-related activities.

The quantitative data collection process employed natural language processing (NLP) methods, web scraping techniques and open-source information for "environmental scanning" - a method used to systematically collect data publicly available on drug trafficking activities. The process involved manually selecting URLs from news sources from the Brazilian Government website using built-in filtering tools, focusing on the keywords "cocaine" and "cannabis" for the period from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022. In total, 1,955

news URLs about drug seizures in Brazil were collected. This approach was chosen due to the lack of unified national statistics on drug seizures in Brazil.

To complement and validate these findings, the study incorporated qualitative research through interviews with key actors. Rather than aiming for data saturation, a common objective in qualitative research, these interviews were conducted to provide in-depth insights into local dynamics and enhance the reliability of the open-source data gathered through NLP-based scraping. In this context, semi-structured interviews served as a tool for data triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the study's conclusion.

Drug Trafficking in the Amazon and Its Environmental Impact: An Exploratory Analysis (2024)

The 2024 study expanded the methodological approach to investigate potential connections between drug trafficking activities and environmental degradation, particularly deforestation. To achieve this, the research integrated multiple datasets from national security, environmental monitoring and geographical databases, including:

- Seizure records of cannabis and cocaine from the National Public Security Information System (SINESP), the Public Security Secretariats of Amazonas and Pará and the Federal Police.
- Asset seizure data obtained through Senad's Integrated System for the Management of Seized Assets (SIGAP), which documents assets confiscated in the context of drug trafficking.

- Deforestation data from the Monitoring Program of the Brazilian Amazon Forest by Satellite (PRODES), conducted by the National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Additionally, the study incorporates supporting data, including:

- Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) shapefiles about municipal and state boundaries.
- INPE shapefiles about hydrography, covering river networks.
- National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC) data that identify both registered and unregistered airstrips.
- MapBiomas Project shapefiles on Quilombola and Indigenous territories.

In addition to the quantitative and geospatial analyses, the study conducted meetings with Indigenous leaders from two distinct Indigenous lands, aiming to capture firsthand perspectives on the impact of drug-related activities on the-

se communities. Furthermore, a literature review of international scientific research was undertaken to contextualize the links between drug trafficking and deforestation within a broader global framework.

Why adjusted approaches?

Continuously refining and adapting the research methodologies is essential to ensure they remain aligned with the complex and evolving dynamics of drug trafficking in the Amazon. It also contributes to more effective and adaptive policy responses. This research reflects a commitment

to methodological rigor and responsiveness by integrating new data sources, analytical techniques and interdisciplinary approaches. These efforts not only enhance the accuracy and relevance of the findings but also strengthen the study's role in supporting evidence-based policies.

ILLICIT DYNAMICS IN THE AMAZON REGION

Criminal Organizations

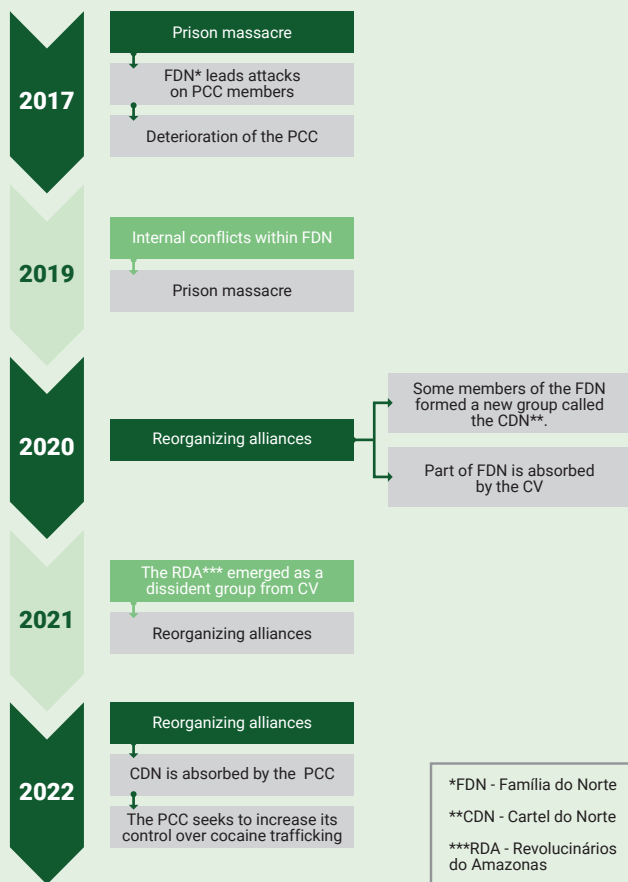
Numerous studies have documented the expanding presence and activities of criminal organizations in the Amazon, highlighting the growing influence of Brazil's two largest criminal groups – *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) and *Comando Vermelho* (CV). These groups have established a foothold in the region and continue to expand their influence and networks. According to the Brazilian Public Security Forum (FBSP), **at least 13 illegal groups are currently operating within the boundaries of the Legal Amazon** (Lima, 2022).

Conflicts between these organizations have been identified as a significant driver of escalating violence in the region.

CDESC's **2023 study analyzed criminal dynamics in the State of Amazonas from 2017 to 2022**, revealing **territorial instability due to disputes among organized crime groups in recent years**. The Figure 1 below exemplifies this complexity.

Beyond territorial control, criminal groups also exert dominance through prison violence, where rival factions target and kill individuals associated with opposing organizations. This reinforces internal hierarchies and power struggles, further contributing to broader patterns of violence and insecurity in the region.

**Figure 1 - Criminal organizations in Amazonas State:
Understanding the complex dynamics involved**

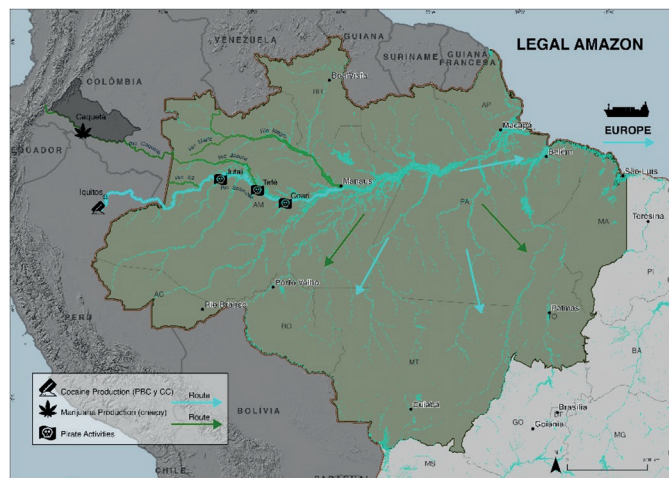


Source: CDESC (2023)

Routes and Seizures - Illicit Drug Markets in the Legal Amazon

According to police officers interviewed in the 2023 study, the state of Pará serves as the primary destination for river-based drug trafficking, while the state of Amazonas serves as a key transit hub. In both states, drug traffickers employ a range of transportation methods and adapt their strategies in response to enforcement efforts.

Figure 2 - Main trafficking routes for drugs along the rivers of the Legal Amazon



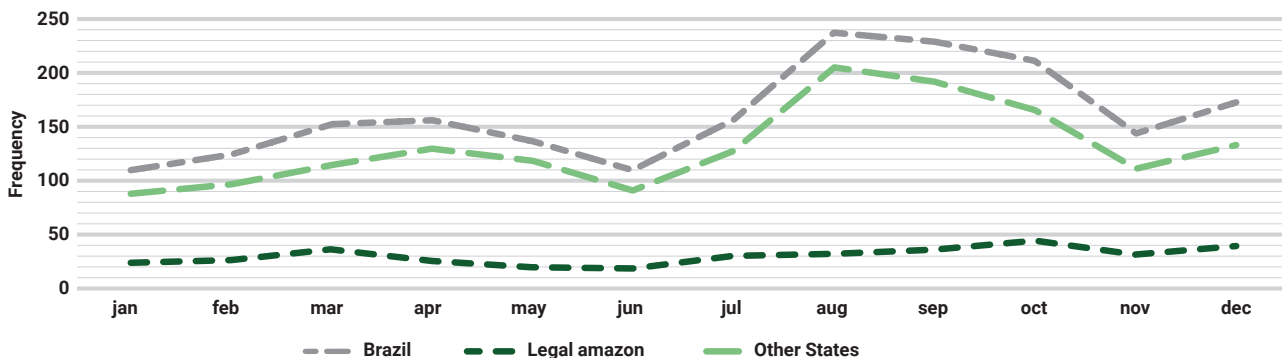
Source: CDESC (2023)

Pará operates as a significant distribution hub where:

- 1. Cannabis and cocaine are processed and dispatched** to various states throughout Brazil via land transport.
- 2. Cocaine, primarily in its hydrochloride (powder) form, is shipped through ports** and subsequently transported in containers on ships bound for Europe.

Analyzing the monthly distribution of drug seizures reported by the Federal Police provides valuable insights into regional differences in trafficking dynamics. While national seizures rates tend to peak in August and September, the Legal Amazon follows a different pattern, with a more evenly distributed volume of seizures throughout the year. Notably, October has the highest number of seizures in this region, just after the national peak.

Figure 3 - Frequency of seizures by month: Legal Amazon, other states (without Legal Amazon) and Brazil (total) - 2022



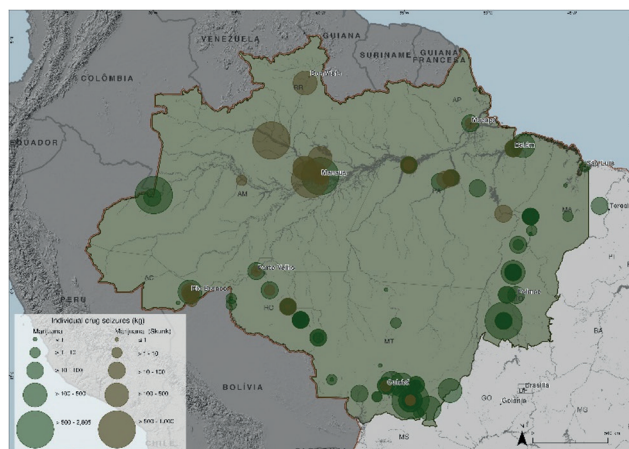
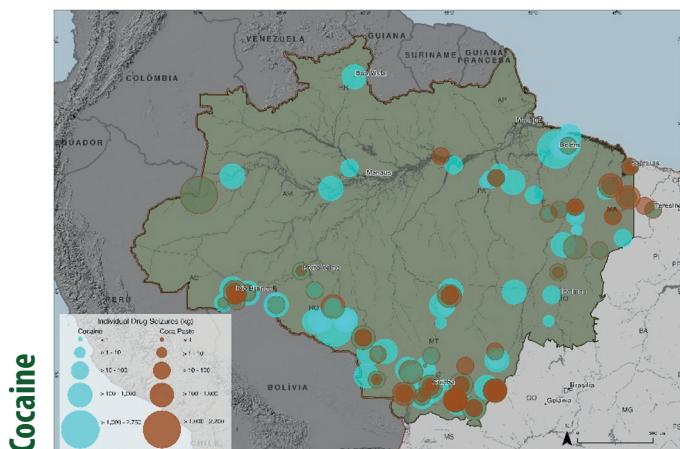
Source: CDESC (2023)

Variations in drug seizure patterns are likely driven by local criminal dynamics, as **organizations continuously refine their operations in response to the region's evolving** environmental conditions. According to a Federal Police source, **criminal organizations strategically modify trade volumes based on seasonal rainfall patterns**, recognizing that river water levels fluctuate significantly throughout the year. These variations in water levels directly impact navigation,

creating natural labyrinths that pose challenges for law enforcement's efforts to monitor and curb illicit activities.

The figures below illustrate individual seizure data for **skunk, cannabis, cocaine base paste** and **cocaine hydrochloride**, providing a detailed breakdown of the substances intercepted in the region.

Figure 4 - Mapping of cocaine and cannabis seizures across the Legal Amazon - 2022



Source: Cdesc (2023)

The maps highlight notable differences in seizure volumes measured in kilograms, **demonstrating that cocaine seizures surpass those of cannabis in the Legal Amazon**. Additionally, a comparative analysis indicates that the dynamics

of seizures in this region differ. The following table presents the number of seizures in Brazil for various types of drugs, contrasted with those in the Legal Amazon.

Table 1 - Drug seizures by type in Brazil and the Legal Amazon in 2022

Type of drug	Region	Total Seizures (kg)	Number of cases	Mean (kg)
Cocaine/ Cocaine hydrochloride	Brazil	77,912	767	102
	Legal Amazon	25,071	214	117
Cocaine paste	Brazil	14,969	208	72
	Legal Amazon	8,198	96	85
Crack	Brazil	244	51	5
	Legal Amazon	79	9	9
Cannabis	Brazil	450,998	934	483
	Legal Amazon	8,562	107	80
Hashish (cannabis type)	Brazil	102	29	4
	Legal Amazon	1	1	1
"Skunk" (cannabis type)	Brazil	5,455	110	50
	Legal Amazon	3,540	32	111

Source: Cdesc (2023)

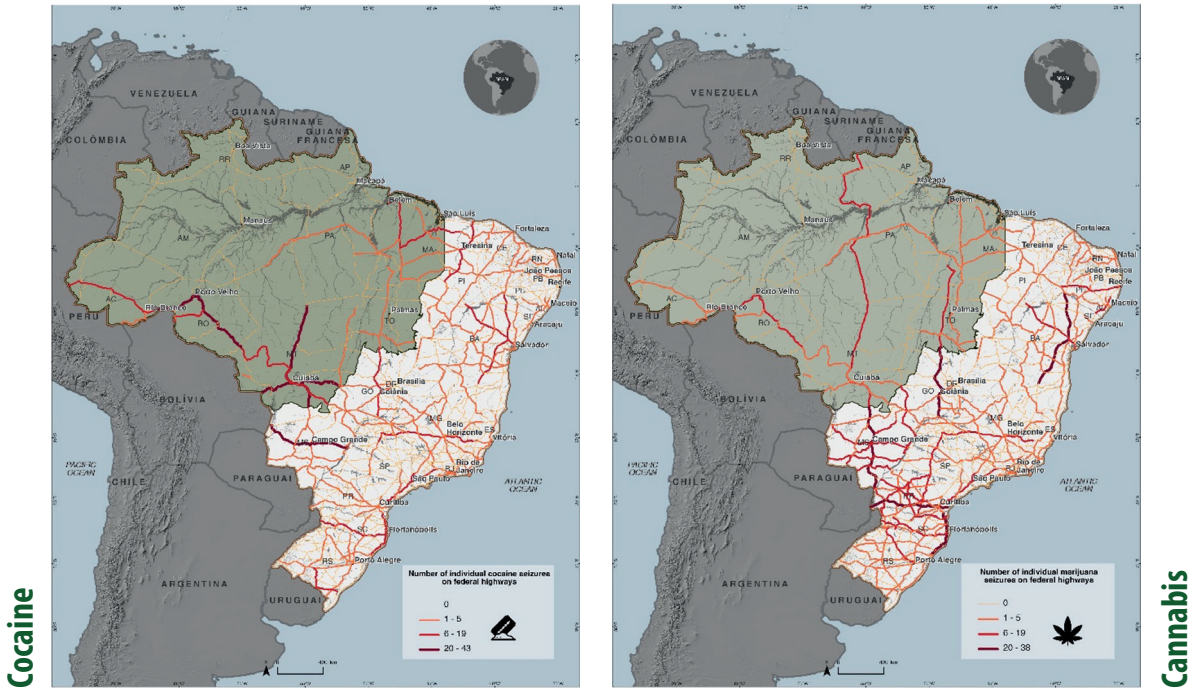
A clear disparity emerges when analyzing cannabis and cocaine seizure statistics, revealing distinct trafficking patterns between the Legal Amazon and the rest of Brazil. **Nationally, the average cannabis seizures are 483 kilograms - significantly higher than the 80 kilograms recorded in the Legal Amazon. In contrast, cocaine seizures present a more balanced picture, with 102 kilograms reported nationally compared to 117 kilograms in the Legal Amazon.**

When considering total annual seizures, cannabis dominate at the national level, with 450,998 kilograms seized – nearly six times the volume of cocaine seizures, which total 77,912 kilograms. However, **in the Legal Amazon, the trend is reversed: cocaine seizures reach 25,071 kilograms, nearly tripling the vo-**

lume of cannabis seizures, which total 8,562 kilograms. These findings suggest **that cocaine trafficking has a greater prevalence in the Amazon region compared to the rest of the country.**

An analysis of drug seizures along the major national highways in 2022 further reinforces this pattern. **For cocaine, 7 out of the 10 highways with the highest seizures are in states within the Legal Amazon.** In contrast, **cannabis seizures are primarily concentrated on highways outside the region, suggesting different trafficking routes and distribution networks for these substances.** Additionally, findings from **interviews conducted for the 2023 study** revealed that the **cannabis—particularly skunk—seized in the Amazon originates primarily from Colombia.**

Figure 5 - Cocaine and cannabis seizure frequencies on federal highways - 2022



Source: Cdesc (2023)

To broaden the understanding of national drug trafficking patterns, the 2024 study examined drug **seizures from ports and airports across Brazil**. This analysis maintained a **comparative approach, highlighting key differences between the Legal Amazon and other regions of the country**.

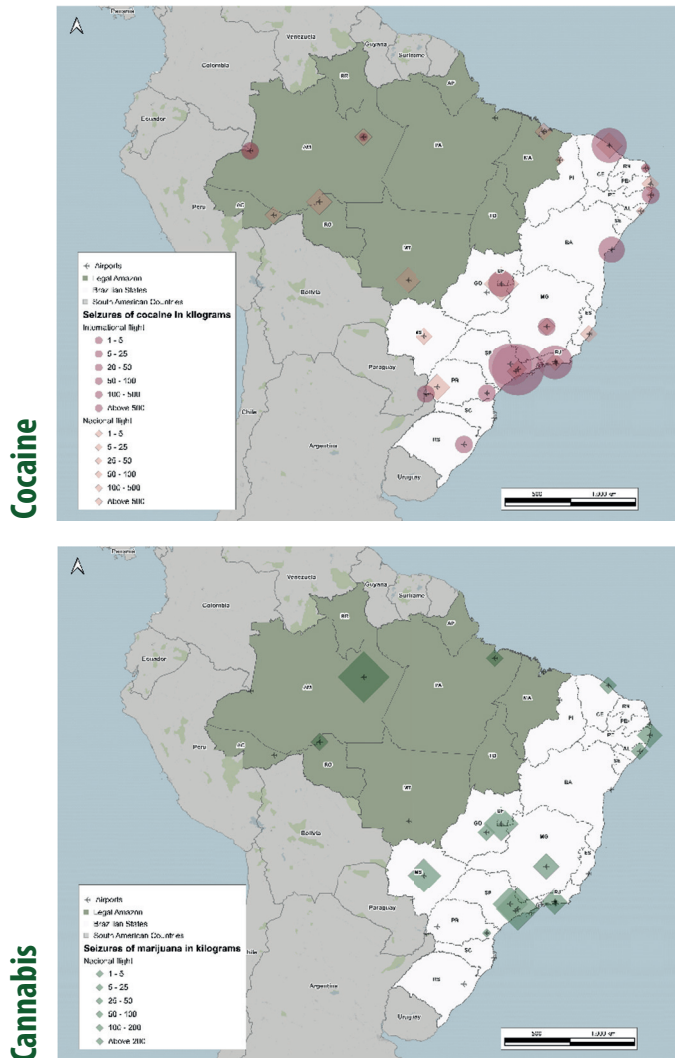
An analysis of cocaine seizures at airports shows that the quantity of cocaine confiscated from international flights significantly exceeded that from national flights. In the state of São Paulo, Federal Police seized two tons of cocaine from international flights, whereas the largest seizure from national flights occurred in Brasília, totaling 70 kilograms. In contrast, **the Legal Amazon region did not emerge as a major hotspot for cocaine**

seizures in airports in 2023. The most notable seizures in this region took place at the airports in Rondônia and Mato Grosso, with seizures of 40 kilograms and 33 kilograms, respectively.

Unlike cocaine, cannabis seizures **at airports in 2023 occurred exclusively on domestic flights**. The largest seizure occurred at Manaus airport, with authorities confiscating 367 kilograms of cannabis.

The **maps below illustrates these findings, with cocaine and cannabis seizures on Figures 6 and 7**. The size of each symbol corresponds to the volume of seizures, providing a representation of the trafficking dynamics observed in 2023.

Figure 6 - Cocaine and cannabis seizures in kilograms on airports - 2023

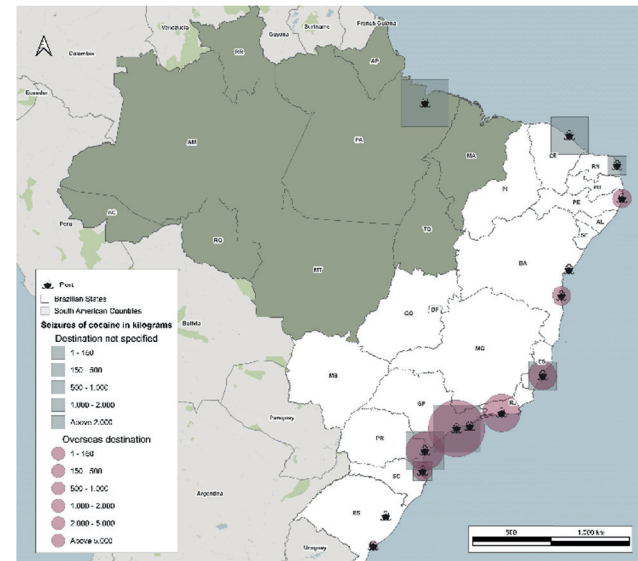


Source: Cdesc, 2024

By focusing the analysis on drug seizures in ports, the study reinforces previous data indicating the critical role of the State of Pará in cocaine trafficking routes.

According to the 2022 data provided by the Federal Police, **ships without a confirmed destination placed Pará as the State with the second-largest volume of cocaine seizures, totaling 2.7 tons.** Among ships with a confirmed destination, São Paulo recorded the highest volume, with 14 tons. For that year, the largest seizure volumes without a specified destination were in the Legal Amazon.

Figure 7 - Cocaine seizures in kilograms on ports - 2022



Source: Cdesc, 2024

The findings in this section underscore the **Amazon's role as a key transit corridor for cross-border drug trafficking**, highlighting the complexity and evolving nature of illicit markets and criminal organizations in the Legal Amazon. Particularly, Pará has emerged as a significant transit and distribution hub. The discrepancies observed between cannabis and cocaine seizure patterns further emphasize the region's importance within both national and international drug trade networks.

Additionally, the seasonal fluctuations in trafficking activities reinforce the need for continuous monitoring and adaptive law

enforcement strategies to address shifting criminal dynamics. By expanding the scope of analysis to include port and airport seizures, this study has provided valuable insights into the diverse transportation methods employed by traffickers.

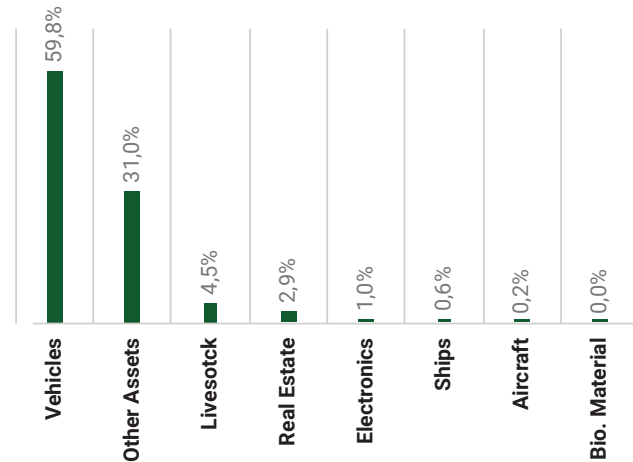
Seized assets in the Legal Amazon: Analysis about the nexus between drug trafficking, environmental crimes and other illicit activities

The management of seized assets is a critical tool in justice and public security, widely endorsed by international guidelines². This approach ensures the efficient allocation of confiscated assets, promoting their use for the benefit of society. In Brazil, SENAD, through its Asset Management and Justice Department (DGA in Portuguese), is responsible for administering assets seized and forfeited in favor of the country due to drug trafficking crimes. Additionally, it oversees the liquidation of assets derived from other illicit activities upon request from the Judiciary³.

As part of the 2024 CDESC study, an analysis was conducted using the System for the Management of Seized Assets (SIGAP in Portuguese), focusing on records of confiscated assets from states within the Legal Amazon.

In the Brazilian context, most records in the SIGAP system pertain to vehicles (59.8%), followed by miscellaneous items⁴ (31%) and livestock (4.5%).

Figure 8 - Percentage of assets registered in SIGAP by type across Brazil (2019 – November 2024)



Source: DGA – Senad/MJSP (2024)

SENAD is responsible for organizing and managing auctions of seized assets, as outlined by legislation under the National System of Public Policies on Drugs⁵ (SISNAD, in Portuguese). In addition, the department oversees other assets based on judicial rulings. The proceeds from auctioned assets are allocated to a specific budgetary fund, depending on the type of crime associated with the asset. These funds play a key role in financing public policies aimed at crime prevention and social reintegration. The National Anti-Drug Fund (FUNAD, in Portuguese) is the primary entity responsible for directing revenues generated from these auctions.

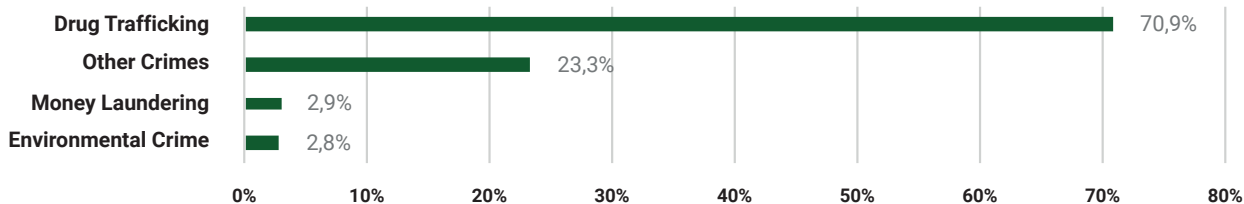
² As highlighted in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention) and the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).

³ The process encompassing the seizure of an asset, its sale or disposal, and its final allocation involves various federal and state institutions and is sometimes a complex procedure (CDE, 2021).

⁴ This category may include jewelry, watches, instruments (such as precision scales), gold and other types of assets.

⁵ Federal Law No. 11,343, of August 23, 2006.

Figure 9 - Assets registered in SIGAP across Brazil from 2019 to November 2024 – by type of illicit activity

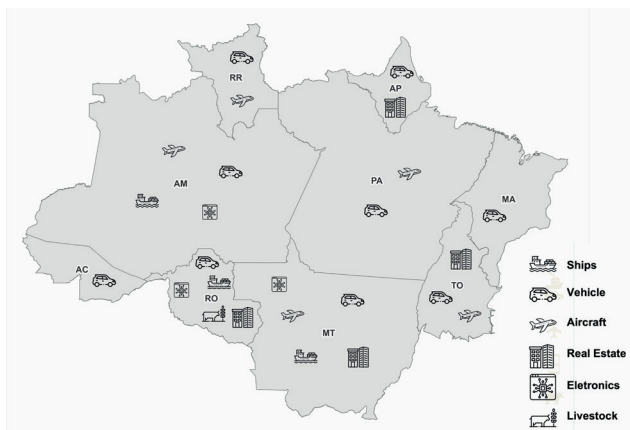


Source: DGA – Senad/MJSP (2024)

In general, the states within the Legal Amazon have asset registrations that are below the national average, except for Rondônia.

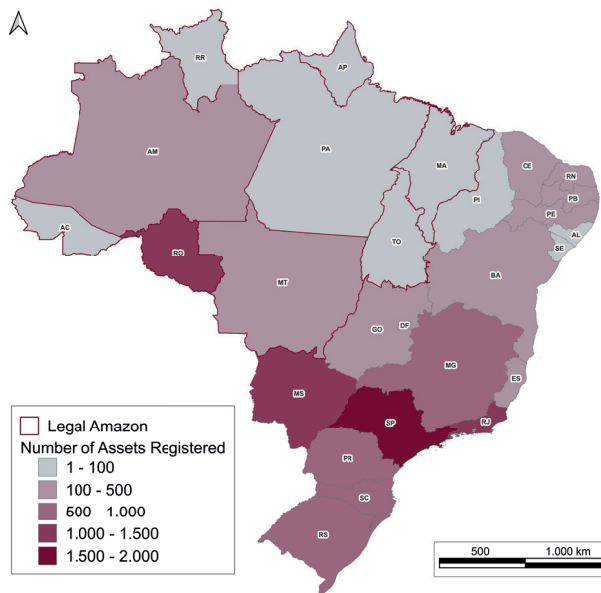
The volume of registered assets varies significantly between states. The three states of Legal Amazon with the highest numbers of registered assets are **Rondônia** (1,062), **Mato Grosso** (499) and **Amazonas** (450). Conversely, the states with the lowest numbers are **Pará** (23), **Maranhão** (17) and **Amapá** (13).

Figure 10 - Assets registered in SIGAP in the Legal Amazon States: Aircraft, Electronics, Vessels, Livestock and Vehicles



Source: DGA – Senad/MJSP (2024)

Figure 11 - Assets registered in SIGAP by state – Brazil - 2019 to November 2024



Source: DGA – Senad/MJSP (2024)

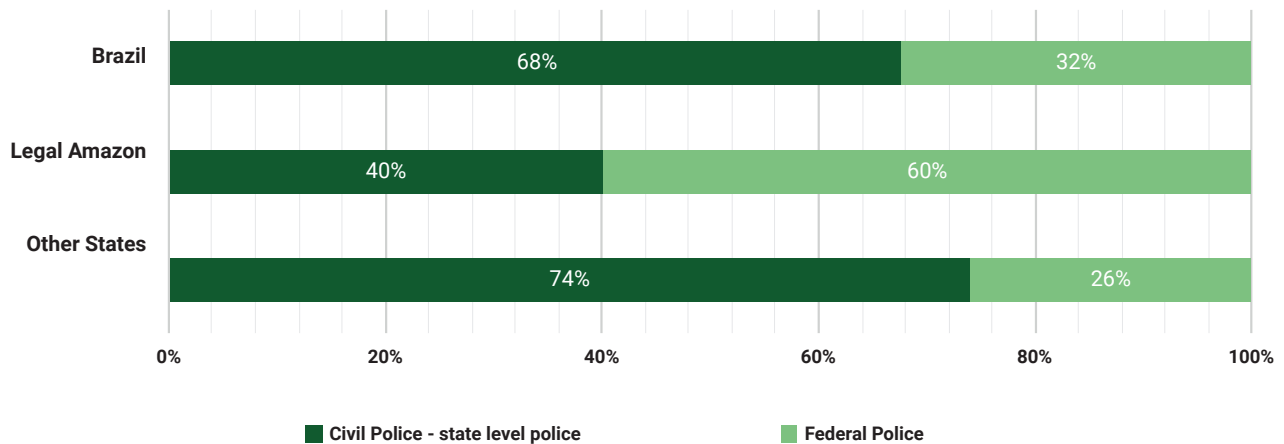
Each Brazilian Amazonian state exhibits distinct patterns of seizures, reflecting its unique geographic and criminal dynamics. This figure visually represents the types of assets confiscated in each state. This graphical representation provides insights into regional trafficking routes and enforcement effort.

For example, in Amazonas, vessel seizures are prevalent, aligning with the widespread use of rivers for drug trafficking. In Pará, **the frequent confiscation of aircraft highlights the presence of illegal airstrips.**

Between 2019 and November 2024, assets seized in the

Legal Amazon and recorded in the SIGAP system accounted for 26% of the total assets registered nationwide. This is **noteworthy given that the region covers 58% of Brazil's total land area.** However, **unlike national trends, a higher proportion of assets in this region were confiscated by the Federal Police,** as illustrated in the **figure below.**

Figure 12 - Assets registered in SIGAP by seizing agency (2019 – November 2024): Legal Amazon, other States and national overview

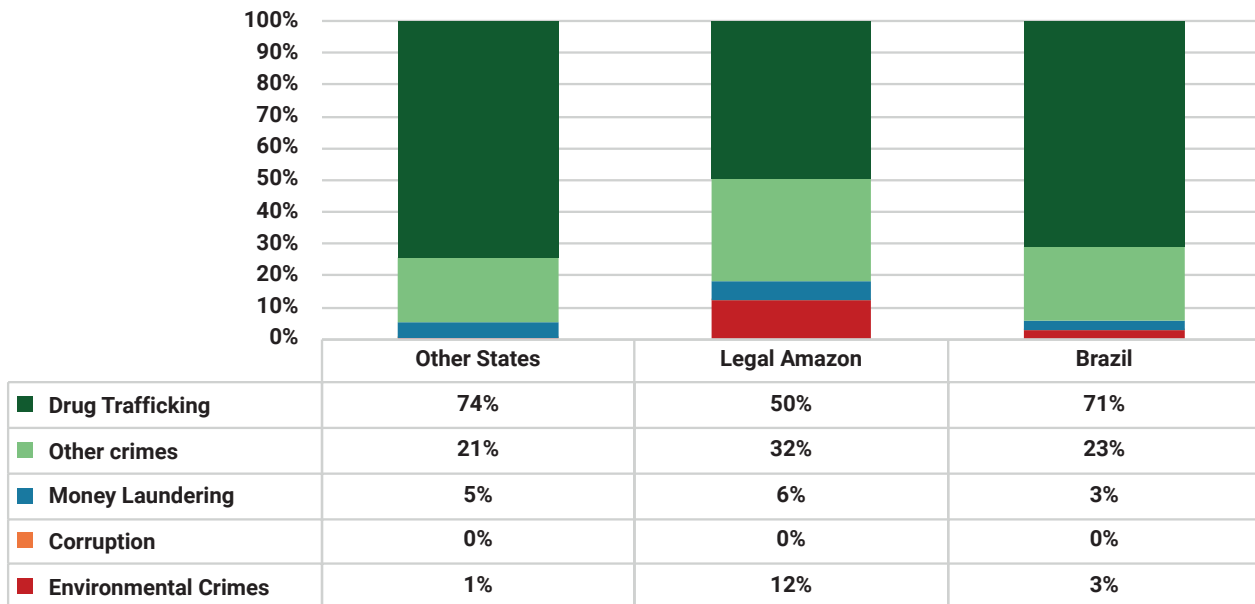


Source: DGA – Senad/MJSP (2024)

When analyzing the types of crime associated with registered assets (in the graph below), the situation in the Legal Amazon differs significantly from the national context. While environmental crimes account for only 3% of the records analyzed in Brazil, this percentage increases to 12% in the Legal Amazon. Assets seized due to money laundering represent 3% in the country, but in the Legal Amazon, this figure is 6%. Conversely,

the percentage of assets linked to drug trafficking is lower in the Legal Amazon compared to the rest of Brazil: 50% in the region versus 71% nationally. Although this data may initially seem counterintuitive, they reveal the complex dynamics of criminal organizations in the Amazon, where the intersection of various illicit activities is more pronounced.

Figure 13 - Assets registered in SIGAP by type of illicit activity (2019 – November 2024): Legal Amazon, other States and national overview



Source: DGA – Senat/MJSP (2024)

The analysis of seized assets in the Legal Amazon reveals significant regional disparities compared to the national trends, underscoring the unique criminal landscape of the region. While drug trafficking remains a primary driver of asset seizures across Brazil, the Legal Amazon exhibits a more diversified profile, with a notable rise in assets linked to environmental crimes and money laundering. This pattern

suggests a deeper interconnection between different illicit activities and economies in the region, reflecting the broader challenges of organized crime in the Amazon. The overlap between drug trafficking, illegal deforestation and financial crimes highlights the complexity of regional criminal networks and reinforces the need for integrated and tailored enforcement strategies to address specific local challenges.

Integrating Environmental Lens into the Analysis

The 2023 study analyzed a possible connection between drug trafficking and illegal mining, using the same logistical infrastructure, such as airstrips and communication networks (internet and telephony).

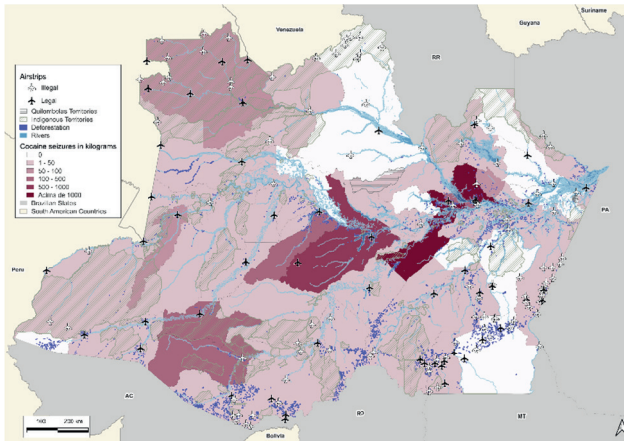
The 2024 study integrated different variables related to illicit markets based on the analytical assumption that combining this information can provide a big picture to understand the situation in the Amazon region. The maps below are the big

picture for the two states we chose: Amazonas and Pará.

The development of maps for the states of Amazonas and Pará aims to compile different indicators related to drug trafficking, environmental deforestation and unregistered airstrips.

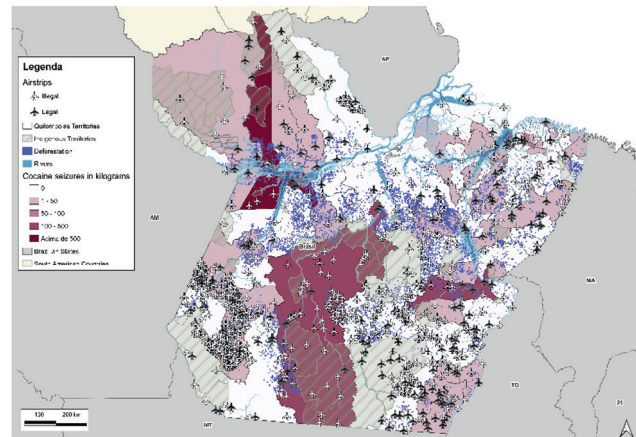
The effort to consolidate this diverse information into a single map can help foster a research agenda that explores potential connections between different types of criminal activities.

Figure 14 - Cocaine seizures in the State of Amazonas – Deforestation, Airstrips and territories data



Source: Cdesc, 2024

Figure 15 - Cocaine seizures in the State of Pará – Deforestation, Airstrips and territories data



Source: Cdesc, 2024

Furthermore, this work allows for the visualization of the proximity of these issues to Indigenous and Afro-descendant (Quilombola) territories, revealing a significant concentration of deforestation and unregistered airstrips near Indigenous lands, particularly in Pará.

The current pressure these territories are facing is a big issue because many illegal activities are surfacing in the same area.

HOW ARE INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS BEING AFFECTED?

The overlap between illicit activities such as illegal mining and drug trafficking in Indigenous territories is not a recent phenomenon. Indigenous communities have long voiced their concerns, as evidenced in public statements and letters they have written and published over decades.

In 1991, indigenous leaders denounced the presence of drug

trafficking in their territories, stating: “We denounce drug trafficking within our area. (...) even Federal Police reports contain information about it” (Carta, 1991). Near three decades later, in 2020: “we do not accept trafficking (of drugs, animals and timber) (...) We know that illegal logging goes together with drug trafficking (...), illegal mining and other practices that enslave, imprison and kill” (Carta, 2020).

Listening to Indigenous voices in Amazonas State (City of Tabatinga, Solimões Valley)

The presence of illicit markets and the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs have been identified as a major concern within indigenous territories. Community members interviewed stated that problematic alcohol and drug consumption is widespread, alongside with the growing recruitment of indigenous people by drug trafficking. In some areas, the influence of criminal organizations is visibly marked by graffiti on walls within indigenous lands, signaling their presence and territorial control.

Authorities operating in the State of Amazonas have highlighted how criminal organizations take advantage of the region's geographical complexity to evade law enforcement.

With the rise in Indigenous recruitment by criminal organizations, professionals in Amazonas' criminal justice system have observed a corresponding increase in the incarceration of Indigenous individuals. This trend has reached the point where prisons now designate separate spaces for Indigenous detainees.

Additionally, the language barrier in pre-trial detentions hearings has been identified as a major obstacle to due process, posing challenges for Indigenous individuals within the legal system.

Listening to Indigenous voices in Pará State (Tapajós Valley in Para State)

According to indigenous groups, drug trafficking has become increasingly prominent in recent years, with a direct connection to illegal mining⁶. The interviews revealed that the more intense the illegal mining activities, the more frequent urban-related problems arise, including an increase in drug-related issues.

This relationship became particularly evident following Federal Police operations in 2023 targeting illegal mining. After these crackdowns, many perceived a decline in drug trafficking activity in the region, suggesting that illicit economies are deeply intertwined.

During periods of heightened drug trafficking activity, Indigenous communities reported a noticeable increase in drug use among their members.

In terms of alcohol consumption, its prevalence is higher in villages with frequent contact with urban centers. Among young Indigenous individuals, alcohol use tends to rise when they leave their communities to work or study. Involvement in illegal activities is frequently related to scarce economic opportunities in the region.

Given the vastness of the region, the effects of these challenges vary significantly between villages. Indigenous communities closer to urban centers reported more frequent drug-related issues, including direct threats from criminal groups.

⁶ This topic has appeared in several reports in recent years, with estimates registering an increase of nearly 500% in illegal mining in Yanomami indigenous territory between 2010 and 2020 (MapBiomias, 2023 apud UNODC, 2023), for example. Additionally, in some Mundurucu communities, there is a possibility of mercury contamination levels affecting nearly 60% of the population, because of the use of the metal for gold extraction in the region where these peoples live. More information available at: < <https://portal.fiocruz.br/en/news/study-shows-indigenous-amazon-have-their-health-affected-mercury> >

PUBLIC POLICIES ARE ESSENTIAL TO ADDRESS THE ILLICIT MARKETS AND PROTECT VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

CDESC studies uncover the complex dynamics of illicit economies in the Amazon, indicating how drug trafficking and other illegal activities converge with environmental crimes, money laundering and organized crime networks, thereby revealing vulnerabilities in nearby communities. Furthermore, these findings underscore the persistent and escalating threats faced by Indigenous communities, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and enhanced protective measures in these areas.

To effectively address the vulnerabilities faced by affected communities and respond to the complex and ever-changing landscape of illicit markets, it is crucial to develop coordinated, evidence-based policy responses that place people at the center. A comprehensive approach must consider the region's unique conditions and the structural factors that sustain illicit economies. Consequently, public policies should offer strategies to mitigate the social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts of these activities.

Public Security

Improving territorial protection and enhancing the financial disruption of organized crime policies are essential to restraining the spread of illicit markets into the region's vulnerable areas, although the vast area of the Amazon rainforest creates logistical obstacles in monitoring and tackling drug trafficking and environmental crimes.

Territorial Protection

When the territory is secure, the population experiences an increased sense of safety, resulting in a domino effect. A key strategy for enhancing security is to invest in public infrastructure, boost government presence in the Legal Amazon and deliver essential services that relieve social vulnerabilities. Consequently, strengthening the territory is vital for preventing the growth of illicit markets in these regions.

Sustainable Alternative Development

Sustainable Alternative Development is a drug policy strategy that aims to offer economic alternatives to local communities affected by illicit economies in order to prevent the involvement in such activities. This approach integrates local development strategies, environmental conservation and social inclusion.

It should adopt a territorial and community approach, with the collaboration of various actors to increase access to rights, strengthen sustainable livelihoods and reduce social vulnerabilities.

Interinstitutional and International Cooperation

Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of drug-related issues, cooperation is essential at both national and international levels. Considering the transnational structure of drug markets and its interconnected crimes, international cooperation is a key strategy for advancing meaningful solutions.

At the national level, given Brazil's vast size, effective coordination between municipal, state, and federal authorities—as well as across various institutions—is crucial and could drive faster progress and amplify the impact of interventions.

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR MITIGATING AND REPAIRING THE IMPACTS OF DRUG TRAFFICKING ON INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES AND POPULATIONS IN BRAZIL

Recognizing the **complex and evolving nature of illicit economies in the Amazon**, SENAD has been implementing **multi-sectoral strategies** to address these challenges through a combination of **Indigenous-focused policies, access to rights and sustainable development alternatives**.

The National Strategy for Indigenous Peoples in Drug Policy, marks a groundbreaking effort to integrate Indigenous perspectives into national drug policies and seeks to:

- Guarantee culturally appropriate responses to issues related to drug use, drug trafficking and illicit markets in Indigenous territories.
- Strengthen Indigenous participation, autonomy and leadership in the development and implementation of drug policies.
- Address the social determinants of drug-related vulnerabilities, ensuring that Indigenous peoples have access to prevention and treatment services that respect their traditional knowledge and practices.

Moreover, SENAD is prioritizing the implementation of alternative development strategies as a sustainable, long-term solution to illicit markets, by designing economic opportunities that reduce dependence on illicit activities. **Such initiatives are not only preventive, as they diminish the economic drivers for illicit markets, but also strengthen social cohesion, protect Indigenous cultures and foster environmental sustainability.**

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