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Systematic review on the perception of risk in the face of criminal violence

Revisión sistemática sobre la percepción de riesgo frente a la violencia criminal

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Abstract

A systematic review with a qualitative and descriptive approach was conducted to examine the perception of risk related to criminal violence in Ecuador. The PRISMA methodology was rigorously applied, including systematic searches in specialized databases such as SciELO, PubMed, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, Dialnet, and Google Scholar, along with a manual cross-reference search. The process yielded 2,339 initial records in databases and an additional 21 through manual search. After filtering by titles/abstracts and removing duplicates, 45 full-text articles were reviewed, ultimately selecting 18 studies that met the inclusion criteria, published between 2020 and 2025. The results highlight a profound impact on mental health, with predominant symptoms such as chronic anxiety, depression, persistent fear, and social distrust, observed even in individuals not directly victimized. Greater vulnerability is evident among adolescents, women, and populations with low socioeconomic resources, exacerbated by high levels of insecurity in urban environments. This evidence positions risk perception as a key social determinant of public health in Ecuador, urgently requiring comprehensive policies for prevention, psychological support, and community strengthening.

Keywords: perception, psychology, violence.

Resumen

Se realizó una revisión sistemática con enfoque cualitativo y descriptivo para examinar la percepción de riesgo frente a la violencia criminal en Ecuador. Para ello, se aplicó rigurosamente la metodología PRISMA, incluyendo búsquedas sistemáticas en bases de datos especializadas como SciELO, PubMed, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, Dialnet y Google Scholar, junto con una búsqueda manual en referencias cruzadas. El proceso arrojó 2.339 registros iniciales en bases de datos y 21 adicionales por búsqueda manual. Después de filtrar por títulos/abstracts y eliminar duplicados, se revisaron 45 artículos en texto completo, seleccionándose finalmente 18 estudios que cumplían con los criterios de inclusión, publicados entre 2020 y 2025. Los resultados destacan un impacto profundo en la salud mental, con síntomas predominantes como ansiedad crónica, depresión, miedo persistente y desconfianza social, observados incluso en personas no victimizadas directamente. Se evidencia mayor vulnerabilidad en adolescentes, mujeres y poblaciones de bajos recursos socioeconómicos, exacerbada por contextos urbanos de alta inseguridad. Esta evidencia posiciona la percepción de riesgo como un determinante social clave de la salud pública en Ecuador, urgiendo políticas integrales de prevención, apoyo psicológico y fortalecimiento comunitario.

Palabras clave: percepción, psicología, violencia.

Introduction

Criminal violence is understood as any delinquent act that undermines the physical, psychological, or social integrity of individuals (García-Ponce, 2025). This phenomenon is complex and multi-causal, characterized by its systematic, structured, and, in most cases, organized nature. It involves actors linked to organized crime networks, gangs, illegal armed groups (some now recognized as terrorist organizations), and other criminal structures. Within the Latin American context, it is considered a serious problem, particularly in countries with high levels of corruption, weak institutional frameworks, economic inequality, and the presence of drug trafficking networks (Valencia &

Cuartas, 2023). This escalation not only threatens security but also permeates daily life, directly connecting to public health challenges.

In recent years, criminal violence has gained relevance as a public health issue, transcending its purely social dimension to impact the overall health of individuals. By embedding itself in this domain, it operates as a parasite that erodes the daily lives of individuals and society as a whole. In particular, it affects psychological health by generating deep trauma resulting from these acts (Bravo et al., 2024; García-Ponce, 2025). This perspective broadens the understanding of the problem, linking it to lasting emotional consequences that demand comprehensive attention.

When addressing this impact, the concept of risk perception emerges, influencing emotions, behaviors, and individual judgments. Each person conducts a subjective assessment of their daily environment, creating a predisposition to anxiety regarding the likelihood of victimization through violent crimes. This perception is associated with chronic fear and distrust of others, driving defense mechanisms often grounded in distorted thoughts, mistaken beliefs, and even an inability to function in routine tasks (Camacho & Mayorga, 2017; González et al., 2021; Triana, 2021). Thus, perception not only reflects actual risk but also amplifies its psychological effects.

In Latin America, this phenomenon has intensified over the years, with violence levels progressively rising. Studies indicate that in countries dominated by criminal gangs, population-wide anxiety rates are elevated due to the constant threat of violent episodes. Factors such as poverty, resource scarcity, and the normalization of violence help explain this trend. At the socioeconomic level, uncertainty about the future exacerbates this social impact (Malamud & Núñez, 2024; Marín-Mamani et al., 2023). This regional dynamic contextualizes the urgency of locally adapted approaches.

In Ecuador, the figures are alarming, especially regarding homicides, one of the most catastrophic consequences of criminal violence. According to the International Rescue Committee (2024), 3,711 homicides were recorded between January and August 2024, a figure slightly lower than the previous year but equivalent to 47 per 100,000 inhabitants. This places the country among the most violent in the region and the world. These statistics not only reflect objective severity but also intensify subjective risk perception, generating diffuse symptomatology even among non-direct victims, as they anticipate imminent danger (Vaca & Pazos, 2024; Potón & Rivera, 2024).

The study of risk perception, an interdisciplinary field between psychology and criminology, has received scarce attention in Ecuador, according to the available literature. The work of Reyes-Sosa and Molina-Coloma (2018) is pioneering in defining it (fear of crime) as a psychic notion influenced by concerns, perceived probabilities, behaviors, and anticipated consequences. These authors developed and validated a scale adapted to the Ecuadorian context to measure fear of crime among university students, using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on a sample of 298 students from Ambato. The results demonstrated high reliability, validating a psychometric instrument for assessing this perception in the Ecuadorian population.

This study also highlights that risk perception is constructed through individual experiences and interaction with the sociocultural environment. The social amplification of risk model and the media play a fundamental role, fostering insecurity both in proximate settings and at the national level. In this way, risk perception in Ecuador carries profound individual, psychological, and social implications, configuring a public health problem that demands policies recognizing it as a determinant, beyond its subjective character, and integrating it into frameworks such as the Organic Health Law, not merely as general violence but specifically as criminal violence.

Nevertheless, the scarce local references reveal a scientific gap on this topic, as most studies focus on partner, domestic, or child violence, prioritizing the family as the primary affected party (Ortega Pérez et al., 2021; Pilco et al., 2021; Castillo & Ruiz, 2021; Morales-Saltos, 2023; Torres & Fernand, 2021). Criminal violence, however, impacts the general population, extending into educational, workplace, and social sectors.

For this reason, this study analyzes the current literature on risk perception in the face of criminal violence in Ecuador. The central hypothesis posits that this situation affects the overall health of Ecuadorians, with implications across all contexts and hindering the development of effective protocols or public policies. The PRISMA methodology was adopted to obtain updated and verified information.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and bibliographic approach, focused on exploring the state of the art regarding risk perception in the face of criminal violence in Ecuador. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method was used as the primary tool, recognized for its rigor, reliability, and validity in systematic reviews.

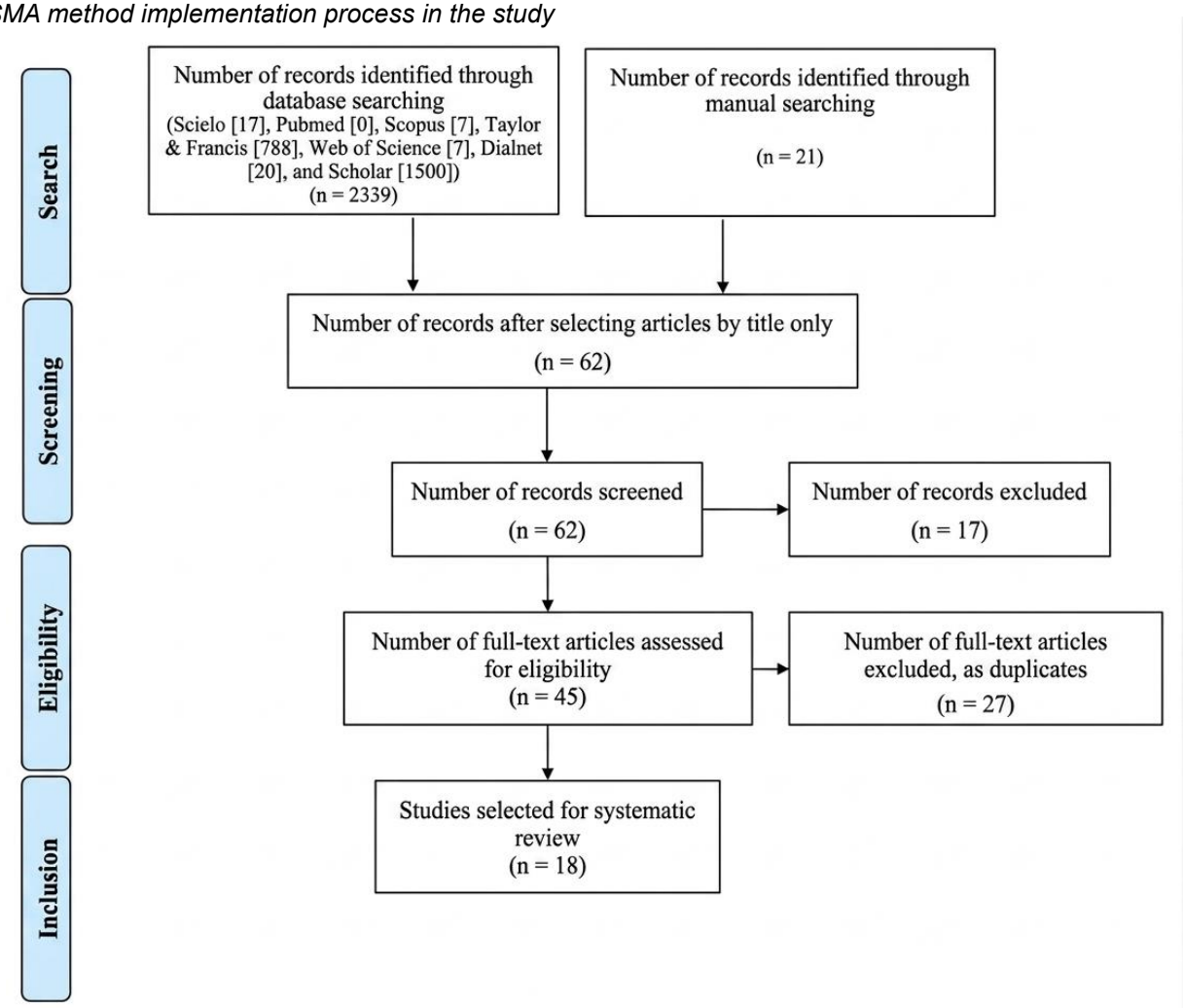
To ensure thoroughness, strict inclusion criteria were applied. Initially, searches were conducted across eight sources: Dialnet, PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, SciELO, Taylor & Francis, along with a manual cross-reference search. Queries employed keywords in advanced search, combined with Boolean operators (*AND, OR*). Terms were included in English ("*Criminal AND violence AND Ecuador AND psychol**"), Spanish ("Violencia *AND* criminal *AND* Ecuador *AND* psicol*"), and Portuguese ("*Violência AND crime AND Equador AND psicol**"), to capture diverse regional literature.

Additionally, a temporal criterion of the last 5 years (2020–2025) was established, aiming to prioritize current and relevant information on advances in the country. This time frame is key, as it does not limit itself to an isolated psychological perspective but integrates multidisciplinary origins and developments of the problem.

Once the search was completed, the information was analyzed applying PRISMA criteria. Below, the process scheme (Figure 1) illustrates the steps followed to identify eligible articles: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final selection.

Figure 1

PRISMA method implementation process in the study



Results

Table 1 summarizes the 18 studies included in this systematic review (2020–2025), classified by author/year, objective, study type, population, and key results. These works, with predominantly quantitative approaches, document the impact of criminal violence on diverse Ecuadorian populations, ranging from inmates

and adolescents to community leaders and rural adults. Below, these findings are expanded thematically, highlighting patterns in psychological symptoms, vulnerable groups, and contextual factors.

Table 1

Systematic review results

Author and year	Objective	Study type	Population	Results
Robalino-Masabanda et al. (2022)	To analyze how psychological testing can serve as a legal mechanism for pretrial release of individuals who committed violent crimes.	Bibliographic and case study	268 incarcerated men	Participants with psychopathic traits exhibited emotional dysregulation and impulsivity, suggesting possible recidivism.
Vargas et al. (2024)	To analyze the impact of criminal violence on the mental health of young adults.	Qualitative observational data study	Adolescents aged 12–21 hospitalized for mood disorders	Relationship found between criminal violence and increased depressive disorders in youth, especially among women.
Fernández-Ulloa & Pesantez-Chacón (2025)	To analyze the impact of criminal violence on the mental health of community leaders in neighborhoods with organized crime.	Quantitative	30 community leaders from Guayaquil, Portoviejo, and Esmeraldas	71% of community leaders reported anxiety and 83% reported stress due to threatening behaviors, pressure from organized crime, and lack of institutional support. Criminal violence is concluded to deteriorate overall health.
Reyes-Martínez (2021)	To identify the relationship between victimization and fear of crime and their association with quality of life in Latin America, with emphasis on Ecuador.	Quantitative, ordinal regression	20,204 individuals from various countries, including Ecuador	Victims experienced recurrent fear, which was negatively associated with quality of life.
Molina-Coloma et al. (2021)	To identify psychological symptomatology in relation to sociodemographic conditions, psychopathological history, and time in prison among inmates.	Quantitative cross-sectional and exploratory study	100 inmates (50 men and 50 women) in Ecuador, convicted of violent and non-violent crimes	Young inmates with prior disorders or shorter time served exhibited more psychopathological symptoms. Criminal violence increased anxiety, paranoid ideation, and hostility, affecting quality of life.
Narváez-Martínez & Rosero-Moran (2025)	To conduct a socio-legal analysis of street harassment as criminal violence against women in Tulcán, Ecuador.	Mixed methods (surveys and interviews)	240 women aged 15–64 and 4 legal professionals	96% of respondents had experienced street harassment, resulting in psychological harm and future distrust.

Del Brutto et al. (2024)	To evaluate the impact of fear of crime on psychological well-being in rural adults.	Quantitative, longitudinal cohort	653 middle-aged and older adults in Atahualpa (rural Ecuador)	Fear of criminal violence was associated with worsening depressive and anxious symptoms.
Tusa et al. (2025)	To analyze the psychosocial and media impact of a live broadcast of a terrorist act on an Ecuadorian TV channel.	Qualitative, psychoanalytic analysis	Analysis of the assault on TC Televisión	Media violence caused fear, anxiety, and activated defense mechanisms in the audience that witnessed the event.
Álvarez & Pontón (2020)	To bring visibility to armed violence with non-lethal consequences and its impact on survivors.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	14 shooting survivors in Quito and Guayaquil	Armed violence primarily affects the poor. The impact relates not only to criminal violence but also to state neglect.
Coloma-Morales et al. (2024)	To describe the influence of criminal gangs on Ecuadorian adolescents from a legal perspective.	Qualitative, descriptive documentary study	Review of 15 articles (2018–2024)	Structural violence, poverty, family disintegration, and addictions facilitate adolescent recruitment into criminal gangs.
Pincay-Aguilar et al. (2023)	To determine whether fear of dying from violent deaths generates anxiety in adolescents.	Quantitative, descriptive, correlational, non-experimental	108 adolescents (14–18 years) from the Las Amazonas sector, Milagro	Moderate anxiety (60.2%) but low fear of death. A mild correlation exists between both variables.
Carche et al. (2025)	To evaluate the impact of exposure to violence on anxiety and depression in El Oro, Ecuador.	Qualitative, cross-sectional correlational	1,043 students from Universidad Técnica de Machala	Significant relationship found between exposure to violence and anxiety (30.2%) and depression (25.1%) symptoms. Young women in rural areas were most vulnerable.
Dávila-Cervantes & Pardo-Montaño (2024)	To analyze trends in violent burden in Latin America (1990–2019).	Cross-sectional descriptive study (secondary analysis of GBD 2019 data disaggregated by country and sex)	General population of Latin America (by country and sex) between 1990 and 2019	Impact on women, who particularly suffer criminal and sexual violence.
Díaz et al. (2022)	To evaluate citizen perception of insecurity and violence in Ecuador through Twitter analysis.	Social perception study with data analysis (NLP and Big Data)	Twitter users in Ecuador; regional analysis (Guayaquil and Quito)	High correlation between words "robbery," "death," "corruption" and insecurity perception; increase in tweets during violent events; Guayaquil showed higher incidence of perceived criminal violence.

Del Brutto et al. (2024)	To evaluate the impact of fear of crime on cardiovascular health (CVH) in older adults during a wave of street violence in Ecuador.	Longitudinal study (Atahualpa Project cohort)	648 adults ≥40 years in a rural Ecuadorian community (2019–2024)	Fear of crime was significantly associated with worsening CVH status (OR up to 5.46); greatest impact on body mass index and physical activity; evidence of adverse effects of sustained fear in violent areas.
Castro & Rengifo (2022)	To analyze the Ecuadorian penitentiary system and its effect on criminal recidivism.	Qualitative socio-legal, documentary, and comparative research	Incarcerated individuals and former inmates in Ecuador	20% of released individuals reoffend, associated with poverty, lack of education, drug use, and structural deficiencies in the penitentiary system. Prisons, far from rehabilitating, function as "crime schools."
Valencia & Balladares (2022)	To analyze the escalation of violence in Guayaquil, characterizing homicides and their motivations.	Descriptive study with statistical analysis	Violent deaths in the Metropolitan District of Guayaquil, 2020–2021	Criminal violence increased by 89.5% between 2020 and 2021, driven primarily by micro-trafficking. The most affected area, Nueva Prosperina, saw a 259% increase. Evidence shows a relationship between violence, poverty, and irregular settlements.
Tapia & Fierro (2024)	To provide a critical assessment of factors contributing to this problem and propose possible solutions.	Qualitative, documentary analysis	Articles from databases	Criminal violence, together with an ineffective judicial system, undermines people's mental health.

The results indicate that risk perception in the face of criminal violence constitutes a complex phenomenon deeply rooted in the Ecuadorian context. This fear of crime should not be reduced to a mere subjective perception but rather represents a structural problem that manifests persistently, affecting multiple sectors of Ecuadorian society in a cross-cutting manner. Most studies in this systematic review corroborate that fear of crime has become a determining factor that fractures the social structure, impacting both directly and indirectly on people's mental health and generating consequences that transcend the individual sphere.

The articles by Del Brutto et al. (2024) and Reyes-Martínez (2021) consistently argue that even in the absence of direct victimization experiences, individuals can develop significant psychological symptomatology derived from indirect exposure to criminal violence. This indirect exposure materializes primarily through media coverage of violent events or the structural characteristics of the residential environment. These factors transform insecurity perception into an experience of constant uncertainty in the face of imminent danger, operating with psychological intensity comparable to that generated by first-hand violence.

According to Tusa et al. (2025), media influence emerges as a determining factor in consolidating psychological symptoms at the population level. The authors exemplify this relationship with the impact of the televised assault that occurred in 2024 on a nationally broadcast Ecuadorian channel. In this context, they highlight

that prolonged exposure to such violent events not only generates anticipatory fear of crimes that may or may not materialize but also triggers other severe psychological reactions that tend to manifest collectively in the exposed population.

From a sociodemographic perspective, the reviewed studies identify clear patterns of differential vulnerability. Adolescents, particularly those between 12 and 18 years old, emerge as one of the most affected groups. Regarding sex, women, especially in the 18-to-65 age range, show a higher prevalence of symptoms. Finally, socioeconomic conditions reveal that individuals with limited resources residing in urban marginal areas or dispersed rural populations constitute the highest-risk profile (Álvarez & Pontón, 2020; Carche et al., 2025; Narváez-Martínez & Rosero-Moran, 2025; Vargas et al., 2024).

All the analyzed works agree that exposure to criminal violence, regardless of its modality, generates profound psychological impact, characterized by both emotional and cognitive alterations. The most prevalent symptoms identified in this review include generalized anxiety, clinical depression, persistent fear or constant perception of violent threat (often associated with paranoid ideation), as well as structural distrust projected toward the future. However, it is imperative to delve deeper into certain specific aspects highlighted by various studies to accurately capture the predominant notion in the current literature.

In the biological dimension, the research by Del Brutto et al. (2024) systematically analyzed the impact on rural adults in the Atahualpa community. The results demonstrated a direct and statistically significant association between sustained fear of crime and the concomitant deterioration of both psychological and biological health. The most alarming finding of this study lies in the documented worsening of cardiovascular health, which forcefully demonstrates how risk perception transcends the mental sphere to negatively impact long-term physical health.

In the strictly psychological domain, recurrent emotional components are identified, particularly evident in the studies by Robalino-Masabanda et al. (2022) and Molina-Coloma et al. (2021). These works reveal that even in traditionally segregated populations such as incarcerated individuals, this impact from criminal violence persists. Moreover, they conclude that this violent cycle not only perpetuates itself in the individual's immediate environment but also significantly increases the likelihood of criminal recidivism. It is particularly revealing that even those identified as perpetrators can experience this same risk perception, underscoring the universal and inescapable character of this phenomenon within structurally violent contexts.

Discussion

The results of this systematic review evidence a clear and consistent relationship between criminal violence and the deterioration of comprehensive mental health across various Ecuadorian population groups, as detailed above. The analyzed studies concur that this violence generates dire consequences at both individual and social levels, with findings corroborated by complementary research that reinforces the robustness of these associations.

This relationship between criminal violence and mental health deterioration has also been documented in other Latin American countries with sociopolitical contexts similar to Ecuador. Given this parallelism, Ecuadorian results may be tentatively extrapolated to broader populations in the region. Research in nations with comparable crime rates, such as Colombia and Mexico, demonstrates that communities exposed to organized crime and armed violence experience diverse symptomatology, including high levels of anxiety, eating and sleep disorders, and clinical depression. These works further corroborate that direct victimization is not required to develop severe symptoms; mere exposure to environmental risk acts as a direct causal factor in mental health impairment (Infante et al., 2020; García & Trejos, 2021; Valencia-Londoño & Nateras-González, 2020).

Another relevant aspect is the association between victimization and diminished quality of life. Reyes-Martínez (2021), in a systematic review covering several Latin American countries including Ecuador, confirms this problem as latent not only at the national level but regionally as well. The study also documents impacts on urban mobility and on people's immediate environment, encompassing social, educational, and occupational dimensions.

The penitentiary context acquires special relevance, as incarcerated individuals may also be victims of criminal violence. Those with prior psychopathological histories face a higher risk of reoffending with violent behaviors, while inmates convicted of various offenses experience anxious-depressive and paranoid symptomatology (Acosta et al., 2023; Moscoso et al., 2022).

Although this research aimed to comprehensively review the national literature, the results are concentrated on studies conducted in Guayaquil, Quito, Machala, and Tulcán. Regions such as the Amazon and the Galápagos lack specific research, representing a significant geographical limitation. No data are available on citizen perception in these provinces or on the direct and indirect impact of organized crime or criminal violence. It is worth noting that

the Amazon faces particular dynamics, such as illegal mining, cross-border drug trafficking, and human trafficking (De La Torre-Lascano et al., 2024; Salazar & Florián, 2022).

From a demographic standpoint, studies are mostly limited to socioeconomic analysis, omitting a cultural approach representative of Ecuador's diverse context or specific ethnic groups. Variables such as religion, indigenous customs, or collective community defense responses, including vigilante justice practices derived from local sovereignty, are not considered.

Sample representativeness constitutes another key restriction: most works employ small samples, without reaching solid population scales or randomized designs that include the majority of the population. It would be ideal to have longitudinal studies monitoring the temporal evolution of the problem, considering political, economic, or security changes, as observed in Latin American and European comparisons.

The measurement scales employed in the studies do not generate consensus on a standardized instrument to assess this problem in Ecuador. Although Reyes-Sosa and Molina-Coloma (2018) validated a pioneering scale, no updates have been recorded with standardized metrics such as interviews or questionnaires adapted to the current context.

This systematic review establishes a clear notion of risk perception in the face of criminal violence, transcending its merely psychological character to reveal multifactorial implications for Ecuadorian well-being. The analyzed concepts encompass direct and indirect victimization, whether mediated or through social networks.

Among the findings, the scarcity or absence of specific public policies to address this problem stands out. Future research should verify or develop protocols adapted to the Latin American context, aimed at victims of criminal violence. Although European studies offer useful references, it is crucial to prioritize free psychological care in the Ecuadorian public system, currently limited to domestic or gender violence.

Finally, it is imperative to investigate therapeutic interventions for affected individuals, given the depth of documented sequelae and their impact on quality of life. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific approaches for the identified symptomatology, anxiety, depression, paranoid ideation, will allow for designing responses, recognizing this as a serious public health crisis (Fuerte & Zizumbo-Colunga et al., 2024).

Conclusions

The reviewed evidence confirms a sustained and multifaceted impact on the psychological, social, and physical well-being of the Ecuadorian population, manifested primarily in symptoms of chronic anxiety, clinical depression, anticipatory fear, and generalized distrust toward the environment. These effects persist even in the absence of direct victimization experiences, underscoring how mere risk perception operates as a sufficient trigger for profound sequelae.

Prolonged exposure to violent contexts, combined with the constant dissemination of criminal events through media and social networks, generates persistent states of insecurity that drastically alter daily life, restrict mobility, and deteriorate overall quality of life. This dynamic turns fear of crime into a chronic stressor with transgenerational reach.

The most affected population groups include adolescents (12–18 years), women (18–65 years), and individuals in precarious socioeconomic conditions, particularly residents of urban marginal or rural areas. These groups experience the greatest emotional impact, anxiety, paranoid ideation, post-traumatic stress, along with significant functional limitations in educational, occupational, and social spheres.

Sustained fear not only compromises mental health but also acts as a biological risk factor, associated with cardiovascular deterioration, sleep disorders, and emotional dysregulation. These cumulative effects transcend the individual sphere to weaken the social fabric, fostering cycles of community distrust and normalization of violence.

National scientific production proves limited, fragmented, and geographically concentrated in major cities (Guayaquil, Quito, Machala), leaving critical regions such as the Amazon and Galápagos without specific research. This distribution restricts comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and hinders the design of evidence-based local interventions.

The absence of standardized psychometric instruments and specific public policies deepens the invisibilization of the problem. A comprehensive approach from public health is urgently needed, recognizing risk perception as a key social determinant, integrating clinical psychology, community prevention, and the formulation of preventive policies adapted to the Ecuadorian context.

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