



## GUAÑUNA



## STUDY GUIDE

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## Guañuna

After police wrongfully arrested Paúl Guañuna, his body was found the next day at the bottom of a ravine. Guañuna follows a father's relentless fight for justice, uniting youth and a wounded community to confront racism, police brutality, and impunity in Ecuador.

## Zámbiza

Zámbiza is a town located in the north of Ecuador. According to a government website, the name of the town is from the Colorado indigenous language and means “We hunt in the sand.”<sup>1</sup> The website also discusses the history of this town. It states, “Zámbiza was a settlement populated by indigenous people many years before the presence of the Incas. It is important to mention that the first inhabitants of this area were descendants of the Mayans, Central Americans or Antilleans.”<sup>2</sup>

Zámbiza is four kilometers northwest of Quito, which is the capital of Ecuador. Quito has a population of more than 2 million. It is in the Andes mountains. The population of Ecuador is around 18 million. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, about 1 million of those people are indigenous, with 14 different indigenous groups. The organization says, “The Indigenous population does not have full guarantees of civil, political, cultural, and territorial rights.”<sup>3</sup>

Ecuador has a high level of both poverty and violence. Violence there has worsened in recent years. According to Human Rights Watch, it is currently one of the most violent countries in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> At least a quarter of the population is estimated to be living in poverty.

## The Police in Ecuador

Ecuador has a national police force, called *Policía Nacional del Ecuador*, which is part of the Ministry of the Interior. There have been reports of corruption, abuses, and human rights violations by the police. There have also been critiques that police officers do not receive sufficient training, that supervision is inadequate, and that there is not enough accountability for misconduct. According to the think tank, InSight Crime, “Between 2013 and 2017, nearly 1,000 police officers, including high-ranking officers, were dismissed.” It says, “Just under half of the dismissals were tied to allegedly criminal behavior. Police involvement in criminal activities has ranged from graft to extortion to facilitating drug trafficking and even transporting drugs in police vehicles.”<sup>5</sup> However despite dismissals such as these, it is widely believed that a significant amount of misconduct goes unpunished.

In a recent U.S. Department of State summary of human rights practices in Ecuador, the authors find substantial corruption in Ecuador’s judicial system, reporting that over the time covered in the report, “While the constitution provided for an independent judiciary, corruption impaired the judicial process. Legal experts, bar associations, and NGOs reported on the susceptibility of the judiciary to take bribes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gadzambiza.gob.ec/contenido/item/acerca-de-la-parroquia-de-zambiza>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gadzambiza.gob.ec/contenido/item/historia-de-zambiza>

<sup>3</sup> <https://iwgia.org/en/ecuador.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ecuador>

<sup>5</sup> <https://insightcrime.org/ecuador-organized-crime-news/ecuador-profile/>

for favorable decisions and faster resolution of cases. Violence and outside pressure, especially from criminal groups, further compromised judicial independence and impartiality.”<sup>6</sup>

## **About Extrajudicial Killings**

An extrajudicial killing is when a government or law enforcement official kills a person, or sanctions their killing, outside of the judicial process. TRIAL International is a non-governmental organization based in Switzerland. It explains that extrajudicial killing is a violation of a person’s fundamental rights, explaining, “Life is the first and most fundamental right of individuals, without which no other right can be upheld. Extrajudicial executions are a violation of this right, designating the deliberate killing of an individual by a State agent (or with their consent) without a previous judgment affording all judicial guarantees, such as a fair and unbiased procedure.”<sup>7</sup> This right to life is recognized in numerous international treaties.

## **United Nations Report on Extrajudicial Killings in Ecuador**

In May 2011, UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston made a report about extrajudicial killings in Ecuador. He found that overall, there was an extremely high homicide rate in this country, and many different obstacles to the prevention of extrajudicial killings or for achieving justice for victims of these killings. He said, “The homicide rate has skyrocketed in Ecuador over the past 20 years. . . . Impunity is a significant cause and aggravator of all of these types of killings. Police and prosecutors are often poorly trained and resourced. Witnesses often do not know about or trust the witness protection programme. The courts are slow. Corruption and threats in the criminal justice system are common and skew ‘justice’ in favour of the violent, wealthy and powerful.”

He also reported specifically on killings by the police, finding that due to an accurate system of record-keeping, there many different estimates of these deaths including: 164 killings between 2000 and 2006, 27 killings between 2000 and 2009, 104 killings between 2005 and 2010, and 83 killings between 2005 and 2010. He found that there was a lack of accurate information on this topic generally, reporting, “The quality of the information recorded by the Government with respect to police killings is poor. The information officially provided to me was very general in nature, and not revealing as to the extent, nature or causes of police killings. No one institution appeared to keep full records of complaints made against police, or of disciplinary and criminal processes and their outcomes.” He concluded, “The abysmal state of police statistics means that officials are unable to have any real sense of the extent of police misconduct, which are the particular problem areas or of changes in police conduct over time.” In addition, he found that as well as a lack of accurate record-keeping, there was a lack of effective or independent investigation when it came to investigating allegations of misconduct by the police. In his opinion, there was a need for significant reform.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ecuador/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://trialinternational.org/topics-post/extrajudicial-executions/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/705553?ln=en&v=pdf#files>

Today, concerns about extrajudicial killings in Ecuador remain. For instance, in its 2025 report on Ecuador, Human Rights Watch mentions “serious human rights violations by security forces, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment.”<sup>9</sup>

### Study Questions

1. Why did people believe that Paul did just not fall into the ravine by himself?
2. Why were the police suspected in his death?
3. How did the stories of the police officers change over time, as explained in the film?
4. How did the community show their support for Paul and his family?
5. As shown in the film, how did young people in the community protest Paul’s death?
6. The film includes numerous portrayals of graffiti. In what ways is graffiti used by members of the community?
7. Why do you think the police officers ended up serving such a short sentence?
8. It is argued in the film that the collective memory of Paul helps serve justice. Why do you think this might be the case?

### Additional Resources

- Human Rights Watch, “Ecuador: Events of 2024.”  
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/ecuador>
- InSight Crime, “Ecuador Profile,” December 3, 2024.  
<https://insightcrime.org/ecuador-organized-crime-news/ecuador-profile/>
- United Nations, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston,” 2001.  
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/705553?ln=en&v=pdf#files>
- U.S. Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ecuador,” 2023.  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ecuador/>

### Contact

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/ecuador>