



CURRENT ARTICLES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION

**Behavior of microtrafficking in the province of Imbabura: social and incidental public health consequences**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** drug microtrafficking is a growing problem in Ecuador, with social and health repercussions that directly affect vulnerable communities and public health.

**Objective:** to analyze the behavior of microtrafficking in Imbabura province and its social and incidental public health consequences during the period 2023–2024.

**Methods:** an observational, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted in the city of Ibarra between November 2023 and April 2024. The population consisted of local inhabitants, from which an intentional sample of 129 individuals was selected. Documentary review and surveys were applied, using descriptive statistical methods while respecting ethical principles.

**Results:** a total of 86,8 % of respondents considered that microtrafficking arises from the scarcity of economic resources, while the same percentage identified women and children as vulnerable groups. Furthermore, 64,3 % indicated that creating opportunities for employment, education, and recreation is the most effective strategy to reduce the problem. In addition, 71,3 % reported having experienced or knowing of health problems related to the consumption of illicit substances. Opinions were divided regarding the elimination of the consumption table.

**Conclusions:** the findings show that microtrafficking in Imbabura is associated with poverty, unemployment, and the absence of preventive programs. Comprehensive policies are required to strengthen education, access to employment, and community prevention, articulating legal and social efforts to reduce the impact of this issue on public health and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Drug and Narcotic Control; Public Health; Drug Trafficking; Substance-Related Disorders.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, precedents have been identified. Micro-trafficking; which is the set of activities that make the distribution and marketing of drugs effective in the local market, micro-trafficking can be autonomous, or be a variant or mitigating circumstance of illicit drug trafficking.<sup>(1)</sup>

From a personal perspective, thanks to the recognition of Jurisdictional Guarantees and Constitutional Control in modern Democratic States of Law and Justice, the current rediscovery of the victim and studies on the social control of crime represent a positive, polarized extension of scientific analysis towards areas previously little explored in the research spirit, but which are already being deciphered at a sustained pace.<sup>(2)</sup>

Ecuadorian law establishes clear guidelines regarding the treatment of consumption and the control of trafficking of controlled substances. The Constitution recognizes the state's responsibility in the prevention, care, and rehabilitation of users, guaranteeing that they are not criminalized.<sup>(3)</sup> Complementarily, the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code defines and punishes conduct related to the production, possession, and illicit sale of narcotics and psychotropic substances, according to the scales and procedures established in current legislation.<sup>(4)</sup>

In this context, an increase in micro-trafficking has been detected in Imbabura, where informants interviewed and surveyed indicate that timely information regarding drug programs is not being provided. Prevention and control of narcotic and psychotropic substances and other factors such as lack of economic resources, unemployment and poverty. Therefore, the research is of paramount importance to the Ecuadorian state, since drug use constitutes a social and global problem, threatening the health of the national collective.<sup>(5)</sup> In accordance with the above, the present investigation was developed, which aimed to analyze the behavior of micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura and its social and incidental public health consequences during the period 2023-2024.

## METHODS

An observational, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted in the city of Ibarra, Imbabura Province (Ecuador), between November 2023 and April 2024. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The population consisted of the inhabitants of the city of Ibarra during the study period. Simple random probability sampling was used for the quantitative component. The sample size was calculated using the formula for unknown populations with qualitative variables:

$$n = (Z^2 \times P \times Q) / E^2$$

Where n = sample size; Z = confidence level (96% is taken, so Z equals 2.05); P = probability of success equals 0.5; Q = probability of failure equals 0.5; E = precision 9 % which corresponds to 0.09.

The sample size turned out to be 129 people who were selected using simple random probability sampling.

For the qualitative component, a non-probabilistic intentional sampling was used, selecting a key informant: a lawyer with a fourth-level degree and more than five years of professional experience, a criterion that guaranteed the relevance and depth of the information on the micro-trafficking phenomenon in Imbabura.

### Techniques and instruments for collecting information

- Qualitative component
  - Documentary research: compilation and analysis of laws, technical reports, previous studies, academic articles and official documents related to micro-trafficking and public health.
  - Semi-structured interview: applied to the key informant using a specially prepared question guide, which allowed obtaining contextualized information, critical assessments and historical background.
- Quantitative component
  - Structured survey: administered to the 129 participants using a questionnaire with closed, mixed, scaled, and polytomous questions. The questionnaire was specifically designed to measure perceptions, experiences, and observations regarding the increase in micro-trafficking and its consequences.

### Procedures

The interviews were conducted in person, recorded, and subsequently transcribed. The surveys were administered directly and anonymously. The documentary process included searching for, selecting, recording, and analyzing sources relevant to the subject of study.

### Data analysis and processing

Qualitative data were processed using content analysis, thematic coding, and comparison with theories and normative documents. Quantitative data were tabulated in matrices and analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and distribution of responses), considering the level of measurement of each variable.

## RESULTS

To determine the current situation of the increase in micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura, a review was conducted. The documentary research, using its corresponding instrument, the Documentary Research Guide, allowed for the examination of online documents such as newspapers, images, and official legal sources. This enabled the collection, presentation, and analysis of accurate and coherent results, which helped the researchers gain a deep understanding of the research topic. The information obtained is summarized below:

The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador stipulates in Article 364:<sup>(3)</sup>

“Addictions are a public health problem; the State will be responsible for developing coordinated programs for information, prevention and control of the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and narcotic and psychotropic substances; as well as offering treatment and rehabilitation to occasional, habitual and problematic users.”

The Organic Health Law, establishes in its Article 6, number 22; it is Responsibility of the Ministry of Public Health: “to regulate, control or prohibit in necessary cases, in coordination with other competent bodies, the production, import, marketing, advertising and use of toxic or dangerous substances that constitute a risk to the health of people”.<sup>(6)</sup>

For its part, the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code establishes in its Article 220:<sup>(4)</sup> "Crimes related to the production or illicit trafficking of controlled substances. Any person who, directly or indirectly, without authorization or in violation of the requirements established in the relevant regulations, traffics, offers, stores, brokers, distributes, buys, sells, sends, transports, imports, exports, possesses, or holds for the purpose of marketing narcotic and psychotropic substances in the quantities indicated in the scales established in the relevant regulations, shall be punished with imprisonment."

Data provided by the Crime Analysis Unit of the National Police of Ecuador, a primary institutional source for the study of micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura, were used. This information allowed for the identification of trends, temporal variations, and operational methods related to the phenomenon (Fig. 1). Additionally, the record of Operation "Colors I-II," carried out in the city of Ibarra, was incorporated. This operation resulted in the seizure of controlled substances and the arrest of three individuals, including a minor (Fig. 2), as part of an investigation aimed at combating micro-trafficking.<sup>(7)</sup>



**Fig. 1** Local confrontation over micro-trafficking by personnel of the National Police of Ecuador.



**Fig. 2** Criminal organization dedicated to micro-trafficking in Ibarra dismantled.

The results in Table 1 demonstrate a widely shared perception regarding the origin and consequences of micro-trafficking in the population of Ibarra. The majority of respondents believe that this phenomenon arises primarily from a lack of economic resources (86,8 %) and recognize that children and women are the most vulnerable groups in this regard (86,8 %). Furthermore, 71,3 % report having experienced, directly or indirectly, health problems associated with the consumption of substances obtained through micro-trafficking. Regarding current regulations, opinions on the elimination of the consumption table are divided, with 32,5 % strongly agreeing and 35,7 % disagreeing, reflecting a marked diversity of viewpoints within the community.

**Table 1.** The opinion of the residents regarding micro-trafficking.

Question mark	Answer	No.	%
The emergence of micro-trafficking due to a scarcity of economic resources	Yeah	112	86,8
	No	17	13,2
Children and women are easy targets for micro-trafficking	Yeah	112	86,8
	No	17	13,2
Have you or someone you know experienced health problems due to drug use from micro-trafficking?	Yeah	92	71,3
	No	37	28,7
Do you agree with the removal of the consumption table?	I completely disagree	20	15,5
	Disagree	46	35,7
	OK	21	16,3
	Totally agree	42	32,5

The data reflect that the population identifies various actions as key to reducing micro-trafficking, with the provision of employment, education, and recreation opportunities standing out as the most valued measure, at 64,3 % approval. The importance of implementing drug use prevention programs (48,1 %) and strengthening law enforcement to dismantle micro-trafficking networks (36,4 %) is also recognized. Furthermore, 34,1 % consider it essential to guarantee access to treatment services for people with addictions. Taken together, these results demonstrate a community understanding of the need for comprehensive strategies that combine prevention, social intervention, and institutional actions to effectively address this phenomenon (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Situations that contribute to the reduction of micro-trafficking.

Situations	No.	%
Implementing consumption prevention programs	62	48,1
Ensuring access to addiction treatment services	44	34,1
Providing opportunities for employment, education, and recreation	83	64,3
Strengthening law enforcement to identify and dismantle micro-trafficking networks	47	36,4

The results of the semi-structured interviews (Table 3) show that key informants recognize a solid legal framework for addressing micro-trafficking in Imbabura, based on the Constitution of the Republic and the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code, which establish state responsibilities and specific sanctions. They also indicate that government strategies should strengthen prevention, education, and rigorous law enforcement, complemented by international cooperation. The need to increase the police and military presence to improve border surveillance and the detection of illicit activities is emphasized. Informants also highlight the insufficient family, educational, and social awareness regarding the consequences of micro-trafficking, which contributes to the vulnerability of young people. Finally, they point out that the lack of employment, economic opportunities, and education, along with social pressures and the allure of quick profits, are determining factors in people's involvement in micro-trafficking.

**Table 3.** Category matrix with respect to the key informant criterion.

Criteria investigated	Main answers
Importance of the existing law that contributes to the fight against micro-trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important because it is regulated within the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador in Article 364. Established in the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code in itArticle220.</li> </ul>
Importance of the existing law that contributes to the fight against micro-trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important because it is regulated within the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador in Article 364. Established in the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code in itArticle220.</li> </ul>
Opinion on the strategies of the government or local authorities to eradicate micro-trafficking in society	Strategies to eradicate micro-trafficking in Ecuador would include prevention measures, education, strict law enforcement, and international cooperation.
Perspective on the need to increase the number of military and police personnel to prevent the entry of controlled substances	<p>Yes, the increase is necessary, as it is essential to detect and stop illegal activities at the borders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen the monitoring and detection of illegal activities, such as the smuggling of controlled substances.</li> </ul>
A viewpoint on whether parents should be involved and have control over the activities that young people do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of awareness in the family, in the social and educational spheres about micro-trafficking, the consequences that this problem entails in terms of physical and psychological health and in the social environment since this leads young people to opt for obtaining easy money.</li> </ul>
Criteria on whether the lack of employment and economic resources are reasons for people to enter into micro-trafficking.	Lack of opportunities, employment, economic resources, social pressure, quick economic gain, lack of education, and the influence of the environment are factors that lead people to become involved in micro-trafficking.

The key informants agree on the answers and express the importance of the existing law that is regulated within the Supreme Law, Article 364 and established in the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code in itArticle220. In the opinion on the strategies of the government or local authorities to eradicate micro-trafficking in society, informant A expresses that measures of prevention, education, strict application of the law and international collaboration should be included, while informant B states that there should not be international collaboration since it should be kept in national coordination only.

Regarding the need to increase the number of military and police personnel to prevent the entry of controlled substances, they affirm that an increase is necessary as it will strengthen controls. When asked whether parents should be involved in and monitor the activities of young people, they state that the lack of information about micro-trafficking within families, schools, and society is alarming. Finally, the key informants emphasize several reasons why people turn to micro-trafficking as an easy way out.

Based on the results obtained, it is considered appropriate to develop a proposal as a possible solution to the problem detected. This proposal consists of developing virtual forums through social networks, with the aim of creating participatory interaction so that citizens can obtain information and a deeper understanding about the Increase in micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura: social and incidental public health consequences.

The forums held aimed to analyze the subject of study in order to promote public understanding. To this end, the following has been done: the topic has been discussed about the Increase in micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura: social and incidental public health consequences. Through virtual conferences, the aim is to raise awareness in society about this issue. Interaction with participants has been encouraged through comments on websites like the trendy TikTok platform.

The implementation of this proposal has highlighted the growing public concern regarding micro-trafficking, a topic of significant social and legal relevance. Through the interactions and comments generated by this content, a palpable demand from platform users for greater awareness and understanding of this phenomenon is evident, as well as a call to action for more training and prevention programs. This digital outcry underscores not only the importance of addressing micro-trafficking in an open and educational manner, but also the need to implement effective communication and education strategies that directly involve affected communities. The massive response to this video reflects a tacit consensus on the urgency of treating micro-trafficking not only as a security issue, but also as a matter of public health and education.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that micro-trafficking in the province of Imbabura continues to consolidate itself as a complex problem that links social, economic, health, and legal dimensions. These findings coincide with those reported in previous research conducted in Latin America, where micro-trafficking is described as a phenomenon that thrives in contexts of social vulnerability, limited access to economic opportunities, and weak local institutions.<sup>(8,9)</sup> In this sense, Ecuadorian regulations provide a substantive technical and legal framework, although their practical application faces significant challenges.

The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador establishes that the consumption of psychoactive substances should be addressed from a public health perspective and never through the criminalization of the user. This principle aligns with international standards that recommend comprehensive responses based on prevention, treatment, and harm reduction, rather than punitive measures.<sup>(10,11)</sup> However, key informants consulted indicated that the limited dissemination and implementation of preventive programs reduces the effectiveness of these provisions, a problem also described in studies on drug policies in the Andean region.<sup>(12)</sup>

For its part, the Organic Health Law assigns to the Ministry of Public Health the responsibility of regulating or restricting toxic substances that may pose risks to the population. Although this regulation constitutes an essential component of health policy, various studies warn that its impact is insufficient if it is not accompanied by sustained interventions in affected communities, strengthening of epidemiological surveillance, and intersectoral participation.<sup>(13,14)</sup>

Additionally, the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code penalizes illicit drug trafficking, including micro-trafficking, reflecting a dual approach where criminalization falls on the distributor, while the consumer is considered a subject of health care. However, regional evidence shows that, in practice, this distinction often becomes blurred, generating tensions between public health objectives and criminal control mechanisms.<sup>(15)</sup>

The findings of this study corroborate that micro-trafficking in Imbabura is influenced by structural determinants such as youth unemployment, urban poverty and lack of access to social services, elements also identified in international research as factors that increase exposure to low-level illicit economies.<sup>(16)</sup> Therefore, the problem exceeds the normative dimension and requires comprehensive strategies that address the social causes that sustain the phenomenon.

The problem is the trafficking gangs that cause unrest in the population, in addition there are factors that contribute to this problem continuing to grow, such as poverty, lack of opportunities, unemployment, hunger, violence and crime, while leaving a gap from the northern border of the country, a focus of enormous passage into the country of narcotic and psychotropic substances.<sup>(17)</sup>

In accordance with Infante Miranda et al.,<sup>(18)</sup> the micro-trafficking of narcotics is based on Ecuadorian legal regulations, in the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, specifically in the section on the rights of good living which guarantee a habitat and a safe environment for the enjoyment of public spaces, in addition, in the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code, sanctions are established for any citizen who distributes substances subject to control, since micro-trafficking is considered a crime.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis identified theoretical gaps and emerging lines of research related to micro-trafficking, understood as the set of activities aimed at the distribution and sale of drugs and other controlled substances. This phenomenon significantly affects society, and its regulation is provided for in both criminal law and constitutional mandates for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. The assessment carried out in Imbabura revealed a sustained increase in micro-trafficking and its physical, mental, and economic effects on the population. In response, a proposal was developed for a series of virtual forums aimed at the residents of Ibarra, held between November 2023 and April 2024, with the purpose of informing, raising awareness, and disseminating information about the social and public health implications of the sale and consumption of controlled substances.

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