

## THE MICRO-TRAFFICKING OF COCAINE

Micro-trafficking has become a profitable activity for Colombia's criminal actors. The sale of cocaine, in particular, has become a lucrative trade. In Cauca, Antioquia, the Gaitanistas Self-Defence Forces (AGC), also known as the Gulf Clan or the *Urabeños*, dominate the supply and sale of cocaine to locals. The Colombian government has [labelled](#) micro-trafficking as a "mega business," but it is hard to establish precise figures about how much profit organised criminal structures can make from micro-trafficking. This analysis, derived from a wider ethnographic study of the AGC and their activities in the Bajo Cauca, illustrates how the sale of cocaine on the local market in Cauca fuels the criminal expansion of the AGC and underpins their social control of the community.

### Key words

Micro-trafficking; drug trafficking; cocaine; Cauca; Clan del Golfo; Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC).

### Key points

- In Cauca, the AGC makes up to **\$4.519.200.000 COP** a month (1.041.065 USD) from the local sale of cocaine. This represents **annual earnings 40.4% higher** than the total security budget of the department of Antioquia.
- The town is divided into 28 "plazas," each of which sells a kilo of cocaine every four months.



*The capture of a micro-trafficking network in Cauca, Antioquia.  
Foto: Policía Nacional de Colombia.*

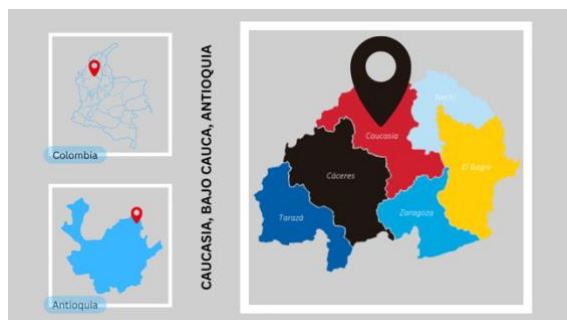
- Micro-trafficking networks in the town tend to be dominated by children and teenagers, from the most junior tasks to leadership roles.

### Context

The Bajo Cauca subregion of which Cauca is the largest municipality has long been a fortress of the AGC and their paramilitary predecessors.

Micro-trafficking networks in Cauca have rigid structures, within which there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The cocaine is transported from makeshift laboratories on the rural outskirts of Cauca and from the wider Bajo Cauca

subregion by *guias* or “guides”. These guides carry small amounts, perhaps no more than a kilo of the drug, and travel by motorbike or bus to bring the drugs into the urban centre, sometimes making several journeys in a day.



Caucasia - a town of 123,000 - is divided into 28 “plazas” and constituent “mini-plazas”. A plaza relates to a specific geographic location. In Caucasia, this is usually a particular neighbourhood or economic sector such as bars, clubs and even schools.

Each plaza is run by an individual, who oversees the sale and supply of cocaine to locals from a base in the plaza often referred to as the *olla*. These properties act as sales and distribution centres. Their presence is usually widely known by the community, if not by the security forces.

Most recently, drugs users in Caucasia have shifted to ordering home deliveries by telephone, rather than turning up at the *olla* in person. This establishes a somewhat more secure business model for the AGC because it creates less coming and going at their *ollas*, making them less obvious and more difficult to spot.

The heads of plaza lead a small group of workers, made up of kitchen assistants, dealers and lookouts. These heads of plaza are therefore responsible for ensuring the drugs are transported safely, as well for devising sales strategies and ensuring profits.

The so-called kitchen assistants weigh and pack the cocaine into small plastic bags to be sold on the streets. They will also produce *basuco* cigarettes, which mix cannabis with a residual paste left from cocaine production (crack cocaine). The substance has become the drug of choice among Colombia’s poorest communities because it is incredibly cheap. However, in Caucasia, the AGC say they have begun to phase out *basuco* because of social and security concerns. They say it creates addicts, who begin to make the *olla* visible and therefore identifiable to the authorities. Addicts often congregate around the *ollas* in desperation. *Basuco* is an incredibly addictive substance.

The cocaine is passed on to dealers to move and sell in agreed locations. Each dealer will be responsible for a mini-plaza, which may include a particular street, business (bar, club, etc) or school. Dealers must sell the drugs they carry. Anything that is returned creates debt bondage.

Lookouts warn of police activity and track the movements of security forces.

Most of the roles associated with micro-trafficking are filled by children and teenagers. By recruiting youngsters to become their proxies and emissaries, it allows the AGC to focus their efforts on more strategic priorities, while also guaranteeing

continuity of the local cocaine trade and underpinning their social control of the community. Through what is effectively criminal outsourcing, the AGC take advantage of the precarity of children and teenagers, who represent a cheap and expendable workforce.

A heavy police presence can affect the price of the cocaine, which fluctuates according to the AGC's assessment of the level of risk they face. Specific threats to their criminal integrity including arrests or large-scale operations will drive up prices. The price of the drug is set by the AGC leadership each weekend.

The AGC buy a kilo of cocaine for **2,500,000 COP** (575 USD). For each kilo purchased, they also buy **250g** of what they call "*tistis*," a white powder which they mix with the drug to make it go further. *Tistis*, also referred to as "30-30" is a food additive formally known as Carboxymethylcellulose (CMC). CMC is a stabilizer that is used in different food products to give the sensation and texture of thickness.

The cocaine is sold to the consumer by gram, but each plastic bag in which the AGC distribute the cocaine weighs **0.7g**, meaning the amount of drug it contains is actually **0.93g**. This allows the AGC to extract **1,345g** from each kilo they purchase.

The price of a gram of cocaine varies between **25,000 COP** and **50,000 COP** (5 - 11 USD), depending on supply and security factors mentioned above. It usually hovers around **30,000 COP** (7 USD), according to recreational users in Caucasia and the AGC seem reluctant to change increase or decrease the price too often. This means that a single **kilo** of cocaine can make a profit of **40,350,000 COP** (9.295 USD) if each dose is sold for 30,000 COP.

The AGC say they sell a kilo of cocaine in each of their plazas each week. Per month, this totals **161,400,000 COP** (37.169 USD). If this is multiplied by **28**, the total number of plazas in Caucasia, this comes to **4'519,200,000.00 COP** (1.041.065 USD). In a year, this would rake in **54'230,400,000.00 COP** (12.492.791 USD).

From these profits, there are of course expenses to be paid. These include the salaries of those who organise and manage the micro-trafficking networks, as well as payments to corrupt officials in the security forces and the local authorities, who may turn a blind eye. When it comes to international drug trafficking, these payments for officials can apparently reach up to several hundred million COP (tens of thousands of US dollars), according to AGC sources, but within micro-trafficking networks these backhand payments are much smaller.

## **Analysis**

The figures used above are obviously not exact and represent a single chain of the AGC's illegal activity in just one town. It is perhaps useful to compare these numbers to legitimate business income in order to better understand the scale of the profits.

For the year 2022, the Secretary of Security and Justice of the department of Antioquia, whose objective is to lead, articulate, coordinate, plan and implement actions aimed at strengthening security and citizen coexistence throughout the department, including Cauca, had as a total general budget of **\$38,601,048,425 COP** (8,892,334 USD). Therefore, the profits from micro-trafficking in the municipality of Cauca represent potential annual profits for the Uldar Cardona Rueda Front of the AGC 40.4% higher than the total security budget of the entire department.

It should be noted that more than a dozen AGC fronts have a presence and/or influence in the department of Antioquia. The potential criminal gains from micro-trafficking are therefore staggering.

If we look at the most recent figures from [Portafolio](#) on the largest companies in Cauca and include the Uldar Cardona Front, only with the profits from micro-trafficking, it would enter the top 10 companies with the most profits in this municipality.

The profits from micro-trafficking obviously exclude the funds raised by international trafficking and other illicit economies, which the AGC might be involved in, such as gold mining, logging or people trafficking. The micro-trafficking profits in Cauca therefore constitute a small percentage of the AGC's overall illegal income, but taking into account that the AGC operates similar networks across Colombia, the amount of money involved in micro-trafficking alone is likely to extend into tens of millions of dollars.

It is important to point out, however, that the profits from micro-trafficking remain within the local substructure of the AGC. The annual income of 54'230,400,000.00 COP from micro-trafficking belongs to the Uldar Cardona Rueda Front, which is the dominant AGC substructure in Cauca and forms part of the Roberto Vargas Bloc.

The Uldar Cardona Rueda Front uses the profits from its micro-trafficking budget to pay its network of members and purchase weapons to support their local battles with rivals, particularly the National Liberation Army (ELN). Anything that is left over is laundered through businesses in Cauca such as bars, clubs, brothels, barbers, etc. and shared between the leadership.

The role of the Uldar Cardona Rueda Front in other illicit economies is much more complex. It usually involves sharing certain percentages of the profits with the *Estado Mayor*, the body that oversees the coordination of the AGC, as well with other factions, including the Roberto Vargas Bloc to which they belong. It is worth remembering that the AGC are not a uniform structure, but rather a franchise which involves numerous groups of varied size and influence.

Micro-trafficking constitutes one of Colombia's greatest security challenges as rival actors fight for territorial control and wider access to local markets and the associated profits. In Cauca, the AGC are the dominant actors meaning there is no competition to control micro-trafficking. As a result, the AGC have been able to expand the local drugs market largely unchallenged.

Micro-trafficking, similar to extortion, allows armed factions to raise funds relatively quickly. The AGC in Caucasia say they have deliberately pushed the sale and use of cocaine in order to boost their profits. Government figures show the recreational use of cocaine in Colombia is [increasing](#), especially among [school pupils and university students](#), as well as in [rural communities](#).

Involvement in micro-trafficking becomes significant for local substructures of the AGC because it becomes their daily bread and butter. The profits they make from micro-trafficking determine how much they can pay their foot soldiers, the number and type of weapons they can buy, as well as the size of the share for local commanders.

International drug trafficking and illegal gold mining produce little financial reward for those at the bottom of the ladder within the AGC structure. In contrast, micro-trafficking shapes opportunities to pursue and increase income.

Micro-trafficking is therefore intrinsically linked to the prowess of AGC substructures. First, it contributes to the cohesion of the structure. Well-paid gangsters perform better. Second, it heavily influences size and military capability, and in turn the power and authority of the substructure. Third, it strengthens a substructure's independence and autonomy within the AGC network and contributes to their territorial and social control of a community.

Micro-trafficking networks create systems of control because the AGC must secure their territorial integrity to prevent competition from rivals and guarantee the smooth-running of sales and supplies. This integrity is achieved by unwritten rules, which dictate the behaviour of citizens. Perhaps the biggest and most important of these is the code of silence, which has far-reaching consequences for the democratic health of the local community.

The extent of illegal profits from micro-trafficking in Caucasia highlight the strategic importance of this illicit activity to the AGC. In the context of "Total Peace" and potential negotiations with the government, an understanding of illicit economies will be key to guaranteeing the long-term sustainability of any future peace agreement.

Specifically, the micro-trafficking profits detailed in this analysis emphasise the criminal pull that may be difficult to leave behind for some in the AGC. Micro-trafficking also represents the criminal opportunities that would characterise any power vacuum resulting from any future AGC demobilisation.

**Author: Mathew H. Charles and Dilan Alexander Marmolejo**