

Article

Narratives of Abandonment: A Media-Based Analysis of School Dropout and Youth Recruitment in Conflict Zones of Ecuador

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Abstract

School dropout and the recruitment of minors by criminal organizations have become deeply intertwined phenomena in Ecuador, particularly in territories marked by extreme violence and institutional fragility. This study investigates how Ecuadorian national media construct and frame these issues in 2025, using a qualitative content analysis of 85 opinion columns, editorials and analytical pieces published in leading outlets including *El Comercio*, *El Universo*, *La Hora*, *Primicias*, *GK*, *Vistazo* and *Mercurio*. Through a critical analysis of discursive patterns, the study identifies dominant narratives that reflect the normalization of violence, the erosion of schools as protective spaces, polarized portrayals of youth as victims or delinquents and a general critique of state inaction. Media narratives were found to vary ideologically, with some reinforcing stigma while others advocated for structural reform and rights-based approaches. The results highlight the role of media in shaping public understanding of educational exclusion and juvenile vulnerability in contexts of conflict. This research concludes that while Ecuadorian media serve as both mirrors and mediators of social crisis, their potential to influence educational policy and child protection efforts remains uneven. A more inclusive, critical and community-oriented media discourse is needed to confront the challenges of educational abandonment and youth recruitment.

Keywords: school dropout; child recruitment; educational inequality; media discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Ecuador has witnessed a significant upsurge in violence, organized crime and socio-educational exclusion, resulting in a concerning increase in school desertion and the recruitment of minors by criminal groups. This complex and multidimensional phenomenon has emerged as one of the most pressing educational and social challenges in the country, especially in the coastal provinces of Guayas, Esmeraldas, Manabí and El Oro. The surge of criminal violence in these regions, largely attributed to transnational drug trafficking routes and the weakening of state institutions, has reshaped the social fabric and disrupted the lives of thousands of school-aged children and adolescents.

Historically, Ecuador's educational system has faced persistent issues related to access, quality and retention, particularly in marginalized and rural areas (Pinto et al. 2025; Espinoza et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, contributing to a sharp rise in school dropouts due to economic hardship, digital exclusion and family disintegration (UNICEF 2024). As schools closed and virtual education proved

inaccessible for many, especially in impoverished areas, students were left without the protective environment that educational institutions traditionally provide. In 2022 alone, over 100,000 students were reported to have abandoned their studies in Ecuador ([Ministerio de Educación 2023](#)), a number that continued to grow alarmingly in the years that followed.

The year 2025 presents an acute juncture where school abandonment has intersected with escalating violence and the increasing involvement of minors in organized crime. Armed groups and criminal gangs—operating with impunity in many communities—have found in out-of-school youth a vulnerable and accessible target for recruitment, coercion and manipulation ([Fundación IDEAS 2024](#)). These minors, deprived of educational opportunities and future prospects, often view criminal involvement as their only viable means of survival or empowerment in a context of structural neglect.

According to [Primicias \(2025a\)](#), more than 450,000 children and adolescents aged 3 to 17 are currently outside the national educational system, as of April 2025. Within the 2024–2025 academic cycle, over 19,000 students formally abandoned their schools; however, about 53,400 of those who had dropped out have since reenrolled, primarily in the Costa and Sierra regions. In the preceding academic year, 2023–2024, the number of students who left school was considerably higher—around 73,000—indicating a marked decrease in dropout numbers following retention efforts and reintegration strategies. The national enrolment rate stands at approximately 90%, equating to about 4,059,952 enrolled students, while census data indicates a total population of children and adolescents of about 4.5 million; this discrepancy underlines a non-enrolled cohort of approximately 450,000. The dropout rate has also been declining, dropping from around 2.11% in 2021–2022 to about 1.75% in 2023–2024. This trend, though encouraging, remains insufficient when viewed against entrenched educational inequities and the structural violence affecting rural, indigenous and marginalized communities. These figures provide a crucial empirical foundation for media discourse analysis and underscore the urgency of addressing not just the numbers but the underlying causes of educational abandonment in Ecuador.

This study is rooted in the urgent need to understand how national media in Ecuador constructs the discourse around this dual crisis—school dropout and juvenile recruitment—and to what extent such representations reinforce or challenge the underlying socio-political structures. In democratic societies, media not only reports on crises but also interprets, frames and, at times, shapes public and institutional responses. The analysis of media narratives thus becomes a powerful lens to understand dominant and counter-dominant framings of social phenomena ([Fairclough 1995](#); [Van Dijk 1998](#)).

The central objective of this research is to analyze the qualitative content of opinion pieces, editorials and columnists' perspectives published in Ecuadorian media throughout 2025, with the aim of revealing how these texts frame the issue of school desertion and its connection to child recruitment in violent zones. This paper also seeks to identify the ideological underpinnings, rhetorical strategies and silences embedded in media narratives, as well as the calls to action or policy implications suggested by the authors.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do national media outlets in Ecuador describe and interpret the phenomenon of school desertion in the context of increasing violence and criminal recruitment? (2) What discursive strategies are employed to attribute responsibility, propose solutions, or articulate blame? (3) To what extent do these media narratives serve to denounce systemic injustices or normalize state inaction?

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to link educational exclusion with structural violence, revealing how media discourses either expose or obscure the political and institutional failures that allow the systematic violation of children's rights. It also contributes to academic discussions on education in conflict zones, media responsibility

and critical pedagogy. By foregrounding the voices of media intellectuals, editorialists, columnists and opinion writers, this research offers insight into the cultural and ideological lenses through which Ecuadorian society views one of its most urgent humanitarian crises. The findings of this paper may serve as a basis for future educational and social policies that prioritize school reintegration, child protection and territorial peacebuilding.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. School Desertion as a Structural Phenomenon

Understanding school dropout in Ecuador requires a shift from reductionist explanations centered on individual behavior to broader analyses rooted in structural, systemic and historical inequities. Classical sociology provides the foundation for such a perspective. As [Bourdieu and Passeron \(1977\)](#) argued, educational institutions tend to reproduce existing social hierarchies by legitimizing the cultural capital of dominant classes while devaluing the experiences and knowledge of subaltern groups. In the Ecuadorian context, this dynamic is clearly observable in the persistent disparities among urban and rural schooling, public and private institutions and between dominant and marginalized ethnic groups ([UNDP 2022](#)). These divisions are not random but structurally embedded, revealing the unequal scaffolding upon which the national educational system is built.

This systemic inequality becomes particularly acute in territories marked by poverty, exclusion and violence, where the school is often a precarious institution lacking resources, infrastructure, or qualified personnel. As [Tedesco \(2012\)](#) notes, dropout is less a personal choice than a systemic outcome—a form of educational exclusion shaped by chronic underinvestment and political neglect. In Ecuador, thousands of children and adolescents face daily obstacles such as long distances to school, unsafe learning environments, teacher absenteeism and curricula that feel disconnected from their lived realities ([Ministerio de Educación 2023](#)). These barriers erode motivation and reinforce the perception that education is irrelevant or unattainable.

This perception is further exacerbated by neoliberal educational reforms that emphasize standardization, competition and efficiency over equity, care and support. [Apple \(2004\)](#) warns that such reforms deepen stratification by rewarding those already advantaged and abandoning those most in need. In Ecuador, policies promoting decentralization and administrative autonomy have unintentionally widened the gap between well-funded urban schools and under-resourced rural or peripheral ones ([Ospina and Llobet 2013](#)). This governance model often displaces responsibility, making local authorities accountable for conditions shaped by national-level disinvestment.

School dropout cannot be understood without considering the socio-economic context in which families and students make decisions. As [CEPAL \(2025\)](#) reports, economic instability, informal labor markets and precarious employment compel many adolescents to prioritize income-generating activities over education. For numerous families, sending a child to school represents not only a financial burden but a risky trade-off between long-term aspirations and immediate survival. This pressure is particularly acute for girls, who face additional barriers related to care responsibilities, early pregnancy and gender-based violence, further compounding dropout rates ([UNFPA 2025](#)).

The widespread normalization of dropout, especially in areas affected by organized violence, also serves to depoliticize the phenomenon. Framing dropout as an unfortunate but inevitable outcome obscures the role of state abandonment and institutional failure. As [Martín-Baró \(1996\)](#) emphasized in his critical psychology of liberation, such normalization is itself a form of ideological violence, where exclusion becomes invisible and systemic injustice is rendered morally acceptable. Recognizing dropout as a political symptom rather than a technical failure is fundamental to shifting public discourse and policy response.

The implications of school desertion extend far beyond the educational domain. Students who leave school prematurely often lose access to protective institutional networks, weakening their resilience against criminal cooptation, exploitation and violence. UNICEF (2024) has warned that out-of-school youth in conflict-affected zones are exponentially more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, trafficking networks and exploitative labor markets. Without the symbolic and material capital conferred by education, these youth face constrained life trajectories, diminished political agency and prolonged cycles of poverty.

School dropout in Ecuador must be understood as a multidimensional, intersectoral and ethically charged phenomenon. It reflects the convergence of educational shortcomings, socio-economic exclusion, institutional negligence and symbolic violence. Addressing this crisis demands a paradigm shift—from blaming individuals to holding systems accountable; from reactive policies to proactive investment; and from fragmented interventions to holistic, rights-based strategies that restore education as a space of dignity, protection and transformative possibility (Dussel 2006).

2.2. Structural Violence and Youth Recruitment in Conflict Zones

To fully grasp the dynamics of youth recruitment in Ecuador's conflict-affected territories, it is essential to examine the phenomenon through the lens of structural violence. Originally conceptualized by Galtung (1969), structural violence refers to the systematic ways in which social, political and economic structures hinder individuals from fulfilling their basic needs and rights. Unlike direct violence, it is invisible, normalized and deeply embedded within institutional frameworks. In the Ecuadorian case, this concept becomes a powerful analytical tool to understand how state neglect, inequality and lack of educational opportunities create the conditions for youth co-optation by criminal groups.

Structural violence in Ecuador manifests in multiple interlocking dimensions: precarious housing, food insecurity, absence of public services and the militarization of marginalized neighborhoods. These environments, often labeled as *zones of neglect*, become fertile grounds for recruitment strategies that promise belonging, income and identity in contexts where the state has failed (Muggah and Aguirre 2022). The criminal ecosystem thus emerges not only as a threat but as a substitute authority, capitalizing on the void left by institutional abandonment.

Education, or rather its absence, is central to this structural entrapment. In many of these zones, schools are under constant threat—physically deteriorated, understaffed, or infiltrated by gang dynamics. As noted by Biehl and Locke (2017), when state institutions collapse or become complicit with violence, public services such as education lose their capacity to protect and emancipate. This fragility renders youth more susceptible to recruitment, particularly when gangs offer not only economic incentives but also social recognition and protection that schools fail to provide.

Recruitment is not merely the result of coercion; it often involves strategic seduction that appeals to the emotional and social needs of adolescents. According to Molina (2023), criminal groups in Ecuador increasingly use narratives of empowerment, rebellion and masculinity to attract vulnerable youth. This narrative construction resonates with young people who have experienced humiliation, poverty, or institutional disregard. In this sense, recruitment operates not only as a socio-economic transaction but as a symbolic alternative to exclusion.

From a psycho-social standpoint, Martín-Baró (1996) emphasized the long-term psychological consequences of structural oppression on Latin American youth. He argued that when adolescents are continuously exposed to violence, insecurity and dehumanization, their identity is shaped by what he termed *learned helplessness* or the internalization of social

abandonment. This internalization weakens their capacity to imagine alternative futures, making them more vulnerable to the narratives and structures of organized crime.

State responses to recruitment often reinforce the cycle of structural violence. Rather than investing in education, mental health, or community resilience, many governments resort to punitive measures such as militarization, mass arrests and youth incarceration. These policies, while politically expedient, criminalize poverty and deepen stigmatization. As [Wacquant \(2009\)](#) notes, neoliberal states frequently replace social policies with penal apparatuses, turning social vulnerability into a matter of criminal justice rather than public investment.

Therefore, addressing youth recruitment necessitates a multidimensional strategy that recognizes structural violence as the root cause rather than focusing exclusively on individual agency. It requires a reimagining of state presence, one that centers education, care and community empowerment in territories historically relegated to marginality. Only by dismantling the structures that produce vulnerability can Ecuador begin to protect its youth from the allure of violence and reconstruct education as a pathway toward dignity and peace ([UNODC 2023](#)).

2.3. Media Framing and Ideological Construction of School Dropout and Youth Recruitment

The media plays a pivotal role in constructing social reality, particularly in contexts where direct experience of conflict or marginalization is limited. As [Van Dijk \(1998\)](#) emphasized, media discourse is not a neutral mirror of events but a powerful ideological mechanism that shapes public perception, political attitudes and moral judgments. In Ecuador, where issues like school dropout and youth recruitment are entangled with structural violence and state abandonment, the press becomes a primary site for the symbolic negotiation of blame, responsibility and legitimacy.

Framing theory, particularly as conceptualized by [Entman \(1993\)](#), offers a critical lens for analyzing how these issues are constructed in the public sphere. A media frame selects certain aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a text, thus promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and treatment recommendations. In the Ecuadorian press, school abandonment is often framed through a lens of moral failure—either of families, youth, or educators—obscuring the systemic conditions that drive educational exclusion.

This ideological framing is not accidental. As [Hall \(2024\)](#) argued, the media operate within broader power structures and reflect the hegemonic interests of the political and economic elite. Consequently, media narratives frequently depoliticize structural crises by individualizing blame and reinforcing neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility. For example, when dropout is attributed to *lack of motivation* or *parental negligence*, the systemic issues of poverty, violence, or institutional decay are rendered invisible.

The differential treatment of victims in media discourse reveals embedded biases. Youth recruited into gangs are often portrayed as *lost causes* or threats to public order rather than as victims of institutional failure. This representation aligns with what [Altheide and Schneider \(2013\)](#) describe as the logic of the *media spectacle*, where fear, punishment and deviance dominate coverage, displacing nuanced or empathetic narratives. The symbolic criminalization of marginalized youth contributes to a broader social discourse of exclusion and legitimizes punitive policies.

Media also function as gatekeepers of public compassion and political urgency. As observed by [Iyengar \(2023\)](#), when structural issues are framed episodically rather than thematically—as isolated incidents rather than systemic patterns—audiences are more likely to blame individuals than institutions. This episodic framing predominates in

Ecuadorian coverage of school violence and dropout, which tends to focus on sensational stories of individual tragedies rather than structural analysis or longitudinal coverage.

Intertextuality further amplifies ideological framing. Through recurrent references to political rhetoric, expert opinions and institutional narratives, media outlets rearticulate dominant interpretations and silence dissenting voices (Fairclough 1995). For instance, if governmental discourses position youth recruitment as a matter of *public security*, media coverage often replicates this frame, marginalizing alternative discourses based on human rights, restorative justice, or educational inclusion.

Importantly, the press also holds potential as a site of resistance and counter-narrative. Critical media scholars such as Kellner and Share (2007) emphasize the possibility of media literacy and activist journalism to challenge hegemonic frames and construct alternative discourses grounded in equity and justice. In Ecuador, a handful of independent media outlets, such as GK (2025) have begun to question official narratives, highlight structural violence and center the voices of affected youth and educators. However, these counter-framings remain peripheral in the broader media ecosystem.

Analyzing media framing of school dropout and youth recruitment is not merely a descriptive task but a critical intervention into the ideological battlefield of public discourse. It allows for the identification of dominant narratives, the silences they produce and the possibilities for reconfiguring how society understands—and ultimately responds to—the educational crisis and youth marginalization in Ecuador (Hepp and Couldry 2023).

2.4. Critical Pedagogy and the Transformative Potential of Education

Critical pedagogy emerges as an essential theoretical lens for understanding and counteracting the structural and symbolic dynamics behind school desertion and youth recruitment in contexts of violence. As articulated by Freire (1970), education must move beyond the transmission of knowledge to become a practice of freedom—an act of consciousness raising that allows marginalized subjects to understand, question and transform the oppressive structures that shape their realities. In Ecuador, this perspective demands rethinking the role of schools not as sites of passive reproduction but as spaces of resistance and hope for communities besieged by poverty, exclusion and criminality.

Pedagogical transformation is deeply political. Giroux (2004) argued that teaching is never a neutral act and educators must embrace their role as cultural workers who equip students with the tools to read and rewrite the world. This approach contrasts with traditional banking models of education, which treat students as empty vessels to be filled with information. In conflict-affected zones of Ecuador, where young people are often trapped between a failing state and violent actors, pedagogical practices must foster critical thinking, ethical reflection and civic agency. Otherwise, education becomes complicit in the production of silence and submission.

Empirical studies reinforce the value of transformative education in preventing youth marginalization. A report by UNESCO (2015) highlights how schools that implement inclusive, participatory and context-sensitive methodologies not only reduce dropout rates but also build protective environments that shield students from recruitment and exploitation. These findings emphasize the importance of teacher training, psychosocial support and community engagement as pillars of an education system capable of resisting structural violence.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy challenges the normalization of failure among poor and racialized youth. As McLaren (2005) contends, when students internalize messages of inferiority and disposability—often reinforced by punitive school cultures and media discourses—they become more susceptible to alienation and external validation from illicit actors. Education must therefore affirm the dignity, cultural identity and transfor-

mative potential of every student, particularly in contexts where social institutions have systematically failed them.

The Ecuadorian education system has made sporadic attempts to integrate human rights and citizenship education, yet these efforts remain fragmented and poorly institutionalized ([Ministerio de Educación 2023](#)). Critical pedagogy offers a more radical alternative by re-centering the curriculum on social justice, historical memory and democratic participation. In territories where the rule of law is weak, schools must become bastions of democratic values and spaces of counter-narrative to the logics of violence and fear.

However, this transformative mission requires structural support. As [Darder et al. \(2023\)](#) argue, critical pedagogy cannot thrive in environments dominated by managerial rationalities, technocratic indicators and market logic. In Ecuador, the precarious conditions of many public schools—underfunded, overcrowded and administratively overburdened—represent significant obstacles to meaningful pedagogical innovation. Transforming these spaces into centers of critical learning necessitates not only discursive change but robust public investment and political will.

Critical pedagogy repositions education as both a shield and a weapon in the struggle against youth recruitment and school abandonment. It is a shield because it offers protection through knowledge, community and institutional belonging; and it is a weapon because it equips students with the epistemic tools to challenge and transform the conditions of their vulnerability. As [Freire \(1997\)](#) noted, education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world. In Ecuador's violent and unequal territories, this pedagogical vision is not only desirable—it is urgent.

2.5. Human Rights, State Responsibility and Legal Frameworks for Child Protection

A comprehensive analysis of school desertion and youth recruitment in Ecuador must be situated within a robust human rights framework that underscores the obligations of the State to guarantee access to education, personal integrity and life itself. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UN 1989](#)) affirms education as a fundamental right and a cornerstone for the full development of personality, dignity and citizenship. Ecuador, as a signatory of these international instruments, is legally and morally compelled to ensure that all children can access safe, inclusive and quality education—especially in contexts of vulnerability and violence.

The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict ([OHCHR 2020](#)) which Ecuador has also ratified, places additional obligations on the State to prevent the recruitment and use of minors by armed actors, including criminal groups. This entails not only punitive measures against perpetrators but also preventive strategies rooted in education, protection and institutional presence in at-risk territories. When the State fails to fulfill these duties, it becomes complicit in the perpetuation of structural violence and social abandonment.

Education is not merely a social service; it is a tool of protection and empowerment. According to General Comment No. 13 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([UN 1989](#)) education must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable. In Ecuador, however, these criteria are not consistently met, particularly in rural, indigenous and conflict-affected zones. Schools in these areas often lack trained teachers, adequate infrastructure and psychosocial support services, undermining their protective function and facilitating conditions for school abandonment and recruitment.

From a Latin American perspective, theorists such as [Dussel \(2006\)](#) and [Martín-Baró \(1996\)](#) have argued that the chronic violation of children's rights in marginal territories is not accidental but systemic—a product of colonial legacies, neoliberal policies and state disengagement. These frameworks challenge the notion of rights as abstract entitlements

and emphasize their material conditions of possibility. A right that exists only on paper, without the institutional means to guarantee it, is a fiction that legitimizes inequality.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has also established jurisprudence on the obligations of States to protect children from violence and ensure access to education in conditions of dignity (IACHR 2021). These rulings underscore that structural failures—such as the absence of schools, qualified teachers, or security in certain regions—constitute violations of the right to education and the principle of equality before the law. In Ecuador, this is particularly relevant in provinces such as Esmeraldas, Guayas and Manabí, where state abandonment is most acute.

In this regard, the Ecuadorian Constitution (OAS 2008) is one of the most progressive in Latin America in recognizing education as a right and a public good, establishing the State's duty to ensure access, permanence and quality across all levels of the system. However, constitutional guarantees must be accompanied by effective implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The discrepancy between legal discourse and institutional practice reveals a gap that often condemns thousands of children to cycles of exclusion and vulnerability.

Ultimately, a rights-based approach reframes school dropout and child recruitment not as unfortunate social phenomena but as violations of international law and ethical norms. It challenges the normalization of abandonment and insists on the political responsibility of the State to intervene, invest and protect. As Tomasevski (2003) emphasized, education must be understood not only as a right in itself but as an enabling right—the right that makes all other rights possible.

2.6. Media Discourses, Framing and the Construction of Youth Vulnerability

Understanding how the media frames issues of school desertion and the recruitment of minors is essential to grasping the broader sociopolitical narratives that circulate in public discourse. Media outlets do not simply report events; they actively participate in the construction of social reality through the selection, emphasis and interpretation of facts. As Van Dijk (1998) argues, news production is a discursive practice governed by institutional ideologies, power dynamics and cultural assumptions. In contexts such as Ecuador, where violence and inequality intersect with fragile educational systems, media narratives play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and state responses to crises affecting youth.

Framing theory, as formulated by Entman (1993), provides a methodological and conceptual framework to identify how media define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations and propose remedies. Frames are not neutral; they reflect and reproduce ideological positions about who is responsible for social problems and which solutions are legitimate or viable. In the case of Ecuadorian journalism, dominant frames around school dropout often attribute responsibility to families or students themselves, omitting structural determinants such as poverty, institutional decay, or state abandonment (Ospina and Llobet 2013). Such frames can legitimize punitive policies rather than inclusive educational reforms.

The discursive construction of minors as either victims or threats significantly influences the social perception of their rights and agency. When children involved in criminal groups are portrayed exclusively as delinquents or *lost causes*, the public discourse tends to support repressive interventions rather than holistic approaches based on protection, rehabilitation and reintegration (Hall 2024; UNODC 2023). Conversely, narratives that humanize these youths, contextualize their experiences and highlight their resilience open space for empathy and policy alternatives rooted in social justice. The choice of frame thus has tangible consequences for how society responds to the educational and existential crisis affecting vulnerable adolescents.

The recurrence of metaphors and lexical tropes in media narratives reveals the underlying cultural codes used to make sense of school abandonment and youth violence. Terms such as *zones of sacrifice*, *child soldiers* or *invisible youth* are not merely stylistic devices; they structure perception, mobilize emotions and delimit what is imaginable within public debate (Lakoff and Johnson 2008). In Ecuadorian press discourse, the metaphorical language used to describe violent territories or dropout students often naturalizes abandonment, framing it as inevitable rather than preventable.

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) allows for the identification of these ideological patterns and the interrogation of their political implications. Media do not operate in a vacuum; their representations are shaped by editorial lines, economic dependencies and sociopolitical interests. Some outlets may downplay state failures due to affiliations with power structures, while others may over-sensationalize violence for commercial purposes. In both cases, the complexity of the dropout crisis and its link to youth recruitment is reduced to simplified, often moralizing narratives that obscure the role of structural injustice.

Another important dimension is the editorial prioritization of themes related to education and violence. As studies in media agenda-setting suggest, the frequency and prominence of coverage directly affect the perceived salience of an issue (McCombs and Shaw 1993). In Ecuador, while high-profile crimes may receive temporary media attention, long-term structural problems such as school abandonment often remain underreported or relegated to opinion columns rather than front-page news. This imbalance reflects broader societal tendencies to react to symptoms rather than address causes.

It is important to recognize the potential of alternative and independent media to challenge dominant narratives and offer counter-hegemonic discourses. Platforms such as *GK* (2025) and *Primicias* (2025b) have published investigative reports that highlight the lived experiences of dropout students, the failures of public policies and the systemic conditions that foster recruitment. These narratives create space for resistance, civic engagement and the demand for accountability. As Martín-Baró (1996) emphasized, the task of communication must be oriented toward liberation—constructing discourses that do not reproduce oppression but illuminate paths toward dignity and justice.

2.7. Gendered Dimensions of Dropout and Recruitment in Media Representation

The phenomena of school dropout and youth recruitment into criminal networks are profoundly gendered processes, shaped by differential vulnerabilities, roles and expectations that intersect with class, ethnicity and geography. However, media representations and public discourse often homogenize these experiences under a male-dominant lens, obscuring the specific ways in which girls are affected by educational abandonment and territorial violence (UN 2012). Recognizing the gendered dimensions of these issues is essential for designing informed, equitable and effective responses.

Empirical evidence reveals that boys and girls face distinct trajectories within contexts of school disengagement. While boys are more likely to be recruited as lookouts, couriers, or foot soldiers within gangs, girls often experience coercion into sexual exploitation, forced relationships with gang leaders, or domestic servitude within criminal structures (UNODC 2023). Despite this, media coverage frequently centers on young male offenders, thereby reproducing androcentric narratives that marginalize female experiences and reinforce patriarchal invisibility.

This discursive erasure has critical consequences. When girls' realities are excluded from media narratives, their specific vulnerabilities are not acknowledged in public policy debates, nor are they integrated into educational or protection programs. As Butler (2004) argues, the politics of visibility determines whose lives are grievable, intelligible and worthy

of protection. In Ecuador, this lack of representation perpetuates structural neglect and limits access to gender-sensitive interventions that could prevent dropout or exploitation.

Gender stereotypes within media coverage shape the moral framing of youth participation in violence. Boys are often constructed as active agents of violence—either as *criminals* or *warriors*—while girls are positioned as passive victims or seductresses, reinforcing binary gender scripts that strip them of complexity and agency (Gill 2007; Zarkov 2014). Such representations not only obscure the structural causes of their circumstances but also hinder the development of nuanced prevention strategies that address coercion, trauma and resilience.

Media silence around sexual violence as a cause of dropout further contributes to the normalization of gendered oppression. In many violent territories, girls abandon school not only because of economic or familial hardship but due to fear of harassment, abuse, or pregnancy resulting from sexual violence within or outside school settings (Thakur 2022). However, such narratives rarely surface in mainstream media accounts, limiting the public's understanding of the intersection between gender-based violence and educational exclusion.

Gender-blind media representations also fail to acknowledge the agency and resistance of girls in violent contexts. While some media narratives portray girls solely as victims, others ignore the ways in which young women organize, protest and seek education as a form of emancipation. This omission contributes to a disempowering discourse that underestimates the transformative potential of girls as political actors, cultural interlocutors and knowledge producers in their communities (Hooks 1994; Mohanty 2003).

Incorporating a gender-sensitive analysis into media discourse studies allows for a more holistic understanding of how school dropout and recruitment unfold. It challenges reductive framings and demands the recognition of intersectional inequalities that shape children's lives differently according to gender. Scholars such as Crenshaw (1990) have long emphasized that failing to address these intersections results in partial and ineffective interventions. Ecuadorian media must be held accountable for integrating such perspectives in their coverage to foster inclusive and rights-based representations of youth vulnerability.

Addressing the gendered nature of educational abandonment and recruitment requires a paradigmatic shift in both journalistic practice and scholarly analysis. It involves moving beyond the gender-neutral façade of *the youth* and acknowledging that boys, girls and non-binary adolescents navigate profoundly different risks, resources and pathways. As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR 2021) has noted, gender equity in education and protection policies begins with visibility in discourse—a goal that remains elusive in much of Ecuador's current media landscape.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the methodology of critical content analysis. Specifically, it analyzes how national media outlets in Ecuador construct and disseminate discourse surrounding the phenomena of school desertion and the recruitment of minors by criminal groups during the year 2025. The research draws from the tradition of qualitative media studies, particularly those that focus on the interpretation of media texts as cultural and ideological artifacts (Krippendorff 2018; Altheide and Schneider 2013) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Research design overview.

Component	Description
Research paradigm.	Critical-interpretive.
Methodological approach.	Qualitative content analysis.
Theoretical foundation.	Critical discourse analysis. (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 2006).
Data analysis software.	MAXQDA 24.
Analytical purpose.	To interpret media discourses as ideological, cultural and political texts.
Ethical considerations.	No human participants involved; public sources only; principle of epistemic responsibility.

This methodological approach enables the identification of patterns, silences and rhetorical strategies in public discourse while remaining sensitive to the socio-political context in which these texts are produced (see Table 2).

Table 2. Methodological design.

Selection Criteria	Units of Analysis	Variables of Study
Relevance to topic, mention of dropout or recruitment, authored by experts, published in 2025.	Message, lexicon, structure, discursive strategies, actor representations.	Narrative framing, causal attribution, metaphors, lexical recurrence, key figures.

The empirical corpus of this study comprises a total of 85 texts, including opinion articles, editorials, analytical columns and journalistic commentaries. These texts were extracted from Ecuador's most prominent newspapers and digital media platforms with national circulation, namely *El Comercio*, *El Universo*, *La Hora*, *Primicias*, *GK*, *Vistazo* and *El Mercurio*. These outlets were strategically selected due to their historical influence on shaping public opinion, their representational balance across the political-ideological spectrum and their broad readership across both urban and rural demographics (see Table 3).

Table 3. Media corpus description.

Variable	Details
Corpus size	85 journalistic pieces.
Time frame	January to July, 2025.
Media outlets	<i>El Comercio</i> , <i>El Universo</i> , <i>La Hora</i> , <i>Primicias</i> , <i>GK</i> , <i>Vistazo</i> , <i>El Mercurio</i> .
Geographic scope	National circulation; urban and rural reach.
Genres analyzed	Informative notes, news reports, bulletins, editorials, feature stories.
Selection criteria	Relevance to topic; presence of discourse on school dropout or youth recruitment.

The selected texts reflect a deliberate focus on interpretive journalism and discursive commentary, as opposed to purely factual reporting. Each document included in the corpus explicitly or implicitly addressed critical educational and social concerns within

the Ecuadorian context, including—but not limited to—the public education crisis, school dropout, structural exclusion, youth recruitment into criminal networks, the erosion of institutional trust and the normalization of violence in marginalized communities.

The genre diversity within the corpus—comprising informative notes, bulletins, editorials, reports and feature articles—allowed for a multilayered textual analysis. This heterogeneity enriched the interpretive depth of the study and enabled the identification of both dominant and dissenting narratives in the construction of public discourse surrounding youth vulnerability and educational abandonment in Ecuador (see Table 4).

Table 4. Analysis on Ecuadorian newspapers.

Media Outlets	Time Frame	Journalistic Genres
<i>El Comercio, El Universo, La Hora, Primicias, GK, Vistazo, El Mercurio.</i>	January to July 2025.	85 opinion/editorial texts, informative note, bulletin, news, editorial, report.

To ensure methodological rigor and comprehensive coverage of the research problem, content analysis was systematically applied across all journalistic genres found within the selected media corpus, including informative notes, news reports, bulletins, editorials and feature stories. This inclusive approach allowed for a comparative examination of discursive variation between ostensibly neutral reporting and overtly interpretive or opinionated narratives. The analysis was performed on the complete set of texts published between January and July 2025 by the seven major national outlets previously cited. Each item was evaluated using a set of pre-established variables and units of analysis, including the framing of the message, the lexical recurrence of key terms, the narrative positioning of actors (e.g., youth, state, teachers, gangs) and the presence or absence of follow-up coverage and editorial prioritization (see Table 5).

Table 5. Units and variables of analysis.

Unit of Analysis	Definition
Lexical recurrence	Repeated keywords and discursive terms. (e.g., “abandonment,” “violence,” etc.)
Narrative framing	How the issue is introduced, contextualized and developed.
Causal attribution	Agents blamed or held responsible. (e.g., State, families, gangs)
Editorial prioritization	Placement, frequency and continuation of coverage.
Affective lexicon	Tone and emotional valence. (e.g., alarmist, empathetic, neutral)
Actor representation	Portrayal of children, teachers, institutions, gangs, etc.
Intertextual references	Quotes from officials, statistics, other articles.

Rather than excluding informative texts, this study critically examined their structure and discursive omissions, investigating how the phenomenon of school dropout is introduced, framed and either maintained or silenced in news agendas. The goal was to assess what is said about dropout and juvenile recruitment, how these issues are problematized, what causal or moral explanations are offered and whether the themes receive sustained attention or are relegated to marginal treatment. By integrating multiple genres, the study captured the heterogeneity of public discourse and the ideological tensions present in contemporary Ecuadorian journalism.

The analysis followed a multi-stage process of qualitative coding and thematic categorization. In the first phase, all texts were imported into MAXQDA software and subjected to open coding, which enabled the identification of lexical patterns, rhetorical tropes, intertextuality and recurrent thematic units. In the second phase, axial coding connected these codes to broader conceptual categories, such as state accountability, educational abandonment, symbolic violence, youth criminalization and institutional decay. The final stage of selective coding yielded meta-discursive constructions, which revealed the dominant ideologies underpinning the media treatment of school dropout and youth marginalization (see Table 6).

Table 6. Coding and analysis phase.

Phase	Procedure	Output
Open coding	Identification of repeated expressions, metaphors, rhetorical devices.	Initial themes and codes
Axial coding	Grouping of codes into conceptual categories (e.g., victimization, structural violence).	Conceptual categories
Selective coding	Development of overarching narratives and ideological patterns across media texts.	Meta-discursive constructions
Peer validation	Inter-coder reliability checks with two external researchers.	Agreement rate

The critical lens adopted in this study aligns with the tradition of discourse analysis as developed by Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2006), emphasizing the role of language in legitimizing certain power structures and silencing others. Special attention was paid to causal attributions (e.g., who or what is blamed for dropout), the presence or absence of proposed solutions and the affective charge of specific lexical choices. The study further examined whether media representations humanize or stigmatize children and adolescents living in conflict zones, particularly in territories characterized by chronic state absence and the proliferation of armed actors.

Research reflexivity was maintained throughout the study. Given that the dataset consisted exclusively of publicly available media texts, no human participants were involved. Nevertheless, the study adopted a principle of epistemic responsibility in its treatment of sensitive content, avoiding sensationalism and situating violent events within their broader structural contexts. The political and economic orientations of each media outlet were considered to understand the potential influence of editorial biases on narrative framing.

Ultimately, this methodological strategy—rooted in critical and interpretive textual analysis—allowed for the emergence of layered insights into how Ecuadorian media articulate, prioritize and either normalize or challenge the discourse surrounding educational abandonment and youth vulnerability. These insights laid the groundwork for the subsequent findings section, where the six core themes derived from the data are analyzed and discussed.

4. Results

The qualitative content analysis of 85 journalistic texts, including opinion/editorial texts, informative note, bulletin, news, editorial, report, published in Ecuadorian national media between January and July 2025, revealed a constellation of six dominant discursive patterns concerning the representation of school dropout and the recruitment of minors by organized criminal groups.

These patterns emerged from a rigorous interpretive process grounded in critical discourse analysis and coded using the MAXQDA software, allowing for thematic saturation and ideological mapping. The analysis captures the complexity with which media narratives construct, legitimize, problematize, or obscure the structural conditions surrounding youth vulnerability in violent and neglected territories.

Each subtheme is presented in detail across six interpretive paragraphs, drawing upon specific textual excerpts from national outlets such as *El Comercio*, *El Universo*, *Primicias*, *Vistazo*, *GK*, *La Hora* and *El Mercurio*. These media examples are examined alongside relevant scholarly frameworks in order to provide a theoretically informed and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomena under study. This structure not only allows for an in-depth exploration of the media's discursive treatment of educational abandonment and juvenile recruitment, but also reveals the moral, political and institutional implications embedded within the national communicative landscape of Ecuador in 2025.

4.1. Normalization of Violence and Abandonment

A dominant narrative across media sources is the normalization of violence in Ecuador's most vulnerable territories. In provinces like Guayas, Esmeraldas and El Oro, articles describe how daily exposure to shootings, extortion and gang disputes has become commonplace. For instance, a *Primicias* (2025a) article states: "In Durán, the crackling of automatic gunfire has become part of the soundscape of children's breakfast routines," illustrating how fear is embedded in everyday life. This aligns with Moser and Rodgers's (2012) concept of "violent peace" in urban Latin America.

Several texts evoke a sense of abandonment, portraying the state as retreating from its duties in territories controlled by organized crime. *El Universo* (2025) editorialized: "The State has ceded entire zones to the rule of the strongest," underscoring the perception of institutional withdrawal. This confirms Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, wherein state absence becomes a form of indirect aggression.

This normalization is reflected in the vocabulary used by columnists. Terms such as "invisible war" (*GK* 2025), "no-man's lands" (*La Hora* 2025) and "lost territories" (*Vistazo* 2025) are recurrent across media. These rhetorical choices signal a discursive shift where violence is no longer an emergency but an expected condition.

In these narratives, dropout is framed not as an individual decision but as an environmental response. A column in *El Comercio* (2025) argues: "It is not that children abandon school; it is the school that abandons them first." This inversion of agency emphasizes systemic failure, consistent with Apple's (2004) critique of school systems that reproduce inequality.

Yet, this normalization risks anesthetizing public response. When crisis becomes routine, it may fail to provoke action. As Van Dijk (2006) warns, repeated exposure to violent discourse can lead to cognitive disengagement. Journalistic repetition of normalized images must be balanced with calls to urgency.

Despite the dominant tone of desensitization, some journalists explicitly reject resignation. An editorial in *Vistazo* (2025) asserts: "We must not grow accustomed to our schools becoming trenches," demanding the reinvention of schools as sanctuaries. Such counter-discourses attempt to re-politicize the educational crisis and restore a sense of collective moral responsibility.

4.2. Criminalization vs. Victimization of Youth

Ecuadorian media frequently frame vulnerable youth in binary terms: either as future criminals or as victims of systemic neglect, a *La Hora* (2025) editorial warned of a generation

adrift and devoid of values, suggesting moral collapse and implicitly supporting punitive solutions. This echoes Giroux's (2015) concept of youth as a *suspect class* in neoliberal societies.

In contrast, *Primicias* (2025b) published a feature describing adolescents recruited by gangs as *children pushed to the edge by the abandonment of the State*. Here, youth are humanized and the language of coercion is foregrounded, aligning with the United Nations' (UN 2012) findings on child recruitment as a form of modern slavery.

These conflicting portrayals reflect ideological divides. Some media refer to dropout youth as "narco-kids" (*El Mercurio* 2025), while others call them *orphans of the Republic* (*El Comercio* 2025). The first dehumanizes; the second demands compassion. This duality illustrates the media's role in either legitimizing stigma or promoting empathy (Van Dijk 1998).

Criminalizing dropout often aligns with calls for increased surveillance and militarization. An article in *La Hora* (2025) advocated for *constant police presence around schools*, reinforcing a narrative of threat over vulnerability. Such framing supports short-term containment but ignores long-term social reintegration (Novelli et al. 2017).

By contrast, columns in *GK* and *Vistazo* highlight alternatives rooted in human rights. *GK* (2025) proposed *restorative education for children affected by violence*, referencing trauma-informed pedagogy aligned with the INEE Minimum Standards (INEE 2010). These voices insist on addressing root causes.

These narratives co-exist in tension. Within the same outlet, one may find alarmist headlines and restorative essays. This ambivalence reflects a broader societal struggle to understand young people not as problems, but as citizens-in-formaion deserving of rights and opportunities.

4.3. Critiques of State Inaction and Institutional Decay

Criticism of governmental inaction is pervasive across media platforms. An *El Comercio* (2025) editorial argued: "Institutional abandonment has condemned thousands of young people to functional illiteracy or crime," reflecting public frustration with a disjointed policy response. Such critiques resonate with Tomasevski's (2003) assertion that denying education constitutes a human rights violation.

A common concern is the dismantling of formerly effective support programs. For instance, *Primicias* (2025a) noted the suspension of school retention programs due to budgetary constraints. This regression in social investment is cited as a catalyst for dropout, echoing Espinoza et al. (2019) warning on the erosion of Ecuador's educational policy gains.

Many editorials denounce a reactive rather than preventative approach. *GK* (2025) criticized the Ministry of Education for deploying interventions only after violent incidents occur. This aligns with Waisbord's (2000) critique of Latin American governance models that prioritize crisis management over structural reform.

The image of the "mute state" recurs across articles. A *Vistazo* (2025) columnist wrote: "Faced with violence, the State does not respond; it remains silent," encapsulating perceptions of bureaucratic indifference. The metaphor denotes not only inaction but complicity, suggesting a vacuum filled by organized crime.

Nonetheless, some media call for institutional renewal. *El Universo* (2025) proposed "building school protection networks with social workers, psychologists and community leaders," reflecting a turn toward systemic solutions. This mirrors Novelli et al.'s (2017) emphasis on multi-sectoral peacebuilding through education.

Civil society's role is also scrutinized. An *El Mercurio* (2025) opinion piece questioned the absence of NGO responses in high-risk zones, arguing: "It is not only the State that has failed; civil society organizations have also remained silent." This suggests a broader institutional crisis requiring collective accountability.

4.4. Territorial Exclusion and Inequality

Media narratives consistently frame territorial inequality as a structural determinant of both school dropout and the recruitment of minors. An article published by [GK \(2025\)](#) describes neighborhoods such as Eloy Alfaro (Esmeraldas) and Monte Sinaí (Guayaquil) as *gray educational zones*, where the presence of the state is fragmented, intermittent and largely ineffective. These portrayals reflect [Escobar's \(2008\)](#) theory of unplanned territories, where the absence of formal institutions gives rise to alternative systems of informal or criminal governance.

In these territories, school dropout is not represented as an individual or familial failure, but rather as the logical consequence of cumulative exclusion. [Primicias \(2025b\)](#) highlights how long commutes, unsafe transit routes and a chronic lack of educational infrastructure undermine consistent school attendance. As one columnist asserted: "There is no dropout—there is a silent expulsion from the educational system." This interpretation aligns with [Apple's \(2004\)](#) critique of schooling as a system that structurally reproduces inequality and marginalization.

Spatial metaphors are commonly employed to express these forms of injustice. Expressions such as *internal borders of abandonment* ([Vistazo 2025](#)) and "provinces without desks" ([El Comercio 2025](#)) underscore the geographical dimension of educational exclusion. These narratives converge with [Nussbaum's \(2011\)](#) argument that place of birth remains a powerful predictor of a child's life trajectory, including access to basic rights such as education.

Racial and ethnic inequalities intersect with these territorial dynamics. An investigative piece by [El Universo \(2025\)](#) reveals that Afro-Ecuadorian and Indigenous communities in rural Esmeraldas and Orellana suffer disproportionate dropout rates and are often invisible to national policy agendas.

These findings echo the work of [Cornwall and Rivas \(2015\)](#), who emphasize the tendency of development policies to overlook intersectional vulnerabilities, especially when race, class and geography converge. Some media connect these patterns to failed decentralization efforts. For example, an editorial in [La Hora \(2025\)](#) criticizes the weak coordination between local governments and national ministries, stating: "Autonomy without resources perpetuates educational inequality." This diagnosis resonates with [Dussel's \(2006\)](#) critique of the neoliberal fragmentation of the state, where administrative autonomy fails to translate into real capacity to guarantee rights.

Nevertheless, various media outlets also highlight forms of grassroots resistance. A feature in [Vistazo \(2025\)](#) documents a community-led initiative in San Lorenzo, where residents built a neighborhood learning center using recycled materials and local donations. These micro-experiences illustrate both the ingenuity of marginalized communities and the importance of recognizing local agency when formulating inclusive and context-sensitive education policies.

4.5. Erosion of Schools as Safe Spaces

Ecuadorian media recurrently report on the degradation of the protective role of schools in areas affected by violence. A special feature by [El Comercio \(2025\)](#) narrates how students in Durán avoid attending school due to frequent gunfire near campus boundaries. This portrayal aligns with [Novelli et al. \(2017\)](#), who argue that the erosion of education's protective capacity undermines its role as a peacebuilding mechanism in fragile or conflict-affected settings.

Educators, too, are frequently targeted. A column in [GK \(2025\)](#) details the experience of a public-school teacher who received threats from local gangs after reporting student absences and refusing to comply with coercive demands. Such incidents foster environ-

ments of silence and fear, weakening institutional authority and creating what Freire (1997) described as an anti-pedagogical climate, in which education becomes impossible.

The psychological consequences for students are significant. A *Primicias* (2025a) article presents testimonies from adolescents who report chronic anxiety, panic attacks and emotional numbness, directly linked to the violence surrounding their schools. These findings support the recommendations of the INEE (2010), which identifies mental health and psychosocial support services as essential in emergency and post-crisis education contexts.

The absence of formal protection protocols exacerbates the situation. According to *El Universo* (2025), the Ministry of Education had failed to conduct safety audits in many high-risk schools and teachers often work without clear guidelines or crisis response training. This institutional neglect places both students and educators in precarious conditions, rendering dropout not only more likely, but in some cases inevitable.

Despite these challenges, several media pieces emphasize the resilience and commitment of communities. *Vistazo* (2025) reports on parent-led patrol groups in Guasmo that escort children to school each morning to protect them from street violence. These efforts align with Nussbaum's (2011) notion of grassroots capabilities, emphasizing the role of local communities in sustaining educational continuity in the absence of effective state intervention.

There is a shared consensus across media platforms on the need to reconceptualize schools as sanctuaries. Journalists advocate for the integration of trauma-informed pedagogy, the placement of school-based psychologists and partnerships with community organizations. These recommendations mirror the UNESCO (2015) framework, which views schools as foundational to promoting peace, inclusion and resilience.

4.6. Call for Systemic and Urgent Reform

The sixth and final theme reveals a growing media consensus regarding the need for profound and urgent structural reform in Ecuador's education system. A *Vistazo* (2025) editorial asserts: "The school dropout crisis cannot be resolved through isolated campaigns but demands comprehensive reforms that restore dignity to public education." This reflects a broader discourse on the social function of education as a public good (Tomasevski 2003).

Journalistic discourse across platforms calls for inter-ministerial collaboration. A *GK* (2025) column proposes a national emergency strategy that integrates the Ministries of Education, Public Health, Interior and Social Inclusion. This perspective aligns with Novelli et al. (2017), who advocate for a whole-of-government approach to education in post-conflict and crisis-prone environments.

Short-term measures are also discussed as urgent stopgaps. *Primicias* (2025a) highlights proposals for mobile classrooms, accelerated literacy programs and the reactivation of school meal plans in conflict-affected areas. These interventions are positioned as necessary to mitigate immediate harms while more transformative solutions are implemented.

Education is increasingly framed as a strategic axis for peacebuilding. A columnist in *El Comercio* (2025) states: "Each class delivered in a red zone is an act of civic resistance." This sentiment echoes Giroux's (2004) interpretation of critical pedagogy as a political and ethical intervention capable of challenging systems of domination.

Curricular transformation also features in media advocacy. There are calls for the inclusion of civic education, ethical reflection and emotional intelligence in classroom content. These shifts represent a move from a purely technical curriculum to one rooted in values, responsibility and affective engagement, in line with Freire's (1970) notion of education as emancipatory praxis.

The role of the media itself is foregrounded. By amplifying local voices, reporting systemic failures and highlighting innovative solutions, journalists become not only observers

but active participants in educational reform. As [Van Dijk \(1998\)](#) notes, media discourse can function as either a mechanism of legitimation or a catalyst for social transformation. In Ecuador's current educational crisis, it has the potential to serve as both.

5. Discussion

The following discussion section synthesizes the principal analytical findings of this research and positions them within the broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks established in the literature review. By critically contrasting the empirical results with established theories of educational exclusion, structural violence and media discourse, this section demonstrates how national media representations in Ecuador reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant narratives concerning school dropout and youth recruitment. This triangulation not only substantiates the validity of the study's conclusions but also highlights the increasing centrality of educational crises in the national communicative agenda. The integration of qualitative data with critical theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of how systemic educational abandonment is both constructed and contested in public discourse.

The prominence of these issues in editorials, opinion columns and investigative journalism underscores a growing societal recognition of education as a battleground for equity, citizenship and social resilience. The discussion thus serves to illuminate the ideological tensions embedded in media narratives while reaffirming the transformative potential of education as both a communicative and political act.

5.1. Territorial Violence and Structural Exclusion

The results of this study reveal a strong correlation between territorial violence and educational exclusion. In Ecuador's most conflict-affected regions, education is no longer perceived as a right guaranteed by the state, but rather as a fragile possibility vulnerable to disruption by criminal control. This aligns with [Escobar's \(2008\)](#) notion of "unplanned territories," where the absence of institutional presence creates a vacuum occupied by informal or illegal actors. Such structural abandonment leads to cumulative exclusions. As [Apple \(2004\)](#) suggests, schools in marginalized regions are often reproducing inequalities rather than mitigating them.

In Ecuador, geographic location has become a determinant of educational destiny, with students in peripheral regions facing systemic barriers to access and retention ([Nussbaum 2011](#)). The narratives found in national media highlight not only material deprivation but symbolic exclusion. By describing provinces such as Esmeraldas and Manabí as *zones without desks* or *educational deserts*, the press indirectly legitimizes a discourse of spatial injustice. This echoes [Harvey's \(2009\)](#) concept of the *right to the city* and the spatialization of inequality.

The intersection of race, poverty and geography further compounds educational exclusion. Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities are disproportionately affected by dropout and recruitment, as also noted in [UNDP \(2022\)](#) reports. These findings confirm the intersectional vulnerability framework proposed by [Cornwall and Rivas \(2015\)](#), where systemic discrimination operates across multiple dimensions.

In this context, dropout is not merely an educational problem but a symptom of state disengagement. [Galtung's \(1969\)](#) theory of structural violence provides a useful lens to understand how bureaucratic negligence, underfunding and policy fragmentation perpetuate harm without direct aggression.

The media's role in making these exclusions visible is crucial. Through investigative journalism and human interest stories, platforms such as [Primicias \(2025a\)](#) and [GK \(2025\)](#)

highlight community struggles and the failure of central authorities. As [Waisbord \(2000\)](#) notes, journalism in Latin America often oscillates between watchdog and advocate roles.

However, media coverage can also reinforce deterministic narratives. By portraying entire regions as *lost* or *irredeemable*, some discourse risks depoliticizing the crisis and reinforcing passive perceptions. This requires a more nuanced journalistic approach that integrates community agency and historical analysis.

Addressing territorial inequality requires integrated policy responses that combine educational investment, infrastructure development and public security reform. As [Novelli et al. \(2017\)](#) argue, peacebuilding and education must be addressed in tandem, particularly in fragile contexts.

5.2. Media Framing and the Construction of Youth Identities

One of the most striking discursive patterns uncovered in this study is the polarized portrayal of youth in media texts—as either potential criminals or passive victims. These dual framings have important implications for public policy and societal attitudes toward adolescents in contexts of vulnerability ([Giroux 2015](#)).

Media narratives that label dropout students as *narco-kids* or a *lost generation risk* pathologizing youth behavior and normalizing punitive state responses. Such language aligns with the logic of securitization; whereby social issues are framed as threats to national security ([Buzan et al. 1998](#)).

By contrast, humanizing portrayals found in [Vistazo \(2025\)](#) and [El Comercio \(2025\)](#) emphasize structural causality, viewing youth dropout as a rational response to exclusion and violence. These narratives resonate with the capabilities approach ([Nussbaum 2011](#)), which emphasizes the importance of giving young people the tools to flourish.

The coexistence of these discourses in the same media ecosystem reflects the fragility of public consensus. As [Van Dijk \(1998\)](#) argues, media outlets serve as both mirrors and producers of ideology, reinforcing certain values while silencing others. The battle over youth identity is thus fought not only in the streets but in headlines and op-eds.

The framing of youth has direct policy consequences. Criminalizing discourses justify repressive measures such as school surveillance, juvenile incarceration and militarized policing. Conversely, restorative frames support interventions like psychosocial support, alternative education and community-based prevention ([Novelli et al. 2017](#)).

Gender is largely absent in most media portrayals. Very few articles address the differentiated impact of dropout and recruitment on girls, who face unique vulnerabilities such as sexual exploitation and domestic servitude within gangs ([UNODC 2023](#)). This absence reflects broader androcentric biases in public discourse.

To counter these tendencies, media professionals must adopt more inclusive editorial practices, amplifying youth voices and diverse experiences. As [Giroux \(2004\)](#) argues, pedagogy is not limited to schools—it extends into all spaces where knowledge is produced, including newsrooms. The way youth are framed in media narratives influences not only their self-perception but also the willingness of institutions and society to defend their rights. A shift toward inclusive, rights-based discourse is not only desirable but ethically necessary.

5.3. The Erosion of the School as a Protective Institution

The findings demonstrate that the deterioration of schools as safe spaces is both a consequence and a symptom of the broader social crisis affecting Ecuador. In violent territories, schools have ceased to function as environments of security and learning. This mirrors [Novelli et al. \(2017\)](#) framework, which underscores the protective role of education in fragile contexts and warns against its erosion.

The testimonies collected from media reports suggest that educators and students are subjected to daily threats, surveillance and intimidation. Teachers are often coerced into silence or complicity and students live in a state of constant fear. Freire (1997) insists that true pedagogy cannot occur in contexts governed by fear, since fear paralyzes critical consciousness and participatory learning.

This situation challenges the role of education as a right and transforms it into a privilege for the few who can afford to access schools in safe areas. The state's inability to secure educational spaces contradicts the constitutional guarantee of the right to education (OAS 2008). The erosion of trust in public institutions further alienates families and communities.

The invisibilization of psychological trauma undermines the quality and sustainability of education. As highlighted by INEE (2010), education in emergencies must include psychosocial support and protection strategies as core components. The lack of mental health protocols or trained staff leaves children unsupported and exposed.

Despite these challenges, communities often step in to fill the institutional void. Parent-led patrols, community watch groups and improvised learning centers reflect grassroots resilience and agency. These forms of local action align with Nussbaum's (2011) idea of basic capabilities and their relation to educational justice.

Without state support, these initiatives risk exhaustion or failure. A sustainable education system requires coordinated investment in infrastructure, training, security and curriculum development. Apple (2004) argues that educational reform must be systemic and not rely solely on the goodwill of local actors.

Journalistic coverage that showcases these community efforts plays a crucial role in resisting narratives of fatalism. Media visibility offers symbolic recognition and can mobilize public opinion. As Van Dijk (1998) asserts, media discourse has the potential to reshape societal attitudes and influence policy formation. Rebuilding the school as a protective institution demands an alliance between state institutions, civil society and international cooperation. It is not merely a logistical task, but an ethical imperative rooted in the defense of human dignity and children's rights.

5.4. Education as a Tool for Peacebuilding and Social Transformation

The media discourse reviewed in this study positions education as a frontline mechanism in the struggle for peace and social cohesion. In regions afflicted by violence and inequality, each act of teaching becomes an act of resistance. This interpretation aligns with Giroux's (2004) conceptualization of critical pedagogy as a transformative political practice.

The call for educational reform is not only about curriculum or infrastructure—it is about restoring the symbolic and ethical meaning of schooling. As Tomasevski (2003) emphasizes, education must be treated as a public good and a vehicle for redistributive justice, especially in contexts marked by historical exclusion.

Educators, students and communities are portrayed not as passive victims but as active agents of change. These representations align with the transformative education model, where learning serves to challenge oppression and imagine alternatives (Freire 1970). Stories of innovation, resilience and solidarity underscore this vision.

Policy proposals identified in media narratives—such as civic education, trauma-informed pedagogy and community-school partnerships—illustrate the shift toward value-based and inclusive educational approaches. These align with UNESCO (2015) frameworks that advocate for education systems rooted in peace, inclusion and sustainability.

This vision requires a redefinition of success in education. Beyond metrics of enrollment and graduation, success must be measured by a system's capacity to foster empathy, critical thinking and ethical reasoning (Nussbaum 2011). This reconceptualization is vital for conflict-affected societies. Nonetheless, the transformative potential of education de-

depends on political will and social investment. Without budgetary and institutional support, even the most progressive curricula cannot produce real change. [Novelli et al. \(2017\)](#) stress the importance of inter-sectoral collaboration and the mobilization of resources for peace-oriented education.

The role of journalism in shaping this agenda is both strategic and ethical. By amplifying calls for reform and exposing systemic failures, the media contributes to public debate and policy accountability. [Waisbord \(2000\)](#) notes that journalism, when practiced with rigor and responsibility, becomes a democratic force.

The educational response to Ecuador's crisis must go beyond containment and address root causes. Schools must be empowered as sites of critical dialogue, emotional healing and democratic participation. Only through such a comprehensive approach can education fulfill its transformative promise.

6. Conclusions

This study has revealed the complex and multifaceted relationship between school dropout, youth recruitment by organized crime and the broader dynamics of territorial violence and social exclusion in Ecuador. At the heart of these challenges lies a systemic failure to guarantee the right to education as a transformative and liberating force. Education must be understood not merely as formal schooling, but as a comprehensive process of ethical, civic and human development ([Freire 1970](#)).

The findings underscore that in contexts of structural inequality, the absence of meaningful and inclusive education creates fertile ground for the proliferation of violence. When young people are denied access to safe learning environments, relevant curricula and opportunities for personal and social development, they are left with few alternatives but to seek belonging and survival elsewhere—often in the ranks of criminal networks ([UNESCO 2015](#)).

The media narratives analyzed in this study offer compelling evidence that education is not only a victim of conflict but also a potential solution. Stories of teacher resilience, community-based initiatives and grassroots innovations point to the latent power of education as a driver of hope and transformation. These initiatives embody what [Nussbaum \(2011\)](#) calls the capabilities approach—providing youth with the freedom and tools to choose a life they have reason to value.

In violent and marginalized territories, education can act as a counterforce to crime and despair—but only if it is reimagined to respond to the lived realities of young people. This requires going beyond content delivery to embrace a pedagogy of motivation, values and activation. As [Giroux \(2004\)](#) asserts, education must teach students not what to think, but how to think critically, ethically and courageously.

True education awakens a sense of purpose. It equips young people not only with knowledge, but with the belief that they can shape their futures through work, resilience and community engagement. In Ecuador's current context, such belief is revolutionary. The classroom, then, becomes a space of resistance and renewal—what [Freire \(1997\)](#) termed a *practice of freedom*.

The testimonies of dropout students and at-risk youth highlight a deep yearning for dignity, stability and meaningful direction. When education fails to deliver these, the void is swiftly filled by the seductive narratives of criminal networks. Conversely, when education is rooted in values such as solidarity, justice and empathy, it becomes a powerful antidote to nihilism and violence ([UNODC 2023](#)).

This transformative vision of education demands ethical leadership, adequate investment and systemic coordination. Education cannot be left to the goodwill of individual teachers or isolated community projects—it must be institutionalized as a national priority.

As Tomasevski (2003) argued, the right to education is not fulfilled by access alone, but by ensuring that education is acceptable, adaptable and of good quality.

A value-driven educational system must integrate emotional intelligence, civic reasoning and ethical deliberation across all levels. In doing so, it fosters a culture of peace and belonging, particularly for those most exposed to the risks of dropout and recruitment. Such an approach echoes the calls by Novelli et al. (2017) for education in emergencies to be both protective and transformative. It is also imperative to reposition teachers as agents of change. In the face of adversity, many educators continue to embody the moral force of education. Their work must be protected, recognized and supported by public policies that ensure safety, professional development and well-being (Apple 2004). Teachers are not just curriculum deliverers—they are mentors, motivators and moral guides.

Likewise, media institutions must recognize their role in shaping perceptions about youth, education and violence. By amplifying stories of resilience and reform, journalism can challenge fatalism and inspire civic engagement. As Van Dijk (1998) noted, discourse is a form of power—used responsibly, it can catalyze transformation. This study reaffirms that education is the only viable path to overcoming the intergenerational cycles of exclusion, poverty and violence. It is not an optional policy area, but the cornerstone of democratic life and national reconstruction. In the words of UNESCO (2015), education is not only about preparing for life—it is life itself.

The Ecuadorian state, civil society and international partners must join forces to defend and expand this vision. The future of Ecuador's youth—and of the nation itself—depends on whether we can build an educational system that not only teaches, but inspires; that not only instructs, but uplifts; that not only informs, but transforms.

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