frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 31 August 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1922238

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Narcisa Medranda - Morales,
Universidad Politecnica Salesiana - Sede Quito, Ecuador

REVIEWED BY
Fátima Martínez-Gutiérrez,
Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Peru
Luis Ordóñez Pineda,
Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador

*CORRESPONDENCE
Fernanda Tusa
ftusa@utmachala.edu.ec

RECEIVED 28 June 2026
REVISED 02 August 2026
ACCEPTED 05 August 2026
PUBLISHED 31 August 2026

CITATION
Tusa F, Aguaded I and Tejedor S (2026) The politics of carceral visibility in Ecuador: human dignity, state power and the public performance of security. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 8:1922238. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1922238

COPYRIGHT
© 2026 Tusa, Aguaded and Tejedor. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

The politics of carceral visibility in Ecuador: human dignity, state power and the public performance of security

Fernanda Tusa[1]*, Ignacio Aguaded[2] and Santiago Tejedor[3]

[1]Universidad Tecnica de Machala, Machala, Ecuador, [2]Universidad de Huelva, Huelva, Spain, [3]Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

This study examined how Ecuadorian digital news media framed, valued, positioned, and followed the penitentiary situation at the Cárcel del Encuentro (CPL Santa Elena No. 1) during 2025 and 2026. Grounded in critical realism, it moved beyond the empirical visibility of news events to interrogate the deeper generative mechanisms associated with prison disease, isolation, institutional opacity, and punitive governance. A purposive corpus of retrievable digital publications from Ecuadorian news outlets was examined through qualitative content analysis and frame analysis. The coding focused on transmitted messages, protagonists, adjectivization, news positioning, follow-up, visual framing, headlines, and interpretive orientation. The media field organized the case through four dominant frames: official control and denial of epidemic risk; humanitarian alarm around tuberculosis, malnutrition, and family testimony; securitized punishment and the symbolic transfer of "dangerous" inmates; and restricted access to information. These frames revealed a stratified reality in which visible events such as deaths and prisoner transfers were connected to deeper structures including punitive populism, militarized prison governance, institutional secrecy, social abandonment, and the cultural dehumanization of incarcerated bodies. The findings indicate that prison dignity is not a rhetorical supplement to security policy but a constitutional, ethical, pedagogical, and public-health condition for democratic life. Ecuador's penitentiary crisis cannot be addressed through isolation alone; sustainable security requires rehabilitation, education, health care, family contact, transparent oversight, and preventive social policies.

KEYWORDS
critical realism, human dignity, media framing, prison crisis, social anthropology

1 Introduction

This study treated Ecuador's prison crisis not merely as a sequence of media events but as a stratified social phenomenon in which empirical reports, actual institutional decisions and real causal mechanisms had to be analytically distinguished (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979; Sayer, 2000). The deaths, transfers and health alarms reported around the Cárcel del Encuentro constituted the empirical surface of a deeper social order. News reports made suffering visible, but visibility did not automatically explain why that suffering occurred, why it became publicly disputable or why state denial and family testimony competed for authority in the media field (Bhaskar, 1993; Danermark et al., 2002; Fairclough, 1995).

Ecuador's prison crisis had already been framed by regional human-rights institutions as a structural crisis marked by state abandonment, violence, corruption and the absence of an integral criminal policy. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights identified the Ecuadorian penitentiary crisis as a severe and structural challenge for the State, while journalistic safety organizations warned that prison reporting remained urgent but difficult because of access restrictions, risks and informational opacity (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2022a,b; Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023; Rivera Rhon, 2026).

Within this broader context, the Cárcel del Encuentro became a powerful symbolic object: it was presented by government discourse as an emblem of maximum security, discipline and state recovery of prison control. However, the same institution also became associated in media coverage with restricted visits, health alerts, tuberculosis-related concerns and questions about whether punitive control had displaced rehabilitation as the central purpose of imprisonment (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

The prison was reported as having begun operations in November 2025 with approximately 300 prisoners and a capacity of around 800, while later reports described its population as having increased significantly after transfers from other facilities. Media sources also noted that the prison functioned under strict security conditions and had been described as Ecuador's only maximum-security prison (Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1961).

The immediate empirical trigger of this study was the 2026 media coverage of tuberculosis, prisoner deaths and transfers from the Cárcel del Encuentro. Ecuavisa reported that a prisoner who died in May 2026 had a medical report indicating respiratory failure, chronic malnutrition and pulmonary tuberculosis, while the Ministry of the Interior denied the existence of a tuberculosis outbreak in that prison (Farmer, 2004; Kleinman et al., 1997).

Primicias likewise reported that official sources confirmed that a prisoner who died on May 15, 2026, had tuberculosis and had shared a cell with three other prisoners with the same disease, although the direct cause of death still awaited formal confirmation. This demonstrated how prison health became a contested object: known through partial official confirmation, family testimony and journalistic reconstruction, yet limited by restricted access to the facility (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

Shortly afterward, Primicias reported the transfer of at least 35 prisoners diagnosed with tuberculosis from the Cárcel del Encuentro to the Regional Guayas prison, based on allegations from the Committee of Families for a Dignified Life. Teleamazonas reported the government's counter-position: authorities confirmed transfers but denied an epidemic, framing the movement as preventive rather than evidence of institutional failure (Hall et al., 1978; Fairclough, 1995).

This divergence between humanitarian alarm and official containment constituted the central communicational problem of the study. While family committees and human-rights voices emphasized deterioration, contagion risk and lack of transparent information, government actors emphasized control, prevention, legality and the absence of an epidemic (Bourdieu, 1991; Couldry, 2012).

The problem was intensified because the Ecuadorian Constitution explicitly recognizes rights for persons deprived of liberty, including communication and visits with relatives and legal professionals and the right to integral health care within detention centers. Therefore, the media debate could not be reduced to public security; it necessarily concerned constitutional dignity, access to justice, health and democratic accountability (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

International standards reinforced this normative dimension. The United Nations Nelson Mandela Rules define minimum standards for prison management and human dignity, while the World Health Organization has warned that overcrowding, poor ventilation, weak health services and prisoner movement can increase the transmission of airborne diseases such as tuberculosis (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; World Health Organization, 2023).

The research problem may therefore be formulated as follows:

- How did Ecuadorian digital media transform a prison-health emergency into public knowledge and to what extent did they reveal or obscure the structural mechanisms that produced the crisis?

This question required a critical realist approach because news coverage is simultaneously empirical evidence, symbolic mediation and a social practice shaped by power relations (Bhaskar, 1979; Fairclough, 2010; Porpora, 2015).

The guiding research question was:

- How did Ecuadorian digital media frame, position, adjectivize, visualize and follow up the penitentiary situation at the Cárcel del Encuentro during 2025 and 2026, particularly in relation to tuberculosis deaths, restricted access and the absence of rehabilitative conditions?

This question linked media studies with social anthropology because prisons operate not only as legal institutions but also as cultural spaces where societies define moral belonging and exclusion (Geertz, 1973; Wacquant, 2009).

The objective of the study was:

- Analyze how Ecuadorian digital media constructed the newsworthiness of the Cárcel del Encuentro, which actors were foregrounded, what language and images were used, how the issue was valued, whether follow-up occurred and how journalistic narratives interacted with official denial, humanitarian testimony and critical interpretations of punishment.

The justification of the study rested on the ethical urgency of the issue. Tuberculosis in prisons is not merely a biomedical fact; it is a social indicator of structural violence, unequal exposure to preventable harm and the failure of institutions to treat imprisoned persons as bearers of rights rather than disposable bodies (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969).

The importance of the study also derived from the centrality of media in democratic oversight. When independent organizations and journalists cannot directly corroborate prison conditions, news coverage becomes a contested arena in which official statements, family testimony, medical evidence and human-rights claims compete for legitimacy (Cottle, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2006). The transcendence of the research lay in showing that the prison is a mirror of the society that builds it. A political culture that accepts isolation without rehabilitation risks normalizing human abandonment as public policy, whereas a democratic culture committed to dignity recognizes that punishment without health, education and reintegration reproduces rather than resolves social violence (Davis, 2003; Freire, 1970).

The Cárcel del Encuentro condensed Ecuador's contemporary contradictions: a State seeking security in the context of organized crime, a prison system historically marked by abandonment, a media ecosystem working under pressure and families attempting to humanize prisoners in the face of institutional silence (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). This case revealed a cultural drama in which the incarcerated person was constructed either as a dangerous body to be neutralized or as a vulnerable human being whose disease testified to institutional neglect. The struggle over naming— "outbreak," "one case," "preventive transfer," "crisis," "control"—became a struggle over reality itself (Turner, 1974; Bourdieu, 1991).

The article argued that the great contribution of a critical realist reading was to move beyond the visible scandal toward the mechanisms that produced it: punitive governance, restricted transparency, precarious prison health, symbolic dehumanization and the absence of education as prevention and rehabilitation. The study maintained that the moral measure of security is not the capacity to isolate bodies but the capacity to transform lives (Bhaskar, 1993; Nussbaum, 2011; Freire, 1970).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Critical realism, stratified reality and media events

Critical realism begins from the premise that reality exists independently of knowledge but can only be known fallibly through socially situated inquiry. This position is crucial for media analysis because news reports are neither transparent mirrors nor mere inventions; they are partial accounts of real events mediated by discourse, institutional access and power (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000; Archer, 1995).

Bhaskar's distinction between the empirical, the actual and the real helped structure the analysis. The empirical referred to what media reported; the actual referred to the deaths, transfers, restrictions and official decisions that occurred; and the real referred to generative mechanisms such as state abandonment, punitive culture and institutional opacity (Bhaskar, 1979; Danermark et al., 2002).

This layered ontology prevented the study from reducing the prison crisis to media representation alone. Framing mattered because it shaped public perception, but the suffering of prisoners, the circulation of tuberculosis and the constitutional obligations of the State existed beyond the frames that made them visible or invisible (Sayer, 2000; Maxwell, 2012).

Critical realism also enabled the study to avoid two analytical extremes: positivist dependence on official numbers as self-sufficient truth and postmodern dissolution of reality into discourse. In a prison context where access is restricted, the researcher must treat official statistics, family testimony, photographs and journalistic narratives as fallible but meaningful clues to deeper causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1993; Gorski, 2013).

2.2 Media framing and the symbolic construction of prison reality

Framing theory explains how media select some aspects of reality and make them more salient in a communicative text, promoting particular interpretations, causal diagnoses, moral evaluations and treatment recommendations. In this case, headlines about "no outbreak," "transfer," "death," or "control" did not merely inform; they organized the moral grammar of public understanding (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

The media frame of official control emphasized security, discipline and the State's capacity to manage high-risk prisoners. However, critical media theory warns that security frames may naturalize exceptional restrictions if they detach institutional power from rights, social causes and human suffering (Hall et al., 1978; Fairclough, 1995).

The humanitarian alarm frame foregrounded illness, family testimony, medical vulnerability and lack of access. This frame allowed prisoners to reappear as social persons with bodies, relatives and rights, rather than as abstract threats. Yet it also risked episodic compassion if not connected to structural explanation (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2006).

Digital journalism intensified these dynamics because online platforms privilege speed, visibility, emotional resonance and headline competition. The same event could be positioned as crisis, denial, scandal or institutional clarification depending on outlet routines, source access and editorial culture (Couldry, 2012; Chadwick, 2013).

2.3 Prisons, punishment and the anthropology of exclusion

Prisons are not merely buildings; they are cultural institutions through which societies produce boundaries between the governable and the disposable. Foucault showed that modern punishment reorganized power through surveillance, classification and discipline, while Goffman described total institutions as spaces that reorganize identity, time and bodily autonomy (Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1961).

In late modern penal cultures, the prison is often mobilized as a political sign of order in periods of fear. Garland argued that contemporary societies combine punitive expressiveness with managerial control, while Wacquant linked punitive expansion to the management of social insecurity and marginalized populations (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

The Cárcel del Encuentro became intelligible within this punitive-cultural field. It was represented as a solution to criminal governance inside prisons, yet the reported restrictions on visits, communication and rehabilitative material raised questions about whether control had displaced the constitutional aim of social rehabilitation (Davis, 2003; Liebling, 2004).

Social anthropology adds that suffering is never only biological; it is culturally interpreted, politically distributed and institutionally organized. Tuberculosis in prisons therefore communicates more than infection: it reveals the material conditions under which certain lives are rendered less grievable and less publicly protected (Kleinman et al., 1997; Farmer, 2004).

2.4 Structural violence, tuberculosis and prison health

Structural violence refers to the social arrangements that place individuals and populations in harm's way by constraining their access to health, dignity and life chances. In prisons, tuberculosis becomes a

diagnostic sign of structural violence when preventable disease spreads through overcrowding, malnutrition, weak medical care or restricted continuity of treatment (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004).

The World Health Organization has emphasized that prisons can intensify airborne disease transmission through infrastructure, overcrowding, movement of prisoners, poor ventilation, weak nutrition and inadequate medical access. Therefore, a prison tuberculosis alert is never reducible to individual pathology; it is a relational event connecting public health, justice and governance (World Health Organization, 2023; Nyasulu et al., 2025).

The Nelson Mandela Rules require that imprisonment respect human dignity and that health services in prisons be organized in relation to public health systems. From this standpoint, denial of an "epidemic" cannot exhaust state responsibility; the relevant question is whether prevention, diagnosis, treatment, monitoring, nutrition, ventilation and continuity of care are guaranteed (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; Liebling, 2004).

Ecuadorian constitutional law further intensifies this obligation. Article 51 recognizes the rights of persons deprived of liberty not to be subjected to isolation as disciplinary punishment, to communicate with relatives and legal professionals, to report treatment before judicial authority and to receive the necessary resources for integral health (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008; Sen, 1999).

2.5 Communication, silence and democratic accountability

Information access is not a secondary issue in prison governance; it is a condition of democratic accountability. When access to prisons is restricted, journalism must triangulate official statements, family committees, medical data and human-rights organizations, while acknowledging uncertainty and resisting sensationalism (Krippendorff, 2018; Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023).

Ecuadorian journalists work in a difficult environment shaped by threats and pressures. Reporters Without Borders documented death threats against journalists in Ecuador in early 2026, while Periodistas Sin Cadenas has described prison coverage as urgent and challenging because of access barriers and security risks (Cottle, 2006; Reporters Without Borders, 2026).

The prison crisis thus required a dialogue between critical realism, media framing, anthropology of suffering and political sociology of punishment. This dialogue made it possible to analyze not only what media said but what social structures had to exist for those statements to become necessary, disputed or silenced (Bhaskar, 1979; Fairclough, 2010; Farmer, 2004).

The central theoretical proposition was that Ecuadorian digital media coverage of the Cárcel del Encuentro revealed a fractured public reality: the empirical reality of news events, the actual reality of illness and confinement and the real mechanisms of punitive governance, structural abandonment and contested dignity. This proposition guided the methodology and interpretation of results (Sayer, 2000; Danermark et al., 2002).

3 Methodology

The study used a qualitative content analysis design, understood as a systematic and interpretive procedure for identifying meanings, patterns, frames and latent categories in textual and visual materials. This design was appropriate because the object of study was not only the frequency of coverage but the moral, political and symbolic construction of prison reality (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The epistemological orientation was critical realist. The analysis treated media texts as empirical traces of real events and deeper mechanisms rather than as self-contained discourses. This allowed the study to ask what the coverage revealed, what it concealed and what social conditions made both revelation and concealment possible (Bhaskar, 1979; Maxwell, 2012).

The temporal delimitation covered digital publications from 2025 and 2026, with special emphasis on the period from November 2025, when the prison began operating, through May 2026, when death, tuberculosis and transfer reports intensified. The retrieval and verification of digital sources were conducted up to June 1, 2026 (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

The spatial and institutional unit of analysis was the Cárcel del Encuentro, officially CPL Santa Elena No. 1, located in Santa Elena. The media corpus also included broader reports on Ecuador's prison tuberculosis crisis when they contextualized the case through national public-health or prison-governance data (Sayer, 2000; Farmer, 2004).

The media outlets were selected purposively, prioritizing Ecuadorian digital outlets that had published retrievable coverage related to the Cárcel del Encuentro, tuberculosis, prisoner deaths, transfers, visits, prison conditions or official statements. The core corpus included Ecuavisa, Primicias, Teleamazonas, Vistazo, El Universo, La Hora, El Mercurio, El Telégrafo, Radio Pichincha, Expreso and El Comercio (Patton, 2015; Schreier, 2012).

Outlets named in the broader monitoring list but not directly recoverable through indexed, specific and verifiable coverage of the tuberculosis episode—such as some television pages or investigative portals for this precise event—were not artificially attributed. This decision followed qualitative reliability principles: absence of retrievable evidence was treated as a limitation, not as permission to invent coverage (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Krippendorff, 2018).

The sampling strategy was theoretical and purposive. Items were included when they contained at least one of the following: direct mention of the Cárcel del Encuentro; tuberculosis or prison health; prisoner death; prisoner transfer; visits or legal access restrictions; family committee testimony; official denial; or comparison with maximum-security models (Schreier, 2012; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

The primary technique was qualitative content analysis supported by frame analysis. Each article was coded for manifest content—headline, date, outlet, quoted actors, explicit claims—and latent content—moral evaluation, implied causality, symbolic positioning and interpretive horizon (Entman, 1993; Mayring, 2014).

The analysis used eight variables: transmitted messages, protagonists exposed, adjectivization of information, news positioning, follow-up, exposed images, headline formulation and interpretation of the news. These variables operationalized the relationship between journalistic form and social meaning (Fairclough, 1995; Krippendorff, 2018) (see Table 1).

The transmitted-message variable identified whether the dominant communicative content emphasized security control, humanitarian emergency, official denial, public-health risk, legal rights, family testimony or rehabilitation absence. This variable was grounded in framing theory because messages do not merely transmit information; they organize interpretive salience (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

The protagonists-exposed variable identified which actors were given narrative centrality: ministers, SNAI, Ministry of Health,

TABLE 1 Methodological synthesis.

Component	Description
Research approach	Qualitative, interpretive, critical realist
Design	Qualitative content analysis with frame analysis
Corpus	Digital news items on Cárcel del Encuentro, tuberculosis, deaths, transfers, visits, official statements and prison health
Period	2025–2026, verified until June 1, 2026
Unit of analysis	Digital news article, headline, image, quoted actor and interpretive frame
Main variables	Messages, protagonists, adjectivization, positioning, follow-up, images, headlines, interpretation
Analytical aim	To identify how media visibility related to deeper social mechanisms

TABLE 2 Coding matrix.

Variable	Analytical question	Possible codes
Messages	What central meaning was transmitted?	Control, denial, alarm, rights, health, rehabilitation
Protagonists	Who spoke or was made visible?	State, families, prisoners, experts, lawyers, NGOs
Adjectivization	What evaluative language was used?	Preventive, severe, natural, infectious, maximum-security
Positioning	Where was the story placed interpretively?	Security, health, politics, human rights
Follow-up	Did the outlet continue the story?	Episodic, sequential, contextual, investigative
Images	What visual evidence or symbolism appeared?	Infrastructure, protest, official image, medical concern
Headlines	How was salience produced?	Death, denial, transfer, crisis, control
Interpretation	What explanation was implied?	Incident, crisis, state control, structural abandonment

prisoners, relatives, lawyers, mayors or former officials, human-rights organizations, medical specialists or anonymous official sources. This variable was important because protagonist selection distributes symbolic authority (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1995).

The adjectivization variable examined evaluative terms such as "maximum security," "preventive," "epidemiological," "deteriorated," "severe," "silent," "crisis," "natural," or "infectocontagious." These terms were treated as discursive indicators of moral orientation and institutional positioning (Fairclough, 2010; Hall et al., 1978). The news-positioning variable identified whether the issue was treated as a security story, health story, human-rights story, political story, institutional clarification or public accountability problem. This allowed the study to distinguish episodic coverage from structural coverage (Iyengar, 1991; Entman, 1993).

The follow-up variable examined whether outlets returned to the issue after the initial event, connected it to prior deaths, contextualized tuberculosis nationally or contrasted official statements with family and human-rights claims. Follow-up was treated as an indicator of journalistic depth and democratic responsibility (Cottle, 2006; Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023). The images variable examined whether visual framing emphasized prison infrastructure, official security, family protest, prisoner vulnerability, ambulances or institutional logos. Visuality matters because images can either humanize suffering or reinforce distance, spectacle and securitized abstraction (Chouliaraki, 2006; Rose, 2016).

The headlines variable examined the syntactic and semantic construction of public attention. Headlines were coded for verbs, agency, certainty and attribution: for example, whether they stated that a prisoner died, that SNAI denied an outbreak, that the government discarded an epidemic or that family committees warned of contagion (Bell, 1991; Fairclough, 1995).

The interpretation variable identified the deeper explanatory orientation: isolated medical incident, state-managed prevention, health crisis, rights violation, political dispute, prison governance failure or humanitarian emergency. This variable connected media analysis to critical realist: the inference from observed patterns to possible generative mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002; Bhaskar, 1979) (see Table 2).

This is the section that concludes the manuscript. To strengthen credibility, the analysis triangulated outlet reports, official statements reported by media, human-rights positions, constitutional provisions and public-health standards. Triangulation did not eliminate uncertainty, but it reduced dependence on a single authority and supported a more critical realist account of contested reality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2012).

The study recognized ethical limitations. It did not interview prisoners or relatives directly, did not access medical records and did not enter the prison. Therefore, the findings refer to media construction and publicly reported facts, not to an independent forensic determination of medical causality (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). The methodological contribution was the articulation of content analysis with critical realist. Instead of stopping at "what the media said," the study asked what kind of penal, political, cultural and communicational order made these media patterns possible and what emancipatory alternatives they suggested (Bhaskar, 1993; Sayer, 2000).

The media corpus was composed only of retrievable digital publications with identifiable title, date, outlet and content directly related to the Cárcel del Encuentro, prison tuberculosis, prisoner deaths, health-related transfers, official denials, family committees or prison-rights debates. Although several Ecuadorian outlets were initially considered for monitoring, no article was included in the corpus unless its existence and relevance could be verified through a specific digital record. Therefore, outlets without a verified item on the specific object of study were not cited as empirical sources.

4 Results

The corpus showed that Ecuadorian digital media gave increasing visibility to the Cárcel del Encuentro between November 2025 and May 2026, moving from an initial infrastructure-security narrative toward a more complex humanitarian, sanitary, legal and human-rights-oriented interpretation.

In the first stage, the prison was framed as a symbol of state capacity, maximum-security control and executive firmness; however, by May 2026, media attention had shifted toward prisoner deaths, tuberculosis diagnoses, transfers of sick inmates, institutional denial and family-based denunciations. This transition revealed how a prison initially presented as an emblem of punitive order became a contested public arena where security, dignity, health and state responsibility were discursively disputed (Entman, 1993; Garland, 2001; Reuters, 2025a; El Comercio, 2025a; Primicias, 2026a).

The earliest dominant frame emphasized maximum security, state authority and the neutralization of high-risk prisoners. Reuters reported that Ecuador transferred approximately 300 high-risk inmates to the new maximum-security Cárcel del Encuentro in Santa Elena, including former Vice President Jorge Glas, as part of President Daniel Noboa's strategy to confront criminal organizations operating from prisons (Reuters, 2025a).

Similarly, El Comercio described the facility as a maximum-security center designed to house hundreds of inmates under strict control conditions, reinforcing the institutional narrative of order, discipline and technological surveillance (El Comercio, 2025a, 2025b). This frame can be read through Foucault's (1977) understanding of the prison as a disciplinary apparatus and Wacquant's (2009) critique of punitive state power.

In that initial stage, the prison was not primarily narrated as a place of social rehabilitation but as a security infrastructure created to contain criminal command structures. The media emphasis on transfer, danger, control, uniforms, guards and architectural capacity gave symbolic centrality to the State's capacity to isolate and govern bodies classified as threatening.

Such coverage corresponded to what Garland (2001) conceptualized as the culture of control, in which criminal justice institutions become public signs of governmental resolve. Thus, the first interpretive layer of the corpus associated the Cárcel del Encuentro with the recovery of sovereign authority in a context of prison violence and organized crime (Reuters, 2025a; El Comercio, 2025a).

Primicias later displaced the purely security-centered reading by placing the prison within the debate on the "Bukele model," emphasizing restrictions on family visits, severe control and the absence of conventional forms of communication with the outside world. The article reported statements by the Interior Minister, John Reimberg, who described prisoners' limited perception of daylight and confirmed that neither relatives nor lawyers could enter the prison physically, although lawyers maintained telematic contact with clients (Primicias, 2026a). This report opened a rights-oriented interpretive field by connecting the prison regime to constitutional guarantees, international standards and the broader question of whether maximum security can be pursued without undermining human dignity (Goffman, 1961; Garland, 2001).

In this coverage, the protagonists were mainly state authorities, human-rights voices, relatives and prisoners represented as governed bodies rather than speaking subjects. The prisoners rarely appeared as direct narrators of their own conditions; instead, their existence was mediated through official statements, family testimony, legal concerns or descriptions of bodily confinement.

This absence of the prisoner's direct voice is analytically relevant because it reproduced the prison as a communicationally closed institution, where the confined body becomes the object of public discourse but seldom the subject of enunciation (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1995; Goffman, 1961; Primicias, 2026d).

Ecuavisa's report of May 19, 2026 marked a decisive shift toward the humanitarian-health frame. The outlet reported that Michael Bautista Angulo died on May 15 in the Cárcel del Encuentro and that the medical report mentioned respiratory failure, chronic malnutrition and pulmonary tuberculosis (Arias, 2026).

The same article also stated that the Ministry of the Interior denied the existence of a tuberculosis outbreak in the prison, thereby placing medical evidence, family concern and official denial within the same narrative space (Arias, 2026). This coverage transformed the prison from a security object into a site of embodied suffering, where illness became a sign of structural vulnerability (Farmer, 2004; Kleinman et al., 1997).

The Ecuavisa report also introduced a dual authority structure. On one side, the State spoke through the language of control, monitoring and denial of an epidemiological outbreak; on the other, family committees and humanitarian voices spoke through the language of bodily deterioration, contagion risk, malnutrition and hidden suffering (Arias, 2026).

This coexistence of competing voices exposed the epistemic conflict that characterizes prison reporting in contexts of restricted access: the official institution seeks to stabilize meaning, while families and civil society attempt to make visible what the closed institution renders opaque (Chouliaraki, 2006; Hall et al., 1978).

Primicias also foregrounded medical uncertainty and institutional opacity. In its May 15, 2026 coverage, the outlet reported that official sources confirmed that a prisoner had tuberculosis and had shared a cell with three other prisoners with the same disease, while the formal cause of death still required confirmation (Primicias, 2026b).

The article's relevance lies not only in the reported death but in its careful attribution of uncertainty: it made visible the difficulty of establishing medical causality in a closed penitentiary environment where journalistic verification depends on partial official information, family accounts and delayed institutional clarification (Entman, 1993; Krippendorff, 2018).

Primicias subsequently expanded the story on May 26, 2026 by reporting the transfer of at least 35 prisoners diagnosed with tuberculosis from the Cárcel del Encuentro to the Guayas Regional Prison, based on alerts issued by the Committee of Families for a Dignified Life in Prisons (Primicias, 2026c). Its headline framed the transfer as an "alert" rather than a routine administrative movement, thereby suggesting that prisoner displacement could be interpreted as evidence of a broader health risk. This coverage moved the interpretive frame from isolated death toward systemic public-health concern, connecting prison movement, institutional silence and the possibility of contagion (Cottle, 2006; Farmer, 2004).

Teleamazonas offered a contrasting frame by reporting that Minister Nataly Morillo confirmed the transfer of prisoners but denied the existence of a tuberculosis epidemic, describing the measure as precautionary (Armijo, 2026). This article gave prominence to official reassurance and presented the government's interpretation that the transfer did not constitute evidence of a generalized sanitary crisis.

In framing terms, Teleamazonas privileged the State's stabilizing discourse, emphasizing prevention, legality and institutional management over the humanitarian alarm expressed by family committees (Armijo, 2026; Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1995).

El Universo similarly foregrounded the institutional denial frame. Its May 2026 report stated that SNAI ruled out an epidemiological tuberculosis outbreak in the Cárcel del Encuentro and claimed that permanent health-surveillance actions were being conducted in

coordination with the Ministry of Public Health (El Universo, 2026). This narrative positioned the State as a technical and administrative actor capable of monitoring prison health risks. However, from a critical realist perspective, the denial of an "outbreak" did not exhaust the analytical problem, because the deeper issue concerned the structural conditions of health, ventilation, nutrition, access and transparency inside the prison (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000).

Vistazo reproduced and amplified the official denial frame when it reported that Interior Minister John Reimberg stated that a third death in the Cárcel del Encuentro had "nothing to do with tuberculosis," while SNAI attributed the death to pancreatitis. Nevertheless, the article also connected that death to the broader sequence of fatalities registered since the prison's inauguration, which gave the report a minimal but important follow-up dimension. In this sense, Vistazo's coverage combined institutional clarification with cumulative chronology, allowing the issue to remain within the public agenda even when official discourse attempted to close the controversy (Goffman, 1974; Krippendorff, 2018; Hidalgo, 2026; La Hora, 2026b; Muñoz, 2026).

El Mercurio followed a similar pattern by reporting SNAI's denial of a tuberculosis outbreak and the institutional claim that the prisoner had died from pancreatitis. At the same time, the outlet noted that the deceased was the third person to die inside the facility since its inauguration, introducing a chronological element that prevented the case from being fully reduced to an isolated medical event (El Mercurio, 2026). This restrained but relevant follow-up helped situate the event within a sequence of deaths, thereby producing a more complex narrative than a simple reproduction of the official communiqué (Cottle, 2006; Neuendorf, 2017).

La Hora emphasized institutional silence and public-health concern. The outlet reported that family committees had warned that around 30 prisoners could have tuberculosis in the Santa Elena prison and that SNAI had not responded to press questions at the time of publication (La Hora, 2026a). This coverage strengthened the accountability frame by treating access to information as part of the crisis itself. The article did not merely report disease; it reported silence, delay and the absence of transparent institutional response, which are central indicators in the journalistic construction of public accountability (Fairclough, 1995; Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023).

Radio Pichincha contextualized the issue nationally by reporting that one in three tuberculosis cases in Ecuador was concentrated in prisons, based on official figures from the Ministry of Public Health for the first quarter of 2026. The outlet stated that 612 of 1,837 confirmed tuberculosis cases corresponded to persons deprived of liberty, equivalent to 33.3% of the national total (Fonseca, 2026). This frame expanded the story from the Cárcel del Encuentro to the Ecuadorian penitentiary system as a whole, treating tuberculosis not as an isolated prison episode but as a public-health problem embedded in confinement conditions (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969).

Primicias deepened the national data frame by reporting that the Ministry of Health had acknowledged discrepancies in its own tuberculosis data and that prisons concentrated a significant proportion of national infections. The article reported official figures for tuberculosis deaths in 2025 and identified prisoners as a relevant population within the national epidemiological picture (Primicias, 2026e). This data-oriented frame complicated both alarmist and denialist narratives: it did not rely exclusively on family testimony, nor did it accept official reassurance as sufficient; rather, it located the crisis within an unstable statistical field where public-health numbers themselves became politically significant (Krippendorff, 2018; Sayer, 2000).

El Telégrafo also reproduced the SNAI denial frame, reporting that the institution ruled out a tuberculosis outbreak in the Cárcel del Encuentro, also known as CPL Santa Elena No. 1 (El Telégrafo, 2026). The relevance of this coverage lies in how the state-centered narrative circulated across multiple outlets, consolidating the official interpretation that there was no epidemiological outbreak. This repetition shows how institutional communication can structure the media agenda, especially when access to the prison is restricted and journalists must depend on official statements to reconstruct events (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1995).

Expreso, by contrast, placed stronger emphasis on the public-health causality frame. The outlet reported that prisoners with tuberculosis had been transferred from Santa Elena to Guayaquil and contextualized the event with national tuberculosis figures and expert warnings regarding overcrowding, contagion and penitentiary vulnerability (Echeverría Vásquez, 2026). By linking the Cárcel del Encuentro to broader epidemiological and structural conditions, Expreso treated the transfer not merely as an administrative measure but as a symptom of a wider sanitary crisis in Ecuadorian prisons (Farmer, 2004; World Health Organization, 2023).

The visual grammar of the coverage varied across outlets and reinforced the discursive tension between security and suffering. Some reports relied on official or referential images of prisons, guards, institutional infrastructure and state control, while others used images of family protests, deteriorated bodies, ambulances or relatives outside prison facilities (Arias, 2026; La Hora, 2026a; Primicias, 2026d). This contrast revealed a symbolic struggle between two ways of seeing the prison: as a technological apparatus of order or as a hidden space of bodily vulnerability. In visual-methodological terms, such images did not merely accompany the news; they participated in the production of public meaning (Chouliaraki, 2006; Rose, 2016).

Across the corpus, the most visible protagonists were state authorities, SNAI, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Government, the Ministry of Public Health, family committees, human-rights advocates and journalists. Prisoners themselves rarely appeared as direct voices, except through medical reports, family accounts, images or institutional descriptions (Arias, 2026; Primicias, 2026b; La Hora, 2026a).

This absence was analytically significant because it reproduced the prison as a site where the confined body is publicly discussed but seldom publicly heard. The prisoner appeared as a legal category, a diseased body, a security risk or a humanitarian concern, but rarely as a speaking subject with agency (Goffman, 1961; Spivak, 1988).

The main result was that Ecuadorian digital media did not construct a single narrative about the Cárcel del Encuentro; rather, they produced a contested field of interpretation. The same prison appeared simultaneously as a symbol of state firmness, a site of official reassurance, a possible locus of epidemiological risk, a human-rights concern and a symptom of the failure of rehabilitation.

From a critical realist perspective, these frames should be read as partial empirical windows into deeper mechanisms: punitive governance, institutional opacity, precarious prison health, restricted family oversight and the social dehumanization of incarcerated bodies (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000; Reuters, 2025a; Arias, 2026; Primicias, 2026c; Teleamazonas, 2026; La Hora, 2026a).

The results suggest that the media dispute around tuberculosis and deaths in the Cárcel del Encuentro was not merely a dispute over facts, but a dispute over the moral interpretation of punishment. When official sources emphasized the absence of an outbreak, they

framed the matter as administratively controlled; when family committees and certain media emphasized deterioration, contagion and silence, they framed the matter as humanitarian abandonment.

The communicational field thus exposed the central contradiction of Ecuadorian prison policy: the State sought to recover order through maximum security, but the media corpus revealed that security without health, rehabilitation, transparency and dignity remains socially fragile and ethically incomplete (Farmer, 2004; Freire, 1970; Garland, 2001; Nussbaum, 2011) (see Table 3).

5 Discussion

5.1 Between empirical visibility and real mechanisms

The findings confirmed a critical realist proposition: media visibility is necessary but insufficient for social explanation. The deaths, transfers and official denials were empirically visible, yet the deeper mechanisms—punitive governance, restricted transparency, weak health infrastructure and social abandonment—required retroduction beyond the headline (Bhaskar, 1979; Danermark et al., 2002; Reuters, 2026).

The official denial frame performed a stabilizing function. By insisting that there was no epidemic or outbreak, state voices attempted to contain the crisis within administratively manageable language (La Hora, 2025; Reuters, 2025b; Vélez, 2025). However, critical realism asks not only whether a label is technically accurate but what causal powers and institutional absences are masked when language narrows reality (Sayer, 2000; Fairclough, 1995).

The humanitarian alarm frame challenged official containment by foregrounding diseased bodies, family fear, transfers and testimonies of deterioration. This frame corresponded to what Farmer called structural violence: harm that appears as illness but is produced by social arrangements, institutional neglect and unequal exposure to risk (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969).

The contrast between official statements and family testimony showed that prison reality was epistemically fractured. The State claimed surveillance and control; relatives claimed suffering and opacity; journalists attempted to mediate between both under access constraints. This fracture was not accidental but produced by the prison's institutional closure (Goffman, 1961; Bourdieu, 1991).

TABLE 3 Mapping of selected digital coverage.

Outlet	Main focus	Dominant frame
Ecuavisa	Prisoner death, medical report, TB, official denial	Humanitarian alarm vs. official denial
Primicias	Prisoner death, TB, shared cell	Medical uncertainty and prison opacity
Primicias	Transfer of 35 prisoners with TB	Public-health alert and family testimony
Primicias	Restrictions, "Bukele model," no physical visits	Punitive control and rights concern
Teleamazonas	Government confirms transfers, denies epidemic	Official reassurance/ prevention
El Universo	SNAI denies outbreak, cites monitoring	Institutional denial and health surveillance
La Hora	Family alert, SNAI silence, press questions	Accountability and information access
Vistazo	Minister denies TB link in third death	Official denial with cumulative follow-up
El Mercurio	SNAI denies outbreak, pancreatitis claim	Institutional clarification
El Telégrafo	SNAI denies TB outbreak	State-centered clarification
Radio Pichincha	National prison TB data	Structural public-health frame
Expreso	Transfers and TB expansion	Crisis and overcrowding warning

5.2 Securitization and the cultural production of indifference

The prison's maximum-security symbolism supported a securitized reading of incarcerated persons as risks to be neutralized. This aligns with Garland's account of punitive governance and Wacquant's argument that penal institutions manage social insecurity through confinement and symbolic severity (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

Yet securitization becomes ethically dangerous when it converts suffering into background noise. If the prisoner is imagined only as a threat, then disease, isolation and family separation can be interpreted as acceptable collateral conditions of order. The media that foregrounded health and rights interrupted this cultural drift toward indifference (Davis, 2003; Chouliaraki, 2006).

The reported restriction of physical visits was especially significant because family contact is not only emotional support; it is a social mechanism of oversight, nutrition, legal defense and reintegration. The Ecuadorian Constitution recognizes communication and visits with relatives and legal professionals, which means that the issue is juridical as well as humanitarian (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). The absence or limitation of rehabilitative materials, education and meaningful activity—reported in relation to the prison regime—must be read through the sociology of total institutions. Goffman showed that such institutions reorganize the self through deprivation of autonomy, while Freire reminds that education is a practice of humanization, not an accessory to discipline (Goffman, 1961; Freire, 1970).

5.3 Tuberculosis as public-health fact and moral sign

Tuberculosis functioned in the coverage as both medical diagnosis and moral sign. The disease exposed the permeability of prison walls: what occurs inside prisons is not separate from society, because infection, public health, legal responsibility and democratic legitimacy circulate across institutional boundaries (World Health Organization, 2023; Farmer, 2004; Ochoa, 2026).

The national data frame complicated the government's local denial. Even if authorities denied a specific outbreak at the Cárcel del Encuentro, broader reports showed a prison-related tuberculosis crisis in Ecuador. Thus, the question was not merely whether one prison had an outbreak but whether the penitentiary system generated conditions

for preventable disease (Sayer, 2000; Farmer, 2004). The transfer of prisoners with tuberculosis raised a critical realist issue of causal displacement. Moving diseased bodies from one institution to another may reduce immediate visibility in one prison while reproducing risk elsewhere. Without diagnosis, treatment continuity, nutrition, ventilation and transparent monitoring, transfer can become symbolic management rather than structural solution (World Health Organization 2023; Galtung, 1969).

The media's use of family committee images and testimony challenged the abstraction of official categories. Instead of "PPL" as an administrative label, the humanitarian frame reintroduced sons, relatives, bodies and lives. Anthropology of suffering shows that such rehumanization is politically important because bureaucracy often erases pain through neutral categories (Kleinman et al., 1997; Das, 2007).

5.4 Journalism, opacity and the ethics of follow-up

The results showed that follow-up was uneven. Some outlets returned to the issue through subsequent deaths, transfers, denials and national data, while others reproduced single-event stories. From an accountability perspective, episodic journalism risks producing momentary outrage without structural understanding (Iyengar, 1991; Cottle, 2006).

The strongest coverage connected the Cárcel del Encuentro to wider penitentiary conditions, national tuberculosis figures, constitutional rights and family testimony. This was closer to contextual journalism, which Periodistas Sin Cadenas recommends for prison coverage because it avoids spectacle and integrates human-rights, security and social realities (Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023; Fairclough, 2010).

The weakness of the coverage was the limited direct voice of prisoners. This absence was not simply an editorial choice; it was structurally produced by prison restrictions, security protocols and the risks of covering organized crime and state institutions in Ecuador. RSF's warnings about threats to journalists reinforced the fragility of investigative conditions (Spivak, 1988; Cottle, 2006).

Journalistic mediation remained decisive. In contexts of closure, journalism can become a substitute public eye, but only if it resists both sensationalism and uncritical reproduction of official language. A critical realist media ethics requires humility about uncertainty and courage in identifying structural mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1993; Krippendorff, 2018).

5.5 Rehabilitation, dignity and education as structural prevention

The most important normative finding was that security without rehabilitation is sociologically incomplete. A prison that only isolates may interrupt immediate command networks, but it does not transform the social mechanisms that produce criminal recruitment, violence, disease and institutional recidivism (Garland, 2001; Davis, 2003).

Rehabilitation must be understood as a material policy, not a decorative discourse. It requires education, health care, psychological support, legal access, family contact, work, reading, cultural activity and preparation for reintegration. Without these mechanisms, prison may become a school of despair rather than a site of social repair (Freire, 1970; Liebling, 2004).

The broader Ecuadorian lesson is pedagogical and preventive. Children and adolescents must encounter a society that offers schools, teachers, cultural belonging, sport, art, digital literacy, family support and dignified opportunities, so that criminal groups do not appear as the only available path to recognition, income or identity (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

The discussion returns to critical realism's emancipatory ambition: to understand the world in order to change it. The Cárcel del Encuentro coverage revealed that Ecuador does not only face a prison-management problem; it faces a moral, educational, public-health and democratic problem concerning which lives are protected, narrated, repaired or abandoned (Bhaskar, 1993; Farmer, 2004).

6 Conclusion

This article answered the research question by showing that Ecuadorian digital media framed the Cárcel del Encuentro through a contested set of narratives: maximum-security control, official denial, humanitarian alarm, public-health risk, family testimony and rights-based accountability. These frames did not simply describe the prison; they struggled over the meaning of state responsibility (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1995).

The objective of analyzing visibility, protagonists, adjectivization, positioning, follow-up, images, headlines and interpretation was fulfilled through a qualitative content analysis of retrievable digital coverage. The results showed that the issue gained visibility mainly when death, tuberculosis, transfer or political detention made the prison publicly newsworthy (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). The main protagonists were state authorities, SNAI, ministers, family committees, human-rights actors and journalists. Prisoners appeared mostly as objects of institutional discourse or humanitarian concern, not as direct speaking subjects. This absence reflected the communicational structure of imprisonment itself (Goffman, 1961; Spivak, 1988).

The most recurrent adjectivizations opposed two semantic fields: the official field of "preventive," "controlled," "no outbreak," and "maximum security," and the humanitarian field of "crisis," "deterioration," "tuberculosis," "silence," and "alarm." This semantic conflict revealed the political struggle over reality (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 2010).

The positioning of the news was not uniform. Some outlets treated the issue as security governance, others as public health, others as human rights and others as institutional clarification. The most analytically valuable coverage connected these dimensions instead of isolating them (Cottle, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2006).

Follow-up was strongest in outlets that linked the Cárcel del Encuentro to national tuberculosis figures, prior deaths, family committee warnings and official denials. This continuity allowed the issue to become more than an isolated scandal and helped disclose its structural character (Iyengar, 1991; Krippendorff, 2018).

The images exposed a symbolic division between prison as infrastructure and prisoner as vulnerable body. Official imagery emphasized order, walls, surveillance and modernity; humanitarian imagery emphasized families, illness, protest and bodily fragility. This visual dispute mattered because public compassion is often mediated through images (Rose, 2016; Chouliaraki, 2006).

The theoretical contribution of the article is the critical realist interpretation of the media corpus. The empirical event was not only

a death, transfer or denial; the real issue was the generative mechanism that made preventable disease, restricted oversight and rehabilitative absence possible inside a democratic constitutional order (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000).

The sociological finding is that the Cárcel del Encuentro condensed Ecuador's punitive contradiction. The State sought to recover control from criminal organizations, yet control without dignity risks reproducing another form of violence: institutional abandonment under the language of order (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

The anthropological finding is that prison suffering became publicly intelligible only when families, journalists and human-rights actors translated hidden bodily deterioration into social meaning. Disease became testimony; testimony became media visibility; and media visibility became a dispute over what Ecuador is willing to see (Kleinman et al., 1997; Das, 2007).

The public-health conclusion is clear: tuberculosis in prisons cannot be treated as an isolated medical inconvenience. It is an institutional indicator requiring screening, treatment continuity, nutrition, ventilation, transparent data, independent oversight and coordination between prison and public-health systems (World Health Organization, 2023; Farmer, 2004).

The legal conclusion is equally clear: persons deprived of liberty retain constitutional rights. Communication with families and legal professionals, access to health care and protection from degrading treatment are not privileges granted by political convenience; they are guarantees of a constitutional democracy (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008; Nussbaum, 2011).

The media conclusion is that journalism must continue monitoring prisons with rigor, caution and human-rights sensitivity. In closed institutions, silence benefits impunity. However, coverage must avoid sensationalism and must connect individual events to structural causes, public policy and institutional accountability (Periodistas Sin Cadenas, 2023; Cottle, 2006).

The political conclusion is that Ecuador cannot build sustainable security by isolating people in conditions that deny education, health, family contact and rehabilitation. A prison policy that treats human beings only as risks may produce temporary control but not democratic peace (Davis, 2003; Liebling, 2004).

The ethical conclusion is that dignity is indivisible. A society that denies dignity to prisoners weakens the moral foundation through which it protects victims, families, children, communities and democratic institutions. Human dignity is not the opposite of security; it is the condition that prevents security from becoming cruelty (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

The pedagogical conclusion is decisive. Ecuador's future will not be transformed only through prisons but through schools, teachers, families, neighborhoods, libraries, sports, arts, science and dignified public opportunities. Education is the deepest prevention policy because it gives children symbolic, emotional and material alternatives to criminal recruitment (Freire, 1970; Sen, 1999).

The study calls for a national rehabilitation agenda that includes literacy, secondary and higher education pathways, vocational training, mental-health support, restorative practices, family reintegration and post-release accompaniment. Without these mechanisms, imprisonment will continue to recycle exclusion rather than repair social life (Freire, 1970; Nussbaum, 2011).

The article also calls for independent prison monitoring, transparent epidemiological reporting, access for legal professionals, carefully regulated family contact and public accountability mechanisms. These measures are not naïve humanitarian gestures; they are rational conditions for health, security, rights and institutional legitimacy (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; World Health Organization, 2023).

The task is not only to describe what happened but to transform the mechanisms that made it possible. Ecuador must move from punitive spectacle toward social repair, from institutional opacity toward democratic oversight and from abandonment toward rehabilitation (Bhaskar, 1993; Sayer, 2000). This final conclusion is hopeful but demanding: yes, it is possible to prevent future generations from aspiring to criminal belonging, but only if the State, schools, families, media and civil society defend education, dignity and life as the true foundations of security. A prison system that rehabilitates and a school system that dignifies are not separate projects; together, they are the architecture of a country that chooses humanity over abandonment (Freire, 1970; Farmer, 2004).

6.1 Punitive populism, penal legality and the limits of carceral spectacle in Ecuador

Punitive populism does not refer simply to the existence of punishment, imprisonment or legitimate state coercion. Rather, it designates a political-communicational logic through which penal severity is publicly performed as an immediate response to social fear, institutional crisis and demands for order, while the more complex legal, social, public-health and rehabilitative dimensions of punishment are displaced to the margins of public debate (Bottoms, 1995; Pratt, 2007; Roberts et al., 2003). In this sense, the Cárcel del Encuentro became a privileged empirical case for observing how punitive power is made visible: the transfer of "dangerous" inmates, the architectural symbolism of maximum security, the restriction of physical access, the official language of control and the media circulation of prison firmness collectively transformed imprisonment into a public performance of sovereign authority.

This interpretation is consistent with the results of the qualitative content analysis. The earliest coverage framed the prison primarily as an infrastructure of maximum security, discipline and state recovery of control, while later coverage introduced humanitarian, sanitary and rights-based counter frames related to tuberculosis, prisoner deaths, family testimony, restricted visits and institutional opacity. The central point is that punitive populism operates precisely through this asymmetry of visibility: security is spectacularized, while rehabilitation, health care, family contact, due process, prison oversight and reintegration remain less visible, less politically profitable and less narratively immediate. Therefore, the manuscript's argument is not that the Ecuadorian State lacks the authority to confront organized crime or prison violence; rather, it argues that such authority becomes democratically fragile when it is communicated mainly through isolation, neutralization and symbolic severity, without an equally visible commitment to constitutional dignity and social rehabilitation (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

The relevance of this argument becomes clearer when examined in relation to Ecuador's Código Orgánico Integral Penal (2014). Article 1 of the COIP establishes that the Code is intended not only to regulate the punitive power of the State and define criminal offences and procedures, but also to promote the social rehabilitation of sentenced persons and the integral reparation of victims. Article 52 further defines the purposes of punishment in terms of general prevention, the progressive development of the

rights and capacities of convicted persons and victim reparation, while expressly rejecting the idea that punishment should pursue the isolation and neutralization of persons as social beings. This legal framework is decisive for the present analysis because it shows that Ecuadorian penal law itself does not authorize a purely exclusionary, incapacitating or spectacular conception of imprisonment. The COIP recognizes punishment as a legally regulated power that must remain linked to rehabilitation, rights, responsibility and reintegration.

From this standpoint, punitive populism emerges as a contradiction between the normative rationality of the Ecuadorian penal system and the public performance of security observed in the media corpus. When carceral policy is communicated through maximum-security imagery, exceptional restrictions, symbolic transfers and the language of dangerousness, punishment risks being detached from the rehabilitative and rights-based purposes that the COIP formally establishes. The populist dimension lies in the simplification of a structural crisis into a visible act of firmness: the State appears to respond to insecurity by showing confinement, discipline and control, while the deeper mechanisms that produce prison violence—criminal economies, institutional abandonment, public-health deficits, corruption, weak rehabilitation, social exclusion and limited educational opportunity—remain insufficiently addressed (Lacey, 2008; Simon, 2007; Wacquant, 2009).

This does not mean that security is irrelevant or that the State should abandon prison control. On the contrary, the Código Orgánico Integral Penal (2014) presupposes the legitimate regulation of punitive power and the protection of society, victims and incarcerated persons requires effective institutional authority. However, a democratic penal order cannot reduce security to the visual neutralization of bodies. The legal purpose of punishment is distorted when prison policy is converted into a communicational spectacle of severity rather than a structured process of accountability, rehabilitation and reintegration. The media coverage analyzed in this study revealed precisely this tension: official frames emphasized control, denial and prevention, whereas humanitarian and public-health frames exposed disease, silence, family distress and the absence of transparent information. Punitive populism is therefore justified in the article as a generative mechanism because it helps explain why punitive visibility becomes politically central even when the legal order requires social rehabilitation as a substantive goal.

Punitive populism functions as a deeper mechanism connecting discourse, political authority, public fear and institutional practice. Its empirical manifestations are visible in headlines, official statements, security imagery and the symbolic transfer of inmates; its actual effects appear in restrictions, isolation, opacity and the marginalization of prisoner voices; and its real causal force lies in the cultural assumption that social order can be restored by making punishment more visible, more severe and more exclusionary. The Cárcel del Encuentro thus condenses a broader political problem: when the public performance of security becomes more communicatively powerful than the legal mandate of rehabilitation, the prison ceases to be represented as a site of social repair and becomes a stage on which the State dramatizes control (Bhaskar, 1979; Bottoms, 1995; Pratt, 2007).

The research's critique of punitive populism is not external to Ecuadorian criminal law but grounded in its own normative architecture. The Código Orgánico Integral Penal (2014) provides a legal basis for limiting punitive excess because it frames punishment as a regulated state power oriented toward prevention, rights, rehabilitation and reparation. The findings of this study show that media visibility matters because it can either reinforce a punitive common sense centered on fear and exclusion or open a democratic debate about the constitutional and legal purposes of imprisonment. In Ecuador, the challenge is therefore not to choose between security and dignity, but to prevent security from being reduced to punitive spectacle. Sustainable security requires legality, rehabilitation, health care, education, transparent oversight, family contact and institutional accountability. Without these elements, imprisonment may produce public images of order while reproducing the structural conditions of abandonment that the COIP itself seeks to overcome.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

FT: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Investigation. IA: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Validation, Visualization. ST: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Visualization, Validation.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. This research was funded by Universidad Técnica de Machala (Ecuador).

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT 4.0 for academic writing assistance, including language editing, summarization of theoretical concepts and the refinement of citations in accordance with APA 7th edition. All outputs generated by the tool were critically reviewed, verified and revised by the authors to ensure conceptual accuracy, academic integrity and alignment with the study's

objectives. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Arias, E. (2026). Un reo falleció por tuberculosis en la Cárcel del Encuentro, confirmó el Ministerio del Interior Ecuavisa. Available online at: https://www.ecuavisa.com/seguridad/reo-fallecio-tuberculosis-carcel-encuentro-20260519-0077.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Armijo, P. (2026). Gobierno descarta epidemia de tuberculosis en cárcel de El Encuentro Teleamazonas. Available online at: https://www.teleamazonas.com/actualidad/noticias/sociedad/tuberculosis-carcel-encuentro-traslado/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Bell, A. (1991). *The Language of news media*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A realist Theory of Science*. Leeds, UK: Leeds Books.

Bhaskar, R. (1979). *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary human Sciences*. Brighton, UK: Harvester Press.

Bhaskar, R. (1993). *Dialectic: The pulse of Freedom*. London, UK: Verso.

Bottoms, A. E. (1995). "The philosophy and politics of punishment and sentencing," in *The Politics of Sentencing reform*, eds. C. Clarkson and R. Morgan (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 17–49.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media System: Politics and power*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London, UK: SAGE.

Código Orgánico Integral Penal (2014). Registro Oficial Suplemento No. 180, 10 de febrero de 2014, Ecuador.

Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (2022a). *Situación de personas privadas de libertad en Ecuador. Organización de los Estados Americanos*. Washington: CIDH.

Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (2022b). *CIDH presenta informe sobre situación de personas privadas de libertad en Ecuador CIDH*. Washington: CIDH.

Constitución de la República del Ecuador (2008). Registro Oficial No. 449, 20 de octubre de 2008. OAS. Available online at: https://www.oas.org/juridico/pdfs/mesicic4_ecu_const.pdf (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Cottle, S. (2006). *Mediatized conflict: Developments in media and conflict Studies*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Danermark, B., Ekström, M., Jakobsen, L., and Karlsson, J. C. (2002). *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the social Sciences*. London, UK: Routledge.

Das, V. (2007). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

Echeverría Vásquez, G. A. (2026). Crisis en la Cárcel del Encuentro: tuberculosis sigue expandiéndose Expreso. Available online at: https://www.expreso.ec/justicia/crisis-carcel-encuentro-tuberculosis-sigue-expandiendose-283826.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

El Comercio (2025a) Daniel Noboa confirmó el traslado de 300 presos a la Cárcel del Encuentro en Santa Elena El Comercio. Available online at: https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/daniel-noboa-confirmo-traslado-300-presos-carcel-del-encuentro/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

El Comercio (2025b) Así es la Cárcel del Encuentro, el centro penitenciario de máxima seguridad en Santa Elena El Comercio. Available online at: https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/asi-funcionara-carcel-del-encuentro-centro-penitenciario-maxima-seguridad-santa-elena/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

El Mercurio (2026) SNAI descarta brote de tuberculosis en la cárcel del Encuentro, reo murió de pancreatitis El Mercurio. Available online at: https://elmercurio.com.ec/nacional/2026/05/28/snai-descarta-brote-de-tuberculosis-en-la-carcel-del-encuentro-reo-murio-de-pancreatitis/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

El Telégrafo (2026). SNAI descarta brote de tuberculosis en la cárcel del Encuentro y fallecido por esa enfermedad El Telégrafo. Available online at: https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/nacionales/210/snai-descarta-brote-tuberculosis-carcel-del-encuentro-fallecido (Accessed June 1, 2026).

El Universo (2026). SNAI descarta brote epidemiológico de tuberculosis en Cárcel del Encuentro El Universo. Available online at: https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/seguridad/snai-descarta-brote-epidemiologico-de-tuberculosis-en-carcel-del-encuentro-nota/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *J. Commun.* 43, 51–58. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, UK: Routledge.

Farmer, P. (2004). An anthropology of structural violence. *Curr. Anthropol.* 45, 305–325. doi: 10.1086/382250

Fonseca, D. (2026). Uno de cada tres casos de tuberculosis en Ecuador está en las cárceles Radio Pichincha. Available online at: https://www.radiopichincha.com/uno-cada-tres-casos-tuberculosis-ecuador-carceles/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace and peace research. *J. Peace Res.* 6, 167–191. doi: 10.1177/002234336900600301

Garland, D. (2001). *The Culture of Control: Crime and social order in Contemporary Society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social Situation of mental Patients and other Inmates*. Cambridge, MA: Anchor Books.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gorski, P. S. (2013). What is critical realism? And why should you care? *Contemp. Sociol.* 42, 658–670. doi: 10.1177/0094306113499533

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., and Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order*. London, UK: Macmillan.

Hidalgo, K. (2026). No tiene nada que ver con tuberculosis": ministro Reimberg sobre tercer fallecido en la Cárcel del Encuentro. Vistazo. Available online at: https://www.vistazo.com/actualidad/nacional/2026-05-28-tuberculosis-ministro-reimberg-tercer-fallecido-carcel-encuentro-MA11005180 (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Hsieh, H.-F., and Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual. Health Res.* 15, 1277–1288. doi: 10.1177/1049732305276687

Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kleinman, A., Das, V., and Lock, M. (1997). Social suffering. University of California Press.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

La Hora (2025). La Penitenciaría del Litoral vive una crisis sanitaria por casos de tuberculosis?LaHora.Availableonlineat:https://www.lahora.com.ec/seguridad/la-penitenciaria-del-litoral-vive-una-crisis-sanitaria-por-casos-de-tuberculosis-20251216-0042.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

La Hora (2026a). Crisis en las cárceles de Ecuador: SNAI en silencio ante contagios de presos por tuberculosis. La Hora. Available online at: https://www.lahora.com.ec/seguridad/crisis-en-las-carceles-de-ecuador-snai-en-silencio-ante-contagios-de-presos-por-tuberculosis-20260526-0049.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

La Hora (2026b). SNAI confirmó la muerte de un detenido en la cárcel de Santa Elena La Hora. Available online at: https://www.lahora.com.ec/seguridad/snai-confirmo-la-muerte-de-un-detenido-en-la-carcel-de-santa-elena-20260527-0034.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Lacey, N. (2008). *The Prisoners' dilemma: Political Economy and Punishment in Contemporary Democracies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Liebling, A. (2004). *Prisons and their moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison life*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *A realist Approach for Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation, basic Procedures and Software solution*. Klagenfurt, Austria: Beltz.

Muñoz, D. (2026). SNAI descarta brote de tuberculosis en la Cárcel del Encuentro y aclara causa de fallecimiento de reo. Ecuavisa. Available online at: https://www.ecuavisa.com/seguridad/snai-confirma-causa-fallecimiento-reo-20260528-0032.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nyasulu, P. S., Hui, D. S., Mwaba, P., Tamuzi, J. L., Sakala, D. Y., Ntoumi, F., et al. (2025). Global perspectives on tuberculosis in prisons and incarceration centers: risk factors, priority needs, challenges for control and the way forward. *IJID Regions* 14:100621. doi: 10.1016/j.ijregi.2025.100621

Ochoa, M. (2026). Así es la realidad de 2 000 presos con tuberculosis dentro de la Cárcel Regional Guayas. Ecuavisa. Available online at: https://www.ecuavisa.com/seguridad/2000-presos-tuberculosis-carcel-regional-guayas-20260531-0036.html (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Periodistas Sin Cadenas (2023) Cómo debemos cubrir la crisis carcelaria en Ecuador? Esta guía trae algunas respuestas Periodistas Sin Cadenas. Available online at: https://periodistassincadenas.org/guia-crisis-carcelaria-ecuador/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Porpora, D. V. (2015). *Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical realist Approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pratt, J. (2007). *Penal populism*. London, UK: Routledge.

Primicias (2026a). Cárcel del Encuentro emula el "modelo Bukele" de El Salvador, restringiendo visitas y aumentando el control a los presos Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/carcel-encuentro-santa-elena-cecot-bukele-visitas-presos-garantias-constitucionales-115401/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Primicias (2026b). Muere prisionero en la Cárcel del Encuentro en Santa Elena este 15 de mayo de 2026 Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/sucesos/preso-muerte-carcel-encuentro-santa-elena-tuberculosis-15mayo-122885/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Primicias (2026c). El traslado de 35 presos enfermos desde la Cárcel del Encuentro hasta la Regional enciende alerta por tuberculosis Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/sociedad/comite-familiares-denuncia-traslado-presos-enfermos-tuberculosis-carcel-encuentro-regional-guayaquil-123725/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Primicias (2026d). Otro preso muere en la cárcel del Encuentro, en Santa Elena: ¿Qué dice el SNAI? Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/sucesos/preso-muerto-carcel-encuentro-santa-elena-ministerio-interior-123892/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Primicias (2026e). Ministerio de Salud reconoce discrepancias en sus propios datos sobre tuberculosis en Ecuador: Cárceles concentran uno de cada cuatro contagios Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/sociedad/tuberculosis-ministerio-salud-discrepancias-propios-datos-casos-contagios-muertes-carceles-ecuador-123943/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Reporters Without Borders (2026). Ecuador: La escalada de amenazas de muerte contra periodistas expone la inacción de las autoridades Reporters Without Borders. Available online at: https://rsf.org/es/ecuador-la-escalada-de-amenazas-de-muerte-contra-periodistas-expone-la-inacci%C3%B3n-de-las-autoridades (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Reuters (2025a). Ecuador Transfers 300 high-risk Inmates to new maximum-Security Prison Reuters. Available online at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-transfers-300-high-risk-inmates-new-maximum-security-prison-2025-11-10/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Reuters (2025b). Fifteen Inmates die at Ecuador Prison amid Fears of tuberculosis Outbreak Reuters. Available online at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/fifteen-inmates-die-ecuador-prison-amid-fears-tuberculosis-outbreak-2025-12-15/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Reuters (2026). Ecuador Prison Deaths Climb again despite Noboa Security Strategy, data Shows Reuters. Available online at: https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-prison-deaths-climb-again-despite-noboa-security-strategy-data-shows-2026-02-16/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Rivera Rhon, R. (2026). Carceral Capture: Criminal Governance in Ecuador's Prison system Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime. Available online at: https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/carceral-capture-criminal-governance-in-ecuadors-prison-system (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Roberts, J. V., Stalans, L. J., Indermaur, D., and Hough, M. (2003). *Penal Populism and public Opinion: Lessons from five Countries*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies*. London, UK: SAGE.

Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and social Science*. London, UK: SAGE.

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content Analysis in Practice*. London, UK: SAGE.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Simon, J. (2007). *Governing through crime: How the war on crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of fear*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). "Can the subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 271–313.

Teleamazonas (2026). El SNAI confirma una nueva muerte en la cárcel del Encuentro en Santa Elena Teleamazonas. Available online at: https://www.teleamazonas.com/actualidad/noticias/seguridad/ecuador-santa-elena-carcel-encuentro-nueva-muerte/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, fields and Metaphors: Symbolic action in human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

United Nations General Assembly (2015). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules): Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2015 (A/RES/70/175)*. New York: United Nations General Assembly.

Vélez, R. (2025). Ministro del Interior sobre la crisis sanitaria en la Penitenciaría del Litoral: "Tenemos un problema, sí". Primicias. Available online at: https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/ministro-interior-crisis-sanitaria-penitenciaria-litoral-carceles-ecuador-112155/ (Accessed June 1, 2026).

Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The Neoliberal Government of social Insecurity*. Duke University Press.

World Health Organization (2023). *TB in Prisons Global tuberculosis Report 2023: Featured Topics World Health Organization*. Geneva: World Health Organization.