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## Introduction

Cargo theft in transit has become one of the biggest logistics security challenges in Latin America, with sustained increases over the last five years and a troubling evolution toward more **technologically sophisticated methods**. One prominent trend is the **impersonation of drivers and fake transport operators** – criminals posing as legitimate carriers (drivers, freight companies, or even authorities) to seize goods without necessarily resorting to physical force.

Below is a preliminary investigation covering six major countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru). It compiles recent statistics<sup>1</sup>, historical trends (2019–2024), and insights from public agencies (transport and security ministries, police data) as well as private organizations (insurance reports, industry associations, specialized media).

While the focus is on identity impersonation and fraudulent operators, other **cargo theft methods** are also discussed to provide context on their growth and the clear shift toward the methods of interest. A comparative table by country is included, followed by detailed country analyses, and finally overarching conclusions and recommendations.

- **Crime on the rise: from physical to digital**

All major Latin American economies have seen an increase in cargo theft since 2019, driven initially by armed highway gangs and, more recently, by fraud and identity impersonation leveraging technology. The crime has moved “from the asphalt to cyberspace,” shifting from violent hijackings to digital logistics frauds.

- **The rise of identity impersonation**

In recent years, “strategic” thefts (deceptive, non-violent methods) have skyrocketed, including identity fraud. For example, fake drivers picking up shipments with forged documents, or bogus police checkpoints on highways. In the US (pioneer in this trend), theft involving impersonation and cyber tactics increased 1500% since 2022, and Latin America is showing similar patterns.

- **Economic impact and industry pressure**

Cargo theft in transit cause massive losses: estimated at over US \$6,6 billion globally per year (Mexico alone loses over 7 billion Mexican pesos annually); Brazil around reales R\$1,2 billion)<sup>2</sup>. This drives up insurance premiums, disrupts supply chains, and raises logistics costs. Authorities and insurers warn that violence remains widespread (in Mexico ≈84% of theft involve violence) but the new wave of non-violent scams is undermining trust across the logistics chain.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministries of Transport/Security, Police, Insurance reports, Industry Associations, Specialized media.

<sup>2</sup> Industry/Insurance reports: Mexico AMIS (Mexican Insurers' Association, ANTP (National Association of Private Transportation); Brazil: Overhaul, NTC&Logística.

## Regional Trends (2019–2025): From highway bandits to digital criminals

In 2019, cargo theft was already a severe problem in countries like Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, placing them among the most affected worldwide. Traditionally, **armed hijackings of trucks en route** – known as “*piratas del asfalto*” (asphalt pirates) in the Southern Cone – dominated, involving violent vehicle stoppages often via **fake police roadblocks** or **ambushes**. Starting in 2020–2021, several factors altered this landscape:

- **COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021):** Early lockdowns caused a **temporary dip** in highway robberies due to less traffic, but the **e-commerce boom** meant more delivery vehicles on the road (especially last-mile vans), hence more targets. In Argentina, for example, the surge in e-commerce increased goods in transit and **multiplied attacks on urban delivery vehicles**, a modality known as “*piraña*” (piranha) **robberies** on small trucks. This diversified the problem: not only long-haul trucks on highways but also vans in cities became victims.
- **Post-pandemic rebound (2022–2023):** With economic activity resuming, **2022 marked a sharp rebound** in cargo theft in several countries. In Chile, for instance, incidents in the freight sector rose **27% above pre-pandemic levels**, alongside a **450% surge in insurance claims frequency** that year. In Brazil, 2023 saw **17,108 cargo robberies (+4.8% vs. 2022)** per Overhaul’s intelligence center, reinforcing an **upward trajectory** after the economy picked up. Mexico and Argentina also hit record highs by 2023–24 (details per country later).

**Professionalization and technology (2023–2025):** Criminal gangs have become more organized and **technologically savvy**. While traditional violent heists continue, new methods have rapidly emerged:

- **Identity impersonation and digital fraud:** Criminals **pose as legitimate transport operators** to steal cargo **without armed confrontation**. Examples:
  - In 2025 in Mexico, a gang **forged driver credentials, websites, and GPS signals** to divert two truckloads of tequila (worth \$1 million) without using force.
  - In Chile, a tactic dubbed “*web freight*” saw hackers **breach logistics IT systems** to change the authorized driver and truck details for a container pickup, then show up with **fake papers and a stolen truck** to withdraw merchandise from the port. A 2023 case involved fertilizer valued at 74 million CLP (Chilean pesos) stolen this way, later cracked by detectives.
  - In Colombia, roughly **14% of reported thefts** in 2023 were through **authority impersonation**: thieves dressed as police (9%) or traffic officers (5%) to stop trucks and steal cargo.
  - **“Phony freight” frauds have proliferated:** con artists create **fake trucking companies** and persons profiles, offer cut-rate hauling services, and when

entrusted with cargo, **vanish with it**. This deceptive scheme has hit multiple countries, exploiting the subcontracting common in modern logistics.

- **GPS jammers and cyberattacks:** In Mexico, thieves frequently use signal jammers to disable tracking during a heist or even **hack fleet tracking platforms** to make a diversion look routine while the cargo is rerouted.
- **Extreme violence against drivers:** Despite the shift to covert tactics, in parts of Mexico there are still **driver abductions and murders** to seize trucks. In Brazil, over half of incidents involve briefly **kidnapping the driver**, combining violence with intimidation.

**Result:** Today, cargo theft is a **more complex crime**. Traditional *asphalt piracy* (armed roadside stick-ups) persists, but **deceptive, non-violent thefts** via **social engineering, fraud, and betrayal of trust** are growing at a rapid pace. This presents new challenges: companies must guard not only the highways but also their information systems, rigorously verify driver identities, and vet their transport partners' legitimacy.

## Comparative by Country: Incidence, Trend, and Main Methods (2019–2024)

To understand the scope, the table below compares the six focus countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru). It summarizes **approximate annual incident counts**, the **5-year trend (~2019–2024)**, and the **predominant modus operandi**, highlighting the role of **identity impersonation** and other key methods in each country. Data comes from official sources (e.g., ministries, police, observatories) and private reports (insurers, industry associations, security firms).

**Table 1. Cargo theft in transit by country – key indicators and trends (~2019–2024).**

Country	Annual Incidents (approx.)	5-Year Trend (2019–2024)	Predominant Methods
Mexico <sup>3</sup>	<p><b>~15–16 thousand</b> thefts/year in recent data. * (Figures vary: private sector estimated 15,937 in 2024 vs. ~9,300 officially reported)*.</p>	<p><b>Rising steadily.</b> Rebounded after 2020; +9.15% in 2024 vs 2023 (15,937 vs 14,600 cases). 2021–2022 saw thousands of cases (~12–14k/year); 2023 set a new record, and 2024 surpassed that.</p> <p>* (Note: Private organizations claim underreporting in official figures)*.</p>	<p><b>Violent hijackings on highways</b> (armed attacks, roadblocks). <b>Fake checkpoints</b> with supposed police to halt trucks. <b>“Ponchallantas”</b> (tire spikes) thrown to force stops. Frequent use of <b>jammers</b> to kill GPS. <b>Growing digital impersonation:</b> identity fraud by transport scammers (“phantom</p>

<sup>3</sup> ANTP, AMIS, AI27 (Mexican insurtech firm)

Country	Annual Incidents (approx.)	5-Year Trend (2019–2024)	Predominant Methods
Brazil <sup>4</sup>	<p><b>~10–17 thousand</b> thefts/year. * (10,478 cases in 2024 per national association; Overhaul detected &gt;17k in 2023)*.</p>	<p><b>General upward trend</b>, with regional fluctuations. 2023 up <b>+4.8%</b> (17,108 cases) vs 2022. 2024 showed some improvement (-32% in risk index per Nstech report), but absolute incidents stayed high (~10–11k). <b>2025 alert</b>: new surge +24.8% in H1 2025 vs H1 2024.</p>	<p>freight") and hacking of tracking systems.</p> <p><b>Armed hijackings</b> on major routes; concentrated in Southeast (SP &amp; RJ ~70% of cases). Prevalence of <b>driver kidnapping</b> during robberies (84% of cases in 2023). <b>Coordinated armed assaults</b>, often very violent. <b>Insider collusion</b> rising (signs of inside help) in 2023. <b>Impersonation &amp; fraud</b> are present too (e.g., drivers <b>faking thefts</b> to divert loads). Growing use of <b>defensive tech</b> (AI for real-time monitoring, etc.) to combat theft.</p>
Argentina <sup>5</sup>	<p><b>~3,000–4,500</b> thefts/year. * (4,476 cases Jul 2023–Aug 2024, double the previous period)*.</p>	<p><b>Sharp recent increase.</b> 2018–2019: ~2–3 thefts daily (~1,000 yearly). After a slight dip in 2020, <b>steady rise from 2021 onward</b> (e-commerce boom). <b>2023 doubled</b> cases vs 2022 (from ~2,238 to 4,476 in 14 months), highest in 16 years. Previously concentrated in Buenos Aires, now <i>nationwide</i> (growth in interior provinces).</p>	<p><b>Classic “asphalt piracy”</b>: armed truck hijackings in transit, often with <b>inside intel</b> and use of <b>fake police uniforms</b> or <b>sham patrol cars</b> to intercept. <b>Critical areas</b>: Buenos Aires province (57% of cases), especially routes into Greater Buenos Aires. Since 2022, <b>new modes</b>: robberies of light delivery trucks (urban e-commerce packages) even in formerly safe city areas. Most stolen goods: food/beverages (38%), parcels (20%), apparel (12%). <b>Impersonation</b>: via <b>fake highway checkpoints</b> (posing as police) [<a href="http://infobae.com">infobae.com</a>], plus possible insider help (drivers involved).</p>
Chile <sup>6</sup>	<p><b>Hundreds of cases/year.</b> * (Lower volume:</p>	<p><b>Clearly rising.</b> Historically low incidence, but <b>since 2019–2020 thefts have climbed</b> markedly.</p>	<p><b>Planned armed robberies</b> of high-value trucks on highways (Central region). Frequent <b>extreme</b></p>

<sup>4</sup> NTC&Logística, Overhaul, Brazilian Government Bulletin, Nstech Group (local risk management company)

<sup>5</sup> Mesa Interempresarial de Piratería del Asfalto (Inter-Company Roundtable on Asphalt Piracy), Industry reports

<sup>6</sup> Chilean Government, TT Club/BSI, ALOG

Country	Annual Incidents (approx.)	5-Year Trend (2019–2024)	Predominant Methods
	e.g., 34 trucks robbed in first 2 months of 2024, per official reports)*.	2022 saw a spike: +450% in theft claim frequency and +27% incidents vs pre-pandemic. 2023–2024 continue the <b>surge</b> : industry describes an “ <i>onslaught of robberies</i> ” on roads with unprecedented violence. Still far below MX/BR in count but growing fast.	<b>violence</b> : >50% of thefts involve <b>driver abduction</b> while cargo is looted. <b>Insider leaks</b> : TT Club/BSI note increased employee collusion or data leaks. <b>Fraud &amp; impersonation</b> : notable cases of <b>fake drivers removing port cargo with forged papers</b> ; gangs <b>clone trucks and IDs</b> to infiltrate supply chains. Authorities urge strict ID verification of drivers and insurance checks at loading points.
Colombia <sup>7</sup>	<b>Dozens</b> of reported cases/year. * (58 “road piracy” incidents in H1 2023, likely underreported)*.	<b>Serious but underreported.</b> Official figures are modest (e.g., 121 cargo thefts in all 2022 via road safety fund) – suggesting <b>widespread underreporting</b> . 2023 showed a slight official dip (-20% first half), but transporters insist the <b>on-road reality is worse</b> (many cases not reported due to cumbersome processes). 2024–2025 continue with high concern (industry estimates >9 trillion COP in losses).	<b>Armed attacks on key routes</b> (Antioquia, Santander, routes to the Caribbean), often linked to armed groups or extortion schemes. <b>Classic highway robbery</b> (86% of cases by violent assault). <b>Authority impersonation</b> : ~14% of incidents by <b>fake police or traffic officers</b> stopping trucks. Also, <b>vandalism &amp; looting</b> amid protests/blockades (not organized crime but cause cargo losses). Some <b>inside jobs</b> (drivers colluding or faking robberies). Extortion of transporters is rising (+38% in 2023), adding to the burden.
Peru <sup>8</sup>	<b>Hundreds</b> of cases/year (estimated). * (No consolidated public data; ~US \$290 million lost annually)*.	<b>Increasing.</b> Private sources indicate <b>+25% of incidents in recent years</b> . The issue gained visibility around 2021–2022 with high-profile truck heists in Lima and on highways (Trujillo, Arequipa). 2023–2024 kept a <b>rising frequency</b> , although Peru still has lower volumes than MX/BR. Industry says theft affects many sectors (mining,	<b>Highway armed robberies</b> (primary MO: interceptions at gunpoint). Frequent fuel theft ( <i>bunkering</i> from tankers) and cargo heists on routes from Lima to interior. <b>Heavy insider involvement</b> : an estimated <b>75% of thefts have driver or staff collusion</b> , via leaked info or staged attacks. <b>Phantom freight</b> frauds also occur (ghost transport

<sup>7</sup> Colombian Government, DITRA, Colfecar, DITRA

<sup>8</sup> Peruvian National Police (PNP), Insurance firms, Industry reports.

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Country	Annual Incidents (approx.)	5-Year Trend (2019–2024)	Predominant Methods
		retail, food), prompting growth in cargo insurance.	companies stealing loads). Police and firms use GPS, escorts, and stricter ID checks, but vast unpatrolled areas pose challenges.

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## Detailed Country-by-Country Analysis

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Below we provide a more in-depth look at each country, integrating insights from public and private sources, specific examples of **identity impersonation** cases, and the **countermeasures** being taken to mitigate these crimes.

### **Mexico<sup>9</sup>: Record thefts and “phantom freight” on the rise**

Mexico leads the region in total cargo thefts. **Nearly 16,000** incidents were recorded in 2024 (according to industry insurers), representing a **~9% increase over 2023**. That equates to **40–60 truck robberies per day** in the country. Official government figures are more conservative (~9,300 in 2024), but even that is about **25 heists per day**. The disparity is attributed to underreporting and many cases going unreported.

**Hot zones:** The **State of Mexico–Puebla corridor** is the epicenter, accounting for roughly 45% of national incidents. Other high-risk areas include Guanajuato, Jalisco, Veracruz, and San Luis Potosí. The **most dangerous highways** tend to be central routes; for example, the México-Puebla-Veracruz toll road (MEX-150D) consistently saw numerous hijackings in 2024.

**Traditional MO:** Over three-quarters of cases occur with the truck **in transit** (on the open road, rather than at rest stops or facilities). The majority involve **armed violence**: assailants force the vehicle to a halt at gunpoint, often **kidnapping the driver** or abandoning them far away. In a 2024 report, **77% of thefts were in-transit and violent**.

**Cargo targets:** Food and beverages (around **40%** of cases) are the most stolen goods, followed by construction/industrial materials, electronics, miscellaneous goods, and auto parts. Thieves favor items that can be **quickly sold** in underground markets.

**Shift towards fraud and impersonation:** In recent years, Mexico is also experiencing the “**digitalization**” of this crime:

- **“Phantom freight” frauds** have surged. Criminal rings establish **fake trucking companies** (complete with professional-looking websites and paperwork) and offer transport services. Once entrusted with a load, they **never deliver it**. According to the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI), this kind of **strategic theft** skyrocketed (up to **15x**) since 2022. In Mexico, notorious cases involved stealing high-value shipments (e.g., truckloads of tequila) through fraud, with **no violence used**.
- **Bogus checkpoints:** Gangs continue to use **false police or military checkpoints** to stop trucks. In May 2025, two criminals in Ecatepec were arrested for using **cloned police patrol vehicles and fake uniforms** (impersonating state investigators) to intercept cargo trucks.
- **Fake licenses:** A cross-border twist—an investigation revealed that thousands of Mexican federal truck driver licenses may have been issued using **false identities and**

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<sup>9</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

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**documents**, enabling unqualified or unknown individuals to operate heavy trucks internationally. This represents another form of identity fraud confronting the sector.

**Response and measures:** To combat these crimes, Mexico is deploying both public and private strategies:

- The **National Association of Private Transportation (ANTP)** and the **Mexican Insurers' Association (AMIS)** call for **comprehensive action**. 2024 data showed **12,462 cargo thefts** recorded by ANTP and a **+40.7% jump** in insured losses (9,421 cases in 2024 vs 6,695 in 2021). They urge greater coordination between authorities and industry, and more tech adoption.
- Law enforcement has launched targeted operations in hot spots, and legislation was approved to **toughen penalties** for cargo robbery, including classifying it as a serious federal crime. A dedicated federal prosecution unit for cargo theft is under discussion.
- To counter fraud, shippers are advised to **vet all carriers and drivers**. Industry groups are developing a **database of vetted transport companies** and circulating “blacklists” of known scammers. The trucking portal *Transporte.mx* even has a “Denounce a Carrier” section for companies to report attempted frauds.
- Investment in **technology** is increasing real-time GPS monitoring of fleets, panic buttons in trucks linked to police, and detection systems for signal jamming. One Mexican tech firm (AI27) created an AI assistant called “Elías” that analyzes route risk and driver behavior to predict hijackings; companies using it claim it has cut thefts by over 90%.
- Crucially, authorities and industry are pushing for better **reporting of incidents**. The gap between the 15,937 thefts estimated by private sources and the 9,299 officially recorded in 2024 underscores the need to simplify and centralize the reporting process so that all incidents are counted and investigated.

In summary, *Mexico faces a dual challenge*: curbing the entrenched highway violence and simultaneously stopping the **increasingly sophisticated thieves** who now use technology as effectively as weapons. **Identity impersonation** has become a real threat, compelling the adoption of robust verification systems and tight collaboration between transport companies and authorities to detect these frauds before the cargo is gone.

### **Brazil<sup>10</sup>: Organized crime on the highways – violence and deception hand-in-hand**

Brazil has long experienced one of the worst cargo theft crises, concentrated on its extensive highway network. In 2023, it reportedly suffered about **17,000 cargo robberies** (per Overhaul), with losses around **R\$1.2 billion**. Although 2024 brought slight relief (one industry report noted a 32% drop in a risk index), the absolute numbers remained high (~10–11k incidents). By mid-2025, a government bulletin warned that **attacks were up 24.8% in H1 2025** compared to H1 2024, signaling the trend is still upward.

**Geographic concentration:** Over 80% of thefts occur in the **Southeast region**, Brazil's economic heart. Historically, **São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro** alone account for ~70% of annual cases, though in 2023 there was a relative uptick in the South (Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul) which surpassed the Northeast in share. The predominance of the Southeast is due to both dense freight traffic and the presence of **well-organized criminal enterprises** in those states.

**Modus operandi: Armed hijacking with intimidation** remains the prevalent method. Gangs typically force the truck to stop (sometimes using multiple cars to box it in) and swiftly **subdue the driver**. It is very common for the driver to be taken **hostage** during the theft: roughly **84% of cases** involve a short-term kidnapping of the driver. The driver is usually released unharmed after the cargo is transloaded, often miles away to delay the alarm. Violence is not only implied but often used; there have been instances of truckers killed for resisting.

**Stolen goods:** Practically anything can be targeted – the leading category in 2023 was “**miscellaneous goods**” (43%), indicating broad targeting. That said, **food and beverages** (fast-moving consumer goods) and **cigarettes** remain high on thieves’ list, and **electronics thefts** have been rising (electronics’ share up by 4 percentage points in 2023). Fuel and pharmaceuticals have also traditionally been frequent targets in Brazil.

**Fraud and impersonation:** Though violent tactics dominate, Brazil is not immune to **logistics fraud**:

- A 2024 survey by NTC&Logística (the national transport association) highlighted schemes like the “**ghost cargo**” and “**double brokerage**” scams. These involve **illicit middlemen** who contract loads under false pretenses and then disappear with them. The freight platform FreteBras has issued guidelines to avoid such scams (verify company credentials, be wary of rates far below market, etc.).
- Authorities have uncovered driver complicity cases. In one 2024 case in Santa Catarina, a driver faked a hijacking—delivering his R\$1.5 million load to accomplices and then filing a false police report. He was later arrested and confessed to staging the crime.

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<sup>10</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

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- At ports, there have been instances of **cargo picked up with counterfeit documents**, akin to the Chilean incident. This has led customs and federal police to tighten **identity and document checks** for anyone claiming shipments.

**Countermeasures:** Brazil's approach combines aggressive policing with advanced technology:

- In 2023, the federal government deployed the **National Public Security Force (FNSP)** to bolster highway patrols in São Paulo and Rio, and some states set up **specialized anti-cargo-theft police units**.
- The private sector heavily relies on **risk management firms** to monitor and safeguard shipments. Three leading firms (now under the Nstech group) managed R\$2.1 trillion worth of cargo in 2024 and report that **74% of attempted thefts were prevented or the goods recovered** thanks to their interventions. These firms use 24/7 control centers, telematics, route risk analysis, and quick-reaction ground teams.
- Technology is at the forefront: for example, some trucking companies outfit trailers with **electric shock security systems** (devices that can emit a 22,000-volt shock if the trailer door is tampered with). Also common are electronic locks, geofenced route adherence (alerts if a truck deviates from its planned corridor or makes an unscheduled stop), and embedded sensors that alert any door opening. If a deviation is detected, the control center immediately contacts the driver and dispatches response units.
- **Driver vetting:** Industry and insurers have partnered to launch systems that **validate driver identities and backgrounds** before high-value shipments. For instance, a platform can check a driver's license authenticity, criminal record, and even fingerprint biometrics before allowing a truck to be loaded. This is to prevent known thieves or those using fake IDs from getting behind the wheel.
- **Legal changes:** A significant development was the enactment of **Law 14.605/2023**, which specifically stiffened penalties for cargo theft and the sale of stolen goods. It also allows treating organized cargo theft as an organized crime offense, enabling more robust investigations (e.g., wiretaps, special task forces) and harsher sentencing.

In conclusion, Brazil has managed to temper the growth of cargo theft somewhat through **heavy investment in security and coordination**. However, the threat continues to evolve. As direct highway attacks become harder due to surveillance, criminals are probing for softer targets, including **insider infiltration and paperwork fraud**. Brazil is paying close attention to trends abroad and reinforcing verification processes to ensure **identity frauds** do not take root as deeply. The balance between forceful response and preemptive intelligence will remain key to protecting Brazil's vast cargo flows.

## Argentina<sup>11</sup>: Record highway piracy and fake checkpoints

Argentina has seen **piratería del asfalto** (highway cargo piracy) cases **double in a short period**. From July 2023 to August 2024, **4,476 incidents** were recorded, roughly twice the number from the preceding 14-month period. This surge marks the highest level in 16 years, according to the national Piracy of Trucks task force (*Mesa Interempresarial*). The current average is over **12 cargo thefts per day** nationwide.

**Evolving patterns:** Buenos Aires province remains the hardest-hit area (57% of incidents), particularly on the highways feeding into the capital (Buenos Aires metropolitan area). However, the problem has **spread across the country**: provinces like Córdoba, Santa Fe, Mendoza, and parts of the north have seen rising numbers as gangs expand to regions with less police focus. A notable development is the **shift towards smaller vehicles and urban deliveries**. With the e-commerce boom, many attacks now target **delivery vans and small trucks in cities**, not just 18-wheelers on open highways. According to the task force, **light-duty vehicles now account for 7.9 thefts per day**, more than double the rate for heavy trucks (3.4 per day). Even upscale urban districts (e.g., **Palermo or Recoleta in Buenos Aires city**) have experienced robberies of courier vans—something virtually unheard of before 2022.

**Targeted goods:** The loot is dominated by items with ready resale markets. **Food and beverages** represent about 38% of stolen goods, followed by **retail parcels (20%)** – much of this being online shopping orders – and **apparel (12%)**. Notably, apparel overtook electronics (now ~11%), likely because electronics companies have tightened security and thieves are capitalizing on the sheer volume of retail packages on the move.

**Methods:** Argentine cargo thieves often operate as **organized gangs with careful planning**. Many strikes involve surveilling a truck from its departure, then ambushing it at a vulnerable moment (for instance, when slowing for a toll or entering a city). Common tactics include:

- **False police checkpoints:** There have been cases of criminals using **counterfeit police vehicles and uniforms** to flag down trucks under the guise of a road inspection. Drivers, believing it's an official operation, comply only to be robbed at gunpoint. Such **impersonation of authorities** has been reported both with fake police and individuals masquerading as highway safety officials.
- **Commando-style hijackings:** Multiple vehicles box in the truck, armed men quickly overtake the driver by force, and the truck is driven off to unload. The driver might be bound and left by the roadside. These attacks can occur on busy highways or even city streets, executed within minutes.
- **Deception of logistics personnel:** In one notable 2023 scheme, thieves dressed in the uniform of a well-known online retailer and approached that company's delivery drivers, falsely claiming a mix-up and requesting packages back. This social engineering angle,

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<sup>11</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

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though not violent, highlighted the need for vigilance even against those **posing as co-workers**.

**Law enforcement actions:** The *Mesa Interempresarial* (a multi-company, multi-agency coalition) works with federal and provincial police to tackle cargo theft. This coordination has led to a **57% recovery rate** of stolen merchandise in 2024 – slightly down from ~60% earlier, but still significant. Stolen goods are often recovered in raids on storage sites where thieves temporarily stash cargo. Convictions have also increased: about **24% of cases lead to convictions** (up from 22%), and many ring leaders are in custody awaiting trial. Still, the gangs' decentralized cell structure means even with arrests, others continue operating.

**Preventive measures:** The Argentine task force and security experts recommend:

- **Driver training and protocols:** Educate drivers to recognize suspicious situations (fake checkpoints, vehicles tailing them) and instruct them not to stop for anything unofficial. Encourage use of secure rest locations and convoys when possible.
- **Rapid response units:** Station special police or private security units at strategic points so they can respond quickly when a theft alert comes (from a GPS alarm or emergency call).
- **Information sharing:** Real-time sharing of incident data among companies and with law enforcement helps identify patterns (e.g., a specific group targeting a type of product or using the same white van in multiple robberies).
- **Market enforcement:** Uprooting the resale markets by inspecting warehouses, flea markets, and online resale platforms for stolen goods. Major busts in notorious areas (like La Salada market) have recovered huge quantities of stolen merchandise and act as a deterrent.
- **Legal definition:** Pushing for a distinct legal classification of *piratería* (cargo piracy) has been a goal so that these crimes are tracked and penalized appropriately, rather than being lost under general robbery statistics.

On the **identity fraud aspect**, Argentina's formal sector has safeguards (loads are released only to drivers with verified ID and paperwork). The weak link has been **en-route verification**. To counter fake police stops, companies now maintain direct lines of communication with genuine authorities. For instance, a driver who is pulled over can call a dispatcher, who can quickly verify with police whether there is an authorized checkpoint in that location. This kind of verification procedure is being refined to shut down the window of opportunity for impersonators.

In essence, Argentina is at **maximum alert** on cargo theft. High-tech tracking and strong inter-company collaboration have improved responses, but the doubling of cases shows that criminals have exploited new opportunities (like the flood of delivery vehicles). The battle now is both on the **physical front** – keeping trucks safe on the road – and on the **intelligence front** – ensuring that sensitive info (routes, driver IDs) doesn't leak to those who would abuse it.

### Chile<sup>12</sup>: From violent heists to IT sabotage in the logistics chain

Chile, despite a smaller scale of incidents, has experienced a **worrying increase** in cargo theft. A report by TT Club and BSI Screen in 2022 highlighted that Chile's cargo theft incidents **jumped significantly**, with 27% more cases than pre-pandemic and an **820% surge in the value of losses claimed**. This peak coincided with a challenging economic period (high inflation, social unrest), which likely spurred black-market demand for stolen goods. By 2023–2024, the issue remained prominent, with industry stakeholders warning of an “avalanche of robberies” on highways, marked by a level of violence not seen before. In absolute terms, Chile's annual incidents (perhaps a few hundred) are far below those of Mexico or Brazil, but the **severity and growth rate** are notable.

**Key areas:** The trouble is mainly along the main north-south artery, **Route 5 (Panamericana)**, and associated feeder routes. The central regions (around Santiago and Valparaíso) and routes to the south (toward Concepción/Biobío) see the most activity. In early 2024, officials reported 34 truck hijackings in just January–February.

**Violent robberies: Coordinated armed assaults** on trucks have become more frequent. Many involve **high violence** – in fact, over 50% of Chile's cargo thefts involve the **driver being kidnapped or restrained** while the thieves unload the cargo. Gangs have been known to use weapons and extreme intimidation, sometimes holding drivers captive for hours to ensure a head start. Top stolen goods mirror consumer demand: **electronics (around 25%)** and **foodstuffs (20%)** lead, based on theft claim analyses.

**Infiltration and identity fraud:** Chile has witnessed sophisticated methods that bypass violence:

- A headline case in 2023 involved criminals hacking into a logistics company's database and **altering the registered driver and truck information** for a container pickup at the port of San Antonio. They then arrived with a **stolen truck and forged documents** matching the new details and successfully exited the port with the container. Only the vigilance of the company (noticing something amiss) and quick police action stopped them shortly after. This demonstrated a new threat: by manipulating digital systems, thieves can **impersonate authorized personnel** and defeat physical security without a shootout.
- **Fake trucking companies** have also tried to operate, similarly to elsewhere. The Chilean Logistics Association (ALOG) has cautioned members to double-check any unfamiliar carrier or freight forwarder, especially if they popped up recently with surprisingly low quotes.
- **Insider collusion** is a growing concern. TT Club noted a rise in internal involvement in Chilean theft incidents. In some cases, employees facing economic hardship have been caught feeding information to thieves or deliberately leaving security gaps. Companies

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<sup>12</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

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are responding by increasing internal audits and employee support, hoping to reduce these temptations.

### Countermeasures in Chile:

- A multi-sector **working group** (ALOG with law enforcement and insurers) convenes regularly. They have issued best practices, such as **rigorous identity verification**: e.g., if a new driver shows up for a pickup, call the transport company to confirm they sent this person. They also urge using **escort vehicles or armed guards** for very valuable shipments in transit and instruct drivers to be skeptical of any unscheduled stop.
- Many trucking companies enforce strict **route and stop plans** – a truck should not deviate or stop except at pre-approved secure locations. If it does, an alert is generated and the situation is treated as a potential hijack.
- The Chilean government, acknowledging the issue, rolled out a plan to **increase highway security**. This includes more patrol cars on the highways most used by trucks, and even drone surveillance over some stretches at night to deter robberies. On the legislative side, there is talk of creating a specific offense for cargo theft to differentiate it from ordinary robbery and impose tougher penalties.
- In the wake of the port fraud case, port authorities and customs have tightened procedures. **Drivers picking up cargo must undergo stricter ID checks**, often including biometric verification or digital QR codes that are hard to forge. If any last-minute changes occur in pickup details, a multi-step authentication is now required. This multi-layered verification makes it much harder for a hacker or insider with partial information to successfully misdirect a shipment.

Overall, Chile is trying to ensure that a burgeoning **organized cargo theft element** is contained before it gets out of hand. The combination of **robust law enforcement, technological safeguards, and industry vigilance** is the strategy. The country is effectively learning from incidents elsewhere and at home – addressing both the **brute-force tactics** and the **high-tech schemes** that together define the new face of cargo theft.

### Colombia<sup>13</sup>: Insecurity on the roads and disguise under uniform

Colombia's cargo transportation security is complicated by the presence of organized armed groups and a history of civil unrest. Officially, relatively **few cases** of cargo theft are recorded (just 58 incidents of “piratería terrestre” in the first half of 2023, and around 121 in all 2022), but industry experts assert these numbers **grossly underrepresent reality**. Many incidents go unreported or are lost in bureaucratic red tape. Additionally, cargo losses often occur in contexts like **road blockades or rebel activity**, which might not be tallied as ordinary crime.

**High-risk routes:** Routes connecting major cities to ports are perilous. **Antioquia, Santander, Norte de Santander, and Bolívar** departments are frequently cited as red zones for truckers. Highways in these areas traverse remote terrain where police presence is thin. The corridor from Bogotá to the Caribbean coast, and the route from the interior to the key Pacific port (Buenaventura), are also well-known problem areas.

#### Nature of incidents:

- **Armed hold-ups:** By far the most common incidents (86% of those reported) involve **assault with firearms**. Typically, a group of attackers will force a truck to stop in an isolated area – often by night or in early hours – and rob the driver at gunpoint. Sometimes trucks are ambushed when slowing for sharp turns or heavy vehicles. Drivers can be forced out, tied up, and left while the thieves take the rig.
- **Fake authorities:** About 14% of thefts are executed through **impersonation of officials**. Criminals have posed as police officers or highway patrol, complete with uniforms and even fake patrol cars, to flag down trucks under the pretense of an inspection. Once the truck stops, the ruse drops and the robbery occurs. There was a case of thieves masquerading as **army soldiers** at an unofficial checkpoint on a northern route, who stopped a convoy of trucks carrying appliances and stole everything. This modus operandi exploits drivers' trust in authority.
- **Extortion and armed groups:** In some regions, it is hard to distinguish cargo theft from the activities of guerrillas or criminal bands. Transport companies in areas like Arauca or Cauca have to pay “**protection money**” to avoid attacks. If they do not, their trucks may be hijacked or torched. While this is extortion rather than theft for resale, it contributes to cargo loss and fear on the routes.
- **Inside jobs:** Colombian authorities have also uncovered cases where drivers themselves simulate a robbery. For example, several truckers were arrested in 2022 for colluding with thieves—delivering their load to accomplices and later claiming they were robbed by armed men.
- **Civil disturbances:** It is worth noting that during times of protest or roadblocks, opportunistic theft occurs. During the 2021 national strike, dozens of delivery trucks and even transport tankers were looted by mobs when they got stranded by blockades.

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<sup>13</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

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These incidents are not organized crime, but they add to the overall risk of transporting goods.

### Measures in place:

- The **Transit and Transport Police (DITRA)** has a unit specializing in cargo theft. They sometimes deploy **decoy trucks** and conduct sting operations on known dangerous stretches. In recent years, these efforts led to the capture of multiple gangs and recovery of goods like textiles, electronics, and even a shipment of liquor.
- To combat underreporting, the Colombian National Police introduced an online reporting platform “*A Denunciar*” (To Report) to simplify filing a complaint. They also have mobile units at highway weigh stations or toll booths where drivers can quickly file a report after an incident. Despite this, Colfecar (the trucking association) notes the need for categorizing these incidents distinctly as “cargo piracy” to properly track and prioritize them.
- For particularly troubled routes, the government at times provides **escort caravans**. For example, on the road between Cúcuta and Bucaramanga (which had seen grenade attacks on trucks in 2023), authorities arranged specific times where trucks gather and **travel under military escort**. While not a permanent solution, it is a stopgap during flare-ups of violence.
- Technology uptake is growing companies increasingly equip trucks with dual GPS units (one hidden) in case one is jammed or removed, and some have experimented with remote engine immobilizers that can be activated if a truck is hijacked. However, remote immobilization comes with risks (it could endanger the driver or others if misused), so it is deployed carefully.
- Given the high incidence of insider collusion, companies are implementing **integrity measures**: performing background checks and even periodic polygraphs on drivers, rotating drivers, and routes to prevent too-cozy familiarity and setting up anonymous whistleblower lines for employees to report if they are approached by criminals.

In summary, Colombia must address **cargo theft on multiple fronts**. It faces classic highway robbery as seen elsewhere, but also the complicating overlay of armed conflict and civil unrest. The use of **police impersonation** in thefts underscores how trust in authorities has been eroded in some areas; rebuilding that trust (so drivers feel safe stopping only for real police) is part of the challenge. Improving incident reporting and response, even in remote stretches, and continuing to professionalize the security around freight transport will be critical. The fact that criminals go as far as to wear uniforms means law enforcement and industry need equally creative and determined responses to protect the supply chain.

## Peru<sup>14</sup>: A growing threat with significant inside involvement

In Peru, cargo theft has escalated from a sporadic issue to a **constant threat** for shippers and truckers in the last five years. While hard statistics are scarce, observers estimate the **annual losses exceed \$290 million**. Security firms indicate an **approximate 25% increase** in cargo theft incidents over the past few years. Particularly since 2021–2022, when some high-profile truck heists in and around Lima made headlines, awareness of the problem has risen. Through 2023–2024, the trend remained **upward**, although the total incidents in Peru still number in the hundreds per year, much lower than in Mexico or Brazil. Sectors ranging from mining to retail to agriculture have all been victims, prompting more businesses to invest in **transit insurance and private security**.

### Modus operandi:

- **Armed highway robberies:** The classic scenario involves gangs stopping trucks on open highways, especially at night or in low-traffic stretches. They might use a vehicle to force the truck off the road or simulate an emergency to make it stop. Once the truck halts, the armed men rob the driver and take over the vehicle. Highways along the coast (Panamericana Norte and Sur) and routes connecting Lima to the interior (through the Andes) have seen such incidents. For example, trucks leaving Lima for cities like Trujillo or Arequipa have been attacked in transit.
- **Fuel theft:** A particular issue in Peru is theft from tanker trucks. Some criminals target fuel transport either hijacking the whole tanker to sell its diesel/gasoline or siphoning fuel (sometimes drivers illicitly sell part of their load as well). This form of theft might not involve stealing the entire vehicle, but it is a significant loss for transporters.
- **Insider participation:** What stands out in Peru is the very high rate of **inside job** involvement. Estimates suggest **about 75% of cargo theft incidents involve collusion by the driver or another insider**. This could be manifested as drivers deliberately deviating to meet thieves, or employees tipping off gangs about valuable shipments and security weaknesses. In some cases, drivers themselves fake being victims — abandoning the truck at a prearranged spot for thieves to collect, then claiming they were forced at gunpoint.
- **Fake transport operators:** Peru has also seen instances of the “**ghost carrier**” phenomenon. Companies have been duped by bogus carriers that offered freight services and then stole the cargo. For instance, an exporter in 2022 hired a transport company off an internet listing, only for the entire container of high-value goods to disappear en route. Since then, business chambers have urged due diligence (checking carrier registration, client references, etc.).
- **False police stops:** Similar to elsewhere, there have been reports of criminals impersonating police at fake checkpoints, particularly on routes in northern Peru. The

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<sup>14</sup> Sources: those mentioned in Table 1 above

PNP has had to clarify protocols (e.g., genuine officers will always have identification and official vehicles) and advise drivers on how to verify a real checkpoint.

### Countermeasures:

- Many logistics and manufacturing firms are now including **theft coverage insurance** in their budgeting, given the rise in risk. Insurers in Peru have noted growth in policies for goods in transit, which both indicates awareness and provides some financial mitigation.
- The **Peruvian National Police (PNP)** launched an initiative (nicknamed “**Operación Escudo**” – Operation Shield) in 2021 targeting freight route security. They increased highway patrols and set up surprise checkpoints in critical routes out of Lima and other hubs. This operation, renewed in subsequent years, led to some arrests, and likely deterred opportunistic thieves, though determined criminals adapt by finding less patrolled backroads.
- Companies, wary of insider issues, have started measures like **dual-driver teams** (so one driver is less likely to collude with outsiders under the watch of another) and frequent route rotations (so drivers do not establish fixed patterns that criminals can exploit through bribes or threats). Some also perform background checks on employees handling high-value cargo and use **security escorts** for the most critical shipments (e.g., mining companies transporting gold or copper concentrate).
- Use of **hidden GPS trackers on cargo** has proven useful. Instead of relying solely on the truck’s tracking device (which a savvy thief might disable or discard), a small covert tracker can be placed within the merchandise or packaging. In one 2024 case, after a truck loaded with consumer electronics was hijacked outside Lima, a hidden tracker embedded in a TV crate allowed police to locate the thieves’ safehouse and recover the goods.
- The legal system is slowly adapting. In Lima, prosecutors formed a special team to handle cargo theft and related organized crime. They coordinate with police to ensure thorough investigations. Courts have started to deliver tougher sentences when theft is clearly organized (10+ year prison terms, even without homicide or extreme violence, in recognition of the serious economic impact). This is meant to send a message that cargo theft is not a minor property crime.

Peru’s strategy is essentially to **nip the problem in the bud**. Authorities and businesses know that if left unchecked, cargo theft could balloon to the levels seen in larger neighbors. So, there’s emphasis on **preventative action** (police presence, corporate security protocols) and improving **detection and response** (technology, insider vetting). With the supply chain modernizing, there is also an opportunity to build security into new systems – for example, integrating real-time cargo tracking data with police response networks. By acting early, Peru hopes to contain cargo theft and protect the flow of commerce before it becomes a systemic threat.

## Conclusions

This investigation shows that **cargo theft in Latin America has both evolved and expanded substantially in the last five years**, acquiring **technological sophistication** that poses new challenges. All the countries analyzed (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru) exhibit **rising trends** in incidents since 2019, driven by common dynamics:

- **Economic strains and inflation** fueling theft patterns (high prices make stolen goods more lucrative, and hardship may push more individuals into crime).
- **Greater volume of goods in transit** (especially due to e-commerce and post-pandemic recovery) providing more targets on the road.
- **Adaptive criminal networks** that have taken methods “from asphalt to cyberspace,” incorporating **fraud, identity theft, and cyber tactics** into their repertoire.

A salient finding is the rise of **identity impersonation in cargo theft**. Once principally an American concern (with a 1500% surge since 2022), it is now clearly a Latin American reality: from **bogus drivers** picking up loads with fake IDs in Chile, to **“phantom” carriers** in Mexico securing contracts and stealing goods, to **thieves dressed as police** in Colombia flagging down trucks. This method offers high reward at relatively low immediate risk – no violent confrontation and often a delayed discovery – which explains its rapid spread and the **urgent concern** around it.

Meanwhile, **traditional violent cargo theft** remains prevalent. In absolute terms, most cargo thefts in the region are still carried out through direct armed robbery or threats. For example, in Mexico roughly 84% involve violence, and in Brazil criminals routinely use weapons and hostage-taking. The new tactics have not replaced the old so much as augmented the overall threat.

### Comparative insights:

- **Mexico** and **Brazil** bear the heaviest burden in number of cases, costing billions annually and challenging authorities to cover large territories. Both have mobilized substantial resources and tech solutions yet struggle with underreporting and persistent violence.
- **Argentina** has a robust intelligence-sharing model and has achieved notable recoveries of stolen goods, but its surge in incidents shows that criminals capitalized on new opportunities (like booming e-commerce) faster than defenses were scaled up.
- **Chile** and **Peru** are in earlier stages of the crisis and are proactively implementing measures to avoid reaching the levels of their neighbors. Chile is focusing on preventing both physical and cyber-enabled theft, while Peru is concentrating on internal integrity and proactive policing.
- **Colombia** is unique due to the overlay of armed conflict and civil issues, which means solving cargo theft there also involves addressing broader security governance in roadways.

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A clear theme is that **official statistics often lag behind reality**. Where private data suggests thousands of incidents, official counts sometimes show fractions of that. Improving the ease of reporting and tracking cargo theft as a distinct category is needed so that the scale of the problem is visible and resources are allocated accordingly.

**Recommendations** that emerge across the board:

- **Holistic supply chain security:** Companies should fortify their entire logistics process. This ranges from better **route risk assessment and monitoring** to investment in secure infrastructure (secured parking, escort services) and contingency planning for incidents.
- **Identity verification systems:** The industry must implement rigorous checks to **authenticate drivers and companies**. This could include centralized databases of trusted transport personnel, digital ID systems for pickups, and verification calls or codes before releasing cargo. Making it standard to verify credentials can thwart many impersonation attempts.
- **Driver and staff training:** Humans are the first line of defense. Regular training on security protocols, how to respond to suspicious situations, and how to use safety equipment (like panic buttons) is crucial. Drivers should be empowered and encouraged to prioritize safety – for instance, not stopping if things do not feel right, or immediately communicating if they suspect something.
- **Legal and penal reform:** Governments should update laws to specifically criminalize and severely punish **cargo theft and related fraud**. Non-violent tactics should not mean lenient treatment; the economic damage and organized nature warrant stiff penalties to deter would-be offenders.
- **International cooperation:** Cargo theft rings often operate across borders (stolen goods fenced in neighboring countries, or gangs learning methods from abroad). Latin American nations would benefit from sharing intelligence, perhaps via a **regional observatory or working group on cargo security**, to exchange information on emerging threats and successful counter-strategies.

In conclusion, **cargo theft in Latin America** today involves not just highway robbers but also **cyber-savvy fraudsters**. The logistics sector and authorities must modernize their defenses as quickly as criminals are modernizing their offenses. Protecting this vital component of the economy – the movement of goods – will require a concerted effort, blending technology, enforcement, policy, and collaboration. Only through such a multifaceted approach can the region stem this growing threat and ensure the safe flow of commerce.