

Illicit Enrichment in the Public Sector: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Enriquecimiento Ilícito en el Sector Público: Una Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura
Enriquecimento ilícito no setor público: uma revisão sistemática da literatura

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Abstract

Objective: This article aims to analyze the impact of illicit enrichment in the public sector. **Methodology:** A systematic review of the scientific literature on illicit enrichment and corruption in public administration was conducted, following the PRISMA 2020 methodology. Empirical and theoretical studies published between 2000 and 2023 were reviewed using databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. After applying selection criteria, 57 studies were analyzed. **Results:** The research identifies factors that facilitate corrupt practices and their institutional and social implications. It addresses the causes, effects, and proposed solutions from legal, public policy, and preventive perspectives, as well as ethical, social, and legal frameworks. **Conclusions:** The study highlights the need to understand illicit enrichment from a multidisciplinary perspective. It offers recommendations for future research and for the development of more effective policies aimed at strengthening governmental integrity and reducing social inequality.

Keywords: Anti-corruption strategies; Corruption; Illicit enrichment; Public officials; Systematic review.

Resumen

Objetivo: El presente artículo busca analizar el impacto del enriquecimiento ilícito en el sector público. **Metodología:** Se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura científica sobre enriquecimiento ilícito y corrupción en la administración pública, siguiendo la metodología PRISMA 2020. Se revisaron estudios empíricos y teóricos publicados entre 2000 y 2023 en Scopus, Web of Science y ScienceDirect. Tras aplicar criterios de selección, se analizaron 57 estudios. **Resultados:** La investigación identifica factores que facilitan prácticas corruptas y sus implicaciones institucionales y sociales. Se abordan causas, efectos y posibles soluciones desde enfoques legales, de política pública y prevención, así como marcos éticos, sociales y jurídicos. **Conclusiones:** El estudio destaca la necesidad de comprender el enriquecimiento ilícito desde una perspectiva multidisciplinaria. Se proponen recomendaciones para futuras investigaciones y para el diseño de políticas más eficaces, orientadas a fortalecer la integridad gubernamental y reducir la desigualdad social.

Palabras clave: Corrupción; Enriquecimiento ilícito; Estrategias anticorrupción; Revisión sistemática; Servidores públicos.

Resumo

Objetivo: O presente artigo procura analisar o impacto do enriquecimento ilícito no setor público. **Metodologia:** Foi realizada uma revisão sistemática da literatura científica sobre enriquecimento ilícito e corrupção na administração pública, seguindo a metodologia PRISMA 2020. Foram revisados estudos empíricos e teóricos publicados entre 2000 e 2023 no Scopus, Web of Science e ScienceDirect. Após aplicar critérios de seleção, foram analisados 57 estudos. **Resultados:** A pesquisa identifica fatores que facilitam práticas corruptas e suas implicações institucionais e sociais. São abordadas causas, efeitos e possíveis soluções a partir de abordagens jurídicas, de políticas públicas e prevenção, bem como de marcos éticos, sociais e jurídicos. **Conclusões:** O estudo destaca a necessidade de compreender o enriquecimento ilícito a partir de uma perspectiva multidisciplinar. São propostas recomendações para futuras pesquisas e para a elaboração de políticas mais eficazes, orientadas para fortalecer a integridade governamental e reduzir a desigualdade social.

Palavras-chave: Corrupção; Enriquecimento ilícito; Estratégias anticorrupção; Revisão sistemática; Servidores públicos.

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INTRODUCTION

Illicit enrichment, defined as the disproportionate increase in the wealth of public officials without legal justification, represents an extreme manifestation of corruption with serious implications for economic development, political stability, and social equity worldwide (Demirgüç-Kunt et al, 2023; Feil, 2021; Martinez & Whitley, 2023; Megías et al., 2023; Venard et al., 2023). This phenomenon is particularly pernicious in the public sector, where resources intended for social welfare are diverted for the benefit of a few, thereby exacerbating inequalities and undermining trust in governmental institutions (Barragán et al, 2020; Cornell & Sundell, 2020; Ibrahimy et al., 2023; Klein et al., 2023).

Over the past decades, illicit enrichment has received growing attention in academic literature in response to increasing public and political concern over corruption scandals (Akhmad et al., 2023; Caserta et al., 2022; García & Sampedro, 2022; Panesso, 2022). However, the complexity of the phenomenon—which involves structural, cultural, political, and economic factors—has hindered the development of effective responses (Banerjee et al., 2022; Grönlund & Setälä, 2012; Habibov et al., 2017). Moreover, research on the topic is often fragmented, focusing on specific case studies or isolated theoretical approaches, which hampers a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Casadesús de Mingo et al., 2018; Mangafic & Veselinovic, 2020; Martinez et al., 2019; Piña Libien et al., 2021).

This article seeks to address existing gaps in the literature through a systematic review of scientific research on illicit enrichment in the public sector. Its primary objective is to rigorously identify and analyze the main causes that give rise to this behavior, as well as its institutional and societal repercussions. Additionally, it examines proposed solutions across various contexts, ranging from legislative reforms to preventive and punitive measures, offering a critical assessment of the effectiveness of these interventions. The study also explores the ethical implications of illicit enrichment and its impact on social cohesion and the quality of governance (Carmeci et al, 2021; Caserta et al., 2022; Haq, 2011; Jahnke & Weisser, 2019; Lesch, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a systematic literature review approach based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). Although originally developed for the medical and health sciences, the PRISMA methodology is also well-suited and adaptable to research in the social sciences and humanities (PRISMA, 2020).

Search Strategy

The search strategy involved identifying relevant studies in well-established academic databases, primarily Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The search was conducted using a combination of thesauri and keywords, formulated according to the research objectives and central question. Boolean operators **OR** and **AND** were used to define the following search equation:

(“enriquecimiento ilícito” OR “illicit enrichment” OR “corrupción” OR “corruption” OR “delitos contra la administración pública” OR “crimes against public administration”) AND (“servidores públi-



cos” OR “public servants” OR “empleados públicos” OR “public employees” OR “funcionarios públicos” OR “public officials” OR “trabajadores del sector público” OR “public sector workers”)

Prior to the search, a series of filters, timeframes, and geographic parameters were defined to ensure the relevance of the selected studies:

- **Years:** Studies published between 2000 and 2023
- **Access:** Open access articles
- **Subject areas:** Social Sciences, Economics and Finance, Public Administration, and Accounting
- **Type of publication:** Original research articles (excluding systematic reviews)
- **Languages:** English and Spanish
- **Regions:** Studies addressing cases in Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the quality and pertinence of the selected literature, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established:

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
 - **IC1:** Peer-reviewed articles that directly examine illicit enrichment and corruption in the public sector
 - **IC2:** Studies presenting empirical or theoretical analyses of the causes, effects, and solutions to corruption and illicit enrichment
 - **IC3:** Research addressing ethical, social, or legal dimensions of corruption and illicit enrichment in public administration
 - **IC4:** Case studies providing concrete examples of corruption and illicit enrichment in various global regions
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
 - **EC1:** Articles focused on corruption in the private sector or in areas unrelated to public administration
 - **EC2:** Studies lacking empirical evidence or based on unverifiable sources
 - **EC3:** Duplicate publications or studies with outdated information (published prior to 2000 with no current relevance)
 - **EC4:** Opinion pieces and essays without methodological rigor

Study Selection Process

The selection process was carried out in several phases:

- Identification:** An initial search across the selected databases yielded a total of 580 potentially relevant articles.
- Screening:** Titles and duplicates were reviewed to exclude clearly irrelevant or repeated entries,



reducing the total to 102 articles.

- c) **Eligibility Assessment:** The remaining studies underwent a two-stage review—first of abstracts and then of full texts—to assess their relevance and methodological quality, ensuring a rigorous selection process. This phase resulted in 78 eligible studies.
- d) **Inclusion:** Ultimately, 57 key studies were included in the review, as they provided comprehensive and relevant information aligned with the research question.

RESULTS

[The results section should include the findings obtained by the author in the review carried out, which will show how the objective was achieved and will also be consistent with the methodological design proposed -according to the type of review proposed-. Due to the volume of materials that support a review exercise, it is advisable to complement the section with synthesis options through tables and diagrams. The author should consider the importance of ensuring the articulation between the methodological route and the results presented].

The results of the systematic literature review are presented below, following the rigorous methodological process outlined by the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. This diagram, shown in **Figure 1**, provides a visual and structured guide for the identification, selection, and evaluation of relevant studies retrieved from various academic databases. This systematic approach ensures the transparency and reproducibility of the findings, allowing for a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the topics under investigation.

Figure 1.
PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Reviews Including Database Searches

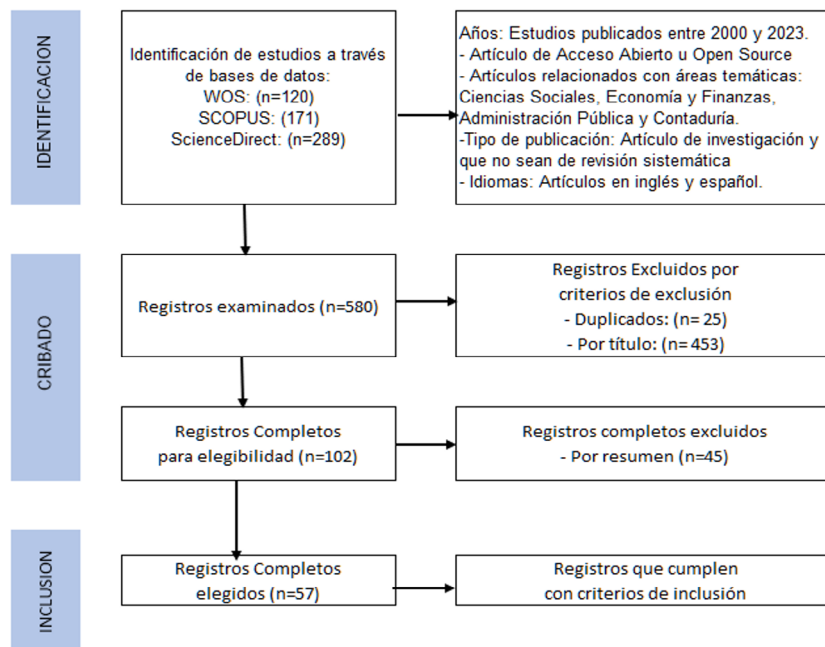
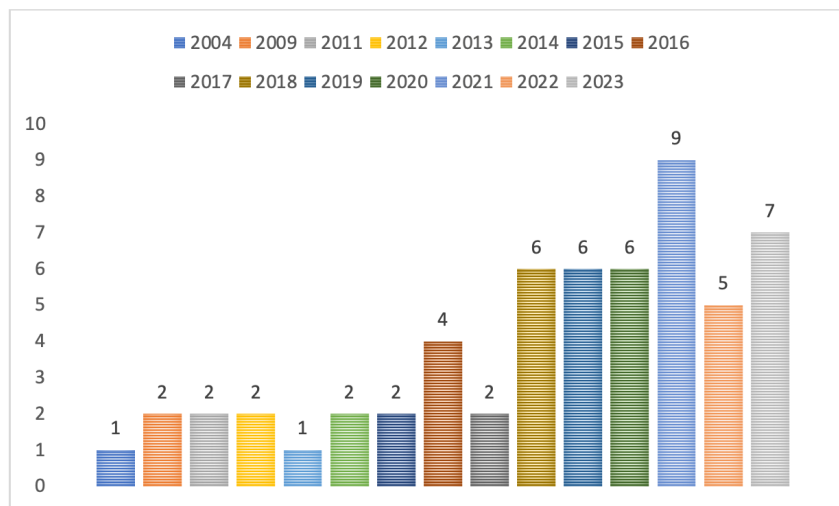


Figure 2.
Temporal Distribution of the 57 Analyzed Studies



Note: Author's own elaboration based on results from the systematic review.

Since 2016, studies on corruption and illicit enrichment have increased significantly, rising from fewer than two per year (2004–2015) to a peak of nine in 2021. This growth reflects heightened global interest and awareness of the harmful effects of these phenomena, with five studies published in 2022 and seven in 2023.

One of the main findings from the literature review is the identification of the underlying causes that facilitate illicit enrichment in the public sector. The reviewed studies consistently highlight institutional weakness as a recurring factor in most contexts where this phenomenon occurs. Literature identifies multiple causes of illicit enrichment and corruption in public administration. Amin and Soh (2021) argue that increased regulatory burdens can lead to greater corruption in developing countries, suggesting that bureaucratic complexity creates opportunities for corrupt behavior. Similarly, Antonakas et al. (2013) identify deficiencies in tax administration systems as contributing factors.

Castañeda Rodríguez (2015), on the other hand, contends that the absence of adequate oversight and control mechanisms within public institutions enables officials to act with impunity, thereby facilitating illicit enrichment. Another important aspect identified in the review is economic pressure as a driver of illicit enrichment (Binhadab et al., 2021; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019; Willems, 2020; Woodhouse, 2002). Abbink et al. (2018) analyze the influence of social norms on the offering of bribes, while Gorsira, Denkers and Huisman (2018) examine the motivations behind corruption among public officials and corporate employees, emphasizing the need to understand both individual and organizational drivers of corrupt behavior.

However, while these factors are widely acknowledged in the literature, important contextual differences persist. For example, in Latin America, social inequality and the weakness of the rule of law are prominent drivers, whereas studies conducted in Europe tend to focus on bureaucratic corruption and state capture by private interests (Alcántara-Lizárraga & Jima-González, 2022; Boly & Gillanders, 2018; Castañeda Rodríguez, 2015; Lara & Carrera, 2019; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Schuster et al., 2020). Castañeda Rodríguez (2016) notes that when citizens perceive their leaders as engaging in corrupt practices,



their trust in government and democratic processes declines. This finding aligns with previous research showing that corruption erodes public trust and undermines the quality of democracy (Curto-Rodríguez & Pascual-Fernández, 2021; Gauthier et al., 2021; O'Toole et al., 2014; Saha et al., 2014).

DISCUSSION

Another important aspect identified in the review is economic pressure as a driver of illicit enrichment (Appiah et al, 2023; Willems, 2020). Abbink et al. (2018) analyze the influence of social norms on the offering of bribes, while Gorsira, Steg, Denkers and Huisman (2018) examine the motivations behind corruption among public officials and corporate employees, emphasizing the need to understand both individual and organizational drivers of corrupt behavior.

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Furthermore, the review highlights that illicit enrichment contributes to increasing socioeconomic inequality. Gauthier et al. (2021) argue that public resources diverted for personal gain reduce the state's capacity to deliver essential services, thereby exacerbating poverty and limiting opportunities for the most vulnerable populations. This effect is particularly severe in developing countries, where corruption can have devastating consequences for human development (Antúnez et al., 2019; Mikkelsen et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

In the legal sphere, Akhmad et al. (2023) examine the effectiveness of illicit enrichment laws by comparing approaches across different countries, while Animashaun and Chitimira (2021) advocate for the use of lifestyle audits for public officials. Klein et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of understanding local contexts in the design of effective anti-corruption policies, whereas other scholars (Berrones, 2016; Demircioglu & Chen, 2019) identify risk factors and propose preventive strategies based on individual and organizational motivations. While certain interventions—such as legislative reforms and the strengthening of audit systems—have shown effectiveness, other studies suggest that these measures may be insufficient if not accompanied by broader cultural change (Escresa & Picci, 2017; Fagbemi et al., 2023).

Proposals have also been made regarding the implementation of e-government technologies, which



are highlighted as promising tools to enhance transparency and reduce opportunities for illicit enrichment. Pedersen and Johannsen (2018) note that in several countries, the digitalization of government processes has facilitated public finance oversight and reduced corruption. However, they also identify significant challenges to implementing these technologies, particularly in countries with limited technological infrastructure and low levels of digital literacy (Kaufmann et al., 2019). This preventive approach aligns with studies that stress the importance of addressing both the opportunities and motivations for corruption (García-Gallego et al., 2020; Ndedi, 2015; Pérez-Chiqués & Bustos, 2021).

Nonetheless, the review also identifies limitations in the proposed solutions. In many cases, punitive measures alone have not been sufficient to deter corrupt officials, highlighting the need to strengthen judicial systems and enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement (Olsen et al., 2019).

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares non-existence of any conflicts of interest



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