



UNDER THE SURFACE

Mexico's Kidnap & Extortion Landscape in 2026

FRONTLINE
GLOBAL



MERRILL HERZOG

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Executive Summary

The following report aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the current kidnapping and extortion environment in Mexico and raise risk awareness for individuals and entities visiting, living, or operating in the country.

It opens with an account of a recent, high-profile kidnapping case in which ten mine workers were abducted from their camp in Sinaloa. From this case study, the report establishes the power of criminal actors, the threat they pose to individuals, and that those without access to local networks and ground truth operate in a low-information environment.

Drawing both on proprietary Merrill Herzog ground truth, as well as publicly accessible information, the report then establishes a typology of kidnapping and extortion cases: conventional kidnapping for ransom, coercive and signaling abduction, express kidnapping, virtual kidnapping, and extortion (which can itself take different forms). This section explicates how the tactics, techniques, and procedures utilized by perpetrators of these various forms of kidnapping and extortion depend on the form the crime takes and the motives driving it. It traces how the kidnapping and extortion landscape has changed over time in Mexico and also explores the geographic distribution of these crimes and the limitations of the data available to measure their incidence.

Following this discussion, the report examines a list of Mexico's most powerful cartels, highlighting the enormous variation in their organizational structures and the broader ecosystem of factions, local cells, gangs, and independent actors operating beneath and alongside them with varying degrees of affiliation, from complete integration to independence. This complex web of actors means that attributing a crime to a cartel does not necessarily identify the specific perpetrators, decision-makers, or actors capable of controlling its outcome.

The subsequent section then notes that perpetrators of kidnapping and extortion target differing profiles and details the exposure factors that can increase or decrease an individual's odds of being targeted: perceived value and coercive leverage; physical access and opportunity; and visibility and available information. It ends by noting that the presence of extraneous variables means that kidnapping and extortion risk can be mitigated, but never fully eliminated.

Finally, this report concludes by observing the broader consequences of kidnapping and extortion risk for businesses, communities, and local markets. It also shows how underreporting compounds those harms by obscuring threat patterns and weakening both institutional responses and operational risk assessments.

Concordia, January 2026

In the early hours of the morning on January 23, 2026, an armed convoy stormed a residential camp operated by a multinational mining company in rural Sinaloa state and abducted 10 Mexican mine workers. Following their kidnapping, the mining company made no public mention of any demands. After two weeks with no leads on the miners' locations, authorities located the bodies of five in a mass grave 40 kilometers from where they had been taken. By April, four more bodies had been identified, leaving just one worker who remains missing and presumed dead.

Local and federal sources strongly suspect the Chapitos organization, a splinter faction of the Sinaloa Cartel, was responsible for the kidnapping and murder of the mine workers, but its motive for these crimes is still unclear. In the aftermath of their kidnapping and murder, local officials hypothesized that the miners were mistaken for members of a rival splinter group, a theory which their families dispute. Former workers also reject this explanation and have noted in anonymous testimony that criminal organizations had previously given them direct warnings about operating in the region, cautioning that they could not guarantee their safety.



Location where the mass graves were found in El Verde, Sinaloa, on February 11, 2026. © Merrill Herzog

The mining company had also temporarily suspended local operations in April 2025 after workers reported being watched, being intercepted by vehicles, and observing drones flying overhead. They suggest that the kidnappings may have instead been a reprisal for failure to pay extortion to criminal groups.

This case is extreme and not fully representative of Mexico's kidnapping and extortion environment. Kidnapping and extortion cases across Mexico vary significantly in their scope, operational methods, targets, and rationales. Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography's (INEGI) national victimization survey, however, found that 43.5 percent of kidnappings in 2024 lasted less than 24 hours. Most kidnappings also involve a ransom demand relayed by a counterparty on the other end of the phone. The above case nonetheless demonstrates the real threat posed by powerful organized criminal groups to parties conducting business in Mexico, both domestic and foreign.

Current Landscape, Change over Time, Geographies, and Data

CASE TYPE	PHYSICAL DETENTION?	OBJECTIVE	SELECTION LOGIC
Conventional Kidnapping for Ransom	Yes	Negotiated payment for release	Perceived payment capacity and accessibility
Coercive and Signaling Abduction	Yes	Recruitment, punishment, retaliation, intelligence, or intimidation	Conduct, affiliation, occupation, or symbolic value
Express Kidnapping	Yes (brief, no secondary location)	Immediate payment	Opportunity, perceived affluence, and immediate access to funds
Virtual Kidnapping	No	Negotiated payment	Reachability, available personal information
Extortion	No	One-off or recurring payment, means of territorial control	Perceived susceptibility, identifiable business that can be repeatedly monitored and disrupted

Figure 1 Typology of Kidnapping and Extortion

Distinct kidnap and ransom case types have emerged over the years. The typology above is not official, but these case types serve as useful analytical frames for the purposes of this report. Migrant kidnappings are also extremely widespread but not as relevant for the purposes of this report. In contrast to other regions worldwide, where ideological factors are at play, perpetrators in Mexico overwhelmingly carry out conventional kidnappings to accrue either money or power. These drivers are not mutually exclusive.

Conventional kidnappings for ransom. In conventional cases, criminal groups abduct and hold victims at a secure location until they secure a ransom payment, following which they are generally (though not always) released. Perpetrators typically contact a victim's family or employer via telephone and open negotiations in which both parties arrive at an agreed ransom price.



Assailants in Mexico deliberately struck a vehicle, forced it to stop, and abducted the driver.

© Merrill Herzog

Ransom payments form a significant revenue stream for organized crime groups, alongside other, more well-known channels such as drug trafficking. Consequently, Merrill Herzog practitioners emphasize that targets are selected based on their perceived accessibility and ability to pay. Businesspeople are frequently victims, with both foreign and domestic individuals targeted. Foreign executives have historically attracted multimillion-dollar ransom demands, but Merrill Herzog practitioners report a more recent shift toward a larger pool of lower-value targets. In line with this transition, criminal groups now target fewer foreigners, and the practitioner-observed ransom amounts for local targets have fallen from around one million dollars to as low as USD 25,000. Overall kidnapping cases have fallen since their Covid-19-era peak.

Merrill Herzog sources also suggest that communication between perpetrators and negotiators is increasingly carried out by “neutral” intermediaries rather than perpetrators themselves, and that negotiation periods have shortened from seven or more to between one and three days. Both trends suggest criminal groups are seeking to de-risk the business of conventional kidnapping and ransom.

Coercive and signaling abductions. These cases differ from conventional kidnapping, as perpetrators seek no ransom. They may alternatively abduct someone to forcibly recruit or exploit them, obtain information, compel cooperation, punish disobedience by the victim or an associate, send a message to a wider audience, retaliate against rivals, or enforce territorial control. In July 2025, armed men abducted a Veracruz taxi driver, forced her to record a video warning other drivers to pay extortion demands, and then killed her. In these cases, release may depend on compliance, an internal organizational decision, or it may not depend on a negotiable condition at all. Merrill Herzog practitioners note that in these cases, it is critical to understand who within a criminal organization ordered an abduction, and to have interlocutors in place to engage with the appropriate decision-makers. Based on publicly available information, the case of the 10 miners in Sinaloa bears the markers of a coercive/signaling abduction, given the apparent absence of any ransom demands and previous cartel warnings. Coercive and signaling abductions are naturally more likely to occur in areas of weak or contested cartel control, given their capacity to convey information and bolster a group’s power.

Express kidnappings. These cases entail the short detention of a victim undertaken to facilitate robbery or extortion. Perpetrators may force victims to withdraw cash from one or several ATMs, disclose confidential banking information, or contact someone to make an immediate payment. Victims are targeted opportunistically, though also based on their perceived affluence. They are not taken to a secure location, as express kidnappings take place quickly, though perpetrators will often drive them from point to point and release them once they have complied with their demands.



Ransom money collected to secure the release of a victim in Mexico. © Merrill Herzog

Virtual kidnappings. A relatively new development, virtual kidnappings occur when perpetrators demand a ransom payment to secure the release of a victim they have supposedly kidnapped, but who in actuality has not been detained. Victims are frequently travelers who are at work, asleep, or on a flight while their family or employer is contacted. Perpetrators leverage personal information, which Merrill Herzog sources note is often obtained directly from victims' hotels, to make their accounts more convincing.

Virtual kidnappings are only successful so long as the victim cannot be contacted. To this end, callers first reach the victim, usually by phone or WhatsApp, and persuade them to isolate: stay in the room, turn off the phone, stop answering, sometimes move to a different hotel. They may be told a criminal group is watching them, that their family is in danger, that they are under investigation, or that complying is the only way to protect someone else. In recent years, the risk of virtual kidnappings has risen, as criminals are more easily able to access victims' personal information from online data brokers and as AI tools, such as voice-cloning tools, become more capable.

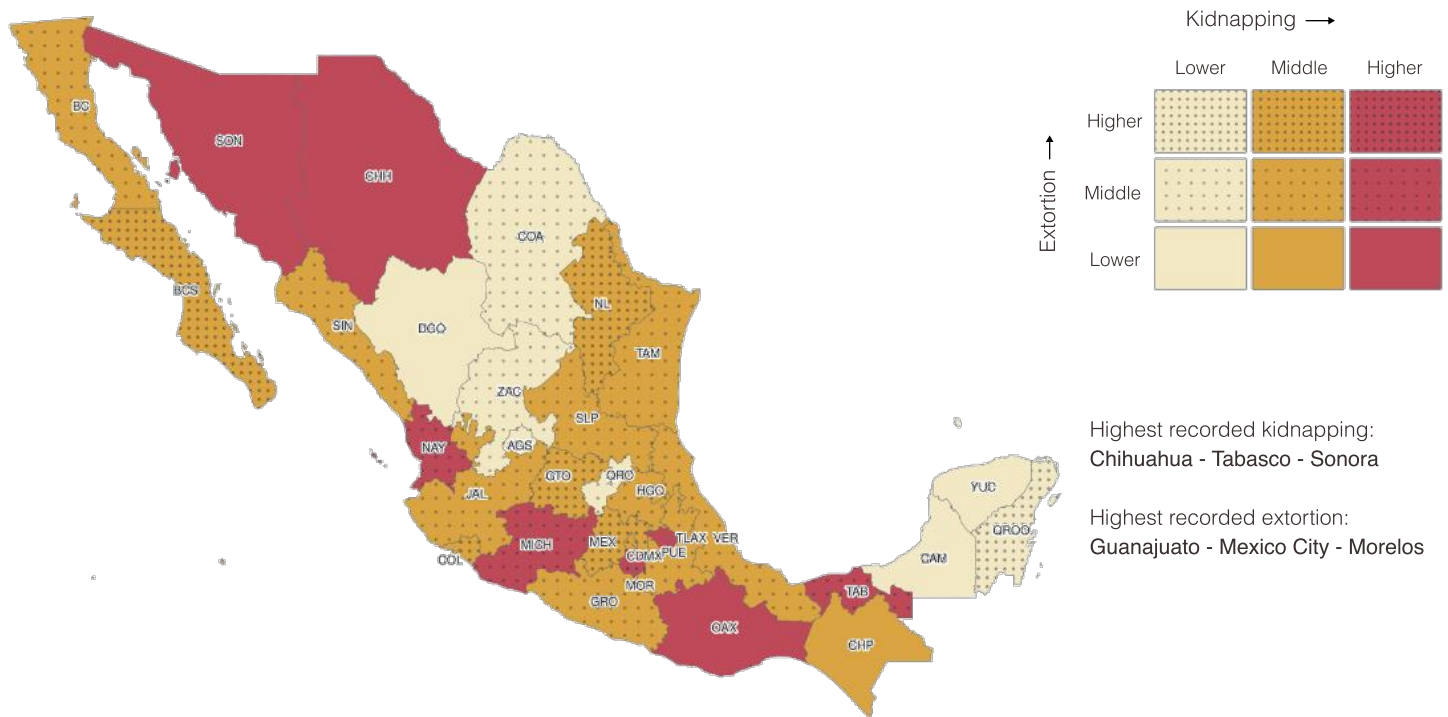
Extortion. Operates on a much greater scale than physical kidnapping, encompassing both remote attempts and threats backed by a local capacity for violence. INEGI estimated that extortion was the most frequent crime experienced by Mexican businesses in 2023. Of the extortion incidents reported by the survey, 84.1 percent were telephone-based, while 15.2 percent occurred in the street, at a business, or as cobro de piso. The latter cases were much more effective, with victims reportedly meeting perpetrators' demands in 67 percent of cases, against just 14.9 percent of extortions overall. Official investigation files into extortion rose approximately 74 percent between 2015 and 2025, indicating a rapidly expanding market corroborated by Merrill Herzog ground sources.

At its most institutionalized, extortion is a form of criminal governance in areas of weak or diminished state capacity. Criminal groups impose suppliers, set prices, determine who may transport goods, and tax production by volume. Merrill Herzog sources report that recurring fees can range from 10 to 80 percent of profits. Businesses may also face demands from multiple groups when they operate in contested territory or move personnel and merchandise across several criminal jurisdictions.

Kidnapping and extortion cases are distributed unevenly across Mexico. In 2025, the eight regions with the highest numbers of recorded extortion investigations accounted for 76.1 percent of the national total, while the corresponding eight for kidnapping accounted for 63.4 percent. Together, the two groups comprised just twelve of Mexico's 32 federal entities. Naturally, virtual kidnapping, along with phone-based extortion, can occur anywhere, as perpetrators need not be physically present. As illustrated below, recorded kidnapping and extortion intensity is sometimes, but not universally, correlated. States such as Michoacán register relatively high rates of both, whereas in states such as Chihuahua and Quintana Roo, the elevated relative incidence of one coincides with the lower relative incidence of the other.

Reported kidnapping and extortion intensity by state, 2025

State color shows kidnapping incidence; dot density shows extortion incidence.



Note: Rates are investigation files per 100,000 residents. Categories show states relative positions, not absolute risk levels, and exclude unreported crime.

Figure 2 Typology of Kidnapping and Extortion. *Source: Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano, based on SESNSP data. Complete-year 2025 series.*

While official statistics are useful for drawing conclusions about relative trends across time and geography, they should be viewed with caution when attempting to ascertain absolute levels of risk. The Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System's (SESNSP) data reflects files opened by state prosecutors and is not a record of all crimes. Statistics are also further distorted across Mexico, and indeed Latin America, as crimes often go unreported due to a mixture of victims' fear of retaliation from perpetrators and a lack of faith in authorities. ENVIPE estimates that 98.1 percent of kidnappings and 97 percent of extortions occurring in 2024 were either unreported or did not result in an investigation file. The absence of a comprehensive dataset heightens the need for accurate intelligence; this can be gathered only through a network of established, trusted human sources on the ground.

Actors, Organizational Structures, and Territories

The landscape of criminal groups in Mexico is fragmented in several ways. At the highest level, fragmentation is seen in the range of cartels currently operating across the country. In 2025, the United States designated six Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations: the Sinaloa Cartel, the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Cárteles Unidos, the Gulf Cartel, the Northeast Cartel, and La Nueva Familia Michoacana. In July 2026, it added the Juárez Cartel and Los Viagras to this list. Of these, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration identifies the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG as the largest, most capable, and most internationally connected organizations. This is not an exhaustive list of cartels; in 2020, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration (2018-2024) identified 19 "high-impact criminal organizations." The national cartel map also continuously changes as new groups emerge and old organizations are defeated by their rivals, subsumed, or fragmented (frequently the result of a government decapitation strike).

The term "cartel" continues to be a useful designation for select criminal networks with substantial commercial, coercive, and territorial power, but it nonetheless flattens significant observed variation in their internal structures, territorial reach, and degree of centralized control, as demonstrated below.

Sinaloa Cartel. Sinaloa is organized around a "federal" system in which separate factions operate semi-independently while cooperating, competing, or forming alliances under a common label. Historically, Joaquín Guzmán Loera AKA "El Chapo" was often the federation's most powerful leader, while Ismael Zambada García AKA "El Mayo" commanded a parallel network and shared in cartel-wide coordination. Since September 2024, their successor blocs, Los Chapitos and La Mayiza, the cartel's two dominant factions, have been at war following the capture of their two principal leaders, Joaquín Guzmán López and El Mayo. The Sinaloa Cartel's stronghold lies in the so-called Golden Triangle of Sinaloa-Durango-Chihuahua, with large operations in Sonora and Baja California.

Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación. Alongside Sinaloa, CJNG is one of Mexico’s two most powerful cartels, with operations in more than 40 countries globally. Within Mexico, it operates a “franchise-based command structure,” but demonstrates far more centralization than Sinaloa, its principal rival. A 2021 Baker Institute study found that its affiliate partners do not tend to ally with each other and engage principally with the core CJNG command structure. Despite this hierarchical structure, the cartel has weathered the death of its leader, Nemesis Oseguera Cervantes AKA “El Mencho”, who was killed during a Mexican security operation in February 2026. United States authorities have identified Juan Carlos González, AKA “El Pelón,” as his successor. CJNG’s operational core lies in the western states of Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and Michoacán. It also retains a strong presence in Veracruz and central Mexico.

Gulf Cartel. The Gulf Cartel no longer functions as a unified organization and serves as an umbrella term for a series of successor organizations. Its two principal factions are Los Metros and the allied Los Escorpiones–Los Ciclones bloc, which maintain separate leaderships and shifting relationships with other factions and outside cartels. The factions are concentrated in northern Tamaulipas, with Los Metros centered on Reynosa and the Ribereña corridor and Los Escorpiones–Los Ciclones around Matamoros.

Cárteles Unidos. Cárteles Unidos is a fluid coalition of Michoacán-based constituent cartels, formed with the primary goal of resisting CJNG’s expansion. Constituent leaders retain control over their own organizations, territories, and criminal economies while coordinating armed operations against CJNG, under the loose central leadership of Juan José Farías Álvarez, AKA “El Abuelo.” Its exact composition has changed as groups enter or leave. Cárteles Unidos is concentrated in central and western Michoacán’s Tierra Caliente region, particularly around Tepalcatepec.

La Nueva Familia Michoacana. La Nueva Familia Michoacana is the strongest successor organization to emerge from the fragmentation of the original La Familia Michoacana Cartel. It is co-led by Johnny “El Pez” and José Alfredo “El Fresa” and operates through local cells. Its principal base spans Guerrero and the southern portions of Mexico State. It also maintains a presence in Michoacán and Morelos.

What a cartel label can conceal

A composite map of recurring actors and relationships

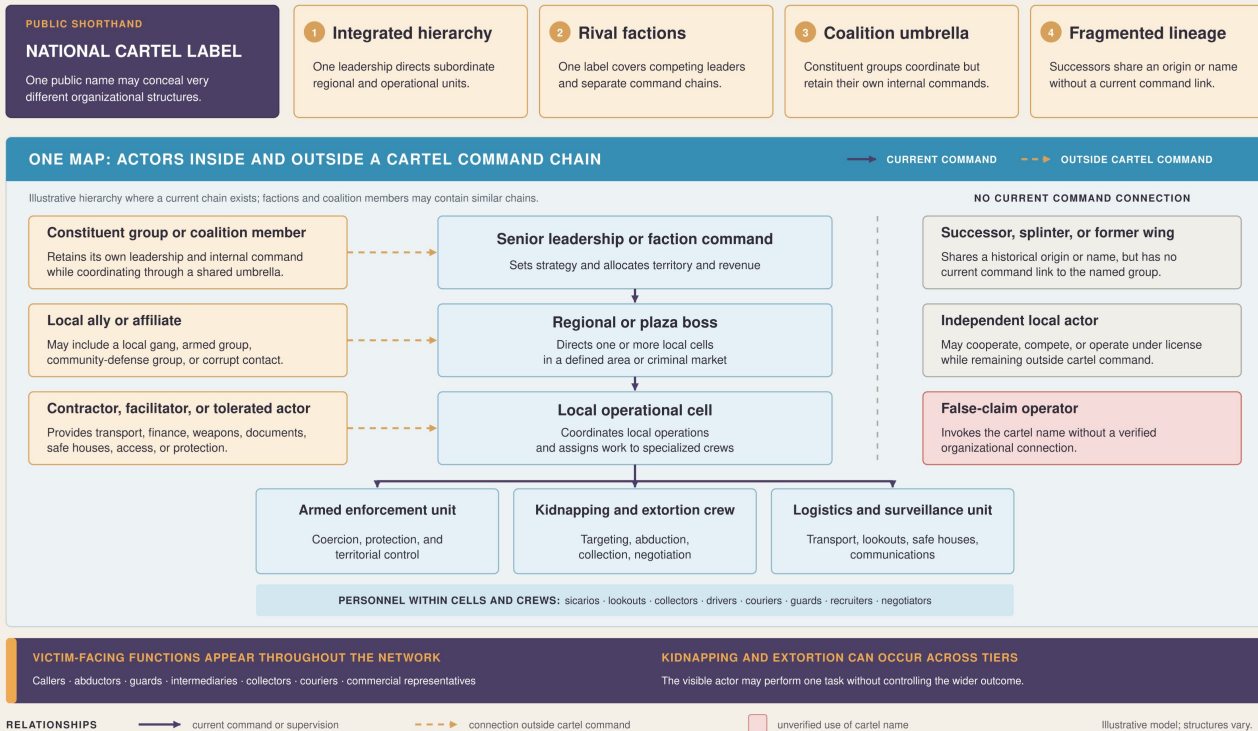


Figure 3 Composite map of recurring actors and relationships in Mexican organized crime.

Beneath and around these cartels also lie an array of leadership factions, constituent organizations, armed wings, plaza bosses, cells, sicario crews, kidnapping and extortion crews, associated gangs, community-defense groups, and corrupt authorities. The International Crisis Group identified at least 543 armed groups that operated in Mexico at some point between mid-2009 and late 2020.

While some of these actors, such as plaza bosses, may be under the direct control of a cartel's leadership, many others retain a high degree of autonomy as coalition members, affiliates, allies, or contractors. Some actors may be entirely independent, collaborating with the cartel or even falsely claiming to represent it. Even when local conditions permit journalists and investigators to attribute a crime to a cartel, victims may not necessarily be able to identify the actor that carried it out, its relationship to senior leadership, or the person capable of controlling an outcome.

Target Profiles and Exposure Factors

Because of both the range of criminal actors active on the ground and the diversity of their motives, perpetrators carrying out kidnappings or extortions do not target a single victim profile. Similarly, many diverse exposure factors can and do contribute to a victim's targeting, with the most important ones shifting from case to case.

Value and coercive leverage. A potential victim's perceived wealth is often among the most important variables a perpetrator will evaluate when selecting a target. In the criminal's calculus, kidnapping or extorting a wealthier victim is more likely to result in a larger payoff, as they can demand a higher ransom or extortion rate due to the greater access to capital available to the victim, their family, or their business. Merrill Herzog's experience suggests that foreign executives can generate exceptionally large demands, while accessible local business owners constitute a much larger pool of routine targets. Ordinary individuals remain at risk of kidnapping when perpetrators seek to target wealthy individuals, particularly when they are connected to another actor with more capital; criminals sometimes abduct an employee or a relative of a wealthier individual in the hopes of coercing them to meet a high ransom.

Physical access and opportunity. Excluding cases of virtual kidnapping and remote extortion, perpetrators must also have physical access to the victims they wish to kidnap or extort. Merrill Herzog's intelligence highlights that predictable patterns of behavior, traveling alone, being physically isolated, using unofficial transport, and staying in accessible hotels all increase a criminal's access to a potential victim. Merrill Herzog sources also suggest that perpetrators often profile multiple victims simultaneously, and will opt to target those that present as the easiest to abduct. At times, victims might simply find themselves "in the wrong place at the wrong time," especially if they are opportunistically targeted for express kidnappings. Repeated physical access to immovable businesses is a major factor facilitating the relatively frictionless growth in extortion across Mexico.

Visibility and information. Information makes up another key variable in kidnapping and extortion cases.

It can be used to establish identity, occupation, relative wealth, travel plans, family relationships, friendships, and other facts that both allow a perpetrator to more effectively target a victim and to more successfully obtain payment via either a ransom or extortion fee. Merrill Herzog practitioners caution that personal intelligence can be obtained legally through online data brokers, websites, business reports, and social media posts, or fraudulently through collaboration with hotel staff, leaked data, or even informants.

Extraneous variables and edge cases. Factors entirely outside of an individual's control might also increase their risk exposure. Blanket territorial extortion; mistaken identity; selection for nonfinancial purposes such as signaling or territorial enforcement; and proximity to an intended target can all result in victimization irrespective of a person's individual risk profile or the precautions they elect to take. Following the death of "El Mencho," CJNG assets carried out widespread and indiscriminate reprisals across much of Mexico.

These risks can never be fully mitigated. Businesses and individuals can act responsibly and take precautions but will never be able to control territorial conflict, criminal fragmentation, corrupt or coerced institutions, mistaken identity, opportunistic interception, or the conduct of third parties. Current ground truth, local network analysis, preparedness, and experienced incident response are therefore necessary both to interpret residual exposure and to manage incidents that prevention cannot avert.

Screenshot from video of four U.S. citizens kidnapped in Matamoros, Mexico in 2023.



Implications

The significant harm caused by Mexico's institutionalized kidnapping and extortion extends beyond victims themselves to families, employees, supply chains, and local markets. At the societal and economic levels, their cumulative effect is staggering, and consistent underreporting distorts not only the magnitude of these threats, but also their precise composition and geographic distribution.

In kidnapping cases, families, friends, and co-workers experience the most immediate secondary harm. Victims and those around them can suffer lasting psychological damage. Ransom demands can impose severe financial losses on families and businesses. The abduction of an employee may also produce operational disruption disproportionate to the victim's role within an organization. In 2024, FEMSA [closed](#) all 191 Oxxo stores and seven gas stations in Nuevo Laredo after gang members abducted two store employees to enforce demands that personnel act as lookouts or provide information.

Extortion, too, imposes persistent harm. Recurring demands increase operating costs and may [force](#) businesses to spend more on security, reduce their hours, alter routes or suppliers, relocate personnel, or close altogether. In more severe cases, perpetrators may coerce businesses into becoming entangled with criminal networks, demanding access to a business's premises, employees, or commercial infrastructure. INEGI [estimates](#) that insecurity and crime cost Mexican businesses MXN 124.3 billion in 2023. Over half of this (54 percent) was spent on preventive measures by businesses reacting only to the threat of crime.

Even when a business is not directly threatened, the effects of extortion further afield can ripple through supply chains. Criminal organizations may extort transporters, suppliers, producers, unions, warehouses, or distributors. These market distortions inevitably result in higher costs which are ultimately borne by businesses and consumers.

One law enforcement operation conducted across 14 municipalities in Mexico state in 2025, exposed an alleged La Nueva Familia Michoacana-linked system that forced merchants to buy or sell at specified locations, displaced independent transporters through cartel-aligned unions, and controlled the distribution of products ranging from food to construction materials. The impact of this rent-seeking on local prices was clear. Rebar costing MXN 18 per kilogram in Toluca sold for MXN 45 in Valle de Bravo. Chicken thighs costing MXN 50 in the state capital reached MXN 120 in Sultepec.

Underreporting of both kidnapping and extortion cases compounds all of these harms by obfuscating risk levels and hampering authorities' responses to crime. It likely distorts the apparent composition of the extortion and kidnapping threats; victims facing sustained coercion and a credible risk of retaliation have stronger incentives to self-censor than those facing remote or opportunistic demands. The intentions behind statistical research are also important. Data collection methodologies, which might log a series of criminal actions as discrete events, can also overlook what might be a single, organized campaign of violence and coercion. Victimization surveys also often lack the geographic granularity needed for operational risk analysis. INEGI's ENVE 2024 survey, for example, lacked sub-state level data. ENVIPE 2025 provides sub-state estimates only for 34 designated urban areas.

Chronic underreporting further emboldens criminals and continues to foster an environment where victims feel too afraid to speak out, ultimately elevating threat levels for the whole of society. Reduced information-sharing weakens collective organization and hinders authorities' ability to identify patterns, repeat perpetrators, and escalating threats. Limited ability and willingness to rely on official institutions increase businesses' dependence on rumor and informal networks, and makes it more likely that they will acquiesce to criminals' demands, further perpetuating the cycle of crime and victimization.

Conclusion

Mexico's kidnapping and extortion landscape has shifted. Kidnappings have declined in number overall, but the relative proportion of lower-profile kidnappings has increased. Meanwhile, extortion has steadily expanded. Both threats encompass distinct practices with different perpetrators, motives, targets, and geographic concentrations. Kidnappings are carried out principally for ransom, though also to compel cooperation, punish resistance, gather intelligence, or enforce authority. Kidnappings can be planned, or they can take place opportunistically. Extortion cases demonstrate similar variation, ranging from opportunistic, remote demands to institutionalized systems that can disrupt entire markets. These activities are carried out within a fragmented criminal environment in which national cartel labels often conceal the local actors, chains of command, and decision-makers specific to a particular incident. Persistent underreporting obscures this complexity further. A shared set of factors can increase an individual's risk of being targeted for either set of crimes or reduce it if they are mitigated, though this risk will never wholly dissipate. Effective risk management therefore depends on the current local intelligence, preparation, and response capacity required to act within that uncertainty.

Endnotes

- 1 INEGI, ENVIPE 2025 (2024 data): 43.5% of kidnappings lasted less than 24 hours; 98.1% of kidnappings and 97% of extortions went unreported or without an investigation file.
- 2 INEGI, ENVE 2024 (2023 data): Extortion was the most frequent crime against Mexican businesses (84.1% telephone-based); total cost of insecurity and crime to businesses reached MXN 124.3 billion.
- 3 Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano (based on SESNSP data), complete-year 2025 series: Extortion investigation files rose ~74% from 2015 to 2025; top eight states accounted for 76.1% of extortion files and 63.4% of kidnapping files.
- 4 Baker Institute, “Mexico’s 2021 Dark Network Alliance Structure” (2021/2022): CJNG maintains a more centralized, hierarchical alliance structure than Sinaloa.
- 5 International Crisis Group: At least 543 armed groups operated in Mexico between mid-2009 and late 2020.
- 6 U.S. Department of State: Six Mexican cartels designated as FTOs in 2025; Juárez Cartel and Los Viagras added in July 2026.
- 7 SESNSP data and contemporaneous reporting on the January 2026 Concordia, Sinaloa abduction of ten mine workers.

These notes cover only the principal public statistical, institutional, and open-source references used in the report. All other analysis, typology, practitioner observations, and assessments of local conditions draw on Merrill Herzog proprietary ground truth and local network sources.

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