

# Security Risks Report – Mexico

May 2025

# Executive summary

Since the arrest of Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada in July 2024, the Sinaloa Cartel has splintered, leading to heightened violence both within and beyond its traditional territories.

- The security landscape in Mexico has thus deteriorated significantly, despite official statistics indicating a decrease in the homicide rate.

The government’s renewed focus on high-profile arrests and drug decommissions, while resonant in the media, is unlikely to produce substantial improvements in public safety, instead contributing to further cartel fragmentation and competition.

The conflict within the Sinaloa Cartel has manifested in direct confrontations between its two main factions – *La Chapiza*, led by *Los Chapitos*, and *La Mayiza*, now under Ismael Zambada Sicairos.

This fragmentation has weakened the cartel’s hold on various regions, prompting other criminal groups to seize opportunities to expand their influence.

- Concurrently, the *Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) appears to be strategically biding its time while making calculated moves to gain control over specific areas.

The rise in cartel-related violence has had a pronounced impact on public safety, with kidnapping and extortion rates soaring. Kidnappings have increased by 16% year-on-year as of March 2025, while extortion has surged by 22%. Many kidnappings are linked to cartel disputes and do not involve ransom demands, further complicating the security situation.

Express kidnappings, characterised by short-term abductions for quick financial gains, have become a significant concern.

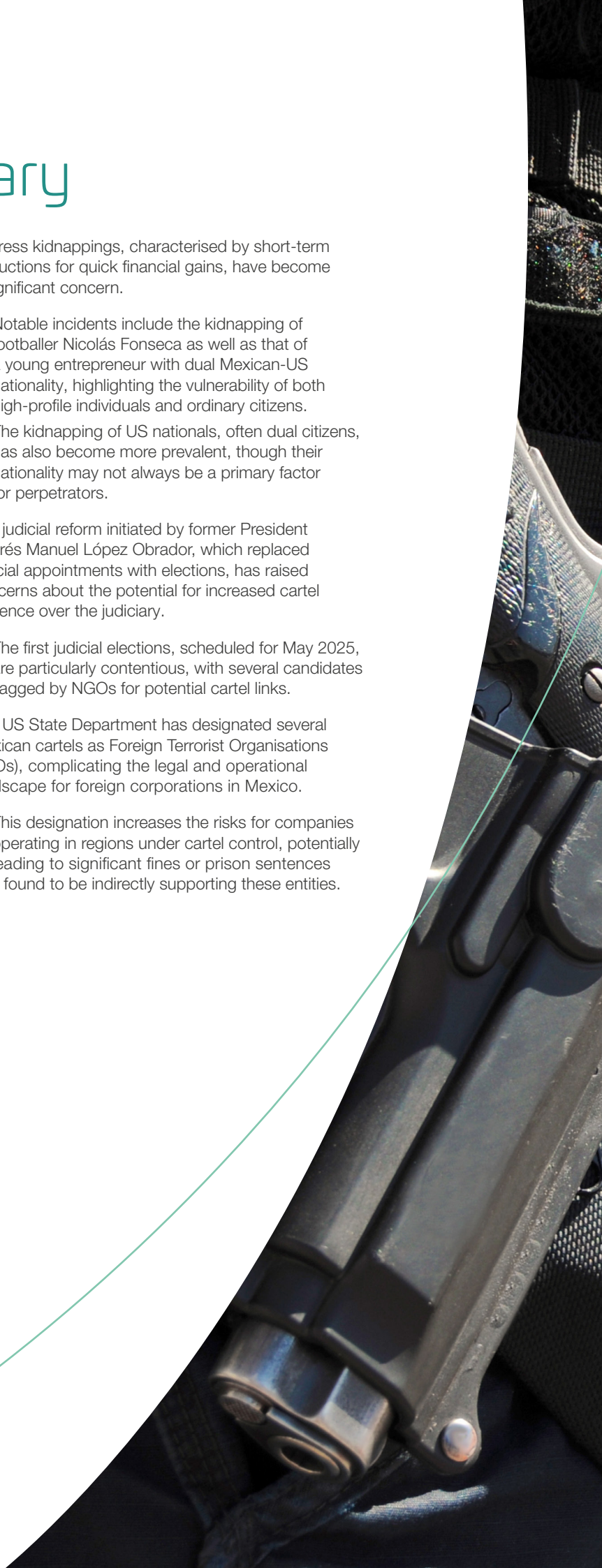
- Notable incidents include the kidnapping of footballer Nicolás Fonseca as well as that of a young entrepreneur with dual Mexican-US nationality, highlighting the vulnerability of both high-profile individuals and ordinary citizens.
- The kidnapping of US nationals, often dual citizens, has also become more prevalent, though their nationality may not always be a primary factor for perpetrators.

The judicial reform initiated by former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, which replaced judicial appointments with elections, has raised concerns about the potential for increased cartel influence over the judiciary.

- The first judicial elections, scheduled for May 2025, are particularly contentious, with several candidates flagged by NGOs for potential cartel links.

The US State Department has designated several Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs), complicating the legal and operational landscape for foreign corporations in Mexico.

- This designation increases the risks for companies operating in regions under cartel control, potentially leading to significant fines or prison sentences if found to be indirectly supporting these entities.











# Review of recent developments

The tide of insecurity in Mexico continues to rise, despite official statistics showing a year-on-year decrease in homicide rates in the first quarter of 2025.

- Homicide figures are misleading given the increasing number of “disappeared” across the country: in the ongoing cartel wars, the trend is to dispose of victims’ bodies in mass graves or by burning them.

The war within the Sinaloa Cartel, triggered by the arrest of Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada on 25 July 2024, has had a nationwide impact beyond Sinaloa, affecting areas that were previously relatively safe, most notably Tabasco (see **Recent organised crime news**).

The impact of the war has been direct, resulting from the conflict between the two Sinaloa factions, and indirect, with violence increasing as other cartels have sought to gain ground in territories where Sinaloa’s hold has weakened (see **Organised crime in Mexico: State of play**).

According to official statistics, some 5,660 clandestine mass graves have been found since 2007, of which nearly half were found in the last six years.

The problem of disappearances is not new, but its scale has become such that numerous associations of “searchers” have sprung up to pressure the government into action and also to conduct their own investigations into the disappearances.

These activists are in turn also at risk: on 27 March, Teresa González Murillo, a prominent activist, was gravely injured during a kidnapping attempt at her home and died six days later. She was the 27th searcher to have been killed since 2010.

Given this backdrop of rising and expanding violence, security risk has increased. According to the Secretary General of the National Public Security System (SESNSP), kidnapping in March 2025 was up year on year by 16%, and extortion was up by 22%. As Convex has noted before, the data underestimate the magnitude of crime rates (see **Statistics**).

*Alto al Secuestro*, a local NGO focused on the kidnapping problem in Mexico, estimates that thus far into the administration of Claudia Sheinbaum (who took office on 1 October 2024), there have been an average of 6.7 kidnappings per day, the highest incidence being in Sinaloa.

- The NGO also notes that some kidnappings in Sinaloa are not classed as such in official statistics.
- Convex notes that many kidnappings in Sinaloa are related to the intra-cartel war and are not for ransom; the victims most often join the ranks of the disappeared.

While most victims of kidnapping are either directly involved in cartel wars or collateral damage of said wars, there has also been an increase in kidnap for ransom risk, affecting a wide range of victims.

“Express” kidnapping – where the victim is held for a few hours – is a particular concern.

- The most notable incident in recent months took place on 27 February, when a well-known footballer, Nicolás Fonseca, was intercepted on a highway as he drove to his training ground. He was robbed and released a few hours later – no further details were made public as to whether he paid a ransom or whether the authorities intervened.
- A few days earlier, on 21 February, a similar express kidnapping took place on the Monterrey-Reynosa highway, a known hotspot for these kinds of interceptions. This time, the victim was not a celebrity, but a young entrepreneur with dual Mexican-US nationality. According to the information available, he may have been stopped by individuals posing as officials – a common practice in these highway abductions.





The kidnapping of US nationals appears to have become more prevalent in recent months, with the caveat that the victims are often dual nationals and the perpetrators may not always be aware that their targets are US citizens.

- Even where victims' US nationality is clear, it may not be a prime factor in the perpetrators' calculations. For example, when law enforcement rescued two kidnapped US nationals on 16 April in Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), the agents found three other captives from Mexico, Honduras and China.
- Nevertheless, US nationality may be a factor in some cases. Mexican-born US residents present attractive targets by having both access to the higher standard of living of the US and sufficient links in Mexico with which to lure them in.
- For instance, in one case, a dual national living in Texas was invited by a friend in Mexico to meet in Reynosa (Tamaulipas), on the border with the US. At the meeting place, his girlfriend managed to hide but saw two armed masked men force him into a van. The fate of the victim remained unknown at the time of writing.

As the cartel war has fuelled insecurity across the country, radiating out from its epicentre in Culiacán (Sinaloa), kidnapping and extortion have become more pressing security risks even in Mexico City. As in other areas, public transport poses a key vulnerability, even when seemingly proper precautions have been taken.

- There have been several instances of "express" kidnapping taking place at Mexico City International Airport. Victims book a cab through an application, thinking this is safe, but in fact, armed men are hidden in the trunk of the vehicles.
- As well as being robbed of all their possessions, victims are forced to reveal banking passwords and other details, enabling the perpetrators to access additional cash resources.

Extortion is also a rising problem for foreign corporations, especially in border areas. US subsidiaries in Mexico are under increasing pressure from organised crime.

- This not only poses security risks to companies and their employees, but also exposes these enterprises to legal risk, given that the US has designated six Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs – see **Organised crime in Mexico: State of play**). This means that doing business, even unknowingly, with the cartels now exposes US companies to the risk of receiving not only significant fines but also prison sentences.





### In focus: Judicial elections

One of the last legislative initiatives of the outgoing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in 2024 was a reform of the judiciary, replacing a system of judicial appointments with elections.

- The elected positions include nine members of the Supreme Court of Justice, five members of a new judicial disciplinary tribunal (tasked with oversight over the judiciary), 17 members of the electoral tribunal and over 3,000 district judges.

The reform was immediately criticised by opponents of the government and international human rights organisations for raising the risk that organised crime will strengthen its control over the judiciary by manipulating the vote or pressuring voters.

Equally, although political parties are in theory forbidden from publicly supporting candidates, in practice the risk that candidates will benefit from covert campaign financing is high.

Ahead of the first judicial elections on 1 June 2025, Local NGO Defensorxs listed 18 high-risk candidates from the point of view of potential links with organised crime.

- Notable among them is Silvia Rocío Delgado, who was part of *El Chapo's* legal team in 2016.

In any case, the judicial reform is unlikely to improve the security environment. Criminal impunity stems from issues of collusion and corruption earlier in the process, during the investigation state – the Jalisco state prosecutor's failings in the case of Rancho Izaguirre is a likely example (see **Recent organised crime news**).



# US State Department advice

The US State Department updated its Travel Advisory for Mexico on 6 September 2024.



Convex notes that Tabasco is not listed specifically for kidnapping, only for crime. However, security risk in the state, including kidnapping risk, has risen sharply since the Travel Advisory was last updated.



# Organised crime in Mexico

The National Intelligence Centre (CNI) has in recent years considered the **Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación** (CJNG) and the **Sinaloa Cartel** (also known as the Pacific Cartel) to be the dominant groups in Mexico's drug trade. However, the consensus in Mexico now is that the Sinaloa Cartel is finished, at least in its past incarnation, as it has fractured into two main factions that are not expected to reconcile:

- **La Chapiza** is led by “*Los Chapitos*”, four of the twelve sons of former cartel leader Joaquín Guzmán Loera (“*El Chapo*”), currently in US custody. Los Chapitos are two pairs of half-brothers:
  - The Guzmán López brothers, Joaquín and Ovidio (“*El Ratón*”), also both currently in US custody
  - The Guzmán Salazar brothers, Iván Archivaldo and Jesús Alfredo, leading *La Chapiza* in Mexico.
- **La Mayiza** was led by former Chapo lieutenant Ismael Zambada García (“*El Mayo*”) until his arrest in July 2024, when he was betrayed by *Los Chapitos*. *El Mayo* is now in US custody, and *La Mayiza* is led by his son, Ismael Zambada Sicaños (“*El Mayo Flaco*”).

Two main questions remain: which faction will win the war, and what winning will mean. The war is draining both sides, sucking resources into the epicentre in Sinaloa and pulling them away from other regions. This, in turn, is weakening the old cartel's hold on those regions and leading smaller groups to make a bid for control. CJNG, in the meantime, appears to be mostly biding its time, although it appears to be making small plays for power in specific areas (see **State of Play**).

Operating alongside and within these two cartels, there are an estimated 150 criminal groups of varying sizes in the country; higher estimates can also be found in the media, of around 175 groups. The sub-groups allied to each large cartel can range in nature from significant paramilitary forces to small criminal street gangs.

Periodically, one of these subgroups will gather enough strength to splinter off and eventually become a rival cartel, resulting in increasing levels of violence as the newcomer seeks to establish itself. This process is in evidence now, with the collapse of the Sinaloa Cartel. At other times, fragmentation has been the result of successful government operations to capture a cartel's top leadership, making the war against drugs akin to fighting a hydra.

There is also the risk of new entrants from abroad, most notably the Venezuela-based **Tren de Aragua**, which is said to be gaining ground in Ciudad Juárez. It would appear that this organisation, which “specialises” in human trafficking and migrant smuggling, has entered Mexico through its networks in the US.

Further complicating the fight against crime, collusion between organised crime and the authorities is endemic, especially at local level.

## State of play

On 20 February, the US State Department designated the following cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs):

- Sinaloa Cartel
- CJNG
- Northeast Cartel
- *La Nueva Familia Michoacana*
- Gulf Cartel
- United Cartels
- *Tren de Aragua* (Venezuela)
- *Mara Salvatrucha* (El Salvador)

The list appears to be somewhat out of date, even leaving aside the fracture of the Sinaloa Cartel.

- The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) acknowledges in its 2025 National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) that the **Gulf Cartel** “is no longer a united cartel, having split into multiple factions”; similarly, the Northeast Cartel is described as “a large network of compartmentalised cells”.
- Conversely, in the same report, the DEA describes two of the other listed entities – **La Nueva Familia Michoacana** and **United Cartels** – as part of one umbrella group, **La Familia Michoacana**.

The war between *La Chapiza* and *La Mayiza* is expected to continue unabated until one side is clearly victorious. However, the power struggle has also led to the emergence of factions that had previously been either quiescent or flying below the radar.

- One key faction is led by Aureliano Guzmán Loera (“*El Guano*”), *El Chapo*'s elder brother and the uncle of *Los Chapitos*. This faction is known as **Cartel del Guano** (CDG) and has reportedly sided with *Los Chapitos* against *La Mayiza*.
- Two other factions to watch are those led by the brothers José Luis, Felipe and Alejandro Cabrera Sarabia, and by Fausto Isidro Meza Flores (“*El Chapo Isidro*”).

Like the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG is at risk of internal strife because its leader, Nemesio Oseguera (“*El Mencho*”), is said to be 58 years old and in poor health. There have been repeated rumours of his death, most recently in mid-2023, but they are unconfirmed, and indeed the US believes him to be alive: on 4 December 2025, the DEA raised its reward for information leading to his capture from US\$10m to US\$15m.

El Mencho's wife, Rosalinda González, has a son, Juan Carlos González, who was adopted by *El Mencho* and has been tipped as his likely successor. The lack of clarity surrounding *El Mencho*'s succession raises the risk of another power struggle similar to that now raging within the Sinaloa Cartel.

- However, Juan Carlos can likely count on the backing of a key group within CJNG, "**Los Cuinis**". These are his mother's siblings, reportedly numbering either 12 or 18: seven sisters and five or more brothers.
- *Los Cuinis* is said to be the "banking" arm of CJNG, dedicated primarily to money laundering. The US considers this grouping as a separate cartel, and some local journalists report that it has begun to work for other cartels as well as CJNG.

The war within the Sinaloa Cartel has sparked pre-existing rivalries and fuelled competition for control over territory, especially where Sinaloa has been weakened by the war.

- CJNG is fighting *La Nueva Familia Michoacana* / *La Familia Michoacana* for control of Edomex, Guerrero and other central states where the latter group is strong. As noted, the DEA considers *La Nueva Familia Michoacana* to be part of the broader *La Familia Michoacana* organisation.
- CJNG is also trying to establish control in Mexico City and Guanajuato.

Even though fragmentation diminishes the operational reach of a cartel, it does not necessarily eliminate or weaken its impact on the population. A case in point is the Gulf Cartel and its enforcement offshoot, **Los Zetas**, composed of former soldiers.

- The Gulf Cartel was very powerful in the 1980s and 1990s, but, despite its listing as an FTO, it has effectively disappeared as an entity – as acknowledged by the DEA.
- Its enforcers, *Los Zetas*, initially rose as the Gulf Cartel waned, but in the 2000s they lost out in a major conflict with the Sinaloa Cartel.
- Unlike the Gulf Cartel, however, *Los Zetas* has found a form of subsistence as a range of splinter groups bearing that name.

According to leaked SEDENA documents, 13 main cartels operate in Mexico City, the main ones reportedly being **La Unión Tepito** and their rivals, **Fuerza Anti-Unión** (which has allied itself with CJNG).



## Recent organised crime news

In early May, news broke that 17 members of the Guzmán Loera family, including *El Chapo*'s second wife (and mother of Joaquín and Ovidio), had left Mexico for the US. This strongly suggested that the Guzmán Loera brothers had reached a deal with US authorities.

- The news has mixed implications for the outcome of the ongoing cartel war. On the one hand, the exodus has been seen by many as a sign that *La Chapiza* is losing ground. This view is supported by the intensification of fighting in Culiacán, traditionally *Los Chapitos*' home territory (whereas *El Mayo* has traditionally held sway mainly in rural areas).
- On the other hand, other observers believe that the Guzmán Loera have leverage over the Mexican government, and the threat that they might disclose uncomfortable information to the US might prompt the government to focus its military efforts on *La Mayiza*, enabling *La Chapiza* to survive.

On balance, however, the government is fighting fires on so many fronts that helping *La Chapiza* would be difficult even if that were the intention. Against a backdrop of a difficult relationship with the US, the Sheinbaum administration cannot be seen to be "soft" on the cartels and has overseen a sharp increase in high-profile arrests and drug decommissions.

- This appears to be a return to the so-called "kingpin strategy", which was developed by the DEA in the 1980s and focused on apprehending cartel leaders.
- However, while this strategy has media resonance, in its previous incarnation it led only to cartel fragmentation, and there is no reason to believe it will prove any more effective this time round.

The government has also come under popular pressure to deal with CJNG, which had been deprioritised as a result of the outbreak of the cartel war in Sinaloa.

- On 10 March, searcher activists announced they had found hundreds of recent human remains (as well as clothing, shoes and other items) in Rancho Izaguirre, in Jalisco. The activists entered the ranch after the state prosecutor's office declared that, although it was a CJNG training camp, it was not an extermination site. When the activists' findings proved the opposite, there was major public outrage, raising questions as to the role of the state prosecutors' office in the investigation.
- The Rancho Izaguirre scandal, together with a rise in violence in Tabasco also linked to CJNG – they are in a fight for territory with a local cartel known as "**La Barredora**" – has pushed CJNG back up the government's priorities.



# Kidnapping and extortion: overview



## Perpetrators

- Drug cartels often perpetrate abductions of public officials, usually ending with the death of the victim. The intention is to challenge the authorities and demonstrate control over territory.
- Among the sub-groups within each cartel, kidnap for ransom is an established practice, together with extortion. The perpetrators are usually street gangs, low down in the hierarchy of the cartels.



## Targets

- Victims of kidnapping and extortion can be random individuals, but most often the targets are local small and medium entrepreneurs known to have the resources necessary to pay the sums demanded in either crime.
- Migrants on their way to the US – legally or illegally – have also become primary targets of kidnapping in recent years.
- Foreign individuals from developed countries are rarely deliberate targets of kidnapping, owing to the media attention these cases attract. An exception to this is express kidnapping (mainly in major urban centres), which involves forcing an individual to extract cash from an automated cash machine and affects victims more randomly.
- A separate social issue is the specific kidnapping of women, linked to sexual assault or human trafficking. The targets are local women or immigrants from other Latin American states.



## Statistics

- Crime statistics in Mexico are highly unreliable owing to significant under-reporting; estimates suggest that only one in five kidnappings are reported to the authorities, but the actual discrepancy is likely to be even higher.

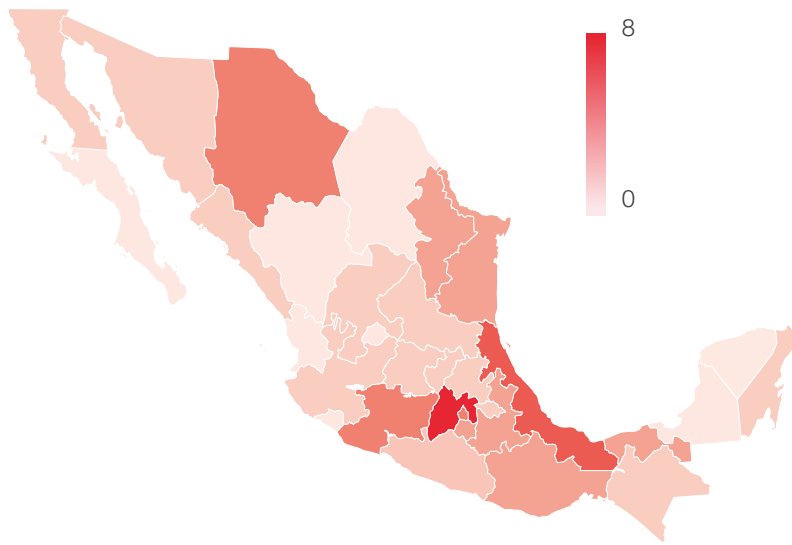




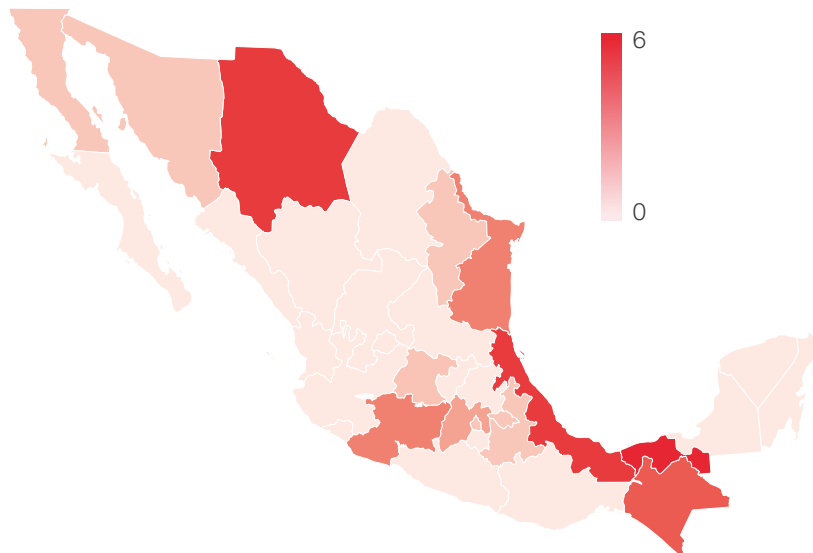


### Kidnap

Five-year average



March 2025





**Extortion**  
Five-year average



**March 2025**



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# Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:



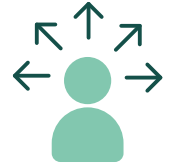
Layers of security



Planning



Communication



Situational awareness



Profile



Routine



Information security

These principles are applicable in any environment, however they are most relevant in unfamiliar surroundings or in areas with high levels of crime, terrorism or civil unrest. In terms of kidnap prevention, experience shows that given the relatively opportunistic nature of many kidnaps adherence to these principles can reduce the likelihood of someone becoming a victim of kidnapping.

- **Layers of security:** there is no single measure that enhances personal security, instead the focus should always be on applying several layers of mitigation involving physical, procedural and behavioural measures, as well as adopting a generally proactive attitude towards security.
- **Planning:** individuals can reduce risk simply by making an effort to understand the general security environment in their location and then pre planning appropriate security precautions (for example insurance, airport pick-ups, security escorts and / or other local support).
- **Communications:** identifying in advance key points of contact in emergencies (for example local office, hotel, police, embassy, security providers) and have a back-up method of communications in the event a phone does not work locally for network or other reasons. In higher threat environments share itineraries with others in advance and consider establishing lost contact plans involving periodic 'check ins'.
- **Situational awareness:** being aware of your general surroundings at all times but particularly with regards regular routines (for example arriving or leaving at home, the office, schools, or restaurants or shopping malls). Be aware of higher risk areas along routes you travel and be alert to unusual or suspicious incidents, behaviours, people or other occurrences in your vicinity. Avoid situations where you could become isolated and, above all, always trust your instincts.
- **Profile:** kidnappers – and criminals in general – normally target their victims because that individual has come to their attention for some reason. It is therefore important that individuals adopt a low profile in high kidnap threat environments. This should involve minimising overt displays of wealth, not unnecessarily sharing unnecessarily details of itineraries or business trips, and ensuring personal information such as home addresses, phone numbers and email address and family information are not easily accessible.
- **Routines:** kidnappers are most easily able to target and abduct victims who have a predictable routine. It is important therefore in higher threat kidnap environments to avoid setting predictable patterns of behaviour, particularly regarding places you regularly visit. Most kidnaps occur at the beginning or end of journeys, so it is critical to be alert during these phases.
- **Information security:** to reduce vulnerability to both kidnapping but also extortion it is important individuals and their families regularly undertake periodic reviews of their online profiles – including all corporate and social media – to enable an assessment of what personal information is easily accessible and could be utilised by criminals.



# Kidnap and Extortion

## INITIAL ACTIONS

### IF YOU SUSPECT YOU ARE THE VICTIM OF A KIDNAP OR THREAT EXTORTION

#### DO

- ✓ Start a log of calls, events and any actions taken
- ✓ Form a small family crisis cell / company crisis team
- ✓ Preserve any physical evidence carefully (e.g. letters or parcels received)
- ✓ If possible record any telecommunications with the kidnapper/extortionist, or carefully note all details of what is said
- ✓ Note details of all demands, deadlines or threats received
- ✓ **If you are a Convex client call the 24/7 Response Helpline and ask to speak to the Convex Crisis Response Duty officer**

#### DON'T

- ✗ Agree to anything, make any offer or start negotiating
- ✗ Acknowledge, agree to or self-impose any deadlines (e.g. "I can get that for you in an hour")
- ✗ Discuss the incident with anyone who does not need to know about it or, if it is not yet publicly known, report the incident without first receiving advice
- ✗ Make any decisions until advised by Convex Crisis Response.

#### If a kidnapping

##### Prepare for a possible first call from the kidnappers by:

- Identifying someone (not a decision maker) to act as a 'Communicator' to speak on behalf of the family/company
- Identifying anyone who could potentially receive a call from kidnappers and brief them on how to respond if they are contacted (to say and promise nothing and direct the caller to the Communicator's number).

##### If communication from someone claiming to hold the victim is received the Communicator should:

- Listen carefully to what is said and ask the caller to repeat anything that is unclear
- Reassure the caller you wish to cooperate
- Explain that you are not authorized to make any decisions as you have to consult other family or company members
- Ask to speak with the victim to confirm that they are alive and well, or ask for other evidence of their well-being (e.g. the answer to a question that only the victim(s) can answer)
- If you do speak with the victim(s) reassure them you are doing everything you can to secure their release and that their family(s) are being looked after
- Stay calm in the face of threats, these are normal, but challenge threats of violence towards the victim(s) (e.g. 'We want to resolve this without anyone getting hurt')
- If possible arrange a time for a call back
- Stall for time pending the arrival of the Convex Crisis Response consultant.



#### REMEMBER

If in doubt call the Convex Crisis Response Helpline – we would rather help you prevent an incident than help you respond to one.







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