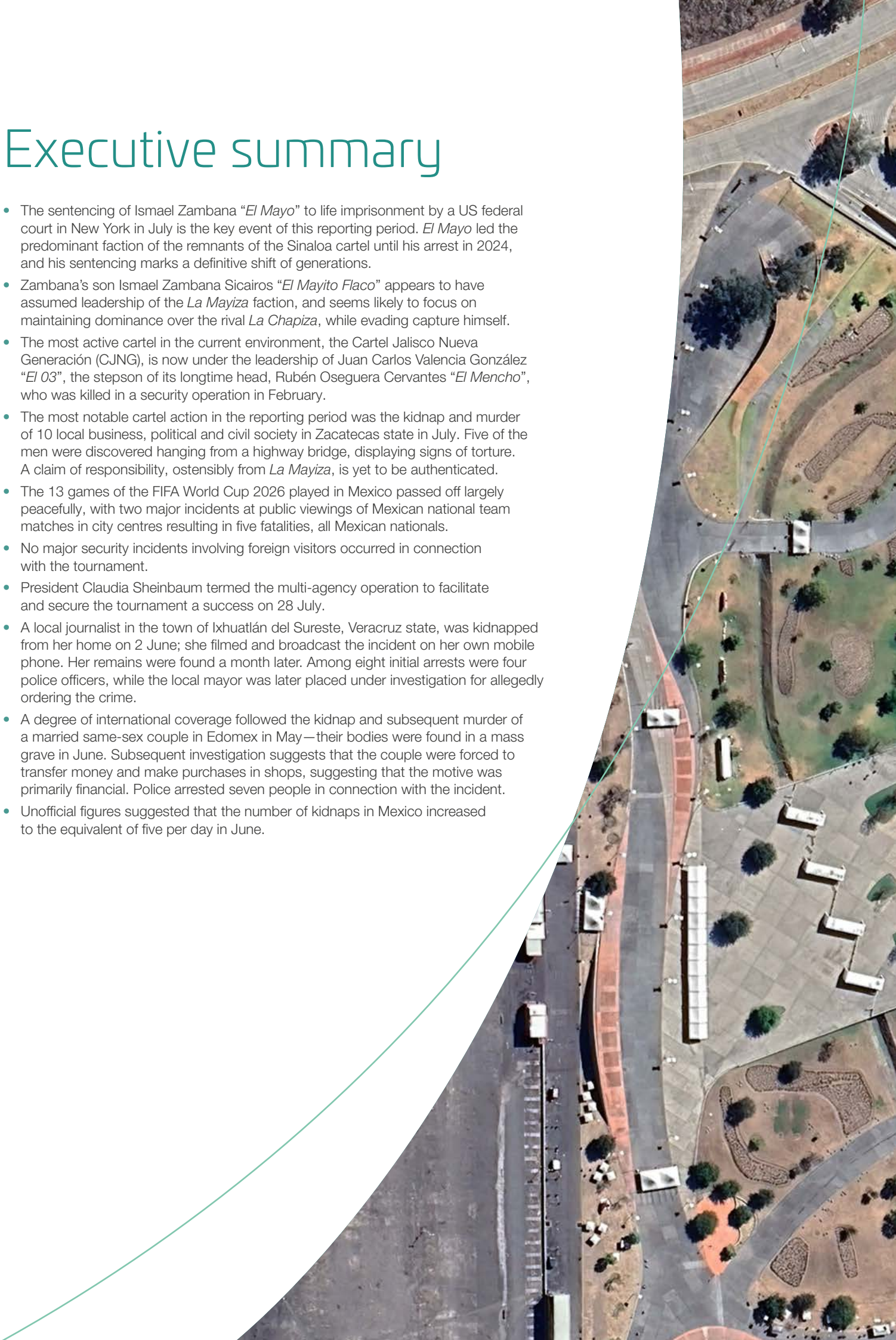


Security Risks Report – Mexico

August 2026

Executive summary

- The sentencing of Ismael Zambana “*El Mayo*” to life imprisonment by a US federal court in New York in July is the key event of this reporting period. *El Mayo* led the predominant faction of the remnants of the Sinaloa cartel until his arrest in 2024, and his sentencing marks a definitive shift of generations.
- Zambana’s son Ismael Zambana Sicairos “*El Mayito Flaco*” appears to have assumed leadership of the *La Mayiza* faction, and seems likely to focus on maintaining dominance over the rival *La Chapiza*, while evading capture himself.
- The most active cartel in the current environment, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), is now under the leadership of Juan Carlos Valencia González “*El 03*”, the stepson of its longtime head, Rubén Oseguera Cervantes “*El Mencho*”, who was killed in a security operation in February.
- The most notable cartel action in the reporting period was the kidnap and murder of 10 local business, political and civil society in Zacatecas state in July. Five of the men were discovered hanging from a highway bridge, displaying signs of torture. A claim of responsibility, ostensibly from *La Mayiza*, is yet to be authenticated.
- The 13 games of the FIFA World Cup 2026 played in Mexico passed off largely peacefully, with two major incidents at public viewings of Mexican national team matches in city centres resulting in five fatalities, all Mexican nationals.
- No major security incidents involving foreign visitors occurred in connection with the tournament.
- President Claudia Sheinbaum termed the multi-agency operation to facilitate and secure the tournament a success on 28 July.
- A local journalist in the town of Ixhuatlán del Sureste, Veracruz state, was kidnapped from her home on 2 June; she filmed and broadcast the incident on her own mobile phone. Her remains were found a month later. Among eight initial arrests were four police officers, while the local mayor was later placed under investigation for allegedly ordering the crime.
- A degree of international coverage followed the kidnap and subsequent murder of a married same-sex couple in Edomex in May—their bodies were found in a mass grave in June. Subsequent investigation suggests that the couple were forced to transfer money and make purchases in shops, suggesting that the motive was primarily financial. Police arrested seven people in connection with the incident.
- Unofficial figures suggested that the number of kidnaps in Mexico increased to the equivalent of five per day in June.





Review of recent developments

The most notable security event in this reporting period was the kidnap and killing of ten local figures in Zacatecas state in July. The victims all had a degree of public profile, including a former local mayor and several prominent business owners. Five of the victims were found hanging from a major road bridge in the state, displaying obvious signs of torture.

The incident has the hallmark of a 'show of strength' from one of the major drug cartels, and a group claiming to be the *La Mayiza* faction of the formerly dominant Sinaloa cartel released a video claiming responsibility for the incident on 21 July. Federal authorities announced on 30 July that 14 people had been arrested in a multi-agency operation in response to the incident. Zacatecas has long been a battleground state between the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) and the Sinaloa cartel, and more recently among the warring factions that have taken over Sinaloa's mantle.

As has become the familiar pattern in Mexico, kidnap cases have been numerous, mostly affecting ordinary local people, whether wealthy or not. However, media attention tends to focus on the more lethal or the more unusual cases. This reporting period is no exception.

A degree of US and international media coverage followed a case in May, where a same-sex married couple, both dual US-Mexican citizens recently relocated to Edomex from Chicago, disappeared after agreeing to meet a supplier for their home renovation in the suburbs of Mexico City. Despite extensive efforts from family and friends, using mobile phone records and banking app notifications to suggest locations, police were unable to locate the victims, whose bodies were discovered in a grave (together with other apparent murder victims) in Edomex in late June.

In another case that attracted international attention, a journalist based in Veracruz state, Roxana Guzmán Ramírez was kidnapped in June, with her body discovered in July. Guzmán was filming a piece to camera on her mobile phone when a group of armed men entered her home, and she was able to broadcast the incident live before her device was seized. Eight arrests were made after the discovery of Guzmán's body, including four suspected kidnappers and four serving police officers suspected of offering them logistical and practical support. Later in July, it transpired that the mayor of Ixhuatlán del Sureste was under investigation for allegedly ordering the operation. He denied all involvement in a court appearance on 30 July.

Guzmán is the third journalist to be murdered in Veracruz state so far in 2026. No arrests have been made in the other two cases.

As regards the strategic level of cartel action, the most significant incident was the sentencing of Ismael Zambada "*El Mayo*", leader of the *La Mayiza* faction of the crumbling Sinaloa cartel, to life imprisonment by a federal court in New York City in July (see **In focus**). *El Mayo* had been out of the picture in Mexico since his arrest in July 2024, and his son Ismael Zambada Sicairos ("*El Mayito Flaco*") has been in charge of the group since then. Both post-Sinaloa factions and the CJNG are now led by a new generation of leaders, following major law enforcement successes in both Mexico and the US, though this appears likely to intensify the conflict between the groups rather than prompt a strategic rethink. Persistent violence in states including Sinaloa, Zacatecas and Chihuahua suggests that the groups' struggles among themselves are continuing.



Qualified success for World Cup security operation despite fatalities

- The 13 games of the FIFA World Cup 2026 played in Mexico passed off largely peacefully, with two major incidents at public viewings of Mexican national team matches in city centres resulting in five fatalities, all Mexican nationals.
- No major security incidents involving foreign visitors occurred in connection with the tournament.
- President Claudia Sheinbaum termed the multi-agency operation to facilitate and secure the tournament a success on 28 July.
- Five fatalities were directly related to the tournament, four of them in a crush at one of the mass viewing locations in Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City during the round of 32 game between Mexico and Ecuador.
- The fifth was the driver of a car who drove into a crowd of fans in the holiday resort of Cabo San Lucas, Baja California Sur, after the Mexico-Czechia game, injuring 16—other fans dragged the driver from the vehicle and attacked him, and he died of his injuries a week later.
- Protests against the security operation for the tournament, contrasting it with other security concerns, proceeded in all three host cities, without major incident.





In focus: “*El Mayo*” sentenced, cartel uncertainty to continue

Ismael Zambada (“*El Mayo*”), the former leader of the Sinaloa cartel, and subsequently that of the *Mayiza* faction, was sentenced to life imprisonment by a federal court in New York City on 20 July. *El Mayo* had been in custody since his arrest in El Paso, Texas, in July 2024, when he was betrayed by Joaquín Guzmán López, one of the sons of *El Mayo*’s longtime colleague and eventual rival Joaquín Guzmán (“*El Chapo*”). Guzmán López tricked or forced (depending on which version of events one believes) *El Mayo* into boarding an aircraft which then flew across the border into the US, thereby delivering them both to US law enforcement. *El Mayo* agreed in August 2025 to plead guilty to two specimen counts on a lengthy indictment, with the prosecution agreeing not to seek the death penalty, and the sentencing in July was little more than a formality.

Nevertheless, the removal of *El Mayo* from the picture further destabilizes the remnants of the Sinaloa Cartel. In his permitted address to the court as part of his guilty plea in August 2025, *El Mayo* apologised for the harm his actions had caused both in the US and in Mexico, and urged younger generations to ‘take an alternative path’. This was immediately interpreted as a message to his son, Ismael Zambada Sicairos (“*El Mayito Flaco*”), encouraging him to step aside from leadership of the faction, if not necessarily to hand himself in to the authorities. Numerous journalists and analysts with expertise in and connections to the cartel world have reported that *El Mayo* also sent messages to his son and other family members via his lawyers around the time of his sentencing, stating that organised crime ‘brought neither honour nor a future’.

El Mayito Flaco has, however, been in effective charge of *La Mayiza* for almost two years already, since his father’s abduction and arrest, and during that time, the faction has gained a dominant position in the battle with *La Chapiza*, the group headed by the sons of *El Chapo*, for pre-eminence among the successors to the Sinaloa Cartel. *El Mayo*’s previously chosen successor is no inexperienced youngster, suddenly elevated to primacy.

However, the upper hand in the battle between the two factions has come at the cost of weakening both. The two groups have both lost key operatives in the conflict, and the human cost in Sinaloa alone—more than 2,800 killed and 1,700 disappeared since *El Mayo*’s arrest in July 2024— While there is a chance he may honour his father’s wishes and stand aside for other senior figures within *La Mayiza*, he is able to choose his own path. The prospect of an undignified capture, similar to that suffered by his father, may also influence his thinking.

What seems more certain is the definitive splintering of the Sinaloa cartel into its warring factions. With none of the leaders of its prime period still at large, there appears to be little prospect of a reunification, at least at the scale previously witnessed. *Los Chapitos* is certainly weak, relative to *La Mayiza*, and its alliance with the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), confirmed by the Mexican and US authorities in June 2026, may have collapsed, but it retains control over areas of Sinaloa and other states where *La Mayiza* has previously had little sway, and the prospect of any other faction supplanting them is remote.

Meanwhile, the CJNG has its own problems, after the death of its longtime leader Nemesio Oseguera “*El Mencho*” in a combined Mexican-US military operation in February 2026, and the subsequent capture of key lieutenant Audias Flores “*El Jardinero*” in April. Juan Carlos Valencia González, variously known as “*El 03*”, “*El Tricky Tres*” or “*El Pelón*”, the stepson of *El Mencho*, has assumed the leadership of the group, and while it is probably still the strongest cartel in the Mexico of mid-2026, that brings its own troubles. The US Administration in July sanctioned more than 50 people linked to the CJNG, leading some media outlets to report that it had termed the group ‘Public Enemy No1’ (a term dating back to the 1930s and no longer used except in informal rhetoric).

Cartel violence is endemic in Mexico, and likely to remain so. The ‘decapitation’ strategy of removing the groups’ leaders may have some impact in the US, but the instability it creates means that any improvements to security south of the border will be a long time coming. *El Mayo* is unlikely to get his wish of a younger generation laying down their arms.

US State Department advice

The US State Department Travel Advisory added a terrorism risk to Mexico in August 2025, reflecting the designation of several drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs). The whole country is classified at Level 2 – Exercise increased caution.

Only two states, Campeche and Yucatan, are classified at Level 1 – Exercise Normal Precautions. The most recent update to the Travel Advisory was published on 29 May 2026, and maintained all states at their previous levels.



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 Sinaloa Cartel has now fractured into two groups that are in conflict with each other and 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 Sicairos (“*El Mayito Flaco*”).

The conflict between the two groups escalated over the course of 2025, though by the end of the year there were clear indications that *La Mayiza* had achieved superiority. The CJNG at first appeared content to bide its time regarding the conflict, while making advances in some areas where the Sinaloa cartel was formerly the key presence. Rumours of an alliance between *La Chapiza* and the CJNG escalated over the course of 2025, and were confirmed by both the Mexican and US governments in June 2026, though the CJNG's own troubles in 2026 have muddled the picture significantly (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. The collapse of the Sinaloa Cartel is a key example of this. 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 ‘in reverse’, 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

The sentencing of *El Mayo* (see **In Focus**) marks a before-and-after moment in the demise of the Sinaloa cartel. While one of the key figures from its period of united dominance remained at large (or, in the last two years, at least not sentenced), a slim prospect of reunification remained. Now, however, the leadership of the two factions has definitively moved on a generation, and the focus of the new leaders will be on both survival and winning the internal struggle, not on re-establishing the 2010s-era cartel. *La Mayiza* is now clearly in the ascendancy relative to *La Chapiza*, but the end of the internecine conflict does not yet appear to be in sight.

The CJNG, now under the leadership of *El Mencho*'s stepson *El 03*, remains the most effective force among the current cartels, although US attention has been refocused upon it since the sentencing of *El Mayo*. The alliance with *La Chapiza* appears over, for now, since the capture of Audias Flores “*El Jardinero*”. While the CJNG has enough operatives to withstand the losses of personnel suffered in 2026 so far, chiefly the death of former leader Rubén Oseguera Cervantes “*El Mencho*”, the group's precise strength or any new strategic direction will not become clear until much later in the year.

The CJNG's battles against other cartels, such as that with La Familia Michoacana/La Nueva Familia Michoacana (see below) in Edomex, Guerrero and other central states, are likely to continue at local level, but take a back seat at strategic level while the cartel reorganises and stabilises itself.

On 20 February 2025, 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 appeared to be somewhat out of date upon publication, even leaving aside the fracture of the Sinaloa Cartel, and this is even more the case in 2026.

- The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) acknowledged 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**.

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).



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, although the policies of the Trump administration have put this source of revenue under pressure.
- 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 is reported to the authorities, but the actual discrepancy is likely to be even higher.
- The main source for statistics on crime is the Secretary General of the National Public Security System (SESNSP).





Kidnap

Five-year average



August 2026





Extortion
Five-year average



August 2026



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Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:



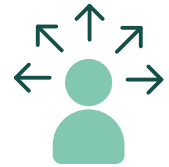
Layers of security



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 to 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 unnecessary 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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