

Security Risks Report – Mexico

August 2025

Executive summary

The US Department of State updated its Travel Advisory for Mexico on 12 August, classifying the entire country as *Level 2 – Exercise increased caution*.

- This update added *terrorism risk* to all states previously listed for crime risk, aligning with the February 2025 designation of Mexico's main drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs).
- While this revision does not indicate a change in actual security risk, it signals heightened US involvement in Mexico's domestic security.

The designation of drug cartels as FTOs raises legal risk for companies operating in Mexico, as extortion and ransom payments expose payers to criminal prosecution.

- Although the Trump administration may not aggressively pursue corporate prosecutions, the FTO designation also opens the door for civil suits.
- Consequently, companies will likely need to enhance compliance programs, supported by legal counsel, increasing the cost of business operations in Mexico.

In response to the Travel Advisory update, President Claudia Sheinbaum said that the addition of terrorism risk was a technical issue, and denied the notion that the US would intervene militarily in Mexico.

- These assurances notwithstanding, the US has visibly increased its military presence in the region, including deploying warships and marines to Latin American and Caribbean waters, and conducting drone surveillance over cartel territories like the Golden Triangle in Sinaloa.

Almost certainly in response to US pressure, Mexico has extradited large numbers of alleged drug traffickers in 2025, with more expected. Increased US pressure is likely to destabilise the already volatile situation in Mexico, particularly affecting the ongoing internal war within the Sinaloa Cartel.

Additionally, heightened logistics challenges and border crossing difficulties may push cartels towards more "domestic" revenue streams, such as extortion and kidnapping.

- For example, kidnappings using dating apps have surged in Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco) and Nuevo Nayarit (Nayarit).
- In Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), traffickers have shifted from smuggling migrants to kidnapping local residents, often US citizens.
- Official crime statistics do not fully capture the extent of incidents, but available data show a rising trend in kidnappings in Chihuahua.

Extortion has also continued to expand as a revenue stream for drug cartels. In response, in early July the Sheinbaum administration launched the National Strategy Against Extortion, featuring measures like a national anonymous whistleblowing line and monitoring phone calls in prisons, as these have become centres for telephone extortion.

Despite a surface lull in the Sinaloa cartel war, ordinary citizens in the state continue to live under the shadow of cartel control. The lull is more likely to be the result of a weakening of one of the factions than a genuine de-escalation.

- Of note is a spate of assassinations of social media influencers in Sinaloa, owing to their alleged links to one or another faction in the cartel war.
- Indeed, Mexico's Financial Intelligence Agency is said to be investigating 64 influencers for money laundering.

Meanwhile, in July Ciudad Juárez also saw a wave of murders, indicative of a turf war between local cartel La Línea and its rivals – a war that could potentially spread to other areas of Chihuahua.



Review of recent developments

On 12 August the US Department of State updated its Travel Advisory for Mexico (see **US State Department advice**). Mexico in its entirety was classified as *Level 2 – Exercise increased caution*, but the most significant change was to add *terrorism risk* to all states previously listed for *crime risk*.

- This revision does not reflect a change in actual security risk on the ground but rather brings the Travel Advisory in line with the February 2025 designation of Mexico's main drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs).
- The designation ups the ante in terms of US involvement in Mexico's domestic security. Legally, it makes it a crime to provide any meaningful assistance to terrorist organisations, prevents their members from legally entering or remaining in the US, and ensures that US financial institutions block and report any money linked to them.
- Additionally, while international law does not grant the US the right to military intervention in countries known or suspected of "hosting" FTOs, on 8 August the *New York Times* alleged that US president Donald Trump had signed a secret directive authorising the Pentagon to use military force against drug cartels in Latin America.

For companies operating in Mexico, the FTO designation gives rise to potential legal risks. Payment of ransoms and payment under "cobro de piso" (a protection racket), to name but two, could open a corporation to prosecution.

- While the Trump administration may not prosecute many or any corporations, the FTO designation also opens the gate to civil suits under the US 2016 Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA).
- JASTA imposes liability on a legal person that knowingly aids and abets – the definition being very broad – an act of international terrorism, committed, planned or authorised by an FTO.
- Companies operating in Mexico will therefore likely need to tighten compliance programmes, supported by legal counsel – which all adds to the cost of business in Mexico.

Fearing the loss of US investors and tourists, President Claudia Sheinbaum was quick to respond to the Travel Advisory update by saying that the addition of terrorism risk to Mexico's profile was a purely technical issue.

- She also claimed to have been informed about the secret security directive, and said that it related to military responses within US territory, not to intervention in Mexico.
- When pressed, she admitted that she had not seen the directive herself, but continued to rule out any "invasion" by the US.
- Despite these assurances, on 15 August US magazine *Rolling Stone* quoted a senior source in the Trump administration as saying that Trump had made it clear that a strike would happen if Mexico did not make major changes.

However, while Sheinbaum's public stance stressing Mexico's sovereignty is understandable, the anecdotal evidence suggests a perhaps less sturdy response to US pressure behind the scenes.

- The US has sent two warships to patrol the coasts of Mexico, and on 15 August announced it would deploy an additional 4,000 marines to Latin American and Caribbean waters. While this was described by a US official as merely a "show of force", it offers the US military a wide range of options should Trump decide to launch a military intervention.
- US drones are overflying known cartel territories, such as the so-called Golden Triangle in Sinaloa – an area difficult to access where the Sinaloa Cartel traditionally produced most of its heroin. Sheinbaum has said after the fact that this is part of a co-ordinated operation between Mexico and the US.
- Thus far in 2025, Mexico has extradited two large groups of alleged drug traffickers – 29 in February and 26 in August – and a third wave is reportedly imminent (see **Recent organised crime news**).

Even without a US "invasion", increased pressure from the Trump administration is likely to have a destabilising effect on an already volatile situation in light of the ongoing war within the Sinaloa Cartel.

- US attention appears to be focused on *La Chapiza*, the faction led by four sons of Joaquín Guzmán Loera ("*El Chapo*"). In any case, the number of operatives extradited from either side will influence the eventual outcome of the power struggle.
- The FTO designation also poses challenges for cartel operatives even on a personal level. Many cartel members have extensive and varied links with the US: border crossings are frequent, as are financial transfers.



Heightened logistics challenges that make border crossings more difficult are putting pressure on existing cartel business, and may potentially lead cartels to switch to more “domestic” revenue streams, such as extortion and kidnapping; there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest this may already be taking shape.

- In 2025 there has been a surge in the use of dating apps to kidnap tourists, with multiple kidnappings of US citizens in the holiday resorts of Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco) and the neighbouring Nuevo Nayarit (formerly Nuevo Vallarta, Nayarit).
- In Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), traditionally a lucrative hub for smuggling migrants into the US, traffickers also appear to have shifted to kidnapping local residents, who are often US citizens.
- As Convex has noted before, US nationality may be a factor in some cases of kidnap for ransom. 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.
- In one case in July, a seventeen-year-old US citizen visiting Ciudad Juárez was kidnapped and later found strangled. It is unclear from reports whether her family paid the ransom before she was murdered.
- Indeed, although official crime statistics do not reflect the true extent of incidents (see **Statistics**), the data available show kidnapping in Chihuahua trending up in 2025.

Extortion is another revenue stream that drug cartels have been expanding in recent years, as noted by Convex. The Sheinbaum administration has responded with the launch on 6 July of the National Strategy Against Extortion, which, among other measures, has opened a national anonymous whistleblowing line.

- The Strategy appears biased towards combating telephone extortion, which has become a serious problem in Mexico. In particular, prisons have become essentially call centres for extortionist groups. The Strategy therefore includes the presence of operatives in prisons, among other measures to monitor and intercept phone calls.
- The Strategy targets the eight states with the most registered incidents of extortion in the official statistics thus far in 2025.



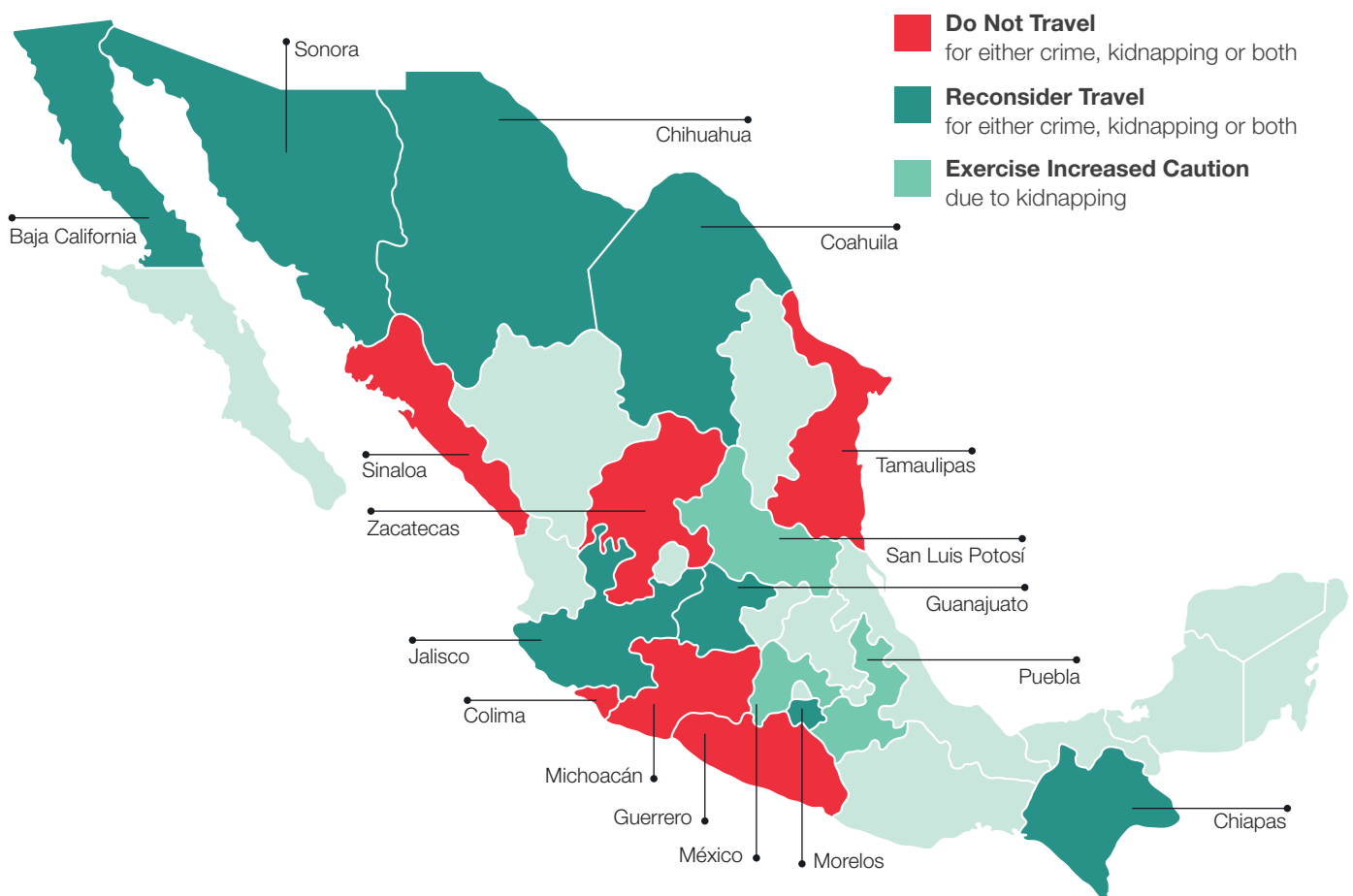


US State Department advice

The US State Department Travel Advisory for Mexico was updated on 12 August 2025.

The whole country is classified at *Level 2 – Exercise increased caution*, and a terrorism risk indicator has been added (reflecting the recent classification of drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organisations).

Only two states, Campeche and Yucatan, are classified at Level 1 – Exercise Normal Precautions.



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

Equally, Nayarit is listed only for terrorism and crime, but as noted in this report, there has been a surge in dating app kidnappings in Nuevo Nayarit.

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 Valencia, 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.

- 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. The group's leading brother, Abigael González ("*El Cuini*"), was one of the 26 extradited in August 2025.
- *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 the summer of 2025, the internecine Sinaloa war appeared to abate somewhat, but there were nevertheless some developments suggesting that, as Convex noted in a previous report, *La Mayiza* could be gaining the upper hand.

- Most notable was *La Mayiza*'s takeover of Badiraguato (Sinaloa), El Chapo's birthplace and a Chapiza stronghold. *La Mayiza* signals its control over territory with graffiti markings that read "MF", which stands for *Mayito Flaco*.
- In this context, the absence of large-scale conflagrations in recent months would be a sign of *La Chapiza*'s reduced effectiveness rather than a genuine de-escalation in the conflict.
- Lack of open warfare, moreover, does not mean that normality has been restored to Sinaloa: ordinary citizens of the state continue to live in the grip of the cartel war.

The Sinaloa war has also led to a wave of assassinations of social media influencers, based on alleged links to one or another faction.

- The question of links between influencers and cartels has become a prominent topic of discussion in Mexico in recent years, and indeed, Mexico's Financial Intelligence Agency (UIF) is said to be investigating 64 influencers in Sinaloa for money laundering on behalf of drug cartels.

War has also broken out in Ciudad Juárez, where a wave of murders (22 in total, as far as is known) broke out on 9-10 July, since referred to as "Red Thursday". The conflict was reportedly the result of a turf war between local cartel La Línea and its rivals over the city's drug markets. The turf war could be spreading to other areas of Chihuahua.

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).





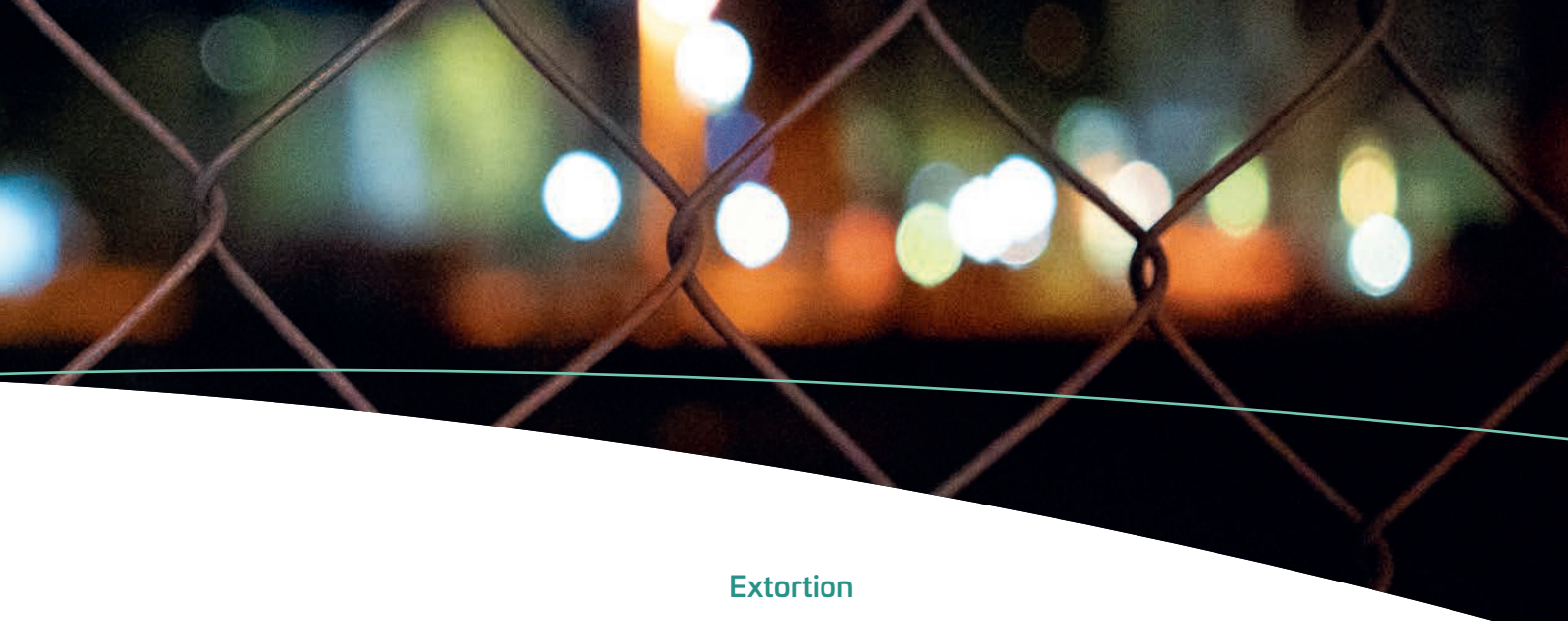
Kidnap

Five-year average



June 2025





Extortion

Five-year average



June 2025



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crisisresponsemanagement@convexin.com



Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:



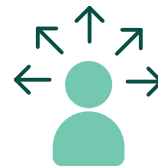
Layers of security



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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