

MIGRANT KIDNAPPING IN MEXICO: REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, an estimated 1.5 to 3 million migrants, mostly from Central America, have crossed through Mexico en route to the United States.¹ These migrants left their homes for a wide variety of reasons, including civil wars, natural disasters, a lack of employment opportunities, and gang and domestic violence. Yet, the challenges that these migrants face do not stop once they leave their home countries. Rather, significant numbers of migrants fall victim to crimes during their transit through Mexico, including extortion, theft, and kidnapping by criminal groups and corrupt authorities. This report covers one of these crimes—migrant kidnapping—and highlights how this high-impact criminal activity manifests throughout Mexico.

The following report bases its findings on an original dataset of 388 cases of migrant kidnappings in Mexico from June 2006 to April 2018. It represents just under 8,000 victims and 451 individual kidnappers. The dataset allows for the analysis of trends and regional differences in migrant kidnappings, and an in-depth analysis of migrant kidnappers' criminal *modus operandi*. To better ascertain the differences in migrant kidnappings across Mexico, this report separates kidnapping incidents into four regions: the southern border (Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca), the northeastern border region of Mexico (Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Veracruz), the northwestern border corridor (Baja California and Sonora), and the Yucatán Peninsula (Quintana Roo). While mass migrant kidnappings did occur in other regions of Mexico, this report only identified 58 cases that occurred in states outside of those already mentioned. Larger trends could not be ascertained given the incidents' more sporadic nature.

Overall, this report offers the most comprehensive and nuanced analysis of migrant kidnappings to date and finds that geography plays a critical role in understanding the operational structures of migrant kidnapping throughout Mexico. For example, along Mexico's southern border, the cases involved primarily Central American migrants (rather than migrants of other nationalities) and included a wide array of criminal actors. This differed from Mexico's northeastern region, where organized criminal

groups were more involved in migrant kidnappings, with the cases split between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas. Along Mexico's northwestern border with the United States, and particularly in Baja California, the majority of the kidnapped migrants were of Mexican origin and the kidnapping rings were smaller, often only involving one or two migrants. Finally, in Quintana Roo, the kidnapped migrants were exclusively of Cuban origin. After analyzing each region, the report concludes with policy recommendations for improving government data collection, awareness campaigns, and law enforcement operations.

METHODOLOGY

The Mexican agency Executive Secretariat for the National Public Security System (Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SESNSP) collects overall kidnapping data at the federal level. However, this data is not broken down by victims' country of origin or immigration status. As a result, kidnapping data must be requested from Mexico's federal or state agencies, rather than from one single source. To analyze migrant kidnappings across Mexico, this report draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources.

First, the database includes official government statistics on migrant kidnapping incidents and migrant kidnappers' demographic information from Mexico's National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM), two specialized units of the federal Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR), and the state-level Attorney General's offices in each of Mexico's 32 states. The available state-level data was first combined with the federal Attorney General's data and then cross-referenced to eliminate duplicate cases. This process resulted in a total of 159 unique cases of migrant kidnapping between 2006 and 2018.

Second, given that migrants infrequently report kidnapping cases to officials, this report supplements federal and state government data with open source analysis. This open source data collection captured



instances of migrant kidnappings through federal, state, and municipal Mexican newspapers. This data collection method did not attempt to be representative of every migrant kidnapping, but rather to fill in gaps from Mexican officials' kidnapping data. Additionally, as kidnappings can be confused with different phases of migrant smuggling, this report created a methodology to identify migrant kidnappings in the newspaper articles. This methodology accounted for how the migrants were captured, how the involved parties were discovered by Mexican authorities, and if the migrants were being held in a location against their will. Cases that did not meet the established criteria were not included in the database.

The cases were then coded in a database with 42 different variables. These variables included information on the incident, the victims, and the kidnappers. Variables included the number of migrants, the number of detained kidnappers, and the incident's location. The database also included variables such as the requested ransom payment and the stash houses' distance from a major road or highway (when the stash house's address was listed). Overall, the open source data collection produced an additional 229 cases, which were added to the Mexican authorities' 159 cases. The final database included 388 migrant kidnapping incidents in Mexico from 2006 to 2018, representing nearly 8,000 victims and 451 kidnappers.

Third, this article drew on two qualitative data sources: 1) 22 testimonies from kidnapped migrants who outlined their experiences to human rights workers or representatives of Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) at Mexican migrant shelters, and 2) the information outlined in newspaper articles, which often included detailed descriptions of kidnappers' modus operandi and migrants' experiences. These newspaper articles also frequently included the kidnappers' demographic information, such as their gender, age, or nationality. Through the testimonies and journalistic narratives, it was possible to collect information on kidnappers' modus operandi, network structures, and individual demographics. These qualitative sources augment the report's quantitative analysis, so as to avoid relying too strongly on any one data source.

Although the database is comprehensive, each data source has its limitations and should be regarded as incomplete. For example, few transit migrants in Mexico report crimes committed against them to Mexican authorities, meaning that many incidents are not listed in government datasets. Additionally, some of the data sources are also structurally incomplete as each state reported the incidents differently, while some states never responded to transparency requests. Quintana Roo and Sinaloa—two states with high levels of insecurity and substantial transit migration—failed to provide their data via the national transparency platform, despite multiple requests from more than one account. Additionally, the northern border state of Chihuahua also did not provide information related to migrant kidnappings, reporting that it does not collect this data.

The open source analysis was also limited to the news articles' information and its accuracy, which is subject to journalists' reporting. Given different reporting standards, the articles did not have standardized information, especially regarding variables such as kidnappers' demographic information, ransom payments, or kidnappers' involvement in organized crime. Further, it is possible that journalists working in high-risk areas may underreport organized criminal activities. This appears to be the case in the state of Veracruz. Less than 1 percent of the database's total cases were identified in Veracruz (including both newspaper articles and government data), despite the state having a reputation for migrant kidnappings and 40 percent of the migrant testimonies noting that they were kidnapped within the state.

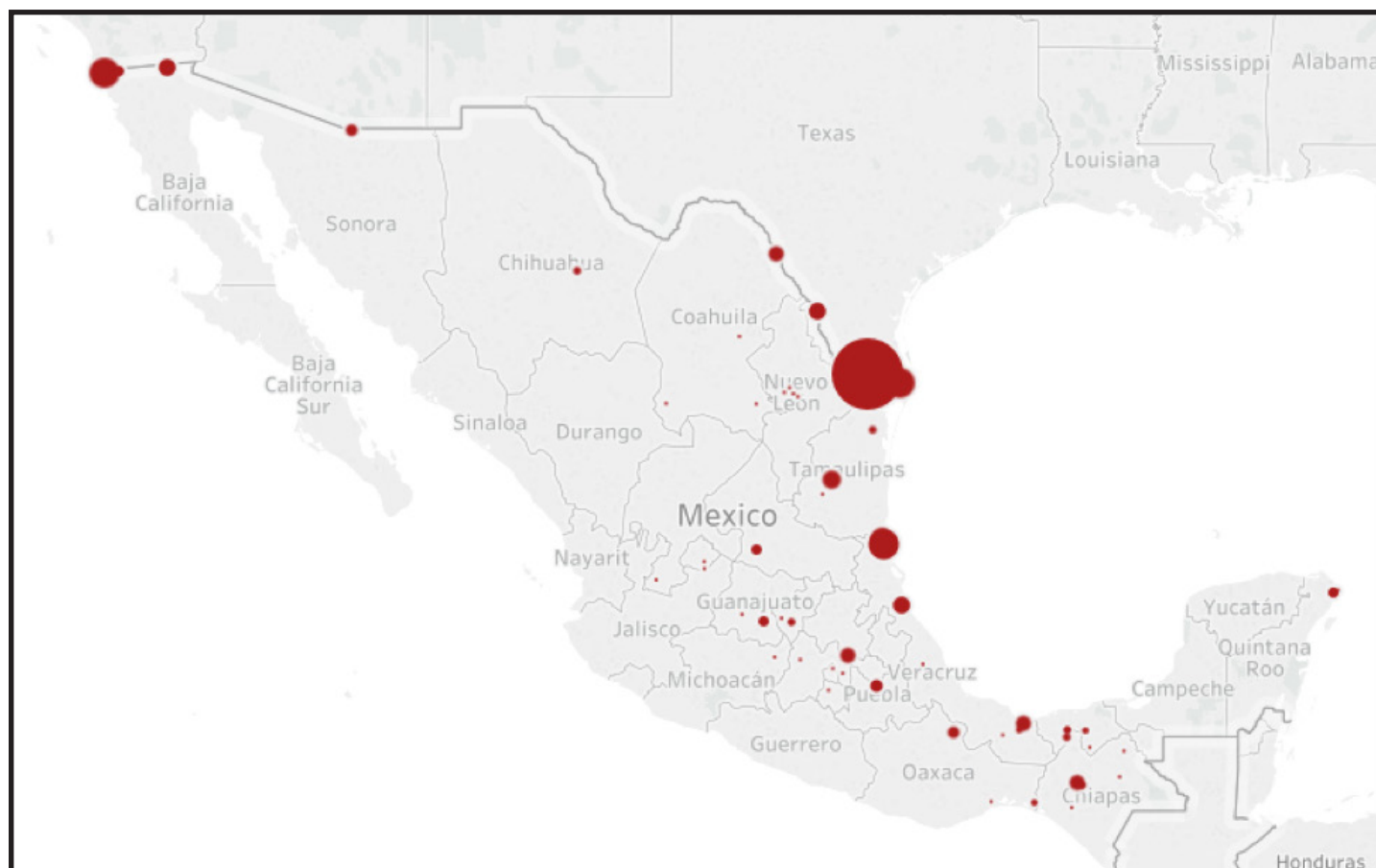
Finally, the migrant testimonies also present limitations. There were only 22 testimonies and they were all conducted in one Mexican shelter in 2008. These testimonies provide qualitative detail regarding kidnapping conditions and kidnappers' modus operandi. They also serve to reinforce, and counter, information gathered in the open source analysis. However, given that the testimonies are a decade old, they add more to the historical rather than current understanding of migrant kidnapping.

KIDNAPPING FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT WITHIN MEXICO

This report relies on Mexico's legal definition of a kidnapping, as outlined in Article 366 of Mexico's Federal Penal Code (Código Penal Federal).² Within Mexico, there are two legal terms that can describe a kidnapping: 1) kidnapping (secuestro) and 2) illegal deprivation of liberty (privación ilegal de la libertad). While these terms are at times used to indicate similar actions, they have different legal definitions. For both a kidnapping and an illegal deprivation of liberty, an individual must be taken and held against his or her will. However, in the case of a kidnapping, the kidnapper must also have at least one additional established reason to hold the individual.³ This paper uses only kidnapping (secuestro) data.

Until 2009, kidnapping was a federal crime. However, the General Law to Prevent and Punish Crimes in the Matter of Kidnapping (Ley General para Prevenir y Sancionar los Delitos en Materia de Secuestro) shifted this jurisdiction and established kidnapping as a state-level crime except in three scenarios.⁴ Under this law, kidnapping cases would be passed to the Federal Attorney General's office (PGR) for federal investigation only when: (1) the crime falls under the definition of the Federal Law Against Organized Crime; (2) it applies to the Organic Law of the Federal Judicial Power and the Federal Code of Penal Procedures; or (3) the state authority requests the federal entity's assistance.⁵ The 2009 law was intended to simplify states' prosecutorial processes and provide them with greater control. However, the law has generated additional confusion regarding exactly when a case should be passed to the

Map 1: Migrant Kidnapping Incidents by Municipality, 2006-2018



Author elaboration



federal authorities. The law also provides for different criminal sentences at the state and federal levels, calling into question its constitutionality.⁶

These legal complications are set upon a backdrop of broader impunity. Within Mexico, an estimated 93 percent of reported crimes never make it to a final court sentencing.⁷ This impunity rate increases to 99 percent for crimes committed against migrants.⁸ This low chance of getting caught contributes to making transit migrants a frequent target for criminal activities. According to Doctors Without Borders—which provides medical services to migrants traveling through Mexico—68 percent of its patients had been victims of a crime.⁹

Migrant kidnappings are a particularly common high-impact crime. Surveys of deported Mexican migrants from 2010 and 2011 revealed that 7 percent were kidnapped in Mexico as part of their migration experience.¹⁰ Other estimates suggest similar kidnapping rates for transit migrants. For example, by extrapolating the annual estimates from the National Commission on Human Rights' 2009 and 2011 reports, some 18,000 to 22,000 migrants are kidnapped each year in Mexico.¹¹ Since an estimated 300,000 irregular migrants pass through the country each year, this would equal approximately 5 to 7 percent of all migrants.

Migrant kidnappings are not isolated to any Mexican region or criminal group. Within this report's database, migrant kidnappings occurred in 22 of Mexico's 32 states, particularly in states along well-known migratory routes, such as Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Veracruz, and Baja California. However, migrant kidnappings also occurred in states that do not have reputations as migrant hubs, such as San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas. Reynosa, Tamaulipas was the municipality with the highest number of migrant kidnappings, with 75 incidents or 19 percent of the database's cases.

STAGES OF A KIDNAPPING INCIDENT

This report outlines four primary stages to a migrant kidnapping incident. These stages include: (1) gaining

physical control over the victim; (2) maintaining this control for the duration of the kidnapping; (3) soliciting and obtaining ransom payments from the migrant's family; and (4) releasing the victim.

The first stage requires recruiting migrants, often under false pretenses, or abducting migrants by force. In promising a fake service, kidnappers often pose as migrant smugglers promising to take migrants to Mexico's northern border or the United States. In some cases, kidnappers operate inside migrant shelters or at train stops to identify migrants who are in vulnerable situations. Kidnappers posing as smugglers must identify their victims, gain their trust, and lure them to a nearby vehicle or house. Alternatively, kidnappers also abduct migrants against their will, usually from buses and bus stations, town squares, or train tracks and roads where migrants might be walking. In all cases, the kidnappers must gain physical control over the victims and transfer them to a safe house.

Second, the kidnappers must maintain this control throughout the duration of the kidnapping. Typically, migrants are held in stash houses that are close to major roads or highways to facilitate quick and inconspicuous movements. On average, the stash houses were four blocks away from a major road or highway, according to the cases that provided addresses. Kidnappers guard the migrants in these stash houses and must maintain sufficient enforcement levels to ensure fear and compliance. While control is key, the kidnappers must also provide basic levels of care—such as food and water—to ensure the migrants' survival.

Third, the kidnappers must solicit ransom payments from migrants' family members. Upon arrival to the stash house, migrants will hand over telephone numbers or be prompted to contact family members in their country of origin or in the United States. These family members will be asked to pay a ransom and will be given instructions for wiring the payment. Once the money is transferred, at least one criminal participant must pick it up from local banks or wire-transfer locations. These individuals are often chosen for their demographic characteristics, and frequently involve people who may not draw a lot of attention, such as women.



Finally, once the ransom is paid, most migrants are released in an area that is geographically removed from the stash house. Although, in some cases, migrants and their families may not have the funds to pay the ransom and these migrants may be killed, forced to work for the kidnappers, or eventually be freed by the kidnappers or security forces during a raid. Given this report's methodology and focus, the database does not focus on this stage.

Migrant kidnappings do not always follow this linear formula and other crimes can occur during the kidnapping. For example, female migrants are particularly at risk for sexual violence. They may also be targeted for forced recruitment into kidnapping or trafficking rings. Further, there are also reports of migrants who were killed for disobeying their kidnappers, attempting escape, assisting an injured migrant, or to instill fear and obedience among other kidnapped migrants.

KIDNAPPERS' DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

To understand kidnappers' *modus operandi*, this report relies on information reported in Mexican newspapers, as state and federal agency data did not provide this level of detail. The open source data includes only the demographic information for detained participants, rather than all potentially involved individuals. However, demographic information and operational patterns can still be determined from these sources. In total, 172 cases in this report's database included the kidnappers' demographic information for a total of 451 kidnappers. Of those articles that reported the gender of the assailants, 270 men were accused of participating in the criminal activity, along with 66 women.

Typically, migrant kidnappers work in groups and an average of three individuals were detained in each migrant kidnapping. However, the number of detained kidnappers ranged from 0 to 15. In multiple cases, only one individual was present at the crime scene when officials arrived, meaning that only one individual was detained. However, this does not necessarily indicate

that the detained individual was the only person operating the kidnapping ring, as others may have escaped.

Migrant kidnappers also had varied demographics. The detained kidnappers were on average 34 years old and this was consistent across years and regions. Yet there was no single kidnapper profile, with the detained individuals' ages ranging from minors (whose specific ages were not frequently disclosed) to 55 years old. Men were detained in almost every incident, but at least one female kidnapper was involved in 30 percent of the cases.

The majority of the detained kidnappers were Mexican, totaling 67 percent. The remaining 33 percent of detained migrant kidnappers were foreign nationals from more than ten other countries. Honduran and Guatemalan nationals were the most common countries of origin for foreign-born detained kidnappers. However, arrested individuals also came from the United States, Peru, Panama, and Nicaragua. It is possible that some of these detained individuals were migrants themselves and incorrectly identified as kidnapping ring participants. Alternately, the migrant testimonies also suggest that some foreign-born kidnappers use their nationalities as a tool to build trust with migrants from the same country.

Mexican authorities were also involved in migrant kidnappings. In nine cases, the police were named as being directly responsible or involved in the migrant kidnappings. Of these nine cases, municipal police departments were named four times. In one instance, the mayor and the deputy director of the municipal police in Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas were said to have ordered a migrant kidnapping. Two other cases mentioned the state police.¹² In the remaining kidnapping cases, the newspaper articles suggested that the police were involved, but did not provide more specific information.

REGION: SOUTHERN BORDER

Map 2: Mexico's Southern Border



Author elaboration

Location: This report defines Mexico's southern border as Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tabasco. While Oaxaca does not share the physical international border with Guatemala, it is the second state of contact for many migrants traveling north. For these three states, the database identified 63 migrant kidnapping cases.¹³ Two-thirds of the kidnapping cases took place in Tabasco, while the other one third were split between Oaxaca and Chiapas. Approximately 50 percent of the reported kidnappings in Mexico's southern region occurred in the Cardenas, Tabasco. Unlike along Mexico's northern border, only 3 percent of the kidnappings (2 cases) took place in municipalities along the physical Mexico-Guatemala border. The remaining 97 percent of the incidents occurred in the three states' interiors.

Demographic and Transit Information: Approximately half of the kidnapping cases in this region provided

migrants' transit and demographic information. Overall, the majority of the kidnapped migrants were from Central America. The most common nationalities were Guatemalan and Honduran migrants, with fewer Salvadoran migrants. Mexican migrants were present in only one 2010 incident. Of the 23 cases that provided the gender of the kidnapped migrants, 70 percent included women and 65 percent included minors.

In the 12 news articles that described the migrants' transportation methods in these southern states prior to being kidnapped, 50 percent (six cases) of the migrants were riding atop trains and 25 percent (3 cases) were traveling in buses. The three remaining cases included migrants who were transiting through the region in either private cars or taxis. In every case, the migrants were intercepted by kidnappers, who either stopped the migrants' vehicles or captured them along train routes.



Kidnapper Profile and Modus Operandi: Regarding the migrant kidnappers' modus operandi, the database found that in Mexico's southern border region, kidnappers were primarily working in small groups rather than as a part of an organized criminal group. A median of four individuals were apprehended in each migrant kidnapping case, with the exception of one case where 21 police officers were arrested. The median number of kidnapped migrants was 11 per incident, although the numbers ranged from 3 to 103. The kidnappers' ages were listed in only one case, and they ranged from 25 to 66 for the four detained individuals. Women kidnappers were involved in 4 of the 11 cases that included demographic information. The kidnappers' nationalities in this region were also diverse and included individuals from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and Peru.

During the kidnapping incidents, most migrants in this geographic area were taken to stash houses. However, in one case, migrants were housed in a municipal police station, and in two other cases, migrants were taken to private ranches. Organized criminal groups were only mentioned twice, which differs from other Mexican regions. In both kidnapping incidents—which took place in 2008 and 2009 along the train route between Ixtepec, Oaxaca and Medias Aguas, Veracruz—the Zetas were named as the responsible criminal group. Only eight cases in the database included the requested ransom payment amounts, with the median payment at US\$3,000. This ransom request is lower than in other Mexican regions.

REGION: NORTHEASTERN BORDER

Map 3: Mexico's Northeast Border Region



Author elaboration



Location: This report defines Mexico's northeast region as the states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Veracruz. While Veracruz is not along the physical U.S.-Mexico border, the trends in this state mirror kidnapping incidents in the other two northeastern states. This is the Mexican region with the most recorded migrant kidnappings. Of the 388 registered cases in the database, 205 (53 percent) of the kidnapping incidents occurred in these northeastern states.

Within the three states, 75 percent of the incidents (153 cases) were reported in Tamaulipas, along with 30 cases in Veracruz and 22 cases in Coahuila. Although, as noted in the methodology section, reporting challenges—particularly in Veracruz—likely distort the kidnappings' distribution. Of the kidnappings, 36 percent took place in just one city along the U.S.-Mexico border: Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Three other border cities—Piedras Negras, Coahuila; Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; and Matamoros, Tamaulipas—served as the location for another 21 percent of the kidnapping cases. This means that 54 percent of all migrant kidnappings in Mexico's northeastern border region took place in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Demographic and Transit Information: In Mexico's northeastern border region, Honduran nationals were the most common kidnapping victims (present in two-thirds of the 159 cases where there is demographic information), but Salvadorans and Guatemalans were also frequently among the victims (in 59 percent and 52 percent of incidents respectively). This was the region with the greatest diversity in kidnapped migrants' nationalities, with victims from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, and Russia. Notably, Mexican migrants were also involved in 44 migrant kidnapping incidents. Additionally, two-thirds of the cases involved women and 22 percent of the cases involved minors. Similar to kidnappings in other Mexican regions, men were kidnapped in almost every case.

The migrants traveling in this region either took buses or trains. In Veracruz, every case that provided transportation information (five in total) noted that the migrants were traveling north via Mexico's train

network before being kidnapped. While in Tamaulipas, every incident (12 in total) listed the migrants as taking buses before being kidnapped. In these latter cases, kidnappers boarded buses and forced the migrants to disembark.

Kidnapper Profile and Modus Operandi: Of the 25 incidents in the northeastern border region that listed information about the perpetrators, 22 identified the kidnappers as the Zetas or the Gulf Cartel. While the Zetas were reported as the perpetrators in kidnapping cases in Tamaulipas, Veracruz, and Coahuila (17 cases in total), the Gulf Cartel were identified only in Tamaulipas (5 cases). These perpetrators tended to kidnap larger groups of migrants than in other geographic regions. The median number of migrants kidnapped in this region was 15, with the numbers ranging from 1 to 244.

In Mexico's northeastern border region, more individuals were detained in each kidnapping incident than in other regions. On average, four individuals were detained in each incident, but the numbers varied from 1 to 14 participants. These detained kidnappers ranged in age—from minors to 45 years old—and were mostly Mexican. However, they also included individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and the United States (three individuals from Texas). The majority of the kidnappers were men, but women were detained in 12 cases. These women played various roles in the kidnapping process, including caring for and feeding the kidnapped migrants.

The majority of migrants in the northeastern region were taken to stash houses. A total of 85 percent of migrants were taken to a stash house (47 cases), while migrants were also held in hotels (5 cases) or on ranches (3 cases). The median ransom fee in this Mexican region was \$3,400. Overall, the requested ransom payments ranged from US\$500 to US\$10,000.¹⁴

REGION: NORTHWESTERN BORDER

Map 4: Mexico's Northwest Border Region



Author elaboration

Location: This report defines Mexico's northwestern border region as the states of Baja California and Sonora. In this region, 49 of the 56 kidnapping cases occurred in Baja California and only 7 cases took place in Sonora. Forty-one percent of all the kidnapping cases took place in Tijuana (23 cases), 16 cases in Mexicali, 6 cases in Nogales, and 4 cases in Tecate. In total, 86 percent of the kidnapping cases in this region occurred in cities directly along the U.S.-Mexico border. The remaining incidents either did not list a city or occurred in the desert region of Baja California that is known colloquially as La Rumorosa.

Demographic and Transit Information: Of the 56 kidnapping cases in Mexico's northwestern border region, 46 provided the kidnapped migrants'

demographic information. In a shift from other Mexican regions, only 35 percent of these cases included a woman and only 7 percent of the incidents (3 cases) involved minors. Additionally, Mexicans were the most common victims and were present in 60 percent of the kidnapping incidents that listed demographic information. Other nationalities were also present, albeit in lower numbers, with Guatemalans present in five kidnapping cases, Salvadorans in four cases, and Hondurans in one case. Indian and Brazilian nationals were also present in two cases.

In the northwestern border region, the majority of the kidnapped migrants were already in border cities and searching for smugglers to take them to the United States. This region's kidnappers frequently made false



promises to smuggle migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border before detaining them in safe houses. There is little information about where these migrants were apprehended. However, in the five cases that provide this information, the migrants were apprehended while walking in remote areas near the border (two cases), while riding buses (two cases), and while driving in a private car (one case).

Kidnapper Profile and Modus Operandi: In Mexico's northwestern border region, organized criminal actors appear to play a smaller role in migrant kidnappings than in the northeastern border region. Only two incidents mentioned organized criminal organizations as the perpetrators, with one case naming the Sinaloa Cartel.¹⁵ The remaining incidents either identified unnamed bandits or perpetrators without clear criminal affiliations.

In the northwestern border region, the median number of kidnapped migrants was three per incident, which

is lower than any other region. Yet, the number of captured migrants varied significantly, and ranged from 1 to 58. A median of three kidnappers were apprehended per incident, which is consistent with other geographic regions. While the majority of the kidnappers were men, women were detained in 30 percent of the incidents (eight cases) that listed kidnappers' demographics. The detained kidnappers were 33 years old on average, although their ages ranged from 20 to 55 years. And in every case that listed the detained kidnappers' nationalities, the perpetrators were Mexican.

Similar to the other geographic areas, migrants in Mexico's northwestern border region were primarily held in stash houses. Eighty-three percent of migrants were taken to a stash house (29 cases), but some migrants were also held in hotels (5 cases) and ranches (1 case). In the northwestern corridor, the median ransom fee request was US\$5,000, with ransom payments ranging from US\$800 to US\$15,000.

REGION: YUCATÁN PENINSULA

Map 5: Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula



Author elaboration



Location: From 2010 to 2017, this report's database records six kidnapping cases in the state of Quintana Roo. This region has a completely different migrant kidnapping modus operandi from the rest of the country. All six migrant kidnapping cases involved Cuban migrants and took place in or around Cancún, with one case occurring on Isla Mujeres, off the coast of Cancún. There were no migrant kidnapping cases in the state's interior.

Demographic and Transit Information: In all six kidnapping cases, Cuban migrants were the only victims. These cases involved 75 victims, with women present in three of the four kidnapping cases that provided victims' demographic information. Minors were not mentioned in any case. Only one article listed transportation information, with the migrants arriving to Quintana Roo on a raft from Cuba. It is also possible that Cuban migrants also arrived to Cancún by plane, but there is no direct evidence in the database's six cases.

Kidnapper Profile and Modus Operandi: In Quintana Roo, the median number of kidnapped migrants per incident was 13, which is consistent with other Mexican regions. Only two cases provided the kidnappers' information, with one individual detained in the first incident and another three people detained in the second case. At least one female kidnapper was arrested. Additionally, at least one Cuban national was detained for his role in a kidnapping. The articles did not provide the detained individuals' ages. In this Mexican region, organized criminal actors did not appear to play any role in the kidnappings.

In the cases that outlined kidnappers' modus operandi, all involved false promises to take the Cuban nationals to the United States. Additionally, in the four cases that listed where migrants were detained, all involved stash houses. Only two of the cases included ransom payments, which were US\$8,000 and US\$10,000. On average, these ransom payments were higher than in the other Mexican regions, but it is difficult to ascertain broader trends from only two cases.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By analyzing migrant kidnappings by Mexican region, this report identifies different kidnapping structures and criminal actors. This report recommends three types of improvements for Mexican law enforcement and policymakers for addressing migrant kidnapping across the country: improved data collection, awareness campaigns, and targeted operations.

The new Secretary of Public Security should create a public data repository of migrant crimes. While the PGR investigates federal crimes against migrants and certain migrant kidnappings, most crimes against migrants are within the jurisdiction of Mexico's 32 states. The Executive Secretariat for the National Public Security System (Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SESNSP) is already tasked with soliciting and publishing data on crimes at the state and municipal level and should also seek to collect information on crimes against foreigners (with immigration status as a variable). The SESNSP should collect this data in collaboration with the Unit of Migratory Policy (Unidad de Política Migratoria) within the Sub-secretary of Population, Migration, and Religious Affairs (Subsecretaría de Población, Migración y Asuntos Religiosos) and the Crime Investigation Unit (Unidad de Investigación de Delitos Para Personas Migrantes) within the PGR.

The Federal Police should launch a targeted awareness campaign on migrant kidnappings in border cities in Mexico's northwestern region. Mexico's Federal Police have launched awareness campaigns for human trafficking and crimes against children, and they could develop a targeted campaign against migrant kidnappings in select areas of the country. In Mexico's northwestern region, migrants are frequently tricked by kidnappers who pose as human smugglers or make false promises. This campaign should be conducted through posters provided to local migrant shelters, government offices that work with migrants, and businesses around train routes and bus stops (to be placed on their walls). It should warn migrants that some kidnappers act as smugglers, and that they should avoid contracting smuggling services from individuals



waiting near major train stops or in bus stations. This campaign should also be developed in coordination with specialized state bodies, which would have in-depth targeted knowledge of local migrant kidnapping dynamics.

Focus law enforcement operations on migrant kidnapping hotspots and create inter-agency task forces in these areas. This report identified multiple migrant kidnapping hotspots across Mexico, including Reynosa, Tamaulipas; Cardenas, Tabasco; Tijuana, Baja California; Matamoros, Tamaulipas; and Mexicali, Baja California. This level of hotspot analysis helps with general allocations of attention and resources. To be operationally effective, however, there should be a greater focus on detecting hotspots and kidnapping operations within cities. For example, in the southern region, migrants were primarily kidnapped near train tracks, while in the northeastern part of the country, migrants were targeted on buses or at bus stations. Operationally, this should prompt a stepped-up law enforcement presence at these locations. However, this report's findings analyze migrant kidnapping trends over a 12-year period, and further analysis could better identify changes in each area over time and current dynamics.



Appendix A

	South	Northeast	Northwest	Yucatán
Case Count	63	205	56	6
Municipality	Cardenas	Reynosa	Tijuana	Cancun
Median # Victims	11	15	3	13
Nationality (victim)	Honduran	Honduran	Mexican	Cuban
Median Ransom (US\$)	\$3,000	\$3,400	\$5,000	\$9,000
Transport Method	Train	Bus	Varied	Walking

Regional migrant kidnapping trends (Author Elaboration)

Sources

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Endnotes

¹ This range estimates that an average of 150,000 to 300,000 irregular migrants crossed through Mexico each year. While recent estimates suggest that the number of irregular crossers is closer to 300,000 to 400,000, the numbers have fluctuated and apprehension numbers in both Mexico and the United States suggest that transit migration numbers were lower from 2007 to 2013.

² The paper chose to rely on this definition given the use of Mexican federal and state-level kidnapping statistics in its database. “Codigo Penal Federal,” Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, August 14, 1931, last reformed July 26, 2008.

³ These additional requirements include: (1) to have the victim rescued; (2) to threaten the life of the individual or to stop the individual from performing a particular act; (3) to cause harm to the individual; or (4) or to commit an “express kidnapping” wherein the kidnapper either robs or extorts the victim. If an individual is taken against his/her will but none of the aforementioned criteria also occur, the crime is defined as an illegal deprivation of liberty which is a less serious crime.

⁴ Ley General Para Prevenir y Sancionar Los Delitos en Materia de Secuestro, Reglamento de la Fracción XXI del Artículo 73 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, November 30, 2010.

⁵ “Secuestro. Las Autoridades del Fuero Común Están Autorizadas Válidamente para Aplicar La Ley General Para Prevenir y Sancionar los Delitos en esa Materia,” Gaceta del Semanario Judicial de la Federación, Libro 7, June 2014, page 1324.

⁶ “Tribunales debatirán penas por secuestro exprés,” La Silla Rota, April 26, 2018.

⁷ “Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública,” Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, September 25, 2018, http://www.beta.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2018/EstSegPub/envipe2018_09.pdf.

⁸ Ximena Suarez-Enriquez & Maureen Meyer, “Access to Justice for Migrants in Mexico,” Washington Office on Latin America, July 27, 2017.

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¹² In one of these two cases, the kidnappers identified themselves as state police officers. It remains unclear whether the kidnappers were truly from the state police or only using that as a cover to gain control of the migrants.

¹³ For a breakdown of the general trends in each region, refer to Appendix A.

¹⁴ The US\$500 ransom payment requests were from a 2008 kidnapping case in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz.

¹⁵ The other case involved a group that identified themselves as the Zetas. However, since the Zetas do not have an operational history in Tijuana, it is possible that these kidnappers were trying to incite fear by referring to themselves as the Zetas.



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