

# EXTORTION



**A KEY TRIGGER OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND FORCED MIGRATION  
IN THE NORTH OF CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO**

# Extortion

## A key trigger of internal displacement and forced migration in the North of Central America and Mexico

This snapshot explores the links between extortion, internal displacement and forced migration in the North of Central America (NCA) and the migration route in Mexico. Although the definition varies across different national legislations, we understand **extortion as being the use of intimidation, violence or threats to force someone to do something or to obtain someone's property**<sup>1</sup>. This type of aggression one of the main drivers of displacement in the region, but it is also one of the main crimes that people are subjected to during displacement, as well as after deportation back to their countries of origin. As such, extortion transcends international borders as one of the main human rights violations committed against displaced people and migrants.

In order to outline the issue of extortion and its relationship with internal displacement and forced migration in this region, this snapshot explores the phenomenon of extortion, its protagonists and consequences. The first section compiles an update on the recent data related to the ongoing protection crisis in the region. Secondly the snapshot provides analysis on the regional similarities and trends related to extortion, and then provides a more detailed examination of the situation in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, through national chapters. Finally, a brief annex explores the protection risks related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Key messages

- 1 Extortion is often reported as one of the main triggers of forced displacement<sup>2</sup>. However, the magnitude of the phenomenon is difficult to quantify, as other triggers of displacement (such as homicides, injuries, sexual violence, and threats) can be directly related to the collection of extortion fees.
- 2 In other cases, migration reported to be due to economic factors can often hide stories of forced displacement triggered by extortion. Some examples include being forced to shut down a family business, or losing an income source, as a result of extortion.
- 3 When faced with extortion, people often employ protection mechanisms that subject them to increased risks. These include staying confined at home, internal displacement or forced migration.
- 4 Impunity, distrust in authority and fear of retaliation from those committing extortion makes the latter prone to underreporting and difficult to measure.



This is the eight snapshot on the protection situation in the North of Central America and Mexico; an initiative of the REDLAC Regional Protection Group for the NCA, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, and supported by AECID and ECHO. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 humanitarian organisations and academic institutions working in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico, as well as monitoring of official statistics, press, and academic studies. The document includes inputs from various organisations in the Protection Group, but does not reflect messages approved by each organisation.

# 2 A general update on the protection crisis

## Data from January to March 2020

### Guatemala

- As of March, 632 homicides were registered: 87% men and 13% women.<sup>11</sup>
- A draft bill was presented to reinstate the death penalty in the country.<sup>12</sup>
- The Government approved reforms that have been qualified as repressive toward civil society organizations.<sup>13</sup>
- In January alone, 347 children under the age of 14 received medical treatment for sexual assaults.<sup>14</sup>

### Deportations from the US and Mexico (January-March 2020) - OIM

Deportations to	2020	Variation 2019
El Salvador	5,962	-5%
Guatemala	21,110	+2%
Honduras	17,195	-13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,267</b>	<b>-5.5%</b>



### El Salvador

- During the first quarter of 2020, 300 homicides were recorded. This is a 50% decrease compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>7</sup>
- 3,093 people went missing in 2019, the majority were men between the ages of 18 and 30.<sup>8</sup>
- In February, members of the Armed Forces and the National Civilian Police occupied the Legislative Assembly.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2019, more than 19,000 pregnancies were reported of girls under the age of 18 (15% of total pregnancies nationwide).<sup>10</sup>

### Honduras

- 722 homicides were recorded (a 14% increase compared to 2019).<sup>3</sup>
- The Honduran Government registered 440 missing Hondurans on the migration route.<sup>4</sup>
- 406 women were assassinated in 2019, one every 21 hours.<sup>5</sup>
- 155 LGBTQI persons were assassinated over the past 5 years (90% of the crimes remain un-investigated).<sup>6</sup>

### Apprehensions at the US-Mexico border (October 2019 to April 2020) -U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Nationality	Unaccompanied minors	Traveling with family	Single adults	Total
Salvadorans	1,685	3,565	5,602	<b>10,852</b>
Guatemalan	6,488	9,448	17,125	<b>33,061</b>
Hondurans	2,863	8,436	13,185	<b>24,484</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,036</b>	<b>21,449</b>	<b>35,912</b>	<b>68,397</b>

## Data from January to March 2020



**Asylum applications in Mexico - COMAR**

El Salvador	1,612
Guatemala	1,040
Honduras	5,539

**Deportations from the United States to Mexico (January-February, 2020)**  
Unidad de Política Migratoria, Mexican Government

**37,215**

**Timeline of relevant events – Mexico and the United States**

Date	Fact
2020	<b>February 28</b> The US Federal court suspends the application of the Migrant Protection Protocol. <sup>18</sup>
	<b>March 7</b> The US Government approves a pilot project to store DNA samples of migrants. <sup>19</sup>
	<b>March 12</b> The US Supreme Court resumes the application of the MPP. <sup>20</sup>
	<b>March 23</b> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the US Government denies access to asylum seekers at the Mexican border. <sup>21</sup>
	<b>March 24</b> The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) postpones the processing of all asylum applications until April. <sup>22</sup>

# 3 Extortion in the North of Central America

## Regional context

Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador face complex challenges in terms of security, due to high levels of criminality and violence and recent histories of internal armed conflicts or military dictatorships, combined with a range of phenomena such as drug-trafficking, corruption, impunity and inequality.<sup>23</sup> This situation has facilitated the proliferation of organised criminal groups, financed by the micro-trafficking of narcotics and extortion. The latter is also used as a strategy for controlling territory.

## Security policies

In recent years, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have adopted joint policies in matters of citizen security (for example, the Regional Plan against Transnational Organised Crime<sup>24</sup> signed in 2016). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the NCA countries have opted for harsh anti-crime laws and so-called 'iron fist' policies to fight criminal groups and set stringent prison sentences.<sup>25</sup> Across all three countries, these policies have included the deployment of military forces to capture members of criminal groups, leading to increased confrontations. While homicide rates have significantly reduced in all three countries, it is worth mentioning that in parallel a rise in the number of gang members has also been reported<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, by focusing on the weakening of criminal structures and not on comprehensive protection mechanisms for their victims, these policies have been shown to reinforce the sense of belonging and emotional bonds among gang members. As such, criminal organisations have become more sophisticated; and their leaders, recruiting strategies and operations in prisons have been strengthened. Through this process, extortion schemes are thought to have been incubated in prisons across the region.<sup>27</sup>

*"At the beginning of the 21st century, Central American authorities tried to bring gangs to a halt through mass arrests and extrajudicial assassinations. Their power only grew thanks to these policies of repression, as they strengthened their bonds, connections and opportunities to finance themselves through extortion from prisons. Most of the time, extortion calls are made from jails, and to follow-up, physical threats and assassinations of those who do not pay are executed by younger recruits on the streets."<sup>28</sup>*

Forced Internal Displacement in Guatemala: 2010-2016 Assessment, IDGT, Rafael Landivar University

## Affected profiles and differentiated impacts

Although extortion is a phenomenon present across the NCA, it is important to differentiate the risks to which children, teenagers, men and women, as well as people working in certain professions, are exposed, and how this impacts their access to rights:

### People distributing merchandise, microentrepreneurs, salespersons

Firstly, certain people are more vulnerable to extortion based merely on where they live and work. **Extortion is commonplace for residents and business owners in gang-controlled territories.** Places such as markets and small businesses are subject to systematic payments to criminal groups. In Guatemala, of the 39,243 reports of extortion made to the National Civilian Police in the past four years, 55% were of residences, 35% of businesses, 5% of buses (urban and inter-municipal), 2% of miscellaneous transportations (heavy machinery, taxis cabs, motorcycle taxis, bicycle taxis and others), 1% of schools and 2% of other non-specified locations.<sup>29</sup> In the same country, extortion taxes vary from about Q100 to Q300 (\$13 to \$40), depending on the business. Vendors are often tasked with collecting their own money and handing it over to the gangs in bags identifying the source of each payment. In Honduras, people who deliver merchandise, microentrepreneurs and people working in the public sectors and transportation have been identified as the most vulnerable to extortion<sup>30</sup>. According to estimations from 2018, 54% of extortion victims in Honduras were businesses, 20% of which were from transportation networks. Furthermore, an 80% of small businesses and informal entrepreneurs declared having been extorted.<sup>31</sup> In Las Torres, a neighbourhood in Tegucigalpa, microentrepreneurs pay 1,000 lempiras per day (\$40) to different gangs, and receive death threats if they do not pay on time.<sup>32</sup> In El Salvador, business owners in several departments, such as San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel and Usulután, report paying between \$20 to \$100 a month in extortion.<sup>33</sup> According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of El Salvador, in 2019, the main security problems affecting business owners were theft or robbery (44%), followed by extortion (35%), fraud (14%) and homicide (7%).<sup>34</sup> Security measures have not stopped criminal groups from extorting; in some instances, payments have to be made in advance or are doubled for "emergencies", such as when a gang member has been arrested, or needs money for "logistics" or lawyer fees. While some business owners have assessed the possibility of closing their businesses, they fear that when they reopen, gang members will increase their fees and demand payment for previous months or issue death threats.<sup>35</sup>

## Transport workers

People working in **public transportation** are particularly affected by extortion. In Guatemala, 2,464 reports of extortion of urban and inter-municipal buses were filed between 2013 and September 2019<sup>36</sup>. Some transport operators state that they have been paying extortion for 15 years to several different groups simultaneously. To avoid being caught, criminal groups constantly change their methods for collecting money, they avoid using telephones, and often make children, teenagers or people pretending to be passengers collect the money. The costs of the extortion are then transferred to public transportation users, through unauthorized increases in fees. Bus drivers who refuse to pay face armed attacks and explosions.<sup>37</sup> Between 2006 and 2018, 1,016 violent deaths of drivers were registered.<sup>38</sup> \$70 million are estimated to be generated through the extortion of buses in Guatemala each year.<sup>39</sup> In Honduras, an estimated 3,000 public transportation operators have been assassinated in the past 10 years by criminal groups. According to the Observatory on Violence of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, 214 drivers were murdered last year alone<sup>40</sup>. Sometimes, when police presence in transport terminals prevents criminal groups from extorting buses directly, bus employees are forced to serve as intermediaries and collect extortion payments from other public transportation operators. In April 2019, Honduran transportation workers organised several protests demanding that the government adopt initiatives to address this phenomenon. However, these protests resulted in an increase in extortion fees, from 900 lempiras (approximately \$36) to 1,200 lempiras (\$47) per week.<sup>41</sup> The vulnerability of workers in this sector is clear: after recently going public on extortion fees, Rony Figueroa, the Vice-president of the Taxi Driver Association of Honduras, was assassinated.<sup>42</sup> In El Salvador, in February 2020, two transportation companies closed temporarily due to extortion fees<sup>43</sup>. It is estimated that transportation workers paid \$18 million in extortion in 2019,<sup>44</sup> paying, on average \$5 per day per vehicle. This data does not include the so-called “point extortion”, a fee charged at the final terminals.<sup>45</sup>

## Men, women and LGBTQI people

Extortion affects **women and men**; however, “*women simultaneously suffer from a more insidious form of extortion shaped by the threat of sexual violence that blurs the lines between extortion, slavery and human trafficking.*”<sup>46</sup> In Honduras, according to the 2004-2018 study on internal displacement due to violence, factors that explain internal displacement differ based on family structures: male-led homes are more likely to be affected by extortion while female-led homes suffer double the injuries and sexual violence, and almost three times more home evictions.<sup>47</sup> In El Salvador, given that according to some estimates, more than 85% of Salvadoran homes are mono-parental female-led families, the responsibility of paying “rent” (extortion payments) often falls on women.<sup>48</sup> According to testimonies, family incomes can decrease between 60 to 70% due to extortion, forcing women to resort to using pensions or incomes of older relatives, or search for temporary, informal jobs. Throughout the region, sexual violence is often used as a way to collect extortion. The bodies of women, teenagers and girls are perceived as a property for vengeance and control.<sup>49</sup> One of the organisations interviewed for this snapshot shared cases of adolescents being threatened with sexual violence if they do not pay extortion fees. Moreover, LGBTQI people in El Salvador are also victims of severe human rights violations, including extortion, based on their sexual orientation, identity and/or gender expression by gangs and state agents.<sup>50</sup> Among the main causes of displacement of LGBTQI persons, it is estimated that 31% were victims of gang threats, 27% have suffered attempted homicides based on their sexual orientation or hate crimes, 11% have been victims of physical violence, 9% have suffered sexual violence and 8% have been victim of extortion.<sup>51</sup>

## Children and adolescents

Children and adolescents are particularly affected by the phenomenon of extortion. Schools in communities affected by violence are often infiltrated or controlled by criminal groups, and children can be extorted at school or on the road between their homes and schools,<sup>52</sup> and also forced or coerced into recruitment from an early age to collect “rent”<sup>53</sup>, to act as “informants” or to monitor communities as they are initiated into armed groups. In the NCA countries, protection laws for underage offenders often create greater vulnerabilities for children in this current context. In Honduras, for example, legislation that has reduced convictions for minors has also promoted their forced recruitment. In 2015, 28% of people detained on extortion charges were boys, girls and adolescents. A similar phenomenon occurs in El Salvador, in 2015, 15% of the gang members detained were minors.<sup>54</sup> Between January and June 2019, the Anti-Gang National Force detained 37 boys and nine girls suspected of extortion.<sup>55</sup>

# 4 Extortion in El Salvador

## Context and actors

Extortion related to criminal violence is a part of the daily lives of many people in El Salvador, where 2,153 victims of this phenomenon were registered in 2019.<sup>56</sup> Approximately, 60,000 gang members operate in at least 247 out of the 262 municipalities countrywide,<sup>57</sup> controlling the limits of their territories, as well as the lives of the residents and people transiting through. This control is particularly strong in public transportation, schools and markets. Older gang members visit informal markets on a weekly basis to collect extortion fees.<sup>58</sup> Extortion in El Salvador directly impacts the national economy: two companies or businesses close each week due to extortion<sup>59</sup> and it is estimated that the country pays approximately 400 million dollars a year in fees.<sup>60</sup>

## Extortion dynamics

During 2019, three out of every ten cases of extortion were carried out through mobile phones and eight out each ten cases happened in cities. The departments with the highest extortion reports were: San Salvador (585), Santa Ana (170), La Libertad (150), Sonsonate (127) and San Miguel (119).<sup>61</sup> The so-called 'iron-fist' policies implemented by the government have overcrowded the country's prisons, which along with limited resources and a tendency to implement preventive custody, have turned jails into recruitment centres for the MS-13 and Barrio 18. Gang members that remain in prison conduct criminal activities through their mobile phones and receive money from gang members outside prisons.<sup>62</sup>

## Magnitude of the phenomenon

While the official homicide record in El Salvador decreased in 2019, the number of extortion victims increased by 30% in 2019 compared to 2018, making extortion the type of crime that has increased the most over the last year.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, in 2019 extortions against youth aged 18-29 increased by 104% compared to 2018<sup>64</sup>; likewise, the number of extortions increased in 11 out of 14 departments.<sup>65</sup> The systematic exposure to extortion affects various aspects of people's public and private lives. According to the 2018 Victimization and Insecurity Perception Survey, delinquency and crime are identified as the main issue affecting the country for 55% of the surveyed subjects, and more than 50% feel unsafe in markets, squares and public transportation, limiting their autonomy and undermining their rights to gathering and free movement.<sup>66</sup> El Salvador is considered to be the country in the North of Central America worst affected by extortion: victims pay annually the equivalent of 1.7% of GDP.<sup>66</sup>

## Underreporting, distrust and impunity

One of the main challenges in responding to extortion is the high levels of underreporting, as despite being one of the most prosecuted crimes in the Salvadoran system, the magnitude of the phenomenon is far greater than what can be inferred from the reports filed with the National Police.<sup>68</sup> Another challenge is the lack of specific response mechanism; for example, there are no protection schemes for children or adolescents being extorted or forced to join gangs.<sup>69</sup> Many people are unaware of the Childhood and Adolescence Court, and the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development is absent at the community level.<sup>70</sup> In parallel, according to media reports, numerous security agents, public servants and elected officers have collaborated with criminal groups in illegal activities, and all political parties have negotiated with gangs during elections.<sup>71</sup> People suffering extortion often do not file reports, due to widespread mistrust in institutions; they don't believe an institutional response will be activated, or fear that the authorities are infiltrated by criminal groups. The obligation to disclose their place of residence can also revictimize people filing reports, due to the high levels of stigmatization toward certain areas of the cities.<sup>72</sup>

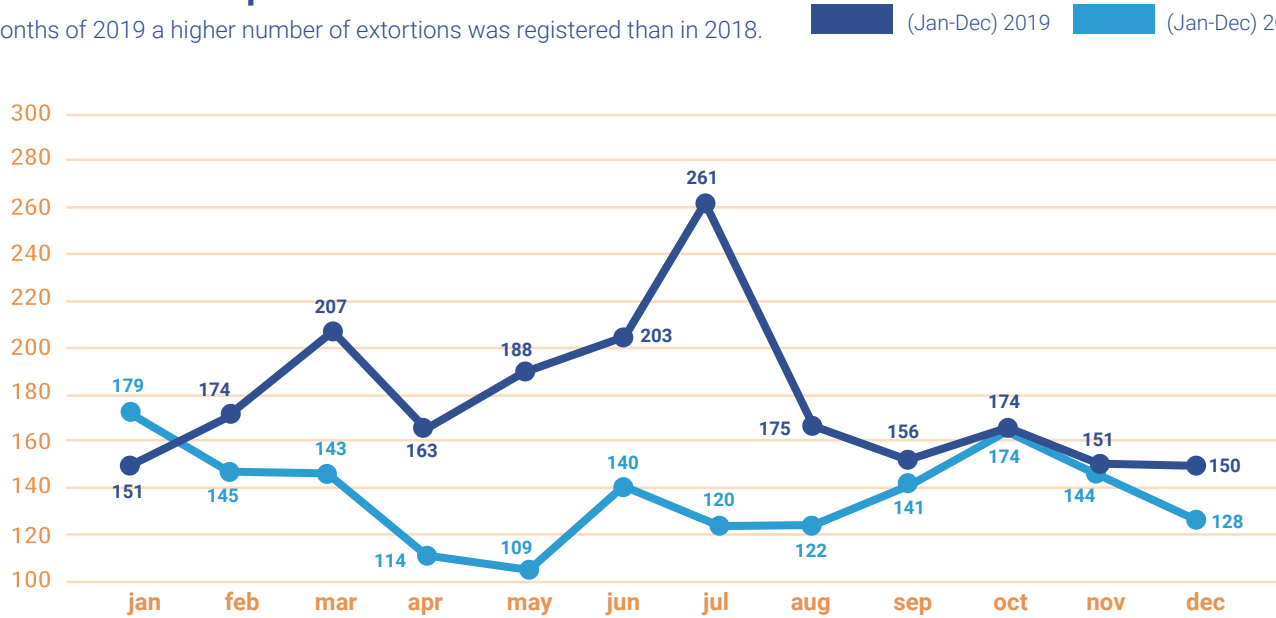
*"People do not trust anyone, they do not file reports. Work needs to be done to restore trust in community actors so that they can refer cases to the institutional response mechanisms. People don't trust authorities; they fear that whatever they say will get back to the gangs. We've been asked several times to stop talking about extortion, and people have even left our programmes because of it. They prefer to remain quiet. They do not know where the next blow can come from. It can also be from police abuse; they cannot even trust those who are supposed to protect them."*

Humanitarian organisation in El Salvador

## El Salvador

### Number of extortions per month in El Salvador

In 10 months of 2019 a higher number of extortions was registered than in 2018.



Data from the Online Portal of the National Police, January 2020.

## Extortion, internal displacement and forced migration

*“The scale of the fear of extortion is often too great to express. When people tell us their stories, they often leave it out, since refusing extortion can lead to death.”*

Humanitarian organisation in El Salvador

Although the real number of Salvadorans displaced or forced to migrate due to extortion is unknown, extortion and its associated violence is one of the main causes leading them to flee. According to data from the Internal Mobilization Characterization conducted by the Government of El Salvador and UNHCR, the three main causes behind internal displacement: threats and coercion (69%), extortion (24%) and the situation of general insecurity (20%).<sup>73</sup> The report of the Civil Society Task Force Against Forced Displacement Due to Violence in El Salvador shows that between 2017 and 2019, extortions and threats represented 2% and 57% of all forced displacements respectively<sup>74</sup>. It is important to bear in mind that many displaced people can report threats as being the main reason for their displacement, when in fact the threat is directly tied to an act of extortion.

## State response

In recent years, a range of mechanisms designed to fight and prevent extortion have been put into place, resulting in different levels of success. In 2014, through the Decree 953, modifications were made to the Penal Code with the purpose of improving the investigation and criminal prosecution of extortion. Among these modifications were: the removal of the obligation for the act of extortion to have been fully carried out, enabling prosecutions to go ahead independently of whether profits were made or not; as well as the criminalisation of the co-authors of the act (including those collecting the money)<sup>75</sup>. However, this policy change failed to acknowledge that people who have been forcibly recruited into gangs can end up being penalized. Also in 2014, the Plan El Salvador Seguro (PESS-2015) was adopted to address violence and criminality, guaranteeing access to justice, and attention and protection for victims of any kind of crime. However, under the recent new government, this strategy has been substituted by the Territorial Control Plan which prioritises 12 of the 262 municipalities in the country and is aimed at eliminating the financial resources of gangs, focusing on the main places where extortions happen.<sup>76</sup> In 2016, the Legislative Assembly modified the antiterrorism law to classify gangs as terrorist organisations, foreseeing convictions of up to 15 years of prison to anyone who “solicits, demands, offers, promotes, devices, negotiates, convenes or makes pacts to not prosecute” with gangs.<sup>77</sup> Notwithstanding, analysis shows that when states exert repression on gangs through ‘iron fist’ policies, human and material losses multiply. Furthermore, a humanitarian organisation in El Salvador stressed that there is no transparency or communication around data on extortion.



## El Salvador



Honduras, NRC, 2017

### Best practices

Several initiatives by national and local organisations can be considered best practices in the response to addressing extortion.<sup>78</sup> The Local Rights Committee has been identified, for example, as a timely mechanism for territorialising at a local level the Comprehensive Protection System and activating response referral routes. The SolucionES programme, executed through a coalition of five Salvadoran non-profit organisations joining forces to prevent crime and violence is a good practice for strengthening the capacity of municipalities.<sup>79</sup> The World Food Program works with municipalities in El Salvador to support the relocation of at-risk extortion victims. 'Outreach Centers' provide positive results in the prevention of juvenile violence; these are grounded in a methodology developed by the USAID program in Guatemala, Alianza Joven (Youth Alliance), and later branched out through the regional USAID-SICA Alianza Joven, and formed by religious organisations (Alcance Positivo) and communities implementing initiatives geared toward facilitating opportunities for vulnerable young people.<sup>80</sup> Finally, it is worth highlighting the work of Factoria Ciudadana which works with former inmates to prevent reoffending and promote reinsertion into society.<sup>81</sup>

### Extortion during Covid-19

In El Salvador, the state of emergency decreed by the government on the 14th of March 2020, due to the Covid-19 situation, has affected extortion as the main source of financing for gangs. Both factions of Barrio 18 –Sureños and Revolucionarios- agreed to temporarily stop collecting payments from informal businesses.<sup>82</sup> However criminal groups seek to maintain their territorial control intact in spite of Covid-19, and have established schedules for a member of each family in the neighborhoods under their control to go buy food. The need to control entry and exit of communities is also due to the fear that if a gang member becomes infected, they might not receive medical attention.<sup>83</sup>

# 5 Extortion in Honduras

## Context and actors

In contrast with El Salvador, where people identify gangs as the main actor committing extortion, in Honduras, other groups associated with organised crime are also identified.<sup>84</sup> The money generated by extortion is used for the purchase of ammunition and financing logistics of organised crime.<sup>85</sup> Extortion from criminal groups in Honduras is also part of a broader context of corruption and impunity. A report revealed that between 2014 and 2018, more than \$10 billion of the public treasury was lost through a variety of mechanisms such as extortion, bribery, overpriced goods and services, tax evasion and the legal transfer of state assets to public figures.<sup>86</sup> As a consequence, only 14.7% of the population in Honduras thinks that others can be trusted, and 62.4% admits having little to no trust in the police. Citizen safety represents the country's main problem for 43% of the population.<sup>87</sup> Since 2015, extortion reports have increased each year, particularly in the municipalities of the Central District, San Pedro Sula, Choloma and La Lima<sup>88</sup>. The Anti Maras and Gangs National Force (created in 2018 out of the Antiextortion National Force) registered 2,000 reports of extortion in 2019.<sup>89</sup>

*"The main cause of people needing relocation is persecution due to refusing to pay extortion fees, and consequently being threatened and forced to abandon their communities. This risk does not disappear with relocation. People need relocation because they are constantly living in fear. It's not always possible to reassure them that they will be safe in the new place, but it is possible to reduce their risk level".*

Humanitarian organisation in Honduras

## Coping mechanisms

According to the report on displacement of the Universal Periodic Review in Honduras, the only coping mechanisms available for victims of extortion are paying or fleeing, due to the lack of protection from authorities.<sup>90</sup>

## Extortion, internal displacement and forced migration

Extortion has been identified as one of the main causes of forced displacement in Honduras. According to the results of a survey conducted on relatives of migrants and deportees, the principle violations suffered are extortion (50%), threats (33%), homicides of relatives (8%) and homicides by gangs (8%).<sup>91</sup> According to the Internal Displacement Characterization Survey, published in 2019, out of all violent acts behind internal displacements in Honduras, extortions are reported as represent 13%, while threats count for 55%.<sup>92</sup> Again, it is important to consider that people could be reporting threats as the reason for their displacement, when in fact behind the threat is a situation of extortion. The risk of extortion does not end after displacement, given that, on the migration route to the United States, at least one out of every four Hondurans is subjected to crime, especially robbery, mugging and extortion, the latter particularly from the authorities<sup>93</sup>.

According to data provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Honduras, in 2019 the organisation supported 47 cases of internal displacement (27 men and 20 women) due to extortion, 12 cases of people who had fled the country due to extortion, and 134 cases of deported migrants (83 men and 51 women) who had previously left the country due to extortion.

*"We supported a case of a 24-year-old man who was a victim of extortion and threats. He and a friend ran a cell phone repair business together. One day a boy brought him a note saying that a gang required them to pay a weekly extortion fee of 1'000 lempiras. They did not have the full amount for the week's payment, so the next day another child gave them a note saying that they now had to pay 20'000 lempiras. Not having that amount of money, the man and his friend decided to close their business. A couple of days later the friend was kidnapped, and his body was found dead, with signs of torture, and with a sign on his chest with the man's name, saying that he was next. He also received another note demanding the 20'000 lempiras he owed. After this, he fled north on the migration route and arrived in the USA, where he applied for asylum, but his case was rejected. When we interviewed him, the man had just returned home after his second attempt to cross into the USA. He said that he was about to try again."*

Humanitarian organisation in Honduras

## Honduras

### State response

The Congress of Honduras has recently approved a Law for the Strengthening of the Security Policy that typifies extortion as terrorism and increases prison sentences from 20 to 50 years, or life sentences if the felony has resulted in deaths.<sup>94</sup> While the Anti-extortion National Force prosecutes perpetrators, there are no programmes for preventing, protecting or assisting victims.<sup>95</sup> The new National Force for Urban Transportation Security (FNSTU, according to its acronym in Spanish), to be inaugurated in 2020, will fight extortion and other crimes committed by gangs against transportation. Authorities foresee that this unit will benefit civilians, of which over 70% use urban transportation. It will begin by deploying 500 agents in Tegucigalpa, and then will expand to San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba, Santa Rosa de Copán and other cities across the country. The FNSTU is integrated by the Armed Forces, the Public Ministry, the Security and Defense Cabinet, the National Interinstitutional Security Forces, the Judicial Branch, the National Directorate of Investigation and Intelligence and the National Police. The mechanism will work with security cameras and panic buttons in transportation, connected to the FNSTU, to be activated as soon as criminal groups try to collect extortion or rob passengers.<sup>96</sup> However, this initiative, as many others, focuses on greater militarisation instead of addressing the social aspects and providing protection against the problem; this in turn could increase threats against those affected and their families.



Honduras, NRC, 2017

### Extortion during Covid-19

Nationwide mobility restrictions have directly impacted sectors across the economy, particularly public transportation and informal businesses. Within this context, the extortion dynamics that disproportionately affect transportation workers and informal businesses have dropped due to reduced operativity. However, people have reported the following changes in extortion dynamics: they have received collection notices, warning of the need to pay overdue fees once the economy is reactivated; door-to-door collections; road blocks in some communities in order to collect toll fees; an increase in alliances between criminal groups through social media with the objective of committing fraud; and new professions at risk (such as food and grocery delivery workers now facing extortion in order to be able to drop deliveries). The Center for Human Rights Research and Promotion also has observed a decrease in police reports, given that the main authorities have been focused on responding to COVID-19 and several institutions have been closed for filing reports.<sup>97</sup>

*"We supported a 25-year-old woman who was the victim of extortion, sexual violence and the murder of her brother because they were unable to continue paying extortion fees. His brother worked in the transport sector (he had his own bus) and a gang began to extort money from him. When he could not continue paying, the gang kidnapped the woman to sexually abuse her, and as a result she became pregnant. She filed a complaint with the police about this incident, the gang found out and they attacked her again (this time they beat her and broke her teeth). Then they murdered her brother. After this, the woman started a beauty salon to support her family (her son, two nephews and her mother, who was disabled). The gang began to charge her extortion and over time the fees increased to 1'200 lempiras. Unable to continue paying, the gang stole all of her hairdressing tools, and she had to close her salon. Members of the gang accused her of filing complaints with the police and told her that she was prohibited from leaving the neighbourhood without their permission. To seek help, she had to flee her home during the night with her family, and we helped her to be relocated in another part of the country."*

Humanitarian organisation in Honduras

# 6 Extortion in Guatemala

## Context and actors

In Guatemala, the dynamics of violence have changed over the past 12 years. Although the homicide rate has been reduced, the extortion rate has increased.<sup>98</sup> According to analysis by Infosegura, there is a geographical relationship between homicides and the presence of organised criminal groups, whereas extortions are related to the presence of gangs.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, an increase since 2013 of perceived insecurity correlates with the increase of reports of extortion made to the National Civilian Police; meaning that the general population's perception of insecurity is not only related to homicides, but to other forms of violence as well.

For Guatemalans, extortions is perceived to be directly linked to gangs,<sup>100</sup> and the Barrio 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha are mentioned as the main perpetrators<sup>101</sup>. These groups have the capacity of committing violent acts against their victims: armed attacks, injuries, sexual violence, and homicides as threats and methods of harassment<sup>102</sup>. However, in reality, there is also the phenomenon of so-called 'imitators': *"these are groups of common people, petty delinquents that pretend to be from a gang to generate fear, whilst not actually belonging to said gang. These groups use peoples' fear, but do not have the actual capacity for attack"*.<sup>103</sup>

## Extortion dynamics

Imitators exploit fear and impunity, but their modus operandi is different: they avoid physical contact and they do not systematically and regularly collect their extortion payments in the same way that gangs do to businesses or public transportation. By expecting victims to obey through a generalised fear of violent gangs, the amounts of money that imitators demand is higher and is often a one-time payment. However, after several rounds of unsuccessful intimidation, they desist; as they do not have the operational capacity to inflict physical harm.<sup>104</sup> It is important to consider the role of prisons in this dynamic. According to investigations conducted by the National Civilian Police and the Public Ministry, 70% of phone extortions are executed from inside prisons<sup>105</sup>, the prisons also happen to be located in departments that are most affected by extortion (Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Escuintla, Chimaltenango and Suchitepéquez).<sup>106</sup>

## Georeferenced analysis

● Group 1 ● Group 2 ● Group 3 ● Group 4

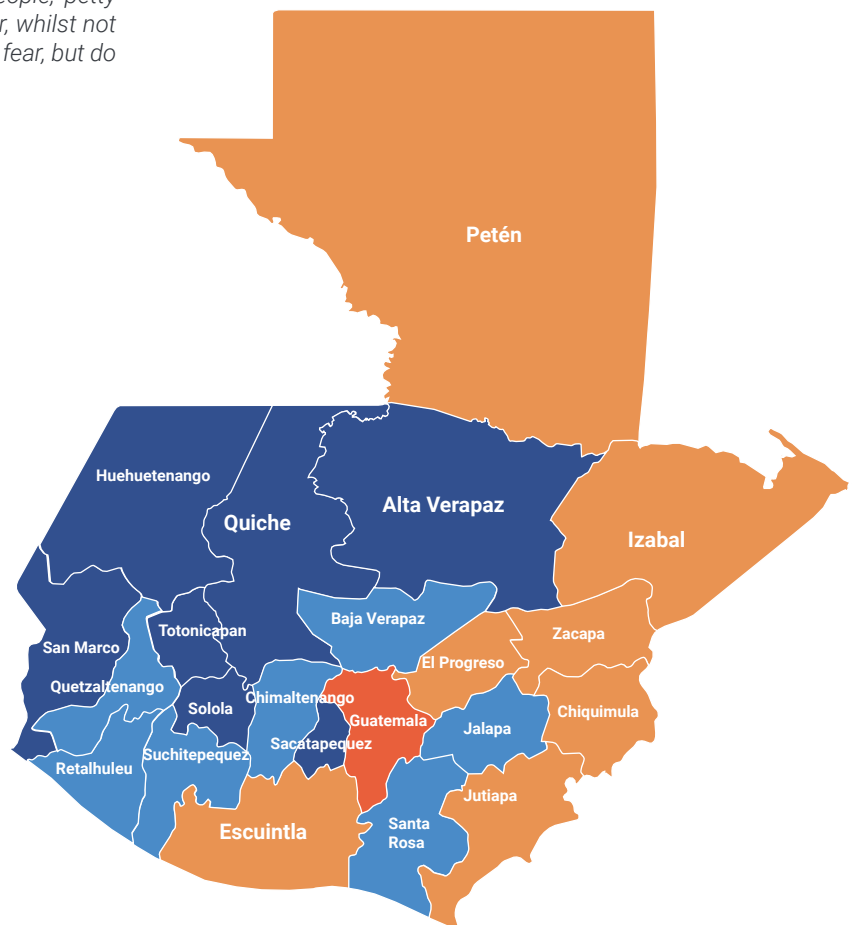
**Group 1** High homicide rate and high extortion rate.

**Group 2** High homicide rate and low extortion rate.

**Group 3** Low homicide rate and high extortion rate.

**Group 4** Low homicide rate and low extortion rate.

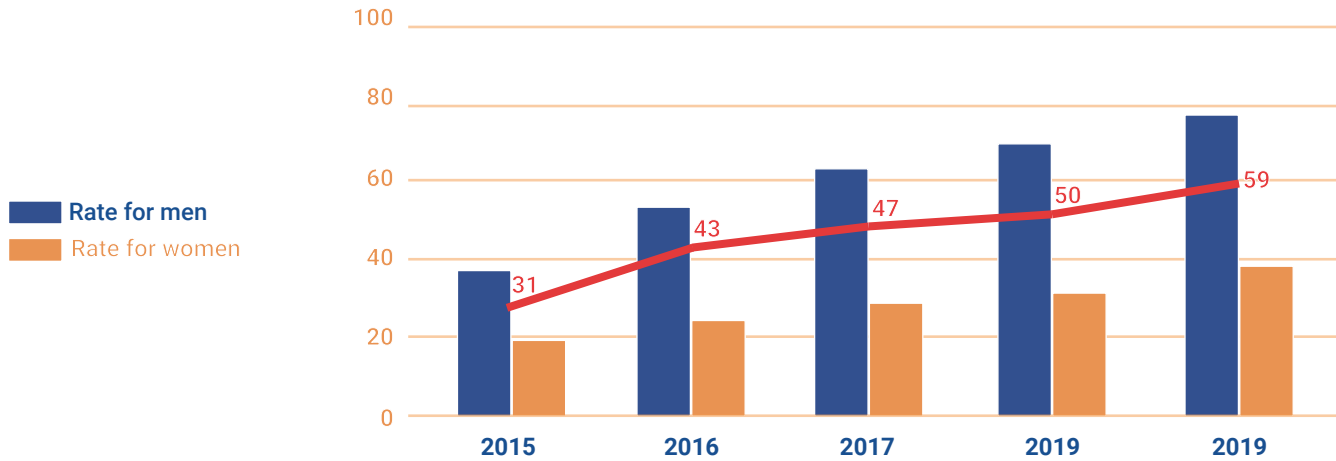
According to analysis by Infosegura, there is a geographical relationship between homicides and the presence of organised criminal groups, whereas extortions are related to the presence of gangs.



Source: [Infosegura. Dinámica territorial de las extorsiones, homicidios y criminalidades asociadas](#), October 2019

## Guatemala

### Rates of extortion, based on reports made to the National Civil Police, by gender and year



Source: SIPREVI, Consulado 29 de marzo del 2020

### Magnitude of the phenomenon

Extortion numbers in Guatemala vary depending on the institution processing reports, but data indicates towards an increasing trend. Until February 2020, a total of 1,686 extortion reports were filed before the Public Ministry. These could lead to a projection of 10,116 reports for 2020<sup>108</sup> (in 2019, the National Civilian Police recorded 10,479 reports, 8,678 in 2018, and 7,923 in 2017)<sup>109</sup>. On the other hand, the National Survey of Public Safety and Victimization shows that out of the people surveyed that had experienced extortion, 65% said that they hadn't reported the crime to authorities.<sup>110</sup> Guatemala is the country in the North of Central America with the highest rate of extortion reports, on average \$60 million are paid each year.<sup>111</sup>

*"The Chief Prosecutor for Extortions, Emma Flores, explained that 60% of extortions are conducted by imitators -people pretending to gang members-or organised crime groups. Additionally, she acknowledges that the existing corruption in the prison system makes the fight against extortion particularly difficult."<sup>107</sup>*

### Individual mechanisms for responding to extortion

*"When you receive a threat, you know you have to leave"*  
Research institute in Guatemala

Three types of coping mechanisms were identified in expert interviews:



#### Paying

In first instance, victims pay the fees demanded<sup>112</sup> and learn to live in violent contexts, and in some cases in forced confinement at home or with mobility restrictions.<sup>113</sup>



#### Closing businesses

For business owners, it can be difficult to keep paying extortions, as demands often increase over time. This often forces businesses to close as a protection mechanism.<sup>114</sup>



#### Fleeing

Displacements are initially intra-urban (from a neighbourhood to a similar one). When situations become more complex, people are displaced or forced to migrate irregularly.<sup>115</sup>

## Guatemala



Guatemala, NRC, 2018

### Extortion, internal displacement and forced migration

There are no official statistics on internal displacement; it is an invisible problem that it is rarely reported due to the lack of trust in both security and justice institutions.<sup>116</sup> However, surveys on migration, displacement and violence, consistently show extortion as being one of the causes of internal displacement.<sup>117</sup> A recent survey on Victimization and Perception of Police Performance conducted in the metropolitan area of Guatemala, shows that 9% of the surveyed persons moved homes due to violence, and out of these, 31% indicated that this was due to extortion.<sup>118</sup> A survey on asylum applicants in Tapachula (Chiapas, Mexico), found that 22% of Guatemalans polled were forced to leave their country due to extortion.<sup>119</sup> The few surveys on this phenomenon in Guatemala show that initially, displacements are short and intra-urban, usually to areas with similar conditions as the neighbourhoods of origin, but then, due to persistent extortion or violence from the same or different criminal groups, displaced people find themselves forced to flee the country. In other cases, migration supposedly due to economic factors can often hide realities of internal forced displacement such as the closing of family businesses or loss of income sources, leading families to suffer economic crises.<sup>120</sup>

For people who are displaced or in transit through Guatemala, some migrant shelters provide safehouses for relocated victims of violence. However, many people do not report extortion along the migration route, as there are no differentiated assistance protocols for people on the move if they are not identified as victims of other crimes, such as human trafficking. In many shelters, migrants are informed of their right to report crimes, and information is provided on the process, however this option is often seen as a waste of time. Extortion and the payment of bribes has become normalised among migrants and is often silenced, affecting people economically and emotionally.<sup>121</sup>

### State response

In response to the phenomenon of extortion, the Public Ministry has created a Prosecuting Office Against Extortion and an Anti-Extortion Helpline; and the National Civilian Police has a Division Against the Criminal Development of Gangs. Both institutions work to provide assistance to victims by receiving reports and prosecuting perpetrators.<sup>122</sup>

*“Political-criminal responses to extortion have been more successful in criminal investigation [...] however, social processes for reintegrating detainees have not been accompanied by mechanisms that reduce reoffending or that cut ties to criminal groups committing extortion”<sup>123</sup>*

### Extortion during Covid-19

When the state-imposed mobility restrictions for the pandemic started, in some parts of the capital city, gangs wrote off extortion payments for businesses in markets.<sup>124</sup> However, different institutions warn about an increase in extortion fees once the restrictions are removed, since criminal groups will need to recover their monetary losses. Many also foresee a spike in armed attacks on public transportation drivers, as well as other crimes. It is important to highlight that extortion has not stopped, as between the 17th and the 31st of March, the Public Ministry received 404 extortion reports, just 93 less than during the same period of the previous year.<sup>125</sup>

# 7 Extortion of migrants and people in need of international protection in Mexico

## Context of violence and migration policies in Mexico

For several years, Mexico has been faced with a crisis of insecurity and violence<sup>126</sup> reaching a peak in 2006 when the Government declared a “War on Drugs”, provoking an exponential increase in violence towards citizens and foreigners alike<sup>127</sup>. Examples include the massacres of San Fernando-Tamaulipas, in 2010 and Cadereyta-Nuevo Leon, in 2012; where organised criminal groups killed more than a hundred migrants<sup>128</sup>. 14 years later, violence continues to increase<sup>129</sup>. In the same vein, migration policies have been put into place with a focus on national security and the reinforcing of borders. Although the current government has announced a New Migration Policy focused on Human Rights<sup>130</sup>, civil society organisations have reported that it merely disguises and continues the mass scale detentions and deportations, including of people in need of international protection<sup>131</sup>, under strategies of persecution, stigmatisation, and criminalisation. Migrants and people in need of international protection are often forced into hiding throughout their transit through Mexico, travelling in contexts of high insecurity and violence, and are therefore more exposed to suffer multiple aggressions, including extortion.

**State agents**, particularly municipal and state police, the federal police and the National Institute for Migration, have been mentioned as responsible of at least 25% of crimes against migrants, including extortion<sup>136</sup>. Even National Guard officers have been reported to participate in extortion<sup>137</sup>. For example, at migration checkpoints along roads and highways, authorities extort migrants travelling in passenger buses, in ‘exchange’ for not detaining them or destroying their migration permits. Moreover, other authorities also commit extortion, such as staff in public ministries, hospitals, and clinics; using their positions of power to extort migrants when they seek medical care or try to file a report. Migrants and people in need of international protection are also extorted by migration authorities, while processing their permits or visas, or upon seeking asylum<sup>138</sup>; they are asked for money in exchange for not being denied the service, or to receive “better treatment”: better food, access to hygiene services, communication with relatives and legal representatives, among others<sup>139</sup>. Although not authorities, private security agents of the cargo trains that migrants use to travel from the south to the north of Mexico, also extort people in transit<sup>140</sup> demanding money from people boarding or even when they are already on the train, threatening to call authorities, to push them onto the train tracks, or whilst stopping in areas known the presence of migration agents or criminal groups.

Abusing their powers, authorities have created a network extorting migrants: threatening to hand them over to organised crime groups or immigration authorities; not letting them continue their journey and deporting them; separating them from their families; or in contrast, bribing them to expedite their immigration procedures and provide them with some kind of service.

## Context and actors

Migrants are direct victims of the illicit activities of **organised crime**, which views them and their families across the region as an important source of income<sup>132</sup>. At the Mexico-United States border, for example, organised criminal groups demand money from migrants before ‘letting’ them cross the border, or kidnap them to ransom their relatives in the United States<sup>133</sup>. According to Doctors without Borders, by the end of 2019, 75% of their patients in Tamaulipas had been kidnapped<sup>134</sup>. Along the route, gangs, whether operating on their own or as part of organised crime groups, as well as less-structured local criminal groups, extort migrants, and in the case of women, intimidate them and commit sexual violence against them<sup>135</sup>.

# México

## Extortion at different parts of the migration route

According to civil society organisations, people not related to organised crime also extort migrants. For example, landowners demand money from people in exchange for letting them cross their land (instead of having to travel through places with a higher presence of criminal groups or to avoid migration checkpoints). Public and private transportation drivers also ask for money in exchange for not turning people into the authorities or criminal groups. Finally, since 2018, as the profile of migrants and persons in transit has changed, extortion over labour issues has increased. Employers promise non-existent conditions and pay to migrants, threatening them to turn them over to migration authorities when they demand the promised conditions at the time of payment, a possible indicator of trafficking. Furthermore, in the north, with the implementation of Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), people seeking asylum in the US and sent back to Mexico to wait during their refugee status determinations are repeatedly exposed to criminal groups exploiting the situation<sup>141</sup>.

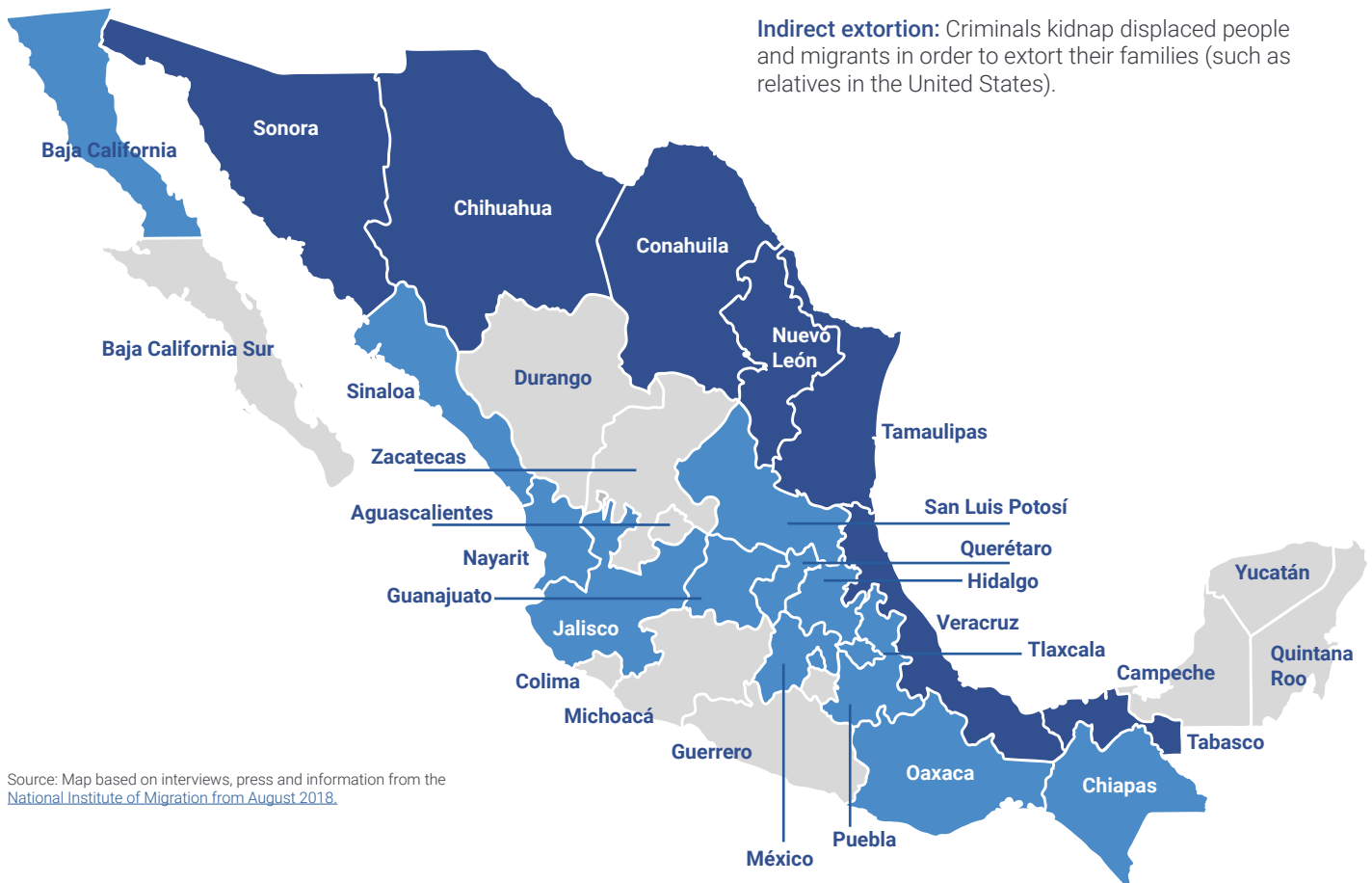
## Governmental and non-governmental responses

Although there are prosecuting offices specialised in addressing crimes committed against migrants, their operations remain limited, especially considering that people face important obstacles seeking help, whether it being due to a lack of knowledge about their rights and/or the fear of being arrested<sup>142</sup>. Civil society organisations provide migrants who have suffered from extortion with food and shelter, medical and psychological care for physical and/or emotional damage, and legal assistance, for example, when people wish to file a report. However, these efforts must be increased in order to address the true scale of the problem.

- Direct and indirect extortion
- Direct extortion

**Direct extortion:** When migrants are directly extorted; for example, forced to give money in order to pass, or take transportation.

**Indirect extortion:** Criminals kidnap displaced people and migrants in order to extort their families (such as relatives in the United States).



Source: Map based on interviews, press and information from the National Institute of Migration from August 2018.



## 8 Final considerations

### There is a direct link between extortion and forced displacement in the North of Central America and Mexico that national and international protection systems need to acknowledge

Extortion is a problem that affects all aspects of people's well-being, from debts due to being deprived of income, to severe mental and physical health problems caused by the trauma, to family disintegration and the destruction of social networks, to macro structural problems such as the increase in informal economies, gender violence and forced displacement. Extortion limits access to the fundamental rights that displaced people should enjoy anywhere, particularly the rights to life, freedom and personal safety. Legislations on internal displacement must acknowledge the links between extortion and displacement.

### There is a lack of attention and services for people affected by extortion

Extortion is a problem that affects all aspects of people's well-being, from debts due to being deprived of income, to severe mental and physical health problems caused by the trauma, to family disintegration and the destruction of social networks, to macro structural problems such as the increase in informal economies, gender violence and forced displacement. Extortion limits access to the fundamental rights that displaced people should enjoy anywhere, particularly the rights to life, freedom and personal safety. Legislations on internal displacement must acknowledge the links between extortion and displacement.

### State responses are partial and traditional, and re-victimise migrants

- Initiatives based on control, security and militarisation to address the phenomenon of extortion often have a counterproductive effect on affected populations. Most measures do not consider variables such as forced recruitment, or the control that criminal groups exercise over communities. When caught extorting due to pressure from criminal groups, victims of recruitment and human trafficking are treated as perpetrators, and are often faced with long prison sentences.
- Some countries have debated reducing the criminal age limit in order to harshen convictions for adolescents committing offenses such as extortion or murder. Again this fails to acknowledge that many of these adolescents have been forcibly recruited.
- While in some legal proceedings, victims are required to participate physically in order to present evidence, authorities do not then ensure the necessary protections against perpetrators.

- The recently formed Joint Task-Force to protect transportation workers in Honduras, although well-intentioned, could be putting people at risk, as families of those who file reports or refuse to pay extortion will bear the brunt of the violence.
- These measures also disregard the role in extortion played by authorities across countries of origin, transit and destination.
- Extortion is systematically underreported across the region, due to impunity, distrust in institutions responsible for addressing extortion cases and fear of retaliation from those committing extortion.
- While in the NCA governments continue to address this issue from a security perspective, instead of attacking the structural causes behind the problem, repressive policies will continue to bring about adverse consequences for the general public and victims.

### Work in prevention, monitoring and assistance must be done from a rights perspective

Urgent work is needed to reduce the prevalence of extortion in countries of origin, transit and destination. Therefore, it is necessary to:

- 1 implement monitoring and assessment mechanisms of extortion in government institutions,
- 2 prevent and punish extortion by private citizens,
- 3 continue to document the phenomenon within the context of migration,
- 4 provide timely support and assistance to civil society initiatives, particularly those providing medical, psychological attention and victim protection,
- 5 ensure that girls, boys and adolescents are central to public policies that provide concrete opportunities through collaborations among communities, companies and public institutions.

## 9 ANNEX: COVID-19 and Protection Risks

In March 2020, after confirming the first Covid-19 cases in their territories, governments of the North of Central America closed borders and declared curfews.<sup>143</sup> While Guatemala and Honduras are among the Latin American countries at greatest risk due to the existing conditions of their health systems,<sup>144</sup> the economy across the North of Central America will be affected by the decline in remittances and the little-to-no income for those who are unemployed or who depend on the informal employment<sup>145</sup>. These situations have a direct impact on the region's protection crisis, particularly for displaced people and migrants.

### Confinement and on-going displacement

In the countries of the North of Central America, people in communities affected by violence have seen their risks increase, especially as they are unable to move due to closed borders and mobility restrictions. In light of the economic crisis, for many the only option for survival will be irregular migration, in spite of the risks brought about by the pandemic. In early March, the president of Guatemala ordered a ban on people with Covid-19 symptoms travelling in migrant caravans, with no exceptions for those with international protection risks<sup>146</sup>. In mid-March, several humanitarian organisations stressed the needs of people from Haiti, Cuba and Africa stranded between the Honduran and Guatemalan border<sup>147</sup>. The lack of adequate infrastructure and necessary supplies to avoid the spreading of the virus forced the temporary closing of shelters for migrants and people in need of international protection.<sup>148</sup> In light of the lack of state responses, displaced people are in greater danger of homelessness, discrimination and violence from host communities. According to the Somos Muchas Collective in Honduras, due to the curfew situation, women face an increased risk of domestic and sexual violence. Additionally, they report that state assistance provided by the Public Ministry to female victims of sexual violence is unreliable and conditioned to the victim's place of residence. Safe spaces must be guaranteed for women; however, safe houses currently do not have the basic supplies nor are they able to provide the adequate sanitary measures to implement their services<sup>149</sup>.

### Deportations

Deportations from the United States and Mexico was temporarily cancelled; however, pressures exerted by the US forced the countries of the NCA to resume the reception of deportees<sup>150</sup>. During March, 10,447 people from the North of Central America were deported, 5,546 were from Guatemala, 3,300 from Honduras and 1,601 from El Salvador. Shelters were habilitated to quarantine deportees in all three countries, however reports show that the necessary biosecurity controls for the prevention of infections are not available. There is little accurate information about the cases and test results,<sup>151</sup> additionally, not all centres have clear criteria for isolating cases; many shelters are at risk of becoming infection hotspots and endangering the lives of deportees and assistance workers<sup>152</sup>.

### Crisis in detention centres and collapse at the Mexico-US border

There are 27,000 Hondurans at the northern Mexican border awaiting responses on their asylum requests being processed in the United States<sup>153</sup>; civil society organisations are concerned about the collapse of the migrant shelters available in this region due to the suspension of the asylum processes in the US, and the closing of borders both at the south and the north of Mexico, leaving people stranded. Some shelters have limited service<sup>154</sup> while others have shut down<sup>155</sup> preventatively due to the virus. In the detention centres in the US, overcrowding conditions, limited access to medical services, and a lack of basic hygiene conditions are risk factors for the spreading of Covid-19;<sup>156</sup> on March 27, 24 ICE employees tested positive for the virus, 5 of them were assigned to detention centres, as well as two cases of detained migrants with the virus.<sup>157</sup> It is important to highlight that approximately 3,500 unaccompanied minors are housed in government shelters and are at risk because of the pandemic.<sup>158</sup>

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