

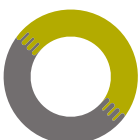


**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

BUILDING A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE

Challenges of measuring
extortion in Central America



COALITIONS FOR
RESILIENCE

Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado,
Luis Félix and Gerardo Carballo

JUNE 2021

ABOUT COALITIONS FOR RESILIENCE

To better understand the illicit economy created by extortion, as well as its impact, the Coalitions for Resilience project against extortion (established by the GI-TOC in 2018), has documented and analyzed extortion trends in the region, and fosters dialogue among a network of over 100 members; see <https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/extortion-in-central-america/>.

Additionally, through the Resilience Fund, the GI-TOC is focusing on extortion and has selected 10 grantees to discuss and develop community responses in the region and worldwide. Through our work in fostering resilience against extortion at the municipal and community level for the past three years, we have learned how criminal governance and extortion act as critical underlying factors for community erosion, economic decline, institutional distrust and forced displacement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Evelyn Espinoza for her participation in the development of the proposed methodology to measure extortion, and the InfoSegura team. We also like to thank the Government of Canada for its generous donation to this project.

Canada 

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado has more than 17 years' professional experience – public, private and in the international cooperation sector – in the development of public security policies, especially related to violence prevention, police institutions and illicit trade. He studied political science and international relations and has a postgraduate degree in administration and public policy.

Luis Félix is a Mexican sociologist. He has taken part in public policy evaluations of municipal and state governments as part of research into electoral issues, quality of life and governance. He is an analyst for the Coalitions for Resilience in Central America project and has worked in Central America with open source research on extortion in the region and multimedia content development.

Gerardo Carballo Barral has more than five years' experience in the development of research analysis, advocacy and knowledge management in the field of migrant human rights and the formulation of public policies focused on young people in Latin America and the Caribbean. He has worked for organizations such as the International Federation of Red Cross, the United Nations Development Programme and the Norwegian Refugee Council.

© 2021 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without the express written permission of GI-TOC.

Cover photo: © Boonchai wedmakawand/Picture alliance/Getty Images

For further information, please contact:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

WMO Building, 2nd Floor

7bis, Avenue de la Paix

CH-1211 Geneva 1

Switzerland

www.GlobalInitiative.net

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Regional overview of open data	4
Guatemala	4
El Salvador	5
Honduras	6
Costa Rica	7
Panama	7
A new tool	9
Conclusion and recommendations	11
Notes	12



INTRODUCTION

Extortion is one of the main crimes that negatively affect citizen security in Central

America. © Wera Rodsawang/
Krisanapong detraphiphat/Getty
Images

Extortion is one of the main crimes that negatively affect citizen security in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) and, to a lesser extent, Costa Rica and Panama.

Given the widespread presence of this crime in the region, the availability, relevance and reliability of data on extortion are essential to understand its magnitude, as well as to develop evidence-based public policies to contain it and build community resilience.

However, unlike for other crimes such as homicides, public institutions in the countries of the region have not yet developed a specific methodology to collect, produce and disseminate up-to-date, reliable, relevant and high-quality data on extortion. This shortcoming hampers the analysis and research needed to measure the real magnitude of this crime and to generate evidence-based public policies.

Furthermore, the dynamics of cooperation and territorial disputes between organized crime groups and the lack of knowledge about the variables involved in establishing an extortion rate are additional factors that merit further investigation, as they make it difficult for public institutions to measure extortion.¹

This report analyzes the availability of public data on extortion and the transparency mechanisms for accessing it. To do so, the authors reviewed the availability and accessibility of data on extortion from official sources in the countries concerned, particularly the websites of national police forces and prosecutors' offices.

It also presents a new tool, developed as part of the Coalitions for Resilience project, which addresses the challenges and areas of opportunity in collecting reliable, comparative and systematic data on extortion in the region. The main contribution of this methodology is the proposal of nine indicators to measure the monitoring of the crime of extortion throughout the entire chain of the criminal justice system.

Unlike for other crimes such as homicides, the countries of the region have not yet gathered reliable, relevant and high-quality data on extortion. © Ullstein bildDtl./ Getty Images





REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF OPEN DATA

There are significant challenges in accessing public information on extortion in Central America.

© Lightguard/ Getty Images

There are significant challenges in accessing reliable public information on extortion in Central America. This has a double effect: it casts doubt on the quantitative evidence available for the authorities in the five countries to develop public policies to control this crime, and it also hinders civil society auditing and citizen participation processes that would allow civil society organizations and community groups to come up with specific proposals suited to their local contexts.

The following are the main institutional challenges based on the authors' consultation of official extortion data.

Guatemala

Guatemala monitors the number of cases, rates and complaints of extortion through the national civil police (PNC) and the Public Prosecutor's Office. However, the authors did not find a public database on extortion on the PNC website nor in the section devoted to the national anti-gang development division.

In contrast, documents such as annual reports for the last two years, containing data on extortion and numbers of structures dismantled, operations carried out and lives saved, were found on the website of the Public Prosecutor's Office. The Public Prosecutor's Office also presents information on the number of extortion complaints registered in the country in 2020, but does not disaggregate the data geographically or indicate how the information received is processed.

In addition, the authors requested all available statistics on extortion from the public information access unit of the Public Prosecutor's Office. The only data received within the 15-day period established by law was the number of extortion complaints per department in 2020, with a total of 13 261 complaints.

Given the lack of public data on extortion from security and justice institutions, some civil society organizations have, in an effort to fill the data gap, taken on the task of making figures transparent and providing analysis on this crime. Diálogos, a Guatemalan think tank, has collected data on extortion for the 2004–2020 period. Last year, they recorded the number of complaints, the annual rates, and the rate of extortion per 100 000 inhabitants. For 2020, their records show 13 116 extortion complaints had been registered.

In Guatemala, it is possible to find official public data on extortion complaints. However, it is not sufficiently comprehensive, up-to-date or disaggregated to assess the effectiveness of public policies aimed at combating and preventing this crime.

The limitations of access to information on extortion in El Salvador are not surprising, as they are in line with the lack of information on other government initiatives.

El Salvador

In El Salvador, the authors found news of arrests and operations against extortionists when consulting the websites of the national civil police and the Public Prosecutor's Office. The most recent news reports provide some figures up to the end of July 2020, but the source and level of disaggregation of these figures is not entirely clear.²

The country also has a transparency portal providing access to public information, but access seems to be geo-restricted to IP addresses within the country and it cannot be consulted from abroad, where the authors are located. For users within the country, however, the portal provides information on various crimes and an extortion database.

Based on the laws on access to public and governmental information that exist in the countries of the region, citizens can request information of interest to them from the authorities. The authors made requests for information through the websites of the security institutions, but the COVID-19 pandemic affected the 15-day turnaround times and, at the time of the research, the deadlines had been extended indefinitely.³

The limitations of access to information on extortion in El Salvador are not surprising, as they are in line with the lack of information on other government initiatives such as the territorial control plan, which aims to improve citizen security by reclaiming gang-controlled territory. According to the Salvadoran authorities, this programme is the centrepiece of the current administration's security policy. However, only three of its seven initiatives have been released and the document has not been published for consultation and reference. El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele himself indicated that 90 per cent of the content of this plan was confidential.⁴

This general lack of transparency and the difficulties in accessing public data in El Salvador obstruct the analysis of criminal phenomena in the country, such as extortion, and the creation of public policies to combat them.



Tegucigalpa, Honduras.
In the country, as in other
countries in Central America,
data on extortion is scarce.

© Jos Morn/EyeEm/ Getty
Images



Honduras has the national anti-gang force (Fuerza Nacional Anti Maras y Pandillas) as its main anti-gang and anti-extortion agency. However, the institution has not set up an official website to publicize its institutional objectives, actions and results. Information on their initiatives is presented on social media, preventing access to databases on the impact of extortion in the country and the actions that have been taken to prevent and/or contain it.

Among the data available on extortion on official-source websites is that published by the Centro Nacional de Información del Sector Social (national social sector information centre), an organization that provides the government with social information tools. This information shows, among other indicators, the rate of extortion per 100 000 inhabitants from 2013 to 2019, with no information for 2020.⁵

In addition, there are other sources of public information providing access to extortion data, but the figures do not match, as they use different variables and sources. Unlike for other crimes such as homicides, there is no process of standardization of the data-collection mechanisms between the various institutions involved.⁶ In addition, while the law on freedom of information provides for a 15-day period, the process for requesting information on extortion through transparency requests can take between one and two months.

In order to make up for these shortcomings, data on arrests and figures on extortion in Honduras is published through the media, which has become the country's main source of information on the crime.

Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, extortion is more closely linked to what is known as loan sharking, which consists of granting short-term loans or micro-credits to those who do not have access to bank loans, thus gaining control over the indebted.⁷

Official public data on extortion in the country is rare; this may be due to the fact that the crime is still minor compared to other crimes such as drug-related crimes or homicides. The most recent information that can be found on this crime in the country is the number of reports of extortion and kidnapping for ransom from 2014 to 2018.⁸

Panama

Exploring data on extortion in Panama is also complex. No information or figures on extortion could be found on the official website of the ministry of public security. Similarly, the Dirección del Sistema Nacional Integrado de Estadísticas Criminales (directorate for the national integrated system of crime statistics), a body whose objective is to compile information on the crime situation in the country, does not have a search engine on its website where data on the main crimes affecting citizen security can be explored.

Despite having a statistical section, the agency does not provide public data on extortion rates or the number of reports of extortion. The most up-to-date data available is from a 2019 crime report that indicates that 318 cases of extortion were recorded, with no disaggregation by sex, age or economic status.⁹

In Costa Rica, extortion is linked to what is known as loan sharking.

The general lack of transparency obstructs the analysis of criminal phenomena. © John Moore/Getty Images



Even so, the authors were able to access data on extortion collected by the Observatorio de Seguridad Ciudadana (citizen security observatory) of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Panama.¹⁰ According to this data, in the last six years, reports of extortion increased by 360 per cent, from 95 in 2015 to 437 in 2020.¹¹

Panamanian security and justice institutions have made an effort to improve their data on citizen security and crime. In fact, they are part of a process of institutional strengthening, called the Sistema Regional de Indicadores Estandarizados de Convivencia y Seguridad Ciudadana (regional system of standardized indicators of coexistence and citizen security), under which working definitions of various types of crime, such as the rate of robbery and theft per 100 000 inhabitants, are established. However, the crime of extortion is not included in this process.






	INSTITUTION	LAST UPDATE	SOURCE
	Public Prosecutor's Office	Extortion complaints April 2019 – March 2020	https://www.mp.gob.gt/documentos
	General Directorate of Penal Centers	Extortion incidents January – July 2020	http://www.pnc.gob.sv/portal/
	National Social Sector Information Centre	Extortion rate per 100 000 inhabitants 2013 – 2019	https://ceniss.gob.hn/seguridad/ConsultaDinamica.aspx
	Judicial Investigation Agency	Extortion and kidnapping for ransom complaints December 2018	https://sitiooj.poder-judicial.go.cr/images/Documentos/ReportedeSituacion2018.pdf
	Directorate for the National Integrated System of Crime Statistics	Extortion incidents January 2005 – December 2019	https://www.siec.gob.pa/images/informes/informe_de_criminalidad_2019.pdf

FIGURE 1 Official data on extortion in northern Central America, Costa Rica and Panama.



A NEW TOOL

There are many obstacles to accessing public, timely and reliable data on extortion in Central America. As the summaries in the previous section indicate, these include delays in complying with requests for information, aggravated by mobility restrictions due to the pandemic; the disparity of sources between national police and prosecutors' offices; and the variability in the quantity and quality of the information available, given that, according to the data obtained, extortion rates do not correspond to the information published in the media.

This context raises some relevant areas of opportunity not only to improve the quality and reliability of data, but also to facilitate access to data. The Coalitions for Resilience against extortion project has made an effort to document and strengthen the local capacities of key players through specialists in the region.

With the collaboration of Evelyn Espinoza, a specialist in security, prevention and measurement of violence in Guatemala, the project has developed a tool to measure the different aspects of extortion and to have a clearer and more comparable idea of the criminal phenomenon in Central American countries.¹²

The use of this tool could provide the minimum necessary information, comparable over time and across countries in the region, to analyze extortion in a timely manner and generate evidence-based public policies that improve citizen security and foster community resilience. With the data currently provided by security institutions, this is very difficult to achieve.

Improving the quality of and access to extortion data in the region is critical to combating this crime.

© Ncognet0/Westend61/Getty Images

Indicator	Calculation	Disaggregation	Frequency	Source of data
1 Extortion rate per 100 000 inhabitants	No. of complaints / Total population, divided by 100 000	Municipality	Quarterly	Public prosecutor's office
				Attorney general's office
				National police
2 Prosecution rate for the crime of extortion	No. of people prosecuted for extortion / No. of people accused of extortion	Municipality	Annual	Public prosecutor's office
				Attorney general's office
				Public prosecutor's office
3 Conviction rate	No. of convictions for the offence of extortion / Total number of rulings on the offence of extortion	Municipality	Annual	Judicial body
				Judicial body
				Judiciary
4 Percentage of defendants using public defence services	No. of defendants benefiting from public criminal defence counsel / Total number of defendants prosecuted for the crime of extortion	Gender / Age	Annual	Institute for public criminal defence
				Attorney general's office
				Judiciary
5 Defendants per public defender	No. of defendants benefiting from public criminal defence counsel / No. of public defenders	Gender / Age	Annual	Public prosecutor's office / Institute for public criminal defence
				Attorney general's office
				Public prosecutor's office / Judiciary
6 Defendants per extortion prosecutor	Number of people prosecuted for extortion / Number of extortion prosecutors	Municipality	Annual	Public prosecutor's office
				Attorney general's office
				Public prosecutor's office / Judiciary
7 Defendants per judge	Number of people prosecuted / Number of competent judges	Municipality	Annual	Public prosecutor's office / Judicial body
				Attorney general's office / Judicial body
				Public prosecutor's office / Judiciary
8 Conviction rate per year	No. of convictions for the crime of extortion in year x / Number of defendants prosecuted	Municipality	2 years	Judicial body / Public prosecutor's office
				Judicial body / Attorney general's office
				Judiciary / Public prosecutor's office

FIGURE 2 Indicators for monitoring extortion in Central America.

SOURCE: Evelyn Espinoza, Monitoring extortion in Central America: A tool for tracking better data, GI-TOC, forthcoming.

These indicators can guide public policy aimed at countering extortion, but this can only happen if the quality of the data is improved. As Espinoza said: 'There is no quality control or training. On the issue of extortion there are specialized judges, there is a specialized [police] force ... but how are they taking these decisions if there really is no data to guide them?'¹³

According to Espinoza, in order to achieve better quality data, institutions must have specialized and trained personnel to register all the statistics produced by each institution and to set standards on the collection and quality of information.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the fact that extortion is one of the main crimes that negatively impact citizen security and social cohesion in Central American countries, public policies do not emphasize the need to adequately monitor it in order to evaluate the different institutional efforts needed.

As with the feminist mobilizations to contain gender-based violence in Guatemala that resulted in the inclusion of an article in the law against femicide and other forms of violence against women requiring the recording of data on this crime,¹⁴ it is necessary to promote a discussion and movement that allows for a better understanding of extortion. To this end, a number of challenges need to be addressed:

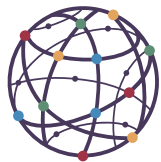
- Make available official sources that offer up-to-date, reliable and quality public data on extortion to promote an accountability exercise that facilitates public discussion on this crime.
- Promote a process of specialized dialogue to generate a standardized measurement of extortion for analysis by country, region, municipality, neighbourhood, type of victim and type of extortion, as well as cross-country comparisons.¹⁵
- Develop institutional capacities in data science to ensure adequate data collection and processing in order to generate evidence-based public policies for the prevention and containment of extortion, focused on populations or victims, territories and types of extortion.
- Promote processes of civil society oversight of data to verify the mechanisms used to build extortion data, as well the usefulness and usability of such data.
- Ensure access to official sources regardless of the country where they are consulted or the software used.

There is still a long way to go in the study and design of strategies against extortion in Central America.

© Jan Sochor/ Krisanapong detraphiphat/Getty Images

NOTES

- 1 Zach Y. Brown et al, Competition for extortion: Evidence from 50 000 extortion payments in El Salvador, Promarket, 30 March 2021, <https://promarket-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/promarket.org/2021/03/30/competition-extortion-gangs-el-salvador-consumers/?amp>.
- 2 El Salvador National Civil Police, *A la baja graves delitos, feminicidios, detenciones, desapariciones, decomiso de armas y droga como resultado del Plan de Control Territorial*, August 2020, <http://www.pnc.gob.sv/portal/page/portal/informativo/novedades/noticias/A%20la%20baja%20graves%20delitos%20feminicidios%20detenciones%20desaparici#YMCMjTZKhQI>.
- 3 Interview with InfoSegura, 25 March 2021, via Zoom. InfoSegura is an evidence-based information management programme implemented by the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and funded by the United States Agency for International Development to strengthen the formulation and monitoring of public policies on citizen security in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.
- 4 Carlos Iván Orellana, *El plan control territorial de Schrödinger*, Gato Encerrado, 22 July 2020, <https://gatoencerrado.news/2020/07/22/el-plan-control-territorial-de-schrodinger/>.
- 5 Centro Nacional de Información del Sector Social, *Análisis situacional seguridad ciudadana*, <https://ceniss.gob.hn/seguridad/ConsultaDinamica.aspx>.
- 6 Interview with InfoSegura, 24 March 2021, via Zoom.
- 7 The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and InSight Crime, *A criminal culture: Extortion in Central America*, May 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Central-American-Extortion-Report-Spanish-03May1055-WEB.pdf>.
- 8 Organismo de Investigación Judicial, *Situation report on drugs and threats of organized crime in Costa Rica*, 2019, <https://sitiooij.poder-judicial.go.cr/images/Documentos/ReportedeSituacion2018.pdf>.
- 9 Sistema Nacional Integrado de Estadísticas Criminales, *Informe de criminalidad*, 2019, https://www.siec.gob.pa/imagenes/informes/informe_de_criminalidad_2019.pdf.
- 10 For more information, see Guillermo Vázquez et al., *Extortion in Central America: gender, micro-trafficking and Panama*, GI-TOC, 21 April 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/extortion-central-america-gender-trafficking-panama/>.
- 11 Cámara de Comercio, Industrias y Agricultura de Panamá, *Analizan la extorsión en Centroamérica y lecciones para Panamá hacia el combate, control y prevención de este delito*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.panacamara.com/analizan-la-extorsion-en-centroamerica-y-lecciones-para-panama-hacia-el-combate-control-y-prevencion-de-este-delito/>.
- 12 Evelyn Espinoza, *Proposal methodology for monitoring extortion in Central America*, GI-TOC, forthcoming.
- 13 Interview with Evelyn Espinoza, 25 March 2021, via Zoom.
- 14 Ley contra el femicidio y otras formas de violencia contra la mujer de Guatemala, Article 20, https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/ley_contra_el_femicidio_y_otras_formas_de_violencia_contra_la_mujer_guatemala.pdf.
- 15 The work of the public policy analysis centre México Evalúa in the development of a criminal statistics reliability index at departmental level could be used as a reference to initiate a similar attempt on the incidence of extortion in the countries of northern Central America and identify which departments present more challenges in reporting up-to-date and quality figures on extortion. See México Evalúa, *Fallas de Origen 2019, Índice de Confiabilidad de la Estadística Criminal*, March 2020, <https://www.mexicoevalua.org/mexicoevalua/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Fallas-de-Origen.pdf>.



GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network of over 500 experts around the world.

The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote further debate and innovative approaches as pillars in building an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net