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Emerging extortion trends
in Latin America

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ABOUT COALITIONS FOR RESILIENCE

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

Additionally, through the Resilience Fund, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) supports individuals and organizations working on community-based responses to organized crime in the region. The GI-TOC’s work against extortion at the municipal and community levels has found that criminal governance and extortion act as underlying factors that erode communities, impede economic development, create institutional distrust and lead to forced displacement.

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In Central America, gangs tightly control territory, earning money from extortion and drug trafficking.

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SUMMARY

The territorial control exercised by criminal organizations and gangs throughout Latin America has facilitated criminal governance processes by which individuals and businesses are forced to pay extortion fees – referred to as ‘rent’ (El Salvador), ‘war tax’ (Honduras), ‘right to work’ (Mexico) or ‘vaccine’ (Colombia).

Threats and violence deployed to extort payments (either in monetary or other forms, such as goods or services) are so widespread that it has led to other types of extortion, carried out by telephone by groups of copycats, or sextortion, which particularly victimizes women.

New forms and methods of extortion are continually emerging in northern Central American countries, as well as Mexico and Colombia, as criminal groups respond to changes in their operating environments – such as the mobility restrictions imposed to combat COVID-19. These new methods not only demonstrate criminal innovation, but also link to other crimes, such as fraud, kidnapping and cybercrime.

Special investigative techniques constitute a set of enforcement activities that, collectively, can be used not only to better understand criminal structures, but also to strengthen criminal investigation processes and improve conviction rates.

Key points

- Territorial control exerted by criminal groups facilitates extortion throughout northern Central American countries, as well as Mexico and Colombia.
- Actors are continually innovating extortion techniques used in the region, such as deploying minors to collect payments; obtaining information from social networks; or requesting payments for services that are not delivered or for crimes that are not carried out.
- Special investigative techniques (which entail using undercover agents, so-called controlled delivery and electronic surveillance) have the potential to help generate robust criminal investigations, leading to successful prosecutions of criminals.
- To understand and address the phenomenon of this innovating criminal economy necessitates dialogue and exchange with various actors.
- It is key to reduce impunity; close ranks against corrupt actors; and provide care and security for victims, while reintegrating offenders.



INTRODUCTION

In the first two decades of the 21st century, criminal organizations in Central America have diversified their operations to grow their revenue sources. Criminal groups originally primarily involved in trafficking illegal drugs from the south to the north of the American continent have begun to broaden their portfolios by venturing into other illegal markets and activities. One of the major activities prevalent across the region today is the extraction of illicit rents from all forms of legal and illegal businesses,¹ demanded as money, goods or services.

According to a report by Global Financial Integrity, it is estimated that each year extortion generates between US\$40 million and US\$57 million for criminal organizations in Guatemala; between US\$190 million and US\$240 million in El Salvador and between US\$30 million and US\$50 million in Honduras.² These resources finance the gangs’ needs, including the cost of legal assistance for incarcerated members, while extortion itself facilitates criminal governance processes.

Trading off the fear generated in their victims by the violence that extortionists perpetrate (psychological, patrimonial physical and lethal),³ criminal groups are able to increase their territorial control, thereby expanding the markets for extortion – much in the same way that gangs trafficking illicit commodities seek to grow market share. At the same time, changes in operational environments, such as the mobility restrictions imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, have forced existing criminal groups to adapt,⁴ leading to new modes and patterns of extortion that emerged in the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras), and in Mexico and Colombia. Adaptations include the increased exploitation of social media networks, the deployment of children in the extortion market, and the targeting of public transport companies and essential services.

The Comuna 13 neighbourhood in Medellín, Colombia. Community members face extortion from armed groups that seek control of the territory to run drug and weapon cartels. © Joaquín Sarmiento/AFP via Getty Images

Criminal organizations' reputation for violence is also being leveraged by groups of copycat extortionists, who pose as members of criminal groups to demand extortion fees from victims over the phone. Although the copycats are not able to carry out the threats they make, the fear among communities and the lack of response from law enforcement means that victims prefer to pay rather than wait to see whether the threat is real or not. In El Salvador, it is estimated that up to 70% of incidents of extortion are carried out by copycats.⁵

Arguably, one of the most morally reprehensible forms of extortion is sextortion,⁶ which often victimizes women. The harms are seen on two dimensions: first, the sexual aggressor generally forces women (and often their families) into submission under duress by disseminating images of abuse or intimate material. A secondary impact is felt, as the authorities are usually unable to take action to address this type of aggression, which is not legally deemed to be a crime and can fall into the grey zone of harassment or sexual violence, both of which are difficult to prosecute.

Over the past four years, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has monitored, analyzed and reported on the modes and patterns of extortion experienced in numerous Central American communities. In 2019, the GI-TOC published a major regional report on extortion in Central America, titled 'A criminal culture',⁷ and has subsequently produced a number of policy briefs and podcasts to better understand the regional extortion economy with a view to encouraging more robust responses.

The GI-TOC team in the region have also implemented more than 30 dialogues and workshops with stakeholders, community members and victims. These were designed to assess the impact that extortion has on citizens and businesses, and to develop ways to foster resilience to this criminal threat. The team has also worked with security and justice institutions in the region to bolster their capacities to respond to the needs of victims of extortion.

This report builds on previous GI-TOC analysis and activities in the region by analyzing innovations in northern Central American countries, and Mexico and Colombia, examining how innovations have continued to emerge after the changes driven by COVID-19. To help address the mutating phenomenon, it proposes a raft of techniques to support more robust investigations into criminal organizations. The first section summarizes new methods of extortion by country, the second section explores special investigative techniques for conducting criminal analysis to generate robust investigations into extortion organizations and groups, and the third provides actionable recommendations.



INNOVATING EXTORTION: CASE STUDIES FROM THE REGION

Guatemala

During the mobility restrictions imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, criminal groups in Guatemala increasingly turned to online platforms to extort money from people selling products on websites and social media. By using the contact information provided on social networks and websites, criminal groups were able to compel their victims into making payments by sending them threatening messages. According to the Guatemalan think-tank Diálogos, it is estimated that more than 40 instances of this type of extortion were reported to authorities each day in the country between January and July 2021.⁸

In another development, according to data from Guatemala's national division on the criminal development of gangs (known as DIPANDA), criminal organizations during 2020 and 2021 increased their deployment of underage children to collect extortion payments. In 2020 and 2021, 215 minors were detained by DIPANDA in connection with extortion offences and other crimes.⁹ Under Article 23 of the Guatemalan Penal Code, minors are not subject to prosecution; however, another article of the penal code stipulates that a minor's involvement in a criminal activity is deemed an aggravating circumstance. This would appear to open the door for the state's prosecuting attorneys to tackle child deployment in extortion-related offences.

The gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is heavily involved in the extortion economy in Central America. © Jan Sochor/Latincontent via Getty Images

Incidents such as these are markers of these criminal organizations' ability to adapt to changing operational environments. As an agent from Guatemala's prosecuting authority's anti-extortion unit said, 'Although it seemed to the public that extortion activities declined [in 2020], as there were fewer reports, extortion payments continued to be collected – and murders still occurred for failing to pay extortion.'¹⁰ Demonstrating the ongoing resilience of the extortion economy, in the first eight months of 2022, 10 757 reported incidents of extortion were recorded by the Public Attorney. It is expected that,

El Salvador

In El Salvador, extortion is ingrained in everyday life. According to studies carried out by the GI-TOC, extortion constitutes the mainstay of the gangs, as well as smaller criminal groups in the country, and the payment of the 'rent' is normalized by victims. Only additional and non-negotiated payments are considered extortion.¹²

During the mobility restrictions imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the face of a diminishing supply of basic services and goods, Salvadoran gangs adapted to the macro-conditions by increasingly extorting payments from businesses offering essential services and products, such as food, water and medicine. They collected the payments using gang-owned vehicles affiliated to taxi-hailing service Uber.¹³

The Salvadoran gangs thus found the means to adapt and modify their operating patterns to

Honduras

Restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 pandemic saw Honduran gangs step up the micro-trafficking of drugs. This was in a bid to replace income lost as a result of the closure of businesses that would have been regular targets for extortion.¹⁷

According to information provided by the agency whose mandate it is to deal with the *maras* and gangs, with the resumption of economic activity,

by the end of the year, the total number of extortions in Guatemala will be in the range of the 13 000 reports recorded for 2020 and 2021.¹¹

In Guatemala, the use of online technology and deploying children in the extortion market to extract fees seem to be recent innovations, as well as the drivers behind the constant reports that authorities receive. It is necessary to allocate resources (technological and human) to better tackle this trend and reduce the harms caused, particularly to children.

changing market conditions so as to enable extortion activities to persist – even during the state of emergency imposed by the Salvadoran authorities since 26 March 2022. Even with the deployment of significant numbers of police and soldiers, resulting in more than 41 000 arrests of citizens allegedly involved in gang activity,¹⁴ extortion has continued.

According to local press reports, food distributors, restaurant owners and business people continued to pay extortion fees during the stringent conditions the government attempted to impose on gangs during the state of emergency.¹⁵ The continuation of the extortion economy during this period was enabled by the tenacity of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang leaders, who, despite having fled to Mexico, continued to give orders to gang members on the streets of El Salvador.¹⁶

gangs began to impose payments on public transport companies for various services – including car washes, raffles and food supplies – to evade security forces. Payment is extracted, but the goods and services are never delivered.¹⁸

This new mode of extortion is problematic not only because it is an alternative illegal revenue source for gangs, but also because it is legally closer to a fraud or a scam, which is a less serious crime than



A public transport strike in protest against violence and extortion in Tegucigalpa. Gangs in Honduras have begun to impose extortion payments on public transport companies.
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extortion in Honduras, potentially complicating investigations.

As in Guatemala, Honduran criminals are exploiting social networks, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok, to boost extortion revenue. Law

enforcement authorities have detected how cyber-criminals seek detailed information on businesses using these platforms and then send threatening messages or make intimidating calls demanding extortion payments.¹⁹

Mexico

Extortion is the crime most frequently affecting the private sector in at least 21 Mexican states. According to the National Victimization Survey of Businesses, during 2021, 829 000 extortion incidents involving the commerce, industry and service sectors took place in Mexico, a slight decline from the 912 000 in 2019.²⁰ Extortion is so prevalent that it has even had widespread effects on the food industry, bringing about shortages of chicken and tortillas, for example, in entire cities, and causing the price of fruit such as lemons and avocados to inflate. Criminal groups not only demand extortion payments from retailers, but also producers and distributors. Recently, criminal groups have made a move to demand payments from the key manufacturing industry. The assassination of the chief operating officer of a major Japanese transnational manufacturing company, with operations in the border state of Tamaulipas, unveiled the attempt to charge illegal fees for every shipping container leaving the factory.²¹

Although only 8% of all extortions demand paying a fee for the 'right to work',²² the practice has had a devastating impact on the Mexican business sector (manufacturers, retailers and traders), as well as on consumers. In the state of Michoacán, for example, it is common for avocado and lemon producers to be extorted by criminal organizations such as the New Generation Jalisco Cartel and for payments to increase during the harvest season. Reflecting this, the price for a kilogram of lemons increased fivefold from 19 Mexican pesos (US\$1) at the end of 2021 to more than 100 pesos (US\$4) in early 2022.²³

Mexico is the world's leading avocado exporter, generating annual revenues of more than US\$2.2 billion,²⁴ which is why the fruit is locally known as 'green gold'. Extortion and threats to producers have developed binational implications. In early 2022, for example, criminal groups facing a loss of income threatened inspectors from the US Department of Agriculture (stationed in Mexico to supervise shipments) for the first time. The threats came as the inspectors had

refused to approve a shipment of more than 25 000 tonnes of avocados, because the shipment contained avocados from states other than Michoacán (which is the only one approved to export to the US).²⁵ The blockage would affect the price of the fruit, and thus, the extent of the groups' illicit revenues. This security situation led to emergency meetings between agricultural and security authorities from both American and Mexican governments.²⁶ While the negotiations brought an end to the trade blockage in the weeks leading up to the Super Bowl (when avocado consumption increases in the US), these incidents have contributed to shortages and price distortions at the local level.

Over 90% of incidents of extortion in Mexico are telephone-based, designed to extract revenue from members of the public. Criminals will sometimes pretend to be members of a known local criminal organization, and claim to be surveilling the victim's business or home. They will then threaten to order an attack if payment is not submitted. However, the psychological violence and social engineering employed by criminal gangs have evolved to such a degree that the technique has earned the sobriquet of virtual kidnapping. There have been several examples in which workers, housekeepers, elderly women and men, and even children, have received threatening calls. Without the use of physical or armed force, and only through psychological violence and social engineering, the criminal is

able to isolate the victim (for example, in a hotel) and force the victim to switch off his or her cellphone. The criminal will then call a relative of the victim, demanding a ransom for a 'kidnapping'. Payments are transferred through banking facilities in convenience stores. If payment is not possible, criminals have been known to demand the surrendering of valuable goods (cars, jewellery and technology). Essentially, the criminal receives payment for releasing the victim from a pseudo-kidnapping situation, with the victim having never been in harm's way.²⁷

Mobile-phone applications have also become an easy way to extort people in need of some cash or facing financial problems. In the first six months of 2022, authorities from Mexico City decommissioned 90 apps,²⁸ which had generated 5 453 reports to the police. These apps offered small loans (US\$25–US\$500) with no prerequisites or financial background checks. In return, they charged extremely high interest for the total of the loan (although only a fraction was deposited to victims). Moreover, by gaining administrative control of the victim's phone (through malware), the apps were able to steal all personal information, including contacts, passwords and pictures. With this information in hand, the criminals behind the apps were able to threaten and harass victims into paying back the full amount, plus high interest, or face public shaming through WhatsApp messages or on social media.²⁹

Colombia

In Colombia, the rise of extortion has its beginnings in the mid-1990s, with the government's creation of a cooperative of civilian self-defence groups, armed and trained by the military, designed to combat insurgents. By 1997, more than 500 of these vigilante groups were operating, and having gained territorial control in several municipalities, they began to collect extortion fees known as 'vaccines'.³⁰

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombian security authorities alerted citizens to a form of extortion similar to the one described above in the Mexican case. Victims were mainly goods-transport service providers, who were isolated through social engineering and psychological violence, and then forced to ask their colleagues and relatives to pay a ransom for release. However, in these situations, victims are not in any real danger of being abducted: the 'kidnapping' is staged.³¹ A variant of this

crime involves the perpetrator isolating the victim and stealing their belongings.

According to Colombian police data, it is possible that extortion incidents could be showing a slight decline. During 2020, 6 902 extortions reports were received, with 8 021 in 2021 and 6 256 in the first nine months of 2022.³² However, results from a citizen security survey show that 27% of participants do not report extortion to the police because they believe the police will not take any action, while 42% considered it 'unnecessary' to report cases.³³ Therefore, incidents are almost undoubtedly an undercount.

Meanwhile, Colombian media outlets continue to report on extortion groups in rural areas, cases of pseudo-kidnapping,³⁴ victims who are forced to flee the gangs for failure to pay their fees,³⁵ and cases of sextortion.³⁶

As the above case studies show, criminal groups in the region have adapted to new operating environments, including pandemic-related restrictions, and developed new, innovative and entrepreneurial modes of extortion. Guatemala and Honduras provide examples of how technology can play a dual role in developing this criminal economy and obtaining key information for the extortion rings. Guatemalan criminal groups have also adapted by deploying minors in their extortion networks, as minors are not subject to prosecution. Meanwhile, the ability of Salvadoran gangs to continue extorting even in highly challenging contexts, such as a state of emergency or when their leaders are abroad, is

also notable. Criminal organizations and groups in Honduras, Mexico and Colombia show a capacity for innovation by applying the techniques found in extortion practices to other types of crime, such as fraud and kidnapping. They have shown themselves to be adept at generating psychological violence to compel victims to pay for services that are not delivered, or ransoms for 'fake' criminal incidents.

Deploying these new methods not only reduces gangs' potential exposure to law enforcement, but also gives them a legal defence advantage by reducing sentences (if they are ever brought to court) and, above all, allows for criminal diversification.



Members of Pueblos Unidos, an armed organization created in August 2020 as a response to the violence, threats and extortion to producers of the 'avocado area' in the Mexican state of Michoacán. © Cristopher Rogel Blanquet/Getty Images



SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES AS A TOOL TO CONTAIN EXTORTION

Territorial control exerted by criminal groups facilitates extortion throughout northern Central American countries, as well as Mexico and Colombia. © Marvin Recinos/AFP via Getty Images

Law enforcement and justice authorities in the region will need to hone their criminal investigation capacities if they are to tackle these innovations and methods outlined above with any degree of success. It is essential that enforcement agencies shift away from mere deterrent policing and placing the emphasis on arrest numbers to adopting robust criminal investigative processes that generate solid judicial results.

It is also crucial to actively target the ringleaders of criminal organizations, as opposed to arresting low-level actors ‘on the street’. According to GI-TOC research, during 2020, more than 60% of extortion-related arrests in Central America involved individuals responsible for collecting payments from victims; only 6% of the cases involved the arrest of a leader of a criminal group.³⁷

Adding to difficulties, levels of trust in security and justice institutions in the region are low. On average, in 2020, only 36% of people claimed to trust the police; while only 25% put their trust in the judiciary (see Figure 1 for a country-by-country breakdown).

COUNTRY	TRUST IN THE POLICE	TRUST IN THE JUDICIARY
El Salvador	57%	30%
Guatemala	20%	20%
Honduras	27%	16%
Mexico	22%	24%
Colombia	37%	23%

FIGURE 1 Levels of trust in security and justice institutions.
SOURCE: Adapted from Latinobarómetro 2021 report

That the police and judiciary have such poor credibility ratings could reflect the institutional weaknesses in criminal justice that organizations such as the World Justice Project have documented for Latin America.³⁸ For the region’s security and justice institutions to gain a greater degree of public trust, they need to yield better results in dismantling organized criminal economies, such as extortion rackets. One way to help achieve this is to adopt investigative techniques that are more likely to lead to prosecutions of leaders of criminal organizations.

What are special investigative techniques?

The term ‘special investigative techniques’ refers broadly to methods designed to obtain information and facts effectively and in a way that will lead to a conviction, with the purpose of providing evidence to the process. They have their origin in several international conventions,³⁹ and have been incorporated and applied in different ways in various states.⁴⁰

As long as they align with domestic laws, special investigative techniques can be effective tools for combating organized crime and prosecuting members of criminal groups. The Practical Guide on Special Investigative Techniques,⁴¹ developed by the Department against Transnational Organized Crime of the Organization of American States and the UNODC, defines them as follows:

- **Undercover agent:** An investigative method authorized by the competent judge or prosecutor, whereby an agent seeks to covertly identify the participants of a criminal structure, discover those involved and learn about the organization’s plans to avoid the offence under investigation.
- **Controlled delivery:** This technique allows illicit or suspect consignments to pass out of or into a country, under the supervision (i.e., ‘control’) of the competent authorities, with a view to investigating an offence and identifying the suspected individuals or networks involved.⁴²
- **Electronic surveillance:** This is a technique carried out by police officers with prior authorization from the competent authority to intercept and seize communications (e.g., email and telephone correspondence) using technological means with a view to investigating criminal organizations by obtaining evidence that establishes criminal involvement or responsibility.

Each of these techniques has specific parameters, methodologies and processes to ensure the objectivity of the investigation, and to protect the lives of the agents involved. Properly employed, they can provide key intelligence on criminal groups from the inside, such as their command structure and financing sources.

Understanding the financial resources generated by criminal groups engaged in extortion rings is one of the greatest challenges facing security and justice institutions. In Central America, there is little information on the amount of illegal money obtained and the mechanisms by which it is laundered into the formal economy.⁴³ It is difficult to quantify not only the number of extortion incidents in the region, but also the amount and timing of the remittances that each victim must make, whether in the form of money, goods or services.

Controlled deliveries of money and the deployment of undercover agents could be effective in generating criminal investigations into how Central American gangs organize and use the resources obtained from extortion. With the information gathered from these techniques, it should be possible to achieve more prosecutions and convictions of senior members of criminal groups' command and administrative structures, and to seize assets that could potentially be redistributed to the benefit of victims.⁴⁴



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Extortion in Central America continues to grow, despite prosecution task forces and courts set up to target it.

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During and after mobility restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations that mastermind illicit economies and flows worldwide have adapted to market constraints in order to maintain sources of revenue. The extortion economies of Central America are no exception. The deployment of minors, the incorporation of social networks and the use of criminal tactics aimed at hindering extortion investigations by disguising the demand of illegal payments through other criminal methods (fraud or kidnapping), are all examples of how criminal organizations in Latin America have innovated and developed new methods to continue obtaining illicit payments.

Adopting special investigative techniques of the sort outlined above could break new ground in gaining a better understanding of the structures of criminal groups, their modus operandi and sources of revenue, and obtain a higher rate of convictions. However, given the speed of innovation seen in some of the regional extortion markets, it is advisable that these techniques be used in combination with a raft of other interventions. These are outlined below.

Foster discussions on new forms of extortion and their effects. Given the innovative capacity of criminal organizations, it is necessary to encourage spaces for dialogue and analysis, in which various stakeholders (from the security and justice cluster, civil society, academia, media and international agencies) can exchange information and share experiences on emerging criminal trends. This will help in identifying them, understanding the processes behind them and generating context-based solutions.⁴⁵

Reduce impunity to build trust. Despite prosecution task forces and courts specially designed to address extortion in the region, the problem continues to expand. Adopting special investigative techniques could help generate robust criminal investigations that could lead to police operations uncovering the criminal and financial structures of gangs. This way, victims and citizens would begin to see the results of their reports to the authorities, while criminal actors would be held responsible by the state for their crimes. The contract of trust between the public and state law enforcement authorities would therefore be rebuilt.

Given the criminal diversification and innovation seen in the extortion economy, which in some cases brings extortion closer to other types of crimes, it will be important to explore the possibility of adding prison terms specifically for extortion and kidnapping or extortion and fraud. This process will undoubtedly be complex and generate results only in the mid-term, but it would discourage criminal organizations from innovation and diversification.

Close ranks against corruption. A precondition for the successful implementation of special investigative techniques by police and prosecutors is reliable personnel. Vetting processes for personnel will be fundamental in preventing criminal investigations from being hampered by members who have been corrupted by criminal groups. Additionally, trustworthy personnel will facilitate smooth collaboration between security and justice institutions, which is another key variable for robust criminal investigations leading to successful prosecutions.

Protect victims and witnesses and reintegrate perpetrators. Extortion as a phenomenon happens essentially by feeding on the fear it generates in victims. To deal with this, it is necessary that victims of extortion feel that they are not alone but are in the company and community of other victims, that they are supported by civil society organizations and, crucially, that they are protected by the authorities. This process will build trust among victims and vulnerable groups, while strengthening community resilience to extortion. There are comparative examples of successful NGO interventions⁴⁶ and support mechanisms in other contexts of organized crime around the world, which have developed innovative models for victims of extortion that could be observed and adapted to the Latin American context.⁴⁷

The process of building resilience to this extortion would not be complete without offering ex-offenders opportunities to reintegrate into society as a viable alternative to crime. Unfortunately, in Latin America there is an almost uniform absence of reinsertion programmes. Undoubtedly, this is an important area of opportunity to be addressed not only for extortion, but for the entire criminal spectrum.

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