

ACTION MANUAL FOR COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO EXTORTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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CONTENTS

- Introduction** 2

- Module 1: What is extortion?** 6
 - Types of extortion 12

- Module 2: What is the impact of extortion at the local level?** 18
 - Impact on family and businesses 20
 - Social impact 21
 - Women and extortion 23

- Module 3: How can extortion be addressed?** 28
 - Government responses 30
 - Private sector responses 37
 - Civil society responses 48

- Module 4: What should I do if someone tries to extort me?** 44
 - What should I do if someone tries to extort me by telephone? 47
 - What should I do if someone tries to extort me through messenger applications, social networks or the internet? 48
 - What should I do if someone tries to extort me in person? 49
 - How do I file a complaint? 50
 - Can extortion be prevented? 51

- Module: How can community action be turned into an initiative against extortion?** 54
 - Community groups to prevent and fight extortion 56

- Module 6: How can the community monitor and provide support to victims of extortion?** 62
 - Types of support 64
 - What types of support and monitoring activities can communities develop for victims of extortion? 66

- Reader notes and reflections 76

- Notes 78

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Central America, communities in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras face a persistent challenge: extortion. This scourge, fuelled by violence and instability, affects not just individuals, but also the entire social fabric of communities. Besides imposing an economic cost, extortion threatens the emotional and social stability of its victims.

Recognizing the different types of extortion is the first step in fighting it effectively and protecting our communities. This manual explores the various faces of extortion, from the most traditional forms to the most sophisticated tactics employed by criminals. Through concrete examples and detailed analyses, this manual provides an overview of how extortion manifests in different contexts, and what the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the business sector and communities are doing to address this social problem.

By understanding the specific types of extortion that communities face, tailored strategies and preventive measures can be developed, thus improving our ability to resist and face this challenge. Community resilience is the ability of a group of people to adapt, resist and recover when difficult situations occur, whether they are natural or human caused. In a world with ever-more frequent and complex crises, community resilience becomes a fundamental pillar for the survival and sustainable growth of our societies.

This manual was first published in 2021. This new version updates focus areas and responses by different sectors to address extortion. It is intended to be a vital tool for communities so they can show a unified front against extortion. It contains proven strategies, shared experiences, and practical resources to empower communities to defend their rights and to build a more resilient environment.

This manual is divided into six modules, with the goal of clearly and accessibly explaining the impact of extortion at the community level, as well as strategies to address it. These modules are:

MODULE 1: What is extortion?

MODULE 2: What is the impact of extortion at the local level?

MODULE 3: How can extortion be addressed?

MODULE 4: What should I do if someone tries to extort me?

MODULE 5: How can community action be turned into an initiative against extortion?

MODULE 6: How can the community monitor and provide support to victims of extortion?

The first two modules explain what extortion is, and how it affects people's daily lives at the personal, family or community level. These impacts are illustrated with specific examples of various types of extortion and experiences shared by people we interviewed, providing a clearer understanding of the issue.

The next two modules explain what is currently being done in the region in response to extortion. Additionally, following recommendations made by subject matter experts, a proposal is provided on how to initiate projects to prevent extortion, and what to do if someone is being extorted.

Finally, the fifth and sixth modules suggest ways to deepen the understanding of what victims of extortion have experienced, how the community can work together to fight extortion and the community's capacity for resilience. Diagnostic, planning and monitoring tools are provided so the problem can be addressed jointly at the community level.

This manual can be used individually or in groups. Each section contains questions for reflection. If the manual is used in a group, there is a guide to help organize discussions and activities.¹ The tools this manual provides help readers apply what was learned, namely by analyzing cases and creating new ways to face down extortion. We hope this tool will be useful for people, groups and communities, helping them understand and fight extortion so they can build a fairer and safer society.



We believe it is fundamental to provide everyone with the tools necessary to combat extortion. Part of this work consists of keeping these tools up to date. If you have comments or experiences that might enrich this manual, please send an email to latam@globalinitiative.net.



Module 1

WHAT IS EXTORTION?

Module objective



At the end of this module, participants should be able to define the term 'extortion', its elements, types and causes in Central America, understand the laws against it, and identify the different types of extortion.

What is extortion?

For many years the people of Central America, specifically Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, have suffered from extortion. Extortion affects people's daily lives, their family environment and their community life. It especially harms vulnerable groups living in conditions of poverty and inequality. It is important to understand when one is being extorted, to be able to define it, understand it, and to the extent possible, counteract its impacts.

Extortion is the pressure that one person exerts over another to force them to act in a certain way and thus gain an economic benefit or another type of advantage, such as goods and services. Fear, threats, intimidation and the potential for aggression to force someone to do something or cease to do something are recurring elements that characterize extortion, with the objective of obtaining a benefit or unjust enrichment for one's self or for others.

The law in these three countries (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) regulates extortion as criminal behaviour. These countries highlight common elements that one must understand in order to identify whether or not someone is attempting to commit this crime. These elements are:

- a. The use of violence and intimidation,
- b. demanding that someone do something or cease to do something, and
- c. profit, income or a benefit.

The law in El Salvador is more detailed, as the country adopted a law specifically to address extortion, classifying aggravated crimes and defining the different types of extortion criminal groups commit.

Extortion may appear in numerous ways depending on who is perpetrating it, the sources of power behind the extortioner, the type of threat, form of payment and how the extortion is carried out. Every case is different, as are the victims and their aggressors.



Identifying extortion according to its elements

WHO IS EXTORTING

Extortions demanded by members of criminal networks or gangs who are usually involved in committing other crimes. In Central America in particular, the most common cases involve members of the Barrio 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), who use threats and violence to seek unjust gain. In some cases, criminal prosecutions have shown that members of state security forces and/or public officials are linked to these criminal networks.



Criminal imitators. This term is typically used to refer to members of groups that engage in extortion but are not part of gangs or criminal organizations. However, to achieve their goals, they unjustly profit by intimidating the public. They are called 'imitators' because they pretend to be members of gangs or criminal organizations, using their slang and other distinctive elements to fake having the same operational or violent capabilities.

THE SOURCE OF POWER



This refers to the various means or resources that an extortionist uses to instill fear in their victim, such as information or images of their family or residence.

The threat of physical or verbal violence is also a source of power and often achieves its purpose, even when, in some cases, the extortionist may not have relevant information about the victim.

THE NATURE OF THE THREAT



This pertains to the consequences threatened if the victim does not comply with the extortionist's demands, such as the destruction of a business, damage to the victim's reputation, violence, or the death of the victim or their family members, among others.

Julio Díaz, a prosecutor from the anti-extortion office in Guatemala, mentioned in an interview that 'there is usually an attack on the victim, such as an assault against drivers of urban or intercity buses, motorcycle taxi drivers or employees of small shops. Generally, if the victim does not agree to the payment, they are attacked'.²

THE PAYMENT METHOD



The forms of payment in extortion can vary, including cash, bank deposits, food, goods or services, or favours such as drug storage, free rent, cleaning properties, childcare or vehicle repairs, among others.

In Central America, sexual payments are a common form of extortion that directly affects women, who in most cases become victims of abuse and sexual violence as a result.

THE METHOD OF EXTORTION

This can be done directly or indirectly.



Direct. This occurs when the extortionist physically appears at the business or private residence to demand payment through threats or intimidation. Sometimes, criminals leave a card with a phone number that the victim must call to negotiate the amount of money to be paid.



Indirect. The most common form of this type of extortion is through a cell phone, but intermediaries can also be used. Increasingly, social media is being used, either to gather information or as a means to carry out the extortion.

Extortion has become one of the main sources of income and livelihood for the members of countless criminal groups. According to the report 'A criminal culture: Extortion in Central America', written by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and InSight Crime, in Central American countries, particularly Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, there are three reasons, or main drivers for committing extortion:



Organized crime is more organized than ever. For quite some time criminal gangs have said that through extortion and the funds it provides them, they have been able to buy firearms and drugs at wholesale prices. Continuing to extort allowed them—and indeed continues allowing them—to buy even more items that strengthen their gang culture, resulting in an increase and proliferation of criminal gangs with readily available firearms, making the threat of violence credible. More weapons and better organization are just two of the reasons extortion has increased in the region.

Furthermore, organized crime in Central America is increasingly tied to macro criminal issues, which means that gangs are committing a variety of crimes. The crime of extortion is a precursor to other crimes such as money laundering, assassinations by hitmen, violence and corruption-related crimes. These crimes have been known to have repercussions

on the credibility of government employees and the criminal justice system, which knows of these practices yet leaves them unpunished.



Cellular telephone technology. After several decades of development, accessibility and cellular telephone coverage in Central America are now at a level at which most inhabitants have a cellular telephone. Groups of extortioners exploit this technology and have found new criminal opportunities in cell phone technology that do not require being physically present; just a call is enough. However, criminal networks that commit extortion have changed how they operate, and their strategies now extend beyond making calls from cellular telephones. An agent in the Public Prosecutor's Office in Guatemala working against extortion said in an interview that MS-13 no longer makes calls; it now uses the WhatsApp messaging network. It has also recently been found that crimes are planned using video games, which would explain why recent confiscations at penitentiaries have found PlayStation games with illegal internet access. An investigator from the División Nacional contra el Desarrollo Criminal de las Pandillas de Guatemala (National Division against Criminal Development of Gangs in Guatemala – DIPANDA) told a journalist that because of these new technologies there is no prison that can completely limit extortion:

We have a case in which just one number generated more than 280 complaints [to date]. What they do now is purchase a SIM card, download the WhatsApp application, and then destroy the chip. It doesn't matter if the lines are cancelled, because WhatsApp remains active and they continue committing extortion.³


This variety of tools, particularly technology such as smartphones, social media networks and geolocation systems allows greater complexity in the way criminals operate, and therefore dismantling these structures is also more difficult.






Criminal imitators. The emergence of groups posing as members of gangs or criminal syndicates and the impunity of crime in the region are other important reasons behind the explosion of incidents of extortion in Central America. Criminal imitators are independent groups that take advantage of extortionary structures and schemes and the fear they cause, using threats, scams and extortion to their advantage. The main difference between extortion conducted by gangs or organized criminal groups, is that the imitators do not have the ability to actually carry through on the violence they threaten. Criminal imitators continue to exist because they realize that people do not trust the authorities and do not report cases of extortion, plus the fact that extortion perpetrated by imitators has surged. Because of fear, people pay extortionists and do not file any type of complaint.

Types of extortion

Extortion in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras is a multi-faceted crime that is committed based on the backdrop of the specific area, such as the political, economic and social climate, availability of funds from criminal structures, and availability of information, among many others. The most common forms of extortion and the ways in which they operate are analyzed below:

TYPE OF EXTORTION	CHARACTERISTICS	POPULATION AFFECTED
 <p>Extortion in gang-controlled territories</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Territories are controlled mainly by members of Barrio 18 and MS-13. ■ Exercising their power, gangs demand money through extortion, which is also known by other names, such as 'work' (Guatemala), 'the rent' or 'the fear tax' (El Salvador), and 'the war tax' (Honduras). ■ Criminal groups tell victims to take money to a specific location, or to make cash deposits into a bank account. ■ This money is usually used to pay the gang's expenses, and a portion is allocated to the country's prisons, where it is delivered to leaders of the criminal group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People who live in territories controlled by gangs. ■ Small- and medium-sized businesses. ■ Multinational companies or distributors of items that have to enter a certain territory to sell their products.

TYPE OF EXTORTION	CHARACTERISTICS	POPULATION AFFECTED
 <p>Extortion using cellular technology and social media networks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This type of extortion generally originates in prisons and is not direct. ■ It consists of demanding sums of money from people outside penitentiaries, threatening the individual or their close family members with death. ■ It is the imitators who use this type of extortion the most. ■ This has been modified over the years, and currently instant messaging apps on smartphones, geolocation applications, video game consoles and social networks, among others, are being used. ■ These networks usually have to have agents outside prison providing the criminals with information about known individuals, or people with whom they have a relationship, such as neighbours, family members, employers, etc. This allows them to cause more fear, because they have real information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People in general, who are usually selected at random, and especially smartphone users.
 <p>Extortion of inmates</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In Central American countries, the penitentiaries have become locations the government can no longer control, allowing numerous crimes to be committed. The policy of social reinsertion has mostly been forgotten. ■ As part of this institutional deficiency, and because of its presumed complicity with the networks that operate within the prison system, there is no control over the prisons or the different areas inside the prisons. ■ Imprisoned gang leaders have a system of collection from other inmates that requires them to pay fees for any legal or illegal service they obtain, such as access to a cell, liquor, and consumption and sale of drugs, etc. ■ Prison authorities are often a key part to the system of extortion, contributing to its perpetuation. They sometimes receive payments from the inmates and their family members for allowing criminal activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inmates and their family members.

TYPE OF EXTORTION	CHARACTERISTICS	POPULATION AFFECTED
 <p data-bbox="220 499 402 613">Extortion through sexual violence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="470 331 986 427">■ This type of extortion mainly affects women, although men and members of the LGBTQ+ community are not excluded. <li data-bbox="470 443 986 640">■ It may appear in various forms. For example, in gang-controlled areas women are forced to have sex with gang members as part of the extortive payment, or it is one of the threats made to the victim for not paying the demanded amount. <li data-bbox="470 656 986 853">■ Another known type is that exerted by the government's security forces, mainly on sex workers, whom they force to deliver money or to provide sex services in exchange for letting them work. This has been documented by the victims; nevertheless, it is rarely reported. <li data-bbox="470 869 986 1104">■ One method that has increased considerably due to the use of technology and social networks is 'sextortion', a method by which the victim is threatened with having their sexual images published on social networks, or sharing them with family and friends in exchange for money or another benefit.⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="1013 331 1433 394">■ Women who live in areas controlled by gangs and criminal groups. <li data-bbox="1013 409 1433 506">■ Sex workers, and in cases of sextortion, men and women who use social networks.

A complicit or omissive government

As already stated, a great deal of extortion originates in the prisons, and a high percentage of extortionate practices affects inmates. In both cases, the state, as the entity responsible for protecting its inhabitants, acts either by action or omission.

The objectives of prison systems in democratic countries are to assure the custody and safety of those deprived of their freedom, and mainly to try to rehabilitate them. These goals seem to be increasingly unattainable in countries in the region. Prisons have become 'operating centres for criminal structures and a haven for the employees to enrich themselves based on the exaction and extortion of those deprived of their freedom'.⁵

Similarly, this interrelationship between crimes associated with extortion causes the state to have to come up with new strategies to fight not just extortion, but also the variety of crimes that are simultaneously committed. We are facing a much more complex reality, however, as these criminal structures clearly require the participation of government employees in order to be successful in committing crimes, which makes it difficult to combat these practices that mainly affect the most vulnerable populations.



Case study

How does extortion begin?

Marta lives in an area known as the 'red zone' in Guatemala City, working with at-risk youth and providing them with an education. In an interview she said that gangs in the area targeted certain families and businesses, threatening them with violence and demanding money in exchange for not harming them. Then they had to do a series of things to make payment, such as placing cash in the trash, which would be collected by the municipal waste collection service.

Marta said that from her long talks with young people in the area she found out that city employees received a percentage of the money collected. She also said that the police demanded that these youth deliver money or assets, such as certain brands of watches, cellular telephones or other items, so they would not be charged as being involved in criminal activities being committed in the area, regardless of whether or not they had done anything. She said it is actually the police extorting young people in the area, some of whom are gang members, others who are not.

Some families choose to pay the money demanded, and others end up abandoning their homes because they do not have the money, and afraid of the threats, prefer to lose everything and start from zero somewhere new, where the same thing will probably end up happening to them all over again.

Very few people report these things to the authorities, because they do not trust the authorities or the justice system.



Let's review

- Extortion is pressure that one person exerts over another to force them to act in a certain way, and thus gain an economic benefit or another type of advantage, such as goods or services.
- The law identifies three elements that must be present for there to be extortion: a) use of violence and intimidation; b) a demand to do something or not to do something; and c) profit, income or a benefit.
- There are two types of extortionists: criminal groups such as gangs, and the imitators.
- The crime of extortion is a precursor to other crimes such as arms trafficking, money laundering, murder for hire, violence and corruption-related crimes.
- Cell phone technology allows these criminal gangs to change their strategies and use mechanisms other than just telephone calls, such as instant messaging networks and geolocation.
- Criminal imitators are independent groups that take advantage of extortion structures and the fear they cause, using threats and scams to get money.
- The most common and recurring types of extortion in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are extortion in gang-controlled territories, extortion using cellular technology and social networks, extortion of inmates and extortion through sexual violence.
- In most cases the success of criminal structures that employ extortion requires complicit state employees, whether they abet the commission of a crime, or fail to fulfil their duty to protect society and allow crimes to go unpunished.



Let's reflect

What type of extortion most affects my community?

Who is most likely to commit extortion?

What are other names for extortion in my community?

Have I ever been the victim of extortion? What was my reaction?



Module 2

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF EXTORTION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL?

Module objective



At the end of this module, participants should be able to understand the effects and impacts of extortion on the lives of people and communities, and the importance of a multi-dimensional focus to understand this phenomenon.

What is the impact of extortion at the local level?

According to the Honduran Assistant Secretary of Security in Police Matters, with support from the Regional Cybersecurity Project of the United Nations, which supports data collection by safety secretaries in Central America, in Honduras in 2022, extortion increased 153% over 2021, with the second-highest number of complaints filed in the decade, with 1 824 events reported. Sixty-two per cent of extortion complaints made nationwide were concentrated in two municipalities: the Central District and San Pedro Sula. Ninety-five per cent of extortion complaints were made in cities, and 60% of the people who were victims of this crime were between 31 and 50 years old. The majority of those who filed complaints (69.4%) were men.⁶

To think about extortion is to remember the fear, terror and uncertainty reflected in the stories of families, neighbours or acquaintances who have been subjected to extortion, or even their own stories and experiences. The impact of extortion on societies is complex, as it extends beyond economic impacts, including social and psychological consequences that are impossible to quantify.

What impacts does extortion have on people's lives and their communities?

Impact on family and businesses

It is impossible to quantify the amount of money that is paid by extortion victims, although there are some estimates. The Association for a More Just Society of Honduras states in a study entitled 'War tax: the phenomenon of extortion and the state response in Honduras', that every year it is estimated the country pays around US\$737 million in extortion.⁷ According to a study conducted by the organization Global Financial Integrity, since 2022, 'financial extortion has exceeded one billion dollars every year in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador combined. Financial extortion is between US\$40–57 million every year in Guatemala, between US\$52–72 in Honduras, and between US\$1.05–1.1 billion in El Salvador'.⁸

Gangs can extort millions from large companies, between US\$1–10 million per year per company.⁹ This has led many companies to include an extortion fee in their fixed expenses. In accounting terms this cost is transferred to production expenses, in addition to the safety elements and insurance purchased to offset extortion, which has repercussions on the end price of consumer products. According to a survey conducted in 2023 by the Guatemalan Chamber of Foods and Beverages, of a sample of 45 member companies, 40% said they were paying extortioners, while 75% have been victims of this crime for three years, while the rest have been victims for more than seven years. The businesses also state that 75% of companies pay up to 100 000 quetzales per year in extortion, while 25% estimate that the amount ranges between 101 000 and 500 000 quetzales (approximately US\$12 000–US\$65 000). These amounts also end up affecting inflation.¹⁰

The economic impacts of extortion are the most visible, both for the people and groups that commit extortion, as well as for their victims, because there are costs, payments and various ways to decrease wealth that are very difficult to calculate. Many small- and medium-sized businesses in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have closed in the face of the threats and/or violence that go hand in hand with extortion, leaving companies, employees and families without work or any source of income.



Case study

Mario, a young father who works as an Uber driver, said he used his savings to create a small home-based business with his wife, located in zone 3 of Guatemala City. Not even one week had passed since they opened their business, when people came to their house and left a note saying that if they wanted to keep their home safe, every week they would have to pay 1 500 quetzales. They had to close after one week.

Social impact

There are many social consequences of extortion, including personal elements such as fear, anguish, health, loss of family members, and lack of socialization, particularly among young people. Many prefer to isolate their families at home rather than to expose their children, spouses or other family members by letting them go out onto the streets, especially in gang-controlled areas. Community life is one of the great losses caused by extortion. These feelings are impossible to quantify, and affect every family differently.

Extortion now affects even basic services such as health and education, especially when healthcare clinics or schools are forced to pay fees or rent. According to an article in *Prensa Libre* on 25 January 2024, during the first three months of the year the gangs charged a type of extortion they called a 'school fee'.¹¹ In that article, an employee of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Guatemala said that due to year-end holiday parties, people did not have money and resorted to extortionary practices. It is the same with the Easter Week fee and the Christmas fee in December.

of extortion that has most heavily impacted Central America is forced displacement. Many families have had to abandon their homes due to threats of extortion-related violence in their communities. Forced displacement statistics are usually associated with various causes such as extortion, crime, drug trafficking, and development projects; therefore,

there are no reliable statistics on the number of displacements caused exclusively by extortion. According to data from the UN Refugee Agency, in 2022 'more than 149 000 Hondurans have had to flee, and since the end of 2018, it is estimated that nine caravans have been organized, with between 17 000 and 25 000 Hondurans leaving [...]. Honduras had the fourth-largest number of new requests for asylum worldwide between January and June 2021, with 33 900 requests (30 100 during the same period of 2020)'.¹²

The impact of extortion on different areas of human life is broad and multidimensional. Constant threats and the high level of violence experienced in Central America create a permanent climate of fear and alert, which causes its own set of complexities, mainly in gang-controlled territories, where the population has had to become accustomed to making payments or rent, often finding in these extortion payments a way to protect themselves and avoid conflicts with the members of criminal organizations. People live with extortioners in gang-controlled territories, which leads them to adapt to the gangs' modes of criminal operation as a way to survive. According to Alexandre Formisano of the Honduran Red Cross in Tegucigalpa, 'people want to be invisible. They try to disappear, cease to exist, because they know the gangs have the ability to find them anywhere in the country'.¹³



Case study

María is a young single mother who came to the city after leaving the rural community where she was born. She moved to a neighbourhood considered to be a 'red zone', and says that after a great deal of effort and dedication she was building a simple home where her children could live. She also said that the community environment where they had lived for several years, despite being humble, was one of collaboration among neighbours.

One year ago, María and her now-adolescent children were forced to abandon her house and return to the community where she had lived previously, in search of refuge and to get her children away from the violence in the area. She fears for her life, because she has been the victim of extortion on several occasions. She was able to pay one time, but she no longer has funds to pay the gangs. 'I left my home, my furniture and everything we were able to build over the years. We left under cover of night', she said.

Women and extortion

When we say that the causes and impacts of extortion are varied and multidimensional, we are not referring only to the multiple impacts on victims' lives, but also to the lives of the extortioners, and mainly their families and collaborators.

The study 'Women of Guatemala: The new face of extortion?', published by InSight Crime,¹⁴ tells how women are playing a growing role in extortion networks, becoming an important source of growth in informal employment in urban neighbourhoods with scarce resources. Many cases documenting women's participation in extortion describe how gang members use and abuse their intimate relationships with women, including their mothers, girlfriends or spouses, getting the women to do 'favours' for them. This might include delivering cell phones, letting them use their bank accounts, or providing information about people they are close to, such as family members, friends, work colleagues and so on. In some cases, participating comes with the promise of a payment or some type of remuneration. Although the participation of women is informed and consensual in some cases, in many others it is the consequence of

deception by gang members, who tell the women lies, mainly so they will let them use their bank accounts. In other cases, they resort to violence and intimidation to ensure the cooperation of these women.

Colectivo Artesana (Artisan Collective), and reflected in the Public Prosecutor's Inspection and Technical Information System Statistical Report, found that in 2023, 276 women were detained for extortive obstruction of traffic, 1 263 were detained for extortion and 1 193 were sentenced for the crime of extortion. Andrea Barrios, director of Colectivo Artesana, says that in 95% of the cases of women imprisoned in Guatemala, the reason is extortion or related crimes. Barrios says there is no understanding of extortion from a gender-based perspective, because although some women engage in these activities knowing the reason why and are an active part of gangs, in most cases they are only the face of the crime, and therefore the easiest to identify in criminal investigations. The brains behind the operations, however, go unpunished.¹⁵

According to a 2023 report issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights entitled 'Women Deprived of Liberty in the Americas', there has been a marked increase in recent years of the female prison population in some Latin American countries. In Guatemala, from 2014 to 2019, the female prison population increased nearly five times; in El Salvador, from 2004 to 2019 it increased ten times; and in Honduras, from 2000 to April 2021 it nearly tripled.¹⁶ Barrios explains that according to this report, most women in prison were involved in micro trafficking activities, but in Central America and mainly in Guatemala, this is inexact because most are imprisoned due to extortion or related crimes.¹⁷

This means that the issue is not just legal in nature, but social as well, because the causes are not analyzed nor are the gender perspective elements considered when applying criminal policy. The report highlights: i) low level of participation in the illegal activity; ii) the absence of violence in engaging in this type of behaviour; iii) the different impact of their imprisonment on those under their care; iv) the lack of focus on social reinsertion in prison policies; and v) violence, and social and labour exclusion facing this population in the region.¹⁸

According to Barrios, it is important that the state implement actions to counter the effect that criminal persecution has directly on women and on their family environment. For example, most of these women are captured in police raids that do not consider factors such as if there are minors in the homes where the raids take place (in many cases these minors end up

without protection because their mother is the only person taking care of them), or the psychological impact these violent raids cause in children. These cases seem to be handled with disproportionate violence due to the social stigmatization caused by the women participating in this type of crime.¹⁹

Desarrollar e implementar políticas públicas con perspectiva de género que permitan crear oportunidades económicas y de vida plena para las mujeres es imprescindible para un abordaje integral de la participación de las mujeres en este tema. Esto ayudaría a prevenir que se involucren en casos de engaño o de obtención de recursos por medio de su participación en los esquemas de extorsión de las pandillas. La respuesta de la justicia ante estos casos particulares sigue siendo un debate abierto.



Case study

Victoria is a 20-year-old woman who works with her mother in an open-air market in zone 21 in Guatemala City. Gang members charge a weekly amount to every market stall owner. The gang gave Victoria a cell phone and the job of collecting money every week, under the threat of harming her and her family if she refused to complete the assigned task. The Public Prosecutor's Office conducted an operation in which, by analyzing several telephone numbers, they were able to tie in the number assigned to Victoria. After a joint operation with the police, Victoria was detained and is now in pretrial detention awaiting trial in the criminal proceeding in which they detained 30 other people, of whom 20 are women.



Let's review

- Extortion has an impact on people's economic, social and psychological lives that is impossible to quantify.
- Extortion affects a family's financial situation, because although it is nearly impossible to quantify the amount of money paid as extortion, some studies conclude it is more than 1 billion dollars per year in the region.
- Large companies are also harmed by extortion, and some even have to have a reserve fund to pay extortion. Furthermore, many small- and medium-sized businesses have had to close because of threats and the violence that goes hand in hand with extortion.
- Elements such as fear, anguish, health impacts, loss of family members and the isolation of families in the community are direct social consequences of extortion.
- One of the most impactful consequences of extortion in Central America is forced displacement, as many people find it necessary to abandon the area they are from.
- In recent years the female prison population has increased, due largely to women's participation in extortion networks. However, determining the causes and applying criminal policies from a gender perspective are elements that have yet to be analyzed to reduce the different type of impact caused by extortion on women and men.



Let's reflect

How has extortion affected community life where I live?

Are there relevant differences between how women and men participate and are judged in extortion networks? What are they?



Module 3

HOW CAN EXTORTION BE ADDRESSED?

Module objective



At the end of this module participants will have information on responses from the state, NGOs, the private sector, and organized communities against the various types of extortion, and they will be able to analyze if these responses are sufficient.

How can extortion be addressed?

There are many ways to counter societal problems. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras there is continuous talk of operations, raids, and multiple actions to fight extortion and the organized criminal groups that use extortion as a tool. Every electoral campaign is an opportunity for discourse, or a political offering by those who declare they will end the extortion and violence. As seen in the previous modules, however, the number of complaints and people in prison for this crime increases every year, so it would seem these measures are not sufficient. Responses to extortion arise from and are implemented by the state through government entities, NGOs, the private sector and organized communities. What are the most effective responses?

This module explores some ways to address the phenomenon. Also presented are some projects to try to fight extortion at the contextual level, in response to concrete activities by criminal groups, as well as at the structural level, to try to improve people's living conditions so that everyone can live a dignified life without extortion. Although there is no recipe to follow, it is important to understand countries' different approaches to facing extortion. There is a great deal of information that makes it possible to adapt and/or create one's own responses in communities and territories.

Government responses

State of exception or limits to constitutional rights

A state of exception is a measure implemented by countries such as El Salvador and Honduras that consists of suspending certain rights within the country's legal framework, without violating fundamental human rights. This measure is taken not only to decrease the number of extortion cases, but also to combat the various activities in which these criminal groups engage, mainly the gangs, such as violence and assassinations, among others.

On 27 March 2022, El Salvador approved a state of exception allowing suspension of rights related to the period of detention, increasing it from 72 hours to 15 days, not immediately providing the reasons for detention or legal defence, and intervening in telecommunications without a court order. In January 2024, the Legislative Assembly approved the 22nd extension to the state of exception, which remains in force as of May 2024.

In Honduras, on 6 December 2022, a state of exception took effect as part of the country's Fight Against Extortion Plan, and it remains in place as of May 2024. The government says this state of exception has allowed it to fight the illegal activities of the gangs and crime syndicates head on. As published in the report entitled *Government Progress in Matters of Citizen Safety 2022–2023*, during the 2022–2023 period, 2 768 members of organized and structured criminal groups that commit extortion and connected crimes were detained, of whom 591 are members of the gang Barrio 18, 468 belong to MS-13 and 1 709 are members of other groups. The government highlights a 24% increase in the capture of criminals as one of the operational achievements under the state of exception.

These states of exception are usually accompanied by what is known as 'iron fist' policies. This might include security-related activities such as military and special forces intervention, mass arrests and more severe treatment in prisons, among others. Numerous national and international organizations in human rights matters have called attention to these practices, questioning the effectiveness of states of exception. It is important to continue the discussion and delve more deeply into how effective policies such as these are, and what they truly achieve.



Legal reforms

Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have approved and applied laws to try to stop extortion in their countries. One of these laws regulates and/ or limits cellular telephone services in the country's prisons, as it has been found that much of the extortion conducted by telephone occurs from within the prison system. Honduras and El Salvador have laws regulating this situation, which were approved in 2015 and 2016, respectively. In Guatemala, although every electoral campaign touches again on the issue, no solutions have been offered, and as of May 2024 there is still no specific regulation on limiting cell phone use.

Specialists agree that these initiatives do not stop all extortion, because technological advances allow new ways to engage in criminal activities. For example, calls can be made or messages sent with applications such as WhatsApp by connecting to a nearby wifi network. A newspaper article in Guatemala stated that demographic growth around penitentiaries and prisons, in addition to technological advances in wifi networks, are 'a high-risk factor because now a wifi signal can be provided from far away using antennas with microwave radio frequency from point A to point B'.²⁰

Another legal reform that has been put into practice is modification of criminal laws. The goal is to make sentences stiffer, have regulations on aggravating circumstances, and establish new ways to conduct criminal investigations. In Honduras, since 2012, the sentence for the crime of extortion has been between 15 and 20 years. However, with approval of the new Criminal Code in 2020, sentences have been shortened. In El Salvador, the 'Special law against the crime of extortion' was approved in 2015, regulating criminal behaviour, conspiracy, investigation techniques, and extortion in prisons, among others. In 2022, President Nayib Bukele announced reforms, such as prosecuting those who agree to pay extortioners, but this caused an uproar, and the measure was not sent to Congress for approval. Finally, in Guatemala, on 14 March 2024, a legal initiative to fight extortion passed in the first round, proposing, among other things, classifying members of gangs and criminal syndicates as terrorists. There is disagreement among courts regarding this legal reform, so it has still not been approved.

 *Specialized security forces*

The creation of specialized security forces is a measure some countries have taken to fight extortion immediately and in the short term. In 2018, the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad y Defensa de Honduras (National Security and Defence Council of Honduras) created the Fuerza Nacional Anti Maras y Pandillas (Honduran National Anti-Gang Force – FNAMP), with the objective of improving the country’s security strategy and broadening the scope of investigative abilities. This unit does not just focus on fighting extortion; it targets all gang-related criminal activities.

Although the safety context in Honduras is complex, the number of reports filed with the FNAMP has increased. In 2018, 1 462 complaints were filed and 1 331 arrests were made, and in 2023, 3 191 complaints were filed and 2 768 members of criminal organizations captured, thus stopping payment of more than 88 million lempiras by way of extortion (US\$3.5 million).²¹

More recently, on 20 July 2022, the Dirección Policial Anti Maras y Pandillas Contra el Crimen Organizado (Police Anti-Gang Division Against Organized Crime) was created to replace FNAMP. This division includes members of the national police, agents from the State Intelligence and Investigation Division, and prosecutors from the Public Prosecutor’s Office Against Organized Crime. This new division will jointly handle crimes committed by gangs, criminal syndicates, and other criminal organizations that commit extortion and connected crimes.

In Guatemala, in 2009 the Ministry of Governance created the División Nacional Contra el Desarrollo Criminal de las Pandillas (National Division Against Criminal Development of Gangs – DIPAMCO), a specialized unit of the police force that receives complaints, monitors victims, investigates specific cases, and uses deliveries and undercover agents to catch extortionists red-handed. It currently has 17 locations in the country’s 22 departments, meaning more complaints are filed and cases resolved. Citizens have filed complaints against extortion to direct telephone number 1574, and the telephone number 4017-1290 is manned 24/7 by specialized personnel. In 2023 alone, 16 816 reports were filed according to the Information Management Section of the Ministry of Governance.

In January 2024, Claudia Palencia, Vice Minister of Safety of the Ministry of Governance of Guatemala, explained in an interview that part of the government’s strategy to fight extortion consists of creating the Special Group Against Extortion, which has a fast-action motorized unit, whose

challenges include providing safety to victims of extortion, mainly in mobile security and perimeter security. As of May 2024, this group includes 440 trained police officers in different specialty areas, with 220 motorcycles, which enables them to react quickly.²²

Furthermore, the public prosecutors' offices in the three countries have units responsible for pursuing criminal groups that focus on extortion, which, added to the work of the specialized security forces units, makes them more effective in prosecuting and sentencing criminals for this crime.

Investigations of extortion-related criminal acts

Other mechanisms used by governments in the region to stop extortion are investigations conducted by special public prosecutors. These investigations include a variety of crimes related to extortion, such as collusion, money laundering, and obstructing traffic, among others. This has allowed governments to use different lines of investigation to try to understand and dismantle the financial structures of the criminal groups engaging in extortion and other illegal activities. Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have carried out successful investigations on the use of money laundering, in which individuals or groups purchase and/or provide services in hotels, clinics, fuelling stations and restaurants, among others, to hide and move the financial gains obtained from activities such as extortion.

In El Salvador, Operación Jaque (Operation Check), a criminal investigation on the financial structure behind the extortion perpetrated by gangs in the region, identified several legal businesses, such as real estate and import/export companies engaging in large-scale money laundering, and increasing the income of their leaders. Through this operation, between 2016 and 2019, people with gang ties were arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced for numerous crimes, such as belonging to terrorist organizations, murders, illegal drug trafficking, and providing and being in possession of weapons of war, among others. Additionally, through different operations various money-laundering structures were dismantled, businesses were raided, and numerous assets were decommissioned.

In Guatemala in 2015, the public prosecutor presented a digital strategy to receive complaints of extortion, leading to better coordination among institutions. The strategy consists of using a cell phone application to file a complaint against a criminal group's demand for a payment. An alert can be issued if the call comes from a number reported as being a source of extortion, and databases can be created with the numbers that are often used to extort; furthermore, investigation strategies can be applied based on this information, such as geolocation mechanisms, identifying imitators, etcetera.

Strengthening justice systems in the region and making them more effective remains a challenge in the face of extortion, because swift justice, redress, care for the victim, and social reinsertion must be provided to prevent people from returning to extortion. It is also important to have a system that allows investigations to be continued, fair trials to be brought, and sentences to be issued that attribute responsibility to those who are behind the crime.

Investment in safety and social development

Driving police reforms and improving investment in safety are also important aspects in the fight against extortion at the state level. Citizens often do not file complaints because of their low levels of trust in the police and in the state institutions that are supposed to protect them.

Countries' investment in safety is an indicator of the working conditions of the police and other public servants whose duty is to protect, as well as the state investments and projects that exist to address problems such as extortion. According to the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – CEPAL), between 2010 and 2020 the total amount allocated by Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to the safety of its citizens at the federal level increased 8.4% per year on average. According to this commission, during this period El Salvador reported average public expense for this line item equal to 3.1% of GDP, followed by Honduras, with an average expense equal to 2.1% of GDP. The average expense by Guatemala on the safety of its citizens was lower at 1.6% of GDP.²³

A safety policy has to focus not only on the mechanisms of coercion, but also on the preventive measures and social problems that pose a risk for the people most likely to suffer from or commit certain crimes, such as extortion. This crime especially affects people living in the lowest socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, the best strategy in safety matters is social investment. By improving people's living conditions,

they can access better public services, more education, better working opportunities, and so on. Public expense on safety does not guarantee a low criminality index; it should be accompanied by other policies, mainly social development policies. As stated in a report by Infosegura:

Comparative historical analysis shows that in general, countries that have higher levels of safety for their population are those that have developed solid institutions, including efficient social protection networks. They have prioritized social investment as a strategy to promote economic growth and achieve greater social cohesion. Overall, therefore, countries that have attained higher levels of development present lower levels of social conflict, instability and violence.²⁴

An interesting case in Latin America is the safety and social integration strategy implemented in Medellín, Colombia, a city that was heavily impacted by drug trafficking groups, gangs and organized crime for many years. In 1991, it was considered to be one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Over two decades, a complete security plan was conducted in Medellín, which included participation by its populace and a series of specific actions. The six axes of the strategy are:

1. **A complete focus on safety.** This would include strategies to prevent, control and repress crime, but also social inclusion programs for vulnerable communities.
2. **Investment in infrastructure and urban development.** Urban transformation and development projects were put in place in vulnerable areas. Libraries, parks, community centres, safe public spaces, and efficient public transportation helped reduce social segregation.
3. **A specific programme to prevent gangs from forming.** This measure consisted of creating programmes for youth at risk of joining gangs or criminal groups. Educational, work, and personal development opportunities were key elements in keeping young people from turning to criminal activities.
4. **Community participation and effective community policing.** Community participation in formulating and implementing safety policies was encouraged. A community police force was also supported, with the goal of improving cooperation among security forces and the community.

5. **Use of cutting-edge technologies and data analysis.** Implementation of technology and data analysis was a key tool for improving security, as it allowed criminal bosses to be identified, and swift and effective responses to be implemented.
6. **Policies to disarm criminals and control weapons.** This resulted in reduced proliferation of firearms, which in turn contributed to decreasing violence.

Two decades after these measures were put in place, Medellín has reduced the index of violence by nearly 97%.²⁵



Do you find these measures interesting?



Retaking control of prisons

One of the main problems in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras is that governments have lost control of the prisons they administer, and they have become operating centres for organized crime. Using different strategies, governments have tried to retake control of the prisons and reduce the crimes committed on the inside.

In Guatemala, the Vice Minister of Safety, Claudia Palencia, stated that the strategy to fight extortion, implemented by the new government in 2024, is based on the 90/10 concept, meaning that 90% of extortion in the country originates in prisons, and 10% outside of them. Steps are in place to retake control of the penitentiary system by confiscating telephones and any technological system that allows crimes to be committed. Furthermore, a registry has been created of individuals who are in prison and their profiles, so that informed decisions can be made, such as identifying gangs and imitators, redistributing inmates among the prisons, and restrictions, among other measures.²⁶

In El Salvador, Bukele's government has built a mega prison for 40 000 inmates, considered to be 'the largest in the Americas', with a harsh imprisonment system. It bears the name 'Terrorism Detention Centre, and has drastic restrictions: people are not allowed to speak without authorization, they only have contact with their guards, families are not allowed to visit, and inmates cannot leave their cells, even to eat, among

other restrictions. This facility currently holds 12 000 inmates.²⁷ While the state of exception was in place and as of October 2023, more than 71 000 people had been detained, of whom 6 000 had been released, according to data the authorities provided to the media.²⁸

Awareness and education campaigns

Governments, NGOs and the private sector support communication campaigns whose end is to educate the population and encourage a culture of filing complaints.

Campaigns such as *'El que presta su cuenta puede ir preso sin darse cuenta'* (a play on words in Spanish that translates to 'Give away your bank account, give away your freedom'), in Guatemala; *'Pagar extorsión, NO es tu obligación'* (Paying extortion is NOT your obligation) in El Salvador, and distributing flyers with preventive information and recommendations on the street and for businesses by DIPAMCO agents in Honduras, are trying to raise awareness among the population, and increase their trust in filing complaints.

Private sector responses

There is a private initiative to fight extortion among small, medium and large businesses, as they are victims of large-scale extortion in Central America. These groups have responded in different ways to the problem, with some including extortion payments in their company's fixed expenses, hiring private security for their businesses, while others simply refuse to pay.

Some public-private initiatives, however, seek to obtain better results in the fight against extortion. Some trade associations have supported public prosecutors as intermediaries between judicial and private citizens, who often mistrust the authorities, so that the associations participate in the communication process among the parties. Some corporate sectors have offered logistical support to national police forces, such as the sugar sector in El Salvador in 2013. The support these private companies have provided to security forces includes the donation of motorcycles, pickup trucks, and radios or drones, which were provided to police officers trained to use them in their security tasks. Private companies might provide funds to finance projects, as well as their experience in cooperation and coordination processes, elements that might help them establish effective alliances to fight extortion.



Case study

The manager of a restaurant chain in Guatemala, who asked to remain anonymous, states that they constantly receive threats so that they will pay extortion. One week after sharing this story, a note was left, accompanied by a toy rifle and grenade, threatening to kill distributors and other personnel if they did not pay the amount being demanded. Despite the intimidation tactics, the company's policy is not to pay extortion, so they immediately contacted the police, with whom they are in direct communication, and let the police take charge of pursuit, investigation, and hopefully apprehension of the extortionists.

► Safe Zone 4, Guatemala

After a project to support economic development in Zone 4 of Guatemala City, incidents of extortion began to occur at the businesses in the area. The best option was to create its own security model: 'Safe Zone 4'. After analyzing the situation, a strategic security plan with four axes was developed: delimitation of the area to protect, creation of a systemic working model, socialization of actions and use of technology. Implementation of this plan has resulted in coordinated activities between businesses and people living in the area, in compliance with the law. Although the results are preliminary, the numbers are positive and encouraging.

Civil society responses

► Investigation and follow-up

In Central America, numerous NGOs work with communities to prevent and respond to extortion. By investigating extortion cases, people have become more aware of the problem and its impacts on different segments of the population. One example of this is the Panamanian NGO Mujeres con Dignidad y Derecho de Panamá (Panamanian Women with Dignity and Rights – MDDP), which in 2017 filed a complaint reporting the extortion of sex workers by members of the police force in Panama City. The investigation

found that more than half of the sex workers had been forced by police officers to pay bribes in exchange for letting them work, and around 45% also confirmed they had been forced to offer free sexual services. In Central America, 30% of sex workers confirmed they had been victims of this type of extortion.²⁹

Following the investigation, several members of the MDDP conducted awareness workshops with members of the country's security forces, including the national police and immigration officers, as well as representatives from different municipalities, to share sex workers' experiences with the police, to raise awareness and continue training them on the subject.³⁰



Crime Stoppers

Crime Stoppers is a programme created in the United States in 1976 to obtain information anonymously from citizens. This programme has been implemented in cities throughout the US, Canada, Europe, the Caribbean, Central America, Australia and Africa, creating a global community that solves a crime every 14 minutes somewhere in the world.

It consists of an international platform that enables people to participate anonymously and safely. The programme receives information from people on illegal events in their communities, and is thus a valuable tool for the national civil police, contributing to capturing criminals with a court order, opening new investigations, and providing additional information to intelligence and investigation teams.³¹

A cooperation agreement has been signed in Guatemala with the Ministry of Governance, allowing it to operate through the Police Information Division, where reports of various types of crimes are filed, including extortion, which are handled by specially trained agents. They are subsequently transferred to the specialized unit in charge of the investigation.

There are two ways to receive information:

-  The web site www.tupista.gt
-  The call centre *1561*

Organizations specialized in victim care

Colectivo Artesana, Guatemala

As stated previously, extortion has a broad and complex impact on society, particularly affecting women, both those who are victims as well as those who participate in committing crimes. There are non-profit organizations that work directly on these issues.

Colectivo Artesana is a Guatemalan NGO that works to access full justice and to prevent crimes, working to protect the rights of women who have been deprived of their freedom and the rights of their children.³² Andrea Barrios, the collective's director, stated in an interview that since the majority of people captured for the crime of extortion are women, the collective provides different types of support, such as:

- Continually monitoring the different problems extortion causes
- Supporting legal initiatives that include the gender perspective, both in the way victims are treated, as well as the women accused of being part of the criminal networks that engage in extortion
- Monitoring women inside prisons, following up on their cases
- Entering into agreements with numerous government institutions in order to address the specific elements required in the criminal processing of women accused of extortion, such as public criminal defence and the national civil police
- Working with the families of women detained for extortion
- Creating communication campaigns to keep women from getting involved in these activities

In 2019, the collective put on the campaign '*Piénsalo antes*' (Think first), which advises women about the risks of letting others use their bank accounts to deposit money, or collecting money on behalf of their spouses or boyfriends, which are just some of the practices recognized among gang members and other criminal groups to facilitate the extortion process.

Grupo Sociedad Civil, Honduras

In 2017, within the framework of the project entitled '*Caminando hacia la esperanza, estrategias de prevención, protección y asistencia a la población desplazada internamente o en riesgo de serlo, con énfasis en la población vulnerable, como las mujeres, la población LGTBI y las personas defensoras de los derechos humanos*' (Moving toward hope, strategies of prevention, protection, and assistance for internally displaced people or those at risk of being displaced, emphasizing vulnerable populations such as women, the LGBTQ population, and those who defend human rights), headed by Grupo Sociedad Civil, and with support from the Pan American Development Foundation, two investigations were conducted with the aforementioned populations.

One result from the investigations that sought to characterize displacement, was that women are being displaced in increasingly large numbers, both internally and externally, and they are taking their children with them for two main reasons: a) violence, namely domestic, intra-family, and forced recruitment, and b) poverty, which is made more acute due to lack of employment and extortion. In addition to these factors is the sexual violence to which young women in the community are exposed.

A set of proposals regarding human security matters was drawn up in light of the State's impact that began with the Secretary of Human Rights, as well as others involved, such as the police and the Public Prosecutor's Office. Some of the items proposed were violence-free communities, with women and youth who were facing domestic, intra-family, and sexual violence; retaking control of public spaces, and citizen partnerships. The results included recovery of public spaces and some minimal agreements between organized groups of women and gang members to cease extorting businesses.





Let's review

- Governments have considered numerous actions and public policies to try to address the social problem of extortion, and have implemented states of exception or restrictions on exercising certain rights. Legal reforms have been approved to make penalties harsher and strengthen investigations, and specialized forces have been created, which, due to their experience are having favourable results. Criminal investigations are becoming broader in scope and include a variety of players; investment in security in the region is increasing, although it is necessary to combine this with social development policies, and efforts are being made to retake control of prisons. Extortion indicators continue to increase, however, so the causes and the measures to be implemented must be analyzed.
- Private initiative (large, medium and small businesses) is one of the sectors most heavily impacted by extortion, so they are taking their own measures to reduce it, focusing their efforts on creating partnerships with the authorities to support the public policies that are implemented.
- NGOs have played an important role in monitoring victims and others involved in extortion. Their proposals, monitoring, and the tools they contribute to state measures play an important role in fighting extortion.



Let's reflect

What do I think of the state of exception measures, such as those in El Salvador and Honduras? What are the positive and negative aspects?

Have the measures adopted to reduce extortion in my community been sufficient?

If I could make decisions, what actions would I support to fight extortion in my community?



Module 4

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF SOMEONE TRIES TO EXTORT ME?



Module objective



At the end of this module, the participant will have information that will enable them to respond to an immediate and direct risk of extortion.

What should I do if someone tries to extort me?

Extortion is a crime that seeks to obtain benefits by causing the victim to feel the sensation of urgency and threat. In these cases, it is common and natural for a person's first reaction to be fear, as well as confusion and uncertainty about what to do in light of the threat against them, their family or their business. How should one react when they are the victim of extortion?

As there are many types of extortion, several specialists were consulted for their suggestions on what should be done in these cases. The following points are the common denominators for the responses obtained, and seek to guide the reader so they can respond better if they experience extortion. There is no question that there is no infallible response against this crime; rather these measures are an attempt to take a step forward by providing information on knowing what to do and how to react in the event of extortion.










According to the specialists consulted, it is always best to remain calm, and seek support from family members, friends, community members and the appropriate authorities to help mitigate the fear and anxiety caused by threats. It is likely that results will take time, but with these actions things will be moving in the right direction.



Important information to remember

- Although there is no exact data, it is important to note that most people who commit extortion by telephone are imprisoned, so it is difficult for them to carry through on their threats.
- The personal information usually referenced during calls comes from public information, social networks, WhatsApp, or general information the extortionists have been able to find, but in truth they do not have specific information.
- The type of language used by extortionists can help differentiate between gang members and imitators. For example:
 - A gang member will rarely identify the group to which they belong. If you receive a call and the extortionist identifies themselves as a member of a certain gang or crime syndicate, this is probably an imitator.
 - The characteristic language of the gang is rarely used during telephone calls. For example, a gang might use the word '*jaina*' to refer to the teenagers that perform certain tasks for them. If they use words such as '*chava*', '*patoja*' or '*chera*', they might be imitators.
 - Members of the Barrio 18 gang identify themselves as a gang, not as a crime syndicate, and they would never wear the colour red (which is the colour of Mara Salvatrucha).

What should I do if someone tries to extort me by telephone?

- 1  Remain calm, listen carefully to what they say and the exact information they have. A great deal of extortion is committed by imitators who are unable to follow through on their threats. End the call as soon as you can.
- 2  Do not provide any type of personal information or anything on family members or friends. Prizes, employment offers and emergencies of family members are usually a lie. No one gives money or things away for nothing.
- 3  Do not interact with the person calling, do not confront or question them. **End the call as soon as possible.**
- 4  Write down the number or save it in your telephone as 'extortionist' and indicate the person's gender, the information they have and what they asked for. **If possible, record the call.**
- 5  If the threat is in relation to a family member or friend, immediately try to locate that person and make sure they are okay before starting to make any type of payment, complaint or taking any other action.
- 6  Share the information with family and friends, and trustworthy businesses in your area. Ask around to see if similar calls have been received to identify crime bosses or verify their veracity. If some of the information they provide is true, analyze who might have given it, and if you suspect someone, report them to the authorities.
- 7  Contact the security authorities in your city to file a complaint through the telephone numbers or cellular applications provided, or go to a nearby police station. **There are units that specialize in fighting extortion in every country.**
- 8  Follow up on your complaint and demand a response from the authorities, who should explain the status of your complaint and what they are doing.
- 9  Do not handle the problem by yourself. Tell those around you about it to understand the situation better. Ask the authorities for a response as a group, and organize alternatives for resolution by the community.

What should I do if someone tries to extort me through messenger applications, social networks or the internet?

1 

Save the number in your cell phone as 'extortioner' or another word by which you can easily identify them.

2 

Do not respond to messages, do not provide any type of information and do not open any links. If the threats persist, block the telephone number. (Select the contact and click on the 'block contact' option).

3 

Gather evidence. Take screenshots of the messages sent. Try to get the date, time and all details possible. Save the messages as quickly as possible so the sender cannot erase them. If the messages come through a social network, go into your profile and take screenshots.

4 

Share the images or screenshots with someone you trust, print them, or make sure they are saved on another device so you don't lose them.

5 

If the extortionist has accessed your email or social networks, change your security password and make sure your social networks are restricted to the people you know.

6 

Copy the address of the profile or email that is extorting you. You can block the email address and mark it as spam so you will no longer receive emails from them.

7 

Contact the security authorities in your city to file a complaint through the telephone numbers or cellular applications provided, or go to a nearby agency and provide all possible evidence. There are units that specialize in fighting extortion in every country.

8 

Follow up on your complaint and demand a response from the authorities, who should explain the status of your complaint and what they are doing.

If you are the victim of sexual harassment, sextortion, or any type of intimidation due to your gender or private life, follow the steps listed above, talk with someone you trust or with a professional, and file a complaint.

What should I do if someone tries to extort me in person?

1



Try to remain calm. Listen to their demands and do not provide any type of information. Do not confront or threaten them, as this increases the risk they will be violent. **If possible and if it does not put you at risk, record the conversation.**

2



Do not refuse the criminal's request, and say you need to look for ways to get what they are asking for. Ask for some time to respond, which will allow you to analyze what happened and to ask for help.

3



When the person leaves, write down everything you remember **(the time, what the person looked like, their demands, the words they used, etc.)**.

4



Share the information with family and friends, and trustworthy businesses in your area. Ask around to see if anyone has had a similar encounter, so that crime bosses or the veracity of the threat can be identified. If you think you know of someone who might be helping extortionists, report it to the authorities.

5



Contact the security authorities in your city to file a complaint through the telephone numbers or cellular applications provided, or go to a nearby police station and provide all possible evidence. There are units that specialize in fighting extortion in every country.

6



Do not handle the problem by yourself. Tell those around you about it so you will understand the situation better. Ask the authorities for a response as a group, and organize alternatives for resolution by the community.

How do I file a complaint?

There are currently various ways to file a complaint reporting extortion, including by telephone, electronic portals and smartphone applications. These are some of the options:

GUATEMALA



1574 Extortion hotline
3038-5376, 4017-1290 División Nacional contra el Desarrollo Criminal de las Pandillas (DIPANDA)
110 National Civil Police
1561 Crime Stoppers (anonymous complaints)



www.tupista.gt
www.mp.gob.gt/denuncias



Mobile app: Reporte MP



Public Prosecutor's Offices
 DIPANDA offices

EL SALVADOR



123 Security Forces of the Government of El Salvador



<https://www.tupista.info/denuncias/extorsiones/>



Public Prosecutor's Offices
 National Civil Police

HONDURAS



143 Dirección Policial Anti Maras y Pandillas contra el Crimen Organizado (DIPAMPCO)
9-1-1














<https://policianacional.gob.hn/contacto>
denunciaspnh@gmail.com



Offices of the National Police of Honduras
 DIPAMPCO headquarters

Can extortion be prevented?

Although anyone can be the unexpected victim of extortion, there are some actions that can help prevent it. The following are some recommendations:

- 1  Whenever possible, only respond to calls, messages or emails from people in your contacts or your address book.
- 2  If someone asks you 'With whom am I speaking'? Always respond 'With whom would you like to speak'? Never give out your personal information.
- 3  Stay in constant touch with family members and/or close friends so you know where they are and when you will be seeing them.
- 4  Do not use kinship words (for example 'mom' or 'dad') to identify family members in your cell phone contacts.
- 5  Be careful about the personal content you share on social networks, and check your privacy configurations. Do not publish details about your current location or what you are doing. Remember that many imitators and extortionists get information on their victims from the public content the victims publish on social networks and other spaces.
- 6  If you make online purchases, payments or bank transfers, verify the security of those internet pages.
- 7  Do not believe job offers or prizes if you are asked for money, as companies do not request money when hiring people or delivering prizes.
- 8  Do not tell other people about bank transactions or negotiations you are involved in.
- 9  Do not share usernames or passwords for digital banking platforms, email or personal applications.
- 10  Warn minors in your care of the risk of providing personal information to people they don't know.
- 11  Create a family protocol to verify that all family members are unharmed in the event of an emergency.

There are many recommendations to keep you from becoming an easy extortion target, as well as recommendations as what to do if it occurs. Although there is no magic formula to not be a victim of this crime, having pertinent and truthful information from the appropriate authorities on the issue is important for adequate prevention, detection and reaction in such cases.

Do not be part of an extortionist network

Many detentions and sentences for extortion affect women who, as we stated previously, are the visible face of the networks engaged in this crime. These women often provide their bank accounts to receive money, and sometimes they do 'favours' for members of crime syndicates or gangs in exchange for a small payment, or so they will not be victims of violence. The following are some recommendations:

- Never let anyone use your personal bank account. Remember that if it is identified with your name, it is easier to use it as evidence against you than against those who asked to use it.
- Do not let anyone use your personal identification document, as it can be used to open bank accounts.
- Do not do 'favours' for inmates, as this is a crime that puts both you and your family at risk of being imprisoned.
- Remember: nothing is worth losing your life, freedom or the company of your family.
- If you suspect your partner or a family member, do not give them your bank card, telephone, passwords or anything else that is exclusively for your personal use.
- Do not give anyone information about your family or friends. This information could be used to commit extortion, and you will be the one responsible for having provided the information.
- Seek the support of your family or people you trust. Do not face the situation alone.
- If you are threatened or forced to open a bank account, report it. There are anonymous communication channels you can trust.



Let's review

- If you are extorted, do not try to handle the problem by yourself. It is important to stay calm and not provide information of any type to the person making the call or visit. Writing down the information and sharing it with family members and close friends can help identify crime bosses and verify the veracity of the case.
- Filing reports with the authorities and government institutions responsible for fighting extortion in their respective countries allows them to record and investigate cases, prosecute them and submit them to the courts.
- Many extortionists are imitators who have no way to follow up on their threats.
- Although anyone can be the unexpected victim of extortion, there are things you can do to help prevent it. Stay in constant contact with family members and close friends, and have action protocols for emergencies, as these are important for preventing extortion.



Let's reflect

How can this information be shared and spread in my community?

What other advice would you give someone who is the victim of extortion?



Module 5

**HOW CAN COMMUNITY
ACTION BE TURNED INTO
AN INITIATIVE AGAINST
EXTORTION?**

Module objective



At the end of this module, the participant will have a community action tool to prevent, monitor and respond to extortion in their area.

How can community action be turned into an initiative against extortion?

An effective strategy when extortion occurs is not to face the problem alone. Extortionists usually target individuals who are isolated and lack connections or support networks, rather than people who work with others to implement preventive measures.

Individual actions against extortion have few or insubstantial results, while joint efforts by public institutions, NGOs, the private sector and the population as a whole is now the best strategy against extortion.

It should be noted that any task or proposal must analyze the environment, context, and personal and community safety. Alternatives and projects, therefore, should consider the need for discretion when addressing the issue. This means holding meetings in safe places, establishing partnerships with other organizations and actively collaborating with government authorities.

This manual provides information about extortion in the region. Now is the time to think about, discuss and analyze a project that will prevent and/or fight extortion in communities. The following tool is created and used by communities to prevent, monitor and respond to extortion where it occurs.

Community groups to prevent and fight extortion

Community groups that seek to prevent and fight extortion are groups of citizens who share public spaces, services and sources of income in their daily lives in a certain area, or who are particularly impacted by crimes that are committed. These groups organize themselves to prevent and plan response actions against the possibility of extortion within the community. The idea is to supplant violence with alternative practices, thus people's participation is fundamental. In forming such a community group, the recommendation is that they be diverse and representative of the different sectors of the community: educators, government employees, businesspeople, tradespeople, human rights activists, those in the religious community, investigators, the population as a whole, and so on.

The group's objective will be to plan and implement activities to diagnose, prevent and respond to extortion in the community. Again, it is fundamental that the group prioritizes discretion and safety in implementing its aims, therefore important safety measures should be taken, such as meeting in discrete and safe places (for example, the meeting room of an NGO, or a community church), to have a filter for attendees so that no criminal elements are let in to the meeting, and to create partnerships and collaborations with various institutions, such as the country's security forces.

Step 1: Formation and introduction of the group

The first step is to create the group with community members who voluntarily show interest in the initiative. Once the group has been formed and its objectives defined, the group and its goals should be presented to organizations, public institutions and community leaders for validation and recognition.

The group should be diverse, and represent everyone in the community. Whenever possible, representatives from public institutions, mainly those responsible for citizen safety should be included (specialized entities, police, municipalities, etc.), so that the group will be recognized at the government level, and so the results will be part of the government's plans. If, for whatever

reason, representatives from public institutions cannot be included, the group should try to create partnerships with recognized government officials so they can create effective decision-making communication channels.

Step 2: Community assessment

The second step is to know precisely how the community is formed and the most relevant aspects, which will provide a broad overview of the community. These questions may provide useful guidance:

- What is the composition of my community?
- What crimes most heavily impact my community?
- What public and security services does my community have?

To answer these questions, information from public institutions and/or investigations and recent studies should be compiled. Some useful information would include: the overall population (women/men); the number of children and adolescents; basic public services (education, health, housing); government offices (municipality, courts, public prosecutor); divisions responsible for safety (national police, special bodies, municipal police); statistics and indicators on poverty, education, employment and safety; complaints filed on crimes that affect the population, including extortion.

Any information that helps obtain a 'snapshot' of the community should be recorded so the group can use the data to understand the actual situation in different areas. The information can be recorded using the means considered suitable to store it, and it should also be available in writing. Below is an example of the instrument to be used in community assessment:



Community assessment

Name of the community	
Year	
Municipality	
Department	
Territory surrounding the community	
General population (women/men)	
Children and adolescents	
Poverty and extreme poverty (%)	
Reports of homicides	
Reports of injuries	
Reports of theft	
Reports of extortion	
Number and names of public schools	
Number of clinics, healthcare centres and hospitals	
Number of police stations or security agencies	
Locations to file complaints	

Note: Include sources of data obtained



Step 3: Problems and needs at the community level

For the third step, it is recommended that the group prepare a list of the community's needs and security issues. As it is impossible to address every problem at the same time and using the same strategy, the group should prioritize the issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest priority. It should also categorize the needs as follows: assessment, prevention or response to extortion.

For this step, key individuals should be interviewed and/or workshops or participative discussions should be held with community members; the tool should be updated every month or two, according to the group's dynamics.

Below is an example of the instrument to be used to list security needs:



Security needs

ISSUE	NEED	PRIORITY	CATEGORY
Extortion in a learning institution	Security at the school	1	Response
People do not know the mechanisms to file complaints	Awareness and information campaign against extortion	3	Preventive
There is no precise information on the number of complaints and responses from security institutions	Number of complaints and types of extortion, broken down by men and women	2	Assessment

Step 4: Map and directory of key figures

The recommended fourth step is to create a map of key figures in public institutions, NGOs, the media, and others who are fighting extortion, which the group can use to coordinate activities and work together.

It would be ideal to create a directory with telephone numbers, addresses and the names of contacts.




List of key figures involved in the fight against extortion

Name	Role	Telephone	Address	Contact person

Step 5: Action plan

Using the assessment and the list of problems and needs, the group can draw up a working plan to respond to the community's main security needs. The plan should contain those responsible, frequency and follow-up activities on each need, as well as risk identification.

Below is an example of the instrument to be used in creating an action plan:

 Action plan	
Problem	Extortion at a primary school
Need	Security at primary school number 16
Possible impact	Violence against children and school staff
Category	Response
Actions to be taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Notify the municipal authorities and request constant patrols ▪ File complaints ▪ Train students on what to do in the event of extortion or violence
Group representatives	Principal, teachers, José, Gonzalo and Felipe
Those responsible for acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National police ▪ Public prosecutor ▪ Community group
Necessary resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Draft a request to the national police chief ▪ Draft the complaint ▪ Paper and printer
Response time	15 days
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting with police authorities ▪ Ratify the complaint and request an investigation ▪ Meeting with the school's principal

Step 6: Monitoring and follow-up

The next recommended step is to monitor and follow up on the action plan. As there are many ways to do this, the following list contains some suggestions:

- In a public space, post the planned activities the group will be conducting so everyone can see it and follow what is happening. Every month, provide progress or results obtained, for example: 'thirty students have been trained in the complaint mechanisms to be used with the public prosecutor's office'.
- Present results in community meetings and to municipal authorities to modify and/or expand the action plan and make decisions.
- Share successful results from activities implemented with neighbouring communities.

Steps 5 and 6 may be conducted simultaneously, with the recommendation they be updated with the established frequency so the needs of the population will be monitored constantly, and to keep the community informed of the assessment, prevention and response activities implemented to fight extortion.

The tools presented in this module are intended to be a general guide for community groups to prevent and fight extortion. It is suggested that each group create its own steps and methodologies, and use the instruments obtained according to community interests and needs so they can achieve their established objectives. Community organization is indispensable in responding effectively to extortion, and strong cooperation will make the community a force to be reckoned with. It is hoped that this document will be a useful and replicable tool for groups that decide to combine their efforts and fight extortion.



Let's review

- Community organization is indispensable in responding effectively to extortion.
- Community groups that seek to prevent and fight extortion should be diverse groups that include representatives from all sectors of the community.
- The suggested steps to activate community groups include formation and introduction of the group, preparation of a community assessment, preparation of a matrix of problems and needs, mapping of the key players, an action plan, and monitoring and follow-up activities.



Module 6

**HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY
MONITOR AND PROVIDE SUPPORT
TO VICTIMS OF EXTORTION?**

Module objective



At the end of this module, the participant should be able to define a victim and what their rights are, and the community actions that should be created to encourage resilience in the event of extortion.

'Victims' means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power.

A person may be considered a victim, under this Declaration, regardless of whether the perpetrator is identified, apprehended, prosecuted or convicted and regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The term 'victim' also includes, where appropriate, the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimization.

SOURCE: Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, General Assembly of the United Nations, Resolution 40/34 of 29 November 1985.



Let's reflect

Why should people who have an immediate relationship to the extorted person also be considered victims of this crime? How are they affected? What type of help would they need? Who would be responsible for providing such help? Why is it necessary to help everyone identified as a victim?

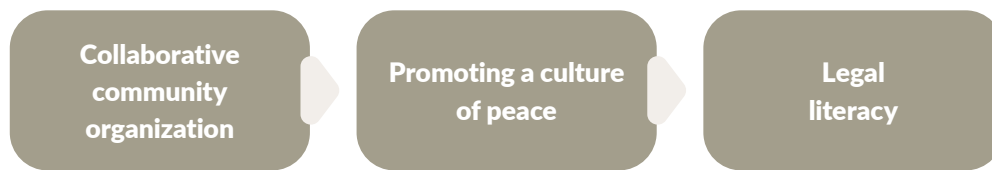
Types of support

Helping victims is part of the cycle of preventing violence. When supported by the state and the community, it can reduce vulnerability factors that increase the chances of a person becoming the victim of a crime, and it can help them when they have been a victim. This reduces ramifications in other areas of their lives.³³ This support is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary care, according to the model used by public health institutions.



Primary care

Primary care actions focus on addressing social, institutional, economic and cultural factors when crimes such as extortion are committed. These preventive activities are developed within a context in which there are no signs of a crime, and organization of the community will not result in greater risks. An environment of peace and concord is cultivated among neighbours, and there are periodic events to raise awareness about citizens' rights and obligations, and the mechanisms of actions with the government when one has been the victim of a crime.



Secondary care

Secondary care tries to reduce the vulnerability factors associated with a median probability of a crime such as extortion occurring. It is an approach for specific contexts in which there are signs of violence and/or violation of rights due to low government presence. In these cases there may be some risk in community organization; however, with a non-confrontational and more informative and united response, it can become a useful resource for the community. This might be, for example, providing information about how to file complaints and encourage the demand for services, such as specialized security forces, and the installation of security infrastructure to increase protection against extortion and other crimes.



Tertiary care

Tertiary care actions seek to reduce the vulnerability factors associated with a high probability of a crime such as extortion occurring. Within this context there is a dynamic of focused extortion as part of territorial control by criminal groups in the area. In these cases it is essential that public security and justice institutions take the lead so that when victims file complaints, they can initiate investigations and determine the criminal liability of those involved to neutralize criminal activities and help those affected with full-scale victim services.



Let's reflect

After reviewing how the three levels of care for extortion victims are defined, create a concrete proposal for each level, considering the resources and needs of your community.

What types of support and monitoring activities can communities develop for victims of extortion?

Support for people who might become victims of extortion or who already are victims merits a series of multidisciplinary approaches by victim prevention and care networks headed by security and justice institutions, in partnership with the organized community.

The jumping off point is always dissemination and timely access to information so that preventive measures can be put in place before a crime occurs, and to establish the road to follow when extortion has impacted the lives of people, families and the community. In this case the objective is to take the necessary steps with the public institutions responsible for psychological, legal and social support that the victims of a crime of this

type need to reestablish their psychosocial equilibrium. These services should adhere to the standards included in domestic and international regulatory frameworks in relation to the rights of crime victims.

On this point it is necessary to again clarify that the person is a victim of the crime of extortion from the moment they receive a request to act in a certain way backed by a threat, such as delivering money, services or other benefits. This is to say that even though the demands might not be met (for example, the victim does not deliver the money, or the threatened harm does not materialize), the crime of extortion exists and its impact on the lives of the people affected is a fact.

When someone becomes the target of the crime of extortion, the circumstance in and of itself becomes an emergency, not only because of the risk that the threats will materialize, but also because of the impact on the person's mental health and the aftermath of the crime.

The emotions that a victim might experience when they are surprised by an extortioner include:³⁴

- **Fear:** Fear is caused by the perception of risk and defencelessness as a natural survival response to the danger. It may be attenuated by actions that help people feel supported and not alone, and even aware of their own strength.
- **Remorse:** A random event may cause remorse, which may show up as lack of personal care. Messages that are transmitted during and after the crisis are very important so that those affected will recognize that they are not responsible for the crimes committed by third parties.
- **Shame:** Shame is due to the humiliation that one feels in the face of an attack that harms the victim of extortion emotionally, physically and materially. Those supporting the victim should try to remind them of their strengths and dignity.
- **Isolation:** This is an unconscious response to the sensation of imminent danger and/or mistrusting those around them as possible criminals. It is also a mechanism to handle fear, remorse and shame.
- **Rage:** This is an exacerbated feeling of anger, which might awaken the desire to act violently when the accused are identified as someone close to them, due to negligence, or against direct perpetrators by extra judicial means. Guidance and monitoring to seek responses through the appropriate institutions are essential to ensure that a downward spiral into violence does not occur and further threaten governability.

- **Disinterest and lack of care:** This is one of the longest-term aftereffects, although it is one of the least discussed, as it is often labelled as a problem of a 'bad attitude'. Loss of motivation regarding personal projects and daily obligations should not be perceived as an attitude problem that has to be resolved individually and in isolation; rather, it should be understood as one of the emotional impacts of extortion. Those who support victims should avoid criticism and accusations.

It is important to pay special attention to cases of gender-based violence in which sexual extortion magnifies all of the feelings described above, due to prejudice, criminalization of victims inside and outside the home and in their close circles, as well as the possibility of suffering new cases of assault and sexual crimes by the perpetrators, and even third parties not involved in the initial crime.

Addressing the emotional impacts created by extortion in a timely manner involves creating resilience, which consists of the ability to adapt and continue on with one's life, despite the adverse circumstances experienced at a given time.

All of this merits the community developing a series of basic skills to handle cases of extortion, during and after their occurrence, so that those affected will receive the necessary physical and emotional support, and obtain stability, which in turn will allow them to make appropriate decisions to handle the issue.

Informative actions

The following is a description of the informative actions that community organizations should provide so that neighbours will learn what they can do in order not to be victims of extortion, and what they should do if they are victimized.

The remote or imminent possibility that something negative such as extortion will impact the dynamics of a community merits having a widely distributed plan so that people will understand:

- how to reduce the possibilities of becoming the victim of extortion,
- what to do if one suspects or sees signs of possible extortion, and
- what to do if one has already been the victim of extortion.

If someone has been the victim of extortion, community members should know who to go to for guidance and information. These key community members should be trained individuals, such as public prosecutors, to support those affected during the processing of the complaint before the courts, using a 'complaint route' designed by the community in coordination with the authorities. This route would list the institutions to turn to (including a contact directory, hours and addresses), as well as steps that should be taken according to the type of extortion. (See Module 4).

How to support a victim of extortion

The steps below should be followed to support a victim of extortion as soon as one becomes aware of the situation the victim and those close to them are in, with a brief description of the elements considered to be part of emotional first aid, such as a tool to support a person who is in a critical situation, before sending them to a formal psychological support programme.

1



Let the individual know they are not alone. The first thing to do is ask about their physical health, so you will know if they suffer from any disease, such as high blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, vascular issues, or any other illness that requires medical attention. This includes reminding them that they need to take their medications regularly, do a basic check of vital signs, or if necessary seek emergency medical care.

2



Help the individual locate their loved ones by telephone to confirm they are unharmed, in the event they received a threat that their loved ones would be affected.

3



Verbally reconstruct the experience to recover as much information as possible (take notes), and include that information in the corresponding complaint.

According to the type of extortion, it is important to clarify any extenuating circumstances (imitators, use of information available on social networks, the terms used to identify the aggressors, etc.), as well as aggravating circumstances (someone who was armed made the threat, or if there was an indirect attack, with or without victims, among others).

4



Go with the victim to file the complaint with the appropriate authorities, taking an envelope containing the documents that will be used in the process (identification document and notes on what occurred, among others). If it is a case of extortion by a government employee, seek help from an institution other than the one where the perpetrator works, and monitor follow-up with the country's office of human rights or an NGO that provides support and legal advisory services to the victims of crimes committed by government employees.

5



Make sure the person stays involved with victim services provided by the institution that received the complaint, or other services in the victim care network.



Let's reflect

Are there victim services in your country? Identify the institutions, the services they provide, the advantages and challenges they face, as well as any suggestion to improve them.

Emotional primary care for direct and indirect victims of extortion

- **Inventory of support networks:** Encourage people to share what happened to them with their support groups so they will be able to handle the issue better. This might include family, friends, work colleagues, acquaintances and/or their religious community. They need to know they are not alone.
- **Personal strengths:** An important step in handling an unexpected event is recognizing that although the person is experiencing an undesired situation, they have many personal characteristics that are their best resource to face the challenges, such as hope, optimism, will and patience.
- **Logistical resources:** Explore ways for the victim and their loved ones to get around safely. For example, if they have access to a refuge or alternative dwelling until things settle down, if they have sufficient economic resources to take the necessary steps to survive, if their economic activities are interrupted while investigations are made, and if they have access to telecommunication devices and services, etc.
- **Normalize the expression of feelings:** A person impacted by extortion will experience a series of emotional responses through which they will process the situation of perceived threat. This is one of the survival mechanisms that allows them to be more alert and receptive to their environment, and these emotions will even affect how they react to situations.
- **Support the victim so they can overcome the aftermath of post-traumatic stress:** In the days following the extortion, the person might feel fatigued, there may be a sudden decline in their health, listlessness, anxiety, sleeping disorders and even episodes of acute psychosis that require intensive professional care. In all cases family and recreational activities, returning to one's regular routine, and going to therapy, if applicable, are essential to the victim's recovery.

Legal support

Finally, the community should be aware of the standards with which security and justice institutions and all other similar organizations that provide victim services must comply to protect victims' human rights.

According to the United Nations' Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, people have four fundamental pillars of rights regardless of race, colour, sex, age, language, religion, nationality, political or any other type of opinion, their beliefs or cultural practices, their economic status, birth or family situation, ethnic or social origin or their physical impediments:³⁵



Access to justice and fair treatment

- Victims should be treated with compassion and respect for their dignity.
- They are entitled to access the mechanisms of justice and to prompt redress for the harm they have suffered, as provided for by national legislation.
- Judicial and administrative mechanisms should be established that are expeditious, fair, inexpensive and accessible to help victims, and those measures will be strengthened where necessary. Victims should be informed of their rights in seeking redress through such mechanisms.
- The responsiveness of judicial and administrative processes will be facilitated to meet the needs of victims.
- Victims should be informed of their role and the scope, timing and progress of the proceedings, and of the resolution of their cases, especially when serious crimes are involved and when they have requested such information.
- Victims' opinions and concerns will be presented and considered at appropriate stages of the proceedings when their personal interests are affected, without prejudice to the accused and consistent with the relevant national criminal justice system.
- Victims will receive proper assistance throughout the legal process.
- Measures will be taken to minimize inconvenience to victims, protect their privacy, if necessary, and ensure their safety, as well as that of their families and witnesses on their behalf, from intimidation and retaliation.

- Unnecessary delays will be avoided in the disposition of cases and the execution of orders or decrees granting awards to victims.
- Official mechanisms for the resolution of disputes will be used, when necessary, including mediation, arbitration and customary justice of indigenous practices, to facilitate conciliation and redress for victims.



Restitution

- Offenders or responsible third parties should, where appropriate, make fair restitution to victims, their families or dependants. Such restitution should include:
 - Return of property
 - Payment for the harm or loss suffered
 - Reimbursement of expenses incurred as a result of the victimization
 - Provision of services, and
 - Restoration of rights
- When considerable harm is caused to the environment, to the extent possible restitution should include restoration of the environment, reconstruction of the infrastructure, replacement of community facilities, and reimbursement of relocation expenses, whenever such harm results in the dislocation of a community.
- When government employees or other agents acting in an official or quasi-official capacity have violated national criminal laws, the victims should receive restitution from the State whose employees or agents were responsible for the harm inflicted. In cases in which the government under whose authority the victimizing act or omission occurred is no longer in existence, the successor state or government should provide restitution to the victims.



Compensation

When compensation is not fully available from the offender or other sources, states should endeavour to provide financial compensation to:

- Victims who have sustained significant bodily injury or impairment of physical or mental health as a result of serious crimes.
- The family, in particular dependants of persons who have died or become physically or mentally incapacitated as a result of such victimization.



Assistance

- Victims should receive the necessary assistance through governmental, voluntary, community-based and indigenous means.
- Victims should be informed of the available health and social services and be readily afforded access to them.
- Police, justice, health, social services and other personnel should be trained so they will be sensitized to the needs of victims, and provided with guidelines to ensure proper and prompt aid.
- In providing services and assistance to victims, attention should be given to those with special needs because of the nature of the harm inflicted or other factors.



Let's review

- If you are experiencing the aftereffects of recent or past extortion that you have not been able to overcome, you should know that you have the indisputable right to claim legal, psychological and social support from government institutions to allow you to enjoy life again without fear or threats to yourself and to your loved ones.
- Humans are social beings by nature, therefore realizing achievements and overcoming challenges means always working as a team.
- Overcoming the aftermath of a violent event such as extortion necessarily means support from specialists who provide help through victim services in your country. They will provide you with adequate support so you can return to your normal life without negative emotions that sometimes not even you can explain, which affect your daily development and that are related to a traumatic event such as extortion, whose repercussions were not tended to in a timely manner.
- After seeking help and taking back control of all areas of your life that were affected by extortion, you will have a successful experience worthy of sharing with others who are experiencing a difficult situation like the one you faced. Share a hopeful message that will serve as motivation and incentive.

NOTES

- 1 Sandra Kozeschnik and Liza Noriega, Guide for community resilience to extortion in Central America, GI-TOC, 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/guide-manual-for-community-resilience-to-extortion-in-central-america/>.
- 2 Interview with Julio Díaz, an agent in the Public Prosecutor's Office against extortion, Guatemala, September 2021.
- 3 Katerin Chumil, *Cada día se reciben 41 denuncias de extorsión, la mayoría son a través de redes sociales*, *Prensa Libre*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/justicia/cada-dia-se-reciben-41-denuncias-de-extortion-la-mayoria-son-a-traves-de-redes-sociales/>.
- 4 Leslie Sequeira, *Sextorsión: Una nueva manifestación de violencia contra las mujeres basada en género*, GI-TOC, June 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/sextortion/>.
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