

DISAPPEARANCES BY ORGANIZED CRIME

A GUIDE TO RESPONSES
AND STRENGTHENING
RESILIENCE

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Disappearances have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the victims but also their families and communities. The emotional toll is immense, leaving families in a state of uncertainty and grief.

In the face of a disappearance, staying composed, gathering information and promptly engaging with authorities are crucial first steps. However, the community's role is pivotal and extends far beyond these immediate actions.

Advocacy, awareness initiatives and support networks can pressure authorities to act, promote legal reforms and create solidarity among those affected. International organizations and legal frameworks provide additional channels for justice. They also create opportunities for civil society groups, victims and their families to advocate more effectively for victims' rights and community safety at the national and global level.

We hope this guide serves as a valuable resource, empowering you and your communities with the knowledge and practical insights needed to address the issue of disappearances linked to organized crime.

'You feel that strange presence, sensing that something happened here, you get goose bumps, and you start looking ... you can imagine what happened to them...'

Graciela, in search of her daughter, who disappeared in Mexico¹

People from all walks of life have disappeared under tragic circumstances orchestrated by organized crime. Courageous voices – such as journalists, activists and whistle-blowers – who stand up against powerful foes often become victims of ruthless suppression, silenced in their pursuit of the truth. In other cases, migrants seeking refuge across seas or deserts see their stories cut short before reaching safety. Women pursuing opportunities abroad disappear without a trace, caught in the underbelly of human trafficking. The whereabouts of these individuals are, and often remain, unknown.

Organized crime groups have demonstrated that they strategically eliminate those perceived as threats or challenges to their illicit operations. One of their goals is to tighten territorial control, assert dominance and cultivate an atmosphere of fear within communities. In some contexts, disappearances are used to artificially lower homicide rates – those missing are not counted as deceased – thereby reducing pressure from law enforcement. Through intimidation, organized crime groups aim to suppress resistance, protect the secrecy of their criminal enterprises and foster a pervasive sense of impunity.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

If you are reading this manual, it is likely that you, a loved one or someone in your community has been affected by this form of criminal violence. This guide is designed to offer valuable insights for individuals seeking to understand and address the issue of disappearances orchestrated by organized crime groups. It delves into the characteristics, typologies, impacts and consequences of such incidents. It also provides practical steps and community-oriented tools to tackle the problem effectively. By encouraging citizen participation, these tools strive to prevent and respond to disappearances, ultimately contributing to a safer and more secure community for all.

How to use this guide

This guide is intended as a practical resource for individuals, families and communities affected by disappearances linked to organized crime, as well as for those supporting them – whether peers, community leaders, advocates or professionals. It recognizes that each disappearance is unique. The actors involved, the local dynamics and the ability to mobilize support or demand accountability can vary widely depending on the region and context. As such, this guide does not offer one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather provides adaptable strategies and tools.

The manual is structured into modular sections. You can use it as a comprehensive resource or refer to specific sections depending on your immediate needs, concerns or role.

MODULE 1 provides an overview of disappearances by organized crime – what they are, how and why they happen, and the different actors targeted.

MODULE 2 examines the impacts of disappearances on family members and the wider community.

MODULE 3 outlines immediate response strategies when a disappearance is suspected, including safety considerations and initial actions.

MODULE 4 focuses on mobilizing support – within your community, through informal networks and with civil society or legal organizations.

MODULE 5 highlights the psychological and emotional effects of disappearances, along with approaches for individual and collective coping strategies.



Module 1

WHAT ARE DISAPPEARANCES?

Note



This guide focuses specifically on disappearances carried out by organized crime groups. These differ from enforced disappearances under international law, which involve direct action by, or the acquiescence of, state authorities (such as police, military or other government actors). For cases involving state-enforced disappearances, families can seek assistance from the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which helps determine the fate or whereabouts of missing relatives and provides guidance on engaging with international human rights mechanisms.²

Defining disappearances by organized crime

In common understanding, disappeared persons are individuals whose whereabouts are unknown to their relatives, or whose absence has been officially reported. This can encompass a range of circumstances, such as being captured, arrested or kidnapped.

While there is no universal definition of what constitutes a disappearance by organized crime, the Resilience Fund uses the following definition, broadly inspired by the UN International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance:

‘an act or instance in which a person has been arrested, detained or abducted, or has in any form experienced a restriction of their liberty by organized crime groups, alone or in collusion with state actors, and whose fate or whereabouts is unknown by their family and acquaintances.’

This definition encompasses acts carried out by organized crime groups, as well as disappearances that result from illicit economic activities. Victims may be abducted or coerced into modern forms of slavery, such as forced labour in mining sites, or drawn into human trafficking networks. In all cases, they often face aggravated forms of discrimination. Families of the disappeared are frequently left in a prolonged state of uncertainty, unaware of the location or well-being of their loved ones. Details regarding the disappearance, death or burial may be unrecorded, or existing records may have been deliberately concealed or destroyed.

Motives

The motives behind disappearances as a form of criminal violence can be manifold. One common objective is silencing dissent – these disappearances serve to suppress voices that challenge or oppose criminal activities.

Another motive is the exploitation of victims to serve illicit markets. In Mexico, for example, trafficked persons have been forced to work in illicit poppy fields or cannabis plantations, or exploited in the sex trade. Armed groups in conflict zones, particularly in parts of Africa and the Middle East, similarly exploit instability to abduct people, especially women and children, who are then funnelled into criminal networks. These disappearances are a direct means for organized crime groups to profits and maintain control over illicit economic activities.

The overarching objective of organized crime groups is to assert control. They use disappearances to generate profit and to instil fear, establishing dominance over communities and deterring opposition.

Targets

Targets range from activists and journalists to rival gang members caught in the crossfire of turf wars and power struggles. Individuals seen as obstacles to criminal enterprises, whether due to their role in law enforcement, community leadership or opposition to criminal activities, are also at risk. Children can also be victims; they may be separated from their families while fleeing a combat zone, forcibly recruited, arrested or even forcibly adopted.

The circumstances in which disappearances occur are diverse. The list below provides some examples, but it is not exhaustive:

1**Community leaders**

A vocal community activist who speaks out against the illicit practices of a local organized crime syndicate vanishes.

2**Whistle-blowers**

An insider within a criminal network decides to expose critical information about the group's activities. The individual suddenly disappears – likely the victim of a calculated effort to eliminate a potential informant.

3**Law enforcement officers**

A dedicated police officer makes significant progress in dismantling a criminal organization's operations. In retaliation, the group kidnaps the officer, sending a warning to others in law enforcement.

4



Journalists

An investigative reporter publishes an exposé on the financial dealings of a powerful criminal network. Shortly after, the journalist disappears under suspicious circumstances.

5



Migrants

A group of undocumented labour migrants is intercepted by smugglers who demand additional payment. When the migrants cannot pay, one of them vanishes as a warning to others.

6



Business owners

A small business owner refuses to pay protection money to a local extortion racket. In response, the criminal group disappears the owner to set an example and force others into compliance.



For reflection

If you suspect someone you know may have disappeared but are unsure, consider the following questions:

1. **Unknown fate or whereabouts:** *Have they been absent without a clear explanation? Are you unaware of their location, with no information from them or other reliable sources?*
2. **Communication difficulties:** *Have there been unexplained restrictions on communication or contact with them?*
3. **Fear and intimidation tactics:** *Did they experience any intimidation or threats from individuals or groups?*
4. **Links to organized crime:** *Do you have reason to believe their disappearance is connected to organized crime or illicit economic activities?*
5. **Motive:** *Was the person engaged in activities that challenged or opposed criminal activities, such as activism or journalism? Could their disappearance be an attempt to silence dissent? Alternatively, are you concerned that they may have disappeared as part of (labour) exploitation or other forms of human trafficking?*
6. **Context:** *Do they live in an area, region or country known for disappearances related to organized crime, violence or control?*

Addressing common misconceptions

There are myriad myths surrounding the issue of disappearances. You may recognize some of the following:

MISCONCEPTION	REALITY
<i>'I have to wait a few days before I can report.'</i>	It's often better to report a disappearance as soon as possible. The first 48 hours are critical, and delays can hinder the investigation. If you are concerned about someone's safety, do not wait.
<i>'Only individuals with criminal connections are at risk.'</i>	Organized crime groups target a wide range of people, including activists, journalists and innocent community members. Anyone can be at risk, so it is essential to stay vigilant and support those affected.
<i>'Disappearances are limited to high-profile targets.'</i>	While high-profile figures such as journalists or activists are often targeted, disappearances by organized crime extend beyond these groups. Ordinary citizens, community members and even children can become victims, highlighting how widespread the issue is.
<i>'Law enforcement always has the resources and capabilities to address these cases swiftly.'</i>	Law enforcement capacity varies, and authorities may face challenges in addressing organized crime. Communities often play a vital role in advocacy, raising awareness and supporting victims' families.
<i>'Disappearances are isolated incidents with no broader community impact/There's nothing we can do to combat disappearances related to organized crime.'</i>	Disappearances deeply affect communities, creating fear and insecurity. Communities have a collective interest in addressing the issue and promoting safety and stability. Proactive steps – such as raising awareness, supporting affected families, advocating for government action and cooperating with law enforcement – can make a difference.



Case study

Familias de Acapulco en Busca de sus Desaparecidos (Mexico)

In Acapulco, Mexico, where criminal groups have operated for years with near-total impunity, a small group of relatives of the disappeared turned personal loss into organized civic action. *Familias de Acapulco en Busca de sus Desaparecidos A.C.* was formed when six families, brought together through meetings convened by the local church, recognized that their cases were part of a wider pattern of violence. With support from the church's victim assistance programme, they created a formal association to demand immediate searches, identification of long-missing persons and protection for other families navigating the same uncertainty.

The group works on two fronts: direct search efforts and community prevention. Its members collaborate with the state, national search commissions and the special prosecutor's office to plan and participate in search operations. They apply detailed safety protocols to protect volunteers in high-risk areas, and have earned the trust of public institutions, which now refer new cases to them.


At the same time, the association conducts awareness workshops in schools, churches and community spaces to address the recruitment of young people by criminal networks. It also provides psychosocial and spiritual support to families coping with prolonged absence and grief.

Although disappearances in Acapulco continue to rise, the work conducted by *Familias de Acapulco en Busca de sus Desaparecidos* shows how local organizations can fill institutional gaps and sustain hope. Their work demonstrates that resilience grows not from the absence of fear, but from the decision to act collectively in spite of it.



Module 2

WHAT ARE THE LOCAL IMPACTS?



The widespread sense of insecurity caused by disappearances linked to organized crime extends far beyond the immediate families of the victims – it ripples through the entire community and society at large.

This impact becomes even more pronounced when disappearances follow a systematic pattern, deepening the fear and uncertainty experienced by the affected communities.

Who is affected?

The disappeared (direct victims)

Disappeared individuals frequently endure various forms of violence, both physical and psychological. They may have been subject to torture and other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment. These victims are aware that their families do not know their whereabouts and that the chances of rescue are slim. Having been removed from the protection of the law and having 'disappeared' from society, they are deprived of all rights and left at the mercy of their captors. When the victims are women, children or members of the LGBTQ+ community, they face heightened vulnerability to sexual violence and other types of abuse.

Even when death is not the final outcome and the victim escapes, the impact is often long-lasting. The trauma endured during the period of disappearance can leave lasting scars, manifesting in physical injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other serious mental health challenges.

Despite these immense hardships, some survivors of disappearance by organized crime demonstrate remarkable resilience.

Friends and family of the disappeared (indirect victims)

The family and friends of disappeared persons often endure prolonged mental anguish, not knowing where their loved one is being held, under what conditions, in what state of health and even if they are still alive.

Often, victims may be returned but choose to remain hidden, fearing for their lives. Meanwhile, their family members, unaware of their fate, are caught in an emotional limbo, oscillating between hope and despair, sometimes for years. Anxiety, grief, anger and guilt become constant companions as families grapple with the lack of closure, which can also take a significant toll on their physical health.

'I was struck by the difference between those whose loved ones had been identified and those who were still waiting... The families of the missing were distraught, sickened by the condition of not knowing. You cannot cry without a body, without the certainty that the person is gone.'

Robin Reineke, founder of the Colibrí Center for Human Rights

The disappearance of community members strains or destroys the social fabric, leading to shifts in interpersonal relationships and community dynamics. Families torn apart by disappearances experience profound emotional trauma that can impair their ability to function as cohesive units. Additionally, suspicion and division may arise within the community, as individuals search for explanations for the disappearances and struggle to process the aftermath.

The anguish experienced by families is often intensified by the practical consequences of the disappearance. In some contexts, the missing person may have been the primary breadwinner. They may also have been the only person capable of cultivating the land or managing the family business.

The economic deprivation that a disappearance may bring disproportionately affects women, who often bear the brunt of a family member's disappearance. In doing so, they may face intimidation, persecution and reprisals.

The emotional shock is exacerbated by material deprivation, which is aggravated by the costs associated with conducting a search. Families may also become targets of extortion and threats, further intensifying their distress. In some cases, national legislation may prevent them from receiving pensions or other support in the absence of a death certificate, deepening the hardship they face.

Communities (indirect victims)

Communities are directly affected by the disappearance of the family breadwinner, which often leads to economic breakdown and increased social marginalization.

Disappearances by organized crime groups have a destabilizing effect on entire communities, fostering an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. When individuals vanish without a trace, community members are left in a state of uncertainty – fearing for their own safety and that of their loved ones. The constant threat of violence and intimidation erodes social cohesion and hinders community development and cooperation.

Often driven by economic motives, these disappearances result in various economic consequences for the affected community. Illicit activities such as human trafficking, forced labour and involvement in the drug trade can disrupt local economies, creating dependencies on criminal enterprises. The loss of skilled workers, entrepreneurs or labourers can leave significant gaps in local industries.

Organized crime's involvement in disappearances also often reveals vulnerabilities in the institutions responsible for ensuring public safety and justice. When cases remain unresolved or ignored, public trust in law enforcement and government institutions falls. This erosion of trust can hamper cooperation between communities and authorities, impeding efforts to combat organized crime.



Exercise

Reflecting on disappearances by organized crime in your community

This exercise is intended to help you think critically about how disappearances manifest in your local context. By identifying patterns, key actors and impacts, you can gain a deeper understanding of the issue and consider appropriate responses or support strategies.

Take time to reflect on the following questions. You may choose to write down your responses or discuss them with others in your community or support network.

1. What types of disappearances are reported in your local media?
2. Are they linked to specific regions, communities or social groups?
3. Are certain cases more visible than others? Why might that be?
4. What criminal activities are commonly associated with these disappearances?
5. Do reports suggest involvement or negligence by public officials or law enforcement?
6. How do these disappearances affect your community?
7. How do people respond – through silence, collective action, migration or other means?
8. Are there community efforts to prevent disappearances or support affected families?

Reflecting on these questions can help identify risk factors, patterns of impunity and potential allies. It may also serve as a starting point for organizing responses, advocating for justice or simply making sense of a complex and often fragmented reality.



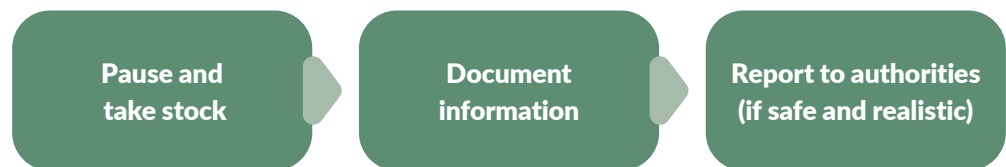
Module 3

WHAT TO DO IN AN INCIDENT?



Through our Resilience Dialogues and communications with victims of this form of criminal violence, we sought guidance from survivors, family members and community leaders to better identify and understand possible courses of action. This section shares the findings from those consultations, aiming to empower readers with practical tools for a more effective response.

This guide will walk you through three key steps to consider when you suspect that someone in your family or community may have become a victim of disappearance.



Pause and take stock

A suspected disappearance is an emotionally overwhelming and often chaotic experience. Panic and confusion are natural responses, but taking a moment to ground yourself can help you think more clearly and act more effectively. You may not feel in control, but small, intentional steps can reduce risk and lay the groundwork for an effective response.

If possible, do not face this alone. Reach out to someone you trust – a friend, family member, colleague or community contact. Talking through what you know (and what you don't) can help clarify the situation and ease the pressure of decision-making.

Document information

Taking a pen and a notebook, begin recording as much information as possible in preparation for reporting it to the appropriate authorities. Document any information related to the disappearance, including the date, time, location and any known witnesses or potential suspects.

Disappeared person report checklist

Your personal information

- Provide your full name, contact information and relationship to the disappeared person.
- Submit valid identification, such as a driver's licence or ID card.

Disappeared person's details

- Provide full name, date of birth and any known aliases.
- If available, include a recent photograph.
- Describe their gender and physical attributes, including height, weight, hair colour, eye colour and any distinctive features (e.g., scars, tattoos).
- Detail the clothing and accessories they were wearing when last seen.
- Indicate any medical conditions, allergies, required medications or relevant mental health information.

Circumstances of disappearance

- Detail the sequence of events.
- Describe the attire of any individuals involved, types of vehicles present and whether the perpetrators are recognizable to anyone. Include any relevant documents or evidence related to the disappearance, such as text messages, emails or notes.
- Reflect on possible motivations behind the disappearance.
- Note any suspicious calls or messages received afterwards.

Circumstances leading up to the disappearance

- Establish when the individual last communicated with someone.
- Determine the location of their last known whereabouts.

Disappeared person report checklist

- Compile a list of recent activities, including the places they visited or the events they attended before disappearing.
- Identify any recent personal or professional conflicts that may be relevant.

Supporting witnesses

- Provide names and contact information for potential witnesses who may have information regarding the disappearance.
- Monitor media coverage, including social media, related to the case.

Report to the authorities (if safe and realistic)

- Once a disappearance has occurred, you do not need to wait 72 hours to file a report. While the time frame for officially recognizing a case as a disappearance varies by country and context, acting sooner is often better.
- If municipal, state or federal police authorities are involved, it is important to report this – but only if it is safe to do so.
- Request DNA testing. Advances in genetics, modern forensic methods and the creation of dedicated databases have made it possible to locate and identify disappeared persons with a level of efficiency and accuracy that was not previously possible.

QUESTIONS TO ASK AUTHORITIES

1. *Is there a dedicated point of contact or liaison officer I can communicate with regularly?*

2. *Can you provide information about the legal process?*

3. *What can I (safely) do to assist in the investigation?*

4. *What can I expect in terms of updates and communication throughout the investigation?*

STAYING IN CONTACT

1. *What is the current status of the investigation?*

2. *What steps have been taken so far to locate the missing person?*

3. *Is there any more available information about the circumstances of the disappearance?*

4. *Are there any resources or support services available to me or my family during this time?*



Case study

Mexico's Buscadoras

The *buscadoras* (searchers) are grass-roots groups, primarily composed of women in Mexico, who take on the daunting task of searching for the remains of missing persons – many of whom are victims of violence and organized crime. These women, driven by the desire to find closure for their families and communities, engage in the challenging and often dangerous work of searching for clandestine graves and burial sites where the remains of the disappeared may be hidden.

These women are typically mothers, sisters, daughters and other relatives of the disappeared. They come from diverse backgrounds and regions across Mexico, united by the shared experience of loss. Many of them have been let down by official investigations or feel marginalized by government institutions, leading them to take action themselves.

Their activities demonstrate remarkable community resilience, evident in several ways:

Collective action. The *buscadoras* form organized groups to search dangerous areas where remains are often found, such as clandestine graves or remote regions. Despite the risks involved, they support one another and share resources to maximize their impact.

Advocacy and awareness. Through their search efforts, the *buscadoras* raise public awareness about the widespread crisis of disappearances in Mexico. Their work exposes the failures of authorities to adequately address the crisis. They advocate for justice and accountability, demanding action from both local and national governments.

Pressure on authorities. By publicly documenting their searches and pressuring authorities, the *buscadoras* challenge the status quo and demand accountability. Their activism has led to increased visibility of the crisis and in some cases forced authorities to acknowledge and respond to their demands.

Support for victims' families. In addition to searching for the remains of their loved ones, the *buscadoras* offer solidarity to other families affected by violence and disappearances. They provide emotional support, share resources and advocate for the rights of victims' families to access justice and support services.



Module 4

COMMUNITY ACTION



We recognize that in many cases authorities may lack the resources or capacity to effectively respond to disappearances linked to organized crime. In these situations, community-based initiatives can be vital sources of resilience.

This section explores the important role that independent and community-led action play in addressing disappearances associated with organized crime. We offer a set of possible tools – which can be adapted based on the appropriateness and safety of your community’s context – for responding to and preventing this form of criminal violence.

In many cases of disappearances linked to organized crime, it is the families of the disappeared themselves, together with civil society, who have promoted and driven the search processes. These families often participate in all activities related to the search.

Communities that remain resilient and proactive in the face of disappearances can apply pressure on authorities, advocate for legal reforms and contribute to the prevention of future disappearances. Community resilience and collective action are indispensable tools in the fight against disappearances, the pursuit of justice and the creation of a safer community. Some steps you can take are presented below.

1

**Raise awareness**

Raise awareness within the community about disappearances linked to organized crime. Advocate for the rights of the disappeared and help reduce the stigma associated with victimhood. This can be done both offline and online.

2

**Establish support networks**

Connect with local, national or international support groups for families of the disappeared to share experiences and provide emotional support. Foster a sense of solidarity among affected families and the broader community.

3

**Share information**

Create community mechanisms for reporting and documenting disappearances. Encourage community members to share relevant information or leads with law enforcement or investigative authorities. Community watch groups can help monitor and report any suspicious activities, ensuring swift responses in cases of potential disappearances.

4

**Engage with human rights organizations**

Work with local and international organizations that specialize in human rights, victim support and advocacy, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Work collaboratively with these organizations to leverage their expertise and resources. They may provide support, resources and advocacy for families of the disappeared.

5

**Work with the media**

Collaborate with media outlets to ensure sustained coverage of disappearance cases and related issues. Use various media platforms to share stories, seek assistance and advocate for justice.

6

**Follow up with authorities**

Hold law enforcement agencies accountable and ensure the prioritization of disappearance cases. Peaceful protests and advocacy efforts have been utilized by victims' families as effective means to demand justice and accountability.

7

**Develop emergency response plans**

Create and practice community-wide emergency response plans for cases of disappearances. Assign designated individuals to contact authorities and legal aid organizations.

8

**Memorialize and commemorate**

Organize events, memorials or commemorations to remember and honour the disappeared. Think about using these occasions to raise public awareness and keep the issue in the public eye.

9

**Educate the community**

Host community workshops, seminars and awareness campaigns to educate residents about the warning signs of disappearances and the associated risks. Offer training sessions on how to recognize indicators of human trafficking, forced labour or other forms of exploitation. Equip community members with the knowledge to protect themselves and others.

10

**Lobby for policy changes**

Advocate for policy changes at the local, national and international levels to address the root causes of disappearances and improve legal frameworks.

International responses

Several international organizations and instruments can assist in accessing justice for cases of disappearances by organized crime:

- **International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.** This treaty aims to prevent enforced disappearances, uncover the truth when they occur and ensure that survivors and victims' families receive justice, truth and reparation. It provides a clear legal definition of forced disappearance and outlines the obligations of states to prevent, investigate and prosecute those responsible for this crime.
- **Committee on Enforced Disappearances.** This body of independent experts monitors how states parties implement the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and supports efforts to uphold its standards.
- **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).** The ICRC works to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, particularly in contexts of conflict or violence. Through its tracing services, it helps reconnect families, provides guidance and support to relatives of the disappeared, and advocates for the protection of detainees under international humanitarian law.
- **Amnesty International.** Amnesty actively campaigns on cases of enforced disappearances worldwide, pressuring governments to determine the fate and whereabouts of all those who have disappeared. The organization also collaborates with grass-roots movements, such as the #SearchingWithoutFear campaign, which recognizes the crucial work of women searchers in the Americas.
- **International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).** Composed of 60 eminent judges and lawyers from across the world, the ICJ promotes and protects human rights through the rule of law. It uses legal expertise to develop and strengthen national and international justice systems, aiming to ensure the progressive development and effective application of international human rights and humanitarian law.



Case study

Legal and human rights perspectives

Over the past three decades, the international community has increasingly formalized its response to enforced disappearances. In 1992, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 47/133, proclaiming the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. This declaration established guiding principles for states, but was not legally binding.

This framework was strengthened by the adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) in 2006, which entered into force in 2010. Unlike the declaration, the convention imposes legally binding obligations on states parties to criminalize enforced disappearance, investigate and prosecute perpetrators, search for disappeared persons, provide reparations and cooperate internationally.

The adoption of the ICPPED was the result of tireless advocacy by families of the disappeared and NGOs around the world. These groups emphasized the urgent need for a universal treaty that would effectively prevent and eradicate this problem.

How does the ICPPED protect victims and families?

The preamble to the convention reaffirms that enforced disappearances constitute a violation of key prohibitions contained in other international legal instruments. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Specifically, the ICPPED:

- Prohibits enforced disappearances under any circumstances, including war or any other public emergency, without exception.
- Requires states parties to criminalize forced disappearance as a crime in their domestic legislation.
- Recognizes the widespread or systematic practice of forced disappearance as a crime against humanity.
- Obliges states parties to search for missing persons, investigate their disappearance and ensure victims' access to justice and reparations.
- Mandates that states parties cooperate with one another and provide mutual assistance in legal matters, as well as in relation to search and investigation.



Case study continues

- Requires states parties to guarantee minimum legal criteria during deprivation of liberty, including maintaining official records of all persons deprived of liberty with essential information, and authorizing them to communicate with their families, lawyers or any other person of their choice.

In essence, states parties have the obligation to adopt effective legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures to prevent or eradicate enforced disappearances. This includes classifying them as continuing crimes in their domestic legislation and establishing corresponding civil liability.



For reflection

How can I leverage the information about international responses and legal perspectives on enforced disappearances to advocate for the rights of victims and their families in my community?



Case study

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign began in April 2014, after 276 schoolgirls were abducted from Chibok, Nigeria, by the militant group Boko Haram. This tragic event occurred on 14 April that year, when Boko Haram militants stormed a boarding school in Chibok, sparking outrage across Nigeria and the world.

The campaign gained momentum through social media, and the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls became a powerful tool for sharing information, expressing solidarity and mobilizing support. Global figures, including Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai, supported the cause and demonstrated how digital activism can pressure governments and attract international attention to localized crises, including that of disappearances by organized crime. Beyond online engagement, protests, vigils and demonstrations took place around the world.

While the immediate goal of rescuing all abducted girls has not been fully realized, over 180 girls have been freed through military operations and negotiations as of November 2025, while at least 90 remain unaccounted for. The campaign's success lies not only in the partial rescues but also in sustaining global pressure and advocacy for the missing girls.



For reflection

How can we mobilize our community by leveraging social media and protests to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of those affected by disappearances?

Helping others

Whether you are being there for a friend, family member or coworker, your support can make a difference in how they cope with and navigate the situation.

STAY INFORMED

Keep abreast of developments related to disappearances, ensuring that accurate and up-to-date information is shared within the community. Advocate for transparency and cooperation between authorities and the community to support a collective response.

OFFER EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Provide empathy and understanding to those directly impacted by disappearances, acknowledging the emotional toll it can have. Avoid making assumptions and respect the unique ways individuals may cope with their emotions.

PROMOTE COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

Foster a sense of community and solidarity among neighbours, friends and colleagues. Organize community events or forums where individuals can share their experiences and work collectively towards healing.

HELP VICTIMS CONNECT WITH SUPPORT SERVICES

Facilitate access to professional support services such as counselling, therapy or support groups tailored to those dealing with trauma and loss. Share information on local resources or organizations specializing in assisting victims of organized crime-related incidents.

ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE

Encourage individuals to report disappearances to law enforcement and provide information that may aid investigations. Advocate for justice and support legal initiatives aimed at addressing organized crime within the community.



Module 5

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

'The impact caused by the disappearance of our daughter cannot be easily described. Every night we think: where will she be, what will become of her... It causes insomnia. When we go to work we cannot concentrate on what we have to do – there is permanent anxiety and physical illnesses, but that does not stop us in the fight.'

Testimony from relatives of missing persons collected by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (2013)³

Disappearances linked to organized crime can have profound and long-lasting effects on the mental and emotional well-being of those left behind.

One of the most significant psychological challenges is ambiguous loss. This is when families and loved ones live in a state of limbo, unsure whether the disappeared person is alive or dead. This ambiguity can lead to prolonged grief, as there is no clear end to the mourning process. In some cases, the sudden and traumatic nature of disappearances can result in PTSD.

Some of the emotions you may experience include:

Fear and worry

- The uncertainty surrounding the fate of the disappeared person intensifies fear, as families are left to imagine worst-case scenarios without concrete information. Fear can also extend to concerns about retaliation, witness protection and the broader implications for human rights and the rule of law. Prolonged fear and worry can take a severe psychological toll, leading to conditions like PTSD.
- Many individuals and communities experiencing fear and worry over disappearances have shown remarkable resilience and determination in their pursuit of answers, justice and accountability, which can be seen as a source of inspiration and hope,

Anger

- Some people may experience a simmering anger, while others may feel explosive rage.
- Frustration and outrage can be directed towards various sources, including the criminals responsible for the disappearance, but also to corrupt officials who may be complicit – or even the broader societal conditions that enable such crimes to persist.
- While prolonged and unresolved anger can have negative physical and mental health consequences, anger can be a motivating force for individuals and communities to seek justice, demand accountability and advocate for change in the face of enforced disappearances.
- Alternatively, anger can lead to social movements, calls for legal reforms and increased public awareness, potentially bringing about changes in societal and political systems.

Grief

- Profound sadness and sorrow for the loss of a loved one, often exacerbated by the uncertainty of their fate.
- This is a unique form of loss because there's often no closure or knowledge of the person's fate, making the grieving process especially challenging.

- People affected by enforced disappearances develop various coping mechanisms, such as forming support groups, engaging in activism or participating in memorial events to help them process their grief and find a sense of meaning.
- Memorializing the disappeared person becomes an important part of the grieving process. Families often hold memorial services or participate in activities to honour the memory of the disappeared.

While coping with the emotional toll of disappearances is inherently challenging, there are various steps you can take to build emotional and mental resilience. Many victims of disappearances have chosen to channel their emotions into positive action – whether through advocating for justice, participating in awareness campaigns or engaging in memorial activities.

Sharing your experiences with trusted friends and family can offer comfort. For many, seeking professional help from therapists, support groups or counsellors provides important emotional guidance and coping strategies. Prioritizing well-being while seeking justice can be a powerful way to address these emotional challenges.

NOTES

- 1 Daniela Rea and Rosario Lucas, A place called disappeared, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, <https://landscapes.globalinitiative.net/>.
- 2 International Commission on Missing Persons, Family rights: Short guide for families of the missing, https://www.icmp.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/15_ICMP_Family-Rights-Guidebook.pdf.
- 3 International Organization for Migration, Searching for missing migrants in Central and North America: Five good practices of Civil Society Organizations, 2019, https://missingmigrants.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl601/files/publication/file/LAC%20best%20practice%20search_EN.pdf.





GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net

ABOUT THE RESILIENCE FUND

The Resilience Fund is the Global Initiative's grant-making mechanism. It was launched in 2019 in Vienna to provide technical and financial support to civil society actors responding to organized crime. It was born out of the need to stand with those fighting at the forefront of criminal governance and violence, to raise the voices of local communities and bring their perspectives to multilateral forums. The Fund has as a mission to identify, enable and protect community actors and their efforts in parts of the world that are most affected by criminal governance.

<https://resiliencefund.globalinitiative.net/>