A light blue background with a white outline map of Central America and Mexico. The map is partially obscured by two dark grey rectangular shapes at the top corners, resembling torn paper. Two white horizontal bars are positioned above and below the main text area.

Disappearances



along migratory routes

Disappearances in Northern Central America and Mexico

A person that goes missing is a situation of constant suffering. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross “missing persons are those whose whereabouts are unknown to their families and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, have been reported missing in connection with an (international or non-international) armed conflict, a situation of internal violence or disturbances or any other situation that may require the intervention of a neutral and independent intermediary”.¹ On the other hand, according to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ratified by Honduras and Mexico, and signed by Guatemala) “Enforced disappearance” shall be understood as the arrest, detention, kidnapping or any other form of deprivation of liberty conducted by State agents or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by the refusal to recognize said deprivation of liberty or the concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, removing them from the protection of the law”.²

In Northern Central America, disappearances have been a constant throughout history, the armed conflicts in the 70s and 80s, situations of violence that are related to criminal groups, domestic and gender violence can be mentioned; and a situation that has gained notoriety in the last decade, are the disappearances along the migratory route, particularly in the journey through Mexico and southern United States.

This Bulletin addresses the historical and legal context of disappearances; it presents statistical data that provide approximations to the phenomenon of disappearances, the links with social and criminal dynamics that can cause the disappearance of people; and an analysis of how the States have responded. Likewise, a specific section is presented on disappearances along the migration route and some of the psychosocial support mechanisms that humanitarian and civil society organizations have provided to families of disappeared migrants are exposed.

Key Takeaways

- 1** In Northern Central America and Mexico, the disappearance of people is a phenomenon present throughout the cycle of migration and displacement.
- 2** Disappearances are a repeated practice of criminal groups and State agents are sometimes involved.
- 3** There is a serious crisis of a missing childhood. In particular, girls between the ages of 13 and 17 are most vulnerable.
- 4** Although there has been progress in the classification and approach of disappearances, the deficiencies of the search and follow-up mechanisms produce a rate of under-registration and barriers to guarantee of immediate search.
- 5** There is a generalized idea that it is a crime to migrate irregularly, therefore, sometimes people do not report the disappearance of a migrant relative because they are afraid, they will cause problems with the authorities.
- 6** There are great challenges in the consolidation and quality of the available information, since each governmental and non-governmental institution manages its own databases, and these vary significantly from one another.
- 7** Civil society organizations and humanitarian organizations are the main actors that provide psychosocial and legal support to the families of disappeared migrants.



This is Snapshot 12 on the protection situation in Northern Central America and Mexico; an initiative of the REDLAC Regional Protection Group, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, and supported by UNHCR, AECID and ECHO. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with 29 humanitarian organizations and academic institutions working in Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and El Salvador, as well as a monitoring of official statistics, press, studies of academic institutions and civil society. The document has input from a variety of Protection Group organizations, although it does not necessarily reflect the position of each organization.

An update on the protection crisis

Key data January to October 2020



-  As of November 5, 2020, 1,134 homicides were registered, an average of four homicides per day. Considering the partial data for this year, 1,020 fewer homicides have been committed compared to the same period in 2019.³
-  As of November 25, 84 femicides were registered (of which 17 were couple femicides⁴), 2,514 complaints of acts of violence, 712 consultations for sexual assaults and 6,581 pregnancies of girls and adolescents.⁵
-  307 people were housed in shelters after Tropical Storm Iota.⁶
-  As of mid-November, 1,152 extortion complaints were filed, representing a reduction of 39% compared to the same period of the previous year.⁷
-  Between January and October, 9,251 Salvadorans were deported, representing a reduction of 72% compared to the same period of the previous year.⁸

-  2,836 homicides were registered; an average rate of 11 homicides per day, and 364 fewer homicides compared to the same period in 2019.⁹
-  From January to mid-October, 44 homicides committed against transporters were registered.¹⁰
-  It is estimated that Honduras will end the year with 38 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, below the 2019 rate of 44 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.¹¹
-  From January to October, 225 violent deaths of women were registered.¹²
-  3.8 million people have been affected by Eta and Iota; 61,000 households have been destroyed. 95,000 people live in shelters a month after the storms and roadblocks and communications have left an estimate of 330,000 people isolated.¹³
-  In some colonies in the Sula Valley that suffered floods, rescue personnel were forced to pay an extortion fee to provide their protection services to the affected population..¹⁴
-  Likewise, organizations of Hondurans residing in the United States requested the start of a new process to grant Temporary Protected Status for people affected by Eta and Iota.¹⁵
-  Between January and October, 31,958 Hondurans were deported, representing a reduction of 67% compared to the same period in 2019.¹⁶

An update on the protection crisis

Key data January to October 2020



From January to October, 2,123 homicides were reported. The rate as of October 2020 was 16 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and presented a decrease of 29% in relation to the rate of October 2019.¹⁷



From January to October, 1,216 Isabel-Claudina alerts for missing women were activated, a 32% decrease in cases during the same period in 2019.¹⁸



From January to September, 2,842 Alba-Keneth Alerts for missing children were activated, of which 689 are still active; Alerts for missing children decreased 57% compared to the same period in 2019.¹⁹



From January to October, 1,006 complaints of domestic violence were reported, 29% more cases than the same period of the previous year.²⁰



Eta and Iota left 2.4 million people affected and 1.8 million stricken.²¹



The crisis in the country has intensified this year, due to social and political situations that have created a general malaise in the population, triggering a series of protests. On November 17, the 2021 budget was approved as a national emergency in the Congress of the Republic, however, this has been seriously questioned due to its distribution since two millionaire loans were approved,²² funds were reduced to the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman and the National Crusade against Malnutrition,²³ among others. This situation provoked the rejection of most social sectors in the country and several demonstrations have taken place,²⁴ that is why, the Board of Directors of the Congress of the Republic suspended the approval of the budget.²⁵



From March 13 to October 14, 1,664 unaccompanied children and adolescents were deported from Mexico and the United States, during the months with the most restrictions due to the pandemic.²⁶



Between January and October, 37,913 Guatemalans were deported, a reduction of 58% compared to the same period in 2019.²⁷

An update on the protection crisis

Key data January to October 2020



Applicants for refugee status in Mexico by nationality (January-October 2020) ³²		Applications in 2019	Difference 2019-until October 2020
Honduras	11,736	30,187	- 18,451
El Salvador	3,103	9,039	- 5,936
Guatemala	2,385	3,800	- 1,415
Total	17,224	43,026	- 25,802

Apprehensions at the US border (October fiscal year 2021) ³³				
Country	Unaccompanied children	People traveling as a family	Single adult	Total
El Salvador	334	518	2,072	2,924
Guatemala	1,082	782	7,055	8,919
Honduras	773	1,102	5,219	7,094
Total	2,189	2,402	14,346	18,937

Migration Policy: Chronology of Relevant Events

2020	September 29	Approval of reforms in Mexico to the Migration Law, and to the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum, in order not to deprive children and adolescents of their freedom and guarantee their rights. ³⁴
	November 2	The Ministry of the Interior in Mexico published a manual from the National Institute of Migration (INM) in which it details the objectives and functions of its ³² offices to resolve immigration administrative procedures in the country. ³⁵
	November 11	Publication of reforms to multiple articles of the Migration Law and the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum, focused on the best interests of girls, boys and adolescents, their non-detention in immigration stations, and the promotion respect, protection, and promotion of their rights. ³⁶
	November 14	Election of Joe Biden as president-elect of the United States and announcement of possible reforms to the country's immigration policy implemented by current President Donald Trump. ³⁷

Covid-19 in Northern Central America

El Salvador	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of November 26, a cumulative incidence rate of 483 cases per 100,000 inhabitants has been registered and the death of 1,098 people has been confirmed. 6% of the cases correspond to active cases, 90% to recovered cases and the fatality rate is 3%. Currently no person remains in quarantine centers.³⁸ According to the Save the Children report "Children and adolescents facing COVID-19 in El Salvador", 8 out of 10 households living in poverty are facing problems accessing food; Also, 86% of the families surveyed for the report stated that the fear of infection has become a barrier to access medicines and food. And they highlight that 56% of the students indicated that the virtual modality is an obstacle to learning and the reporting of tasks, because in addition, the same document indicated that 46% of the students have limited access to the internet.³⁹
Honduras	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of November 21, 2,857 people died from Covid-19. The incidence rate increased to 1,122 confirmed cases per 100,000 inhabitants. The percentage of accumulated positivity is 41% and the mortality rate is 31 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.⁴⁰ More than 20,000 dengue cases have been reported in the country.⁴¹ Psychiatric experts estimate that 30% of Hondurans have suffered from psychiatric disorders because of the pandemic. According to Doctors Without Borders, there is a ratio of 0.5 psychologists for every 100,000 inhabitants. The budget dedicated to mental health is less than 2% of the general health budget. This situation means that 76% of the population with psychological needs do not have access to adapted services.⁴²
Guatemala	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of November 23, there were 119,349 cases of Covid-19 registered, 6,912 estimated active cases, the cumulative incidence was 708 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, the mortality rate of 24 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, with a fatality of 3%.⁴³ An average of 2,126 daily tests have been carried out with results of 650 new infections per day.⁴⁴ The Family Bond is a government strategy to support families living in poverty affected by the measures taken against Covid-19. A plan was in place to deliver three monthly payments of 1,000 GTQ (130 USD); however, the last payment was reduced by 75%, that is, families will only receive 250 GTQ (32 USD).⁴⁵

Disappearances in El Salvador

The phenomenon of disappearances in El Salvador cannot be measured without understanding its most recent history. Since the mid-1970s, forced disappearance was used by the State as a mechanism of repression against political opponents.⁴⁶ According to official data, during the Salvadoran civil war approximately 8,000 people disappeared; civil society organizations estimate that 10,000 people disappeared.⁴⁷

According to Salvadoran legislation, until 2019, the only type of disappearance that was legally defined was that committed by the security forces. In October 2019, the Legislative Assembly, through article 148-A, approved a partial reform of the Penal Code to include the disappearance of persons committed by individuals as a crime, with prison terms of between 15 and 25 years.⁴⁸ However, currently disappearances committed by civilians fall within the figure of the crime of deprivation of liberty (punishable by penalties of three to six years⁴⁹), since the Executive Power has not yet sanctioned and published in the Official Gazette this reform of article 148-A. The Office of the Attorney General of the Republic advocated to undertake reforms to the Penal Code to broaden the classification of disappearances, assuming greater legal security for citizens by including the different modalities of disappearances based on the actors who participate in it. It should be noted that, according to the investigation of criminal prosecutors and criminologists, this crime has been committed on a regular basis by gangs, going unpunished precisely because of the lack of legal classification.⁵⁰

Sizing disappearances

Until November 20, 2020, 1,225 missing persons were registered, an average of 3 missing persons every day. These figures represent a downward trend compared to 2019, when the rate of disappearances exceeded the threshold of what is considered an epidemic with more than 48 disappearances per 100,000 inhabitants.⁵¹

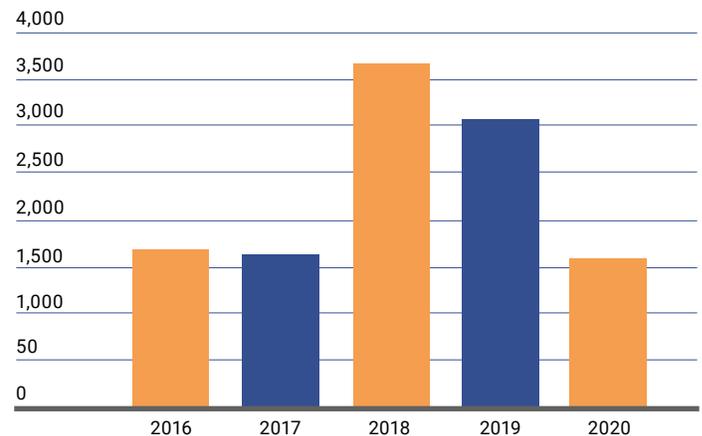
Regarding data for the first semester of 2020, in 72% of the cases in which the victim was found alive, no crime had been associated, since it involved voluntary absences, socioeconomic causes, family problems and other reasons. On the other hand, in the other 122 cases where the victim was found alive, there was, among other crimes, effectively deprivation of liberty, disappearance of the person, sexual crimes, robbery and injuries. Of the 26 people found dead, 22 were due to homicides and four to femicides.⁵²

The existence of fragmented and/or duplicated actions and services by various state and non-state actors and the lack of coordination mechanisms between local and state authorities induce a rate of under-registration of disappearances.⁵³

Disappearances by state agents are the type that is least reported, since family members distrust state institutions and fear putting their lives at greater risk. From 2016 to 2019, the Office of the Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights received 46 complaints of enforced disappearance committed by state agents.⁵⁴

Data of disappearances 2016-2020

Data from El Salvador.com



Profiles of the most vulnerable population

Adolescent women

Of the 3,030 reports of missing persons registered in 2019, 33% were women and 67% men. Even though men have a greater weight in disappearances, it is highlighted that the percentage of disappeared women increased by 17% from 2018 to 2019, going from 560 to 676.⁵⁵ But, adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 represent more than 60% of the women who have disappeared in the country from January 2012 to June 2020. Therefore, adolescent women are in a position of greater vulnerability in the face of disappearances or deprivation of liberty.⁵⁶

Women Human Rights Defenders

The country does not have a single registry of human rights violations and crimes committed against human rights defenders. However, it has been observed that women who accompany and defend other women suffer discrimination, attacks, assaults, and other acts of violence. Therefore, it is a population that is more vulnerable to disappearances. Its main aggressors belong to organized criminal structures.⁵⁷



Photo: Union/ECHO/A. Aragon 2016

LGTBQ and intersex people

Even though El Salvador has a record of the crimes committed against these people, according to a Human Rights Watch report, prosecutors sometimes refrain from asking about the sexual orientation or gender identity of the complainants, translating into an under-registration rate. Furthermore, there is no civil law that prohibits discrimination against these people by public and private actors. On the other hand, it is required to enact a law that makes it easier for transgender people to change their name and gender identity in official documents through a simple administrative process. This often results in humiliating and discriminatory situations due to the discrepancy between gender identity and official documentation.⁵⁸

LGTBQI people also suffer social stigmatization, mainly from families and church groups. In the last five years, the Attorney General's Office has registered 692 cases of violence against LGTBQI and intersex people, even carried out by security officials. For their part, trans women are subjected to gang violence due to the animosity they feel and the real or perceived social and economic vulnerability of LGTBQI people. Due to this situation of threats and constant violence, many trans people, and sometimes gays, lesbians, and intersex people, flee the country. COMCAVIS served 84 people in 2019 who were internally displaced due to their sexual

orientation or gender identity. Although there are no specific data on the disappearances of LGTBQI people, the existing impunity and the prevailing hatred place them in a position of greater vulnerability to suffer these phenomena.^{59/60}

Minors

Age seems to be a relevant factor of exposure to this crime. By 2019, 31% of disappearances occurred in minors between 0 and 17 years old (53% corresponded to girls and 47% to boys), highlighting 128 cases of children under 11 years old.⁶¹ Among underage girls reported missing, 65% were between 13 and 17 years old and 35% were between 0 and 12 years old. On the other hand, among the minor children reported as missing, 58% were between 0 and 12 years old and 42% between 13 and 17 years old.⁶² In 2018, 696 complaints about missing minors were filed.

Table prepared by the authors based on information from the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman.

Data: [Afectación del desplazamiento interno forzado en la niñez y adolescencia salvadoreña](#), January 2020.⁶⁸

Facts	% Complaints	% Guidance
Threats	35	52
Hominy of a family member	16	7
Extortion	9	7
Injury or retaliation	6	0
Fear of violence	5	11
Attempted murder of a family member	5	4
Attempted homicide of your person	4	2
Harassment	3	4
Deprivation of property	2	2
Disappearance of a family member	2	5
Witness of the accused	2	0
Forced recruitment by gangs	1	2
Victims of rape	1	0
Kidnapping	1	0
Witness to a criminal act	1	0
Victim of sexual assault	1	0
Victim of domestic violence	1	0
Torture or cruel acts	1	0

Departments with the highest incidence of missing persons

Regarding the location of disappearances, these are usually concentrated in specific territories of the country; 56% of the disappearances that occurred in 2019 took place in the departments of San Salvador, La Libertad and San Miguel.⁶³ According to data from the first semester of 2020, San Salvador, La Libertad and Sonsonate have been the departments that have registered the most disappearances.⁶⁴ In parallel, seven of the municipalities that reported the most homicides in 2019 and January 2020 are located in these three aforementioned departments.⁶⁵

Disappearances and their link to displacement

According to the attention of cases of the Civil Society against Forced Displacement due to Violence Panel (MCDF), disappearance is one of the main crimes that cause forced displacement. Gangs practice disappearance as a mechanism of pressure, control, and intimidation. The MCDF points out that the disappearance of a relative is a factor that drives displacement: 17% of the total number of cases attended between 2017 and September 2019 reported the disappearance of a relative as a cause of displacement.⁶⁶ The

relative weight of disappearances as a displacement factor indicates that the disappearance of a relative poses an implicit threat to their environment and may ultimately trigger displacement.

In line with the publication of the *Impact of forced internal displacement in Salvadoran children and adolescents* Report, in January 2020, by the Office of the Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights (PDDH), a series of consultations were held with adolescents and young people where they pointed out the various crimes that may affect them individually or the family group, including forced disappearance by gangs.⁶⁷

How are disappearances related to other crimes?

Trafficking in persons

In the 80s there was a significant number of missing minors associated with human trafficking under the pretense of adoption. Currently there are testimonies indicating that in El Salvador there were small groups of lawyers who conducted express adoptions that lasted between 1 and 3 days that, in reality, concealed illegal trafficking of minors directed, above all, to the United States, France, and Italy.⁶⁹ At present, it is estimated that in 60% of the identified cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the country, the victims are children and adolescents.⁷⁰

Activities of gangs, and organized crime

According to the testimony of a humanitarian organization, criminal groups constitute one of the main actors associated with the disappearance. Recognized national forensics have indicated that if a person is missing for more than eight days, it is highly likely that they have been murdered and buried in a clandestine cemetery.⁷¹ Since 2014, more than 150 cemeteries of this type have been found, with about 220 victims of homicidal violence. Recently, the Prosecutor's Office of El Salvador ordered the arrest of 116 members of the Mara Salvatrucha for the forced disappearance of 25 people between 2016 and 2019.⁷²

State responses to disappearances

The country has designed different search agencies according to the different types of disappearance: disappearances during the armed conflict, missing migrants, and disappearances due to current violence.⁷³

Disappeared from armed conflict

The National Commission for the Search of Disappeared Persons in the Context of Armed Conflict (CONABÚSQUEDA) was created in 2017 based on a recommendation from the IACHR, through an Executive Decree. Its main function is to “investigate and determine the whereabouts and situation of the girls and boys who disappeared during the internal armed conflict”, in addition to “promote the reunion with their family of origin in a context of respect for the dignity of the victims”. It is responsible for investigating ex officio or upon request of any person and receiving information about the disappearances of girls and boys that occurred during the war and promoting the victims’ right to the truth, the restitution of family relations between the disappeared person and their biological family.⁷⁴ One aspect to consider is the content of Article 3 of the Executive Decree, which defines the concept of enforced disappearance only in cases where the deprivation of liberty is attributable to State agents, that is, cases where the alleged perpetrator of the disappearance was the Salvadoran guerrilla are not included. One of the main consequences derived from this legislation is a legal vacuum towards the victims of the armed conflict on the part of that actor in the conflict or someone other than the State. Therefore, the right to truth, justice and reparation for these people is being violated.⁷⁵

For people disappeared by violence in El Salvador

In 2018, the Protocol for Urgent Action and Search Strategy for Missing Persons was launched, prepared by an inter-institutional group made up of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Attorney General’s Office, the National Civil Police, the Institute of Legal Medicine, the Peace Judges, and the Office of the Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights. This marked an advance in matters of investigation, by distinguishing between persons reported as missing, persons found who have been victims of crime, and persons found who have not been victims of crime. The classification mechanism has facilitated a tighter follow-up and a better registration of cases. In addition, one of its advantages has been the elimination of the period required by the institutions to report a disappearance.⁷⁶ However, this document is administrative in nature and although it explains the role of each actor involved, the mechanism required for its activation, the duration of the alert and the actions to be followed in search and collection of forensic information during the first thirty days in which a person disappears does not imply that it is mandatory. It represents an instrument focused on criminal investigation and not so much on humanitarian considerations.⁷⁷

The two main institutions responsible for tackling the phenomenon of disappearances are the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic (FGR for its acronym in Spanish) and the National Civil Police (PNC for its acronym in Spanish). One of the main recent advances has been to recognize the magnitude and seriousness of this problem. In this regard, the FGR created in July 2019 the Specialized Unit for the Search of Missing Persons, and the PNC opened a web portal to report on this crime.

Specialized Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons

Infographic (Own preparation) based on information from Contrapunto Digital⁷⁸



1 Establishes the criteria for the investigation of missing persons.



2 Creates international search alerts for untraceable persons.



3 Investigates cases based on the histories, composition, means and objectives of the actors linked to the disappearances.

Portal of Missing Persons

Infographic (Own preparation) based on information from ElSalvador.com⁷⁹

WWW

<https://desaparecidos.pnc.gob.sv>



1 Directly activates a protocol for attention and action in cases of missing persons.



2 The person should enter his or her name, sex, features that characterize the missing person and date of last time and place where he or she was seen.



3 Allows you to view the active cases of people who have already been reported missing to the authorities.

On the other hand, the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Colombia shared its experience with its Unique System to Register Missing Persons to carry out information cross-checks between the registry of the missing persons and the registry of medical-legal autopsies. In January 2020, the Salvadoran registry began a process of adjustment and adaptation of this system implemented by Colombia and it is expected that in the coming months it can be implemented. The objective is to improve the interoperability of the different systems by assigning a single record to each case to avoid duplication and, consequently, for family members not to have to appear at different institutions or go through corpse albums, producing a re-victimization.⁸⁰

From the point of view of care and psychosocial support, in 2019, the Ministry of Health published “The Technical Guidelines for Comprehensive Health Care of People Affected by Violence.” This document establishes the guidelines that mental health personnel must include to face the different traumas suffered by victims of violence. However, despite the incidence of disappearances in the country, these guidelines do not include the families of the missing persons. There is no plan or protocol to care for these people in a specialized way. However, the Ministry of Health is preparing an Action Manual together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to address this profile.⁸¹

It should be noted as a positive process the presentation of the draft of the “Law for the Comprehensive Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders and for the Guarantee of the Right to Defend Rights”, whose purpose was “the protection of human rights defenders and, affirm the State’s commitment to effectively implement international and regional instruments in defense and security of human rights defenders.” In August 2020, the Roundtable for the Right to Defend Rights formed a Technical Roundtable to agree on the document by different human rights organizations and forward it to the officials of the PDDH and the Legislative Commission of Justice and Human Rights so that is approved in the Legislative Plenary Session.⁸²

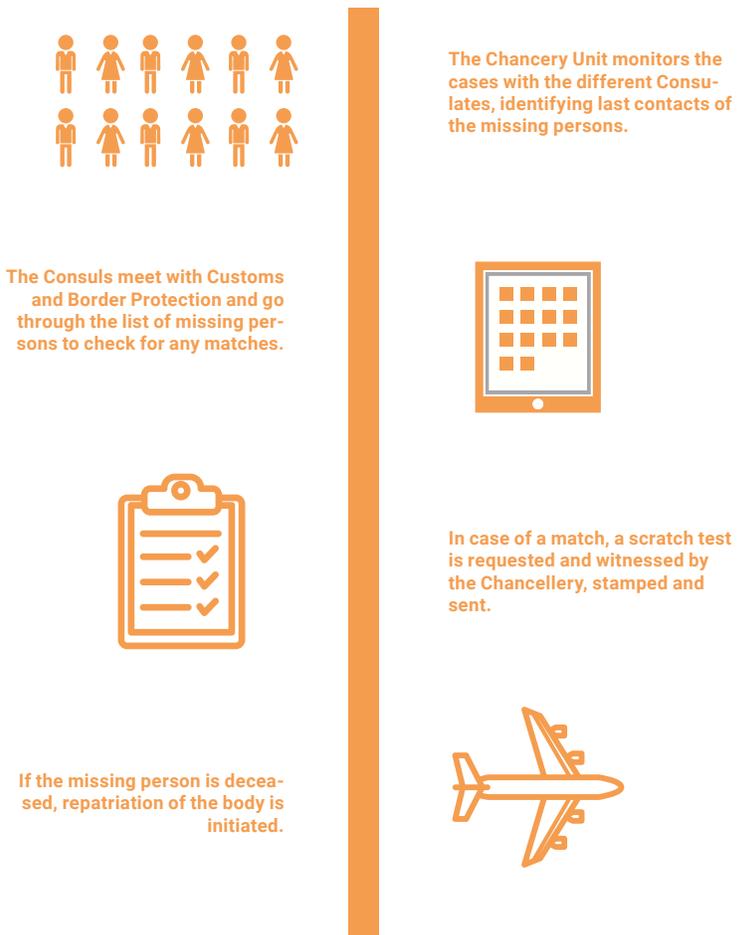
For persons missing on migration routes

As indicated by humanitarian organizations based in El Salvador, it is the responsibility of the Salvadoran State to support, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the search for migrants who disappeared during the migratory route on the border with the United States. However, currently the families of missing migrants depend heavily on the efforts of the Red Cross, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, and other NGOs.

At the regional level, there is no standardized registry with the characteristics or variables of forensic anthropology so that the conditions or characteristics can be searched to know if someone may have information on these people, which would facilitate the search. According to the testimony of a humanitarian organization, a requirement for professionalization is needed based on advances in forensic technology. Currently, each Consulate manages different lists of missing persons. In the Salvadoran case, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs Unit communicates with the Consulates, to monitor the cases, trying to establish last contacts of the missing

Search for missing persons on the migratory route

Infographic based on information from Contrapunto Digital.



persons, and, in a weekly meeting of the Consuls with the Customs and Border Protection Service they go through the list of missing persons to see if there is a match.

The success rate of this program is exceptionally low, especially since most of the processes where the victims were murdered must be recognized by DNA, which is expensive and not all countries have the technology and qualified personnel for these processes. On the other hand, the affected families express many doubts and fear of sharing DNA samples, especially because it is information that the Government will process, which is leading to an under-registration of missing persons.⁸³

“We have identified gaps around the disappearance of migrants on the migration route, especially in the identification of corpses: the information is not centralized. It is a great challenge to work in the forensic area. A great challenge would be to have a unified database to improve the traceability of the search for missing migrants during a migration route. It is necessary to create a platform where the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the NCA countries and Mexico can share reported cases. This would facilitate inter-institutional coordination.”

Humanitarian organization in El Salvador

In 2010 the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Committee of Relatives of Deceased and Missing Migrants of El Salvador and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team signed an agreement whose objective is to “Create a mechanism to improve the exchange of information for the purpose of identifying non-located migrants and unidentified remains that could correspond to migrants who are in forensic services, municipal cemeteries, among other places, in Mexico and/or in The United States of America.” To access the Forensic Bank for Unlocated Migrants, family members must file a direct complaint with any of the institutions that make up this Bank or by notice sent by the Consulates. Although it is a good practice, its legal framework is weak as it is established through an agreement between different parties that can jeopardize its validity or continuity in the event of a change in institutional or presidential ownership.⁸⁴

In September 2020, and because of a consultation process with relatives of missing migrants in San Miguel, Santa Ana, and San Salvador and with representatives of institutions and civil society, the PDDH and the ICRC, upon request of COFAMIDE, presented a technical proposal for a law in favor of missing migrants and their families. This proposal includes the guarantee and recognition of the following rights: “The right to be searched, to have a thorough investigation of the circumstances of the disappearance carried out, to have the interests of the families protected and that, if the person is found deceased, their remains are safeguarded and handed over to their next of kin, respecting their Customs and culture.” The relatives of the missing migrants assured that this law recognizes the right to the truth, to know what happened and to receive dignified treatment. This technical bill develops articles 27, 29 and 30-A of the Special Law for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and Their Families.⁸⁵

Some of the **main challenges in tackling migrant disappearances** indicated by a humanitarian organization interviewed, are the need to make explicit the rights of the disappeared migrants and their families, and to make effective the laws that establish the creation of programs and funds to offer answers to their search and their humanitarian needs to implement a systematic program of psychosocial care aimed at the families of missing migrants. On the other hand, there is a lack of knowledge from public and private institutions about the care route and the organizations to which cases can be referred.

On the other hand, article 105 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPP for its acronym in Spanish) established that only family members in crimes whose result is the death of the offended person will be considered victims, disregarding the status of disappeared and, therefore, leaving the relatives of missing persons, excluding them from access to the rights conferred by article 106 of the CPP. That is why civil society organizations consider that it is essential to operationalize the **policy for the protection of the migrant person** which already contemplates providing greater resources to the special fund for the repatriation of victims and deceased and “implement communication, information and guidance mechanisms for the relatives of the migrant who died not located and deprived of liberty in transit, on the process to follow in these cases and the instances to which they should go.”⁸⁶

Humanitarian responses to disappearances

Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations are the main entities that provide support to the search for missing persons and psychosocial support to the families of missing migrants.

The **Committee of Relatives of Missing Migrants** (COFAMIDE for its acronym in Spanish) was founded in 2006 by a group of relatives who had suffered the disappearance of a loved one on the migration route to the United States. Its objective is to defend the human rights of migrants in transit and works to guarantee that affected families are treated with dignity and facilitate their access to justice, truth and compensation for the damages suffered. Its main activities are research on migrants who died or disappeared on route to the United States, provide psychosocial support to affected families, defend the human rights of migrants in transit in national and international representations, advocate at the international level to create more efficient search mechanisms and facilitate accompaniment to families throughout the investigation, notification, repatriation and burial process.⁸⁷ During its work, it has materialized a series of good practices and experiences: in 2013 it signed an agreement with the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement in Mexico to improve the location of migrants. Thanks to this agreement, 18 Salvadoran migrants were located who until then had not been able to communicate with their families. That same year, they signed an agreement with other organizations in Central America, the Mexican Attorney for Human Rights and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team to travel to Mexico and exhume bodies from the Tamaulipas massacres of 2010, 2011 and 2012.⁸⁸ On the other hand, the **International Committee of the Red Cross** (ICRC) has provided psychosocial support to the families of missing migrants through the Program for Restoring Family Contact and the Disappearance Program, understanding the unique dimension of each situation and incorporating a broader perspective of ‘ambiguous loss’, leaving behind the theories focused on trauma and pain that they previously used, and facilitating the coping with psychological and social problems by family members.⁸⁹

Disappearances in Honduras

Disappearances in the country have happened at three particularly critical moments.

1980-1990s

RIt represents the most intense historical period in terms of enforced disappearances and took place in the context of the implementation of the National Security Doctrine.⁹⁰ In this doctrine, the perpetrators of disappearances were mainly the death squads created within the State security forces and the police. Through illegal detentions, kidnappings, executions, and concealment of corpses, they sought to obtain information, and promote a state of anguish, insecurity, and fear. The Committee of Detained and Disappeared Relatives in Honduras (COFADEH for its acronym in Spanish) registered 184 cases of enforced disappearance from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. These cases continue in impunity and despite the judicial investigations undertaken, all the alleged culprits have been dismissed.⁹¹ In this sense, although these disappearances took place 40 years ago, in its 2017 report, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Honduras expressed its concern when noting that no progress had been made in the promotion of the right to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition for the victims of the serious human rights violations that occurred during the 1980s. OHCHR reminded the Honduran State that enforced disappearances do not prescribe and that its obligation is to investigate and prosecute those responsible. Finally, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights delivered three rulings condemning the State of Honduras for the practice of enforced disappearance.⁹²

2009

After the coup d'état on June 28, 2009 to President Manuel Zelaya, who was captured and sent to Costa Rica, the National Congress appointed Roberto Micheletti as the new President of the Republic. In this process, the territory was militarized, and military and police checkpoints were organized to prevent the concentration of protesters. State agents used excessive force and protests were criminalized. During these events, COFADEH registered 13 detained persons forcibly disappeared. The disappeared detainees were human rights defenders, especially leaders or coordinators of the National Front of Popular Resistance or simply people accused of collaborating with this group. At present, the material and intellectual perpetrators of these 13 enforced disappearances have not yet been brought to justice. In addition, harassment, and threats against the relatives of the victims of enforced disappearance have been documented.⁹³

After the 2017 general elections

Disappearances are happening at a second important moment in recent years. On November 26, 2017, after the results of the presidential election, where fraud was reported by the opposition party, thousands of people took to the streets to protest, in different parts of the country. Since the protests turned violent because of police repression, the government had to impose the curfew measure. During the period of restricted mobility, it has been estimated that approximately 705 people were arrested, and eight people were executed at the hands of State security forces. In addition, in its 2018 report, COFADEH registered 50 cases of missing persons in contexts with high rates of violence and insecurity, mainly in the departments of Cortés and Atlántida. This type of disappearance is the most complex to document and measure, since the next of kin of these victims do not have habeas corpus resources and end up not filing any complaint with the justice mechanisms because they are afraid the authorities could be implicated.⁹⁴

Currently, the disappearance of people is due to multiple causes: generalized violence, natural disasters, dangers on the migration route and events from the past that remain unsolved.⁹⁵

Different organizations have stressed that the regulatory framework articulated for the protection of people against enforced disappearances is weak and insufficient. Despite the fact that disappearances have been a recurring phenomenon during the last forty years, until 2012, Honduran legislation did not introduce the classification of enforced disappearance in the criminal system, and while the country is a State party to the Inter-American Convention on the Enforced Disappearance of Persons and of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons against Enforced Disappearance, the crime of enforced disappearance is not classified as defined by these mechanisms. On the other hand, the 2012 reform is not retroactive, preventing enforced disappearances from being applied to previous periods (the 1980s and the 2009 Coup d'état).⁹⁶



Photo: Union/ECHO/A. Aragon 2016

Sizing disappearances

In the first semester of 2020, 345 disappearances have been reported, of which 77% correspond to minors between 0 and 17 years old, 50% being female. Cases involving missing minors are reported more frequently in the cities of San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, Tocoa, La Ceiba, El Paraíso, Comayagüela, Juticalpa, El Progreso and Trujillo.⁹⁷

According to the ICRC, although the disappearance of a loved one has similarities to a traumatic event, the difference is that the situation experienced by people affected by a disappearance does not have a fixed duration and they experience constant pain and anguish. In this sense, the disappearance of a family member generates different physical and psychological effects among family members.

Although disappearance is a historical and recurring phenomenon in the country, certain profiles and sectors of the population are in a situation of greater vulnerability to suffer this crime:

Women

Human trafficking, kidnapping and commercial sexual exploitation are patterns associated with the disappearance of women. According to data collected by the Women for Life Forum, between 2016 and 2018, 1,707 women were reported victims of abduction, kidnapping, human trafficking, and crimes in the context of human trafficking, torture, and unjust deprivation of liberty, most of them being minors.⁹⁸ Despite the fact that women are one of the main victims in the country, there is no differentiated state response to face this phenomenon. Although the Public Ministry collects data

from complaints, it does not provide information on the follow-up of the cases, preventing knowing how many women are still missing, how many were found alive and how many were murdered.⁹⁹

Minors

According to data from the International Criminal Police Organization, between 2016 and 2019 more than 1,000 minors have disappeared. Recruitment by gangs or organized crime, recruitment to collect extortion and kidnapping are some of the main patterns that explain the disappearance of minors.¹⁰⁰

Environmentalists

Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries for environmentalists. From 2009 to 2020, 684 cases of violence against environmentalists have been reported, including 138 homicides. Despite the implementation of the National Protection System for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators, and Justice Operators since 2015, several Honduran activists have indicated that they do not have timely and effective protection measures.¹⁰¹

Indigenous people

Defenders of Garífuna territories are at particular risk, and their situation has worsened after 2015, when the State lost two lawsuits before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for violating the ancestral and collective right of the territory inhabited by these

communities.¹⁰² Strategic attacks have been targeting community leaders who oppose extractivism and who defend their ancestral territories.¹⁰³ In July 2020, 4 Garífunas from the Triunfo de la Cruz community, in the municipality of Tela, Atlántida, were kidnapped. The following days there were peaceful protests by the El Triunfo communities under the slogan “Garífuna lives matter,” demanding the State to carry out an investigation of these kidnappings to clarify the facts. The Garífuna communities are affected by organized crime, since they are in a strategic corridor for drug trafficking for illegal use, controlled by the Cachiros Cartel (seven municipalities located on the Atlantic coast appear in the list of the 25 places with the highest homicide rate in Honduras in 2019).¹⁰⁴

Disappearances and their link to displacement

According to the Study of Characterization of Internal Displacement due to Violence in Honduras 2004-2018, the main causes of displacement in Honduran territory are: persecution and insecurity in the community (68%), threats (20%), murders (17%), personal injuries (12%), extortion (10%) and situations of sexual violence, home invasion, kidnapping and forced recruitment (13%). Therefore, disappearances are not among the main factors that people report when they initiate internal displacement, but they do exert an important influence in the context of generalized violence that favors both internal and cross-border displacement. The disappearance of a family member and the imminent threat it poses to their environment can be a trigger for displacement.

“After 20 years, the reasons why disappeared migrants have emigrated remain basically the same, being added to the violence and insecurity that has significantly increased in the last 10 years. For old problems, new and effective responses are necessary, that is why the Committees of Relatives of Missing Migrants do not give up seeking their loved ones, but also fighting for structural changes that guarantee human rights and a dignified life to the entire population so that they do not feel compelled to emigrate. Less forced emigration = less enforced disappearance.”

Introduction of UNCOMIDEH to the Study of Honduran Migrants Missing along the Migration Route and Their Families

In relation to the disappearances that occur during a migratory route, it is worth highlighting the “Study of the Honduran Migrants Missing along the Migration Route and Their Families” presented in 2019 by the Family Union of Committees of Missing Migrants of Honduras (UNCOMIDEH). It points out that 741 Honduran migrants have been registered missing on the migration route: 82% were men and 18% were women.¹⁰⁵

The Coalition Against Impunity has stressed the need for the disappearances of migrants to be classified as enforced disappearances. This change would mean making explicit that there are disappearances perpetrated with the direct, indirect

support or acquiescence of state agents, implying greater legal consequences.¹⁰⁶

State responses to disappearances

The State has made some progress, such as, for example, the entry into force of the AMBER Early Warning Law for the location and protection of children and adolescents. It represents a mechanism that helps because it tracks the disappearance of a minor in the first 24 hours, issuing the alert as soon as possible through various media. This instrument is the result of the work of 12 institutions: DINAf, Secretariat of Security, National Telecommunications Commission, Prosecutor’s Office for children of the Public Ministry, the National Institute of Migration, the Association of Municipalities of Honduras, the Scalabrinian Sisters Organization, the National Forum for Migration in Honduras and the Association of Media.¹⁰⁷ Through the implementation of this law, the Search Unit of the Police Investigation Directorate was created, a step forward to initiate the formulation of a national search mechanism for missing persons as a result of violence.¹⁰⁸

The institutional mechanisms designed to prevent, identify, and investigate disappearances lack several crucial aspects for their effectiveness. On the one hand, in terms of investigation, since the Public Ministry has not developed methods to clarify the crime patterns, the perpetrators and the location of the victim. On the other hand, in relation to exhumations, a protocol is missing that can guarantee the preservation of the skeletal remains and a process of identification of those that are recovered from clandestine cemeteries. In addition, the procedures are not coordinated with the affected families nor are they informed of the procedures that are being carried out. The Public Ministry has not adopted a procedure to investigate, preserve the evidence and recover the victim alive, or their remains, identify them and preserve them as the main evidence in criminal trials. So far, the search for missing persons has started through a judicial complaint. It is necessary to implement a proactive search policy for missing persons where the Public Ministry initiates the search *ex officio*.¹⁰⁹

Regarding the protection of witnesses and relatives of missing persons, the country does not have an adequate mechanism to protect them. Despite the existence of a Witness Protection Law, it was not drawn up incorporating witnesses or victims of enforced disappearance. This legal gap in terms of real and effective protection of witnesses and relatives makes it difficult to access rigorous data on who are subjects of protection, what support is provided in each particular case and the effectiveness of institutional support. Among other issues, there have been practices of stigmatization and criminalization of victims and lack of implementation of precautionary measures.¹¹⁰

“The families of missing migrants have endorsed the speech that “it is not only my case, but also the case of all the missing migrants in Mexico and the United States. That speech creates advocacy.”

Humanitarian organization based in Honduras.

Since 2015, an inter-institutional coordination process called **Search Desk for Missing Migrants** to work together in the development of a single registration form and unification of a database to facilitate coordination in the search for missing migrants on the migration route, as well as to provide assistance to family members.¹¹¹ This space is made up of government institutions, civil society organizations from Honduras and Mexico, and the Mexican Embassy. Some of its main achievements have been the creation of a unique format so that the Committees can use it in an agile way with government institutions for the notification and repatriation of remains or bodies of migrants and the strengthening of advocacy before the Mexican embassy, facilitating the management of the most complex cases. This Roundtable also has the support of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF for its acronym in Spanish), who have strengthened forensic medicine assistance to relatives of migrants in Honduras and Mexico and have generated the Forensic Data Bank that has allowed many families to Through DNA taking, they could identify the bodies or remains of their missing relative.¹¹²

It should be noted that in 2015 the Investigation Unit of Crimes for Migrants and the Mechanism of Mexican Foreign Support for Search and Investigation were created, allowing, for the first time, that the relatives of a missing migrant person can file a complaint in Honduran territory to start the search and investigation in Mexico. This mechanism was modified through the General Law on Enforced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearance Committed by Individuals, and the 2018 National System for the Search of Persons. This change brought with it a positive repercussion, since, previously, it was attached to the Sub-Attorney for Human Rights of the PGR and as of 2018 to the Special Prosecutor's Office for Disappearance, avoiding possible conflicts of jurisdiction when investigating crimes committed against migrants that are different to disappearance, such as massacres. As of this change, the Consuls of Mexico are authorized to receive complaints at any time and can provide information to the complainants, without the need to require the presence of any other actor. Although it does not work with the standards of effectiveness and diligence that it should, it represents a hopeful procedure to guarantee access to truth, justice and reparation for migrants and their families.¹¹³

On November 6, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) will be applied in Honduras. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) advocates that it is necessary to strengthen the Forensic Database of Missing Migrants. One of the main challenges is to strengthen coordination and generate greater consistency regarding the registration of the bodies of missing migrants, since erroneous identifications have been reported by family members.¹¹⁴

“The family reaches the Ministry of Foreign Affairs if it does not know about the existence of the Committees. There they document the case, which consists of filing it. The communication only passes to the corresponding Consul, but the State does not have any search mechanism in the field. It will not make a link with the authorities of that place to search for where the family said the last contact was made. They do not do it. Those who do this work most are

the families because they work in a network, they have networks with collectives and civil society organizations in Mexico and the United States. The search mechanism that the Committees have works more than the search mechanism that the entire State has.”

Humanitarian organization based in Honduras

Humanitarian responses to disappearances

Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations are the main entities responsible for providing both logistical support and psychosocial support to the families of disappeared migrants. According to a humanitarian organization based in Honduras, the country has made great strides in forming family alliances, unlike in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico.

In this sense, the work carried out by the **Committees of Relatives of Missing Migrants** is highlighted. Five decentralized Committees are distinguished throughout the territory: Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committee in El Progreso (COFAMIPRO), La Guadalupe Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committee (COFAMIGUA), Amor y Fe Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committee (COFAMIDEAF), Central Honduras Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committee (COFAMICENH) and the Pespire Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committee. Their main functions consist of providing psychosocial support, promoting advocacy with the different authorities to guarantee compliance with human rights and strengthening access to truth and justice for disappeared migrants. Other lines of action consist of facilitating the search and documentation of disappeared migrants, providing legal assistance for access to truth and justice, and advocating for the implementation of projects, programs, and laws to guarantee the protection of the human rights of migrants, and their families.¹¹⁵

In relation to the search for missing migrants, OHCHR in Honduras has advocated for the implementation of an Attention to Disappeared Migrants Protocol, it has joined the Missing Persons Search Roundtable to provide technical assistance in the search for missing migrants and has also developed technical assistance with the Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committees.¹¹⁶

On the other hand, in 2016, and thanks to the technical support of the Human Mobility Pastoral and the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law, **UNCOMIDEH** is created, formed by the different committees of relatives of missing migrants present throughout the country. UNCOMIDEH supports the registration of cases, the organization of files, their follow-up and advocacy work with national and international government authorities. UNCOMIDEH is preparing a National Search Protocol that does not currently exist.¹¹⁷

Some of the pending challenges are to ensure psychosocial support for all active members, reestablish contact in inactive cases, expand the budget for home visits, and provide support for the sons and daughters of deceased or missing migrants on the migration route.¹¹⁸

Another successful experience has been the creation of the **National Network for Psychosocial Support and Mental Health-RENAPS** in coordination with the ICRC, thanks to which psychosocial agents have been trained to assist and accompany returned migrants with disabilities, relatives of migrants who disappeared on the migration route, and people with protection needs. In addition, psychosocial assistance protocols have been developed and civil society organizations and other institutions interested in supporting migrants and relatives of migrants have been identified.¹¹⁹

The **Human Mobility Pastoral (PMH for its acronym in Spanish)** strengthens and empowers the Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committees in psychosocial support workshops, in the search for missing persons, and provide support. They also provide prior preparation and psychosocial support to the Caravan of Central American Mothers, which are held annually. Finally, they assist individual cases of mental health referred by the different Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committees.¹²⁰

As a consequence of Covid-19, the PMH has had to adapt its mental health care and psychosocial support to this group through virtual workshops. However, most of the families they serve live in rural areas where they do not have access to a telephone and, at times, do not have electricity and therefore the follow-up of these cases has stopped. The demand for psychosocial support by families of missing migrants has skyrocketed 500% because of Covid-19. For this reason, and with the technical support of the ICRC, they have created virtual spaces for self-care and, in recent times, also face-to-face spaces to reduce the high levels of fatigue among staff.¹²¹

For its part, the **ICRC** provides technical assistance to these Committees since 2015, through psychosocial support and mental health programs, as well as developing peer support tools that allow facing the psychological consequences of the disappearance, managing mechanisms to address the search process, and preventing emotional distress through the development of crisis intervention skills, active listening, responsible help, stress management and ambiguous loss. This program is complemented by the Missing Motor Group, made up of volunteer psychologists and family members from the different committees established in the country who guarantee the constant implementation of group, family, and individual accompaniment activities. Finally, through the Program to Reestablish Contact between Relatives, support is provided to carry out family reunifications and through the Disappearance Program, repatriate the remains of missing persons found lifeless so that they can be returned to their relatives and can be given a dignified burial.¹²²

Restrictions on mobility have hindered the assistance of food and the provision of medicines to the families they serve. Covid-19 has delayed the search for missing migrants and the demand for truth and justice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has paralyzed the notifications and repatriations of the remains of missing migrants. This situation postpones the suffering of the families, generating an impact on the mental and physical health of these people: "every day that passes with that ambiguous loss, is a deterioration and psychological torture for the families". UNCOMIDEH has demanded that the search processes continue. According to the families, Covid-19 is one more variable in this process that revictimizes them. The fear that has been installed to become infected, die and be unemployed causes these processes to freeze at an individual level.¹²³

Disappearances in Guatemala

“Disappeared is not being alive or dead, for the victims the past is still in the present, the crime continues for that reason we do not stop searching.”¹²⁴

Forum: 90 minutes for the missing children in Guatemala

Guatemalan history goes through permanent situations of violence against the population. The sum of historical factors, the social and political situation of the 1950s and early 1960s led to 36 years of internal war that ended in 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords. 93% of the human rights violations that occurred during the internal armed conflict are attributed to the State, mainly from 1978 to 1984.¹²⁵ One of the forms of repression and control was enforced disappearance as a systematic practice, which, according to the Guatemala Memory of Silence report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) *“Its purposes were to dismantle the movements or organizations that the State identified as prone to insurgency, and to spread terror among the population”*.¹²⁶

Despite the number of disappearances during the Internal Armed Conflict (CAI for its acronym in Spanish), estimated by the Commission for Historical Clarification at 40,000 cases, in Guatemala there is a legislative gap.¹²⁷

Guatemalan law Article 42 of the civil code, contemplates the figure of The Absence “... The person who has disappeared from his/her home and whose whereabouts is unknown is also considered absent, for legal purposes”¹²⁸ his in order to establish the legal situation of the absent person and create mechanisms so that those present do not suffer any impairment of their rights (use of real estate, for example).¹²⁹ On the other hand, the Penal Code Article 201¹³⁰ establishes the figure of enforced disappearance and penal sanction for this crime; it refers to enforced disappearance as that committed by agents of the State or with the knowledge of the State, in the third part it expands that it not only refers to a political crime and includes those committed by organized crime or others.¹³¹

In the Migration Code (Decree 44-2016) Chapter V is designated for the procedures of attention to families of persons reported as missing due to migration.¹³² However, the possibility of filing a complaint is not established, only of reporting the disappearance; A complaint implies that a search process and guidelines for the investigation are initiated, however, in Guatemala the institutions empowered to receive complaints are the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation, the National Civil Police and the Public Ministry, and the latter does not appear in the Code of Migration. This situation limits the possibilities of initiating a search process for the disappeared migrants.¹³³ In addition, there is still no specific regulation of the Migration Code for the search for disappeared migrants.¹³⁴

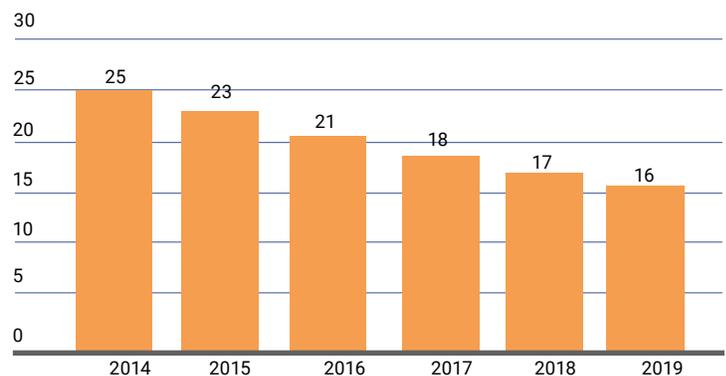
Sizing disappearance

After the Internal Armed Conflict in Guatemala, disappearances have not been widely documented, there is some data from different government institutions that may vary from one to another. It is important to consider these situations since the information is partial, however, it can provide approximations to the phenomenon.

In the last 17 years, 41,086 missing persons have been reported to the National Civil Police. According to the age range, adolescents between the ages of 12 to 17 years are the ones who represent the largest number of reports (49%), followed by the ages of 18 to 28 years old (16%), boys and girls of 0 to 11 years old (10%), 26 to 35 years old (10%) of 36 years and older (13%) and in a small percentage age is ignored (2%). 55% of the reports were of missing women and 45% men.¹³⁵

Annual comparison of the rate of missing persons per 100,000 population, 2014-2019.

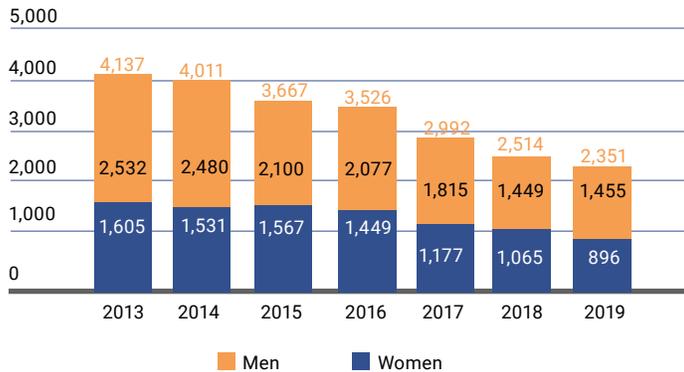
Data: Disappearances in context of peace and pandemic, with data from Ministry of Interior, Mutual Support Group.



During the first semester of 2020, 844 missing persons were reported, 329 men and 515 women; on average 141 missing persons are reported per month and 5 per day. During 2020, only 66 people (8%) were located, 22 men and 42 women.¹³⁶

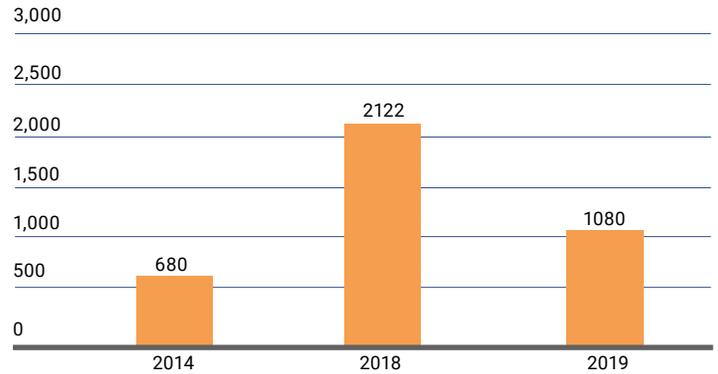
Missing persons by gender, 2013 - 2019

Data: Infosegura, Análisis sobre la situación de violencia e inseguridad en Guatemala durante 2019.



Isabel-Claudia Alerts activated, February 2018 to October 9, 2020

Data: Observatorio de las mujeres del Ministerio Público.



Missing women in Guatemala

Before 2015, the disappearance of women was not mentioned as a systematic phenomenon in the country and many people were still looking for their relatives who disappeared during the Internal Armed Conflict. As part of the compliance with the ruling issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights regarding the femicide of two women prior to their disappearance (Velásquez Paiz and Others v. Guatemala and Veliz Franco and Others v. Guatemala) the Isabel-Claudia Alert is created for the immediate search for disappeared women.¹³⁷ The Isabel-Claudia Alert was established in 2018 as an immediate search mechanism, made up of the Public Ministry, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, National Civil Police, General Directorate of Migration, Attorney General's Office, Secretariat of Social Communication of the Presidency, Secretariat against Sexual Violence, Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons and non-governmental institutions such as local search committees.¹³⁸

According to the Observatory of Women of the Public Ministry, on average 4 Isabel-Claudia Alerts are activated daily. Since the reporting of the alert for missing women began in February 2018 to October 9, 2020, 3,851 alerts have been activated, of which 16% are still active and 84% were deactivated. 44% of the women who are reported missing were between the ages of 21 to 30 years old, 31% were 18 to 20 years old, 17% were 31 to 40 years old, 5% were over 61 years old and 3% were 51 to 60 years old.¹³⁹

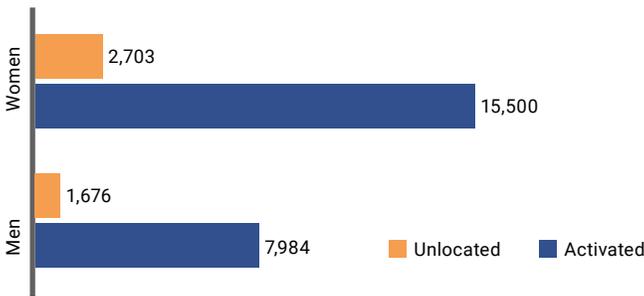
Missing children and adolescents in Guatemala

The disappearance of boys and girls in Guatemala has been historical, in the 80s and 90s thousands of boys and girls were sent abroad under the figure of adoptions, many of these cases were stolen and kidnapped children.¹⁴⁰ Given the disappearance and kidnapping of children and adolescents, the Alba-Keneth Alert System was created on August 10, 2020, with the aim of helping in the search and location of children and adolescents who are missing or abducted.¹⁴¹

23,484 children and adolescents have been reported missing from 2017 to September 2020 through the Alba-Keneth Alert, of which 4,379 children and adolescents remain without being located. In addition, 66% are girls and adolescents. There is a marked trend related to the age in which girls are most vulnerable to disappearing and that is when they enter adolescence, since 71% of the reports of missing girls are in the range of 13 to 18 years of age. To a lesser extent, but in a high percentage, boys are also vulnerable to disappearing when entering adolescence, 51% of the reports of missing children are between the ages of 13 to 18 years.

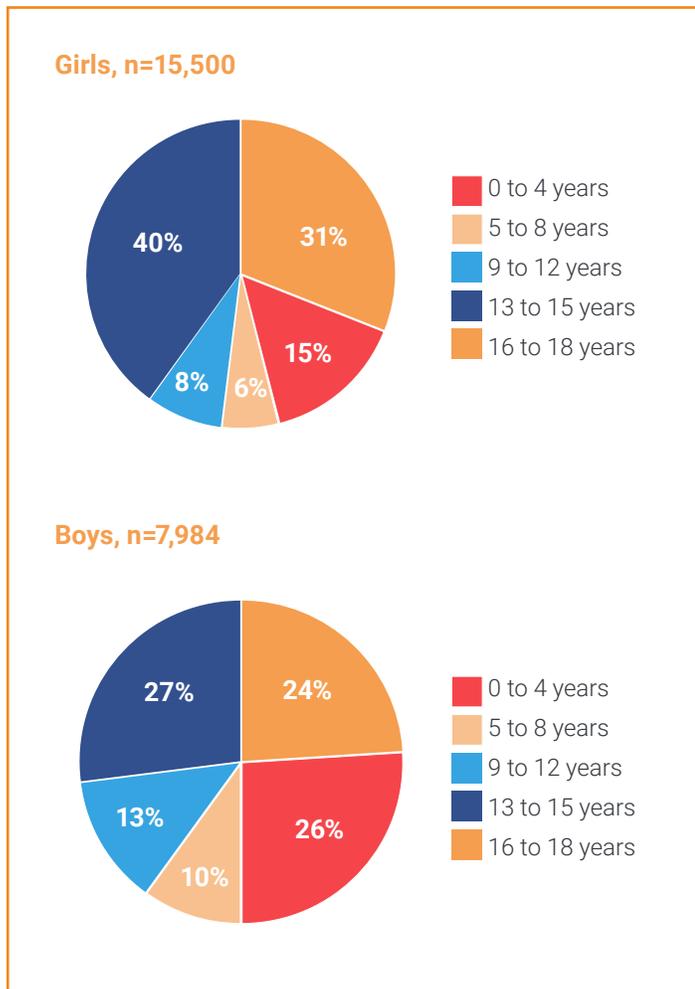
Alba-Keneth Alert: Children and adolescents reported missing and unaccounted for by gender, 2017 to September 2020.

Data: Resolución de acceso a la información Pública No. 290-2020, Procuraduría General de la Nación, septiembre 2020.



Alba-Keneth Alert: Children and adolescents reported missing and unaccounted for by gender, 2017 to September 2020.

Data: Resolución de acceso a la información Pública No. 290-2020, Procuraduría General de la Nación, septiembre 2020.

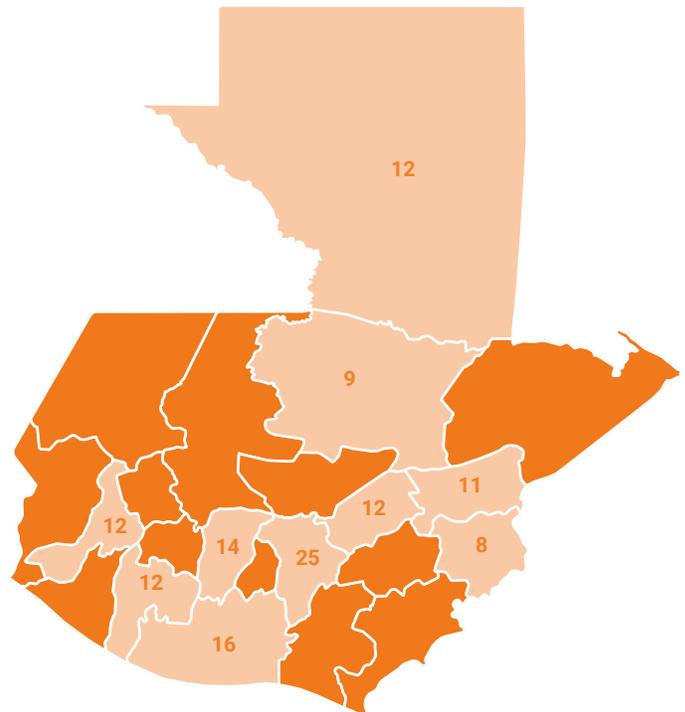


Departments with the highest rate of missing persons reports

The departments with the highest rate of missing persons reports are Guatemala with a rate of 25 annual reports of missing persons per 100,000 inhabitants, Escuintla with 16, Chimaltenango with 14, Petén, El Progreso, Suchitepéquez and Quetzaltenango with 12 and Zacapa with 11.¹⁴² It is important to highlight that these data may be linked to the access to complaint mechanisms that the population has available in their departments.

Map of 10 departments in Guatemala with highest rate of disappearances

Data: Disappearances in the context of peace and pandemic, with data from the Ministry of the Interior, Mutual Support Group.



Missing	Annual rate
Guatemala	25
Escuintla	16
Chimaltenango	14
Petén	12
El Progreso	12
Suchitepéquez	12
Quetzaltenango	12
Zacapa	11
Alta Verapáz	9
Chiquimula	8



Photo: NRC/Milena Ayala

Regarding reports of missing children and adolescents, the highest rate in Alba-Keneth Alerts has occurred in the departments of Guatemala, Escuintla, Quetzaltenango, and Petén. In the case of missing women, the highest rate Isabel-Claudina Alerts has been reported in Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Escuintla, and Alta Verapaz.

Understanding disappearances: link with other social dynamics

Guatemalan families continue to suffer the scourge of disappearance, under different conditions, perpetrators, and motives.¹⁴³ Due to the characteristics of the phenomenon and the few statistical data available, it is difficult to accurately determine criminal and social situations associated with disappearances, however, it is possible to have approximations of the circumstances of the disappearance.

In relation to missing children, the Missing Childhood Unit has found that, for children from 0 to 13 years old, the phenomenon is often due to family problems, and from 14 to 17 years old it may be related to forced recruitment. On the other hand, the Alba-Keneth Alert Operational Unit has identified that the crimes associated with the disappearance are sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons, physical and psychological abuse, own and improper abduction.¹⁴⁴

The Public Ministry reported 205 women located between 2018 and 2020 who had been victims of a crime during their disappearance, 33 were victims of sexual crimes, 32 violent death, 25 physical assault, 23 death (unspecified), 20 robbery, 18 kidnapping, 18

does not indicate, 13 illegal detention, 8 accident, 6 psychological aggression, 5 threats and 1 human trafficking. However, these data represent only 7% of localized women (2,962).¹⁴⁵ Fridays and Saturdays are the days that more missing women are reported (32%).¹⁴⁶

In the migratory context, people can disappear due to traffic accidents, clashes between armed groups, people who have separated and lose contact with the family. There are also cases that due to the mismanagement of corpses, the body of a person can disappear and is not delivered to their relatives.¹⁴⁷ The loss of communication or contact between family members occurs due to different situations: imprisonment, physical and mental conditions, and being victims of trafficking networks for the purpose of sexual exploitation.¹⁴⁸

How are disappearances related to other crimes?

Homicides and disappearances

in the case of women there is a trend between homicides and disappearances by territory, according to the 'Analysis of the situation of violence and insecurity in Guatemala' report: "Territories with high rates of homicides of women also have high rates of reported disappearances of women (departments of Guatemala, Zacapa and Escuintla)"¹⁴⁹ and at the municipal level according to the report 'Because more than seven women disappear a day in Guatemala': "The ten places where the most disappearances were registered this year (2019) were in this order: Mixco, Guatemala, Villa Nueva, San Juan Sacatepéquez, Chimaltenango, Amatitlán, Villa Canales, Puerto Barrios, Morales and San Miguel Petapa. Seven of them coincide with the main places where the Police registered homicides of women and six with the municipalities where there were more violations".¹⁵⁰ In October 2020, there were five cases of women and adolescents who were victims of femicide; two had Alba-Keneth alert (missing children),¹⁵¹ an Isabel-Claudina Alert (missing women)¹⁵² and another had been a victim of human trafficking.¹⁵³ It is important to note that there are more cases with these characteristics that have not been covered by the media.

Childrens

In 2019 the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation reported 57 deceased NNA (Children and adolescents) with activated Alba-Keneth Alerts, 6 were between the ages of 0 to 12 years and 51 between the ages of 13 to 17 years. In addition, in 2020 (until October 14), 23 cases of deceased NNA were reported, 6 under 12 years of age and 17 between the ages of 13 and 17 years.

Trafficking in persons and disappearances

the crime of human trafficking is underreported in Guatemala despite being one of the main businesses of organized crime. It is difficult to obtain information from the victims since exploitation has sometimes been naturalized. During 2019, the Public Ministry detected 596 possible victims of human trafficking, 118 more cases than in 2018. 65% of the victims were women and 33% were children.

The Office of the Attorney General of the Nation in 2019 rescued 234 possible victims of trafficking, 11 in the form of illegal adoptions, 122 labor exploitation, 6 forced marriage, 24 forced begging, 47 sexual exploitation and 24 forced labor or service; 68% were adolescent girls and women. In addition, of the total of Alba-Keneth Alerts deactivated in 2019, in 53 cases the possibility of the crime of human trafficking was reported, 89% were girls.¹⁵⁴

Domestic violence and disappearances

The Guatemalan Secretariat for Women states that most disappearances of women are due to domestic violence. When the investigations began for the alerts issued, they identified that the cases are related to circles of violence. Many women are escaping their husbands and/or partners or for personal reasons decide to distance themselves and are afraid of suffering harm.¹⁵⁵

During the pandemic, it has been shown that some disappearances of women coincide with the disappearance of children: The Public Ministry and the Attorney General's Office agree that the victims could be escaping their attackers along with their children.¹⁵⁶ Of the 431 alerts activated during the pandemic (from March 17 to August 3), 56 correspond to women who disappeared with their children.¹⁵⁷

Theft of children and disappearances

In Guatemala, the theft of children has been a constant in the history of the country to a lesser or greater extent depending on the time. Impunity in cases of illegal adoptions and the complexity of legal adoptions have contributed to this crime continuing to be perpetrated. Organ trafficking has also been associated with the theft of children.¹⁵⁸ The media constantly broadcast news about children who have been robbed in the country¹⁵⁹ and on criminal groups dedicated to illegal adoptions in the country. Some operate through social networks to contact people interested in adopting.¹⁶⁰

Disappearances and link with displacement

Disappearances and forced displacement are linked in two moments, it may occur prior to the disappearance or later. Violence in certain areas where criminal structures, or gangs operate, causes forced displacement and on many occasions, people are forced to flee without notifying their families or neighbors. This causes anxiety among people who do not know their whereabouts.¹⁶¹ After the disappearance of a person, families may move out of fear, as they think they are in danger. When the family suspects who the perpetrators are, they continue to threaten the family and are forced to flee.¹⁶² The disappearance of a person on the migration route

can result in families having to move because they cannot pay the debt, they acquired for the person to make the trip.¹⁶³ All of these situations can be a trigger for displacement.

Guatemalan Migrants Missing Abroad

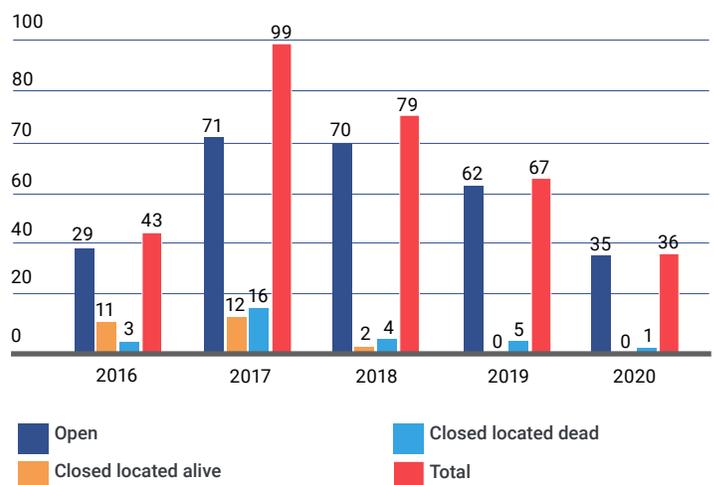
The Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman from 2011 to 2017 received 99 requests for support to locate missing migrants; of which 80 were men and 19 women, in addition 8 were under 18 years of age. Of these requests, 30 people were identified in Mexico and 5 in the United States.¹⁶⁴

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs received 324 reports of Guatemalans who disappeared abroad from 2016 to October 21, 2020, of which 83% have not yet been located, 8% were located alive and 9% were located deceased.¹⁶⁵

However, these data do not reflect the total number of missing persons, only those who used government agencies within the country as a search mechanism.

Reports made to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Guatemalans Missing Abroad, 2016 - 2020

Data: Public Information Unit, MINEX, Resolution 78-2020, October 2020.



Search mechanisms available in the country for missing persons

In general, in the event of the disappearance of a person, a complaint can be filed with the Public Ministry, the National Civil Police or the Attorney General's Office, or the lines to report missing children and women can be called:

The Alba-Keneth Alert and the Isabel-Claudina Alert. In both there is the possibility of reporting the disappearance of migrants in Guatemalan territory,¹⁶⁶ however, families must travel to Guatemala to file a complaint,¹⁶⁷ and in the absence of established criteria in the institutions receiving complaints, families are often denied the right to submit it.¹⁶⁸ In addition, these types of lines do not exist to report missing men or migrants specifically.

The families of disappeared migrants can follow two routes to report and/or denounce the disappearance of their loved one in government agencies:

- 1) for a migrant disappeared within Guatemalan territory, the Public Ministry, through the Prosecutor's Office for Crimes Against Life and the Integrity of the persons or specific prosecutor's offices, coordinate with the National Police to initiate the search. However, the information sheet of the disappeared persons of the National Civil Police is incomplete because it does not collect enough data to facilitate the search and identification, since the Special Directorate of Criminal Investigation only has a unit for the disappeared with few personnel (not specialized in migrants) located only in the capital city.¹⁶⁹
- 2) When the disappearance occurs outside the country, families can go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁷⁰ The process begins with the disappearance report made by a family member or friend, a form is filled out and a referral is made to the Guatemalan consular network, so that it can initiate the relevant procedures for the search through consultations and verifications in shelters, detention centers, detention, jails, immigration stations, hospitals, or morgues. They maintain constant communication with the authorities of the countries where the disappearance is presumed and with the families to find out if there is additional information. If the whereabouts of the Guatemalan migrant are located, depending on the case, the deceased person is repatriated or the person is given assisted return if they are in a vulnerable situation.¹⁷¹

The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office advises and accompanies the families of disappeared migrants to file complaints and/or reports where appropriate. The Institute of Forensic Sciences on its website has a tool to search for missing persons within the list of corpses that were identified through the investigations, but no one claimed them, if the families find a match with the person's name they are looking for, it should go to the nearest expert headquarters for identification.¹⁷²

Challenges for the registry, immediate search, and identification of missing persons

"They have been working on bills for 20 years"

Humanitarian organization in Guatemala

Humanitarian organizations have promoted different initiatives of law to search for missing persons in the country. Mention is made of the proposed Law 3590 "Law of the Commission for the Search of Persons Victims of Enforced Disappearance and other Forms of Disappearance in Guatemala" (disappearances in the context of the Internal Armed Conflict) during 2016; In 2018, a proposal was promoted from the Human Rights Commission of the Congress of the Republic for the general search for missing persons; In October 2019, the National Committee for Migration presented the Framework Law for the Search for Disappeared Persons initiative. None of these initiatives has been approved by the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala.

There is no entity that has a unified database or a single registration system for Guatemalans who have disappeared in Guatemala and outside the country, nor is there a registry of missing foreigners in the territory.¹⁷³ This situation causes a data gap. The government agencies empowered to receive complaints and reports of missing persons, specifically in the case of migrants, often do not share the information among themselves.¹⁷⁴ Due to the multiple complaints in different institutions, there have been cases in which the families of disappeared migrants have complaints and reports in different institutions, hoping that one of them will give them an answer about the fate and whereabouts of their loved one, and they fall into a circle of re-victimization in the face of the constant questions to which they are subjected due to the lack of a unified database and inter-institutional coordination.¹⁷⁵

Records of the Alba-Keneth and Isabel-Claudina Alerts are limited and cover short periods of time since the first came into effect in 2010 and the second in 2018.¹⁷⁶ For example, in the case of records for missing women from 2008 to July 2018, the Public Ministry has a record of 30,564 missing women, while the National Civil Police has records of 18,275, and according to the Institute of Forensic Sciences there are 891 bodies of unidentified women who were buried in the same period. All these cases are attended by other prosecutors of the Public Ministry since the Alert does not record the data before its creation and each institution has its own database.¹⁷⁷ There is an under-registration of missing persons in transit through Guatemala or who reside in the country, because many times families do not file a complaint due to lack of information, fear, distrust, or lack of access to institutions.¹⁷⁸

In the absence of state mechanisms to search for migrants, families experience multiple barriers to search for their relatives from Guatemala:

Criminalization of migration: There is a generalized idea that it is a crime to migrate irregularly, a situation that generates fear of reporting the disappearance of a missing migrant family member.¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, when they approach government agencies to file a complaint, they are held responsible for the disappearance, by questioning why they let their partners or children go.¹⁸⁰

Lack of complaint mechanisms: As there is no clear complaint route, the families begin a kind of pilgrimage with all the institutions they know to request the search for their missing relative. Unfortunately, in many cases they do not find support.

Legal and administrative needs: For the report and/or complaint, the authorities request identification documents of the disappeared person, which in many cases the families do not have them. In addition, they face legal problems such as the use of bank accounts, property, or insurance of the disappeared person, running into the moral dilemma of declaring their relative as deceased.¹⁸¹

Disinformation of the process: part of the process of searching for missing migrants is to maintain constant communication with the families to periodically inform them of the progress of the case, this helps the families reduce anxiety.¹⁸²

Humanitarian responses to disappearances of migrants

Humanitarian organizations contribute from their experience and their efforts that are complementary, thus avoiding duplication of operations.¹⁸³ The following actions have been conducted:

Psychosocial support to the families of missing persons on the migration route. The Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team since 2013 provides support to families of missing migrants.¹⁸⁴

Guidance and accompaniment to the families of missing persons. The National Board for Migration regularly guides and accompanies families to file complaints and reports of missing persons, they have repeatedly accompanied the Caravans of Mothers of Missing Migrants.¹⁸⁵

Legal advice and support. The Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law is based in Guatemala and seeks to promote access to justice for families of missing migrants in Mexico.¹⁸⁶

Forensic identification. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team through the Border Project has supported the identification of missing migrants through the exchange of forensic information.¹⁸⁷ Also, the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala has provided specific support to families of missing migrants and other organizations in the country.¹⁸⁸



Photo: NRC/Ana Karina Delgado

Construction of knowledge on immigration matters with the creation of analysis documents, attention routes, proposals for laws to address missing persons, which has been one of the work axes of humanitarian organizations such as the National Committee for Migration, the Mutual Support Group, the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team, International Committee of the Red Cross, and International Organization for Migration, among others.

The **Missing Migrants' Relatives' Association (AFAMIDEG)** is an association formed by relatives of missing migrants. They provide mutual support to other families. There are currently 250 families that are in search processes.¹⁹⁰

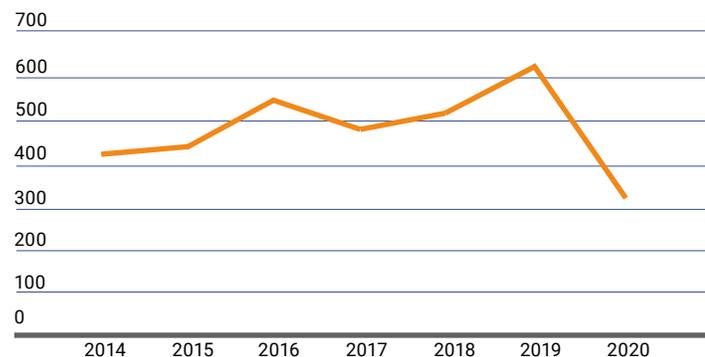
Disappearances in México

Disappearances on migration routes

The disappearance of migrants in transit in Mexico and the United States tends to be concentrated in blind spots along the United States-Mexico border and in States in southern Mexico. According to data from the Missing Migrant Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), between January 2014 and November 2020, 3,379 migrants have died and/or disappeared, 64% in the United States, 36% in Mexico and 0.03 % in any of the Northern Central American countries. With an average of 493 deaths and/or disappearances per year.

Deaths and/or disappearances of migrants in the North of Central America, Mexico and the United States (2014-Nov 2020)

Information from the IOM Missing Migrant Project, 2020.



According to the organizations consulted, the bulk of their records of deaths and/or disappearances refer to men between the ages of 18 and 50 from Mexico and the NCA.¹⁹¹ Data that agree with those of the Missing Migrants Project, who of the 3,359 registrations that took place in Mexico and the United States between 2014 and November 2020 has been able to document that 1,819 corresponded to men, 220 to women and 154 to girls, boys and adolescents.¹⁹² This also contrasts with the characteristics and magnitudes of migratory flows in this region.¹⁹³ However, organizations consulted in Mexico have emphasized that there are profiles of disappearance of people directly related to the activities of criminal groups operating in the region. For example, according to the organizations interviewed, the figures for disappearances of women are higher in the age range of 9 to 17 years, as they are usually linked to cases of forced labor and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation in Mexico and the United States but also in other countries.

Understanding disappearances: link with other social dynamics

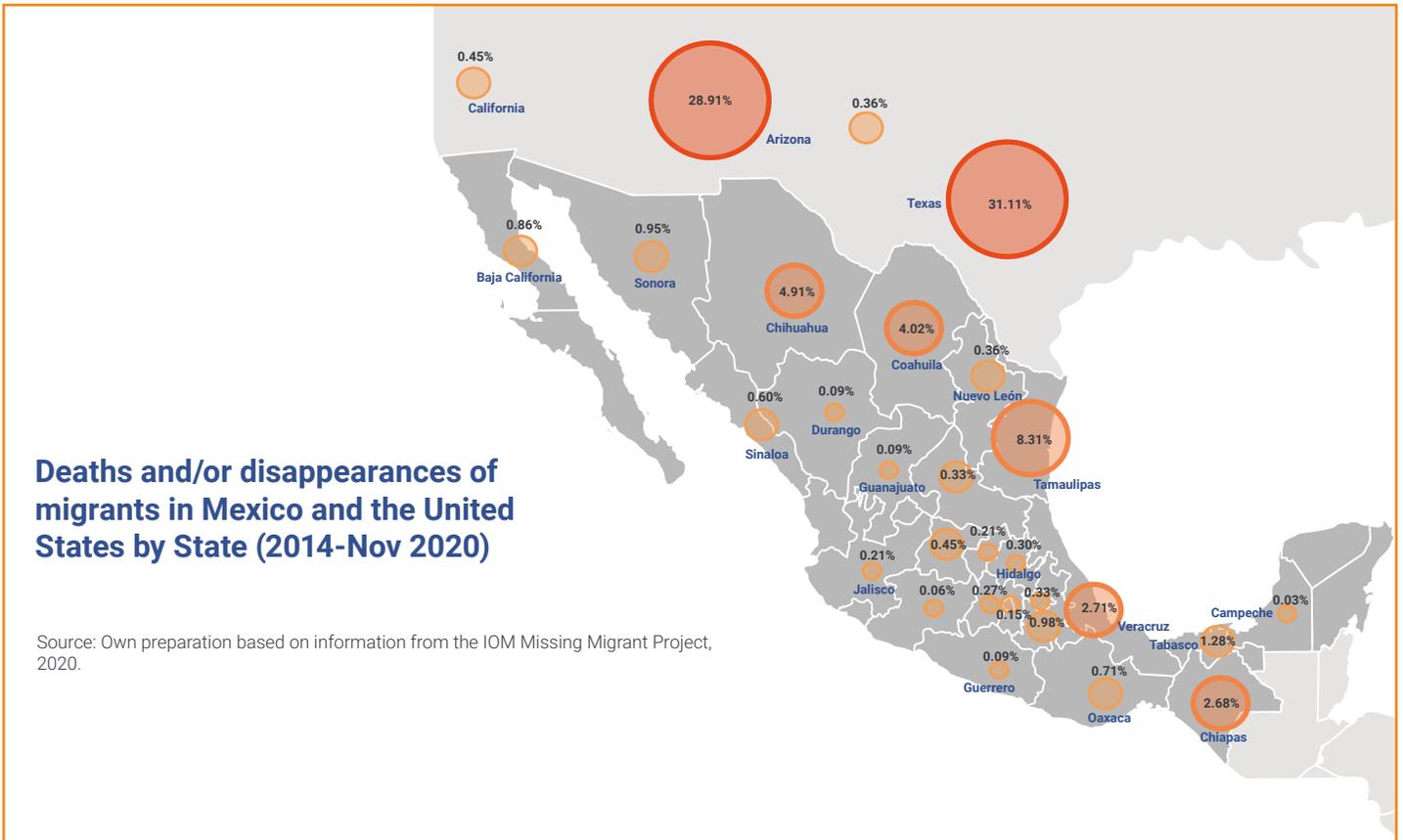
In Mexico, deaths and/or disappearances take place in practically all its federal states but concentrating on those through which migratory routes cross, which have regions controlled by criminal groups that generate income from committing crimes against migrants. According to data from the Missing Migrant Project, 64% of the registrations in Mexico occurred in one of the six border states that border the United States, 19% in four states in the south, 4% in other states and 13% in unknown states.¹⁹⁴

"Most of the Honduran migrants who disappeared in Mexico have perished at the hands of organized crime. Honduras has the highest number of victims in the different massacres recorded. Our migrants have fallen prey to organized crime in Mexico: they have been kidnapped and executed. Since the implementation of the Southern Border Plan, migrants began to take higher risk routes. That meant that we began to find more remains of migrants in the Arizona desert. Also, since these measures were implemented, the number of returned Honduran migrants with amputations has increased."

Humanitarian organization based in Honduras

In the north of the country, all border states stand out, known for having a strong presence and territorial control of multiple organized crime groups. In this region, deaths and/or disappearances are associated with extortion kidnapping cases, use of migrants in the forced transport of illegal merchandise to the United States, forced labor in marijuana and poppy fields, labor for criminal actions; and also cleaning, surveillance and control of other migrants concentrated in safe houses.¹⁹⁵ For example, according to data from Doctors of the World, between January and September 2019, 18.6% of those who attended through its mental health program in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, had been victims of kidnapping. Percentage that in relation to the people benefiting from the MPP Program rises to 43.9% in September and 75% in October of the same year.¹⁹⁶ Also outstanding is the labor exploitation of migrants in factories and/or maquilas under threats and withholding of documents (which occurs throughout the country). As well as the murder of migrants by organized crime as a corrective and public example of what can happen to those who do not pay the fees required to travel the migration routes.¹⁹⁷

In relation to these last cases, from 2010 to April 2020, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) has registered 1,421 cases of missing migrants (39% from Honduras, 24% from El Salvador and 8% from Guatemala) and 223 identifications of remains (30% from



Honduras, 30% from El Salvador and 24% from Guatemala), 113 in the United States (64 in Arizona, 47 in Texas, 1 in Florida and California respectively) and 110 in Mexico (90 in Tamaulipas, 15 in Nuevo León, 3 in Coahuila, 1 in Baja California and 1 in Quintana Roo).¹⁹⁸ It is worth mentioning that a considerable number of the remains identified in Mexico by the EAAF are related to the murder of migrants by organized crime in the San Fernando and Cadereyta Slaughters.

In the central region of Mexico, states such as Jalisco and Guanajuato stand out, and in the south, Veracruz and Chiapas, where deaths and/or disappearances are associated with **failure to pay fees required by gangs and organized crime** to travel along the migratory routes; as well as the kidnapping of girls and women for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation; falls from the freight train because criminal groups throw them, for falling asleep without having restrained themselves or for jumping from the train to avoid being apprehended by immigration agents or attacked by criminal groups. Although deaths and/or disappearances are more evident in these states, they occur at any point along the migratory routes through which migrants cross without having the necessary resources, mainly financial, to do so successfully. This makes mapping the points with the highest prevalence of migrant deaths and/or disappearances a complicated task and the results of which tend to be limited and have a short duration.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, in general terms the underreporting of disappearances is a challenge for authorities and civil society organizations, in the case of migration it is much more complex,²⁰⁰ this situation is compounded by the fact that not all the relatives of disappeared migrants file a complaint with the authorities.²⁰¹

In the United States, deaths and/or disappearances are concentrated in southern states that border Mexico. According to data from the Missing Migrant Project, 94% of the records that occurred in this country took place in Texas and Arizona, states where two of the main migratory routes cross.²⁰² These states have rugged terrain and extreme weather conditions that make search and rescue opportunities slim. **Desert and/or mountainous areas in which people die of dehydration or hypothermia** stand out due to temperatures of up to 40° Celsius during the day and -12° during the night, bites of poisonous animals and/or eaten by carnivorous animals, injuries or fractures caused by falls from ravines, twists when crossing mountains, or due to lack of food and water for prolonged periods; as well as by drowning when being dragged by river flows.²⁰³ According to Gabriela Martinez, Researcher at the Metropolitan Autonomous University, an expert on the subject of disappearances, there are also cases that occur in this region that are a consequence of the **abandonment of migrants in the desert and/or mountains** by smugglers who, in addition, have agreements with organized crime to hand over migrants who may be useful for labor and/or sexual exploitation.

Other explanations behind the disappearances

The disappearance of migrants does not automatically mean that they have died or been victims of some crime and/or violation of human rights (by action). In other words, they are not necessarily a consequence of the direct participation of private and/or state agents. There are also cases related to their retention in hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, jails, or detention centers where they are denied communication with their relatives. Disappearances related to the separation of families when trying to escape immigration checkpoints or because they were unable to get on the train.²⁰⁴ Where the violation of their human rights is by omission or acquiescence. However, there are also cases in which migrants cannot continue to their places of destination or return to those of origin due to having lost the contact information of their relatives, or because they decided to cut off communication with their relatives voluntarily due to problems or shame for having suffered a mishap on their way. In this sense, through its program to search for living migrants, between 2011 and 2019 the Jesuit Service to Migrants - Mexico, has located 450 people reported as missing with cases like these (out of 650 cases received).²⁰⁵

Despite their differences, what is common to disappearances is that they refer to cases in which the whereabouts of a person are unknown due to the loss of communication with a family member or person with whom they were expected to have contact by some means in a more or less defined period and under circumstances that suggest that said situation has been involuntary. However, given the complexity of migratory dynamics, the period of disappearance is difficult to define, since it can range from a couple of hours from the loss of communication to the moment when it is re-established, so if this does not happen the periods become indeterminable.

Responses from the Government of Mexico

In 2017, the Government of Mexico published the Law on the Enforced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearance Committed by Individuals and the National System for the Search of Persons (LGMDFP)²⁰⁶ and although in 2018 the first National Search Commissioner was appointed and said that they had begun to implement the law, the organizations interviewed agree that it was until 2019 when the Plan for its implementation was released that this happened.²⁰⁷ Expanding the concept of enforced disappearance,²⁰⁸ both actions meant the official recognition of the existence of the problem of disappearances at the hands of authorities and individuals. The importance of this Law also lies in the fact that it brings together different efforts made regarding the attention to the problem, articulates governmental bodies (such as the Executive Commission for Victim Attention, responsible, among other things, for the comprehensive reparation of the damage to

victims of crimes and human rights violations)²⁰⁹ it contemplates groups of relatives of disappeared persons and civil society organizations, and re-launches the National and State Search Commissions as responsible for the search of missing persons.²¹⁰

For the year 2020, the Government of Mexico relaunched an Approved Protocol for the Search of Missing and Not Located Persons²¹¹ that although it already existed in the law, it had not been implemented, nor was it subject to consultation and scrutiny by people with missing relatives and civil society organizations. This document considers differential procedures for vulnerable groups such as migrants, the search for people in life and stops focusing its attention on the forensic identification of bodies.

Currently, the monitoring of cases of disappearance begins with two figures. The first, by means of a news of disappearance, the receipt of information by means of which the authorities can presume a case of disappearance, to which they must respond regardless of whether there is a formal complaint filed or not. The second, through an anonymous complaint addressed to various government institutions (for example, the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic and state prosecutors, the National Human Rights Commission and the state human rights commissions, police forces and the National Search Council) who will be responsible for informing the other institutions that are relevant to begin the process. In the latter case, even if the authorities have the data of the person who made the complaint, they cannot share it, either because their integrity could be at risk or because the person does not want to be involved in legal problems.

Finally, although the search for disappeared persons, including migrants, is a duty of the Mexican State, it is the collectives and relatives of disappeared persons who have assumed this task.²¹² Although agents of the National and State Search Commissions, the National Defense Secretariat, the National Guard, the Attorney General's Office, State Justice Prosecutors, the National Human Rights Commission, the National Commissions participate in some of these searches. State Human Rights and the different police corporations, family members and civil society organizations have reported the lack of accompaniment and protection by the Mexican Government that puts them at risk because the searches are carried out in territories where organized crime operates.²¹³

Challenges for tracking the disappearances of migrants

Even though the Mexican State has made considerable progress in addressing the problem of disappearances, and although the little time that has passed since it began its efforts in this area does not make it possible to fully assess its impacts, there are some limitations that can already be pointed out around monitoring the disappearances of migrants:

Although the Beta Group for the Protection of Migrants of the National Migration Institute is not an agency designed to search for people, it does help to locate missing persons or those who may have been missing for different reasons, as it provides advice to migrants²¹⁴ and carries out rescue, salvage and humanitarian aid actions.²¹⁵ In this context, during 2019 these groups provided 229,458 guidelines on risks in migratory routes, 2,805 rescues from risky situations and 170 first aid assistance and 51 locations of

migrants reported as missing or not found.²¹⁶ However, locating and/or searching for people is not part of a defined effort, which is reflected in the referred figures.

In the United States, the participation of the Customs and Border Protection stands out, who communicates to ambassadors and consuls about the registration of persons reported as missing who are confined in prison and/or immigration detention centers, as well as the discovery of corpses found that agree with reports or complaints of disappearance, allowing them to collate biometric data that facilitate their identification or discard it.

With the promulgation and implementation of the LGMDFP, the National Personnel Search System was installed, however, various organizations have indicated that there is fragmentation and inconsistency of the information that the Mexican authorities have, given that the databases (not public) of missing persons had been fed by various institutions, based on non-unified criteria and through information systems without communication between them.²¹⁷ These problems seek to be solved through the creation of a Single Information System and the National Registry of Missing or Missing Persons that has replaced the National Registry of Missing or Disappeared Persons (RNPED).²¹⁸ Which, together with the differential approach for vulnerable groups, is expected to allow the establishment of patterns of disappearance along the migratory routes.

The organizations consulted pointed out the existing limitations from the Mexican government to deal with the disappearances of nationals, which prevents effective searches and comprehensive public policies for their prevention. While, in the case of disappearances of foreigners, they point out that there is a lack of will since they are not seen as an urgent and/or priority issue on their agenda, an example of this is that, according to data from the National Planning Center, Analysis and Information for the Fight against Crime (CENAPI), from 2006 to May 2018 there are only 606 registered cases of disappearance of foreigners: 67 from Honduras, 56 from Guatemala and 12 from El Salvador.²¹⁹

Finally, the Mexican Foreign Search and Investigation Support Mechanism (MAEMBI) stands out,²²⁰ through which the Mexican State has opened complaint windows in its embassies in Central America, to report cases of disappearance through any of the three procedures accepted by law. This mechanism allows people not to have to leave their countries to present their complaints in the places in Mexico where the events are believed to have occurred and prevents them from having to resort to the intermediation of their embassies or consulates, a process that is usually more complicated and that sometimes favors duplication of efforts due to the lack of articulation between the governments of these countries.²²¹ However, some organizations consulted mention that assistance is only provided on certain days and at too short hours and there is no follow-up by the authorities to report on the progress of the complaints, which causes exhaustion for families

Responses from Civil society organizations

In general terms, there are few civil society organizations in Mexico that work on the issue of the disappearance of migrants.

Most of the organizations focused on the issue of the disappearance of migrants in the United States, such as Armadillos Binacional - Ni un migrante más, Colibrí Center, Coalición de Derechos Humanos, Águilas del Desierto, and the Center for Human Rights of South Texas are focused on the direct search for missing persons in the desert and/or the forensic identification of the bodies found.

Humanitarian organizations in the United States

The **Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico**, has a program to support families and organizations with cases of relatives and/or migrants with whom communication has been lost. Through the program, an attempt is made to locate people in prison and immigration detention centers, migrant shelters, social assistance centers, and medical and psychiatric centers in Mexico and the United States, directly or through allied organizations and networks in the region, like the **Documentation Network of Organizations for the Defense of Migrants (REDODEM) Y the Central America and North America Jesuit Migration Network**,²²² and missing migrants' relatives' committees such as COFAMIPRO and COFAMIDE, in addition to liaising with international organizations such as the IOM, the ICRC, embassies and consulates. In line with this program, from 2011 to 2019, the organization has registered 650 cases of people reported as missing and has located 450, mainly Mexican and Central American. The organization does not assist all the cases it receives, especially those related to serious crimes and/or the participation of authorities or organized crime, due to the security risks that surround these types of cases, in any case, the organization refers them to the competent authorities. The program is focused on the search for people alive, and it only assists cases in which the loss of contact does not have more than a year of having happened.

For situations in search of missing persons presumed dead, the main reference is the **Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)**, who since 2010 has the Border Project which aims to create a Regional Mechanism to improve the search and identification of missing migrants among unidentified remains through the exchange of forensic information.²²³ Within the framework of this Project, forensic banks have been created by taking genetic samples in countries of origin to be compared with genetic samples of bodies found on migratory routes, as well as with the records of authorities in Mexico, United States (through the Border Forensic Coalition²²⁴) and NCA. Participating in the project are the organizations of missing persons' relatives (who present their cases and provide DNA samples), the EAAF (who take the samples) and the authorities (who give access to their databases to collate information). Thanks to this Project, as of April 2020, 1,421 records of missing migrant cases, 223 identifications of remains, and 3,745 genetic profiles of donors had been achieved (34% from Honduras, 25% from El Salvador, 8% from Guatemala).²²⁵ It is important to note

that throughout the Project, DNA donor records have exceeded those of missing migrants, suggesting that there are more cases than the ones known.

The **Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law** is a benchmark in Mexico and NCA for having a more focused approach on political advocacy and strategic litigation at the transnational level. Like the EAAF, the organization managed to get the PGR to authorize them to analyze the homicides that occurred in the framework of the aforementioned massacres, through an agreement that established the creation of a Forensic Commission to resolve the events.²²⁶ Finally, thanks to its presence in NCA, this organization collaborates closely with the MAEBI and provides support to the committees of relatives of disappeared migrants.²²⁷

The **Mesoamerican Migrant Movement** stands out for providing estimates on the disappearance of migrants based on reports made by relatives, as well as for its support in the formation and strengthening of the **Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants**,²²⁸ main effort organized by political advocacy and search effort in Mexico, in which the relatives of missing migrants in the country participate.

Responses from international organizations

Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM),²²⁹ which has been operating since 2014, recording cases of deaths and/or disappearances of international migrants that take place on migratory routes and appear in the news broadcast by various media. For this reason, the figures only make it possible to make visible and estimate the trends and risks faced by migrants. Since the information depends on what the media makes public, the information provided by the Project cannot always include complete data on the identity of the missing and/or dead, sometimes only their nationality, sex, and age. In addition to offering figures based on media monitoring, publications have also been written on the disappearance of migrant children, the best practices for identifying disappeared migrants and how to improve the information available on this problem.²³⁰

The data provided by the IOM have been taken up for the generation of public policies and documentation of the issue, in the case of the Unit for Migration Policy, Registration and Identity of Persons of the Secretariat of the Government of Mexico,²³¹ which is consistent with the objective of the program.

For its part, the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)**, although it does not search for missing migrants, it implements a program to re-establish contact between migrants and their families in places of origin, transit, or destination.²³² Providing the necessary means to make calls along the migratory route, through collaboration with dining rooms, ranches, shelters, and organizations that provide support to migrants. This program helps to raise awareness in migrants about the importance of keeping their loved ones informed about the conditions in which they are and the places where they are located; to prevent emotional crises

in migrants and their families due to not being able to communicate; in addition, in the event of a disappearance, the next of kin will be able to determine with greater speed and precision the place where the event could have occurred based on the last call received. The ICRC also distributes information on risks.

Within the framework of these efforts, during 2019 82,932 calls were made from the 53 points operated by migrant houses and the Mexican Red Cross (1,773 during the caravans at the beginning of 2019) and 10,000 brochures were distributed with information on the risks migrants face and 10,600 self-care messages were sent through WhatsApp.²³³ The ICRC also advises the authorities on the importance of implementing information systems that allow the search and identification of missing migrants. The program also accompanies consulates and embassies in processes of strengthening and generating knowledge on these issues. Finally, it also provides training to authorities for the handling of deceased persons, identification of persons or bodies, and disseminates good practices that help prevent the disappearance of bodies of migrant persons due to mismanagement during the storage and repatriation process.

Final considerations

- Despite the high number of disappearances that have occurred in the context of internal armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador, countries have made slow progress in the search for truth, justice, and reparation. Still many families continue to search in the hope of at least accessing the truth.
- In Northern Central America there is a constant in the relationship between age and gender of people reported missing. In El Salvador, 60% of the women reported as missing are between the ages of 13 and 17; in Honduras, during the first semester of 2020, 345 missing children and adolescents were reported, mainly girls; Similarly, in Guatemala 71% of the reports of missing girls are between the ages of 13 to 18 years. While in Mexico the disappeared migrants are mainly men between the ages of 18 and 50. There are no data on the disappearance of people with diverse gender identity, although the threats and acts of violence to which they are exposed indicate the relevance of having these measurements.
- Disappearance is a phenomenon present throughout the cycle of migration and displacement. The disappearance of a family member and the imminent threat it poses to their environment can be a trigger for displacement.
- None of the countries in Northern Central America and Mexico have consolidated government and civil society databases, so their records vary significantly between them. This situation does not allow a complete picture of the magnitude of the problem. In addition, it hinders the registration processes, immediate search, and location of missing persons.
- State responses to address disappearances have evolved positively in terms of classification and enactment of laws. However, this process has not occurred to the same extent in the case of missing migrants. The categorization of these events as events of disappearance committed by both authorities (enforced disappearance) and individuals, would allow reinforcing the existing response mechanisms for the families of missing migrants, as well as guaranteeing the rights to seek truth and justice.
- Civil society organizations and humanitarian organizations almost exclusively concentrate search and location actions, as well as psychosocial and legal support for the families of missing migrants.
- There are no efforts in the countries of Northern Central America that group the organizations into consolidated supranational platforms that facilitate the multiple tasks that the Missing Migrants' Relatives' Committees, civil society organizations and humanitarian organizations have been carrying out.
- Covid-19 has increased the uncertainty of those affected by the disappearance of a loved one and has limited the responses and follow-up provided by humanitarian organizations. It is essential to rethink the approach to the cases of relatives of missing migrants so that the existing obstacles do not lead to mental health problems.²³⁴

People and organizations consulted

This report was made possible by the following organizations and institutions, among others:

International Organization for Migration (IOM) - Missing Migrant Project; IOM Mexico; Jesuit Migrant Service - Nicaragua; with Central and North American Jesuit Migration Network; Armadillos Binacional - Ni un migrante más; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico; Colibrí Center; Scalabrinianas Mission with Migrants and Refugees Mexico; Deceased and Missing Migrants' Relative's Committee (COFAMIDE); Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF); Gabriela Martínez Castillo (PhD in Anthropology, UAM Iztalapa. Department of Anthropological Sciences); NRC - El Salvador; NRC - Honduras; OHCHR - Honduras; Committee of Detained and Disappeared Relatives; Center for the Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and their Families; Human Mobility Pastoral; ICRC - El Salvador; IOM - El Salvador; Association for the Search of Missing Children, Mutual Support Group; Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team; National Roundtable for Migration of Guatemala; IOM Guatemala; ICRC Guatemala; Missing Migrants' Relatives' Association of Guatemala; Human Rights Ombudsman; Guatemala Forensic Anthropology Foundation.

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