Extortion Study for Northern Central America (NCA)

Final Report

Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response (LACLEARN)

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Extortion Study for Northern Central America (NCA): El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala

Final Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS BY COUNTRY

TABLE OF TABLES

TABLE OF FIGURES

ACRONYMS

AMSS	Greater San Salvador Metropolitan Area
ANEP	National Association of Private Enterprise, El Salvador
ASJ	Association for a More Just Society, Honduras
CENISS	National Social Sector Information Center, Honduras
CIEN	National Economic Research Center, Guatemala
CNBS	National Commission of Banking and Insurance, Honduras
COMCAVIS	Communicating and Training Trans Women, El Salvador
Conatel	National Telecommunications Commission, Honduras
DIGESTYC	General Statistics and Census Office, El Salvador
Dipanda	National Division against the Criminal Development of Gangs, Guatemala
Dipampco	Police Directorate against Gangs and Organized Crime, Honduras
ENPEVI	National Survey on Perception of Public Safety and Victimization, Guatemala
FESCCO	Special Prosecutor against Organized Crime, Honduras
Fecotrans	Federation of Transportation Entrepreneurs, El Salvador
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FGR	General Prosecutor of the Republic, El Salvador
FNA	National Anti-Extortion Task Force, Honduras
FNAMP	National Anti-Gang Task Force, Honduras
FUSADES	Salvadoran Foundation for Social and Economic Development, El Salvador
FUSINA	National Interagency Security Force, Honduras
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GI-TOC	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
GTQ	Guatemalan Quetzal
INAM	National Women's Institute, Honduras
INE	National Institute of Statistics, Guatemala
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement
IUDOP	University Institute of Public Opinion, Central American University, El Salvador
IVE	Special Verification Administration, Guatemala
KII	Key Informant Interview
LACLEARN	Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MIPYMEs	*Micro, Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas*
MP	Public Ministry
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
MZMVS	Commonwealth of the Metropolitan Area of the Sula Valley, Honduras
NCA	Northern Central America
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PDLs	Persons Deprived of Liberty
PESS	Secure El Salvador Plan
PGR	Attorney General of the Republic, El Salvador
PMOP	Military Police of Public Order, Honduras
PN	National Police, Honduras
PNC	National Civil Police, Guatemala and El Salvador
SSPAS	Passionist Social Service, El Salvador
UNIMUJER-ODAC	Institutional Unit for Specialized Assistance to Women in Situations of Violence

USD	United States Dollar
USG	United States Government
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response's (LACLEARN's) Extortion Study for northern Central America (NCA), on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, provides a holistic examination of extortion trends and impacts within the three countries of NCA: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Through this analysis, the report provides evidence-based recommendations for USAID and other actors to combat extortion via policy and programs.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The study addresses three main questions:

1. What are the socioeconomic conditions that foment extortion?
2. What are the specific impacts of extortion dynamics among vulnerable populations?
3. How well do police and judicial agencies work together to prevent, investigate, and prosecute extortion crimes?

Extortion is an inherently difficult topic of study, in part due to challenges in collecting accurate secondary data because of widespread underreporting. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, employing a literature review of 105 publications, review of secondary databases, and primary data collection consisting of 120 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 30 focus group discussions (FGDs). The analysis covers a broad range of regional and country-specific patterns, while identifying specific data and policy gaps that remain. Annex I provide supplemental quantitative analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

SOCIOECONOMIC TRENDS AND IMPACTS

Extortion affects every productive sector in NCA countries, notably micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and transport. At the individual level, extortion disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations including women and girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons; and migrants. Socioeconomic impacts from extortion include loss of income, business closures, sexual exploitation, physical harm, and forced displacement and emigration. As a result of its pervasiveness, it appears extortion has become normalized to a "way of life" for both communities and gangs.[1]

However, available data can obscure the full extent of extortion's impact on individuals and communities. Official data likely reflect underestimates, as many businesses and individuals do not report the crime due fear of reprisal from perpetrators and lack of confidence in the criminal justice system.

MSMEs: MSMEs are the mainstay of NCA economies: microenterprises constitute well over 90 percent of businesses in each country.[2] Evidence suggests that extortion is both costly and widespread in terms

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[1] Gang structures in NCA are further presented under Issue Area II.

[2] In El Salvador, micro and small enterprises constituted an estimated 97 percent of all businesses in 2022: 155,000 micro, 5,500 small, 575 medium, and 603 large enterprises. In Guatemala, micro and small enterprises constituted an estimated 98 percent of MSMEs, as of 2015: 331,000 micro, 36,000 small, and 4,000 medium-sized businesses. In Honduras, micro and small enterprises

of its impact on MSMEs. For instance, the assessment team found that extortion hinders a business's ability to profit and invest due to increased costs (including extortion fees and security costs), while forcing some businesses to close. Likewise, smaller businesses are disproportionately affected by the crime, relative to larger entities that can absorb associated costs.

El Salvador: In recent victimization surveys, the majority of MSMEs report having been extorted. Extortion is concentrated in urban areas, such as in San Salvador's city center. Its impact in rural areas is also evident among the agricultural sector, particularly sugar cane producers.

Guatemala: Evidence suggests that Guatemalan businesses spend at least seven percent of their budget on extortion fees and at least ten percent on security costs.[3] Interviewees suggest that nearly every business in gang-controlled areas has been extorted, particularly informal ones.

Honduras: Interviews and reports suggest that the majority of extortion victims in certain areas, such as Tegucigalpa's Colonia Las Torres, are businesses. The assessment team found that the Honduran sectors most affected include merchandise distributors, micro-entrepreneurs, and transport. One private sector official reported that an estimated 90,000 businesses closed because of extortion between 2016-2021.

Transport Sector: Extortion has decimated transport sectors in NCA countries through violence and loss of revenue among businesses, operators, and passengers. Forms of extortion include tolls and set fees called *rentas*, which vary depending on the value of products delivered. Wider societal impacts include limited access to certain areas, limited movement for economic opportunity, and disruption to commerce.

El Salvador: Extortion impacts an estimated 40 to 60 percent of public transport routes.[4] The assessment team also found that agriculture and product distributors are strongly affected.

Guatemala: The assessment team found that extortion is the main link between the transport sector and organized crime. Bus assistants are often members of gangs and gangs often acquire bus lines or control them through extortion. Likewise, transport businesses have been a major channel for money laundering and embezzlement, as shown by several high-profile cases.

Honduras: The assessment team found that the sector's geographic exposure to gang-controlled routes is a determining factor for its risk of extortion. And although the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

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constituted an estimated 99 percent of all businesses, as of 2013: 141,600 micro, 4,500 small, 715 medium, and 390 large businesses. Additional data is provided in the MSMEs section of this report.

[3] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) and Insight Crime 2019. "A Criminal Culture: Extortion in Central America." https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Central-American-Extortion-Report-English-03May1400-WEB.pdf

[4] Dalton 2010. "La 'rebelión de las maras' paraliza el transporte público en El Salvador." El País. https://elpais.com/internacional/2010/09/09/actualidad/1283983203_850215.html. See also: EFE 2010. "Las pandillas paralizan el transporte en El Salvador y piden negociar al Gobierno." ElMundo. https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/09/08/noticias/1283932492.html.

> gang has shifted most of its operations to trafficking illegal narcotics, it still extorts transport companies.

Women and Girls: Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to extortion. They are typically subject to a greater range of extortion forms and at greater risk for revictimization by the criminal justice system. Conversely, the roles of women and girls in extortion schemes are evolving. Women are increasingly shifting from peripheral roles (e.g., fee collection) to those more central to extortion schemes, as they are perceived to draw less attention.

> **El Salvador:** Women own approximately 64 percent of microenterprises in El Salvador,[5] and are prime targets for private sector extortion. Women also face abuse and intimidation within the criminal justice system, which makes them less likely to report extortion.

> **Guatemala:** Based on official data, the prevalence of women victimized by extortion schemes and incarcerated on extortion charges has increased since 2016. However, the assessment team found that the National Civil Police (PNC) and Public Ministry (MP) often fail to take into consideration how gender factors into extortion schemes, thus hindering the effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions.

> **Honduras:** Based on official data, 11 percent of those incarcerated for extortion are women; of which about half are detained for collecting extortion fees. In addition, the National Women's Institute (INAM) stressed that the criminal justice system falls short on issues such as responding to reports from female extortion victims and under-registering crimes against women writ-large.

LGBTQI+: LGBTQI+ individuals comprise another subset of the population that is particularly vulnerable to extortion, as extortionists leverage their existing vulnerabilities. LGBTQI+ individuals in the region are more likely to experience socioeconomic instability, as discrimination limits access to education, housing, and employment. Such limits may push members of the LGBTQI+ community into informal commerce, sex work, or other income sources that are more exposed to extortion. Evidence also suggests that discrimination within the criminal justice system hinders assistance to LGBTQI+ extortion victims and deters reporting.

> **El Salvador:** Several cases of extortion-related violence towards LGBTQI+ individuals, transgender people in particular, mirror broader trends of endemic violence against LGBTQI+ individuals in the region. Gangs also appear to take advantage of LGBTQI+ individuals' vulnerability in extortion schemes by forcing them into sex work or to bring contraband in prisons, as indicated by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Communicating and Training Trans Women (COMCAVIS Trans).

> **Guatemala:** The assessment team found that homophobia and transphobia pervade the criminal justice process for LGBTQI+ individuals who report crimes. Additionally, policies such as Law

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[5] Women and Girls Empowered (WAGE) 2019. "Women's Economic Empowerment in El Salvador." https://grameenfoundation.org/documents/elsalvador-women-economic-empowerment-barriers-opportunities-path-forward-full-10-2019.pdf

> Initiative 5940 enable discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals and perpetuate vulnerabilities.[6]

> **Honduras:** Interviews and media reports suggest that many Honduran LGBTQI+-owned businesses pay extortion fees. Reports also suggest that the National Police (PN) and Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) aggravate extortion, with demands and raids of LGBTQI+ businesses. Likewise, the assessment team found that the police are major clients of sex workers, which fuels extortion and other related abuses.

Displacement and Migration: Extortion in the NCA region increases violence, fear, poverty, and other vulnerabilities that likely contribute to increased rates of displacement and migration.[7] Violence serves as a major cause of displacement and migration; however, data are generally not detailed enough to reflect the extent that this violence is extortion-related.

> **El Salvador:** According to Passionist Social Service (SSPAS) data, extortion was estimated to be the second-leading cause of forced displacement in 2021 and the fourth-leading cause in 2018, 2019, and 2020. SSPAS estimated a sharp increase in forced displacement linked to extortion in 2021, when violence displaced 166 LGBTQI+ Salvadorans.

> **Guatemala:** In 2017-2018, the main catalysts for displacement were general threats (36.4 percent), family violence (12.1 percent), and injuries (9.2 percent), as identified by the Human Rights Ombudsman Office. It is unclear to what extent these are extortion-related. Notably, according to one migration official interviewed, "almost no one" reports extortion as a cause.

> **Honduras:** According to 2019 data, the most frequently-reported causes of women's displacement were general threats (55 percent) and extortion (13 percent). However, 64 percent of respondents were victims of more than one crime, so there is a need to understand how crimes may be interrelated.

SECURITY AND JUDICIAL STRUCTURES

Each country's security and judicial structures have tools to combat extortion, including enforcement by the police; tracking extortion rates; oversight of finances and telecommunications; investigations by public prosecutors; trial and sanction in courts; and penitentiary operations. Given that gangs are the primary perpetrators of extortion, security and judicial structures must account for their organization, tactics, and proliferation when combating extortion.

Substantial gaps in implementation, policy, and data remain, including a lack of citizen-based approaches to violence prevention; a lack of data sharing among agencies; insufficient banking and

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[6] Law Initiative 5940 seeks to approve the Law to Guarantee the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Gender Identity Disorders, which was presented in Congress in July 2021.
[7] Norwegian Refugee Council. 2020. "Protection Snapshot: Extortion: a key trigger of internal displacement and forced migration in Central America and Mexico." https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/protection-snapshot-extortion-a-key-trigger-of-internal-displacement-and-forced-migration-in-central-america-and-mexico/.

telecommunications regulations; deficiencies in investigations (e.g., tracking extortion finances); a lack of resources for courts; and a lack of effective extortion prevention within prisons.

Enforcement by Police: While police and anti-extortion units have developed initiatives and strategies to combat extortion, they face several deficiencies. Extortion is perhaps the crime least-affected by policing approaches centered on repression and raids, given its pervasive integration into the daily lives of both victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, corrupt linkages persist between police and gangs, which also fuels extortion.

El Salvador: Various crime prevention plans have been initiated in recent years, although there is mixed evidence regarding their effectiveness in reducing extortion. While such policies have incorporated some citizen-based approaches, militarized and repressive tactics dominate in practice.

Guatemala: 14 regional police offices conduct search-and-seizure operations in prisons, carry out arrests, and advise victims. The assessment team found that such expanded geographic coverage has contributed to an increase in the number of extortion cases reported in recent years.

Honduras: The National Anti-Gang Task Force (FNAMP) – recently renamed the Police Directorate against Gangs and Organized Crime (Dipampco) – has centralized operations against extortion, while the assessment team identified deficiencies in this structure. Dipampco officials also stated that 95 percent of extortion is cash-based, which makes it difficult for them to trace the criminal networks involved.

Tracking Extortion Rates: Agencies face challenges in tracking extortion rates. This is due to an inconsistent definition of extortion among agencies, as well as underreporting by victims, in part because of the dynamics of extortion fee collection, lack of confidence in the justice system, and fear of reprisal. These and other shortcomings mean that complete and reliable 2021-2022 data are largely unavailable.

El Salvador: According to Ministry of Justice and Public Security data, between 2010 and 2017, extortion fell by 69 percent. Over the 2016-2020 period, official PNC data reflect a decline of 38 percent. However, there are evident contradictions between official data and interviews, which suggests that declines in official data may reflect underreporting.

Guatemala: Official rates of extortion targeting residences (per PNC data) rose by 113 percent between 2013 and 2019; extortion of businesses by 292 percent; and extortion of transport by 80 percent. Many officials attribute these increases to the expansion of channels for secure reporting and the opening of new police stations in ten departments. Even with this expansion, only a small percent of extortion is reported.

Honduras: Official police data reflect a 46 percent increase in extortion rates from 2017 to 2018, countered by a 66 percent decrease from 2018 to 2020, but followed by a sharp increase of 267 percent from 2020 to 2021.

Finances and Telecommunications: Extortion is facilitated by telecommunication and banking channels that lack the necessary political will to enact adequate controls. The laundering of extortion funds is becoming increasingly complex through the utilization of bank loans, financial cooperatives, and cryptocurrency, in addition to money transfers via mobile apps. Likewise, extortion is driven by the ease of communications from within prisons, such as uncontrolled access to mobile phones.

> **El Salvador:** The adoption of Bitcoin as an official currency complicates the fight against extortion, since its virtual and decentralized structure make illegal money transfers more challenging to track. Until 2013, 24 percent of extortion money was moved through the platform Tigo Money, according to one former official interviewed.

> **Guatemala:** Anti-extortion policies appear to be crippled by the government's inability to track and freeze the illicit resources and money generated by the crime. Officials cited a lack of cooperation from banks to freeze accounts and provide information that could help them trace banking activity.

> **Honduras:** Honduran officials interviewed complained about the ease with which gangs utilized Banco Azteca for extortion, money laundering, and other financial crimes. Likewise, the National Commission of Banking and Insurance (CNBS), which oversees most financial institutions, has been accused of overlooking companies with political ties and ignoring patterns of money laundering.

Investigation: Through recent initiatives, NCA countries have strengthened public prosecutors to fight extortion. However, large-scale investigative operations often fail to address the dynamics of increasingly complex extortion schemes. For example, even as prosecutors become more effective, most perpetrators successfully investigated are from the lower ranks of gangs. Underfunding, lack of training, and poor interagency coordination all hinder investigations. When cases remain stagnant due to institutional deficiencies, suspects may continue to fuel broader extortion schemes.

> **El Salvador:** To strengthen PNC and public prosecutor (FGR) efforts in recent years, 100 new prosecutors were hired around the country. Data reflect that prosecution has become more effective following a spike in kidnappings and related crimes, even leading to the creation of the FGR-organized crime unit; however, prosecutorial actions overall remain limited because of underfunding.

> **Guatemala:** The public prosecutor has 11 specialized extortion regional offices that manage extortion cases. These offices are understaffed and lack equipment, which presents challenges to tracing money and other activities critical to case development. While cases remain stagnant, suspects may continue to fuel extortion schemes.

> **Honduras:** Extortion investigations have improved through coordination among specialized agencies, such as the Criminal Investigation Technical Agency (ATIC) and Special Prosecutor against Organized Crime (FESCCO). FESCCO reports that at any given time, there are approximately 350 active extortion summons and 90 percent of cases in court result in convictions, which is a rate affirmed by the National Interagency Security Force (FUSINA).

Trial and Sanction (Courts): Following enforcement and investigation, the trial and sanction of extortion cases in courts are another crucial line of effort. The assessment team found that backlogged courts reflect a lack of resources and hinder case resolution for extortion and other crimes.

> **El Salvador:** Nearly every entity interviewed reported a systemic failure in case processing. The National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP) asserts that 92 percent of extortion cases are not resolved. Evidence suggests the lack of resolution, resulting in backlogged courts, is due to weak or incomplete investigations.[8]

> **Guatemala:** In 2020, 84 percent of indictments ended in a conviction.[9] Cases progressed relatively quickly until late 2019, when courts closed during the pandemic and resulted in a backlog that remains unaddressed.

> **Honduras:** Established in 2017, the effectiveness of the anti-extortion circuit court is notable. With five courts in the country's two main cities, the court received 787 cases in its first two years and resolved 629 (80 percent).[10] One judge interviewed attributes this success to the strong vetting of all personnel, transparent databases, and agency collaboration.

Penitentiary Systems: Following trial and sanction, the penitentiary systems in NCA countries also play a role in the fight against, and conversely, the proliferation of, extortion. NCA's prisons are a source of a large percentage of extortion calls and schemes, as overcrowding and personnel deficiencies allow for prison-based extortion to persist. As a result, clear solutions have not been effectively applied, such as better monitoring and technological blocks.

> **El Salvador:** From 2000-2016, the prison population quadrupled as well as the number of incarcerated gang members.[11] A quarter of inmates are estimated to be gang members convicted of extortion.[12] Gang leaders have centralized operations in prisons, which became a prime origin of extortion schemes over time.

> **Guatemala:** Challenges within prisons include a lack of guard vetting and low salaries, a combination that fosters bribery. Authorities interviewed agree that until they have full oversight over persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), they cannot reduce extortion.

> **Honduras:** 17 percent of the incarcerated population was convicted for extortion, according to official data. Personnel appear to have little control over telephone calls from inside prisons, from

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[8] Such backlogs date back to 2003 with the implementation of the *Mano Dura Plan of 2003,* centered on indiscriminate arrests, based on circumstantial evidence. The vast majority of those arrested were released within hours due to lack of evidence.

[9] CIEN 2022. Estudio de Extorsión para el Triángulo Norte: Enfoque Institucional para Guatemala.

[10] ASJ 2022. Impuesto de Guerra: El fenómeno de la extorsión y la respuesta estatal en Honduras.

[11] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.

[12] Andrade 2015. "Las pandillas salvadoreñas y el delito de extorsión. Desafíos y prioridades en relación con el fenómeno extorsivo." Centro de Investigación Científica (CINC-ANSP). Revista Policía y Seguridad Pública, Año 5, Vol. 1, p. 103-148. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282897651_Las_pandillas_salvadorenas_y_el_delito_de_extorsion_Desafios_y_prioridades_en_relacion_con_el_fenomeno_extorsivo

which 70 percent of extortion orders originate.[13] Efforts to block cell signals have been circumvented by PDLs, such as through satellite phones.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reforms should effectively address the various implementation and data gaps highlighted in combating extortion. Anti-extortion efforts should be thoroughly integrated into security policies, programs, and laws. Policymakers must holistically examine parallel chains of criminal activity, such as how individual extortion schemes can lead to other crimes, and chains of enforcement, in which weak collaboration among security and judicial agencies undermine action. Approaches must also cover national, departmental, and municipal levels, and ensure collaboration between relevant officials. As such, the recommendations below are based on practical steps that have potential for change.

ADDRESSING SOCIOECONOMIC TRENDS AND IMPACTS

MSMEs:

- Support and expand MSME associations: Global experiences indicate that one of the most effective responses to commercial-zone extortion are MSME associations. USAID support could include training on resilience and security measures.

- Improve reporting mechanisms such as hotlines: Secure and accessible communications channels are one of the best ways to maximize reporting of extortion. USAID could provide technical assistance and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) support to improve and expand existing models.

Transport Sector:

- Support the surveillance of high-risk transport hubs and routes: Surveillance has proven to be a useful protection measure, as evidenced in El Salvador. United States Government (USG) actors – such as the United States Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) – could expand support for rights-respecting surveillance measures (e.g., cameras, panic buttons) for workers along high-risk routes.

- Support capacity-building of specialized transport security units: Existing units should be evaluated and, provided they meet vetting requirements, supported by USG actors such as INL. Such support could focus on improving coordination with the transport sector through secure communications and reporting channels, among operators, victims, and institutions.

Women and Girls:

- Support gender-focused investigations by anti-extortion units: Extortion tactics and schemes which rely on gender dynamics (e.g., the utilization of female perpetrators) should be further investigated and prosecuted. USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide training to relevant anti-extortion units on such approaches.

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[13] Restrepo 2019. "Extorsión, violencia y crimen organizado: 8 ideas para frenar el impuesto del miedo." Inter-American Development Bank. https://blogs.iadb.org/seguridad-ciudadana/es/extorsion-violencia-y-crimen-organizado-8-ideas-para-frenar-el-impuesto-del-miedo/

- **Support and expand multi-service centers for female victims:** Existing multi-services centers, including NGO and state initiatives, require additional funding to support victims. One promising model for multi-service centers is *Ciudad Mujer* in Honduras. Furthermore, USG actors could provide technical assistance for women's police units, such as the Institutional Unit for Specialized Assistance to Women in Situations of Violence (UNIMUJER-ODAC) in El Salvador, to increase reporting and facilitate victim assistance.

LGBTQI+:

- **Support LGBTQI+-sensitive training among justice sector actors:** Due to deficiencies and discrimination in supporting LGBTQI+ victims within the justice system, USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide LGBTQI+ and gender-sensitive training to police and prosecutors.

- **Improve safe reporting mechanisms:** USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide technical assistance in improving safe reporting mechanisms for LGBTQI+ victims.

Displacement and Migration:

- **Provide M&E support to agencies and NGOs engaged in addressing displacement and migration:** Given vast gaps in relevant data, USAID should invest in efforts to better understand the relationship between extortion and displacement. This could include tracking residential turnover rates in collaboration with NGOs; developing and strengthening information platforms; and monitoring extortion among returnees.

IMPROVING AND REINFORCING SECURITY AND JUDICIAL APPROACHES

Enforcement by Police:

- **Invest in local, community-oriented policing approaches:** Approaches could serve as an alternative to repressive, raid-focused tactics. USG actors such as USAID and INL could provide financial assistance and capacity-building for the replication of successful models.

- **Support and expand police-private sector partnerships:** These partnerships emphasize trust-building between police and citizens at the local level, allowing for cooperation to detect and combat extortion. Examples from El Salvador could serve as models.

Tracking Extortion Rates:

- **Provide M&E support at the municipal and departmental levels:** USAID could provide assistance to local entities managing extortion data, such as support for annual standardized victimization surveys and facilitating mechanisms for interagency collaboration and standardization.

- **Provide technical assistance in reviewing primary legislation relating to extortion:** USG actors could provide technical assistance by reviewing existing legislation that covers extortion in each NCA country. This support could identify gaps in definitions, enforcement, and punishment, among other factors.

Finances and Telecommunications:

- Strengthen banking and telecommunications regulations: With support from international actors, national governments should strengthen banking regulations by focusing on controls and monitoring of extortion-related activity.

- Improve financial investigations: USG actors could assist local entities to better "follow the money" and trace patterns of laundering and investment, and support investigations of frequent channels such as Tigo Money.

Investigation:

- Address operational gaps in prosecution: USG actors such as INL could provide technical assistance and training to prosecutors and other specialized units at the national and local levels to address gaps in combating increasingly complex extortion schemes. Training could address case theory, counter-interrogation, litigation, and evidence preparation. Financial assistance could boost personnel and equipment gaps.

Trial and Sanction (Courts):

- Replicate and support successful anti-extortion court models: The anti-extortion circuit court in Honduras has resulted in concrete advances in the prosecution of extortion cases. USAID could provide financial and technical assistance to expand such models, particularly at regional and local levels within each country.

- Support local and regional courts: Likewise, courts with regional jurisdiction within each country need far more training and resources to handle extortion, and to better coordinate with each national government.

Penitentiary Systems:

- Support preventative measures (including a monitoring and communications strategy): Prison officials should be supported to develop strategies to better detect extortion schemes. Improved monitoring, telecommunications blockages, and internal restrictions could all be supported through financial and technical assistance.

- Support rehabilitation and counter recidivism: Those who are released from prison are vulnerable to continue working with gangs and extortion schemes. One mechanism could be post-sentence service centers with recidivism-reduction programs, using restorative justice models. USG actors such as USAID and INL could provide support in the implementation of such programs.

RESUMEN EJECUTIVO

El estudio de extorsión para el norte de Centroamérica (NCA), llevado a cabo por LACLEARN para USAID, proporciona una mirada holística de las tendencias e impactos de la extorsión en los tres países del NCA: El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras. Gracias a este análisis, el informe ofrece recomendaciones basadas en evidencia, para combatir la extorsión a través de políticas y programas, que podrían ser implementadas por USAID u otros actores relevantes.

RESUMEN METODOLÓGICO

El estudio intenta responder a tres preguntas fundamentales:

- ¿Cuáles son las condiciones socioeconómicas que fomentan la extorsión?
- ¿Cuáles son los impactos específicos de la dinámica de la extorsión para las poblaciones vulnerables?
- ¿En qué medida colaboran los organismos policiales y judiciales en prevenir, investigar y procesar los delitos de extorsión?

Cómo tema de investigación, la extorsión es intrínsecamente difícil en parte debido tanto a las dificultades que plantea la recopilación de datos secundarios, como a la falta generalizada de denuncias. Este estudio utilizó un enfoque metodológico mixto, empleando una revisión bibliográfica de 105 publicaciones, una revisión de las bases de datos secundarias y una recopilación de datos primarios a partir de 120 entrevistas a profundidad a informantes clave (KII) y 30 grupos focales (FGD). El análisis abarca una amplia gama de patrones regionales y específicos de cada país, a la vez que se identifican aquellos vacíos identificados en datos y políticas. Anexo I ofrece un análisis cuantitativo complementario.

PRINCIPALES HALLAZGOS

TENDENCIAS E IMPACTO SOCIOECONÓMICO

La extorsión afecta a todos los sectores productivos en los países del NCA, especialmente a las micro, pequeñas y medianas empresas (MIPYMEs) y particularmente al transporte. A nivel individual, la extorsión desproporcionadamente afecta las poblaciones vulnerables, incluidas las mujeres y las niñas, las personas lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transexuales, queer e intersexuales (LGBTQI+) y los migrantes. Entre las repercusiones socioeconómicas más destacadas se encuentran: la pérdida de ingresos, el cierre de negocios, la explotación sexual, los daños físicos y el desplazamiento forzado y la emigración. Como resultado de su omnipresencia, parece que la extorsión se ha convertido en una "forma de vida" para las comunidades y las pandillas.[14]

Sin embargo, los datos disponibles pueden ocultar el alcance e impacto real de la extorsión en los individuos y las comunidades. Es probable que los datos oficiales reflejen un sesgo importante ya que muchas empresas y personas no denuncian el delito debido al miedo a las represalias o la falta de confianza en el sistema penal de justicia.

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[14] La estructura de Maras y Pandillas en el NCA se desarrolla en el Área 11.

MIPYMEs: Las MIPYMEs son el pilar de las economías del NCA: las microempresas constituyen más del 90% de las empresas de cada país.[15] Los datos sugieren que la extorsión es costosa y está muy extendida en cuanto a su impacto en las MIPYMEs. El equipo de investigación descubrió que la extorsión obstaculiza la capacidad de las empresas para obtener beneficios e invertir debido al aumento de los costes (incluidas las tasas de extorsión y los costes de seguridad), al tiempo que obliga a algunas empresas a cerrar. Asimismo, las empresas más pequeñas se ven afectadas de forma desproporcionada por el delito, en comparación con las empresas más grandes que pueden absorber los costes asociados.

> **El Salvador:** En las recientes encuestas de victimización, la mayoría de las MIPYMES informan que han sido extorsionadas. La extorsión se concentra en las zonas urbanas, como por ejemplo el centro de San Salvador. Su impacto en las áreas rurales también es evidente entre el sector agrícola, particularmente los productores de caña de azúcar.

> **Guatemala:** Los datos sugieren que las empresas guatemaltecas gastan al menos el 7 por ciento de su presupuesto en cuotas de extorsión y al menos el 10 por ciento en costes de seguridad.[16] El equipo de evaluación encontró que casi todos los negocios en las áreas controladas por las pandillas son extorsionados, particularmente los informales.

> **Honduras:** Entrevistas e reportajes sugieren que la mayoría de las víctimas de extorsión en ciertas áreas, como en la Colonia Las Torres de Tegucigalpa, son empresas. El equipo de investigación descubrió que los sectores hondureños más afectados son los distribuidores de mercancías, los microempresarios/as y el sector transporte. Un funcionario del sector privado informó que se estima que 90.000 negocios cerraron como resultado de la extorsión entre 2016-2021.

Sector del transporte: La extorsión ha diezmado los sectores del transporte en los países del NCA a través de la violencia y la pérdida de ingresos de las empresas, operadores y pasajeros. Entre las principales formas de extorsión se encuentran los "peajes" y las tarifas fijas denominadas "rentas", que varían en función del valor de los productos distribuidos. Los impactos sociales más amplios incluyen la limitación del acceso a ciertas áreas, la limitación de la circulación para mayores oportunidades económicas y la interrupción del comercio.

> **El Salvador:** Se estima que la extorsión afecta a entre el 40 y el 60 por ciento de las rutas de transporte público.[17] El equipo de evaluación también encontró que la agricultura y los distribuidores de productos se ven fuertemente afectados.

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[15] En El Salvador, las micro y pequeñas empresas constituyen aproximadamente 97 por ciento de todas empresas en 2022: 155,000 micro, 5,500 pequeñas, 575 medianas, y 603 grandes empresas. En Guatemala, las micro y pequeñas empresas constituyen aproximadamente 98 por ciento de las MIPYMEs, desde 2015: 331,000 micro, 36,000 pequeñas, y 4,000 medianas empresas. En Honduras, las micro y pequeñas empresas constituyen aproximadamente 99 por ciento de las empresas, desde 2013: 141,600 micro, 4,500 pequeñas, 715 medianas, y 390 grandes empresas. Datos adicionales están proveídos en la sección de MIPYMES (MSMEs) de este informe.

[16] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) y Insight Crime 2019. "A Criminal Culture: Extortion in Central America." https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Central-American-Extortion-Report-English-03May1400-WEB.pdf

[17] Dalton 2010. "La 'rebelión de las maras' paraliza el transporte público en El Salvador." El País. https://elpais.com/internacional/2010/09/09/actualidad/1283983203_850215.html

EFE 2010. "Las pandillas paralizan el transporte en El Salvador y piden negociar al Gobierno." ElMundo. https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/09/08/noticias/1283932492.html

> **Guatemala:** El equipo de investigación descubrió que la extorsión es un vínculo clave entre el sector del transporte y el crimen organizado. Los auxiliares de los autobuses suelen ser miembros de pandillas, y las pandillas suelen adquirir líneas de autobuses o controlarlas mediante la extorsión. Asimismo, las empresas de transporte han sido un canal importante para el lavado de dinero y la malversación, como lo demuestran varios casos de alto perfil.

> **Honduras:** El equipo de investigación encontró que la exposición geográfica del sector a las rutas controladas por las pandillas es un factor clave. Y aunque la pandilla Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) ha desplazado la mayor parte de sus operaciones al tráfico de narcóticos ilegales, sigue extorsionando a las empresas de transporte.

Mujeres y niñas: Las mujeres y las niñas son especialmente vulnerables a la extorsión. Suelen ser objeto de una mayor variedad de formas de extorsión y corren un mayor riesgo de revictimización por parte del sistema penal. Por el contrario, el papel de las mujeres y las niñas en los planes de extorsión está evolucionando. Las mujeres son cada vez más pasando de las funciones secundarias (por ejemplo, el cobro de cuotas) a las más centrales en los planes de extorsión, ya que su perfil se percibe atraer menos atención.

> **El Salvador:** Las mujeres son propietarias del 64 por ciento de las microempresas en El Salvador,[18] son principales objetivos de las extorsiones al sector privado. Las mujeres también se enfrentan a abusos e intimidaciones dentro del sistema penal, lo que hace menos probable que denuncien las extorsiones.

> **Guatemala:** Según los datos oficiales, la prevalencia de mujeres víctimas de esquemas de extorsión, así como las encarceladas por cargos de extorsión, ha aumentado. Sin embargo, el equipo de investigación encontró que la Policía Nacional (PNC) y el Ministerio Público (MP) a menudo pasan por alto los enfoques de género en los esquemas de extorsión, obstaculizando la capacidad de investigar y procesar las tácticas pertinentes.

> **Honduras:** Según los datos oficiales, 11 por ciento de los encarcelados por extorsión son mujeres; de las cuales cerca de la mitad de estas mujeres fueron detenidas por cobrar cuotas de extorsión. El Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (INAM) destacó que el sistema de justicia penal tiene deficiencias en aspectos clave como la respuesta a las denuncias por mujeres víctimas, así como el subregistro de delitos contra las mujeres en general.

LGBTQI+: El colectivo LGBTQI+ constituye otro subgrupo de la población especialmente vulnerable a la extorsión, como los extorsionadores aprovechan a sus vulnerabilidades existentes. Las personas LGBTQI+ de la región tienen más probabilidades de sufrir inestabilidad socioeconómica, ya que la discriminación limita el acceso a la educación, la vivienda y el empleo. Estas limitaciones pueden empujar los miembros de la comunidad LGBTQI+ al comercio informal, al trabajo sexual o a otras fuentes de ingresos que están expuestas a la extorsión. Los datos también sugieren que la discriminación dentro del

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[18] Women and Girls Empowered (WAGE) 2019. "Women's Economic Empowerment in El Salvador." https://grameenfoundation.org/documents/elsalvador-women-economic-empowerment-barriers-opportunities-path-forward-full-10-2019.pdf

sistema penal dificulta la asistencia a las víctimas de extorsión entre la población LGBTQI+, que se disuade de denunciar.

> **El Salvador:** Varios casos de violencia relacionada con la extorsión hacia personas LGBTQI+ (personas trans en particular) reflejan tendencias más amplias de violencia endémica contra personas LGBTQI+ en la región. Parece que las pandillas también se aprovechan de la vulnerabilidad de las personas LGBTQI+ en los esquemas de extorsión, obligándolas a realizar trabajo sexual o a llevar contrabando a las cárceles, como informó una ONG local (COMCAVIS Trans).

> **Guatemala:** El equipo de investigación encontró que la homofobia y la transfobia impregnan el proceso de justicia penal para aquellos individuos LGBTQI+ que denuncian delitos. Además, las políticas permiten que persista la discriminación (y las vulnerabilidades pertinentes) de las personas LGBTQI+, como la Iniciativa de Ley 5940.[19]

> **Honduras:** Las entrevistas y los informes de los medios de comunicación sugieren que muchos negocios hondureños propiedad de personas LGBTQI+ pagan cuotas de extorsión. Reportajes también sugiere que la Policía Nacional y la Policía Militar del Orden Público (PMOP) agravan la extorsión, con demandas y redadas a los negocios LGBTQI+. Asimismo, el equipo de investigación descubrió que la policía es uno de los principales clientes del trabajo sexual, lo que alimenta la extorsión y los otros abusos relacionados.

Desplazamiento interno y migración: La extorsión en la región aumenta la violencia, el miedo, la pobreza y otras vulnerabilidades hasta niveles que probablemente contribuyen a las tasas aumentadas de desplazamiento interno y migración.[20] Está claro que la violencia es una de las principales causas del desplazamiento y la migración; sin embargo, los datos no son lo suficientemente detallados como para reflejar hasta qué punto esta violencia está relacionada con la extorsión.

> **El Salvador:** Según datos del Servicio Social Pasionista (SSPAS), se estimó que la extorsión fue la segunda causa de desplazamiento forzado en 2021, y la cuarta causa en 2018, 2019 y 2020. El SSPAS estimó un fuerte aumento del desplazamiento forzado vinculado a la extorsión en 2021, cuando la violencia desplazó a 166 salvadoreños LGBTQI+.

> **Guatemala:** En 2017-2018, los principales catalizadores del desplazamiento fueron identificados como amenazas (36,4 por ciento), violencia familiar (12,1 por ciento) y lesiones (9,2 por ciento), como identificados por el Procurador de los Derechos Humanos. No está claro hasta qué punto están relacionados con la extorsión. En particular, según un funcionario de migración entrevistado, "casi nadie" señala la extorsión como causa.

> **Honduras:** Según los datos de 2019, entre las causas más reportadas de desplazamiento de las mujeres estaban las amenazas (con un 55 por ciento) y la extorsión (con un 13 por ciento). Sin

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[19] La Iniciativa de Ley 5940 busca aprobar la Ley para Garantizar la Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes contra los Trastornos de Identidad de Género, que fue presentada en julio de 2021.

[20] Norwegian Refugee Council. 2020. "Protection Snapshot: Extortion: a key trigger of internal displacement and forced migration in Central America and Mexico." https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/protection-snapshot-extortion-a-key-trigger-of-internal-displacement-and-forced-migration-in-central-america-and-mexico/

embargo, 64 por ciento de las encuestadas fueron víctimas de más de un delito, pues es necesario entender cómo estos delitos se interrelacionan.

ESTRUCTURAS DE SEGURIDAD CIUDADANA Y JUSTICIA

Las estructuras de seguridad ciudadana y judiciales de cada país tienen herramientas para combatir la extorsión: aplicación de la ley por parte de la policía; seguimiento de los índices de extorsión; vigilancia sobre las finanzas y las telecomunicaciones; investigaciones por parte de las fiscalías; juicio y sanción en los tribunales; y operaciones penitenciarias. Debido a que las pandillas son los principales autores de la extorsión, las estructuras de seguridad ciudadana y judiciales deben tener en cuenta su organización, sus tácticas y su proliferación en la lucha contra la extorsión.

Siguen existiendo grandes vacíos en la aplicación, las políticas y los datos, entre las que se incluyen: la falta de enfoques basados en la ciudadanía para la prevención de la violencia; la falta de intercambio de datos entre los organismos; la insuficiencia de las regulaciones bancarias y de telecomunicaciones; las deficiencias en la investigación (por ejemplo, el seguimiento de las finanzas de la extorsión); la falta de recursos para los tribunales de justicia; y la falta de prevención eficaz dentro de las prisiones.

Aplicación de la ley por parte de la policía: Aunque la policía y las unidades antiextorsión han desarrollado iniciativas y estrategias para combatir la extorsión, se enfrentan a varias deficiencias. La extorsión es quizás el delito que menos ha sido impactado por las estrategias policiales centradas en la represión y las redadas, dada su omnipresente integración en la vida cotidiana tanto de las víctimas como de los autores. Además, persisten los vínculos corruptos entre la policía y las pandillas, lo que también alimenta la extorsión.

El Salvador: En los últimos años se han puesto en marcha varios planes de prevención del delito, aunque existen pruebas contradictorias sobre su eficacia para reducir la extorsión. Aunque dichas políticas han incorporado algunos enfoques basados en la ciudadanía, en la práctica predominan las tácticas militarizadas y represivas.

Guatemala: 14 oficinas regionales de policía realizan operaciones de búsqueda y captura en las cárceles, llevan a cabo detenciones y asesoran a las víctimas. El equipo de investigación constató que ante una mayor cobertura geográfica ha contribuido al aumento de las denuncias de extorsión en los últimos años.

Honduras: La Fuerza Nacional Anti-Maras y Pandillas (FNAMP) -recientemente rebautizada como Dirección Policial Anti Maras y Pandillas Contra el Crimen Organizado (Dipampco)- ha centralizado las operaciones contra la extorsión, al tiempo que afirma que las pandillas se infiltran en todas las ramas del sistema penal. Los funcionarios de la Dipampco también afirmaron que el 95 por ciento de las extorsiones se realizan en efectivo, lo que dificulta su rastreo.

Seguimiento de los índices de extorsión: Las agencias enfrentan retos en el seguimiento de las tasas de extorsión. Esto se debe a la definición inconsistente de extorsión entre las agencias gubernamentales y el subregistro de denuncias, en parte debido a la dinámica del cobro de extorsión, la

falta de confianza en el sistema de justicia y el miedo a las represalias. Estas y otras deficiencias representan datos incompletos y poco fiables para 2021-2022.

> **El Salvador:** Según el Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica, las extorsiones disminuyen de 69 por ciento entre 2010 y 2017. Los datos oficiales de la PNC reflejan en general una disminución de 38 por ciento entre 2016 y 2020. Sin embargo, las entrevistas sugieren que los descensos en datos oficiales pueden reflejan un subregistro en denuncias.

> **Guatemala:** Las tasas de extorsión oficial contra las residencias aumentaron en un 113 por ciento entre 2013 y 2019; la extorsión a los negocios en un 292 por ciento; y las tasas contra el transporte aumentaron en un 80 por ciento. Muchos funcionarios atribuyen estos aumentos como resultado de la expansión de los canales de denuncia segura y la apertura de oficinas en 10 departamentos. Aun con esa expansión, solo se denuncia un pequeño porcentaje de las extorsiones.

> **Honduras:** Los datos de la Policía Nacional (PN) reflejan un aumento del 46 por ciento en las tasas de extorsión de 2017 a 2018, contrarrestado por una disminución del 66 por ciento de este período a 2020, y otro fuerte aumento del 267 por ciento de 2020 a 2021.

Finanzas y telecomunicaciones: La extorsión se facilita a través de canales de telecomunicaciones y bancarios que carecen de voluntad política para ejercer controles administrativos y técnicos. El blanqueo de los fondos de la extorsión se vuelve más compleja a través de préstamos bancarios, cooperativas financieras y criptomonedas, además de las transferencias de dinero a través de aplicaciones móviles. Asimismo, la extorsión se ve impulsada por la facilidad de comunicación desde las prisiones y el acceso poco controlado a los teléfonos móviles.

> **El Salvador:** La adopción de Bitcoin como moneda oficial complica la lucha contra la extorsión, ya que su estructura virtual y descentralizada hace que las transferencias ilegales de dinero sean aún más difíciles de rastrear. Además, hasta 2013, el 24 por ciento del dinero de las extorsiones se movía a través de la plataforma Tigo Money.

> **Guatemala:** La política anti extorsión parece estar paralizada por la incapacidad del gobierno de rastrear el dinero pertinente y congelar los activos. Los funcionarios citan la falta de cooperación de los bancos para congelar cuentas y proporcionar información que podría ayudar a las autoridades a rastrear la actividad bancaria.

> **Honduras:** Los funcionarios hondureños entrevistados se quejaron de la facilidad con la que las pandillas utilizaban Banco Azteca para la extorsión, el blanqueo y otros delitos financieros. Asimismo, la Comisión Nacional de Bancos y Seguros (CNBS), que supervisa a la mayoría de las instituciones financieras, ha sido acusada de pasar por alto a las empresas con vínculos políticos y de ignorar los patrones de lavado de dinero.

Investigación: A través de iniciativas recientes, los países de la NCA han reforzado las fiscalías para luchar contra la extorsión. Sin embargo, las operaciones de investigación a gran escala a menudo no logran abordar esquemas de extorsión más amplios. Por ejemplo, aunque los fiscales sean más eficaces, la mayoría de los autores investigados con éxito pertenecen a rangos inferiores de las pandillas. La

escasa financiación, la falta de formación y la escasa coordinación entre organismos dificultan aún más las investigaciones.

El Salvador: Para reforzar los esfuerzos de la PNC y la Fiscalía General de la República (FGR) en los recientes años, se contrataron 100 fiscales nuevos en todo el país. Los datos reflejan que la persecución fiscal se ha vuelto más eficaz tras un aumento de los secuestros y los delitos conexos (que dieron lugar a las unidades de delincuencia organizada de la FGR); sin embargo, sigue siendo limitada debido a la falta de fondos.

Guatemala: La fiscalía cuenta con once oficinas regionales especializadas en extorsión que dan seguimiento a los casos de extorsión. Estas oficinas enfrentan una falta crónica de personal y equipo, presentando así dificultades para rastrear fondos y otras actividades criticas para desarrollar un caso judicial. Mientras los casos de extorsión permanecen estancados, los sospechosos pueden seguir alimentando los esquemas de extorsión.

Honduras: Las investigaciones de extorsión han mejorado gracias a la coordinación entre agencias especializadas, como la Agencia Técnica de Investigación Criminal (ATIC) y la Fiscalía Especial contra el Crimen Organizado (FESCCO). La FESCCO informa que en cualquier momento hay aproximadamente 350 citaciones de extorsión activas y que el 90 por ciento de los casos en los tribunales resultan en condenas - una tasa afirmada por la Fuerza Nacional de Seguridad Interinstitucional (FUSINA).

Juicio y sanción (tribunales): Tras los esfuerzos policiales y las investigaciones, el juicio y la sanción de la extorsión en los tribunales constituyen otra línea de esfuerzo clave. El equipo de investigación descubrió que los tribunales sobrecargados reflejan la falta de recursos y dificultan la resolución de los casos de extorsión y delitos relacionados.

El Salvador: Casi todos los organismos informan de un fracaso sistémico en el procesamiento de los casos. La Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) afirma que el 92 por ciento de los casos de extorsión no se resuelven. La evidencia sugiere problemas en la agilización de los procesos judiciales durante la etapa de investigación, lo que genera atrasos en los tribunales.[21]

Guatemala: En 2020, el 84 por ciento de las acusaciones terminan en una condena.[22] Los casos avanzaron con relativa rapidez hasta finales de 2019, cuando los tribunales cerraron durante la pandemia y dieron lugar a un retraso que sigue sin resolverse.

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[21] Estos atrasos han sido desde 2003 con la implementación del *Plan Mano Dura,* lo que enfocó en las aprehensiones indiscriminadas, basadas en evidencia de circunstancia. La gran mayoría de los aprehendidos fueron liberados entre algunas horas debido a la falta de evidencia.
[22] CIEN 2022. Estudio de Extorsión para el Triángulo Norte: Enfoque Institucional para Guatemala.

Honduras: Establecido en 2017, la eficacia del tribunal de circuito antiextorsión es notable. Con apenas cinco juzgados en las dos principales ciudades del país, en sus dos primeros años el tribunal recibió 787 casos y resolvió 629 (80 por ciento).[23] Un juez entrevistado atribuye su eficacia a los procesos investigativos para contratar personal; a la transparencia de las bases de datos; y a la colaboración interinstitucional.

Sistemas penitenciarios: Tras el juicio y la sanción, está claro que los sistemas penitenciarios de los países del NCA también desempeñan un papel en la lucha contra la extorsión (y a la inversa, en su proliferación). Las prisiones son una fuente de un gran porcentaje de llamadas y esquemas de extorsión, mientras que el hacinamiento y las deficiencias de personal permiten que persista la extorsión en las prisiones. En consecuencia, no se han aplicado soluciones claras -mejor vigilancia y bloqueos tecnológicos- de forma efectiva.

El Salvador: La población carcelaria se cuadruplico de 2000 a 2016, así como el número de pandilleros tras las rejas.[24] Más de una cuarta parte de los privados de libertad son miembros de pandillas condenados por extorsión.[25] Los líderes comenzaron a centralizar las operaciones en las prisiones, y con el tiempo, las prisiones se convirtieron en un origen principal de los esquemas de extorsión.

Guatemala: Desafíos dentro de las prisiones incluyen la falta de investigación de los guardias y los bajos salarios, una combinación que fomenta el soborno. Las autoridades entrevistadas están de acuerdo en que hasta que no tengan una supervisión total de las Personas Privadas de Libertad (PDL), no podrán reducir la extorsión.

Honduras: El 17 por ciento de la población encarcelada fue condenada por extorsión, según datos oficiales. Parece que el personal tiene poco control sobre las llamadas telefónicas desde el interior de las prisiones, desde donde se origina el 70 por ciento de las órdenes de extorsión.[26] Los esfuerzos por bloquear las señales de los celulares han sido burlados por los PDL, como a través de teléfonos satelitales.

PRINCIPALES RECOMENDACIONES

Las reformas deben abordar eficazmente los vacíos tanto en la aplicación de medidas como en los datos existentes para lograr mejores resultados en la lucha contra la extorsión. Simultáneamente, la extorsión debe integrarse a cabalidad en las políticas, programas y leyes de seguridad ciudadana. Los responsables de las políticas deben examinar de forma holística los encadenamientos de actividad delictiva, así como la forma en que los planes de extorsión individuales pueden conducir a otros delitos. Así como los

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[23] ASJ 2022. Impuesto de Guerra: El fenómeno de la extorsión y la respuesta estatal en Honduras.

[24] GI-TOC y Insight Crime 2019.

[25] Andrade 2015. "Las pandillas salvadoreñas y el delito de extorsión. Desafíos y prioridades en relación con el fenómeno extorsivo." Centro de Investigación Científica (CINC-ANSP). Revista Policía y Seguridad Pública, Año 5, Vol. 1, p. 103-148. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282897651_Las_pandillas_salvadorenas_y_el_delito_de_extorsion_Desafios_y_priori dades_en_relacion_con_el_fenomeno_extorsivo

[26] Restrepo 2019. "Extorsión, violencia y crimen organizado: 8 ideas para frenar el impuesto del miedo." Inter-American Development Bank. https://blogs.iadb.org/seguridad-ciudadana/es/extorsion-violencia-y-crimen-organizado-8-ideas-para-frenar-el-impuesto-del-miedo/

encadenamientos de aplicación de la ley, en los que la escasa colaboración entre los organismos de seguridad y judiciales socava la acción. Los enfoques también deben abarcar los niveles nacional, departamental y municipal, y garantizar la colaboración entre los funcionarios responsables. Por ello, las recomendaciones que aquí se ofrecen se basan en medidas prácticas que tienen potencial para el cambio.

SOBRE CÓMO ABORDAR LAS TENDENCIAS E IMPACTOS SOCIOECONÓMICOS

MIPYMEs:

- <u>Apoyar y ampliar las asociaciones de MIPYMEs:</u> Las experiencias mundiales indican que una de las respuestas más eficaces a la extorsión en zonas comerciales son las asociaciones de MIPYMEs. El apoyo de USAID podría incluir la formación sobre medidas de resiliencia y seguridad.

- <u>Mejorar los mecanismos de denuncia, como las líneas directas:</u> Los canales de comunicación seguros y accesibles son una de las mejores formas de maximizar las denuncias de extorsión. USAID podría proporcionar asistencia técnica y apoyo de seguimiento y evaluación (M&E) para mejorar y ampliar los modelos existentes.

Sector transporte:

- <u>Apoyar en la vigilancia de los centros y rutas de transporte de alto riesgo:</u> La vigilancia ha demostrado ser una medida de protección útil, como se demostró en El Salvador. Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (USG) -como la Oficina Internacional de Narcóticos y Aplicación de la Ley (INL) del Departamento de Estado de los Estados Unidos- deberían ampliar las medidas de vigilancia (por ejemplo, cámaras, botones de pánico) para los trabajadores de las rutas de alto riesgo.

- <u>Apoyar en el desarrollo de capacidades de las unidades especializadas en seguridad del transporte:</u> Las unidades existentes deberían ser evaluadas y apoyadas por los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (como el INL). Se podría centrar en mejorar la coordinación con el sector del transporte a través de comunicaciones seguras y canales de información.

Mujeres y niñas:

- <u>Proporcionar asistencia centrada en el género a las unidades de lucha contra la extorsión:</u> Las tácticas de extorsión basadas en el género (por ejemplo, el uso de mujeres como perpetradoras) deberían investigarse más a fondo y perseguirse. Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (como el INL y USAID) podrían proporcionar capacitación a las unidades antiextorsión pertinentes sobre estos enfoques.

- <u>Apoyar y ampliar los centros de apoyo múltiple para las mujeres víctimas:</u> Los centros de apoyo múltiple existentes, incluidas las iniciativas de las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales (ONG) y el Estado, requieren financiación y apoyo adicionales. Un modelo prometedor de centros de apoyo múltiple es Ciudad Mujer en Honduras. Adicionalmente, los actores del gobierno de los Estados Unidos podrían proporcionar apoyo técnico para las unidades femeninas policiales (como UNIMUJER-ODAC en El Salvador), para apoyar a las denuncias y facilitar asistencia a las víctimas.

LGBTQI+:

- <u>Fomentar mayor sensibilidad respecto a la población LGBTQI+ entre los actores del sector de la justicia</u>: Debido a las deficiencias y a la discriminación en el apoyo a las víctimas LGBTQI+ dentro del sistema de justicia, los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (como el INL y USAID) deberían proporcionar formación sensible al género a la policía y a los fiscales.

- <u>Mejorar los mecanismos de denuncia seguros:</u> Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (como el INL y USAID) deberían proporcionar asistencia técnica para mejorar los mecanismos de denuncia seguros para las víctimas LGBTQI+.

Desplazamiento interno y migración:

- <u>Proporcionar apoyo en materia de seguimiento y evaluación a las agencias y ONG que participan en el desplazamiento interno y la migración:</u> Dadas las enormes lagunas en los datos necesarios, USAID podría proporcionar apoyo para informar sobre cómo la extorsión impulsa el desplazamiento. Los mecanismos podrían incluir: el seguimiento en colaboración con las ONG de las tasas de cambio de residencia; el desarrollo de plataformas de información; y el seguimiento de la extorsión entre los retornados.

POSIBILIDADES DE MEJORA DE LA SEGURIDAD Y EL SISTEMA JUDICIAL

Aplicación de la ley por parte de la policía:

- <u>Invertir en enfoques policiales locales y comunitarios:</u> Estos enfoques podrían servir como alternativa a las tácticas represivas y centradas en las redadas. Los actores del Gobierno de EE.UU. (como USAID y el INL) podrían proporcionar ayuda financiera y desarrollo de capacidades para la replicación de modelos exitosos.

- <u>Fomentar mayor cercanía y colaboración entre la policía y el sector privado</u>: Estas asociaciones hacen hincapié en la creación de relaciones de confianza entre la policía y la ciudadanía a nivel local, lo que permite la cooperación para detectar y combatir la extorsión. Los ejemplos de El Salvador podrían servir de modelo.

Seguimiento de los índices de extorsión:

- <u>Proporcionar apoyo de M&E a nivel municipal y departamental:</u> USAID podría proporcionar asistencia a las entidades locales que gestionan los datos de extorsión, como el apoyo a las encuestas anuales estandarizadas de victimización y la facilitación de mecanismos de colaboración y estandarización interinstitucional.

- <u>Proporcionar asistencia técnica en la revisión de la legislación clave:</u> Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos podrían proporcionar asistencia técnica en la revisión de la legislación existente que cubre la extorsión, en cada país del NCA. Este apoyo podría identificar lagunas en las definiciones, la aplicación y el castigo, entre otros factores.

Finanzas y telecomunicaciones:

- <u>Reforzar la normativa bancaria y de telecomunicaciones:</u> Con el apoyo de actores internacionales, los gobiernos nacionales deben reforzar la normativa bancaria, centrándose en los controles y la supervisión de las actividades relacionadas con la extorsión.

- Mejorar las investigaciones financieras: Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos podrían proporcionar asistencia a las entidades locales para que puedan "seguir el dinero" y rastrear los patrones de blanqueo e inversión, y apoyar las investigaciones de canales frecuentes como Tigo Money.

Investigación:

- Apoyar en acabar con los vacíos en la judicialización: Los actores del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos (como el INL) podrían proporcionar asistencia técnica y capacitación a los fiscales y otras unidades especializadas a nivel nacional y local para abordar las deficiencias en la lucha contra esquemas de extorsión más amplios. La capacitación podría abordar la teoría del caso, el contrainterrogatorio, el litigio y la preparación de pruebas. Mientras tanto, la ayuda financiera podría cubrir las carencias de personal y equipamiento.

Juicio y sanción (tribunales):

- Apoyar y replicar aquellos modelos de tribunales antiextorsión que hayan tenido éxito: Un modelo clave en Honduras ha dado lugar a una mayor eficacia en el juicio de los detenidos por extorsión. USAID podría proporcionar asistencia financiera y técnica para ampliar estos modelos, especialmente a nivel regional y local.

- Apoyar a los tribunales locales y regionales: Del mismo modo, los tribunales regionales necesitan mucha más formación y apoyo para combatir la extorsión, y una mejor coordinación con el gobierno nacional.

Sistemas penitenciarios:

- Apoyar las medidas preventivas (incluyendo una estrategia de control y comunicación): Los funcionarios de prisiones deben recibir apoyo para desarrollar estrategias que permitan detectar mejor las tramas de extorsión. La mejora de la vigilancia, los bloqueos de las telecomunicaciones y las restricciones internas podrían apoyarse con asistencia financiera y técnica.

- Apoyar la rehabilitación y luchar contra la reincidencia: Las personas que salen de la cárcel son propensas a seguir trabajando con las pandillas y las tramas de extorsión. Una medida podría ser la creación de centros de servicios posteriores a la sentencia con programas de reducción de la reincidencia, utilizando modelos estadounidenses de justicia restaurativa. Los actores del Gobierno de Estados Unidos, como el INL y USAID, podrían apoyar la implementación de dichos programas.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

DEFINITION OF EXTORTION

From a legalistic view, extortion can be defined as the demand for money or objects of value through threat against persons or property. This report moves beyond the traditionally narrow perception of extortion to one that fully captures its sources and impacts.

An expanded view of extortion considers more nuanced forms, such as payment for the ability to engage in routine activities, including entering a specific area, accessing basic services, keeping a job, sparing children from gang recruitment, using public spaces, and starting or selling a business. It also considers transactions for less routine activities, or "commissions" in the sale of large goods like cars and furniture, fees for mediating disputes, forcing restaurants to provide food, requiring residents to vacate, or being forced to provide sexual services. Parallel to the vast range of extortion types are its perpetrators and victims. Extortion practices initiated by two gangs, MS-13 and 18th Street, have expanded to other criminal actors (e.g., gang imitators) and a range of targets.[27]

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The study addresses three main questions:

1. What are the socioeconomic conditions that foment extortion?
2. What are the specific impacts of extortion dynamics among vulnerable populations?
3. How well do police and judicial agencies work together to prevent, investigate, and prosecute extortion crimes?

As such, the team's analysis follows two overarching themes, while Figure 1 and Figure 2 below reflect illustrative causal chains for both focus areas.

1. **Socioeconomic trends and impacts of extortion:** The team examines the underlying conditions that lead to extortion, how extortion aggravates other forms of strife, and the impacts of extortion on vulnerable populations. The analysis focuses on sub-groups most affected by extortion: MSMEs, the transport sector, women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, and internally displaced persons and migrants.

Figure 1: The Chain of Socioeconomic Causes and Criminality

CONTEXT	EXTORTION (TYPES)	VICTIMS	IMPACTS
Poverty, education, unemployment, lack of state presence	Cash, valuables, activities, services Related crimes: assault, robbery, murder	MSMEs, transport sector, women, LGBTQI+, migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Physical harm, business failure, family dissolution, migration

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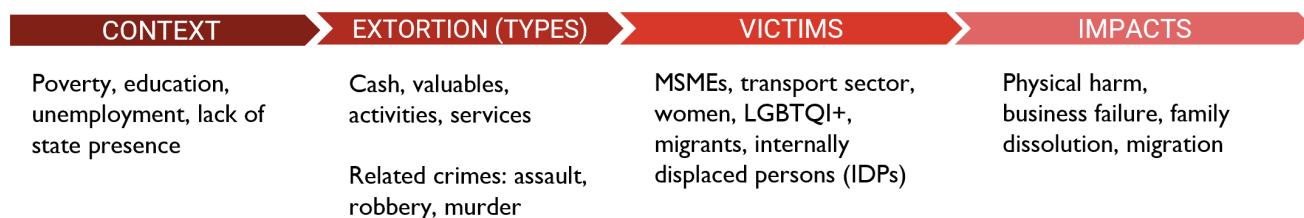
[27] Gang structures in NCA are further presented under Issue Area II.

2. **Security and judicial operations and effectiveness:** The team analyzes each step in the government's response to extortion, focusing on security and judicial efforts. This theme is delineated by line of effort: enforcement by the police; tracking extortion rates; controlling finances and telecommunications; investigations by prosecutors; trial and sanction in the courts; and penitentiary system operations.

Figure 2: The Chain of Enforcement (Security and Justice)

INTELLIGENCE	INVESTIGATION	PROSECUTION	ADJUDICATION
Citizen-Based Information (Police)	Number of Investigation Reports (Police, Fiscalía)	Number of Investigations leading to Prosecution (Fiscalía)	Changes in Numbers and Types of Penal Sentences (Courts)
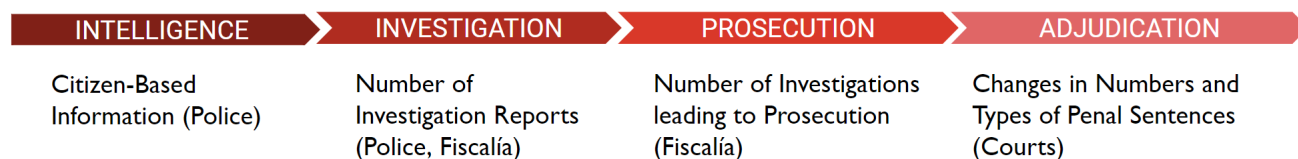
METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study utilized a mixed methods approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data collected between July 2021-March 2022. The study employed a literature review of 105 publications, review of secondary databases, and primary data collection consisting of 120 KIIs and thirty FGDs. For primary data collection, two fieldwork trips were conducted in each of the three countries, with initial pilot fieldwork trips taking place in 2021.

The analysis covers a broad range of regional and country-specific patterns as outlined in each section, while identifying specific policy and data gaps. Supplemental geographic and quantitative analysis w also conducted by the team, provided in Annex I.

Table 1: Summary of Methods and Data Collection

METHOD	DATA SOURCES	DATA COLLECTION
Secondary Data		
Literature review	Academic and press articles on extortion in NCA.	105 articles reviewed
Collection of quantitative evidence	National databases and victimization surveys (from each country as available).	Police databases (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador); Household surveys (Honduras, El Salvador); Victimization survey (Guatemala)
Primary Data		

METHOD	DATA SOURCES	DATA COLLECTION
KIIs	– Underline International organizations: Global Initiative, United Nations – Private sector: Business associations, transport associations, business owners – Government officials: Former prison officials, human rights officials, mayors, business commission directors – NGOs: NGOs specialized in citizen security, public policy, human rights, women's rights, migration and forced displacement, youth in conflict with the law, LGBTQI+	120 interviews conducted
Site Observations	Affected neighborhoods, gang-controlled areas, commercial districts, peri-urban areas	30 sites visited[28]

GRANTEES

Four grants under contract contributed supplementary analysis to fill select gaps:

- El Salvador: University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) conducted a victimization survey of over 1,000 respondents and select KIIs, both with a focus on enterprises.

- Guatemala: National Economic Research Center (CIEN) conducted an analysis of justice and security institutions and operators dealing with extortion. Diálogos conducted a geographic analysis of extortion (classifying counties into low and high extortion areas) and examined institutional responses to victimization patterns.

- Honduras: Association for a More Just Society (ASJ) conducted case studies on emblematic extortion cases, analyzed court files, and developed a typology of perpetrators and victims.

LIMITATIONS

Extortion is an inherently difficult topic of study, in part due to challenges around collecting accurate secondary data. As such, this study has several limitations:

- Unavailability and incompleteness of secondary data: Extortion data are inherently limited because of incentives to manipulate related data, inconsistent definitions among agencies, and vast underreporting from victims.

- Respondent biases: As extortion does not have a clear definition, it may be reported as another type of crime (such as a threat) or regarded as an expected part of respondent life.

- Geographic skew: The great majority of extortion reports are from urban and commercial areas, which may obscure high rates of extortion in peri-urban and rural areas.

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[28] Site visits include colonias in San Pedro Sula, López Arellano, Choloma, Tegucigalpa (including colonias of Estados Unidos, Nueva Suyapa, and San Miguel). Other sites were police installations, military offices, training centers, courthouses, and NGOs.

ISSUE AREA I: SOCIOECONOMIC TRENDS AND IMPACTS

OVERVIEW

Extortion affects every economic sector in NCA countries, especially MSMEs and transport. It disproportionately impacts vulnerable individuals, including women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, and migrants. Notable socioeconomic impacts include loss of income, increased security costs, business closures, disruption of commerce, sexual exploitation, physical harm, and increased displacement and emigration. As a result of extortion's pervasiveness, the crime has become normalized as a "way of life" for communities and the gangs who depend upon the income it generates.[29]

At the macroeconomic level, extortion depresses investment and spurs violence. Aggregate estimates of private sector extortion payments further reflect its broad economic impact. In El Salvador, 2014 estimates of the total cost of extortion to the private sector ranged from United States Dollars (USD) 756 million to USD 1.3 billion, or three to six percent of gross domestic product (GDP).[30] In Guatemala, businesses in 2017 collectively paid an estimated USD 38 million annually.[31] These numbers are reinforced by a 2021 estimate of at least USD 33.5 million worth of economic losses.[32] In Honduras, the National Anti-Extortion Task Force (FNA) estimated that between USD 200-212 million was paid in extortion between 2013-2017, or approximately USD 41 million per year.

However, available data can obscure the full extent of extortion's impact on individuals and communities. Official data likely reflect underestimates, as many businesses and individuals do not report extortion due fear of reprisal from perpetrators or a lack of confidence in the justice system.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Extortion is concentrated in urban areas. In El Salvador, 73.8 percent of extortion cases were in urban areas and 26.2 percent were in rural areas, according to the 2018 General Statistics and Census Office (DIGESTYC) national survey. Figure 3 demonstrates the urban concentration of extortion in El Salvador, using PNC and DIGESTYC data. In Guatemala, PNC and National Institute of Statistics (INE) data also reflect extortion's urban concentration, as seen in Figure 4. In Honduras, the same trend is mirrored in Figure 5, using data from the Ministry of Security's former data portal, the National Center of Social Sector Information (CENISS). Additional analysis of extortion rates and their geographic relationship is included in Section 2.2 Tracking Extortion Rates and Annex I. Data over 2021-2022 are largely unavailable or unreliable.

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[29] Gang structures in NCA are further presented under Issue Area II.

[30] Estimated by some sources to be USD 756 million, while the cumulative amount reported by a range of businesses added up to USD 1.3 billion. Salguero. 2016. "¿Extorsión o apalancamiento operativo? Aproximación a la Economía Pandilleril en El Salvador." https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fesamcentral/12975.pdf; affirming such estimates, the Central Bank estimated that the private sector paid an equivalent of three percent of GDP in fees in 2014 (Peñate et al., 2016).

[31] Perspectiva 2017. "El impacto de las extorsiones en costos de operación de las empresas." https://www.perspectiva.gt/noticias/impacto-las-extorsiones/

[32] Mendoza 2021. "Guatemala: el problema de las extorsiones a la luz de la victimización." Diálogos. https://www.dialogos.org.gt/blog/guatemala-el-problema-de-las-extorsiones-la-luz-de-la-victimizacion

Figure 3: Extortion Clusters in El Salvador (2016-2020)

2016- 2020Conglomerates of high rates of extortion.

☐ Never
☐ Occasionaly: One or two years
☐ Commonly: Three years
☐ Most commonly: Four or five years.
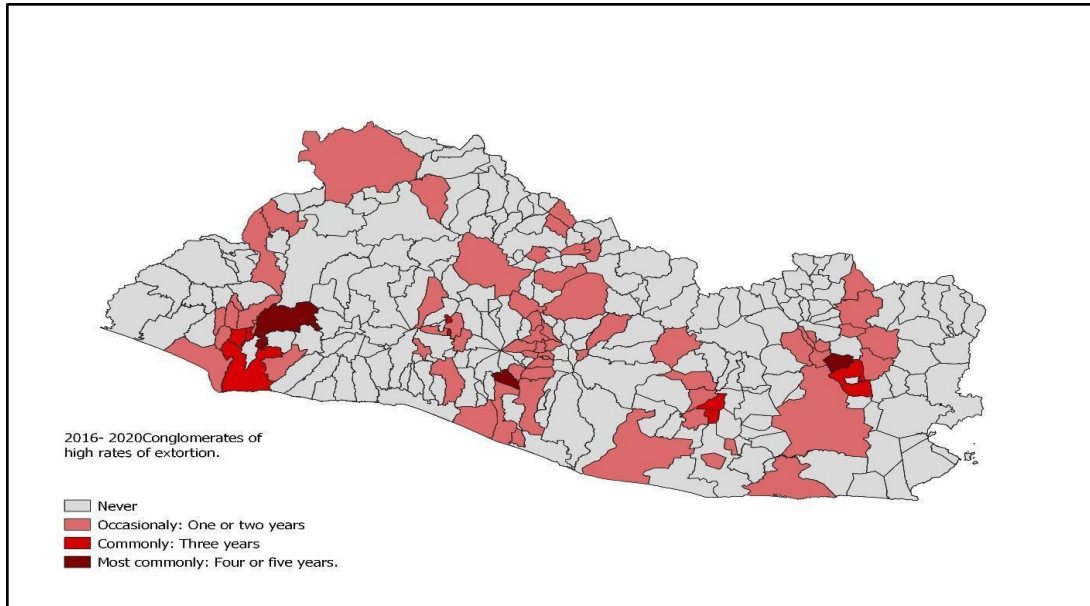
Source: LACLEARN, using PNC and DIGESTYC data.

Figure 4: Extortion Clusters in Guatemala (2016-2020)

2016-2020 Conglomerates with high rate of extortion.

☐ Never
☐ Occasionaly: One or two years
☐ Commonly: Three years
☐ Most commonly: Four or five years
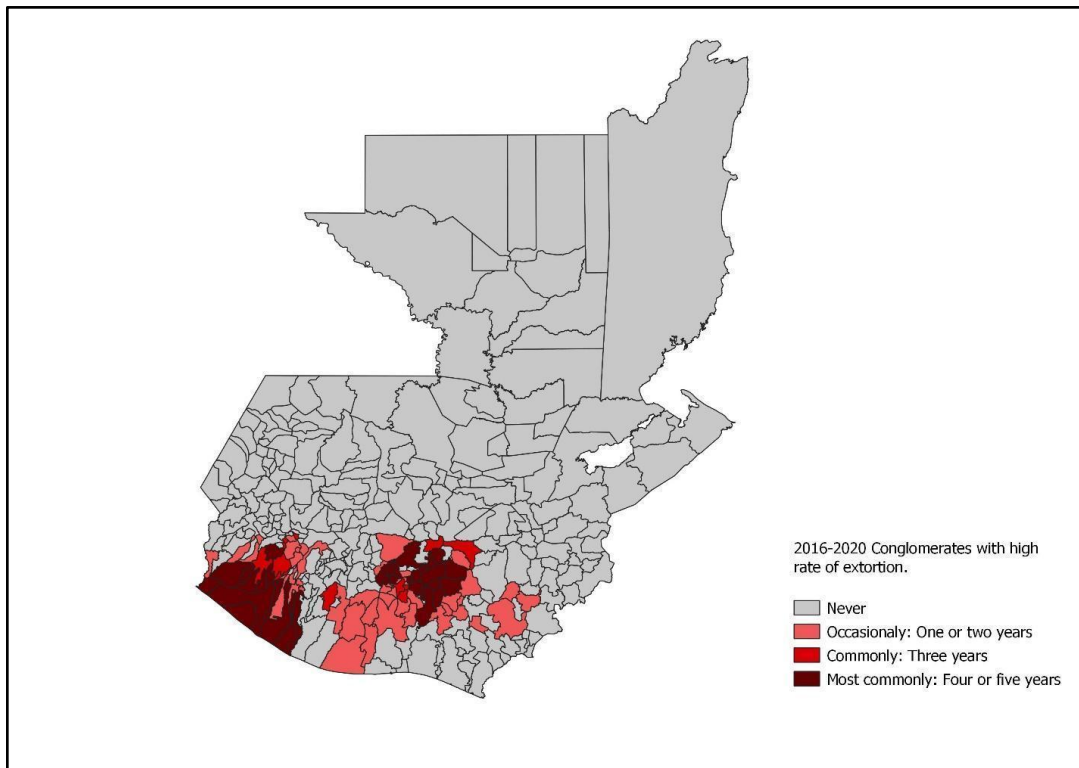
Source: LACLEARN, using PNC and INE data.

Figure 5: Extortion Clusters in Honduras (2016-2020)

2016-2020 Conglomerates of high rates of extortion
- Never
- Occasionaly: One or two years
- Commonly: Three years.
- Most commonly: Four or five years
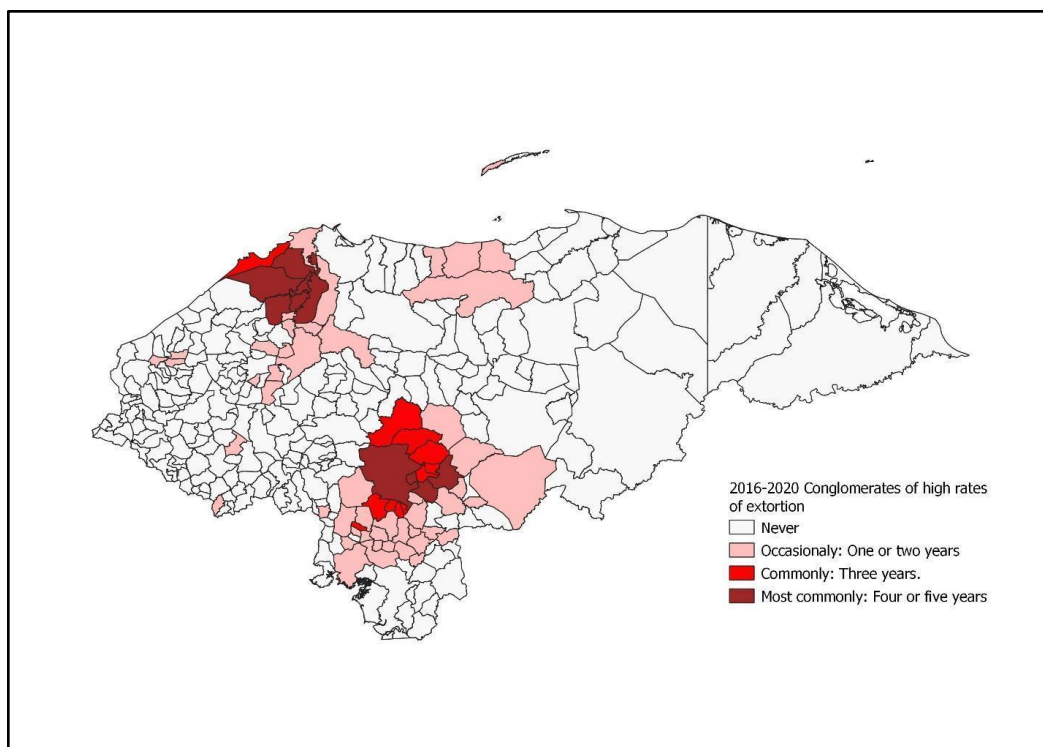
Source: CENISS

1.1 MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (MSMES)[33]

OVERVIEW

MSMEs are the mainstay of NCA economies: microenterprises constitute well over 90 percent of businesses in each country.[34] Evidence suggests that the impact of extortion on MSMEs is both costly and widespread, further affecting the broader economy. For instance, the assessment team found that extortion hinders a business's ability to profit and invest due to increased costs, including extortion fees and security costs, and forces some businesses to close. Likewise, smaller businesses are disproportionately affected by the crime relative to larger businesses that can absorb associated costs more easily.

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[33] Business classifications may vary from country to country. In El Salvador, microenterprises are defined as those with ten or fewer employees and annual revenues of less than USD 100,000; small businesses are those with revenues of less than USD 1,000,000 annually and up to 50 employees; and medium-sized businesses are those with up to 100 employees and revenues of up to USD 7 million (MINEC 2012).

[34] In El Salvador, micro and small enterprises constituted an estimated 97 percent of all businesses, as of 2022: 155,000 micro, 5,500 small, 575 medium, and 603 large enterprises. In Guatemala, micro and small enterprises constituted an estimated 98 percent of MSMEs, as of 2015: 331,000 micro, 36,000 small, and 4,000 medium sized businesses. In Honduras, micro and small enterprises constituted an estimated 99 percent of all businesses, as of 2013: 141,600 micro, 4,500 small, 715 medium, and 390 large businesses.

OVERVIEW: EXTORTION TRENDS AMONG MSMES
El Salvador: In recent victimization surveys, the majority of MSMEs report having been extorted. Extortion is concentrated in urban areas, such as in San Salvador's city center. Its impact in rural areas is also evident among the agricultural sector, particularly sugar cane producers. The impact on Salvadoran MSMEs is concerning for the broader economy, as they comprise an estimated 98 percent of Salvadoran businesses, contribute 35 percent of GDP, and employ one-third of the labor force.[35]
Guatemala: Evidence suggests that Guatemalan businesses spend at least seven percent of their budget on extortion fees and at least ten percent on security costs.[36] Interviewees suggest that nearly every business in gang-controlled areas is extorted. Informal businesses and MSMEs comprise the sub-group most targeted by MS-13 and 18th Street for extortion.
Honduras: Interviews and reports suggest that the majority of extortion victims in certain areas, such as Tegucigalpa's Colonia Las Torres, are businesses. The assessment team found that the Honduran sectors most affected include merchandise distributors, micro-entrepreneurs, and transport. One private sector official reported to the assessment team that an estimated 90,000 businesses closed because of extortion between 2016-2021.

As evidenced in El Salvador, it appears that businesses are typically extorted through a "tipping point" approach, where gangs negotiate a fee that maximizes cost while preventing a business from closing. Evidence from multiple NCA countries suggests that payments are typically sent on a regular basis to one or more gangs. Table 2 below compiles aggregate estimates of extortion payments by MSMEs in each country. Guatemalan MSMEs sent the most in extortion payments, followed by El Salvador and then Honduras, and respective GDPs generally follow the same order over time.

Table 2: Estimated MSME Extortion Payments (in USD)[37]

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS[38]
2016	–	–	USD 1.2M
2017	–[39]	USD 29.3M[40]	USD 0.7M
2018	USD 18M[41]	–	USD 0.6M

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[35] Abrego and Barrios 2021. "El costo del crimen para las micro y pequeñas empresas en El Salvador." Inter-American Development Bank. https://blogs.iadb.org/seguridad-ciudadana/es/el-costo-del-crimen-para-las-micro-y-pequenas-empresas-en-el-salvador/

[36] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.

[37] Inter-American Development Bank. 2019. "Extorsión, violencia y crimen organizado: 8 ideas para frenar el impuesto del miedo." https://blogs.iadb.org/seguridad-ciudadana/es/extorsion-violencia-y-crimen-organizado-8-ideas-para-frenar-el-impuesto-del-miedo.

[38] Official data provided by the Member of Parliament via request for public information.

[39] The average annual cost due to crime in 2016 for the *maras* and *pandillas* in El Salvador was USD 325 (Abrego and Barrios, 2021).

[40] Prensa Libre. 2017. "Extorsiones cuestan Q220 millones al año." https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/justicia/violencia-golpea-al-sector-comercial/.

[41] ANEP 2018.

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS[38]
2019	–	–	USD 0.9M
2020	–	USD 1M	USD 0.2M[42]

(A) EL SALVADOR

Forms of extortion: The assessment team found that the types of extortion targeting businesses hinders their ability to profit and invest. A gang member often negotiates with a targeted business to determine the maximum payment without forcing the business to shut down. This "tipping point" approach has prompted nearly 30 percent of surveyed businesses to say that they do not invest more in their business because of increased costs and security risks.[43] Extorters also demanded services such as drug storage and employment for gang affiliates from businesses.

A 2016 Salvadoran Foundation for Social and Economic Development (FUSADES) survey revealed that 59 percent of extortions were centered on a set schedule of periodic payments and personal contact; 12 to 13 percent were opportunistic, usually via phone calls for single payments; and the rest were hybrid. Increasingly, money is paid electronically, such as through the Tigo Money platform.

Estimated impacts: Victimization surveys point to the widespread impact of extortion on MSMEs. In a 2015 National Small Business Council survey of over 11,000 MSMEs, 79 percent reported having been extorted.[44] In addition, a 2017 National Micro and Small Business Commission survey of 9,569 MSMEs found that extortion was the most common crime suffered, at 49 percent. IUDOP's 2022 survey also shows that 30.5 percent of MSME victims reported being threatened with death.

According to the 2015 National Small Business Council survey, small businesses pay approximately USD 10 million monthly in extortion.[45] Overall, fees are highest for businesses with 21 to 25 employees, followed by those with just one employee.[46] In addition to extortion fees, businesses are also impacted by increased security costs. Aggregate estimates of private security costs to Salvadoran businesses range from USD 157 million in 2014[47] to USD 500 million annually in 2013, according to ANEP. As a result, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported in 2018 that every week at least two businesses planned to close due to extortion.[48]

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[42] This sharply-reduced number was attributed to the quarantine, which was longer and stricter than in the other NCA countries, according to official documentation obtained through the Public Prosecutor.
[43] IUDOP 2022. "La Extorsión en El Salvador."
[44] *El Economista* 2015. "Víctimas de extorsión han pagado $1.2 millones por Jessel Santos-LPG."
https://www.eleconomista.net/actualidad/E.S.-Victimas-de-extorsion-han-pagado-1.2-millones-20150629-0009.html
[45] Chicago Tribune 2016. "Micro y pequeñas empresas victimas de extorsión de pandillas."
https://www.chicagotribune.com/hoy/ct-hoy-8654519-micro-y-pequenas-empresas-victimas-de-extorsion-de-pandillas-story.html
[46] Abrego and Barrios 2021.
[47] Peñate et al. 2016. Estimación del Costo Económico de la Violencia en El Salvador 2014. Departamento de Investigación Económica y Financiera, Banco Central de Reserva de El Salvador.
https://www.bcr.gob.sv/bcrsite/uploaded/content/category/494397239.pdf
[48] Guzmán 2018. "Cada semana dos empresas cierran debido a las extorsiones."
https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/477898/cada-semana-dos-empresas-cierran-debido-a-las-extorsiones.html

Geographic distribution: Figure 3 above demonstrates the urban concentration of extortion in El Salvador. In San Salvador, one government official reported to the assessment team that businesses in the city's center collectively pay USD 2 million in extortion fees monthly. Gangs capitalize on the informal economy, collecting money every day among the approximately 40,000 vendors operating without a license.[49]

In rural areas, the agricultural sector is heavily impacted. The sugar cane sector is a primary target, with annual profits of over USD 185 million and 7,000 producers spread across ten departments. The sector is represented by several associations, some of which estimate the sector pays between USD 3 million and USD 4 million per year in extortion, and few members file crime reports.[50] However, the estimated cost of extortion to these businesses has declined since 2019, which is largely attributed to a partnership between sugarcane producers and the police in sharing information and granting access to their private property.

Reporting: The assessment team found that extortion is underreported by MSMEs. IUDOP estimates that approximately ten percent of extorted businesses file reports, primarily when they reach a tipping point of unaffordability - when fees increase or business decreases.[51] Other reasons for low reporting by MSMEs are a lack of faith in the criminal justice process, fear of repercussions from extortionists, and the costs of filing a report, such as legal fees or the time taken away from work.

(B) GUATEMALA

Forms of extortion: Interviews suggest that most extortion payments are made weekly to both major gangs (MS-13 and 18th Street), in addition to bonus payments during the year. Payments vary greatly since a single business might be extorted by multiple gangs or *clicas*.[52] The assessment team also found that informal businesses and MSMEs comprise the sub-group most targeted by MS-13 and 18th Street for extortion. Likewise, the National Division against the Criminal Development of Gangs (Dipanda) reports that both major gangs target small businesses.

Estimated impacts: The Guatemalan private sector faces increased costs and risks associated with extortion. In 2014, Guatemalan businesses spent at least seven percent of their budget on extortion fees, while an estimated USD 63 million was paid that year across businesses.[53]

MSMEs in Guatemala also face increased security costs, which some businesses factor into budgeting and operations. Evidence suggests that larger businesses spend at least ten percent of their budget on security costs (e.g., video surveillance, private security), while the relative cost for MSMEs can reach up to 40 percent of operations.[54] For Guatemala, there are no available data or registry of company closures aside from periodic reports from municipalities.

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[49] Dudley and Papadovassilakis 2020. "The 'Protection Racket,' Gangs and Violence in San Salvador." Insight Crime. https://insightcrime.org/investigations/racket-gangs-violence-in-salvador/

[50] Tristan C. 2019a. "Cómo el sector privado ayudó a contrarrestar la extorsión rural en El Salvador." Insight Crime. https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/sector-privado-ayudo-contrarrestar-extorsion-rural-el-salvador/

[51] IUDOP 2022.

[52] Local faction of a gang (MS-13 or 18th Street).

[53] La Fundación para el Desarrollo de Guatemala, the main private enterprise association, has not regularly collected data since 2014. See: Benavides 2014. "Las extorsiones en números".

[54] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.

Geographic distribution: Figure 4 above demonstrates the urban concentration of extortion in Guatemala. Interviewees suggested that nearly every business in a gang-controlled areas is extorted. Outside of gang-controlled areas, some are victimized by imitators, who are extortionists posing as members of the gangs but who are often incarcerated or lone actors with some connection to the victim.

Reporting: The assessment team found that extortion is underreported by Guatemalan businesses; only an estimated 40 percent of cases are reported.[55] According to the PNC's anti-extortion unit, multinational companies like Coca-Cola pay extortion instead of reporting it, in part to avoid publicity. Moreover, informal businesses rarely report extortion because they are not registered and do not want to pay taxes. Other business owners do not file reports because they fear reprisals from perpetrators or because they do not believe their cases will not be investigated. Official data indicate that about 16 percent of reports lead to investigation and trial, and only five percent of those cases end up in a conviction.[56]

(C) HONDURAS

Forms of extortion: The longevity of extortion's impact on businesses is evident in that 9.5 percent of business owners have paid extortion fees for less than a year, 28 percent for one to two years, 14 percent for three years, 27 percent for four to five years, and 7.5 percent for longer.[57] Evidence also suggests that most extortion payments are made weekly (73 percent) or daily (55 percent), similar to other NCA countries. Many MSMEs also pay interest rates of 20 to 40 percent to loan shark mafias.[58]

Interviews and reports suggest that the majority of extortion victims in certain areas, such as Tegucigalpa's Colonia Las Torres, are businesses. The assessment team also found that the Honduran sectors most affected by extortion include merchandise distributors, micro-entrepreneurs, and transport.

There is mixed evidence regarding the role of gangs versus imitators as perpetrators. In 2013, the FNA estimated that 70 percent of perpetrators were imitators.[59] In 2020, MS-13 announced a halt to extortion during quarantine; however, reports circulated that public transportation drivers continued to be extorted by gang members.

Estimated impacts: General estimates of the daily amount paid by individuals range from USD 2-6, and USD 4-8 for merchants, usually as "rent" for commercial space, based on FNA data from 2013-2017. Business closures also indicate the impact of extortion. In 2012, extortion closed an estimated 10,800 small and micro businesses in Tegucigalpa, resulting in the loss of 100,000 jobs.[60] Extortion also

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[55] Perspectiva 2017.

[56] Data provided by the Member of Parliament via request for public information (*Solicitud de Información Pública*).

[57] S Medina, Juanjo and Pedro-Mateu-Gelabert, *Mara y Pandillas, comunidad y policía en Centroamérica*, Agencia Sueca de Cooperación Internacional Para el Desarrollo (ASDI).

[58] El Heraldo. 2016. "Empresas de Honduras gastan 6,000 millones de lempiras en seguridad." https://www.elheraldo.hn/economia/empresas-de-honduras-gastan-6000-millones-de-lempiras-en-seguridad-CNEH993023; EFE. 2019. "La extorsión, una lacra que sigue llevando a la ruina a muchos hondureños."

[59] FNA. 2013. "Por Internet, Nueva Forma de Extorsionar en Honduras." https://zdocs.mx/doc/por-internet-nueva-forma-de-extorsionar-en-honduras-lp7dwnervnp7.

[60] CCIT 2012. "Extorsiones obligan a 1,600 comercios de Tegucigalpa a cerraroperaciones." See also: El Heraldo. "Extorsiones lapidan 10,800 Mipymes en la capital de Honduras." https://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Metro/story.csp?cid=586167&sid=298&fid=213.

forced the closure of an estimated 90,000 businesses between 2016 and mid-2021, according to one private sector official. In 2013, the Micro and Small Business Union of Honduras estimated that 97 percent of microenterprises that opened in San Pedro Sula closed within ten months and medium-sized businesses survive only by paying for security.

Geographic distribution: Figure 5 above demonstrates the urban concentration of extortion in Honduras. Over 2016-2020, extortion was concentrated around the two main cities in Honduras, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The assessment team found that in rural areas, agricultural businesses are both victims and participants in extortion. Sugar plantations have been invaded by armed groups, but "narco-palma" groups in the palm oil sector are part of crime networks.

Reporting: As in the other NCA countries, official rates of extortion appear to be underestimated; most businesses do not report cases to the Dipampco because they regard the police as either complicit or ineffective. The assessment team found that those businesses who report extortion say they are not consulted with or updated on any investigation.

MSME RECOMMENDATIONS

> **Support and expand MSME associations:** Global experiences indicate that one of the most effective responses to commercial-zone extortion is building MSME associations that cooperate on common security interests and anti-extortion organizing. USAID, in coordination with other USG agencies, should support such models through financial assistance and capacity-building. This support could include training on resilience and security measures and technical assistance to encourage formal registration.

> **El Salvador:** The sugar cane sector and businesses in San Salvador's center have effectively organized MSME associations. USAID could support and expand efforts geared towards extortion, such as the agricultural model in San Lorenz, while coordinating with local associations such as ANEP.[61]

> **Guatemala:** The city of Villa Nueva provides one cooperative model which USAID could support and expand upon in other areas.[62] The city provides a range of security-oriented programs which support businesses and communities, laying the groundwork to help MSMEs fight extortion. The approach emphasizes institutional coordination among local government and business associations, while providing training to citizens and seed funding to small businesses.

> **Honduras:** USAID could support security-focused capacity-building by working with Services for Entrepreneurs in Honduras, who trained 1,800 people from 2018-2020 in business operations.

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[61] For the past decade, the city's economic sector has been strengthened by its Participative Strategic Plan for Local Development and Municipal Investments, in which state agencies and a local committee strategically invest in small-scale businesses, provide technical training, and award equipment to select businesses.

[62] Because extortion is woven so seamlessly into the city's economics, from local markets to regional transport hubs, it will never be uprooted without integration of the private sector. Such integration can be led by the members of the Businessmen's Association of Villa Nueva (*Asociación de Empresarios de Villa Nueva)* and the Association of Entrepreneurs, Service, Commerce, and Industry (*Gremial de Emprendedores, Servicio, Comercio e Industria*). The city's working-class identity indicates that efforts led by the MSME sector are more likely to gain traction and trust than state-directed efforts.

Improve reporting mechanisms, such as hotlines: Secure and accessible communications channels between citizens, service providers, and the government are one of the best ways to maximize extortion reporting. USAID could provide technical assistance and M&E support to improve and expand existing models, as there is currently a lack of data on their effectiveness.

El Salvador: The PNC has a hotline for citizen reporting, although it lacks resources to expand. USAID could provide relevant capacity-building for the PNC in implementing the hotline and expanding alternative mechanisms.

Guatemala: There are several ways to report extortion in Guatemala: contact the prosecutors' call center; report on the public prosecutor's website; or go in person to a local PNC or public prosecutor's office. USAID could provide capacity-building to improve such reporting mechanisms.

Honduras: Extortion can be reported by calling the anti-extortion Anonymous Reporting System or by filing a report directly with Dipampco. USAID could provide capacity-building to improve such reporting mechanisms.

Improve estimates of extortion's economic impacts: There is a need for a streamlined methodology to accurately estimate extortion's economic impacts on the private sector, both at micro and macro-levels. USAID could provide M&E support to local governments, such as capacity-building for municipal-level surveys. Particular focuses could include extortion's relationship to the ability to open a business, reluctance to invest in a business, and rates of closure and bankruptcy.

El Salvador: USAID could provide capacity-building for existing associations that report on extortion, such as the Society of Salvadoran Merchants and Industrialists.

Guatemala: USAID could support a study comparing urban and rural areas, such as Guatemala City, a small peri-urban city, and a majority-indigenous town. Cities like Chinautla, which is small but committed to addressing the problem, could be of interest.

Honduras: USAID could support and expand upon municipal initiatives like Choloma's, which developed a relationship of institutional cooperation between municipal agencies and the private sector on security issues.

Improve synergy between private and public security: There is a need to better understand the efforts of private security providers, their collaboration with local governments, potential collusion with perpetrators, and associated costs to businesses. USAID could support research on this topic while working with local government and private security actors to implement effective approaches in combating extortion and related collusion.

El Salvador: USAID could support the PNC in identifying gaps in service provision. This could be achieved through a study in cooperation with the National Union of Private Security Agencies to document geographic coverage and costs to MSMEs.

> **Guatemala:** USAID could support a study of Guatemala's estimated 182 private security businesses, their protocols for combatting extortion, and potential relations with corrupt actors.[63] The study's findings could help clarify these businesses' roles in providing daily security and gaps in government oversight.

> **Honduras:** The private security sector currently employs approximately 70,000 guards, making it three times larger than the police.[64] USAID could support a study of the private security sector, similar to Guatemala's.

1.2 TRANSPORT SECTOR

OVERVIEW

Extortion has decimated transport sectors in NCA countries through violence and loss of revenue among businesses, operators, and passengers. Forms of extortion include tolls and set fees called *rentas*, which vary depending on the value of products delivered. Every mode of public transit is impacted, including taxis, motorcycle taxis, buses, inter-urban transport, and delivery trucks used by businesses. Wider societal impacts include limited access to select areas, limited movement for economic opportunity, and disruption to commerce.

OVERVIEW: EXTORTION TRENDS AMONG TRANSPORT SECTOR
El Salvador: Extortion impacts an estimated 40-60 percent of public transport routes.[65] The assessment team found that agriculture and product distributors are strongly affected. Transport sector costs have broader economic impacts; in 2010 and 2015, gangs paralyzed San Salvador's transportation system for days.[66]
Guatemala: The assessment team found that extortion is the main link between the transport sector and organized crime. Bus assistants are often members of gangs and gangs often acquire bus lines or control them through extortion. Likewise, transport businesses have been a major channel for money laundering and embezzlement, as shown by several high-profile cases.
Honduras: The assessment team found that the sector's geographic exposure to gang-controlled routes is a determining factor for its risk of extortion. And although the MS-13 gang has shifted most of its operations to trafficking illegal narcotics, it still extorts transport companies.

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[63] According to the country's general Office of Private Security (*Dirección General de Empresas de Seguridad Privada*). Plaza Pública. 2018. "Los dueños de la seguridad privada en Guatemala." https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/multimedia/guate_armada/los_duenos_de_la_seguridad_privada_en_guatemala.html.

[64] La Seguridad Privada en Honduras, Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible de Guatemala, and Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance 2021.

[65] Dalton 2010; EFE 2010.

[66] BBC Mundo 2015. "El paro que demuestra el poder de las maras en El Salvador." https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/07/150729_america_latina_el_salvador_maras_pandillas_paro_transporte_aw.

Table 3 below compiles estimates of transport sector extortion payments and killings of transportation workers in each NCA country over the 2016-2021 period.[67] Over time, Honduras has experienced both a higher number of transport sector-related killings and volume of extortion payments relative to El Salvador and Guatemala.

Table 3: Estimated Transport Sector Extortion Payments and Killings[68]

	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA[69]	HONDURAS[70]
2016	– Payments: USD 18M-26M[71]	– Payments: USD 260 per truck;[72] capital city drivers paid USD 20-45 weekly plus a bonus of approximately USD 200.[73] – Killings: 71	– Payments: USD 21.6 M (Tegucigalpa) – Killings: 246
2017	– Payments: no data – Killings: 64[74]	– Payments: Bus drivers paid at least USD 33 per month.[75] Trash collection trucks paid USD 52 per month.[76] – Killings: 101	– Payments: USD10 M (Tegucigalpa) – Killings: 163
2018	– Payments: USD 18M – Killings: 38	– Payments: USD 130 per week per trash collection truck – Killings: 149	– Payments: USD 8M (Tegucigalpa) – Killings: 149
2019	– Payments: USD 15M – Killings: 14	– Payments: USD 26 per week per delivery truck – Killings: 56 (through October)	– Payments: USD 10.5M (Tegucigalpa) – Killings: 134

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[67] Data from 2021-2022 are largely unavailable.

[68] These homicides are not necessarily tied to extortion, see: López, J. 2019d. Sector de transporte público registra 14 muertos en 2019. https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/669502/sector-transporte-de-pasajeros-registra-14-muertos-en-2019.html.

[69] Dipanda does not estimate payment amounts beyond specific examples. Source for 2016–2019 on bus drivers and assistants killed: Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos Republica. 2019. "Muere otro piloto de bus en ataque de presuntos extorsionistas." https://republica.gt/guatemala/ 2019-12-24-0-29-57-muere-otro-piloto-de-bus-en-ataque-de-presuntos-extorsionistas.

[70] Most data from Honduras are limited to the two main cities: Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. See La Prensa (2016); Tiempo (2019); Radio America (2017); Waldivision (2018).

[71] 18M: estimate according to Fecotrans; 26M: estimate according to Avelar 2016. "The Bus Route That Institutionalized Extortion in El Salvador." Factum. https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/bus-route-institutionalized-extortion-el-salvador/

[72] Of each bus's monthly earnings in 2016, an average of Guatemalan Quetzal (GTQ) 1,680 went to the assistant, GTQ 3,200 to the driver; GTQ 3,200 to gangs, and GTQ 7,200 to the bus owner. Killings of bus drivers have declined in the capital since 2016, but they have increased in other areas, such as San Lucas, Sacatepéquez, or to and from Quetzaltenango. For examples, see Soy 502 (2016); Sucesos (2022); TN 23 (2021); T 13 (2021); Nomada (2016).

[73] Aguinaldo; Soy 502. 2016. "Delincuentes ofrecen a pilotos pagar en 'cuotas' las extorsiones." https://www.soy502.com/articulo/delincuentes-ofrecen-pilotos-pagar-cuotas-extorsiones-32419.

[74] Peñate, S. 2017. "29 usuarios han muerto en ataques al transporte público este año." https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/; 29-usuarios-han-muerto-en-ataques-al-transporte-publico-este-ano-20171229-0156.html

[75] Chapin. 2017. "Extorsión: Mensualmente buses pagan 250 mil quetzales." https://www.chapintv.com/noticia/extorsion-mensualmente-buses-pagan-250-mil-quetzales/.

[76] Ibid.

	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA[69]	HONDURAS[70]
2020	– Payments: USD 10M – Killings: 9[77]	– Payment:[78] 50 buses paid up to USD 3,200 weekly – Killings: No data	– Payments: USD 20.4M (Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula) – Killings: 108
2021	– No data	– No data	– Payments: No data – Killings: 99 (through September)[79]

(A) EL SALVADOR

Forms of extortion: Extortion schemes in the transport sector include tolls, *rentas,* and fees to conduct temporary projects such as construction. Criteria used to set extortion rates include the estimated value of vehicles, merchandise being delivered, and the business receiving the delivery.[80] Based on those estimated values, extortionists demand varying amounts on a weekly or daily basis from transport workers. Sources estimate that transport units pay a daily fee of USD 3-5 or a weekly payment of USD 20-50 per unit.[81]

Estimated impacts: Extortion impacts an estimated 40 to 60 percent of public transport routes.[82] Estimates of annual extortion payments by transport companies range from USD 18 million to USD 26 million.[83] In most years, the Federation of Transportation Entrepreneurs (Fecotrans) estimated that about 20 percent of gross income of transport companies is paid in extortion.

Costs to the transport sector have broader economic impacts. In 2010 and 2015, gangs paralyzed San Salvador's transportation system for days.[84] Interviewees also said that extortion forced one company to decrease buses on a main route from 96 to 42. These shocks and deviations from standard commerce are harmful to the economy at large. Furthermore, the assessment team found that agriculture and product distributors are strongly affected. According to one driver, his company pays fees to both 18th Street and MS-13 since routes go through territories controlled by both, and then deducts those costs from drivers' payroll.

Killings: The assessment team found that transport workers and passengers are vulnerable to violence which may be related to extortion, including killings (as listed in Table 3). Extortion-related killings can

[77] Bernal, D. and Jordán, L. 2020. "Transportistas pagaron $10 millones en extorsiones durante 2020." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Transportistas-pagaron-10-millones-en-extorsiones-20201231-0003.html.
[78] Prensa Libre. 2020. "Extorsionistas tambien esperan la reactivacion del transporte publico." https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/comunitario/coronavirus-extorsionistas-tambien-esperan-la-reactivacion-del-transporte-publico/.
[79] Radioamerica.hn. 2021. "Reportan en Honduras asesinato de 99 miembros del sector transporte de enero a septiembre." October 13.
[80] Higher demand for a good is associated with higher extortion amount. See: Brown et al. 2020. "Market Structure and Extortion." National Bureau of Economic Research. http://www.nber.org/papers/w28299
[81] Gómez Hecht 2013. El Crimen Organizado en las Cárceles: Las Extorsiones desde los Centros Penales en El Salvador (2008-2009). Revista "Policía y Seguridad Pública". https://www.lamjol.info/index.php/RPSP/article/view/1333
[82] Dalton 2010; EFE 2010.
[83] 18M: estimate according to Fecotrans; 26M: estimate according to Avelar 2016. "The Bus Route That Institutionalized Extortion in El Salvador." Factum. https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/bus-route-institutionalized-extortion-el-salvador/
[84] BBC Mundo 2015.

take place when gang-imposed transport restrictions are not followed, such as blockades of select routes. Official sources state that 510 people were killed between 2006 and June 2010 and 692 were killed between 2012-2016.[85]

Efforts to combat transport-related extortion: The assessment team found mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of government efforts. The National Citizen Security Council coordinated efforts among public transportation drivers prior to 2020 and the Transport Protection Unit provides support with agents trained by the Federal Bureau of Investigations.[86] However, the Transportation Bureau claims that criminal investigations and forensic techniques are deficient.

Between 2015 and 2017, nearly USD seven million were invested in protection measures such as fleet renewal, camera installation, GPS, and passenger counting.[87] Such changes helped reduce crime by almost 95 percent in buses with video surveillance.[88] However, many drivers report a lack of support from relevant officials.

(B) GUATEMALA

Forms of extortion: The assessment team found that extortion demands have expanded beyond MS-13 and 18th Street gangs to additional *clicas*. Drivers in Guatemala City reported that extortion payments had increased in recent years since there were more *clicas* demanding payment. However, Dipanda reports reflect a broader range of perpetrators, including an increased role of gang imitators.

Rates of gang-based extortion in the transport sector significantly diminished under COVID-19 restrictions. In early 2020, mobility restrictions were imposed in departments where the first COVID-19 cases were reported, which were coincidentally three of the departments with the highest gang mobility: Guatemala, Sacatepéquez, and Quetzaltenango. These restrictions were followed by an almost seven-month ban on public transportation. Paired with a prohibition of visits to incarcerated individuals to thwart potential prison-based extortion schemes, these measures led to a sharp decline in extortions.

Estimated impacts: Estimated payment amounts at the aggregate level reflect the extensive cost of extortion to the transport sector, as shown in Table 3. Daily payments may reach up to USD 12 per taxi and USD 65 per bus. In 2017, gangs collected an estimated USD 70 million from public transportation in Guatemala City alone.[89]

Moreover, the assessment team found that extortion is a critical link between the transport sector and organized crime networks. Bus assistants are often members of gangs, and gangs often acquire bus lines

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[85] Gómez Hecht 2013; Martínez, Martínez, and Sontag 2016. "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador." New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/world/americas/el-salvador-drugs-gang-ms-13.html

[86] The *Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia* was established in 2014 to develop citizen security reform proposals, both for the short term, such as whether to declare states of emergency, and the long term, such as structural changes to the PNC.

[87] Peñate. 2017. "En los últimos dos años, habrían invertido cerca de $7 millones en renovación de flota, colocación de cámaras, GPS y cuenta pasajeros." https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/29-usuarios-han-muerto-en-ataques-al-transporte-publico-este-ano-20171229-0156.html.

[88] Fecotrans 2018.

[89] Tristan 2019b. "Extortion of Guatemala's Red Buses: Where Gang and Elite Criminal Interests Meet." Insight Crime. https://insightcrime.org/investigations/extortion-guatemalas-red-buses-gang-criminal/

or control them through extortion. Furthermore, transport businesses have been a major channel for money laundering and embezzlement, as shown by several high-profile cases.[90]

Comparisons among departments reveal common factors and patterns of transport-related extortion, such as proximity to main transport routes which offer more potential businesses to extort. Escuintla is not part of the top four departments in gang activity, but it has one of the country's highest extortion rates because a major highway runs through it, and it houses one of the country's largest prisons. However, in Chinautla the common extortion sites of MS-13 and 18th Street have defined territories and access points.

Killings: Gangs resort to violent tactics to intimidate transportation business owners into paying extortion fees, as evidenced by a January 2019 explosion in a Guatemala City passenger bus linked to gang threats. Approximately 540 bus drivers were killed between 2010 and 2020, and there were also additional deaths of a range of other transport actors (e.g., assistants, inspectors, passengers, owners). This trend is similar in El Salvador and Honduras.

(C) HONDURAS

The assessment team obtained relatively limited information on the relationship between extortion and the transport sector in Honduras.

Forms of extortion: One complementary study from 2022 revealed that although the MS-13 gang has shifted most of its operations to trafficking illegal narcotics, it still extorts transport companies.[91] It also appears that gangs are using more complex tactics to mitigate risk. For example, the way gangs extract money has shifted from written threats to other mechanisms, such as forcing drivers to buy tickets for local "raffles" that never take place.

Estimated impacts: The assessment team found that the sector's geographic exposure to gang-controlled routes is a determining factor for its risk of extortion. In 2019, the Honduras transport sector paid an estimated USD 27 million in extortion.[92] Most transport businesses in San Pedro Sula pay about USD 10 each month per vehicle to extortion schemes, adding up to nearly USD 60,000 per month. Individual workers are affected, as taxi drivers lose on average an estimated 30 percent of their income to extortion.[93]

Killings: The estimated number of transport killings in Honduras appears relatively higher to those rates in El Salvador and Guatemala. Between 2010-2020, an estimated 3,000 carrier workers were killed

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[90] Investigated by the Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity, the Transurbano case involved the illegal expenditure of USD 35 million in public funds to form a public bus system using pre-paid cards (known as Transurbano) during the Alvaro Colom administration (2008-2012). There were fewer buses, higher rates, and an increase in illegal bus routes. See: CAP 2019. "El transurbano y las heridas de un proyecto fallado." https://cicloscap.com/el-transurbano-y-las-heridas-de-un-proyecto-fallido/; International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. 2018. "Caso transurbano: Fraude al estado (etapa 1)." https://www.cicig.org/comunicados-2018-c/com-015-caso-transurbano-etapa-i/
[91] ASJ 2022.
[92] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[93] ASJ. 2019. "Estudio de la situación de maras y pandillas en Honduras 2019." http://biblioteca.asjhonduras.com/?docs=estudio-de-la-situacion-de-maras-y-pandillas-en-honduras-2019.

for non-payment of extortion.[94] As of March 2022, the National Autonomous University of Honduras Violence Observatory reported 27 killings of transportation workers in Honduras that year.

TRANSPORT SECTOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Support the surveillance of high-risk transport hubs and routes: Surveillance has proven to be a useful protection measure, as evidenced in El Salvador. USG actors such as INL should review, improve, and expand surveillance measures, like cameras, GPS, panic buttons, and armed personnel for transport workers along high-risk routes. USAID could provide M&E support to inform effectiveness of approaches.

El Salvador: Support could build upon investments in surveillance and protection measures, while improving collaboration between government and the transport sector. High-risk routes of focus could include Routes 42 and 152.

Guatemala: Support could build upon past successes, such as use of video surveillance as opposed to street patrolling in Guatemala's Zone 18 and the Transurbano bus stops.

Honduras: This support could begin with the San Pedro Sula bus depot as a high-risk hub.

Improve witness assistance: Although witness protection measures facilitate prosecution and help some anti-extortion units to dismantle schemes within the transport sector, they appear to have high risk for witnesses and high cost to governments. USG actors such as INL should review the witness protection programs of each country and provide capacity-building support to local counterparts throughout the chain of witness protection, including appeals.

El Salvador: The effectiveness and utilization of the 2007 Witness and Victim Protection Law (Decree 89) in extortion cases could be a focus.

Guatemala: Transport workers face increased security risks and incur personal expenses when serving as witnesses. USAID could seek ways to minimize such risks and costs through improved protection mechanisms.

Honduras: Addressing lengthy trial durations and protection of witness identification throughout the judicial process could be a focus.

Support capacity-building of specialized transport security units: Existing units within broader police and security structures should be supported by USG actors such as INL, provided they meet vetting requirements. One focus could be improving coordination between transport companies, workers, and government through the establishment of secure communications and reporting channels.

El Salvador: The PNC's Transport Protection Unit could be evaluated and supported.

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[94] REDLAC 2020. "La extorsión: un detonante del desplazamiento interno y la migración forzada en el Norte de Centroamérica y México." Boletín N8. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/BOLETIN%20REDLAC%208%20-%20ABRIL%202020%20-%20ESPA%C3%91OL.pdf

> **Guatemala:** The Immediate Reaction Group (GRIL), a specialized police unit whose members focus on pursuing crime suspects on highways, could be evaluated and supported. One area of focus could be improving coordination with transport alliances (e.g., Business Association of Urban Buses, Association of Suburban Transport). USAID could also support municipal-level police units, such as the transit police unit in Villa Nueva.

> **Honduras:** The Honduran Ground Transportation Institute and the National Office of Highway Administration and Transport could be evaluated and supported.

1.3 WOMEN AND GIRLS

OVERVIEW

In addition to sectoral-level impacts, extortion affects households and individuals. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to extortion. They are typically subject to a greater range of extortion forms and are at greater risk for revictimization by the criminal justice system. Conversely, the roles of women and girls in implementing extortion schemes are evolving. Women are increasingly shifting from peripheral roles (e.g., fee collection) to those more central to extortion schemes, as they are perceived to draw less attention.

OVERVIEW: EXTORTION TRENDS AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS
El Salvador: Women own approximately 64 percent of microenterprises in El Salvador, [95] and are prime targets for private sector extortion. Women also face abuse and intimidation within the criminal justice system, which makes them less likely to report extortion.
Guatemala: Based on official data, the prevalence of women victimized by extortion schemes and incarcerated for extortion charges has increased since 2016. However, the assessment team found that the PNC and MP often fail to take into consideration how gender factors into extortion schemes, thus hindering the effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions.
Honduras: Dipampco reports that the role of women in gangs and related extortion schemes is escalating. Based on official data, 11 percent of individuals incarcerated for extortion are women, and approximately half are detained for collecting extortion fees. In addition, the National Women's Institute (INAM) stressed that the criminal justice system falls short on issues such as responding to reports from female extortion victims and under-registering crimes against women writ-large.

(A) EL SALVADOR

Gang-based extortion: As perpetrators, female partners of gang members typically collect extortion fees or serve as emissaries for prison-based messages. While women affiliated with gangs take part in criminal activity, they are also at greater risk of assault, rape, or murder, according to case files from the Prosecutor's Office. Because of their relatively visible roles in gangs, women are also more likely to be

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[95] Women and Girls Empowered (WAGE) 2019. "Women's Economic Empowerment in El Salvador."

arrested for extortion. Only 3.3 percent of male gang members were incarcerated for extortion, compared to 26.7 percent of women.[96]

Female victims also face additional risks, such as being forced into sexual transactions rather than extortion via cash.[97] Respondents also reported that major gangs threaten parents into handing over underage daughters, many of whom are taken to prisons to be sexually exploited by gang leaders. Unfortunately, such vulnerabilities are poorly monitored and documented by the government.

Private sector extortion: Surveys reveal that male-owned businesses are subject to more extortion than women-owned businesses. This is due in part to the fact that larger companies are primarily owned by men and are more attractive targets.[98] Nevertheless, women own approximately 64 percent of microenterprises in El Salvador,[99] and are also prime targets for extortion. They often operate solely with cash and readily comply with extortion demands to avoid risks due to their responsibilities as the head of household, according to respondents.

Criminal justice: Women also suffer from abuse within the criminal justice system, such as strip searches by police, which reduces their willingness to report crimes like extortion. According to SSPAS, women are often threatened when filing reports or are intimidated by military patrols responding to extortion reports.

Gender-focused policy: The assessment team found that anti-extortion units lack gender-centric training, such as taking into account how gender factors into extortion schemes. Existing gender-focused support for victims of violence, such as *Ciudad Mujer,* has limited coverage.[100] Likewise, the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women, which oversees national-level gender policies, has been essentially dismantled, according to NGO respondents. Within the PNC, efforts to address women's needs, such as the UNIMUJER-ODAC unit, have been weakened and investigative capacities have decreased. There are no integral policies to protect girls and women from violence and extortion, prevent their entry into gangs, or protect women who intend to leave gangs. These gaps allow for the proliferation of women both participating in and victimized by extortion schemes.

However, there are still cooperative NGO-state initiatives addressing vulnerabilities faced by women. Las Dignas participates in Committee 1325,[101] the Spotlight Initiative, and the Citizen Window for the Right of Justice in Usulután, which are gender-focused initiatives that could be leveraged to address gendered aspects of extortion.

(B) GUATEMALA

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[96] IUDOP 2010.
[97] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[98] FUSADES 2016. "Soluciones. Extorsiones a la micro y pequeña empresa de El Salvador." http://fusades.org/publicaciones/Extorsiones_MYPE_ES.pdf. See also: DIGESTYC 2018. Encuesta de Victimizacion y Percepcion de Inseguridad; Encuesta de Cultura de Paz.
[99] Women and Girls Empowered (WAGE) 2019.
[100] *Ciudad Mujer* ("Women City") is a project of the Salvadoran government that was created in 2011 and offers aid to victims of violence against women.
[101] This committee oversees actions connected to the 2000 United Nations Resolución 1325 "Mujer, Paz y Seguridad."

Gang-based extortion: Women in Guatemala have become increasingly victimized by extortion. Between 2016 and 2020, data show that women composed between 48 percent and 53 percent of victims of extortion.[102]

The assessment team found that women have become increasingly engaged with gang-based extortion schemes, which contributes to their increased incarceration on related charges. Many incarcerated gang members have three or more female partners who collect extortion fees. Cases increased in 2020 and 2021, according to Dipanda, because more young women were joining gangs due to the shrinking job market because of COVID-19.

Sex workers are also vulnerable to gang-based extortion schemes. In one example from 2017, 19 MS-13 members were convicted for extorting nearly 165 sex workers in Zone 1 in Guatemala City; they charged the workers around USD 23 per week and USD 528,000 over three years.

Private sector extortion: According to the PNC and other reports, there is no statistically significant impact of extortion among women-owned businesses. However, the assessment team found that female employees in larger businesses (e.g., *maquilas*, factories) are frequently targeted as they exit their place of employment and return home to gang-controlled *colonias*.

Criminal justice: The assessment team found that the number of women incarcerated on extortion charges has increased, based on official data. In 2014, a total of 382 women were incarcerated for extortion; by 2017, the number climbed to 791 (30 percent of all incarcerated women). In 2017, out of 935 18th Street members in jail, 107 were women (11 percent). Of the 522 MS-13 gang members in jail, 61 were women (12 percent).[103]

In 2021, 799 women were detained for extortion-related crimes, the majority of which were for lending their bank accounts.[104] 68 percent of incarcerated women were held on extortion-related charges.[105] However, neither the PNC nor the MP investigate gender as a component of extortion.[106] Officials thus overlook critical patterns, such as the practice of incarcerated gang members demanding sexual services from female relatives of extortion victims. Financial patterns of victimization are also missed; for example, females affiliated with extortionists are often duped into transferring payments on their behalf for deceitfully benign purposes and years later may be arrested on extortion-related charges for transferring small amounts.[107]

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[102] *Ministerio de Gobernación de Guatemala* and UNDP 2021. Compendio Estadístico 2020: Indicadores de Seguridad Ciudadana y Acciones Policiales. https://mingob.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Compendio-estadi%CC%81stico-MINGOB-2020.pdf

[103] Albani and Coronado 2017. "Las prostitutas le pagan las cuentas a una clica de la MS." CICLOSCAP. https://cicloscap.com/las-prostitutas-le-pagan-las-cuentas-a-una-clica-de-la-ms/

[104] Diario de Centro America. 2021. "Reportan 799 mujeres detenidas por delitos de extorsión – Noticias Última Hora de Guatemala." https://dca.gob.gt/noticias-guatemala-diario-centro-america/reportan-799-mujeres-detenidas-por-delitos-de-extorsion/.

[105] Chumil, Katerin. 2021. "Cómo prestar una cuenta bancaria puede ligar a alguien a las extorsiones." Prensa Libre. April 17.

[106] La Seguridad Privada en Honduras, Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible de Guatemala 2021. See also: Diálogos 2021b. Informe sobre extorsiones en Guatemala. https://www.dialogos.org.gt/sites/default/files/2021-06/INFORME%20SOBRE%20EXTORSIONES%20EN%20GUATEMALA%20ABRIL%202021%20Fin.pdf

[107] Menchú 2019. "Los negocios pequeños de Guatemala: una mina de oro." Insight Crime. https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/los-negocios-pequenos-de-guatemala-una-mina-de-oro/

Gender-focused policy: The assessment team could not identify any anti-extortion policies that incorporate a gendered approach. One information campaign in 2019 targeted women and raised awareness about the risks of lending a bank account for transfers of unknown origin.

(C) HONDURAS

The assessment team obtained relatively limited information on the relationship between gender and extortion in Honduras.

Gang-based extortion: Dipampco reports that the presence of women in gangs is escalating, which increases their participation in extortion schemes. Women appear to be taking on a greater diversity of roles with more responsibility and risk, such as contract assassinations,[108] surveillance, and coordination of extortion fee collection. However, the increasing participation of women in extortion does not necessarily bring them more power; both major gangs are deeply misogynistic with internal hierarchies that exclude women from command roles.[109]

Criminal justice: Currently, Honduras's 23 prisons have a record 3,534 individuals detained for extortion. 3,147 are men (89 percent) and 387 are women (11 percent).[110] The assessment team found that about half of the women held on extortion charges held at any given time were detained for collecting fees.

INAM stressed that the criminal justice system falls short on appropriately responding to reports and registering crimes against women. These shortcomings make women less likely to report crimes and more likely to retract initial reports; one result of the *carambola* effect is re-victimization by the criminal justice system and heightened risk from the abuser.

WOMEN AND GIRLS RECOMMENDATIONS

> **Support gender-focused investigations by anti-extortion units:** Extortion tactics and schemes which rely on gender dynamics (e.g., the utilization of female perpetrators) should be further investigated and prosecuted. USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide training to relevant anti-extortion units on such approaches.

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[108] InSight Crime. 2020. "Liderazgos criminales de mujeres y uso diferencial de la violencia." https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/liderazgos-criminales-mujeres-uso-diferencial-violencia/.
[109] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[110] Instituto Nacional Penitenciario 2021. Reporte de Estadísticas 2021. Obtained via public information request.

> **Support and expand multi-service centers for female victims:** Existing multi-service centers, including NGO and state initiatives, require additional funding to support victims. USG actors could provide financial assistance and capacity-building support to local NGOs that provide varied forms of victim assistance to women, including support to victims of extortion.
>
> One promising model for multi-service centers is *Ciudad Mujer* in Honduras. However, there are only six sites available with limited hours, which constrains access, particularly for women in remote regions.[111] Mobile sites like the one based in Cofradia could also be funded to improve access for victims of extortion and related violence.
>
> Furthermore, USG actors could provide technical assistance for women's police units, such as UNIMUJER-ODAC in El Salvador, to increase reporting and facilitate victim assistance.

> **Provide M&E support to anti-extortion units and NGOs:** USAID could provide M&E support to anti-extortion units and NGOs in tracking gendered victimization, which would inform gender-focused anti-extortion policies. One potential model is the typology of risk factors for women's involvement with gangs, developed by El Salvador's FGR. Furthermore, NGOs such as *Las Dignas* and Salvadoran Women's Movement in El Salvador could be supported in their ongoing efforts to monitor violence and related crimes against women (including extortion).

1.4 LGBTQI+

OVERVIEW

LGBTQI+ individuals comprise another subset of the population that is particularly vulnerable to extortion, as extortionists leverage their existing vulnerabilities. LGBTQI+ individuals in the region are more likely to experience socioeconomic instability, as discrimination limits access to education, housing, and employment. Such limits may push members of the LGBTQI+ community into informal commerce, sex work, or other income sources that are more exposed to extortion. Evidence also suggests that discrimination within the criminal justice system hinders assistance to LGBTQI+ extortion victims and deters reporting.

In addition to extortion schemes targeting LGBTQI+ individuals and affiliated business, specific extortion tactics involve threats of "outing" LGBTQI+ persons to family and workplace, coercion for sexual acts, and forced participation in drug selling.[112] Resulting from challenges in reporting and government tracking, there is a scarcity of data available on crimes against LGBTQI+ people. Due to this, the assessment team obtained limited data asides from its desk review and select interviews.

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[111] The six sites are Choluteca, Choloma, Juticalpa, Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba, and San Pedro Sula.
[112] REDLAC 2019. "El impacto de la violencia sobre la comunidad LGBTI en el Norte de Centroamérica." Boletín N 6. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/BOLETIN%20REDLAC%206%6%20-%20SEPTIEMBRE%202019%20-%20ESPAN%CC%83OL.pdf

OVERVIEW: EXTORTION TRENDS AMONG LGBTQI+ PEOPLE
El Salvador: Several cases of extortion-related violence towards LGBTQI+ people, transgender people in particular, mirror broader trends of endemic violence against LGBTQI+ people in the region. Gangs also appear to take advantage of LGBTQI+ individuals' vulnerability in extortion schemes by forcing them into sex work or to bring contraband in prisons, as indicated by a local NGO, COMCAVIS Trans.
Guatemala: The assessment team found that homophobia and transphobia pervade the criminal justice process for LGBTQI+ individuals who report crimes. Additionally, policies such as Law Initiative 5940 enable discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals and perpetuate vulnerabilities.[113]
Honduras: Interviews and media reports suggest that many Honduran LGBTQI+-owned businesses pay extortion fees. Reports also suggest that the PN and PMOP only aggravate extortion, with demands and raids of LGBTQI+ businesses. Likewise, the assessment team found that police are major clients of sex workers, which fuels extortion and other related abuses.

(A) EL SALVADOR

Disaggregated data: Official data on extortion against LGBTQI+ individuals are scarce. Between 2015 and 2020, there were 21 reported extortion cases and three aggravated extortion cases against LGBTQI+ individuals nationally.[114] However, the Attorney General's Office lacks disaggregated data on violence or crimes against LGBTQI+ individuals, according to one activist respondent. In 2020, the Attorney General's Office reported 692 cases of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals in five years, but it is not clear if any of these killings were extortion-related.

Extortion-related violence against LGBTQI+ people: Violence is endemic against all LGBTQI+ individuals in the NCA region. In 2020, when one transgender woman was no longer able to pay the weekly fee to live in her neighborhood, extorting gang members raped and beat her.[115] Another transgender woman was tortured by gang members after refusing to store guns and drugs in her home. Transgender people are particularly vulnerable to extortion-related violence: they, and sometimes their families, are subject to repeated assault by gangs.

Criminal justice and reporting: Evidence also suggests that discrimination within the criminal justice system hinders assistance to LGBTQI+ extortion victims and deters reporting. COMCAVIS Trans concludes that filing a complaint to the judiciary would result in greater risk, especially in cases where the aggressor is a police official, as LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly transgender people, are often subject to further discrimination and stigma. Furthermore, justice sector information systems do not allow non-family members to access case information, presenting additional challenges for LGBTQI+

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[113] Law Initiative 5940 seeks to approve the Law to Guarantee the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Gender Identity Disorders, which was presented in Congress in July 2021.
[114] *Dirección de Información Avanzada* 2020. Violencia contra población LGBTI.
[115] Human Rights Watch 2020. "Violence and Discrimination Against LGBT People in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and Obstacles to Asylum in the United States." https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/07/every-day-i-live-fear/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-el-salvador

individuals who may be estranged from their families. The assessment team found that such barriers in access to justice discourage LGBTQI+ individuals from reporting extortion and other related crimes.

A local NGO explained to the assessment team that extortion is not solely used by gangs; there are also cases of extortion from government officials. For instance, transgender women sex workers report that they are frequently extorted by police officers and gang members simultaneously to be allowed to work in certain areas.

In line with these factors, the assessment team found no focused measures to prevent violence and extortion against LGBTQI+ individuals. Police are not trained in how to assist transgender victims and existing international protocols on violence against LGBTQI+ individuals are often overlooked, such as the Organization of American States' San Salvador Protocol.

(B) GUATEMALA

Disaggregated data: Similar to El Salvador, official data on extortion against LGBTQI+ individuals are scarce. From January to July 2020, the MP registered 59 crimes against LGBTQI+ victims. According to the Public Prosecutor's Office, there were 46 reported killings of LGBTQI+ individuals from 2016-2021; it is not clear if any of these killings were extortion-related.

The assessment team found that PNC investigative units lack adequate measures to track sexual identity, which prevents the collection of disaggregated data. Some LGBTQI+ activists track cases and cross-reference them with official data.

Criminal justice and reporting: As in El Salvador, interviews suggest that discrimination within the criminal justice system hinders assistance to LGBTQI+ victims of extortion and other crimes. The assessment team found that homophobia and transphobia pervade the criminal justice process for LGBTQI+ individuals who choose to report crimes. If a victim is a transgender woman, but her identification has a male name, the police will designate "male" on a crime report. Such instances further distance LGBTQI+ individuals from the criminal justice system, deter reporting, and complicate data disaggregation.

Likewise, government policies enable discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals and perpetuate vulnerabilities. In 2022, Congress debated legislation that effectively enables discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly youth, such as through Law Initiative 5940. This initiative vows to protect minors from "gender identity disorders," prohibits information on transgender identity from sexual education programs, and requires media organizations to flag programs with transgender content.

(C) HONDURAS

The assessment team was unable to obtain official data on extortion or other crimes against LGBTQI+ individuals from official sources. NGOs in Tegucigalpa reported many "express kidnappings," which

resulted in at least 434 documented killings of LGBTQI+ individuals since 2009, but as with the other countries, it is not clear if any killings were extortion-related.[116]

Interviews and media reports suggest that many Honduran LGBTQI+-owned or affiliated businesses pay extortion fees. Evidence also suggests that the PN and PMOP only aggravate extortion, with daily demands and raids of LGBTQI+-affiliated businesses.[117] Likewise, the assessment team found that police are major clients of sex workers, which fuels extortion and other related abuses.

Interviews also suggest that there is limited political will to address crimes targeting LGBTQI+ individuals, including extortion and related violence. Concerted efforts to address homophobic violence, such as the *Unidad de Impacto*, have made minimal progress due to limited funding and political support. LGBTQI+ groups say that no police agency has accepted invitations to meet with them, including Dipampco, Police Directorate of Investigations, and ATIC.

LGBTQI+ PEOPLE RECOMMENDATIONS

Support LGBTQI+-sensitive training among justice sector actors: Due to deficiencies and discrimination in supporting LGBTQI+ victims within the justice system, USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide LGBTQI+ and gender-sensitive training to police and prosecutors. Assistance could include revising police curricula and protocols to combat discrimination and address tactics utilized by extortion schemes targeting LGBTQI+ individuals. Additionally, USG actors could support the employment of designated ombudspersons by region.

USG actors also could also support NGO efforts in LGBTQI+-sensitive training. In Guatemala, USG actors could support and expand a training offered by a local NGO (Diké+) to agents of the Ministry of Interior, the Directorate for Migration, the General Directorate of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP), and others. In Honduras, USG actors could leverage the working relationship between the LGBTQI+ community and *Medicina Forense* for expanded training, as well as previous investigative efforts under the *Unidad de Compacto*.

Improve safe reporting mechanisms: USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide technical assistance in improving safe reporting mechanisms for LGBTQI+ victims. This could include support to justice sector operators and alternative mechanisms through NGOs and multi-service centers for victims. This assistance should support mechanisms that enable non-family members (e.g., partners) to access information on cases involving LGBTQI+ individuals.

Provide M&E support to improve data disaggregation: Official data on extortion and related crimes against LGBTQI+ individuals are scarce. USAID could provide technical assistance to local governments to address this gap, such as the development of an inter-institutional database that registers crimes with classifications sensitive to LGBTQI+ individuals. Gaps in crime reporting would also need to be addressed, such as discreet sexual identity self-identification.

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[116] Express kidnappings are short-term (up to 4 hours) kidnappings intended to extort cash from ATM withdrawals. *Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos*; La Republica. 2022. "5 personas LGBTQI+ han sido asesinadas en Honduras durante el 2022." February 7.
[117] Latinameicanpost. 2018. "Honduras: así ha sido la lucha de la comunidad LGBTI." February 4.

1.5 DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

OVERVIEW

Extortion in the NCA region increases violence, fear, poverty, and other vulnerabilities that likely contribute to increased rates of displacement and migration.[118] This section explores the relationship between extortion and migration, although there is a lack of available data on this link. Violence is a major cause of displacement and migration; however, data are not detailed enough to reflect the extent that this violence is extortion-related. Likewise, poor coordination among institutions causes endemic gaps in data and analysis.

OVERVIEW: EXTORTION TRENDS RELATED TO DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION
El Salvador: According to SSPAS data, extortion was estimated to be the second-leading cause of forced displacement in 2021 and the fourth-leading cause in 2018, 2019, and 2020. SSPAS estimated a sharp increase in forced displacement linked to extortion in 2021, when violence displaced 166 LGBTQI+ Salvadorans.
Guatemala: In 2017-2018, the main catalysts for displacement were general threats (36.4 percent), family violence (12.1 percent), and injuries (9.2 percent), as identified by the Human Rights Ombudsman Office. It is unclear to what extent these are extortion-related. Notably, according to one migration official interviewed, "almost no one" reports extortion as a cause.
Honduras: According to 2019 data, the most frequently-reported causes of women's displacement were general threats (55 percent) and extortion (13 percent). However, 64 percent of respondents were victims of more than one crime, so there is a need to understand how crimes may be interrelated.

(A) EL SALVADOR

Extortion's role as a direct catalyst for displacement, disappearance, and migration is unclear. According to migration support organizations interviewed, the leading cause continued to be "threats," although there is insufficient analysis of the motives behind such threats, which could include extortion. Likewise, surveys reflect violence by gangs as a primary motive behind displacement and migration, although the extent to which this violence is extortion-related is unclear.[119]

The assessment team found that data on the relationship between extortion and migration was scarce. This is due to a lack of publicly accessible data, weak coordination among agencies (such as the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office and the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development), limited capacity, and an apparent resistance from the current administration to recognize displacement.

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[118] Norwegian Refugee Council. 2020. "Protection Snapshot: Extortion: a key trigger of internal displacement and forced migration in Central America and Mexico." https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/protection-snapshot-extortion-a-key-trigger-of-internal-displacement-and-forced-migration-in-central-america-and-mexico/.

[119] Ramos 2015. Desplazamiento interno forzado y su relación con la migración internacional. Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador. http://biblioteca.utec.edu.sv:8080/jspui/bitstream/11298/255/1/Investigacion%2056%20ok.pdf

There is a lack of quantitative data on the link between extortion and migration. Cross-referencing other criminal and socioeconomic data, such as rates of extortion and migration by department, is difficult because of differences in data collection methodologies among departments.[120] The most comprehensive compilation, by Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman Office from 2017-2018, used general data to extrapolate the gender and geographic origins of displaced people.[121] It identified the main catalysts for displacement as general threats (36.4 percent), family violence (12.1 percent), and injuries (9.2 percent). As mentioned, threats could be confounded with extortion to an uncertain extent. The limited and general nature of displacement data appear to stem from poor reporting and methodological weaknesses.[122]

(C) HONDURAS

As in the other NCA countries, detailed data on the relationship between extortion and migration are limited in Honduras. Among the leading causes of displacement of women, general threats (55 percent), killings (40 percent), restriction on mobility (24 percent), injuries (20 percent), extortion (13 percent), sexual violence (10 percent), and other crimes (26 percent) are reported.[123] The National Registry Program on Human Mobility under the Human Rights Commissioner's Office has reports on forced displacement, but the primary causes reported were general conditions such as "fear" and "threats."

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[120] Guatemala Department has the highest extortion rate, the fifth-highest murder rate, and the fifth-highest rate of migrant origin. Quetzaltenango Department has the fourth-largest number of migrants originating from or returning to it, the sixth-highest extortion rate, and the 12th-highest homicide rate. The top three departments that are points of origin or return to the largest number of migrants, Huehuetenango, Quiché, and San Marcos, havethe lowest homicide and extortion rates but the highest rates of poverty. 2020 data from the Immigration Guatemalan Institute.

[121] Procurador de los Derechos Humanos. 2018. "Diagnostico sobre desplazamiento forzado interno desde el analisis de expedientes de la procuraduría de los derechos humanos periodo 2017-201." https://enfoca.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GT-Informe-PDH.pdf.

[122] The main source is a questionnaire by the National Board for Migration, which asks deportees where they will return to or their point of origin, which is not necessarily where they are originally from.

[123] *Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de las Personas Desplazadas por la Violencia de Honduras* 2019. Estudio de caracterización del desplazamiento interno por violencia en Honduras 2004-2018. https://www.refworld.org.es/docid/5df3b7674.html

Provide M&E support to agencies and NGOs engaged in addressing displacement and migration: Given vast gaps in relevant data, USAID should invest in efforts to better understand the relationship between extortion and displacement. Innovative mechanisms could include tracking residential turnover rates in collaboration with NGOs; developing and strengthening information platforms; and monitoring extortion among returnees. Another starting point could be a quantitative study at the department-level to ascertain rates of displacement, migration, and extortion.

El Salvador: One area of focus could be addressing significant discrepancies in the number of displaced and disappeared Salvadorans. USAID could collaborate with the General Directorate of Migration, Directorate of Migrant Assistance, as well as international actors such as the International Red Cross Committee. Another potential partnership to leverage would be the recently reactivated *Mesa de Actuaciones Policiales y Derechos Humanos*, which promotes interagency collaboration with NGOs on human rights issues.

Guatemala: One area of focus could be documenting extortion among individuals crossing the border to Mexico. Potential partners in this effort could be the *Mesa Transfronteriza,* which is a network of state and non-state organizations promoting rights on the Guatemala-Mexico border, and the Guatemalan Institute of Migration.

Honduras: USAID could continue partnerships with NGOs outside of the capital, such as the *Comisión de Acción Social Menonita* in San Pedro Sula. Relevant government agencies include the National Institute of Migration and General Directorate for the Protection of Honduran Migrants.

ISSUE AREA II: SECURITY AND JUDICIAL EFFECTIVENESS

OVERVIEW

In addition to socioeconomic trends and impacts, this study examines the forms of enforcement against extortion and their effectiveness. Each country's security and judicial structures have tools to combat extortion, including enforcement by the police; tracking extortion rates; oversight of finances and telecommunications; investigations by public prosecutors; trial and sanction in courts; and penitentiary operations. However, critical gaps in implementation, policy, and data remain, including a lack of citizen-based approaches to violence prevention; a lack of data sharing among agencies; insufficient banking and telecommunications regulations; deficiencies in investigations (e.g., tracking extortion finances); a lack of resources for courts; and a lack of effective extortion prevention within prisons.

This study examines the full chain of enforcement (Figure 6) to identify bright spots and weaknesses at each stage. Table 4 below outlines the primary actors with responsibility for addressing extortion in each country.

Figure 6: The Chain of Enforcement (Security and Justice)

INTELLIGENCE	INVESTIGATION	PROSECUTION	ADJUDICATION
Citizen-Based Information (Police)	Number of Investigation Reports (Police, Fiscalía)	Number of Investigations leading to Prosecution (Fiscalía)	Changes in Numbers and Types of Penal Sentences (Courts)
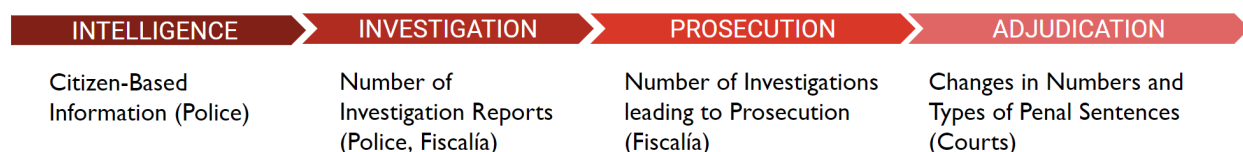
Table 4: Primary Agencies Overseeing Extortion

COUNTRY	INTELLIGENCE/ INVESTIGATION	PROSECUTION	ADJUDICATION
El Salvador	PNC	Public Prosecutor	Specialized Courts of Instruction
Guatemala	Dipanda (part of the PNC)	Special Prosecutor against Extortion Crimes	First Instance Criminal Court against Extortion Crimes; Criminal Sentencing Court against Extortion Crimes
Honduras	Dipampco (formerly FNAMP)	Public Prosecutor	Anti-Extortion Circuit Court

Given that gangs are the primary perpetrators of extortion, security and judicial structures must account for their organization, tactics, and proliferation when combating extortion. Table 5 below provides additional detail on the structures of gangs and related extortion schemes, highlighting the region's two major gangs: MS-13 and 18th Street.

MS-13 primarily obtains its income from arms and drug trafficking, while 18th Street relies on extortion. In Guatemala, extortion has proven to be more lucrative and lower-risk than drug sales, according to Dipanda. Across the NCA region, MS-13 and 18th Street are made up of small groups, *clicas*, each with

its own leader and varying levels of hierarchy; extortion schemes have been largely relegated to the lower ranks.[124]

Table 5: Gang Structures in NCA

El Salvador: With 40,000-60,000 members, the two major gangs have a documented presence in 247 of the country's 262 municipalities. According to the PNC, they carry out 80 percent of all extortions and extort an estimated 70 percent of businesses, earning between USD 18-25 million each year, according to one respondent. Of all extortion reports, 73.4 percent were attributed to gangs, mainly MS-13 and 18th Street. The rest were attributed to imitators. This coincides with the FUSADES survey (2016), in which respondents revealed that perpetrators in 80 percent of cases identified themselves as gang members.

Guatemala: Officials estimate there are about 8,000 gang members in Guatemala. Contacts among the *clicas* have grown as leadership structures have become more centralized: MS-13 has the Council of Nine and 18th Street has the *Rueda del Barrio*. The *Rueda* is believed to be composed of 16 of the highest-level gang members (*ranfleros*), while the Council of Nine has 35-40 members.

Honduras: Estimated gang members in Honduras range from 5,000 to 40,000, which underscores a lack of official data. MS-13 and 18th Street were established in the country around the 1990s, when many of their members were deported from the United States. Over the last two decades, close to a dozen new gangs have emerged. Many of them are short-lived, as they disband or end up joining other gangs. There are also many imitators who impersonate gangs for extortion purposes.

2.1 ENFORCEMENT BY POLICE (NATIONAL POLICE; EXTORTION UNITS)

OVERVIEW

While police and anti-extortion units have developed initiatives and strategies to combat extortion, they face several deficiencies. Extortion is perhaps the crime least-affected by policing approaches centered on repression and raids, given its pervasive integration into the daily lives of both victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, corrupt linkages persist between police and gangs, which also fuels extortion.

OVERVIEW: POLICE ENFORCEMENT AGAINST EXTORTION
El Salvador: Various crime prevention plans have been initiated in recent years, although there is mixed evidence regarding their effectiveness in reducing extortion. While such policies have incorporated some citizen-based approaches, militarized and repressive tactics dominate in practice.
Guatemala: 14 regional police offices conduct search-and-seizure operations in prisons, carry out

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[124] The profiles of extortion arrests provide additional insight into extortion schemes (Table 6). In El Salvador, 2013 and 2015 data reflect that 62.1 percent of those convicted were low-level, adolescent gang members tasked with money collection, while gang leaders were only 6.6 percent of arrests. In Guatemala, 2020 data reflect that arrests among men (51 percent) and women (49 percent) were relatively equal, while only eight percent were minors. In Honduras, 2018 data reflect that 50 percent of females arrested were minors, particularly those linked to gangs.

OVERVIEW: POLICE ENFORCEMENT AGAINST EXTORTION
arrests, and advise victims. The assessment team found that such expanded geographic coverage has contributed to an increase in the number of extortion cases reported in recent years.
Honduras: Dipampco (formerly FNAMP) has centralized operations against extortion, while the assessment team identified deficiencies in this structure. Dipampco officials also stated that 95 percent of extortion is cash-based, which makes it difficult for them to trace the criminal networks involved.

One indicator for the extent of anti-extortion policing efforts is the number of extortion-specific arrests made. Between 2016 and 2019, NCA countries experienced varied trends in extortion arrests, as presented in Table 6. In Guatemala, arrests remained relatively stable over this period, only decreasing slightly from 2017. In El Salvador, arrests increased dramatically from 2016 to 2017, and then decreased steadily. All NCA countries suffer from underreporting of extortion crimes, so these relatively low volumes of anti-extortion policing efforts compared to the number of actual victims also indicates a need for increased effectiveness in the criminal investigation process.

Table 6: Extortion Arrests, 2016-2020

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2016	1,394	495	684
2017	2,493	547	946
2018	2,213	424	1,342
2019	1,916	424	1,831
2020	1,417	397	1,621

Sources: PNC (El Salvador), PNC (Guatemala), FNAMP/Dipampco (Honduras)

(A) EL SALVADOR

The PNC oversees operations against extortion in El Salvador. Various crime prevention plans have been initiated in recent years, although there is mixed evidence regarding their effectiveness in reducing extortion. While such policies have incorporated citizen-based approaches in violence prevention, militarized and repressive tactics dominate in practice.[125]

The Secure El Salvador Plan (PESS) was presented in 2015 to tackle crime. This plan also entailed a joint PNC-FGR Criminal Investigation Information System to enable collection and monitoring of data on crimes, perpetrators, suspects, and criminal patterns (i.e., modus operandi). In the plan's first years,

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[125] García Pinzón and Ospina 2020. "La política de seguridad en El Salvador: la construcción del enemigo y sus efectos en la violencia y el orden social". Revista de Estudios Sociales 73: 96-108. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342467173_La_politica_de_seguridad_en_El_Salvador_la_construccion_del_enemigo_y_sus_efectos_en_la_violencia_y_el_orden_social. See also: Aguilar 2019. "Las políticas de seguridad pública en El Salvador 2003-2018." https://sv.boell.org/sites/default/files/las_politicas_de_seguridad_publica_en_el_salvador_2003-2018.pdf

extortion reports dropped by 28.3 percent. However, in 2016, the PESS was replaced by a set of law reforms known as Extraordinary Measures and the deployment of the Special Reaction Forces of El Salvador, composed of 600 military personnel and 400 members of the PNC's Anti-Gang Units.[126]

In 2020, the Territorial Control Plan was launched to strengthen the police, tackle organized crime, and combat extortion.[127] At this time, extortion accounted for an estimated 80 percent of gang funding.[128] The PNC reported that between March and June 2020, extortions, robberies, and theft decreased by 55 percent from the same period in 2019 and 49 percent from 2018. Furthermore, the PNC reported that the plan reduced extortion by 26 percent in the first trimester of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. During this same period, the number of people charged for extortion increased by 25 percent, indicating a higher percentage of prosecution.[129]

There are competing explanations for the decline in extortions over this recent period. COVID-19 prevented many people from leaving home to file a report, many extortion schemes were put on hold, and 18th Street halted the extortion of informal vendors.[130] Later in 2020, most types of crime had returned to previous levels.[131]

The assessment team found that promising responses to extortion have not been sufficiently replicated. One example is police-private sector partnerships, such as the sugar cane sector's agreement with the PNC for anti-extortion support. This partnership built trust between officials and citizens at the local level, allowing for cooperation to detect and combat extortion. Among the transport sector, effective approaches have identified commercial and transport zones as extortion hotspots and fostered cooperation among municipalities, the PNC's anti-extortion unit, and the military.

Programs like USAID's Justice Sector Strengthening Activity helped implement community-oriented policing in 16 municipalities between 2013 and 2016.[132] Local PNC delegations lacked regular supervision and support to implement community-oriented policing, and only one-third of programs remained active.[133] More fundamentally, most neighborhoods lack a permanent police presence, cutting off a key source of intelligence and cooperation on extortion. Instead, a constant rotation of police personnel and abuses by police authorities undermine the Anti-Extortion Unit.[134] In addition, interviews suggest that police officers routinely commit extortion and collaborate with gangs.

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[126] The Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Special Act on Terrorism Acts, the Juvenile Criminal Law, and the Special Domain Extinction Law were reformed.
[127] This plan was solidified by the *Ley de Maras y Pandillas* (Decree 458) and the 2006 *Ley Contra Actos de Terrorismo* (LECAT).
[128] Presidencia El Salvador 2019. "Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia plan de seguridad para atacar al crimen organizado." https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/presidente-nayib-bukele-anuncia-plan-de-seguridad-para-atacar-al-crimen-organizado/
[129] Presidencia El Salvador 2021. "Policía contabiliza una baja de los casos de extorsión en los primeros meses de 2021 en comparación con 2020, gracias a la estrategia de seguridad del Gobierno." https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/policia-contabiliza-una-baja-de-los-casos-de-extorsion-en-los-primeros-meses-de-2021-en-comparacion-con-2020-gracias-a-la-estrategia-de-seguridad-del-gobierno/
[130] However, MS-13 raised *rentas* to businesses to compensate for losses in other industries (GI-TOC 2020).
[131] Abrego and Barrios 2021.
[132] Determined as part of a PESS evaluation of 262 municipalities.
[133] USAID 2016. Análisis para Nuevas Estrategias en Implementar la Filosofía de Policía Comunitaria en La Policía Nacional de El Salvador. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WFF4.pdf.
[134] Lemus 2018. Los atajos inútiles de la Policía Antiextorsiones. El Faro. https://elfaro.net/es/201802/salanegra/21449/Los-atajos-in%C3%BAtiles-de-la-Polic%C3%ADa-Antiextorsiones.htm. See also: IDHUCA 2018. Abusos Policiales y Derechos Humanos, Sistematización de 60 casos en El Salvador. https://www.uca.edu.sv/idhuca/wp-content/uploads/LIBRO-ABUSOS-POLICIALES-Y-DERECHOS-HUMANOS.pdf

(B) GUATEMALA

The PNC established an anti-extortion unit (Dipanda) in 2009, and the MP created a specialized prosecution unit for extortion, the Special Prosecutor against Extortion Crimes, in 2014. The PNC has 14 regional offices that conduct search-and-seizure operations in the prison system, carry out arrests, and advise victims. The assessment team found that such expanded geographic coverage has contributed to an increase in the number of extortion cases reported in recent years.

However, there appears to be minimal effort among the PNC to analyze changes in criminal data, such as detention rates for extortion. While extortion remains the most reported crime (43 percent in 2019; 44 percent in 2020), detention rates for extortion have declined (871 in 2014; 397 in 2020), as reported by Diálogos. A lack of interagency collaboration, particularly on data collection and analysis, hinders anti-extortion efforts. Data provided by the PNC and the Interior Ministry can drastically differ, with unexplained changes between years. The Prosecutor's Extortion Office has also shown a lack of consistency in reporting extortion data across years.

Additional deficiencies in case processing also hinder PNC effectiveness. According to the Specialized Criminal Investigation Division, police must first sort through reports received and separate extortion from related crimes, like fraud and slander. Gangs further benefit from underreporting among extortion victims, which further reinforces the criminal justice sector's deficiencies.[135]

(C) HONDURAS

Dipampco (formerly FNAMP) has centralized reporting and investigations against extortion in Honduras, along with six regional offices. They have a stand-alone extortion reporting hotline (143). Dipampco officials interviewed reported difficulty in tracing extortion schemes, despite maintaining a registry of telephone numbers reported to be conducting extortion calls. Dipampco explains the challenges in investigating extortion schemes is largely due to the prevalence of cash in its schemes; officials estimate that 95 percent of extortion is cash-based. A PMOP commander stated that "extortion is the most complicated crime to combat," in part because it is a crime intertwined with other crimes.

Dipampco bases their need to centralize extortion investigations and isolate themselves from other security entities on the allegation that gangs infiltrate every branch of the criminal justice system. Other respondents stated that there are significant police deficiencies throughout the investigation process. For example, if a person detained for extortion has no direct ties to a gang, they are granted pretrial release according to interviewees, and often fail to appear at trial. Furthermore, the centralized nature of Dipampco prevents police investigations of extortion outside of their coverage area.

While there is evidence that some interagency coordination takes place between Dipampco and others, FUSINA reports that these agencies still lack shared databases, methodologies, and geographic coordination. Likewise, differences in institutional reporting indicate that specific patterns of extortion need improved and objective tracking.

ENFORCEMENT (POLICE) RECOMMENDATIONS

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[135] In the 2018 national victimization survey, 65 percent of extortion victims did not report cases to authorities. Of them, 58 percent did not do so out of fear of reprisals.

Invest in local, community-oriented policing approaches: Evidence suggests that community-oriented policing could serve as a successful alternative to repressive, raid-focused approaches. These approaches could also improve the understanding of municipal-level criminal networks, such as how arrests affect extortion in specific areas. USG actors such as USAID and INL could provide financial assistance and capacity-building for the replication of successful models, like those supported through the Justice Sector Strengthening Activity in El Salvador. However, national governments remain accountable to ensure adequate funding, personnel, and resources to effectively succeed.

Support and expand police-private sector partnerships: These partnerships emphasize trust-building between police and citizens at the local level, allowing for cooperation to detect and combat extortion. USG actors such as USAID and INL could provide financial and technical assistance to build upon successful police-business partnerships. Examples from El Salvador could serve as models, such as between the anti-extortion unit and agricultural sector, and another partnership between the transport sector, municipalities, and the anti-extortion unit. In Honduras, the Directorate of Police Intelligence could work more closely with transit security and control centers to develop ongoing channels to document and respond to specific patterns of extortion.

Analyze the links between police officers and gangs to prevent collusion: No progress can be made on extortion without an assessment of the patterns and practices that characterize the different collusion levels between police officers and gangs at the local level, ranging from alliances that shift along territory, harassment and threats against citizens who report gang activity, and acts of extortion. Provided sufficient political will, USG actors such as USAID and INL could provide M&E and investigative support.

2.2 TRACKING EXTORTION RATES

OVERVIEW

Agencies face various challenges in tracking extortion rates. A foundational weakness in tracking extortion is an inconsistent definition of the crime among government agencies. Other obstacles include underreporting by victims, lack of coordination among government agencies (see Table 7), and deficiencies in the ability to investigate criminal networks related to extortion. Underreporting is a particular challenge, in part due to the dynamics of extortion fees, a lack of confidence in the justice system, and fear of reprisal. These and other shortcomings mean that complete and reliable 2021-2022 data are largely unavailable.

Table 7: Primary Government Agencies Managing Extortion Data

El Salvador: PNC, Anti-Extortion Office of the Public Prosecutor, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Office for Attention to Displaced and Migrant Persons
Guatemala: Dipanda, PNC, Ministry of Interior, MP
Honduras: Dipampco (formerly FNAMP), Ministry of Security, Anti-Extortion Court

Policies to address specific crimes are most effective when they accurately define who is and who is not likely to become perpetrators and victims. In NCA countries, extortion policies lack consistent definitions of the various forms of extortion and those who perpetrate the crime. One study identified several extortive activities that are increasing in Honduras but are not formally defined as extortion in policies.[136] Another weakness is a lack of developed risk factors of victimization.

Table 8 presents official rates of extortion in NCA in recent years. Across 2016-2021, rates are highest in Guatemala, then El Salvador, followed by Honduras. Supplemental geographic and quantitative analysis is presented in Annex I.

OVERVIEW: TRACKING EXTORTION RATES
El Salvador: According to Ministry of Justice and Public Security data, between 2010 and 2017, extortion fell by 69 percent. Over the 2016-2020 period, official PNC data reflect a decline of 38 percent. However, there are evident contradictions between official data and interviews, which suggests that declines in official data may reflect underreporting.
Guatemala: Official rates of extortion targeting residences (per PNC data) rose by 113 percent between 2013 and 2019; extortion of businesses by 292 percent; and extortion of transport by 80 percent. Many officials attribute these increases to the expansion of channels for secure reporting and the opening of new police stations in ten departments. Even with this expansion, only a small percent of extortion is reported.
Honduras: Official police data reflect a 46 percent increase in extortion rates from 2017 to 2018, countered by a 66 percent decrease from 2018 to 2020, but followed by a sharp increase of 267 percent from 2020 to 2021.

Table 8: Rates of extortion per 100,000 persons, total victims

	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS[137]
2016	35 / 2,183	43 / 6,759	12 / 1,003
2017	26 / 1,607	46 / 7,461	11 / 1,000
2018	26 / 1,655	61 / 9,953	16 / 1,464
2019	34 / 2,153	96 / 15,945	9 / 846
2020	21 / 1,354	78 / 13,288	5 / 504
2021	818 (through July)	10,601 (through September)	20 / 1,850 *

Sources: PNC (El Salvador); PNC (Guatemala); FNAMP/Dipampco (Honduras).
* 2021 data for Honduras were provided at the aggregate level by the FNAMP.

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[136] ASJ 2022.
[137] REDLAC (2020). See also: InfoSegura 2018. "State of the Crime of Extortion in Honduras." https://infosegura.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Extortions-HND_ENG_Vdatospublicos_Flyer_Infosegura_11dic2018-copia.pdf

Extortion rates: The evident contradictions between official data and interview data suggest that declines in data may reflect underreporting; this theory is supported by interviews with non-government respondents. However, without a methodology to separate those patterns, officials will not have the information to inform their decision-making process. A 2016 FUSADES survey reveals that only 15 percent of extortion victims filed a complaint, while 54 percent refused to because of fear of retaliation and 23 percent refused to because they did not trust the government. There are few incentives to file a complaint, as victims must keep paying for extortion during an investigation, risk reprisal from perpetrators, and lack confidence in the justice system.

Another gap refers to the inconsistency between data from different institutions. In 2014, the FGR recorded 3,010 extortion cases nationally, but the PNC reported just 2,480. The same pattern can be seen in Guatemala.[138] In contrast to official data, a 2018 DIGESTYC survey revealed 339,116 cases of extortion during the reporting period. In IUDOP's 2019 annual survey, 23.2 percent of respondents who reported being a victim of a crime reported being a victim of extortion. Of them, 42.3 percent said they had been extorted three or more times, 23.1 percent twice, and 34.6 percent once. In IUDOP's 2020 survey, 29.7 percent of respondents who reported being a victim of a crime were victims of extortion, which was an increase from 23.2 percent in 2019 despite the onset of COVID-19. Of those respondents, 34.3 percent claimed they were extorted once, 28.6 percent twice, 2.9 percent between four and seven times, 5.7 percent from 8 to 11 times, 25.7 percent from 12 to 15 times, and 2.9 percent more than 15 times.

Perpetrators and victims: According to the PNC, gangs carry out 80 percent of extortions and extort 70 percent of businesses. Of all extortion reports in 2016, 73.4 percent were attributed to gangs, mainly MS-13 (841 cases) and 18th Street (514); the remainder were attributed to imitators. This coincides with the 2016 FUSADES survey, in which respondents revealed that perpetrators in 80 percent of extortion crimes identified themselves as gang members.

Extortion is a crime often intertwined with other crimes, which are also mostly committed by gangs. According to the International Crisis Group, half of 93,000 murders committed between 1993 and 2017 were attributed to gangs.[139] Gangs utilize violence to compete for territory, exert authority and fear, and enforce extortion demands. Evidence suggests that a correlation between extortion and homicide cannot be statistically established because of inadequate data and high rates of underreporting.[140] However, other studies discovered that the 28-month non-aggression pact between gangs in 2016 prompted a fall of homicides in most previously-contested municipalities while simultaneously increasing extortion.[141]

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[138] Alvarado 2017. La Extorsión de Nuestra Cada Día, Séptimo Sentido. https://7s.laprensagrafica.com/la-extorsion-nuestra-dia/
[139] International Crisis Group 2017a. El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence. Report N° 64. https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/64-el-salvadors-politics-perpetual-violence
[140] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[141] Argueta 2016. "Transformaciones de las pandillas en El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras." https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/reconceptualizacion_de_la_violencia_web-final.pdf. See also: Brown et al. 2020; International Crisis Group 2017b. Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America. Report N° 62. https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/62-mafia-poor-gang-violence-and-extortion-central-america

(B) GUATEMALA

Extortion rates: Many officials state that increases in extortion reporting is a result of the expansion of channels for anonymous or secure reporting and the opening of offices in ten departments with USAID assistance. Even with that expansion, only a small percent of extortion is reported. The 2018 ENPEVI survey found that only 35 percent of victims report their cases.[142] Among those who do not, 60 percent feared reprisals from perpetrators. The rest do not trust authorities, are unsure of where or how to file a report, or don't believe their case will be solved. Under five percent of extortion cases are fully processed.

There are also evident deficiencies in report processing among justice sector operators. The 15 Dipanda offices and 11 branches of the Public Prosecutor's anti-extortion unit should be able to receive and process reports, but in some cases they lack a Dipanda or other official to do so. As in the other countries, the police often incorrectly categorize reports. These challenges undermine the collection of accurate extortion data, which could better inform policy.

Extortions declined 11 percent from January 2019 to April 2020, which the PNC attributes to violence prevention approaches: a public transit ban; the *estados de excepción* (similar to state of siege) in areas of high gang activity; the transfer of gang leaders to different prisons; and the suspension of prison visits. However, rates began to increase in May 2020 because the prison system was unable to keep extortionists separate from the general inmate population or to stop cell phone acquisitions.

Of 22 departments, only the Guatemala department had an increase in both extortion and homicide. In 2019, about half of all extortion occurred in that department, even though it has just 20 percent of the population. In 68 percent of the remaining departments, extortion and homicide moved in opposite directions. One view is that, as gangs consolidate control, murder rates drop and extortion rises. Of the 20 municipalities with the highest rates, nine were department capitals. The Guatemala department, with 20 percent of the country's population, had six of the 20 municipalities (30 percent) with the country's highest extortion rates, which may also reflect a skewing toward areas with more thorough reporting and access to officials.

Perpetrators and victims: There are a lack of detailed data regarding perpetrators. Although cases are registered by location, little information is released on perpetrators, victims, and motives. The most crimes are carried out by the two major gangs; but according to the MP and Dipanda, approximately 80 percent of extortion is carried out by imitators.[143] Understanding how perpetrators operate, their power structures, and their linkages with other entities is critical for effective responses to extortion.

The only data available on extortion victims are collected from cases reported to the PNC or MP; there are no non-government sources on victimization. PNC data report that 73.7 percent of victims are between ages 20 and 50. Those between 30-34 are the most targeted, which is the most economically-active age group. 70 percent of cases are reported by homeowners, 23 percent by businesses, and six percent by bus owners. According to the 2018 ENPEVI survey, 60 percent of extortion victims were

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[142] Ministerio de Gobernación de Guatemala and UNDP 2019. Compendio Estadístico 2020: Indicadores de Seguridad Ciudadana y Acciones Policiales. https://mingob.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Compendio-estadi%CC%81stico-MINGOB-2020.pdf

[143] Barreno Castillo, Raúl, "Ministerio Público: 'El 80% de los extorsionistas no son pandilleros y denunciar es fundamental para combatir a las estructuras," *Prensa Libre*, May 10, 2022

extorted in their home, 30 percent were shopkeepers, and six percent were transporters; although Dipanda and the Attorney General's Office reported that the main group filing reports were transporters, followed by merchants.

(C) HONDURAS

Extortion rates: Official data reflect a 46 percent increase in extortion rates from 2017 to 2018, from 1,000 to 1,464; countered by a 66 percent decrease through 2020, to 504; and another sharp increase of 267 percent in 2021, to 1,850. Extortion can be reported in person in any Dipampco office, at phone number 143, or through social media, including Facebook and Twitter.

Perpetrators and victims: In 2017, the FNA estimated that 40 percent of all extortion detainees were minors, and in 2022, Dipampco estimated that 17 percent were minors.[144] Authorities of the National Penitentiary Institute registered 387 women imprisoned from 2015 to June 2021 for extortion crimes, which represents 11 percent of the total number of sentenced persons.

From 2013 to mid-2015, the FNA documented 3,411 new extortion victims. Additional evidence suggests that from 2010 to 2020, nearly 3,000 transportation workers have been killed for non-payment of extortion.[145] The Resilience, Youth and Violence Survey, published in 2018 by Infosegura, showed that three percent of youth reported being forced to pay an extortion fee. However, in the assessment team's FGDs with youth, nearly every participant reported that they or someone in their family were subject to extortion.

TRACKING EXTORTION RATE RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide M&E support at municipal and departmental levels: Municipal and departmental-level analysis of extortion trends is needed to better understand patterns and responses. This could include monitoring the correlation between extortion and population concentration, displacement, and/or other crimes, such as homicide.

USAID could provide technical assistance and capacity-building support to local entities managing extortion data, such as support for annual standardized victimization surveys. USAID could also facilitate mechanisms for local interagency collaboration to standardize data collection and analysis. Additionally, online platforms could be developed to facilitate civil society access to relevant data in user-friendly formats.

One Honduran study on Colón's 2014 firearms restrictions is a promising model for how departmental crime data can be tracked.[146] USAID could also foster partnerships, such as Guatemala's *La Mancomunidad Gran Ciudad del Sur*, an association of seven cities in Guatemala Department formed in part to conduct collective studies.

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[144] Tiempo (2022) "FNA: 40 de cada 100 detenidos por extorsión son menores de edad." https://tiempo.hn/menores-extorsionadores-en-honduras/.
[145] REDLAC 2020.
[146] El Heraldo. 2018. "Prohibición de uso de armas en Colón debe imitarse." September 25; La Prensa. 2014 "En operativos en Colón decomisan armas y droga." April 17.

> **Provide technical assistance in reviewing legislation:** USG actors could provide technical assistance by reviewing existing legislation that covers extortion in each NCA country. This support could identify gaps in definitions, enforcement, and punishment, among other factors.

2.3 FINANCES AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

OVERVIEW

Extortion is facilitated by telecommunication and banking channels that lack the necessary political will to enact adequate controls. The laundering of extortion funds is becoming increasingly complex through the utilization of bank loans, financial cooperatives, and cryptocurrency, in addition to money transfers via mobile apps. To avoid triggering suspicion or automatic banking alerts, extortionists rotate bank accounts, require payments in small amounts, and use names of other people on accounts. Likewise, extortion is driven by the ease of communications from within prisons, such as uncontrolled access to mobile phones.

OVERVIEW: FINANCES AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS
El Salvador: The adoption of Bitcoin as an official currency complicates the fight against extortion, since its virtual and decentralized structure make illegal money transfers more challenging to track. Until 2013, 24 percent of extortion money was moved through the platform Tigo Money, according to one former official interviewed.
Guatemala: Anti-extortion policies appear to be crippled by the government's inability to track and freeze the illicit resources and money generated by the crime. Officials cited a lack of cooperation from banks to freeze accounts and provide information that could help them trace banking activity.
Honduras: Honduran officials interviewed complained about the ease with which gangs utilized Banco Azteca for extortion, money laundering, and other financial crimes. Likewise, the National Commission of Banking and Insurance (CNBS), which oversees most financial institutions, has been accused of overlooking companies with political ties and ignoring patterns of money laundering.

(A) EL SALVADOR

Finances: Extortion funds, primarily cash, are often laundered in legal businesses owned by gangs. In addition to the challenges in tracking cash-based operations, it appears that neither the PNC nor the FGR have resources to track blockchain operations.[147] The adoption of Bitcoin as an official currency, as well as its utilization through the Chivo App, complicates the fight against extortion, due to its virtual and decentralized structure. However, respondents believe that bitcoin's overall impact will be minimal because the official Chivo App requires user registration.

Telecommunications: The assessment team found that extortion is driven by ease of communications from prisons, access to mobile phones, and moving money on phone apps. Up until

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[147] Blockchain is a system in which records of transactions made via cryptocurrency are maintained across several computers that are linked in a peer-to-peer network.

2013, 24 percent of extortion money in El Salvador was moved through Tigo Money, according to a former Security Minister. In 2013, Tigo and the FGR agreed to combat extortion, but there has been no review of that agreement, nor has there been follow-up analysis of operations by the PNC's Anti-Extortion Unit to tackle the illicit flow of resources through Tigo Money, such as the 2019 *Tigo Money/DA17* operation that led to the arrest of 25 people.

While systematic extortion typically involves personal contact between perpetrator and victim, opportunistic extortions tend to be carried out via phone calls. FUSADES's 2016 survey found that only 33 percent of initial extortion requests were done by phone, while police records indicate that 38.6 percent of extortions were committed via phone calls or the internet. Using authorities granted by *Intervención en Comunicaciones* (Decree 285, 2017) and the Telecommunications Intervention Center, phone tapping has been central in anti-extortion efforts; a total of 209,009 phone taps were conducted in 2016.

(B) GUATEMALA

Finances: According to one former Dipanda official interviewed, extortion policy is crippled by the government's inability to track money and freeze assets, due in part to limited interagency coordination. While Dipanda investigates specific acts of extortion, the Specialized Criminal Investigations Division investigates money laundering in coordination with the Attorney General's money laundering unit, which itself only investigates cases based on alerts of irregular activity in bank accounts received from the Special Verification Administration (IVE).

The assessment team found that extortionists can avoid detection by depositing and transferring small amounts through accounts in which similar activity has already been established. Extortionists also demand payment in small amounts and deposits of USD 650-900 in different bank accounts to avoid alerting authorities. Banks may block an account if it violates a provision in one of two laws. Article 2 of the 2001 Law Against Money Laundering prohibits any banking transaction with money that is the product of illegal, delinquent, or criminal activities and Article 28 obliges report of any suspicious transaction to the IVE.[148] However, police complain that banks are "untouchable" due to their political influence and rules governing privacy.

A 2020 IVE report found that IVE filed 106 reports involving 1,557 people and USD 43 million, down from USD 168 million the previous year. Between 2018 and 2019, authorities identified five banking operations that were part of 149 extortion cases, which led to 300 arrests. The transfers and deposits ranged from USD 253,000 to USD 2.9 million. Much of this money goes to the families of *clica* leaders and helps purchase firearms, cars, or cell phones. The anti-extortion unit of the Public Prosecutor indicated it has identified five banks in which most extortion transactions take place. Other reports indicate that Banco Azteca may be involved.[149]

Telecommunications: The assessment team found that NCA countries have an endemic lack of control over the selling of SIM cards, which are constantly used in extortion schemes. In Guatemala, a SIM card purchaser is required to present identification, but it appears that this is rarely enforced, which

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[148] *Ley Contra el Lavado de Dinero u Otros Activos;* Decreto No. 58-2005.
[149] Fontes, A. W. 2016. "Extorted Life: Protection Rackets in Guatemala City." *Public Culture*, 28(3), 593–616. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-3511562.

inhibits the ability of investigative units to trace calls. For example, in Villa Nueva one respondent was able to buy hundreds of SIM cards anonymously and then move around to other locations, thus avoiding detection while conducting extortion calls.

In addition to being negligent, telecommunications businesses can be victims of extortion. In 2017, one mobile phone company was targeted by extortionists who demanded USD 13,333. Some sellers have explained that the companies (Claro and Tigo) pay them only if they reach a certain quota of sales per day and do not enforce the identification requirement. The sellers who want to be paid do not enforce the rule, and also do not have any way to check if an identification document is real.

(C) HONDURAS

Finances: Honduran officials interviewed complained about the ease with which gangs utilized Banco Azteca for extortion, laundering, and other financial crimes. PMOP officials say that gangs purchase phones with stolen or doctored identification and that they collaborate with bank personnel. The CNBS, which oversees most financial institutions, has been accused of overlooking companies with political ties and ignoring patterns of money laundering. However, respondents from the CNBS say that the government ignores gang infiltration in the financial system and their "ad hoc" and "isolated" actions miss the larger patterns of extortion and money laundering facilitated by connections among different sectors, such as transport, and highly diverse investments. The CNBS is unable to monitor or register accounts used to process extortion payments for lack of regulations.[150]

High rates of turnover and politicization within investigative units further prevent the knowledge needed for multi-year financial crime investigations. CNBS members have long said that the primary forms of organized monetary crime are extortion, corruption, and narcotrafficking. However, given the Government of Honduras's failure to develop a clear financial intelligence policy and strategy, CNBS relies upon the general standards of the Financial Action Task Force, a global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog. This approach has done little to prevent the movement of USD 200 million in funds generated through extortion annually through undetected channels.

Banking alerts reflect another gap in monitoring extortion schemes. Banking alerts are triggered for movements of USD 600 or over 100 monthly transactions, indicators which are both easily skirted through multiple accounts, fake names, or relatives' or victims' identification documents. There are also gaps in institutional coordination. The CNBS can only access individual information through a court order and there are strict limits on sharing information with the private sector. As in Guatemala, banks often do not confirm to the law. Banco Azteca instituted rules to investigate any transaction of USD 2,000 or any transaction involving a person connected to a political official, before approval. However, intimidation and bribery lead many bank officials in local branches to skirt these regulations.

Telecommunications: There are relevant protective measures, such as cell phone jammers, in prisons. The National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), responsible for overseeing telecommunications, has a mandate to conduct inspections and verify their functioning. However, these controls are easily evaded by prisoners using WiFi or satellite signals, as suggested in interviews and reports. An antenna system was installed on a hill adjacent to the maximum-security prison El Pozo in Santa Bárbara. The Interagency Commission on Telecommunications Security was formed in 2006 to

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[150] ASJ 2022.

oversee compliance of cell phone blocking in prisons, but it seems to be inactive, as there are no publicly-available evaluations of its operations.

Although there are legal limitations in place to guarantee the right to privacy, they are largely ineffective in order to expedite investigations. As with the CNBS, Dipampco needs a court order to attain the name associated with the number of a seized phone. There are also legal limitations for phone companies. The 2014 SIM Card Law requires the telecommunication firm seller to request, verify, and document the personal information from their buyer. However, it is easy to register under a different name or to use the card of a different person; furthermore, one person can buy up to ten SIM cards.

Moreover, Conatel has lodged a series of fines against cell phone companies who resist enforcement of the ID verification rule. Another set of efforts began in 2014 with enactment of the Law of Limitation of Mobile Cellular Telephony and Personal Communications Service (244-2014) and in 2015 with the Law on the Limitation of Telecommunications Services in Prison, Prisons Farms, and Detention Centers for Minors (43-2015). Based on those laws, fines of about USD 410,000 were lodged against two cell phone operators for not blocking cell signals in 2016.[151] There have been eight total Conatel investigations of failures to block cell phones. Even though action was taken in those cases, the Radio Frequency Identification Devices used were subsequently rendered obsolete by WiFi apps, as up to 61 businesses offer internet services and satellite communication.[152]

FINANCES AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen banking and telecommunications regulations: With support from international actors, national governments should strengthen banking regulations by focusing on controls and monitoring of extortion-related activity. Local interagency coordination should also be promoted, such as between the National Penitentiary Institute, National Directorate of Investigation and Intelligence, and cell phone companies in Honduras.

Banking and telecommunications legal instruments should also be reviewed, such as El Salvador's *Intervención en Comunicaciones* (Decree 285, 2017) and Telecommunications Intervention Center. Honduras has several strong but under-utilized legal instruments, such as *Ley sobre Privación Definitiva del Dominio de Bienes de Origen Ilícito* (Law on Definitive Deprivation of Ownership of Goods of Illicit Origin), *Ley Especial contra el Lavado de Activos* (Decree 144-2014), and 244-2014 and Decree 43-2015.

Improve financial investigations: USG actors could provide technical assistance and capacity-building for investigative entities to better "follow the money" and trace patterns of laundering and investment with extortion earnings. For example, Honduras should strengthen the Financial Intelligence Unit, which is part of the CNBS, and the Interagency Money Laundering Commission. USG actors could also promote local interagency collaboration on investigations of frequent channels, such as Tigo Money.

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[151] The law stipulates an initial fine of 10 million lempira; if the problem continues the second fine is 20 million lempira, and a third includes cancellation of concessions and operating licenses.
[152] United Nations Development Program. "Operadores de Servicio de Internet en Honduras." https://nsrc.org/regions/CENTRAM/HN/operadores-internet-honduras.pdf.

2.4 INVESTIGATION

OVERVIEW

Through recent initiatives, NCA countries have strengthened public prosecutors to fight extortion. However, large-scale investigative operations often fail to address the dynamics of increasingly complex extortion schemes. For example, even as prosecutors become more effective, most perpetrators successfully investigated are from the lower ranks of gangs. Underfunding, lack of training, and poor interagency coordination all hinder investigations. When cases remain stagnant due to institutional deficiencies, suspects may continue to fuel broader extortion schemes.

OVERVIEW: INVESTIGATIVE EFFORTS AGAINST EXTORTION
El Salvador: To strengthen PNC and public prosecutor (FGR) efforts in recent years, 100 new prosecutors were hired around the country. Data reflect that prosecution has become more effective following a spike in kidnappings and related crimes, even leading to the creation of the FGR-organized crime unit; however, prosecutorial actions overall remain limited because of underfunding.
Guatemala: The public prosecutor has 11 specialized extortion regional offices that manage extortion cases. These offices are understaffed and lack equipment, which presents challenges to tracing money and other activities critical to case development.
Honduras: Extortion investigations have improved through coordination among specialized agencies, such as the Criminal Investigation Technical Agency (ATIC) and Special Prosecutor against Organized Crime (FESCCO). FESCCO reports that at any given time, there are approximately 350 active extortion summons and 90 percent of cases in court result in convictions, which is a rate affirmed by the National Interagency Security Force (FUSINA).

Table 9 below provides insight into completed extortion investigations across the NCA region. In El Salvador, investigation rates remained relatively stable from 2016-2019 and experienced a decline of 36 percent in 2020 (from 894 to 572). In Guatemala, investigation rates remained relatively stable over the 2017 (840) to 2020 (884) period. Lastly, Honduran investigation rates increased 99 percent between 2018 and 2019 and declined slightly in 2020. Honduras has the least amount of completed extortion investigations, relative to El Salvador and Guatemala.

Table 9: Completed Extortion Investigations[153]

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2016	900	735	240
2017	913	840	309
2018	984	1,915	280

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[153] Data were acquired through requests for access to public information by the team; Guatemala data was from the MP.

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2019	894	1,845	558
2020	572	996	513

(A) EL SALVADOR

Structure: In 2006, the FGR's Anti-Extortion Unit and the PNC's Anti-Extortion Force were formed. Although most low-level extortion cases are prosecuted by the Unit of Crimes Relating to Private Property, the FGR's Anti-Extortion Unit typically prosecutes aggravated homicide cases connected with extortion. The unit has 19 offices nationwide and is open to receive reports 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

As part of PESS strengthening of the PNC and FGR, 100 prosecutors were hired and distributed around the country.[154] While new units and prosecutors have been made available to combat extortion, extortion sentences in El Salvador have declined. In 2015, there were 162 acquittals and 675 convictions; in 2016, there were 151 acquittals and 674 convictions; and in 2017, there were 159 acquittals and 673 convictions.[155]

The assessment team found that prosecutors are struggling to build cases because of an overdependence on capturing suspects *in flagrante* and a systemic lack of unified criteria between investigative agencies. Furthermore, IUDOP reports that among the 2,000 extortion case investigations initiated by the Public Prosecutor between 2014 and 2020, there are little data about how many investigations concluded.[156]

Operations: Large-scale operations have tried to dismantle extortion networks. The 2018 *Operación Jaque* led to 120 arrest warrants, 157 raids on gang-linked businesses and properties, and 77 arrests, including a few gang leaders.[157] In the 20 operations carried out between 2016-2019 involving agricultural, tourism, and telecommunications companies, 1,198 properties and vehicles worth USD 180 million were seized. However, one respondent asserted that such operations primarily capture collaborators and low-level gang members.

Efforts to strengthen state responses have included the implementation of a permanent mechanism between the FGR and PNC to coordinate investigations through specialized teams, along with proposed training for PNC, FGR, and PGR personnel, and the judiciary in crime investigation and prosecution. Although a cooperation protocol was signed between the heads of the PNC and FGR, a mechanism has not been established and training has not occurred.

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[154] *Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia* 2018. Informe de Monitoreo 2016-2017 Plan El Salvador Seguro. https://infosegura.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/d5a0b-informe-de-monitoreo-2016-2017-vf-250718.pdf
[155] Ibid.
[156] IUDOP 2022.
[157] Insight Crime. 2016. "Case Against El Salvador's MS-13 Reveals State Role in Gang's Growth." https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/case-against-el-salvador-s-ms13-reveals-state-role-in-gang-s-growth/.

In terms of effectiveness, one respondent claimed that one-third of crime reports remain shelved without investigation. In contrast, one anti-extortion unit official reported a 95 percent conviction rate in extortion cases, because of controlled deliveries and wiretapping.[158]

According to the FGR's annual report, between 2019 and 2020 extortion had the fifth-most cases among crimes (2,356). Of the defendants brought to initial hearing for extortion, 97.5 percent (1,620) continued to the next stage, the preparatory hearing. Of those, 74.7 percent (1,051) were then ordered to stand trial. Of defendants tried, 67.1 percent (1,010) were convicted.[159] Pivotal to maintaining these processes were expert analysis, call logs, and testimonial evidence.[160] Most sentences range between ten and 40 years, depending on the number of victims and the types of crimes involved, such as defendants affiliated with gangs.

As one respondent explained, prosecution became more effective after increases in kidnapping and other crimes led to FGR-organized crime units, but remains limited because of staff shortages, as there are only 1,800 prosecutors nationwide. Another respondent explained that staff are not sufficiently trained and lack knowledge in case theory and the use of data systems. Such deficiencies are rooted in severe budget shortfalls. In the General Budget of the Nation 2021, the judiciary's allocation was USD 104.2 million, only 1.4 percent of the total.

(B) GUATEMALA

Structure: Created and supported with support from USAID, the public prosecutor has eleven specialized extortion regional offices to manage extortion cases.[161.] These regional offices work with the Public Prosecutor's Money Laundering Unit to track illicit financial flows and with the PNC through Dipanda to make arrests.

Operations: Investigating an extortion scheme is largely dependent on the institutional operations of the investigative units. The ability to follow money is impacted by a lack of tools, know-how, personnel, and other resources. Some offices do not have vehicles, which undermines time-sensitive investigations. Likewise, one prosecutor in Tiquisate, Escuintla said that they are half-staffed, with prosecutors managing caseloads of up to 1,500, which makes it difficult for them to process extortion reports.[162]

Investigative ineffectiveness impacts more than just specific cases. While extortion cases remain stagnant, suspects may continue to buy firearms, rent stash houses, buy high-end condos for *clica* bosses, and pay off corrupt authorities, further fueling extortion schemes.

A lack of resources also impacts PNC precincts. One Dipanda respondent reported that their regional unit only has one vehicle, which forces them to borrow cars from police officers or citizens. Many areas are not sufficiently patrolled. The same source said that they rarely conduct investigations in the 30,000-

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[158] Vásquez 2020. "Denuncias de extorsión disminuyen 48 % por la pandemia." El Mundo. https://diario.elmundo.sv/Nacionales/denuncias-de-extorsion-disminuyen-48-por-la-pandemia
[159] FGR 2020. Informe Annual. https://www.gob.mx/fgr/acciones-y-programas/informes-institucionales
[160] Ibid.
[161] However, it is worth noting that municipal prosecutor's offices do not manage extortion cases. Municipal-level offices were created to address lower-level conflict, while extortion cases are transferred to the regional level.
[162] Godínez, Escobar and López 2022. "Shalom: la colonia más violenta del municipio más violento de Guatemala." El Faro. https://elfaro.net/es/202202/centroamerica/25994/Shalom-la-colonia-m%C3%A1s-violenta-del-municipio-m%C3%A1s-violento-de-Guatemala.htm

person town of Tiquisate, although it has a neighborhood from which 175 of 300 families have fled from violence and extortion.

Prosecutors also acknowledge that tracking extortion funds is very challenging. According to Dipanda and anti-extortion prosecutors, 18th Street does not use the formal banking system as often as MS-13, as it spends money relatively quickly. Most funds go towards attracting recruits, supporting convicted bosses' families, renting stash houses, and purchasing weapons and drugs. But, as in El Salvador, a limited level of investigations makes it difficult to confirm these patterns. 53 percent of reports have been archived in the previous five years.[163]

(C) HONDURAS

Structure: The assessment team found that extortion investigations have greatly improved through better coordination among the main specialized agencies, including ATIC, the Investigative Team against Drug Microtrafficking, and FESCCO, which oversees extortion investigations. Nevertheless, as in the other two countries, those arrested for extortion crimes are typically lower-level gang members.

Operations: FESCCO reports that at any given time there are approximately 350 active extortion summons (*requerimientos*) and that 90 percent of cases in court result in convictions, which was affirmed by FUSINA. In the 2016 *Operation Avalanche*, 700 law enforcement agents discovered that MS-13 owned large businesses. Similarly, in 2018, *Operación Morazán* dismantled seven criminal rings and captured more than 2,000 criminals. However, no further investigative analysis took place regarding the longer-term impacts of either operation.

Large-scale operations seem to fail in reducing complex extortion networks or dismantling the daily, small-scale actions plaguing most Hondurans over the long-term. The causes of such ineffectiveness are largely internal, such as infiltration of gangs in criminal investigations, which has enabled them to avoid capture, doctor, or steal criminal and judicial documents.

There are also strong disagreements within the investigative units regarding the effectiveness of the others. FUSINA says that its actions have prevented the advent of imitators, but this is disputed by other agencies. The MP refutes PMOP accusations of its ineffectiveness, while FUSINA asserts that police involvement in extortion is minimal to none, a claim strongly refuted by most other agencies.

INVESTIGATION RECOMMENDATIONS[164]

> **Address operational gaps in prosecution:** While large-scale operations to combat extortion are in effect, it appears they fail to address the dynamics of increasingly complex extortion schemes and capture gang leaders. Investigations are also hindered by lack of resources, equipment, and personnel. USG actors such as INL and USAID could provide technical assistance and training to prosecutors and other specialized units at the national and local levels to address such gaps, while considering the gang infiltration of criminal investigations and telecommunications and banking schemes. Training could address case theory, counter-interrogation, litigation, and evidence preparation. Financial assistance could be provided to boost personnel and equipment gaps. USG actors could also support initiatives

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[163] Diálogos 2022. "Using data analysis to assess and evaluate policies and best practices to counter extortion in Guatemala."
[164] Recommendations for telecommunications and financial investigations are included in the prior section.

2.5 TRIAL AND SANCTION – COURTS

OVERVIEW

Following enforcement and investigation, the trial and sanction of extortion cases in courts are another crucial line of effort. The assessment team found that backlogged courts reflect a lack of resources and hinder case resolution for extortion and other crimes. Court effectiveness in all NCA countries is also limited by long-standing repressive policing and arrests of lower-ranking criminals. However, anti-extortion courts (such as those in Honduras) could serve as a specialized model to process cases more effectively.

OVERVIEW: TRIAL AND SANCTION (COURTS)
El Salvador: Nearly every entity interviewed reported a systemic failure in case processing. ANEP asserts that 92 percent of extortion cases are not resolved. Evidence suggests the lack of resolution, resulting in backlogged courts, is due to weak or incomplete investigations.[165]
Guatemala: In 2020, 84 percent of indictments ended in a conviction.[166] Cases progressed relatively quickly until late 2019, when courts closed during the pandemic and resulted in a backlog that remains unaddressed.
Honduras: Established in 2017, the effectiveness of the anti-extortion circuit court is notable. With five courts in the country's two main cities, the court received 787 cases in its first two years and resolved 629 (80 percent).[167] One judge interviewed attributes this success to the strong vetting of all personnel, transparent databases, and agency collaboration.

Table 10 depicts the reported number of extortion convictions between 2019 and 2020. In both El Salvador and Guatemala, it appears there have been significant reductions in convictions between 2019-2020, but convictions remained relatively stagnant in Honduras.

Table 10: Extortion Convictions

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2019	Convictions: 919	Convictions: 1,692	Convictions: 1,479
2020	Convictions: 588	Convictions: 940	Convictions: 1,121

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[165] Such backlogs date back to 2003 with the implementation of the *Mano Dura Plan of 2003,* centered on indiscriminate arrests, based on circumstantial evidence. The vast majority of those arrested were released within hours due to lack of evidence.
[166] CIEN 2022. Estudio de Extorsión para el Triángulo Norte: Enfoque Institucional para Guatemala.
[167] ASJ 2022. Impuesto de Guerra: El fenómeno de la extorsión y la respuesta estatal en Honduras.

(A) EL SALVADOR

Goals of the PESS include reducing delays in investigation and prosecution; however, official data reflect incremental changes. While the number of pending processes increased in 2016 and 2017, the number of criminal sentences for extortion decreased by 0.6 percent.[168] At the same time, nearly every agency reports a systemic failure to process cases. For example, ANEP asserts that 92 percent of extortion cases are not resolved, while the Chamber of Commerce says that only one of the five cases the organization has reported was resolved.

Evidence suggests problems in expediting judicial proceedings during the investigation stage or in the scheduling of public hearings, which generate backlogs in the courts.[169] In 2019, of 18,800 arrests made by the police, only five percent continued into the formal investigation phase.[170] Similarly, there have been 7,000 detentions in total, but under five percent received sentences. In 2021, there were 20,000 PDLs but under 3,000 processed cases.

At the local level, the Specialized Judge on Sentencing in San Salvador tried 43 people for extortion and related crimes in February 2022. However, there is a lack of analysis among agencies to determine how such cases can be leveraged to inform policy, improve investigation, and strengthen trials. As a result, the assessment team found that the judiciary lacks the capacity to review and adapt its functioning.

(B) GUATEMALA

According to CIEN, 84 percent of indictments end up in a conviction in 2020. This backlog has coincided with more cases sent to Major Risk Courts. Although nationally only ten percent of extortion cases are sent to Major Risk Courts, in the Quetzaltenango Major Risk Court, extortion cases accounted for 28 percent of all cases tried in 2019, according to official data. According to two official respondents, these cases could be tried in less congested courts to improve efficacy.

Police respondents complained that judges do not authorize raids at the pace and extent needed to break up extortion rings. Many police have requested raids in prisons, but by the time they are approved, patterns within the prison have shifted.

At the local level, community-based courts and conflict resolution mechanisms such as peace courts (*Juzgados de Paz*) could be leveraged to combat extortion and improve access to justice in these jurisdictions. Based on Constitutional Article 66's recognition of the sovereignty of indigenous communities, many have established separate judicial channels. For example, one of the more active courts in Sololá resolved 3,000 cases in 2016; these high performing courts could support extortion cases nationwide.

(C) HONDURAS

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[168] *Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia* 2018.
[169] Such backlogs date back to 2003 with the implementation of the *Mano Dura Plan of 2003,* centered on indiscriminate arrests, based on circumstantial evidence. The vast majority of those arrested were released within hours due to lack of evidence.
[170] Aguilar 2019.

The assessment team found increasing judicial effectiveness in extortion cases; since the start of the Honduran anti-extortion circuit court in 2017, the model appears incredibly promising.[171] With five courts in the two main cities, the court received 787 cases and resolved 629 (80 percent) in its first two years, a rate far higher than the rest of the justice system. In 2020, the court resolved all incoming cases. However, one judge estimates that 80 percent of those detained for extortion are those sent out to collect the money and are caught *in flagrante*. According to other judges interviewed, 99 percent of those incarcerated for extortion were those who collected money. The success of the anti-extortion circuit model can also be attributed to the strong vetting of all personnel, adherence to digitalization of cases and to timetables for each procedural stage, and collaboration with the National Directorate of Investigation and Intelligence and Dipampco. However, the shortcoming of police practices and the weakness of investigations relying primarily on *in flagrante* cases should be the subject of further analysis.

In the revised penal code, the crime of extortion may need to be further reconciled. For example, Article 374 stipulates aggravating factors if extortion is carried out as part of organized crime; when it employs a minor or person with a disability; or when the accused is a public official. While Article 375 reduces sentencing when accompanied by a confession or collaboration with authorities to identify those involved in leading extortion.

TRIAL AND SANCTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Replicate and support successful anti-extortion court models: The anti-extortion circuit court in Honduras has resulted in concrete advances in the prosecution of extortion cases. USAID could provide financial and technical assistance to expand such models, particularly at regional and local levels within each country.

Support local and regional courts: Regional courts need far more training and resources to handle extortion, and to better coordinate with each national government. For example, Honduras has a structure of decentralized courts whose role in documenting and preventing extortion should be strengthened. Another model from Honduras is the Model of Integrated Specialized Care, formed in 2018 at the lower levels of the judiciary to standardize the processing of specific forms of violence.

Community-based courts and conflict resolution mechanisms, such as peace courts and first instance courts in El Salvador and Guatemala, have helped provide access to justice at local levels and could be leveraged to combat extortion in these jurisdictions.

Support extortion-involved youth: While youth play a role in gangs and extortion schemes, there are steps that could be taken to better mitigate their involvement while supporting those convicted. These steps could include assigning a prosecutor to document youth involvement in extortion schemes, identifying and supporting alternatives to detention, collecting and analyzing data on recidivism for extortion among youth, and supporting NGO initiatives for at-risk youth with a focus on involvement in extortion. For example, support could be provided to juvenile courts in Honduras and the Comprehensive System for the Guarantee of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, which works with courts to ensure rights for youth who are accused of extortion.

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[171] ASJ 2022.

2.6 PENETENTIARY SYSTEMS

OVERVIEW

Following trial and sanction, the penitentiary systems in NCA countries also play a role in the fight against, and conversely, the proliferation of, extortion. NCA's prisons are a source of a large percentage of extortion calls and schemes, as overcrowding and personnel deficiencies allow for prison-based extortion to persist. As a result, clear solutions have not been effectively applied, such as better monitoring and technological blocks.

OVERVIEW: PENITENTIARY SYSTEMS
El Salvador: From 2000-2016, the prison population quadrupled as well as the number of gang members behind bars.[172] A quarter of inmates are estimated to be gang members convicted of extortion.[173] Gang leaders have centralized operations in prisons, which became a prime origin of extortion schemes over time.
Guatemala: Challenges within prisons include a lack of guard vetting and low salaries, a combination that fosters bribery. Authorities interviewed agree that until they have full oversight over persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), they cannot reduce extortion.
Honduras: 17 percent of the incarcerated population was convicted for extortion, according to official data. Personnel appear to have little control over telephone calls from inside prisons, from which 70 percent of extortion orders originate.[174] Efforts to block cell signals have been circumvented by PDLs, such as through satellite phones.

Table 11 below depicts trends in extortion prosecution and conviction in recent years using official data. In Guatemala, it appears that captures and prosecutions have generally remained stagnant over 2016-2020, while convictions steeply declined between 2019-2020. In El Salvador, captures steadily declined following a peak in 2017, as did convictions between 2019-2020. In Honduras, captures and prosecutions generally increased over 2016-2020, with a slight decline between 2019-2020. All three countries reflect a significant reduction in convictions in 2020.

Table 11: Incarceration for Extortion: Prosecutions and Convictions[175]

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2016	Captured: 1,394 Convicted: N/A	Captured: 495 Convicted: N/A	Captured and Prosecuted: 262 Convicted: 232 (127 men, 27 women, 54 boys, 24 girls)
2017	Captured: 2,493 Convicted: N/A	Captured: 547 Convicted: N/A	Captured and Prosecuted: 352 Convicted: 230 (145 men, 27 women, 49 boys, 19 girls)

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[172] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[173] Andrade 2015.
[174] Restrepo 2019.
[175] Data were acquired through 2021 requests for access to public information.

YEAR	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS
2018	Captured: 2,213 Convicted: N/A	Captured: 424 Convicted: N/A	Captured and Prosecuted: 396 Convicted: 296 (226 men, 18 women, 49 boys, 13 girls)
2019	Captured: 1,916 Convicted: 919	Captured: 424 Convicted: 1,692	Captured and Prosecuted: 591 Convicted: 234 (124 men, 15 women, 78 boys, 17 girls)
2020	Captured: 1,417 Convicted: 588	Captured: 397 Convicted: 940	Captured and Prosecuted: 521 Convicted: 169 (93 men, 14 women, 49 boys, 13 girls)

(A) EL SALVADOR

Incarceration and prison-based extortion: Incarceration in El Salvador is relatively high and includes a prevalence of gang members and others convicted for extortion and related crimes. As of 2021, there were 36,663 PDLs, which was the world's fourth-highest incarceration rate, according to the World Prison Brief.[176] The same data reflects that pre-trial detainees were 23.1 percent of the incarcerated population and prison capacity was at 135.7 percent. Likewise, women were 7.4 percent of PDLs, and approximately 70 percent of them were convicted of extortion.

According to InSight Crime, an estimated 75 percent of all prisoners are gang members.[177] The prison population quadrupled from 2000-2016 and the number of gang members behind bars grew from 7,555 in 2009 to nearly 13,000 by 2015.[178] After 4,000 gang members were jailed between 2004 and 2008, their leaders began to centralize operations in prisons, a dynamic that was reinforced through the segregation by gang-affiliation that is enforced by prison authorities within most NCA facilities.[179] Over time, prisons became the origin of 85 percent of extortion plots.[180] The lack of use of gang exit and reinsertion strategies for gang members released from the prison system has resulted in a high likelihood that they will continue working with gangs and related extortion schemes.[181]

Policy: In 20 percent of extortion cases, victims identified that the initial call came from within a prison.[182] Installation of signal blockers for cell phones within a radius of 500 meters was one of a set of measures approved in 2016. Since then, officials estimate that between 6,000 and 10,000 cell phones have been removed from prisons. Other steps taken include the seizure of electronic equipment and a freeze of telecommunications traffic. In 2017, blockers were enhanced, leading to 90 percent drop in cell phone signal intensity in penal centers, according to one respondent.

According to official 2017 data, there was an 83 percent decrease in crimes committed from prisons over the previous year, which officials attributed to increased telephone seizures.[183] In 2019, signals began to be blocked and cell towers were prohibited within 500 meters of any prison, while

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[176] World Prison Brief 2021. El Salvador Overview. https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/el-salvador
[177] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[178] Ibid.
[179] International Crisis Group 2017a.
[180] International Crisis Group 2017b.
[181] Programs to help gang members exit are small, underfunded, and lack needed with private sector collaboration. Efforts like those of the *Dirección de Tejido Social* are regarded as ineffective because they lack resocialization or reinsertion programs. NGOs such as Fundación Forever only cover a limited number of individuals.
[182] FUSADES 2016.
[183] *Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia* 2018.

telecommunications businesses that did not cut services around prisons were subject to fines.[184] The Territorial Control Plan also aimed to break up prison-based criminal communications and finances based on the assertion that 80 percent of homicides and extortion originate in prisons.[185]

According to one former penitentiary employee, clear personnel deficiencies hinder the monitoring of PDLs. El Salvador has approximately 1,200 prison guards, but the system chronically lacks lawyers, psychologists, and other crucial professionals who could support PDLs. There is a penitentiary school for staff, but it is unclear what training is received on extortion, even though over a quarter of inmates at any given time are gang members convicted of that crime.[186]

Recent developments depict the impact of broader policies on the proliferation of gangs in prisons. In 2022, the reformed Penal Code Article 345 raised incarceration sentences for gang leaders from nine to 45 years. In addition, the state did not relax COVID-19 restrictions in prisons, such as locking down PDLs from different gangs in the same cells and prohibiting visits from relatives.[187] The Bukele government secretly negotiated with MS-13 and 18th Street to keep murder rates low in exchange for improving prison conditions, winding down anti-gang operations, and denying or delaying U.S. extradition requests.[188]

(B) GUATEMALA

Incarceration and prison-based extortion: As of 2021, Guatemala imprisoned 24,629 people according to the World Prison Brief,[189] a rate of 133 per 100,000 people. Of them, 48.5 percent were in the pre-trial phase and the capacity rate was 367.2 percent, which both rates among the highest in the world. The assessment team found that one underlying source of extortion within prisons is a lack of guard vetting and low salaries, which is a combination that fosters bribery by inmates.

Furthermore, local officials in Villa Nueva estimate that each PDL has five to six financial dependents, which makes prison-based extortion a vital source of income. Interviews also suggest that communities physically adjacent to prisons receive most extortion calls, but this assertion has not been fully documented.

Policy: Authorities in the PNC and the Attorney General's Anti-Extortion Office agree that until the government has full oversight of PDLs, they will be unable to reduce extortion. Most proposed solutions center on building more jails and offering house arrest for non-violent inmates. As with the PNC, there appears to be a lack of follow-up to raids by penitentiary inspection units and the General Directorate of the Penitentiary System's Penitentiary Elite Group.

COVID-19 measures showed that internal restrictions can serve as one mechanism to combat prison-based extortion. In 2020, the government began isolating inmates involved in extortion into collective

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[184] GI-TOC and Insight Crime 2019.
[185] Presidencia El Salvador 2019.
[186] Andrade 2015.
[187] Valencia 2022. "Opinión: Lo que sea que esté haciendo Bukele con las maras no se parece a la Tregua de 2012." Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2022/02/15/nayib-bukele-maras-tregua-el-salvador/
[188] Martínez, Cáceres, and Martínez 2021. "Criminal Investigation Found the Bukele Administration Hid Evidence of Negotiations with Gangs." El Faro. https://elfaro.net/en/202108/el_salvador/25670/Criminal-Investigation-Found-the-Bukele-Administration-Hid-Evidence-of-Negotiations-with-Gangs.htm
[189] World Prison Brief 2021. Guatemala Overview. https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/guatemala

cells without electrical outlets. They also transferred gang leaders to different prisons and imposed a ban on visits, which cut off inmates' main source for cell phones and chips. As a result of such measures, extortions declined until April 2020, according to official data. Rates then increased after inmates won injunctions against being separated from the general population.

Official monthly extortion rates from March to August 2021 were higher than those during the same period in 2020. In 2021, Dipanda reported that rates were back to normal, with 70 percent of extortion calls originating from jails.[190] Around that time, the end of the ban on mobility restrictions and visiting hours is considered to have led to a spike in extortions to levels close to pre-pandemic rates.

(C) HONDURAS

Incarceration and prison-based extortion: According to official 2020 penitentiary data, Honduras's 23 prisons held 20,897 people, of whom 3,534 were incarcerated for extortion (17 percent). Of the 17 percent, 11 percent were women. In 2021, capacity was 218 percent (8,761 PDLs above maximum capacity) and 54.1 percent were in pre-trial detention.

Prison administrators have little control over telephone calls from inside prisons, from which 70 percent of extortion orders originate.[191] Efforts to block cell signals have been circumvented by PDLs, such as through satellite phones.[192] From behind bars, gang leaders continue exerting control over their subordinates around the country. The assessment team found that women play a primary role in relaying messages from imprisoned leaders.

Another major branch of the penitentiary system is detention centers for minors, whose chronic overcrowding is fueled by relentless gang recruitment. In contrast to up to 15 to 20 years' incarceration, minors may receive two to five years in a juvenile center. In 2014, authorities arrested 93 children for extortion, which rose to 158 in 2015, 28 percent of minors arrested that year, and to 200 in 2020.[193] At the beginning of 2021, the Directorate for Children, Adolescents, and the Family estimated that about 45 cases of children linked to extortion and drug trafficking are reported daily. In 2022, 30 percent of detained minors were held for extortion.

Policy: Combating prison-based extortion should focus on identifying illegal forms of communication rather than repressive physical occupations. The 2019 declaration of a prison-wide state of emergency led to an Intervention Commission with about 1,200 military and police. Within a week of the Commission's appointment, 37 gang-affiliated PDLs were killed in massacres at the El Porvenir and the Tela Penitentiary.[194]

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[190] Extortion within the prisons also continued. In May 2021, nine inmates were killed in three jails. In one, the killings were rooted in the internal extortion of an inmate who was a drug trafficker. The extortionists hired *sicarios* to kill the trafficker's wife, and the trafficker's team killed all seven extortionists. Three days before, an inmate was gunned down at the *Centro Preventivo para Hombres zona 18*. An inmate was found hanged in another jail, with his hands and feet tied, which the government ruled a suicide.

[191] Restrepo 2019.

[192] *La Prensa* 2014. "Tigo comienza a bloquear señal en centros penales de Honduras." https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/tigo-comienza-a-bloquear-senal-en-centros-penales-de-honduras-FFLP461352

[193] REDLAC 2020.

[194] Agence France-Presse 2019. "Dos masacres en dos cárceles de Honduras dejan 37 muertos este fin de semana." https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/12/23/actualidad/1577090369_937942.html

In response to a request for data on how they identify PDLs carrying out extortion, the National Penitentiary Institute suggested that judicial authorities should bear responsibility. Such a response is indicative of the weaknesses among the criminal justice chain and the lack of collaboration between the Penitentiary Institute and extortion investigators.

PENITENTIARY SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS

Support preventative measures (including a monitoring and communications strategy): Prison officials should be supported to develop strategies to better detect extortion schemes. Improved monitoring, telecommunications blockages, and internal restrictions could all be supported through financial and technical assistance. For example, USG actors such as INL could provide training to prison guards and administrators in oversight and prevention, while reviewing and adapting ongoing local efforts.

Support rehabilitation and counter recidivism: Those who are released from prison are vulnerable to continue working with gangs and extortion schemes. One potential mechanism to address this challenge could be post-sentence service centers, with recidivism programs differentiated for adults and juvenile offenders. A prime example is the United States's restorative justice programs, which have been more effective at reducing recidivism than most other policies.[195] USG actors such as INL and USAID could support the implementation of such programs. In El Salvador, Urban Centers of Welfare and Opportunity are potential models to expand; in Guatemala, the Rehabilitation Sub-Directorate of the penitentiary system could be supported; and in Honduras, programs like the Catholic Church's *Pastoral Social* could support post-sentence reintegration processes.

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[195] For example, one study showed that youth assigned to one program were 19 percent less likely to be rearrested within six months, a 44 percent reduction relative to those not in the program, and those results continued for four years. See Shem-Tov, Yotam (2022) Restorative Justice and Recidivism: Evidence from the Make-it-Right Program.

ANNEX I: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW

This supplemental quantitative analysis further examines the relationship of extortion to socioeconomic variables and citizen security characteristics in each NCA country. Extortion has been analyzed according to data from the police, MPs, statistical institutes, and victimization surveys.[196] As a result, municipalities with the highest incidence of extortion have been characterized by demographic, socioeconomic, and criminal indicators.

In the last five years, there has been a significant drop in extortion reports in El Salvador and Honduras, but not in Guatemala, where extortion reports have grown. These reports may reflect changes in people's interest and ability to report extortion as much as it reflects actual rate of the crime.

Reports of extortion are concentrated in the main cities of each country. In Guatemala, close to 40 percent of complaints are concentrated in the department of Guatemala, while in El Salvador, the greater San Salvador area holds almost 30 percent of complaints. In Honduras, the metropolitan areas of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula contain up to 70 percent of complaints. Official extortion complaints suggest men report extortion to police in a higher proportion than women in NCA.

Extortion is not randomly distributed; it is concentrated in the areas surrounding major cities in each country. In a five-year cluster analysis, the areas surrounding the municipality of Guatemala and Quetzaltenango held important blocks of municipalities that registered high rates of extortion. This dynamic was also present in the Central District and the Metropolitan Zone of the Sula Valley in Honduras. In the Salvadoran case, it was more difficult to establish clusters of municipalities with similar values; however, the existence of spatial correlation was detected for a sustained period in a strip of municipalities in the western coastal zone. The assessment team found that municipalities with high extortion rates are generally characterized by higher levels of urbanization, internet access, high population density, and homicides and other crimes, such as property crime.

Victimization data also suggest that people from urban areas, those in upper-middle income ranges or higher, and those who are self-employed are more likely to be victims of extortion. Evidence from AmericasBarometer surveys suggest that people living in a household victimized by extortion tend to report a greater desire to migrate than others, and that extortion may negatively affect interpersonal trust, but it does not significantly affect civic participation at the community level.

Moreover, evidence suggests that a small proportion of extortion offenses initially reported are successfully prosecuted. However, when cases enter the system, the assessment team found that the prosecution rate is much higher than for most crimes. The use of official surveys highlights an obvious disparity in the recording of extortion complaints. Although reporting statistics show a predominance of male victims, victimization analysis suggests that women are at least as likely to be victims of extortion as men, which suggests that women are less likely to report extortion than men.

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[196] It is important to recognize that the analysis of victimization data is different from that of official records, since the former includes a broader vision that is not limited to whether the person reported the incident. It is difficult to leave aside the "black figure" of crimes committed that go unreported. As a result of such analysis, it appears that increased desire to migrate to another country, socioeconomic profile, and area of residence are at least descriptively related to exposure to extortion.

NCA EXTORTION TRENDS BASED ON OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Understanding extortion starts with a careful analysis of the official information produced by the entities responsible for public security in each country. Between 2015 and 2021, the NCA experienced a decreasing number of registered homicides. However, trends in extortion were not universal: El Salvador and Honduras experienced reductions in the official number of extortions but Guatemala experienced a significant increase.

Table 12 shows two different realities of extortion according to the national police data from each country: In El Salvador and Honduras, there have been significant decreases, but the Salvadoran extortion rate dropped from 36 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to 21 in 2020, while the Honduran rate dropped from 12 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to five in 2020. In Guatemala, extortion reporting has seen an increase from 33 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to 78 in 2020; the September 2021 figure indicates that 2021 will likely surpass the 2020 rate.

Homicide figures have shown a downward trend in all three countries, with consistent year-to-year decreases, except from 2018 to 2019 in Honduras, where the homicide rate increased from 41 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants to 44. El Salvador saw the largest decreases, going from above 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to 18 in 2021.

Table 12: Extortion, Homicides, and Robberies in NCA (2015-2021)

COUNTRY	YEAR	POPULATION	EXTORTION REPORTS	EXTORTION PER 100,000	HOMICIDES	HOMICIDES PER 100,000	ROBBERIES	ROBBERIES PER 100,000
Guatemala	2015	15,567,419	5,151	33	4,778	31	15,654	101
	2016	15,827,690	6,759	43	4,521	29	14,328	91
	2017	16,087,418	7,461	46	4,410	27	12,112	75
	2018	16,346,950	9,953	61	3,884	24	11,000	67
	2019	16,604,026	15,945	96	3,578	22	8,473	51
	2020	16,858,333	13,104	78	2,569	15	7,282	43
	2021	17,109,746	10,601*	61*	2,418	14	–	–
El Salvador	2015	6,259,901	2,242	36	6,656	106	9,511	152
	2016	6,278,901	2,183	35	5,280	84	12,279	196
	2017	6,293,594	1,607	26	3,954	63	10,709	170
	2018	6,305,496	1,655	26	3,341	53	11,072	176
	2019	6,314,755	2,153	34	2,390	38	8,468	134
	2020	6,321,042	1,354	21	1,322	21	5,324	84
	2021	6,325,827	818	13**	1,140	18	2,106	33**
Honduras	2015	8,576,532	–	–	5,148	60	11,262	131
	2016	8,721,014	1,003	12	5,150	59	12,243	140

COUNTRY	YEAR	POPULATION	EXTORTION REPORTS	EXTORTION PER 100,000	HOMICIDES	HOMICIDES PER 100,000	ROBBERIES	ROBBERIES PER 100,000
	2017	8,866,351	1,000	11	3,863	44	19,559	221
	2018	9,012,229	1,464	16	3,732	41	20,998	233
	2019	9,158,345	846	9	3,996	44	22,464	245
	2020	9,304,380	504	5	3,497	38	14,266***	153
	2021	9,450,711	–	–	3,648	39	20,511***	217

* Extortions for the year 2021 in Guatemala are available until September.
** Extortions and robbery-theft in El Salvador for 2021 are available until June.
*** Downloaded from the Honduras Datos Abiertos de Seguridad portal launched in July 2022.
Source: Data from the National Statistics Institute and PNC/PN from each country.

The following figures present monthly extortion rates in El Salvador and Guatemala, in main metropolitan areas from 2015 to 2021. Rates in Honduras are presented on an annual basis.

Figure 7: National extortion totals versus extortion in the Greater San Salvador Metropolitan Area (AMSS), 2015-2021
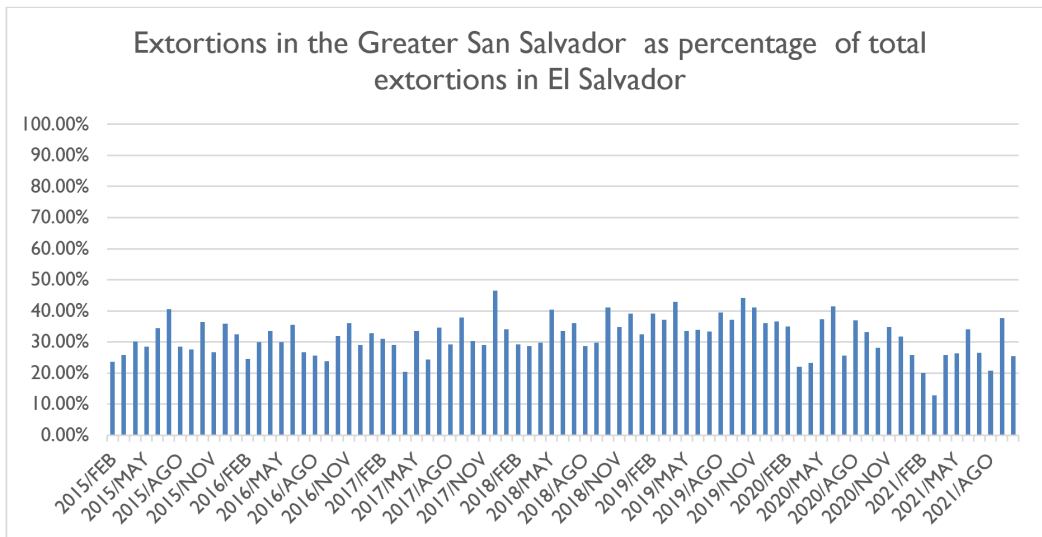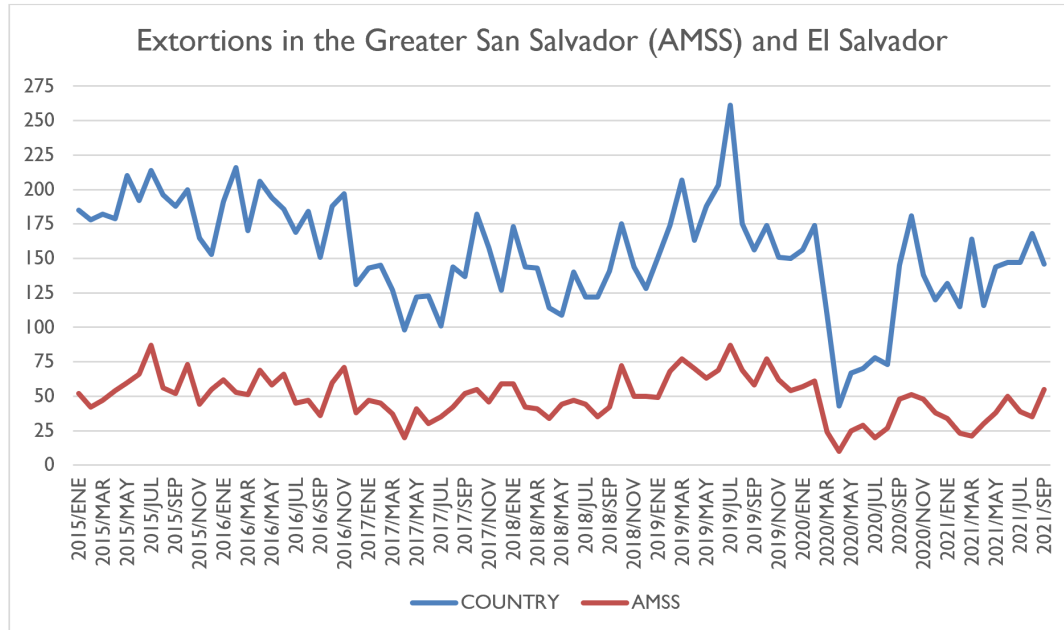
Source: LACLEARN, using PNC data (2021).

El Salvador began the five-year period from 2015 to 2020 with an average number of extortion reports that ranged from 180 to over 200 per month. The number dropped in 2016 and 2017, and then

increased in 2018, ultimately reaching its highest point in July 2019, when there were 275 extortions. In 2020 there was a drastic reduction, but the extortion rate rose again in 2021.

Figure 7 shows a very consistent participation of the AMSS over the last six years in the total number of extortions recorded, as well as an important similarity in the trends of extortion records in the country, with very few exceptions, such as August-September 2021, where the number of extortions decreased in the country overall, but increased in the AMSS. Over the six years of study, the monthly proportion of extortion complaints in the AMSS generally remained between 20 percent and 40 percent. The AMSS represented 27 percent of the projected population of El Salvador in 2020 within eight percent of the country's territory. The 14 counties of the AMSS accounted for 35 percent of extortion complaints at the national level in 2020.

In the Guatemalan case, as seen in Figure 8, there was an increase in extortion reports from 2015 until 2019. In July 2019, there were over 1,600 reports of extortion. The figure dropped from February-July 2020. In August 2020, there was an increase that was sustained through March 2021. The main department of Guatemala contained between 35 percent and 45 percent of the monthly extortion reports over the six years of study, and has had significant growth since 2018. The department of Guatemala, which represents 1.6 percent of the national territory and 21 percent of the population, contained 43 percent of all the extortion complaints in 2020.

Figure 8: Extortion complaints in the Country of Guatemala versus the Guatemalan Metropolitan Area, 2015-2021

Extortions in the Greater Guatemala as percentage of the national total
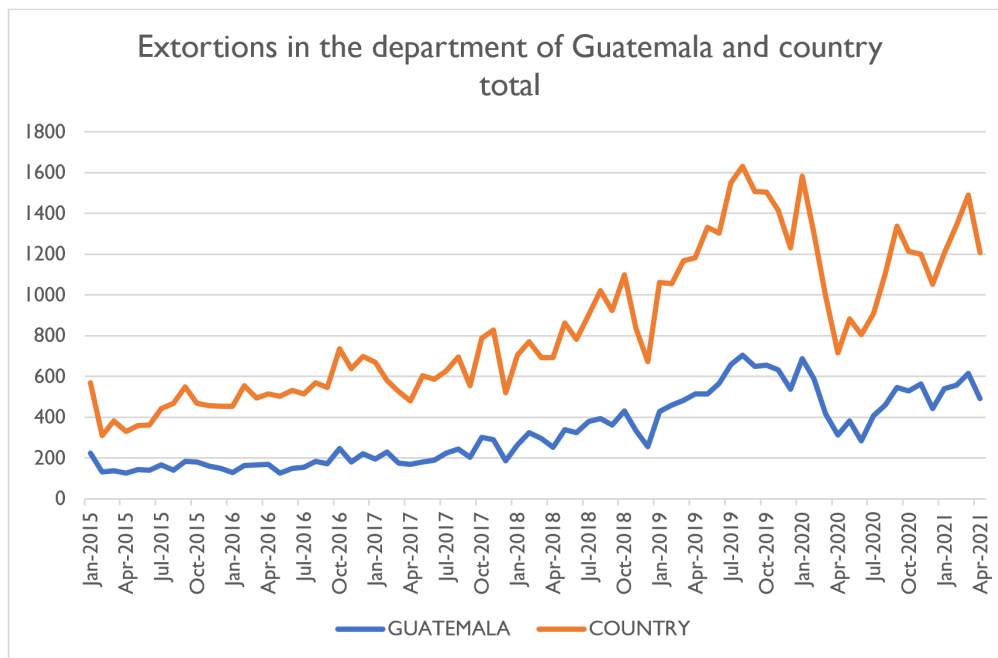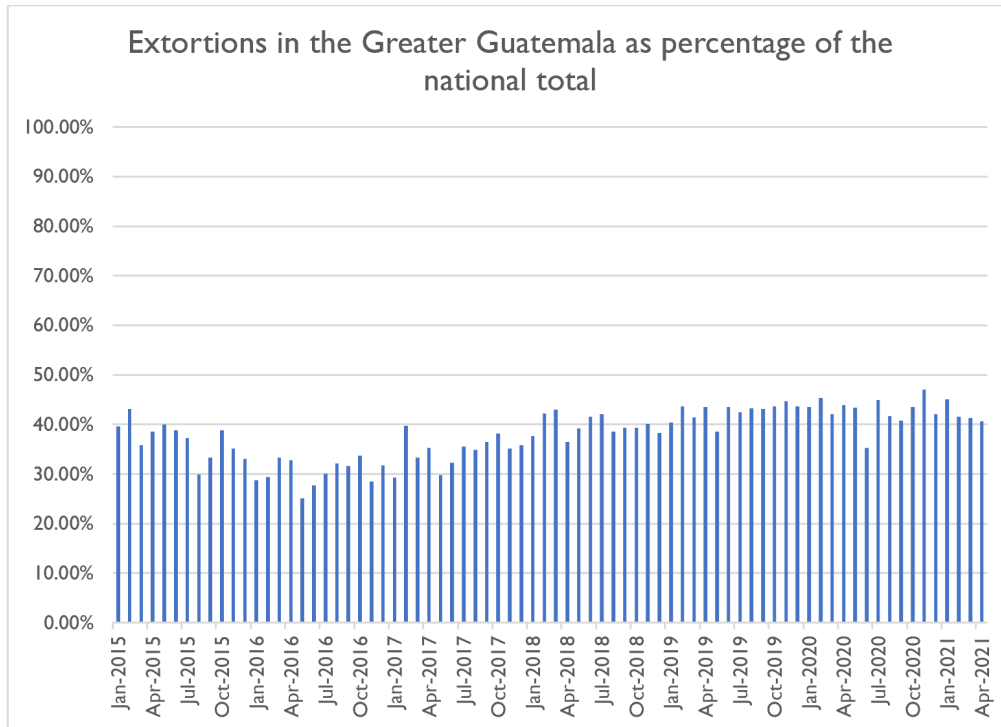
Source: LACLEARN, using data from INE and Diálogos (2021).

Honduras is the most difficult country to assess as monthly evolution data are not available. Year-on-year disparities in commercially and demographically-important locations, such as the Central District and Commonwealth of the Metropolitan Area of the Sula Valley (MZMVS) municipalities that went from reporting 406 extortions in 2018 to 14 in 2019, call into question the reliability of the official data. When interpreting the official figures, the country had a significant decline in 2014, maintaining similar figures until 2017, with an upturn in 2018 and then significant declines in 2019 and 2020.

Regarding the concentration of extortion near the capitals and main cities, it is important to note that the country that apparently shows the highest concentration is Honduras. In Honduras, by 2020, 34 percent of extortions were concentrated in the Central District, where 14 percent of the projected population lives, and 49 percent were concentrated in the MZMVS, where 23 percent live. Around eight percent of the country's area is concentrated in both zones.

Figure 9: National extortion complaints versus complaints in the MZMVS, 2013-2020

National extortion complaints against complaints in the Sula Valley and the Central District
— Central District — MZMVS — Country

Extortions in metropolitan areas as percentage of national total
■ Central District ■ % MZMVS
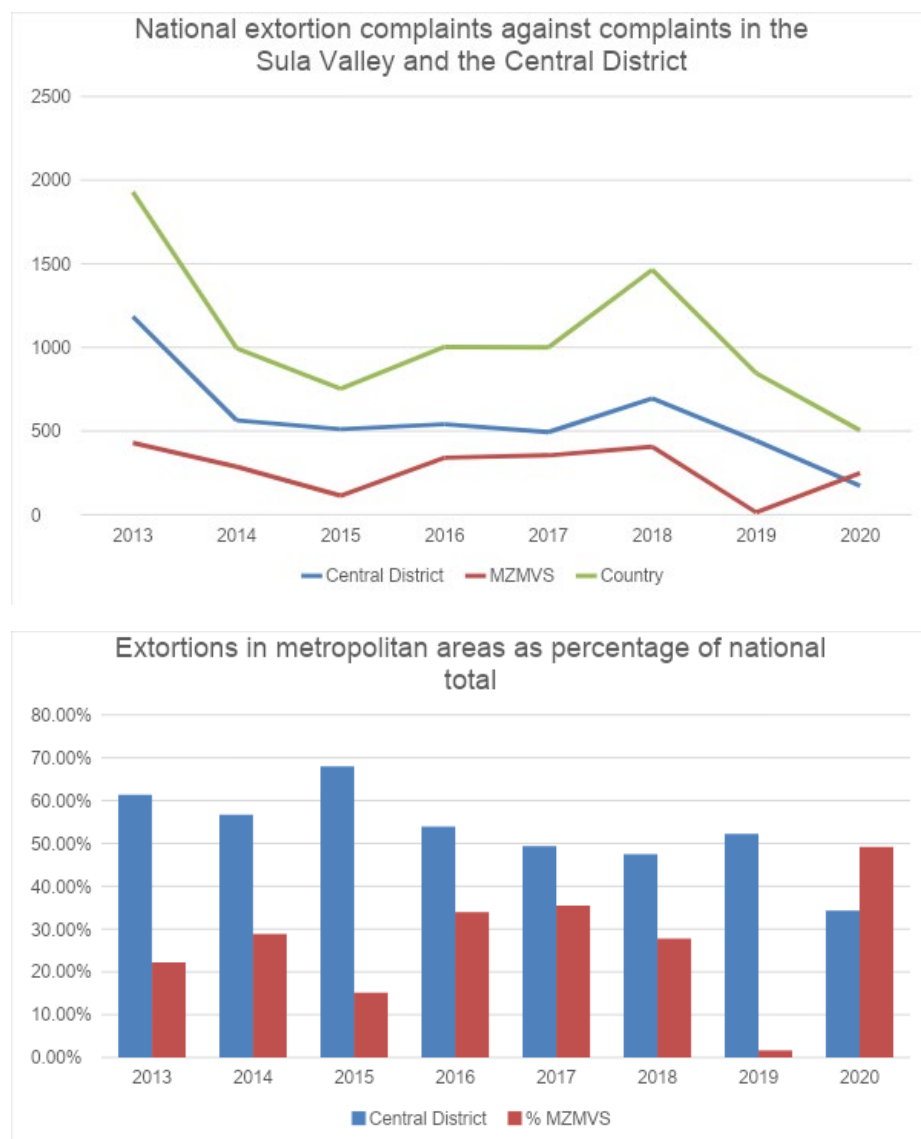
Source: LACLEARN, using CENISS data (2021)

EXTORTION VICTIMS

Data from the three countries were also analyzed to determine the main characteristics of the victims who report extortion. Due to the disaggregation available, variables and years per country vary.

Guatemala: Statistical information from Guatemala accessed through the INE shows that there are certain patterns in the profiles of extortion victims.

Table 13: Extortion complaints in Guatemala by sex, age, department, and area

YEAR	GENDER		AGE		DEPARTMENT		AREA	
	MALE	FEMALE	<40	40+	GUATEMALA	OTHER	URBAN	RURAL
2016	59.83%	30.67%	53.56%	46.44%	42.18%	57.82%	64.39%	34.66%
2017	65.54%	31.52%	55.50%	44.50%	43.51%	56.49%	–	–
2018	65.16%	32.54%	60.09%	39.91%	43.95%	56.05%	–	–
2019	64.76%	32.91%	62.43%	37.57%	44.75%	55.25%	59.63%	39.57%
2020	64:45%	34.33%	63.43%	36.57%	44.23%	55.77%	–	–

* Data for 2021 are complete as of June.
** In 2.47 percent of extortion victims in 2015, no area could be identified.
Source: INE

El Salvador: The analysis of victims of extortion-related crimes who have filed complaints in El Salvador shows that the sex of the victim was not identified in most cases. However, of the victims that was identified, there were more than twice as many men as women. Nearly a quarter of the victims came from San Salvador, which reflects a lower concentration of crime reporting than in Guatemala. Finally, about 80 percent of victims were from urban areas and a minority from rural areas.

Table 14: Extortion complaints in El Salvador by sex, department, and area

YEAR	GENDER			DEPARTMENT		AREA	
	MALE	FEMALE	N/A	SAN SALVADOR	OTHER	URBAN	RURAL
2015	14.85%	6.77%	78.38%	25.92%	74.08%	89.56%	7.97%**
2016	7.18%	5.47%	87.36%	26.71%	73.29%	94.76%	5.24%
2017	13.41%	6.94%	79.65%	25.06%	74.94%	78.53%	21.47%
2018	12.59%	7.24%	80.17%	30.73%	69.27%	76.16%	23.84%
2019	15.78%	10.52%	73.70%	32.83%	67.17%	78.09%	21.91%
2020	13.50%	5.84%	80.66%	29.65%	70.35%	77.46%	22.54%
2021*	13.70%	7.20%	79.10%	24.58%	75.42%	74.44%	25.56%

Source: PNC 2022.
* Data for 2021 are complete as of June.
** In 2.47 percent of extortion victims in 2015, no area could be identified.

Honduras: Analysis of victims in Honduras was constructed with a considerably smaller number of victims than in the other countries because reports from the judiciary were used instead of using data

from complaints, which could not be accessed. All victims reached a judicial stage. However, as with the other countries, men were almost two-thirds of reported victims.

Table 15: Extortion complaints in Honduras by sex and department

YEAR	GENDER		DEPARTMENT		
	MALE	FEMALE	FRANCISCO MORAZÁN	CORTÉS	OTHER
2015	64.38%	35.62%	36.99%	16.44%	46.57%
2016	62.26%	37.74%	35.85%	18.87%	45.28%
2017	62.86%	37.14%	28.57%	41.43%	30%
2018	65.29%	34.71%	10.74%	28.93%	60.33%
2019	65.40%	34.60%	11.39%	33.33%	55.28%
2020	65.38%	34.62%	26.92%	28.21%	44.87%
2021*	65.82%	34.18%	16.46%	39.24%	44.30%

Source: MP data accessed through public information request.

COURT SENTENCES

The assessment team conducted a general analysis on the outcome of judicial sentences issued for extortion compared to complaints filed. Due to the complexity of the variables and the difficulty in finding official information, this analysis should be taken as an initial research parameter intended to estimate, over a considerable period, the number of complaints that end up being prosecuted. This should not be confused with the prosecution of the crime once the cases are put together and enter the system.

Guatemala: In comparison with other crimes such as robbery, theft and even homicide, fewer extortion crimes reached a judicial sentence. While homicides reflect a about one-half of acquittals or convictions per open case, extortions have a much lower level of effectiveness, even lower than robberies and thefts.

Table 16: Registered Crimes and Judicial Sentences in Guatemala, 2018–2020

CRIME	COMPLAINTS	SENTENCES	RATE OF SENTENCES TO COMPLAINTS
Robbery	26,775	4,847	18.1%
Homicide	10,031	4,850	48.4%
Extortion	39,002	4,756	12.2%

Source: INE 2021.

El Salvador: Evidence on sentences from the data provided by the Supreme Court shows an important difference between extortion complaints filed with the PNC over a six-year period between 2015-2020 and sentences, as only 13 percent of complaints received a sentence. However, eight out of ten sentences ended with a conviction.

Table 17: Judicial Sentences and Complaints of Extortion, El Salvador

VARIABLE	TOTAL (2015–2020)
Complaint	11,194
Sentences	1,423
Sentences over complaints	12.71%
Guilty sentences over total sentences	81.10%

Source: PNC and Supreme Court of Justice, 2021. Supreme Court of Justice data were requested via access to public information.

Honduras: In Honduras, public information was obtained and systematized in a similar way to El Salvador, via requests for access. There is a much higher proportion of convictions over the number of complaints, with the former comprising about half of the latter. In Guatemala and El Salvador, convictions tended to compose no more than 13 percent of complaints.

**Table 18: Judicial Sentences and Complaints of Extortion, Honduras**

VARIABLE	TOTAL (2015–2020)
Complaints	4,817
Sentences	2,176
Convictions over sentences	72.25%
Sentences over complaints	45.17%

Source: Honduras Judiciary, 2021.

SPATIOTEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF EXTORTION COMPLAINTS

The analysis carried out in the previous section contributes to the delimitation and description of the sites most affected by extortion in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, despite the use of population rates, it purposely focused on the overall volume of extortion complaints since its main objective was to quantify extortions. This presents an important limitation of analysis, as it may be excluding municipalities with smaller populations, but which are being hit by extortion at a higher rate. Moreover, as has been mentioned by various theorists, crime does not behave randomly in the territory; rather, it tends to present associated behaviors in the national or even regional space.

Figure 10: Rate of extortion per 100,000 inhabitants in the NCA, 2020
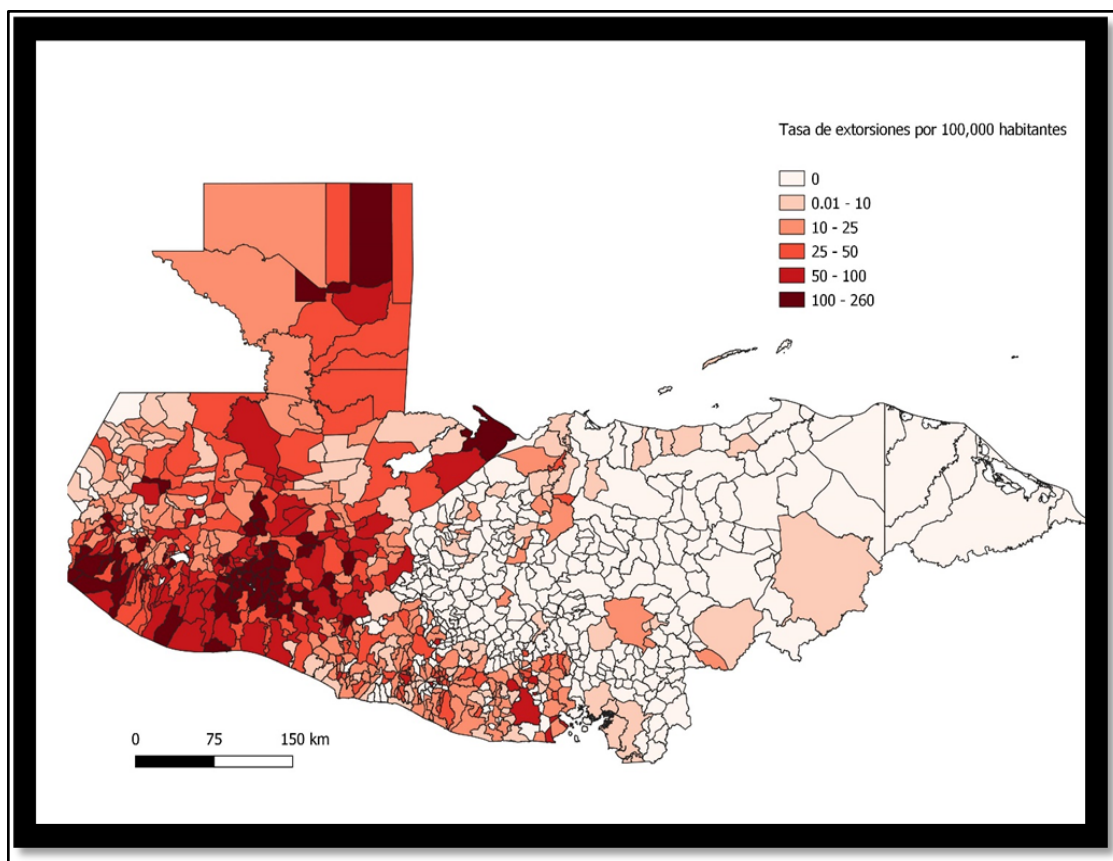
Source: PNC (El Salvador, Guatemala), CENISS (Honduras), and national statistical institutes.

From Figure 8, an immediate inference can be made: the official statistics show an obvious disparity between the rates of extortion in each country. In Guatemala, many municipalities exceed 100 extortions per 100,000 inhabitants and most show at least a few figures per year, while Honduras has an apparent absence of extortion in most of the country and El Salvador also has mostly low figures.

Data systematization criteria may vary from country to country and even within countries. 2020 was undoubtedly an atypical year; in each of the three countries, there were mobility restriction measures that reduced the flow of people and trade for prolonged periods of time.

In Guatemala, the most affected areas seem to be the southwestern part of the country, which includes several municipalities in the department of Quetzaltenango, from Coatepeque to Rethaluleu, and in neighboring municipalities in the department of the same name, and seems to reach the southern border with Mexico, including many municipalities in the department of San Marcos. The area of the capital has a ring generated in the central zone of the country, mainly within municipalities of the department of Guatemala.

In El Salvador, the most relevant points seem to be the Metropolitan Area of Greater San Salvador, San Miguel and San Francisco Gotera in the east; some municipalities bordering Guatemala in the west; and some other departments, such as Zacatecoluca and La Unión. In Honduras, despite a low apparent

incidence and with most of the national territory at zero, there is a significant concentration in San Pedro Sula, its neighboring municipalities, and in the Central District.

The following section provides an analysis of the high extortion rate clusters in each country and their evolution over time.

Figure 11: Temporal Incidence of Clusters with High Extortion Rates in Guatemala
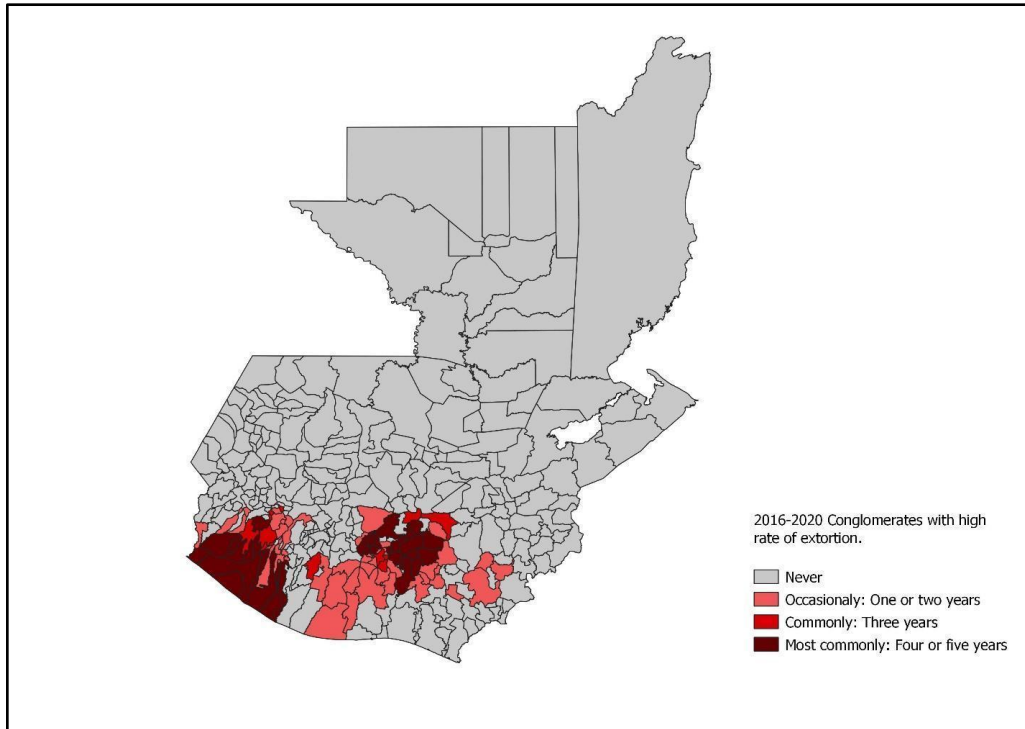
Source: LACLEARN, based on data from the PN and INE.

According to Figure 11, the areas surrounding the capital, Guatemala City, and the most important municipality in the southwest, Quetzaltenango, have clusters of high extortion rates. These locations have been joined sporadically by municipalities in neighboring areas, particularly in the area from the capital to the southern coast. Table 19 characterizes the municipalities that appear in the clusters, with respect to the other municipalities of the country.

Table 19: Characterization of Municipalities with High Extortion Rates, Guatemala

| CLUSTER	2020 POPULATION	2020 POPULATION DENSITY	2018 URBANIZATION	2018 INTERNET ACCESS	2020 RATE OF PROPERTY CRIMES	2020 HOMICIDE RATE	2020 EXTOR -TION RATE
Appears in no year	41,889	352	37%	22%	11	12	39
Appears occasional	39,804	531	56%	27%	19	12	84

CLUSTER	2020 POPULATION	2020 POPULATION DENSITY	2018 URBANIZATION	2018 INTERNET ACCESS	2020 RATE OF PROPERTY CRIMES	2020 HOMICIDE RATE	2020 EXTOR-TION RATE
ly (1–3 times)							
Appears frequently (4–5 times)	127,438	1,275	67%	37%	29	16	122

Source: Guatemalan Statistics Institute and PNC

Municipalities with extortion problems are concentrated in more urbanized and densely-populated areas. The municipalities that appear most commonly in the clusters have socio-demographic characteristics that are very different from the other municipalities. The municipalities that appear occasionally are more similar to those with a low incidence of extortion. One hypothesis is that the areas where the crime originates are spreading from the capital cities and areas of greater industrialization. When there are high levels of extortion, neighboring municipalities also suffer, even though they do not necessarily share the same population and urbanization characteristics.

Figure 12: Temporal Incidence of Clusters with High Extortion Rates in El Salvador
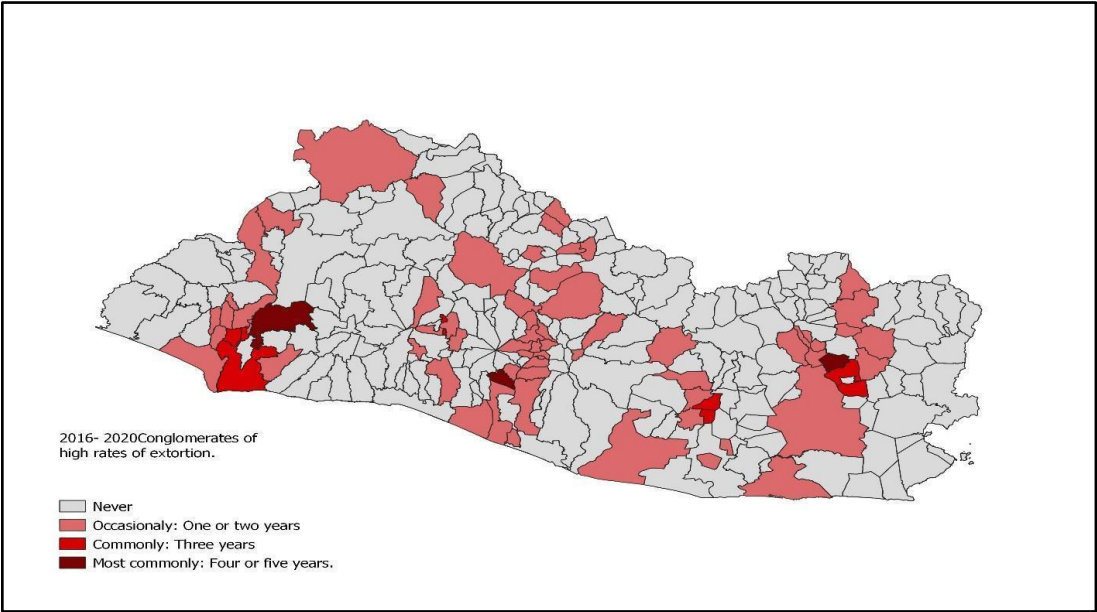
Source: LACLEARN, using data from PNC and DIGESTYC

According to Figure 12, municipalities in El Salvador tend to participate less frequently in clusters of high extortion rates. Very few municipalities have participated three or more times. The AMSS is surrounded by territories that have appeared some years in high-rate clusters from the coast to Chalatenango municipalities, such as Nueva Concepción. The same pattern appears in San Miguel, the most important city in the east of the country, which is bordered by a strip of municipalities that have appeared

occasionally from the coast in the east of the country to the border in the north of Morazán with Honduras. The area that has repeated the most over the years includes Izalco and Acajutla in the west, plus some surrounding municipalities.

Table 20 characterizes the municipalities according to their incidence within the clusters of high extortion rates per 100,000 people in El Salvador. The team did not separate the municipalities by cluster type, since the number of municipalities that have participated more than twice is very low.

Table 20: Characterization of Municipalities with High Extortion Rates, El Salvador

CLUSTER	2020 POPULATION	2020 POPULATION DENSITY	2020 RATE OF ROBBERIES	2020 HOMICIDE RATE	2020 EXTORTION RATE
Appears no year	22,636	391	30	20	13
Appears occasionally or frequently (1–5 times)	28,420	818	30	20	17

Source: PNC, DIGESTYC data.

In El Salvador, the spatial correlation of extortion is lower than in Guatemala. This is reflected in the low number of significant clusters per year and in the similarities of the groups of municipalities, regardless of their incorporation in any of the annual high-rates clusters. Population density likely becomes a weight factor, but other types of data, such as urbanization and poverty, could help to better characterize the clusters.

Figure 13: Temporal Incidence of Clusters with High Extortion Rates in Honduras
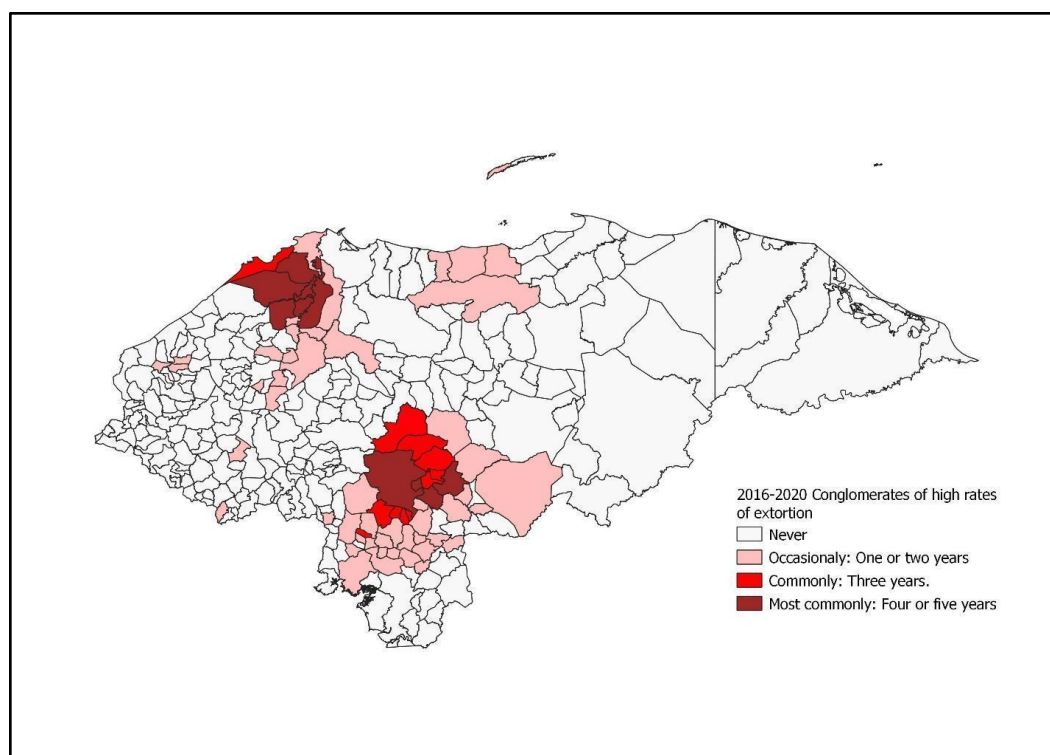
Source: CENISS

Figure 13 shows that a concentration of high extortion rates around the two main cities. San Pedro Sula, in the north, appears almost always in the high-rate cluster. San Pedro Sula is accompanied by Choloma, El Progreso, Villanueva, San Manuel, La Lima, and occasionally Omoa, Yojoa, and Puerto Cortés, among other MZMVS municipalities. In the center, the Central District is accompanied by Francisco Morazán, but the wave of high rates also extends to El Paraíso in the east and occasionally to some municipalities in the southern departments. Table 21 shows municipalities according to their extortion cluster.

Table 21: Characterization of Municipalities with High Extortion Rates, Honduras

CLUSTER	2020 POPULATION	2020 POPULATION DENSITY (PER SQ KM)	2020 RATE OF RETURNEES	2020 URBANIZATION RATE	2020 HOMICIDE RATE	2020 EXTORTION RATE
Appears in no year	20,409	86	364	25%	33	1
Appears occasionally (1–3 times)	29,211	112	267	26%	28	2
Appears frequently (4–5 times)	293,481	490	316	70%	35	11

*Source: Honduran PN and Honduran Institute of Statistics*

In Honduras, there is a marked difference in the sociodemographic characteristics of the municipalities that appear most in the clusters of high extortion rates. They tend to be more densely populated and more urbanized. The extortion rate, although very low relative to the other countries, was significantly higher in 2020 than the other municipalities. Homicide rates and returnees do not seem to make much difference on the type of cluster in which the municipalities are located.

Example of Extortion Analysis Beyond the County Level in Guatemala City

This section aims to briefly delve into victims and has been constructed with national surveys that incorporated questions related to extortion victimization. Using data provided by the INE, it was possible to analyze the evolution of extortion complaints in Guatemala City areas to determine possible concentrations in the country's capital. Zones 18, 7, and 1 have the highest concentration of extortion complaints, registering close to 40 percent of all complaints in the entire period. Zones 5, 6, and 21 each registered at least five percent of the complaints in the period.

The coincidence between the records of reports of extortion, homicides, and crimes against property is striking. Zone 18 has always recorded at least 20 percent of the cases. Zones 6 and 7 always recorded higher numbers than the other administrative zones, while the zone maintained high levels of homicides but not crimes against property. Figure 14 presents a visualization of the concentration of high proportions of extortion reports.

Figure 14: Concentration of Extortion Reports in Guatemala City

*Zonas 20, 22 y 23 son parte de otras jurisdicciones
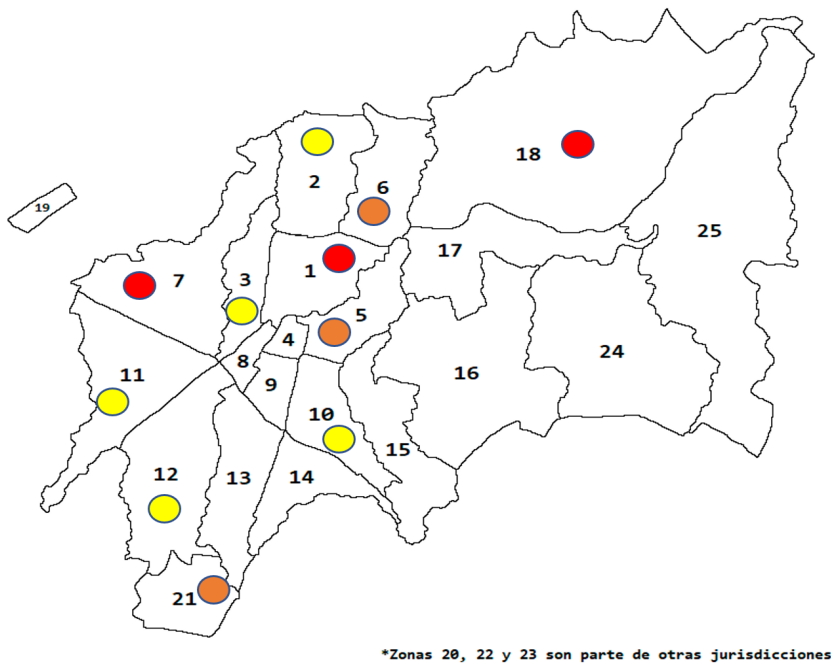
Source: Guatemalan PNC.
Red = more than 10 percent of extortions in the city; orange = between 5-10 percent of extortions in the city; yellow = between 2.5-5 percent of extortions in the city.

The analysis took the proportions representative to each zone in 2017–2020: for example, zone 18 recorded 17 percent of extortion complaints in the period. As the map shows, the records of complaints tend to be concentrated in the northwestern block of the capital, with associations of clusters of high-incidence and medium-high incidence blocks in the areas adjacent to Zones 18, 7, and 1. The southeastern part does not seem to present high volumes of complaints, with the sole exception of one 21.

COUNTRIES MOST AFFECTED BY EXTORTION

This section has been constructed under the assumption that crime does not affect territories homogeneously, but tends to concentrate in specific regions. It would be useful to know where extortion is most present within each country and, taking into account the limitations imposed by the lack of official figures, to characterize and differentiate them from the rest of the municipalities.

The assessment team constructed a ranking of the ten municipalities that contribute most to the national number of extortion victims, from 2015-2020. The ranking considers the constancy in which the municipalities usually appear with the highest values at the end of each year rather than taking the total victims over the entire period. This allows for detecting and minimizing the effect caused by possible outliers, such as those that may be generated by municipalities that remained with low values in five of the six years but had an atypical increase in one year.

It is important to note that the countries do not report the same statistics. An attempt has been made to present in tabular form as much information, meaningful for the analysis, as possible for each country. The results by country are presented below.

Guatemala: The data show the socioeconomic differences and the behavior of the existing crimes in Guatemala. In addition to generally being more densely populated, the municipalities with the highest extortion rates tend to have almost all of their population residing in urban areas. The only exception was Coatepeque, a municipality in the department of Quetzaltenango near the department capital, with a larger rural population that has experienced a surge of urbanization in the last five years. In all cases, except for the municipality of Chimaltenango, the proportions of women who are heads of household without sharing headship with men are higher than the national average of 18.7 percent. The percentage of people with internet access is also generally higher than the national average.

The rates of crimes against property and homicides in 2020 also tend to exceed the national municipal average; however, there are also some exceptions, such as Quetzaltenango, which had a homicide rate lower than the national rate of 15 per 100,000 inhabitants, or Jalapa and Coatepeque, which had rates of crimes against property lower than the national average.

Table 22: Municipalities with highest number of extortion victims in Guatemala, 2016-2020

COUNTY	DEPARTMENT	URBANIZATION	FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS	HOMICIDE RATE	AVERAGE EXTORTION RATE
Guatemala	Guatemala	100.00%	25.40%	32%	190%

Mixco	Guatemala	99.41%	20.35%	15%	132%
Villa Nueva	Guatemala	98.29%	20.53%	26%	107%
Quetzaltenango	Quetzaltenango	100.00%	19.59%	10%	173%
Chimaltenango	Chimaltenango	100.00%	16.92%	28%	212%
Coatepeque	Quetzaltenango	35.41%	20.11%	31%	177%
Huehuetenango	Huehuetenango	100.00%	21.95%	5%	168%
Escuintla	Escuintla	100.00%	21.58%	39%	110%
Jalapa	Jalapa	100.00%	21.96%	32%	87%
San Miguel Petapa	Guatemala	95.33%	20.98%	18%	114%
NATIONAL TOTAL		**53.86%**	**18.69%**	**15%**	**61%**

In Guatemala, extortions in 2021 had a higher level than the average from 2016-2020. The data for 2021, available until May, reflected an increase in extortion compared to 2020.

El Salvador: Municipalities with the highest annual incidence of extortion in El Salvador seem to reflect similar socioeconomic factors to Guatemala. Although the assessment team lacked updated urbanization data, the population density, which is much higher in most cases than the national total (300 inhabitants per square kilometer); the high proportion of people with internet access (higher in all cases except Sonsonate than the national average); and the projected population numbers (also higher than the national average) all indicate that there is a high probability that we have selected highly urbanized municipalities.

The proportions of people belonging to the wealthiest deciles of the population were defines as per capita household income over USD 325, an indicator that reflects the inequality that exists in the country. Santa Tecla and Colón, neighboring municipalities with high territorial mobility between them, are both included in the list of municipalities with high extortion figures, but there is a large difference between the socioeconomic profile of each county. In Santa Tecla, one-third of people in 2019 were in the richest decile of the country, compared to only six percent of Colón residents.

Poverty is highly associated with extortion. San Salvador had a poverty rate of over 20 percent. The 2020 homicide and robbery rates do not seem to explain high extortion rates. These data could be misleading, as 2020 represents an irregular period. Municipalities such as San Miguel, Mejicanos, Cojutepeque, and Colón appear below the national homicide rate.

Finally, the extortion rates, with the sole exception of Soyapango, remained above the national rate. As in Guatemala, the national statistics obtained from the PNC in El Salvador showed that there was an increase in the volume of extortions compared to 2020 as of July 2021.

Table 23: Municipalities with Highest Number of Extortion Victims in El Salvador, 2016–2020

COUNTY	DEPARTMENT	POPULATION	POVERTY RATE	INTERNET ACCESS	AVERAGE EXTORTION RATE
SAN SALVADOR	SAN SALVADOR	338,268	20.3%	63.9%	71%
SAN MIGUEL	SAN MIGUEL	218,137	16.8%	57.8%	55%
SANTA ANA	SANTA ANA	253,515	28.8%	55.8%	43%
MEJICANOS	SAN SALVADOR	137,337	12.9%	69.5%	43%
SOYAPANGO	SAN SALVADOR	259,147	20.4%	66.8%	25%
APOPA	SAN SALVADOR	155,747	25.1%	59.8%	30%
COJUTEPEQUE	CUSCATLÁN	54,462	25.0%	61.7%	72%
SANTA TECLA	LA LIBERTAD	127,263	17.3%	66.9%	31%
SONSONATE	SONSONATE	80,635	23.9%	47.2%	46%
COLON	LA LIBERTAD	118,419	28.6%	55.0%	28%
NATIONAL TOTAL		**6,321,042**	**27.5%**	**49.3%**	**28%**

Honduras: In Honduras, population density and urbanization do not appear to be determining factors in the inclusion of municipalities in the list of those with the highest incidence of extortion over the years. Danlí, Catacamas, and Yojoa appear well below the national urbanization rate, while Santa Lucía and Juticalpa are close to the average.

With respect to returnees by municipality of destination, there are municipalities well above the national rate, such as Yoro, which has almost double the national rate, or Yojoa. However, there are also other municipalities with a low incidence, such as Danlí. There may be other municipalities at the national level with a low incidence of crime that are receiving returnees.

The relationship between homicide and extortion rates is not clear, but some municipalities with very high rates do coincide, such as Choloma or Catacamas. Central District and San Pedro Sula have high homicide rates, but they are also home to a large population.

Until June 2022, CENISS was the official Honduran data repository on security matters. It was then replaced by a new platform of citizen security open data.[197] The CENISS data was not consistent in reporting extortion rates. Municipalities such as La Ceiba, a repeat offender in the rate and quantity of homicides, appeared to have high extortion volumes in some years, but later present drastic reductions. San Pedro Sula, which went from a rate of 26 extortions per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 to one extortion per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019. The new government data platform also presents

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[197] Secretaria de Seguridad: Datos Abiertos. http://www.seguridaddatosabiertos.gob.hn/

inconsistencies in Cortes Department, they only reported one extortion in 2020 and none in 2021. Therefore, the assessment team only used 2016-2020 extortion data from the FNAMP/Dipampco.

Table 24: Municipalities with Highest Number of Extortion Victims in Honduras, 2016–2020

DEPARTMENT	MUNICIPALITY	URBANIZATION	RETURNEES RATE	HOMICIDE RATE	AVERAGE EXTORTION RATE
FRANCISCO MORAZÁN	DISTRITO CENTRAL	90.6%	221	45	71
EL PARAÍSO	DANLÍ	40.1%	209	18	55
CORTÉS	SAN PEDRO SULA	94.9%	419	41	43
YORO	EL PROGRESO	74.1%	675	49	43
OLANCHO	CATACAMAS	44.9%	342	63	25
CORTÉS	SANTA CRUZ DE YOJOA	38.6%	519	38	30
CORTÉS	CHOLOMA	82.9%	427	58	72
OLANCHO	JUTICALPA	58.6%	328	42	31
CORTÉS	LA LIMA	92.0%	435	49	46
FRANCISCO MORAZÁN	SANTA LUCÍA	57.0%	25	25	28
NATIONAL TOTAL		**58.4%**	**368**	**38**	**10**

Source: Honduras 2019 Multi-Purpose Household Survey from INE

ANALYZING EXTORTION THROUGH THE AMERICASBAROMETER SURVEY

The AmericasBarometer has become a reliable tool for monitoring public opinion in Latin America. Inferences can be drawn in the field of politics and perception of security, economy, governance, and victimization from the biannual survey. The assessment team used AmericasBarometer data to look at the relationship between the perception of security in repondents' neighborhood and the desire to migrate, which are influenced by extortion.

El Salvador: Table 25 below shows that in the Salvadoran case, extortion directly affects interpersonal trust and trust in the police. While only a little more than one-third of the population had low trust in the PNC, almost six out of ten people living in households where at least someone had been extorted had low trust in the PNC.

Contrary to what might be hypothesized, people who lived in households where someone was extorted did not have less community participation. The desire to migrate did increase considerably when

someone was a victim of extortion: one-third of the population in 2021 had intentions of migrating to another country, but that the proportion rose to four in ten when someone was extorted at home.

Table 25: Impact of Extortion on the Social Fabric and Desire to Migrate (El Salvador)

VARIABLE	POPULATION	NO ONE IN FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	SOMEONE IN FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	LAST AVAILABLE YEAR
Low interpersonal trust	45%	43.84%	55.78%	2021
Low trust in the police	37.88%	36.46%	55.36%	2018
Attended community improvement groups	26.65%	26.47%	28.83%	2018
Attended meetings organized by the county	8.24%	7.88%	12.73%	2018
Intends to migrate	32.44%	31.49%	41.50%	2021

Honduras: Honduras has similar trends as El Salvador. Interpersonal trust and trust in the police is affected by the fact that someone in the family group is a victim of extortion. Respondents who were extortion victims were 12 percent more likely to have low trust in the police compared to households that reported no extortion. Attendance at community or municipal meetings was not affected by extortion, while intentions to migrate suffer a large upward impact when a family member is a victim.

Table 26: Impact of Extortion on the Social Fabric and Desire to Migrate (Honduras)

VARIABLE	POPULATION	NONE ONE IN THE FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	SOMEONE IN THE FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	LAST AVAILABLE YEAR
Low interpersonal trust	45%	44.31%	51.94%	2018
Low trust in the police	54%	53%	65.14%	2018
Attended community improvement groups	33.18%	33.60%	39.59%	2018
Attended meetings organized by the county	15.22%	18.94%	15.54%	2018
Intends to migrate	38.27%	36.42%	58.02%	2018

Guatemala: As in El Salvador and Honduras, interpersonal trust and trust in the police in Guatemala dropped when someone in the household was a victim of extortion. In the case of attendance at community meetings, the difference between the two groups is substantial. People attend more frequently when someone in the household has been extorted. The desire to migrate also increases significantly after extortion.

Table 27: Impact of Extortion on the Social Fabric, Trust, and Desire to Migrate (Guatemala)

VARIABLE	POPULATION	NONE ONE IN THE FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	SOMEONE IN THE FAMILY WAS EXTORTED	LAST AVAILABLE YEAR
Low interpersonal trust	53.70%	53.37%	58.04%	2018
Low trust in the police	51.75%	50.32%	70.18%	2018
Attended community improvement groups	39.52%	39.79%	50%	2018
Attended meetings organized by the county	15%	14.58%	20.35%	2018
Intends to migrate	25.25%	24.30%	37.39%	2018

OFFICIAL COMPLAINTS VERSUS VICTIMIZATION SURVEYS IN NCA

The persistence of a high number of unrecorded crimes is an undeniable reality for Latin American countries. This topic has been studied and measured over the last few decades and scholars have concluded that only a small percentage of crimes committed are reported to the authorities. According to Mexico's National Victimization and Perception Survey conducted by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography in 2020, 92.4 percent of the crimes that occurred were not reported. Extortion represented one of the least reported crimes: only three percent were reported.

Each NCA country has different statistical tools at the national level to get a better understanding of crime rates. In this section, we focus is on national victimization tools with an objective of having a departmental-level overview. Only El Salvador and Honduras have a victimization section that meets these requirements for this section, in that the data can be analyzed at the departmental level and collection is repeated periodically.

El Salvador: The 2019 El Salvador Multipurpose Household Survey is the last official survey done by the government of El Salvador that allows for the analysis of extortion victimization at the department level because the sample is representative at the department level. Due to the official nature of the information and the reliability of the population weights given in the sample, it is possible to extrapolate on a national and departmental scale to come closer to understanding the "black figure" of extortion and its national territorial distribution.

Disaggregation of these official statistics show that there is no significant difference in terms of gender or age range with respect to extortion victimization; on the contrary, extortion victimization is more concentrated in urban areas and among people with incomes over USD 1,000.
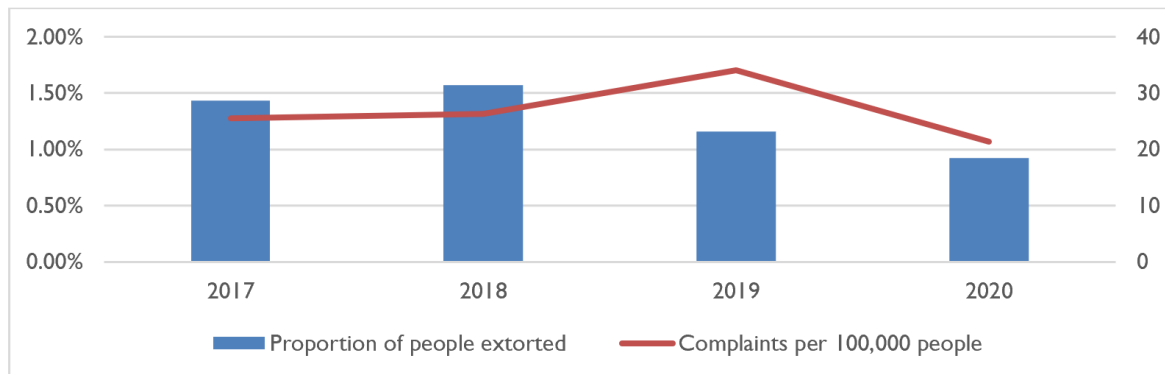
National victimization statistics show that in 2019, 1.2 percent of the population was extorted. When extrapolating and comparing victimization data with official extortion reports, official extortion reports

appear to only cover three percent of the total number of people who had been victims of extortion that year.

When disaggregating the data at the territorial level, the disparity between departments is evident. While in Morazán, Usulután, and Chalatenango, the percentage covered by reports of extortion is greater than ten percent, in La Paz and Ahuachapán, between 98 and 99 victims out of every 100 may be underestimated by the official figure. The entire western zone is below the national figure in the coverage of victimization reports, while the east, with the exception of La Union, is well above the national figure. San Salvador, the department with the largest population, has a percentage slightly above the national average.

On the positive side, the El Salvador Multipurpose Household Survey has documented annual measurements of victimization for various crimes, and extortion has decreased between 2018 and 2020. An inference that generates much added value is to compare victimization with the rate of complaints registered by the PNC. This mechanism can be used to explore the behavior of the "black figure," since a lower rate of denunciations does not necessarily mean a decrease in extortions or vice versa. The analysis based on these two statistics reflects that in 2019, although there was an increase in complaints, there was a reduction in victimization, which could indicate the existence of greater confidence to report that year. In 2020, there was a pronounced decrease in reporting, and there was a less-pronounced decrease in the proportion of people reporting having been extorted.

Figure 15: Proportion of people reporting having been extorted and rate of extortion complaints, 2017–2020

Honduras: In Honduras, the disaggregation of official statistics does not show significant differences in extortion victimization by sex or age. When disaggregated by area, there is a higher concentration and percentage of victims in urban areas and in the income range above 15,000 lempiras. National victimization statistics show that in 2019, 0.8 percent of the population had been extorted that year. When extrapolating and comparing victimization data with official extortion complaints, it appears that official extortion complaints only cover about two percent of the total number of people who had been victims of extortion that year.

The territorial disaggregation shows a polarized reality: while victimization by extortion, as measured by the national victimization tool, is practically nonexistent in rural departments such as Ocotepeque,

Copán, or Valle, but Francisco Morazán, Comayagua, and Cortés have victimization percentages higher than the national average.

Cross-checking with the national figures is quite complex given the low or almost non-existence of reports in some parts of the national territory. Francisco Morazán, the second-most-populated department, is an interesting case, as it contains the majority of extortions but has a much higher coverage than the national average. Cortés, the most populated department and one of the most victimized, has the lowest coverage in the country.

Guatemala: In the absence of annual, or at least periodic official surveys that allow for the analysis of extortion in Guatemala, ENPEVI collected data between November 2016 and October 2017 of the over 18 population. The evidence shows, as in El Salvador and Honduras, that extortion is not a problem that affects men more than women. In Guatemala, the highest proportion of victimization in 2018 was older adults, people from urban areas and mainly from the department of Guatemala, with 65.9 percent of victims concentrated in that department. This was followed by Quetzaltenango with 8.8 percent and the rest of the departments accounted for only one-quarter of extortion victims. A relevant finding in the survey is that there is a higher concentration of victimization among self-employed persons. Although they represent just 37 percent of the population, they represent more than half (54.2 percent) of the people who were victims of extortion. While a little more than a third said they reported the incident (35.1 percent), nearly two-thirds did not (64.9 percent).

RECOMMENDATIONS (DATA)

1. One of the main limitations in this research was the lack of access to updated public information. Even as the study developed, important sources of information were closed in El Salvador, such as the advanced online analyzer of the PNC or the shapefiles provided by the National Registration Center. In the case of Honduras, the web portal of the National Center for Social Sector Information was closed, which had important data on complaints records. Increased public access to data is a first, critical step in understanding and responding to extortion.

2. Evidence-based research projects are ultimately beneficial for decision-makers, as they provide them with information that could help them maintain a broader view of reality. It is imperative for each country, especially El Salvador and Honduras, to rethink their lines of action in terms of open data and seek mechanisms that facilitate civil society access to indicators and publicly available, user-friendly formatted statistics. A joint working group between governments and civil society to analyze data, recommend operational and policy level changes, and commission assessment of said changes would be strategic in all three countries.

3. A greater disaggregation of the units of analysis could help to generate geostatistical analyses of greater benefit; an important issue for future occasions would be to use smaller units of analysis than municipalities. The only geographic region where this analysis was partially possible was Guatemala City. Increased analytical and geospatial capacities of data in each country could greatly improve understanding of trends and concentration, and consequently identify and enhance utilization of government resources to combat extortion.

4. Just as crime is concentrated in specific municipalities, it is also concentrated in specific areas within Guatemala City, particularly in the northwestern part of the city. Having access to

information from more cities with data disaggregated by area would greatly improve the quality of analysis and could translate into better public policy suggestions. Similarly, increased local-level data collection and analysis would strengthen the ability to analyze extortion and respond accordingly in areas most impacted by this crime.

5. Finally, victimization surveys have the power to complement the information provided by the registry of complaints, especially in contexts such as Latin America, where the number of crimes reported is very low. In the absence of consistent government data, the periodic collection of victimization data by civil society can guide citizens in the path of having a more critical view of official data and a more complete picture of social reality. Increased support to victimization surveys that include a deeper dive into extortion is recommended.