Kids Count in Mexico 2022

Children and Disappearances

How the disappearance of persons affects girls, boys and adolescents in Mexico

REDIM

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
Trabajando con las comunidades en favor de la niñez

tableau FOUNDATION

Kids Count in Mexico 2022

Children and Disappearances

How the disappearance of persons affects girls, boys and adolescents in Mexico

Photo: Miguel Tovar

Kids Count in Mexico 2022 Children and Disappearances

How the disappearance of persons affects girls, boys, and adolescents in Mexico

Coordination:
Valeria Geremia and Tania Ramírez Hernández

Research and writing:
Paula Mónaco Felipe

Photos:
Miguel Tovar, Paula Mónaco Felipe and María José Martínez

Statistical research and freedom of information requests:
Fernando J. Salas Ventura

Transcripts:
Jorge Sánchez and Julia Arnaut

Graphic design:
La Liga Comunicación

Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México
Av. México Coyoacán Núm. 350, General Anaya, Benito Juárez, C.P. 03340, Ciudad de México

www.derechosinfancia.org.mx
Twitter: @derechoinfancia
Facebook:
derechosinfancia.org.mx
Instagram: redim_mx

First edition. 2022

Made in Mexico

Table of contents

Foreword

This publication, Kids Count in Mexico, follows the data-based advocacy methodology developed and used by REDIM for 18 years. Selecting an issue, researching it, analyzing data available and bringing attention to violations of children's and adolescents' rights is its main objective. Another objective is that of assessing the dimension of these rights violations as a public problem and also as part of the broad human rights agenda in our country, with the same sense of urgency as that regarding serious human rights violations suffered by adults, because part of the challenge we face is that children are not always taken into account upon addressing these issues.

Thus, Kids Counts in Mexico has been a useful tool, based on empirical evidence and the rigor of data science, to account for new meanings in a society in constant need for explaining itself and generating knowledge amid a changing reality in which it is imperative to see children and adolescents as rights holders, agents of change and a source of truth, hope and inspiration.

On this occasion, we made the decision to address one of the most painful and pressing issues in Mexico: disappearances, in particular the disappearance of children and adolescents, through the limited amount of data available, although much more light should be shed on them: Who are they and for what purposes are children and adolescents disappeared? Where are they, what do they do and what are they subjected to during the time they are missing? What are they running away from? How do authorities intervene in those cases by action, omission or consent? How do the families of missing children and adolescents live?

But there is another issue that may be less visible: the issue of girls, boys and adolescents growing up in the more than 100,000 families affected by the disappearance of one of their members. It is imperative for the Mexican State, and society as a whole, to look and listen to what they are experiencing and the profound neglect in which they can be left when searches are imposed on families. To this end, this Kids Counts report took the time to listen to them, to give them a voice, so they could share what they have experienced and the lessons they have learned: children are sharing with Mexico and the world a new dimension of pain, but also of courage and dignity, a new way of understanding the exercise of rights and the best interest of the child in the Mexico of disappearances.

Introduction

"I know missing persons will return to their families", says Fernando, a child searching for his uncle. His words not only reflect the hope, but also the love behind the search: *"It's not something sad, because you have fun, it's like an adventure."*

The rights to security and justice are essential to protect all people, especially the most vulnerable, such as children and adolescents. The disappearance of persons, and in particular the ripple effect of the disappearance of children, reaffirm the urgent need to address the issues of violence, insecurity and lack of access to justice. Added to this situation is the alarming impunity not only resulting from a breach of the State's duty to investigate and punish these serious crimes, but also encouraging their repetition. In a country with more than 100,000 people officially registered as missing or disappeared, barely 35 have led to convictions.

During its visit to Mexico in November 2021, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) learned about the particular impact of disappearances on children thanks to their interaction with families and collectives, authorities, civil society organizations, experts and other relevant sources. Their mission report includes a harrowing assessment based on public information:

> *"Official figures show a significant increase in disappearances of children as young as 12, adolescents and women, a trend that increased in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Those cases correspond to disappearances resulting from the abduction of children (inside or outside of the family environment), as well as disappearances to hide sexual violence and femicides, recruitment and retaliation. Victims and authorities also reported abductions for sexual exploitation and trafficking."*

The large number of acts of violence targeting children and adolescents is a serious and complex issue. They live in a spiral of violence and are sometimes recruited by organized crime groups to participate in criminal activities, are deprived of liberty for purposes of sexual exploitation or become the victims of dynamics of violence in their own households. The causes are multiple and the consequences are devastating in a context of institutions that fail to protect their rights.

It is in this context that we see the importance of the report *Niñez y Desapariciones* ("Children and Disappearances"), which was prepared by the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico (REDIM) to bring attention to the conditions faced by children and adolescents in light of the disappearance of persons in Mexico. The report, which is divided into two parts –and *"Searching children"*– provides an assessment of the causes and effects of disappearances and other crimes, through the voice of experts and authorities aware of and committed to working on the issue, which is analyzed in part one and complemented with a series of official data that, despite its limitations, provides a timely analysis of this scourge.

In part two, the report incorporates the voice of several children who have been affected by the disappearance of family members and loved ones. It is here where the voices of Fernando, Valentina, Monse, Jade, Sebastián, Rubí and Emiliano help us to understand the heavy burden they, their mothers and other family members carry on their shoulders.

In an era of continuous learning, *searching children* grow up walking through bushes, carrying a pickax or a shovel, fetching water or carrying buckets, always with the firm hope of finding their loved ones. As affirmed by Fernando and referred to in the beginning of this introduction, searches become an "adventure" where findings combine both the elements of fun and a painful reality that affects more than 100,000 households.

With the platform provided by this report, several questions arise regarding how to address the disappearance of children and adolescents. One of them has to do with analyzing the meaning -in this context- of the best interest of the child. How do we protect the rights of children who go out to search for their loved ones and consider them a priority in all measures pertaining to them? The absence of their mother, father or another family member creates a void that drives them to join searches that are both the exercise of a right and a potential source of affectation of their rights.

On the other hand, given the risks they are exposed to as a result of violence in the public and family domains, how can we prevent the perpetration of more disappearances? If impunity is a key element in the repetition of crimes, what measures should be adopted to put an end to it?

In this regard, it is important to eliminate those practices that render children and adolescents defenseless, eliminate the "adult-centered" perspective, move away from the militarization of public security and eliminate all kinds of obstacles to the prosecution of cases, among other measures. Addressing these challenges also requires adopting an intersectional approach with a focus on gender, social or economic conditions, ethnicity, skin color and nationality, among other factors.

Existing regulations on protocols, alerts, and searches, which consider the impact of disappearances on this population sector, represent a significant achievement, but they must be still fully and effectively implemented by the Mexican State. To ensure the efficacy of tools such as the Alba Protocol, the Amber Alert and the Additional Protocol for the Search of Children and Adolescents, it is necessary to strengthen existing infrastructure, budgets and human resources, ensure interinstitutional coordination, secure political will and provide the training required.

A good starting point would be the implementation of an effective awareness raising campaign, as stated by the CED in their recommendations. A clear pedagogic approach is also required to link the context of disappearances of girls, boys and adolescents to other phenomena, such as human trafficking, violence and sexual exploitation, kidnapping and domestic violence, among other criminal practices. It is also necessary to address stigmatization and promote effective prevention measures. To address and discuss these issues, which represent serious human rights violations, it is important to identify and bring attention to them and provide appropriate responses.

The report provides a national perspective, which also takes into account regional contexts, of the main challenges faced by Mexico in terms of the disappearance of children and adolescents. Many of these challenges require restructuring the predominant culture to protect the human rights to security, integrity, liberty and life, among others. The recommendations in REDIM's report are not only relevant but pressing: **Fourteen boys and girls go missing every day!**

For the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico, the disappearance of persons will continue to be a priority, and the commitment to the families of missing persons, and in particular to boys, girls and adolescents, is reaffirmed through publications such as that of REDIM. We acknowledge their efforts, their courage and the love for their loved ones. An essential part of their existence is gone or has been affected. It is time to fully acknowledge them as rights holders and agents of change who deserve protection and support according to their age and stage of development.

It is not impossible. Something else the report clearly shows is that girls, boys and adolescents can teach us valuable lessons about transformation. *"Regaining that trust and going out to the streets was a really difficult process," says* Monse, who shares her experience after her sister went missing and adds *"... but I'm no longer afraid of going out."* It is our responsibility to look for them, listen to their voices and acknowledge them as protagonists of the times and circumstances they face with dignity.

Guillermo Fernández-Maldonado Castro

Representative of the
Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico.
August 2022

Girls who went missing

Children growing up in loneliness because their mothers are still search for their siblings.

Adolescents digging graves.

Disappearing and searching: two words that have taken on a whole new meaning in Mexico to designate a desolate deep and infinite pain.

The name of silences.

In light of the painful reality of children and disappearances, the Kids Count 2022 report, produced by the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico (REDIM), is conceived as an instrument with two "doors". The first door reveals, describes and provides an update on the situation of children who have gone missing in the country through a combination of statistical information, voices of experts, data analysis, legislation and protocols, in addition to official responses from 6 Prosecutor's Offices and other institutions to freedom of information requests. It also includes updates based on open sources and documents from non-government organizations, in addition to reports from civil society organizations and context analysis studies.

The second door looks out into the universe of searching children and adolescents: we listen to them. They tell us why they are searching, how they feel about it, and how they experience disappearances around them. They say what they want to say, they conjure silence.

26 persons were interviewed for this report –13 relatives of missing persons and 13 experts and government officials. An effort was made to use both quantitative data and qualitative information from children's accounts and authorities working in the field. It is only by looking at both sides that, in our opinion, we will gain a better understanding of our complicated present, but we are particularly led in this effort by children and adolescents: Fernando, Sebastián, Monse, Jade, Valentina, Rubí and Emiliano. We are wholeheartedly grateful to them and their families for trusting us and telling their stories with courage and generosity.

Disappearing

and searching...

Door 1:

Missing children

Door 1:
Missing children

In Mexico, 14 children and adolescents go missing every day.

One every two hours.

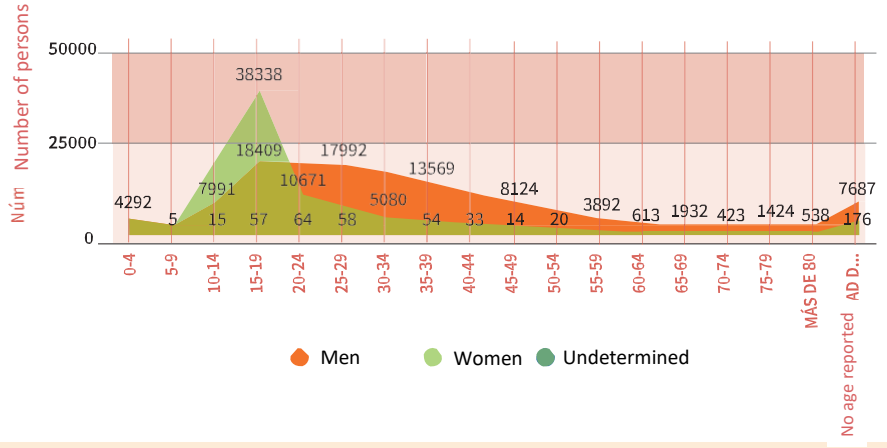
How did we get here?

The disappearance of persons between the ages of 0 and 17 is not something new, considering that from 1964 to the date of completion of this document 84,160 cases have been reported. Without minimizing the cases of persons gone missing decades ago, it is a fact that from 2006 to date, in a context of militarization of security tasks and the strategy known as the war on drug trafficking, statistics show an exponential growth in disappearances in general, but also in particular. Girls, boys and adolescents, as well as young adults between the ages of 19 and 29, account for the majority of persons gone missing. They are among the main victims of this crime.

PERSONS DISAPPEARED, UNACCOUNTED-FOR AND FOUND BY AGE RANGE

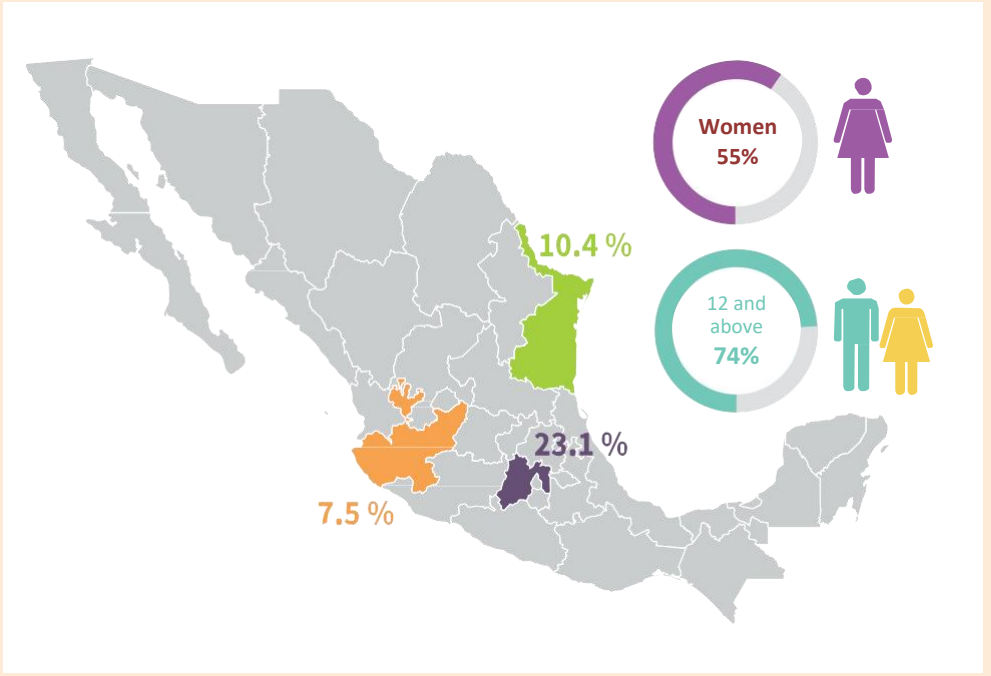
Period from March 15 1964 to June 30 2022

Status of the person: disappeared, unaccounted-for and found



Official figures show 1,896 girls, boys and adolescents went missing in Mexico in 2021. For purposes of comparison, this number of missing persons would be enough to fill, almost four times, the San Lázaro Legislative Palace, which has 500 seats, or almost the entire Nezahualcóyotl Concert Hall –which has a capacity of 2,177 persons– and would exceed the seating capacity of the Palace of Fine Arts (1,396 seats). But the actual number may be even higher, because the disappearance of persons is a crime not always reported. The statistics of the National Registry of Disappeared and Unaccounted-for Persons (RNPDNO)[1] are based on reports from Prosecutor's Offices, Attorney General's Offices, local search commissions, authorities and citizens themselves. There is no way to measure underreporting. While statistics available can be used as reference, they may be incomplete.

Still, the RNPDNO, which is updated daily with a number that would never seem to end, provides valuable data, including the following:



- In Mexico, the majority of missing persons in the 0 to 17 age range are women (55%).
- The numbers are higher among persons 12 and above (74.4%).
- 40% of the cases reported are concentrated in 3 of the 32 Mexican states: **State of Mexico (23.1%)**, **Tamaulipas (10.4%)** and **Jalisco (7.5%)**.
- Eight out of ten girls, boys and adolescents reported missing are found alive.

Taking a closer look at this data may help us to understand the situation. What is happening, why they are being disappeared, who, where, how. We will start by looking at the places where this crime occurs more frequently. They are three states: the State of Mexico, the most populous state in the country, which surrounds the capital; the northern border state of Tamaulipas, and Jalisco, one of the most important states from a political and economic standpoint.

[1] Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda. 2022. Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas. https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/Index

State of Mexico

Sol Salgado does not have a fixed schedule. Her days are different depending on the level of urgency of her tasks. She springs into action every time she receives information that could lead to the location of a girl, and she will cancel appointments if she has to join an emergency search operation to rescue an adolescent. With her dark hair, attentive eyes and gentle talk, she apologizes every time she has to postpone the interview for this investigation. In her voice messages we can hear voices, sirens, a lot of hustle and bustle.

She is the head of the State of Mexico Search Commission and has ample experience in the field, because she is an attorney and has a master's degree with a specialization in gender. She worked as a professor at the State of Mexico Autonomous University and from 2014 to 2018 she was the Special Prosecutor for Investigations on Missing, Unaccounted-for and Absent Persons.

Sol Salgado knows the intricacies of all these issues based on her experience in the field. She says that, in her opinion, "there is not a single cause" that explains the disappearance of children in the State of Mexico, the country's most populous state, with 17 million inhabitants, 33% of whom are in the 0 to 19 age range.[2]

She makes reference to disappearances for human trafficking or sexual exploitation, but she immediately adds that "we should not include everything under this type of exploitation, because that may blind us." Next in the list of causes is recruitment for organized crime, which she associates "with a bad economic situation, one of the factors that, without a doubt, has made it easier for organized crime to recruit them", and also points to domestic violence as a "factor of expulsion".

Searching mother. Mexico City, 2015 Photo credit: Miguel Tovar.

[2] Consejo Estatal de Población del Estado de México. 2022. ¿Cuántos somos? https://coespo.edomex.gob.mx/cuantos_somos

"I couldn't say there is a situation or modality in particular that explains why we have so many missing persons in the State of Mexico. I actually see a combination of factors that contribute to it, because we cannot talk about a particular actor or modus operandi. There are several, and they target the most vulnerable persons in the state: girls, boys and adolescents."

Commissioner Sol Salgado describes the scenario as complex.

As complex as growing up in one of the most violent states in the country. According to official homicide data, the State of Mexico is a territory particularly dangerous for being a woman and has ranked first in number of femicides for several years. It is a state where poverty would seem like a sentence, because its population must survive in those conditions: 48.9% of its inhabitants live in poverty, and 8.2% in extreme poverty, according to 2020 data from CONEVAL (the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy), in municipalities with a multiplicity of challenges where, for example, barely 10% of the population has access to basic utilities and only 34% has access to health services. A state where the non-poor and non-vulnerable population only accounts for 21% of the total, that is, two out of ten.[3]

A present marked by poverty and limited future opportunities that make girls, boys and adolescents vulnerable. A crucial element is the power to recruit them into organized crime and sexual exploitation but also, as explained by the Commissioner, into jobs in precarious conditions.

"You have recruitment at all levels, not only for criminal activities, but also for illegal activities, with long working hours... they are permanently exposed." That is another form of exploitation.

And if there is violence in the household, children become even more vulnerable:

"Because you have people out there lurking, watching for vulnerability, which is quite common during adolescence, particularly in the contexts we are living in in this state, and that combination can result in different outcomes. One of them is recruitment into organized crime, another is that of sexual exploitation, and another is that of illegal activities."

REDIM has thoroughly studied the issue of recruitment and use of children and adolescents by criminal groups[4], which puts between 145,000 and 250,000 children all over the country at risk of falling into these networks. This situation demands urgent measures such as an appropriate legal classification of crimes and the implementation of programmes. Based on her experience in the State of Mexico, Commissioner Sol Salgado adds two red flags: the universe of social media and the infinite circle that begins when they are recruited by organized crime.

---

[3] Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (Coneval). 2022. Entidades federativas. https://www.coneval.org.mx/coordinacion/entidades/EstadodeMexico/Paginas/principal.aspx

[4] REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, Reclutamiento y Utilización de niñas, niños y adolescentes por grupos delictivos. https://issuu.com/infanciacuenta/docs/reclutamiento_final_7_de_diciembre_compressed_1_

“There is a permanent process of recruitment through social media. They offer them jobs, and children leave farewell letters to their families simply saying they left looking for better working conditions. (…) What we have found is that [in the case of recruitment] it doesn’t even have to be somebody in their inner circle; a device in the hands of boy or girl is enough to create an opportunity to groom and recruit them, to convince them over a long period of time without their parents realizing it. Parents only find out about it the day the boy or girl takes money from them, which is fairly common, buys a bus ticket and leaves (...) The common denominator in the [social media] accounts we have identified is that as soon as they accomplish their purpose, those accounts are closed. That is heartbreaking, because it’s not a single social media account, they alternate them.”

for information on his cellphone and has fun. Puebla, March 18 2022. Credits: Miguel Tovar.

Sebastián uses his cellphone to look up information and have fun.

And they not only open and close accounts on social media channels such as Facebook, TikTok or online gaming platforms. They also throw away SIM cards, change cell phones, connect from different IP addresses. Online connections are now more sophisticated.

Commissioner Salgado adds:

"The exploitation process usually begins by recruiting them as halcones ("lookouts"). I would say they begin with the weakest link, but [the children’s] aim is to become hitmen, not only killing rivals and authorities, but also hiding bodies. The cases of youths who have dared to speak are only a few, because they have witnessed horrible acts, including killings, and have also assisted in the dismemberment and destruction of bodies. (...). Our main concern in the case of the youths we have rescued is the type of treatment that can be provided to a boy or a girl who has had to dismember bodies. That is the most painful experience we have lived.”

Girls, boys and adolescents who disappear to disappear others.

Girls, boys and adolescents who disappear to enter a world where they will get trapped. And they face the same truth –once they return or are rescued, they will remain silent:

"Several months ago, for example, a 15-year-old girl left for the state of Zacatecas, and thanks to a raid led by the Navy, we were able to bring her back, but we only brought back her body, because there was a clash with them and she was with those people… she was working, or was beginning to work, with them (...). If those children ever return, they'll never tell you where they were, so we may see cases closed under the argument that the child was not a victim of violence, that he or she was with friends, and we won’t receive any other information.”

In Sol Salgado's experience, recruitment and disappearance survivors seldom tell what they have gone though, because if they happened to witness or participate in acts of violence, they will see themselves as criminals and will be afraid of being punished. Because if they speak, criminal gangs may learn about it and go after them or their families. If they decide to talk, they will never do it during the early interviews; they will always do it later. But reality shows it is impossible to get to that stage, as the majority of investigation files or investigations on disappearances will be closed once the missing children are found, which represents an area of opportunity to guarantee non repetition measures and facilitate access to justice in the case of these human rights violations.

While article 105 of the General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons establishes that once a person is found investigations must not necessarily be closed, what happens in practice is the following:

"The vast majority [of investigation files] are closed, especially if, during the first interview, children state they were not the victims of a crime and there is no evidence to prove it. In my opinion, that reduces the likelihood of further investigation."

Once they are found, we do not know what they went through while they were missing.

Missing runaway children

It would be wrong to assume that all girls, boys and adolescents who have gone missing in Mexico were always and unequivocally disappeared or abducted by other individuals or taken completely against their will. It is difficult to digest and not easy to understand, but some of them simply leave. They run away.

It is important to understand the complexity of the disappearance of children, because there is recruitment, there is human trafficking, there are abductions, but there are also push factors. In those cases, we cannot speak about voluntary absences, but running away as a survival strategy.

That is a situation that Sol Salgado, the State of Mexico Commissioner, must face too often. It happened to an adolescent she calls Kim a few days ago. She was reported missing in a municipality, and while they were searching for her the following happened:

"When she went missing on Thursday, she posted a video on Facebook saying she was not the victim of any crime and she just wanted to share with others what her everyday life was like. And she also posted a short video showing her mother beating her up. You could see her mother knocking on her door and then breaking the door to get to her. That was a clear scenario that pointed to a push factor that motivated her to leave."

There were clues indicating that Kim was in another municipality in the same state. The Commissioner drove there together with her team:

"I was surprised when her neighbors in that place, in an effort to help her when we arrived in the house, denied she was there, believing we wanted to take her back to her Mom. And they not only refused to help us, but lied to us. They said, 'She's not here' and even locked the door from the outside so we would believe what they said.

It was thanks to our insistence and the fact that [geolocation] antennas had pinged that location that we made the decision to break the door open and found the girl, but her neighbor said, 'She asked me to do it, she begged me to do it, she said she was afraid of being taken back to her mother, and thought that you, the authorities, were here to take her back. I told her no, that the idea was to rescue and protect her and make sure she wouldn't return to a circle of violence, but that's an example of their lack of knowledge on how to deal with adults when something like that happens. They don't know what to do. And us, institutions, make lots of mistakes."

Kim was lucky to be rescued by Salgado, a woman who did not hesitate to make decisions:

"Once we found her, one of our priorities was not to call her Mom, but allow the appropriate authorities, in this case the state DIF (the System for Integral Family Development) to interview and assess her and identify her family networks so she could be placed her with them."

While this case had a positive outcome, it is a clear example of everything that can go wrong. Domestic violence, an adolescent who runs away with an older man who might abuse her, a society does not trust the authority and, once she is rescued, another conflict looming: Where to take her? With whom? Are existing institutions prepared to protect girls, boys and adolescents running away from violent realities?
This type of cases is currently handled by Public Prosecutors –who often stigmatize victims– and the National DIF system.

Andrés Marcelo Díaz speaks slowly and patiently. This attorney, who was born in the state of Nuevo León, has a deep knowledge of the issue of disappearance, because he travels all over the country documenting cases. Although he is barely 35 years old,[5] he has a lot of experience: he has a master's degree in human rights and has worked as trial attorney and researcher for the non-government organizations Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (Prodh) and Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación A.C. He also teaches at the Claustro de Sor Juana and Tecnológico de Monterrey universities. Based on all that experience, he wants us to understand that some of those children experiencing such levels of violence go missing in an effort to survive. And we need to address that reality to start thinking about possible responses:

"In the case of women, we already have some experience –we have women's homes or shelters. In theory, children could also go to those centers given the differentiated impact they experience. We need to bring attention to this issue and gain a better understanding thereof: it's already happening. We need to find a way around Public Prosecutors' stigmatizing phrases such as 'She must have eloped with her boyfriend. We need to analyze how we are supporting boys, girls and adolescents in a society full of violence.

If there are domestic violence situations in the household and the boy or girl wants to run away from home, what should we take into consideration as a society, knowing that prosecutors cannot fully decide either? We must bear in mind that we have a very violent country and the need to run away is there. A country where violent disappearances occur is different."

Institutions may have to adapt to these situations, like Kim running away, admits Commissioner Salgado, who then then asks several questions about the situation of children of serial killers or persons perpetrating different crimes: How will we care for those witnessing their own parents' acts of violence against others right in front of them? What are we going to do to support those children witnessing kidnappings, killings and dismemberments in their own homes?

"The fact that those are family issues doesn't mean they're private, because I've often been told, 'His/her parents were in the middle of a custody battle, so we cannot intervene.' I'd say we should."

And he comes up with potential solutions: all institutions should become "one-stop shops to take disappearance reports". There should be different forms to do it, with efforts to promote collaboration without a maze of laws and offices making excuses, creating confusion, to the point where people don't know who to go to. Without people ending up in the wrong place in a wild goose chase. He suggests the creation of a single entity in charge of coordinating the actions of authorities and society to rebuild mutual trust.

And Andrés also asks, "What should be the interpretation of the best interest of the child mean when a boy or a girl runs away from home? That best interest should be contrasted with the right to search and be searched for. And how does that interest coexist with other rights?

[5] Interviewed in September 2020.

Photo: Paulina Mónaco

Faces and data of those missing. Missing persons roundabout. Guadalajara, Jalisco. 2021. Photo credit: Miguel Tovar.

Tamaulipas

A border with the United States and a coastal territory are two of the characteristics that may have sealed the fate of Tamaulipas, a state where violence associated with drug trafficking and organized crime, in their different forms, has not seen a truce for several decades. A state where massacres occur again and again.[6]

It is also a dangerous territory for girls, boys and adolescents –it ranks second among the states with the largest number of missing children and adolescents in the 0 to 17 age range.

As in many other cases, official statistics are scarce or contradictory: according to the national registry, a total of 190 persons went missing in that state in 2021. In response to a freedom of information request, by means of official letter FGJET/DGAJDH/IP/5503/2022, the State of Tamaulipas Prosecutor General Office informed us that 149 investigation files, 79 of had been closed, were opened in that period.

Beyond the differences in official figures, one aspect that draws our attention is the limited amount of public information found in official documents. Because the official letter reads:

> *"Every time girls, boys and adolescents are found, they go through psychological, medical and other necessary exams, and experts write the corresponding report. Also, once a girl, boy or adolescent is brought before the Public Prosecutor, police officers write a report including details of the moment they were found."*

Not much information is provided. Even though we requested anonymous information, that is, no personal data, the Prosecutor's Office only gave us a list of 12 records of girls, boys and adolescents who were the victims of rights violations: 4 were victims of abduction, 3 victims of psychological violence, 2 victims of physical violence, 1 victim of disappearance at the hands of private individuals and 1 victim of homicide. No further details were provided.

What happened to them? What conditions did they live in while they were missing, or what kind of situations did they go through? And in particular, if they can only inform us of 12 cases, what happened in the rest of the cases? What happened to the majority of children and adolescents who went missing?

The Attorney General's Office for the State of Tamaulipas would not provide information about the profile of victims either. "There is no information available" was the response to the question about their level of education. This is where it may be worth looking at official statistics to understand the everyday situation of children in the northern state of Tamaulipas.

According to the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), this state has a total of 989,999 students, including primary, middle education and middle-higher education (data for the 2020-2021 period). 96.4% of the children enrolled in primary school complete that level of education. The completion rate, however, is significantly lower in the case of secondary education (85.7%), and even lower in the case of middle higher education (74%).[7] That means that almost 15% of adolescents in the state of Tamaulipas do not complete secondary education, and three out of ten do not complete middle-higher education. They drop out of school, fail exams and are excluded from the system.

If we consider the group of adolescents enrolled in secondary education in Tamaulipas, disaggregated by sex, we find a significant different between women, with an 87.4% completion rate, vs. 80.1% for men in the same group. The dropout rate is even higher among male adolescents in middle-higher education, with only 66.8% of them completing that level of education compared to 72.5% for women.

[6] Redacción Animal Político. 25 de junio de 2021. Una década de violencia en Tamaulipas: masacres y enfrentamiento de cárteles. Animal Político. https://www.animalpolitico.com/elsabueso/decada-violencia-tamaulipas-masacres-carteles/

[7] SEP, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Principales cifras del sistema educativo nacional 2019-2020. https://www.planeacion.sep.gob.mx/Doc/estadistica_e_indicadores/principales_cifras/principales_cifras_2019_2020_bolsillo.pdf

But there is an important aspect to consider here: the Ministry of Education's official data on dropout rates is based on the number of students enrolled. This means there is another figure missing: the number of those who never enrolled. To estimate that number, they use a "coverage" percentage or gross enrollment rate, that is, "the total number of students in a given education level at the beginning of the school year per 100 persons from the population group in the age range required to attend that level of education." In the case of Tamaulipas, the Ministry reports a coverage percentage of 99.1% for primary education, 91.8% for secondary education, and 76.7% for middle-higher education. This means there is a 1%, 8% and 13% of girls and boys, especially adolescents, who did not enroll and, therefore, do not have access to education.

The decline in completion rates, i.e., the percentage of students completing each level, basically follows the same pattern at the national level. That rate is 90% for primary education in most states (vs. the national average of 96.2%), 80% for secondary education (vs. the national average of 86.3%) and 60% for middle-higher education (vs. the national average of 64.8%). These are the adolescents that are gradually being excluded from the education system without access to education, with everything that entails for their everyday lives, projects and future.

But all these percentages have faces and lives behind them. While these figures may seem small, they are not, because if we consider the country has a total of 6,407,056 students enrolling in secondary education in its different modalities –public, private, *telesecundaria* (schooling through satellite television in isolated communities) and technical– the 13.7% that do not complete secondary education represent more than 877,000 girls, boys and adolescents whose studies are interrupted. In the case of middle-higher education, which has a total of 5,144,673 students, that represents almost two million persons (1,810,924) excluded from the education system.

Without a school, unable to study, with the need to work and the vulnerability of being an easy prey for different types of recruitment. A fertile ground for multiple forms of violence.

According to the Salvador Uribe Human Development Center, one of REDIM's member organizations in the state of Tamaulipas, this state just came out of a period of more than 80 years of ruling by the PRI (the Political Revolution Party) thanks to political alternation. This led to a series of problems, including the neglect of social policy, influence peddling in key institutions such as DIF, SEP or the Ministry of Welfare, alleged acts of corruption and fraud through social programmes and the elimination of some other programmes vital for survival. With high levels of poverty and inequality, and institutions responsible for working with children that have failed to consolidate efforts to protect them, hunger is turning girls, boys and adolescents into an easy target for drug traffickers. In addition, with a border without a real control of cross-border mobility, the whole *frontera chica* ("little border") is a territory full of trails and illegal crossings where clandestine burial pits that Mexico would have never imagined years ago have been found. A fertile ground for countless acts of violence.

[8] SEP, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Principales cifras del sistema educativo nacional 2019-2020. https://www.planeacion.sep.gob.mx/Doc/estadistica_e_indicadores/principales_cifras/principales_cifras_2019_2020_bolsillo.pdf

Jalisco

Chapultepec avenue is one of the most important avenues in Guadalajara, the capital of the state of Jalisco. And one of its most important street crossings is a roundabout with a column over 50 meters high surrounded by a monument to the “Boy Heroes”, a group of cadets who died during the 1847 Mexican-American war.

For more than 70 years, this place was known as the Boy Heroes Roundabout. But today it has a different name: The Roundabout of Disappeared. It was renamed as such in 2018 by the family members of thousands of persons who went missing in recent years.

The outer wall of the large promenade is now plastered with photos of faces and details of missing persons. Smiling faces, driver license photos or images cropped from a group photo. But as you approach and walk around that circle of pain, and see one photo after another, poster by poster, you will notice something: the number of young people missing in the state of Jalisco is increasing.

Photo/Miguel Tovar

We are talking about an increasingly larger number of youths in a state with **more than 18,000 persons missing** to date according to the latest records. In fact, the authorities had to expand the facilities of the Jaliscience Forensic Sciences Institute, where there is always a large number of family members waiting for news outside of the morgue. And the state government has already built several "forensic cemeteries" where burial niches are dug every week to bury new bodies.

Jalisco, the state with the largest number of persons gone missing in recent years, also owes a debt to children. *Niñez y adolescencia desaparecida en Jalisco: una crisis inadvertida* ("Children and adolescents in Jalisco: an unnoticed crisis") is the title of a research paper by Aletse Torres and Samantha Anaya published by *Zona Docs*,[9] an independent media outlet, in August 2021. Their study, which includes testimonies and official data obtained through freedom of information requests, shows the disappearance of children began increasing in 2017. It also points to underreporting or significant differences between information sources, as well as the fact that in the state of Jalisco more men than women go missing, and the most prevalent age range is that of 12 to 17 (more than 80% of the cases).

But media outlets have also documented a large number of failures, deficiencies and loneliness. The beginning of their report is harrowing:

> *"Alerts that are not issued, search protocols that are not implemented and actions in the field that are not implemented are some of the many challenges faced by families searching for girls, boys and/or adolescents missing in Jalisco, a state where, according to official figures, a total of 804 minors victims of disappearance were reported."*
>
> *"I requested them [the search records] from the Prosecutor's Office, but I was told they couldn't release any information about the Amber Alert because my son had gone missing together with an adult and, therefore, the investigation file would be handed over to the Prosecutor's Office for Missing Persons. The two agencies are working on the same investigation. (Some time later) the person who assisted me told me that the alert had been issued, but only to hospitals and the Red Cross, because it was not a public alert. I don't know if that's what actually happened, because I never saw my son's alert go public.*
>
> *(Estela, Christian Alexander's mother)*

Family-led organizations report the local Prosecutor's Office refuses to release any information. In response to an information request for this investigation on the number of missing girls, boys and adolescents, the time they have been missing, the number of investigations opened and some other information, they refused to provide most of that information under the argument that "said information must be considered and exceptionally treated as restricted access, RESERVED AND CONFIDENTIAL information."

They delivered sixteen pages of quotes taken from legal provisions before stating that the level of schooling of children and adolescents missing in the 0 to 17 age range is "reserved" information and refused to provide any further information.

The Jalisco Prosecutor's Office, however, did share some information about some particular aspects. By means of official document FE/UT/2625/2022 they informed us, for example, that girls, boys and adolescents reported missing between January 1st and December 31st 2021 **were missing an average of 20.7 days.**

[9] Anaya, S.; Torres, A.; Orozco, I.; Franco, D. 2021. Niñez y adolescencia desaparecida en Jalisco: una crisis inadvertida. Zona Docs. https://www.zonadocs.mx/ninez-y-adolescencia-desaparecida-en-jalisco-una-crisis-inadvertida/

They also informed us that in 2021 a total of 665 girls, boys and adolescents were found (irrespective of the date of reporting of their disappearance, which means they may have gone missing in previous years). Also, by means of a letter signed by Teresa Ikal Téllez Aguirre, the head of their Transparency Unit, they stated they had opened a total of 95 investigations on missing girls, boys and adolescents, all of which are "still active" because "at this Special Prosecutor's Office, we do not close any investigations".

The fact that no investigations are closed is something positive compared to other practices such as closing them once children are found, something that, based on the testimonies shared here, is a widespread practice in several states. But keeping investigations open is as important as continuing them.

We submitted information requests to 6 Prosecutor's Offices: State of Mexico, Chiapas, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Jalisco and Mexico's Prosecutor General's Office. However, none of them provided any information regarding missing girls, boys and adolescents after they were found. We also requested information about how those disappearances occurred, the crimes of which they were the victims in those periods, and some other aspects related to those events and the population in question.

What was their response? That they were unable to provide any information because such information was reserved or reports exist but they do not include that level of detail. The Tamaulipas Prosecutor's Office, for example, stated that every time a person is found experts and the Public Prosecutor prepare separate reports. The Jalisco Prosecutor's Office stated information is reported in three forms: a telephone call to the Public Prosecutor, a "standardized police report where the first responder informs the competent authority that the person was found and provides related information", and an official document stating that the person was found, "which may be a free writing document containing any elements deemed relevant".

Where does all that information go and how is it analyzed? Are records kept somewhere? Why do individual agencies produce different reports, including free writing documents, considering there is a need to process and systematize that information by using existing forms that have already been validated in theory?

Karla Quintana, the head of the National Search Commission, affirms that such lack of information reduces the possibility of more effective searches. Because despite the existence of a national registry:

> *"Probably 90% of the sources of information are prosecutor's offices, and there are more than 400 information variables requested from prosecutor's offices, authorities or anyone who may have information. It's important to know how many days later the person was found, if the person found, either dead or alive, was the victim or not of a crime...*
>
> *And we ask her:*
>
> *– Do prosecutor's offices take into account and keep records of those approximately 400 factors?*
> *– No.*
> *– So they don't keep any records of that information?*
> *– They don't keep any records.*
> *– Could they do it if they wanted?*
> *– It's something they should do, because the records they currently use only provide minimum information that prevents us from knowing who's being searched for and since when. What's the only information they provide? Name, the date the person went missing and, if we're lucky, the place of disappearance and age of the missing person."*

A guide with almost 450 variables to report was released two years ago. It includes a form based on article 106 of the General Law on Forced Disappearance (chapter seven, section one), that specifies the information that must be submitted to the National Registry of

Photo: Miguel Tovar

Disappeared and Unaccounted-for Persons. It also includes 19 items that, in turn, can lead to other items to report. One of them, for example, refers to “clinical and dental records, surgeries and other information for the person's identification”. The more than 400 variables appear in the form of choices that must be selected by each authority, in different states, and are updated by the RNDPNO in real time. The failure of authorities to complete these items properly significantly reduces the probabilities of finding a missing person, and makes it almost impossible to identify patterns to prevent future disappearances.

Either due to apathy, lack of training or conflicts between State institutions, the only information available from official sources are the absolute numbers of disappearances of girls, boys and adolescents (the same applies to cases involving adult men and women).

Intermittent disappearance

An official letter from the Jalisco Prosecutor's Office contains some striking information, to say the least: information about repeated disappearances. In response to one of our questions, this state agency stated that “in 2021 a total of 69 girls, boys and adolescents were reported missing more than once”.

69 children and adolescents went missing more than one time. This is an unusual situation –or one that has not been studied enough– that points to the possible occurrence of a phenomenon that some are now referring to as 2intermittent disappearance", a concept introduced in Mexico by academic Emanuela Borzacchiello in a recent report on sexual and femicidal violence against girls and adolescent girls in 10 countries in Latin America prepared by the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA) and CLADEM, a non-government organization.[10]

“Many Latin American countries lack disaggregated official records of disappearances or investigations and statistics that make it possible to analyze the actual impact of this issue on girls and adolescents. But thanks to qualitative research, we are beginning to see some progress in the identification, classification and tracking of the evolution of this type of crime”, states the research paper released in 2021 by CLADEM-UNFPA (page 29). In this regard, Emanuela Borzacchiello, who was interviewed for this report, adds, “It’s a new form of violence against adolescent girls”. And she describes the findings of her research:

"They are usually young women who won’t escape [from the perpetrators]; they will send them back. They’re not interested in perpetrating a femigenocide. They don’t want to kill us, because they can use our bodies. But it would be wrong to analyze these as kidnapping or human trafficking cases, because they not only use them sexually, they use them for other work activities related to gender stereotypes."

[10] CLADEM-UNFPA, Comité de América Latina para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres y Fondo de Población de las Naciones Unidas. Investigación sobre la interrelación y los vínculos entre la violencia sexual y la muerte de niñas y adolescentes en la región de América Latina y el Caribe (2010-2019). https://cladem.org/investigaciones/index.php/vinculos-entre-violencia-sexual-y-muerte/

Borzacchiello, with her curly reddish hair and a speech that is a clear combination of her native Italy and Mexico, her place of residence, speaks in the feminine because her research has shown her that adult and young women are the main victims of what she refers to as intermittent disappearance. She affirms that, as a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, she identified that phenomenon when her female students began to tell her about their experiences and those of their girlfriends, and put her in contact with other victims. That led her to work on approximately 50 cases of women mainly in the 15 to 18 age range that occurred in the capital and several municipalities surrounding the State of Mexico where, she says, she identified several common characteristics, but also many other questions to answer:

"There are no comprehensive records, only some patterns.

All the girls and women whose cases I documented were raped. Rape was used as an instrument to keep them silent. But there is a common threat that goes beyond sexual threats: they're told that if they dare to speak they will kill their families, friends or communities.

They are more susceptible of being blackmailed because they're younger, not financially independent, and their first sexual experience consists of a rape.

Most of the times families will remain oblivious to all of that, because if they report the disappearance of a female family member, once she's found the investigation will be closed and will come to a halt. And if she goes missing again, the family will think, 'She'll come back', and authorities will say, 'She must have eloped with the boyfriend'. Investigations should remain open, and the reasons why the missing woman was not found should be investigated, but they hide everything."

Borzacchiello, a researcher at The University of Texas in Austin, has ample experience in the fields of femicide, femicidal violence and feminism archives. She became interested in the phenomenon of intermittent disappearance when she began connecting the accounts of her students to another phenomenon she had also observed: the decline in the number of femicides in some locations. When one form of violence declines, it is important to identify what other form of violence is increasing, she says, and consider intermittent disappearance from a broad perspective:

"This type of violence shows how the criminal economy is changing. Any form of violence operates as a mechanism that activates and regenerates the economy, as explained by Karl Marx in the second chapter of The Capital. And violence is one of the pillars of the capitalist system.

In the case of intermittent disappearances, they don't take your life, but your liberty. We cannot analyze this phenomenon outside of the neoliberal economy: they use our bodies and enslave them. The perversion of the patriarchal system is expanding. But it's not human trafficking, because those women live a double life: one that is perfect and normal, and another hidden behind different forms of violence.

I haven't been able to identify a victim profile for those cases, which can occur in different social classes. There are girls who go to school, are literate, don't have financial problems at home and have a good level of schooling, the kind of the girls you may find in street protests on March 8."

Intermittent disappearances raise a question that we may not want to face: Why are girls, boys and adolescents, that is increasingly younger bodies, being used to reproduce violence?

And if femicide is a form of violence that cannot be studied by applying the same pattern as that of a homicide, there is no doubt intermittent or repeated disappearances, or however you want to refer to the fact of disappearing more than once, require a particular approach.

The concept coined by Emanuela Borzacchiello in Mexico is also being studied more or less similarly in other places in the region. In countries like Argentina and Uruguay they call it *systemic intermittent disappearance*. These are all attempts to comprehend, describe and better understand the complexities of illegal economies with their new forms of violence against people's bodies. One of the main challenges to those studies, says the academic, is the lack of more real approaches towards data. But that is something impossible if Prosecutor's Offices and public institutions fail to keep thorough records of missing persons and persons found, if they do not fill the almost 400 check boxes they should fill and share that information.

Photo: Miguel Tovar

Chiapas

Invisible, that is what missing girls, boys and adolescents would seem to be in Chiapas. Completely invisible to the State.

*"What we have seen over the last three years, from 2019 to date, is **an almost four-fold increase in the number of missing children.** A total of 183 missing children were reported in 2019, 384 in 2020 and 625 last year.*

But all this information is hidden by the state government because, according to the national registry, 51 girls, boys and adolescents went missing in the state of Chiapas last year. However, our records show they were 625 in total, 12 times as many.

The person speaking is Jennifer Haza, Director of the civic association Melel Xojobal.[11] From San Cristóbal de las Casas, her voice is one of anger. Anger at the significant increase in the number of missing persons, at the same time the neglect or possible disdain for children from authorities in the state of Chiapas increases.

She affirms the government does not release any official data, statistics or records. That means the members of Melel Xojobal must literally "fish" for missing posters posted on Facebook by the Chiapas State Prosecutor General's Office.[12] They know a social media account cannot be considered an official source, but they cannot obtain information anywhere else. That is how ***they documented the 12-fold increase in the number of cases the state failed to report*** to the federal registry.

That is a huge difference for a single year. "A huge gap!", says an angry Jennifer. And she affirms the problem is not only the underreporting, but also the silence around the issue:

"Part of the problem has to do with the capacity of institutions, and another with the invisibility, for example, of the different situations of armed violence in the region. The best known case is that of the town of Aldama, where shootings occur despite the presence of the National Guard and the police.

But clashes between armed groups also occur along the border [with Guatemala], where people have been killed. And here in San Cristóbal we have seen an increase in armed violence and the State's failure to act.

I believe [increased violence] is associated to different factors: preexisting conditions of impoverishment and inequality, because we're the state with the highest level of child poverty in the country; the impact of the pandemic in terms of unemployment and lower incomes, and power vacuums filled by armed groups or criminal gangs, not necessarily organized crime. Youths and adolescents, are cannon fodder for recruitment, human trafficking and labor exploitation."

[11] Melel Xojobal, Trabajando por los derechos de la infancia y juventud indígena. http://www.melelxojobal.org.mx

[12] Fiscalía General del Estado de Chiapas. ¿Has visto a? https://www.facebook.com/fibup

The difference in numbers seems to be even more complex: to the abysmal difference between the 51 cases reported to the national registry and the 625 identified by Melel Xojobal, we must add a third figure the Chiapas State Prosecutor General Office shared with us in response to a freedom of information request. According to official letter number 070136722000156, in 2021 there were 232 "minors reported as missing or unaccounted-for" in that state. So is it 51 according to the national registry, 232 according to the Prosecutor's Office or the 625 documented by the non-government organization? Which number is the one closest to reality?

The Chiapas Prosecutor's Office Transparency Unit adds that 199 of those persons were found and, therefore, only 33 are still missing. From 2012 to date, our report identified two periods with significant peaks for this crime: 2013-2014, with 170 and 268 cases respectively, which is twice as many as the previous year; and the present, the 2020-2021 period, with a total of 208 and 232 cases respectively reported in that state, that is, three times as many compared to the two previous years.

Melel Xojobal, which in the Tsotsil language means "true light", is an organization with 25 years of experience in the areas of advocacy, defense and the exercise of rights of indigenous girls, boys and adolescents in the state of Chiapas. Based on their own records and the support they have provided in many cases, Jennifer Haza sheds a little light on the current situation the local government seems so keen to keep in the dark:

"The cities with the largest number of children missing are the most populous, the largest in the state: Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tapachula, along the border with Guatemala.

Between 35% and 40% of the girls, boys and adolescents missing are indigenous. As regards their age, gender reasons and vulnerability, the situation is consistent with the current trend in the rest of the country: adolescents in the 12 to 17 age range.

We have also found that ***three out of ten girls, boys and adolescents gone missing haven't been found."***

This situation is worse compared to the national average, considering that in other states the average number of persons not found is two out ten.

Information in response to a freedom of information request confirms that the cities mentioned by Jennifer Haza are those with the highest prevalence, but she also adds the municipality of Chiapa de Corzo to the list of places with the largest number of cases documented (11 in 2021). And she shares additional data, such as the clear relationship between age, level of schooling and disappearances: even though institutions claim they do not have information about the victims' level of schooling in 63 of the 232 cases reported, for those where such information is available secondary students (75) stand out. That is more than twice as many victims compared to those in primary (35), preparatory (33) and preschool (23) education. The largest number of cases of missing persons for which information is available, from 2012 to date, corresponds to secondary school students.

The Chiapas State Prosecutor's Office shared some data worth analyzing because it has to do with the possible "causes of disappearance".

Of the 199 cases of girls, boys and adolescents gone missing and later found in the state of Chiapas last year, according to the local Prosecutor's Office, 47 were related to "family conflicts", 15 to "personal relationships", 2 to "intimate partners", 2 to work-related reasons", 1 was "detained", 1 was "the victim of a crime" and the majority, 131, "not specified".

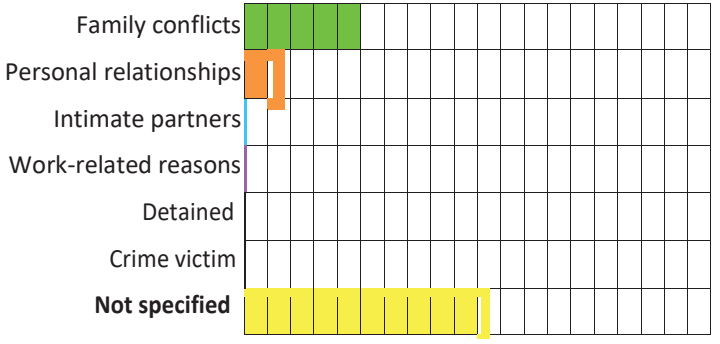


Photo: Miguel Tovar

There are no child protection programmes in Chiapas, says Jennifer Haza. The previous government made public a draft project that has not been approved yet, and strategies designed in previous years have not been implemented due to the lack of budget. "The State does not have a public policy to prevent and address the different expressions of violence against children."

There is nothing to provide the care needed for 2.1 million girls, boys and adolescents –37.8% of the state's total population– growing up in adverse conditions, because in the state of Chiapas over 75% of the population lives in poverty and 93% experiences deprivations.[13]

Backlog is the word that would seem to designate everything there. According to recent reports released by INEGI and CONEVAL, Chiapas is the Mexican state with:

- the highest percentage of children and adolescents living in poverty and extreme poverty;
- the highest percentage of girls, boys and adolescents without access to social security;
- the highest percentage of adolescent women married or in union;
- the highest percentage of adolescent mothers;
- the second highest percentage of girls, boys and adolescents with social deprivations such as undereducation, lack of access to health services and lack of access to basic housing services.[14]

In addition to hunger and the lack of opportunities, there is a situation whose magnitude does not exist in any other state: "When it comes to the right to identity, we are the state with the biggest gap. Four out of every ten child births are not registered", says Jennifer Haza.

Without documents, they are inexistent in the eyes of the State.

The lack of official records compounds the issue of access to rights: they are more vulnerable.

Thousands of Chiapaneco children do not exist in the eyes of the authorities, the State or the law. They are already missing.

[13] Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (Coneval). 2022. Entidades federativas, Chiapas, Pobreza. https://www.coneval.org.mx/coordinacion/entidades/Chiapas/PublishingImages/Pobreza_2020/Pobreza_2018-2020_CHIS.jpg

[14] REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México. June 2022 Ficha técnica: Infancia y adolescencia en Chiapas (2022). https://blog.derechosinfancia.org.mx/2022/06/23/ficha-tecnica-infancia-y-adolescencia-en-chiapas-junio-2022/

Guanajuato

Guanajuato is one of the states with the highest rates of violence in recent years, both against the general population and children; it was also the state with the largest number of girls, boys and adolescents murdered in the 2018-2021 period. However, that type of violence would seem to have suddenly disappeared, as if by magic, according to official data.[15]

So far this year, in 2022, only 9 cases of missing girls, boys and adolescents were reported to the RNPDNO compared to last year, with 85 cases. The population of children of one of its neighboring states, Jalisco, is less than twice that of the state of Guanajuato, but they have reported five times more disappearances to the national registry.

Scarce data, a huge lack of transparency and a spiral of violence that has not stopped growing in recent years. A state where in the early weeks of 2022 alone, 453 intentional homicides (of adults) were reported, according to official data from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System. A state where, on any given day, as on Tuesday March 8, 16 homicides were reported, including executions inside a restaurant, hanged and mutilated bodies and shootings in public places, streets, resorts and homes.[16]

It is in this context of violence and risk that Guanajuato's vulnerable children are growing up today. We do not even know how many of them have become victims. But there is an undisputable fact: they exist. They have faces, a history, and persons searching and waiting for them.

Elliot Janick Barrios Molina went missing in the city of Celaya on March 22, 2019. A CCTV camera captured the last image his family has of him. Elliot, 14 at the time, arrived in a street where a shooting where one of his uncles was killed occurred.

> *"You can see the moment the child gets there on his bicycle. A red bike, a white T-shirt, light blue jeans, black tennis shoes with brown soles.*
>
> *You can see he's in shock and suddenly decides to leave. He has two choices: to ride his bike west or south. And you can clearly see he wants to leave. The area has not yet been cordoned off, so the child returns on his bicycle, stops in the middle of the street in front of the apartments and turns around. And when he does, he seems to be in shock. Unfortunately, he rode away in the same direction as the men in the car" [the men who a few minutes earlier shot the victims].*

Elvira Ramírez, Elliot's grandmother, talks about it. She's a 63-year-old housewife and member of a neighbors association in her community for which she volunteers.

Elvira cared for Elliot for five years because his mother migrated to the United States. But she did not abandon her three children. She would send them money and was working to get them a visa so they could move to the US with her. Everything was ready; Elliot and his two siblings were only a few weeks away from traveling to the other side of the border to reunite with their mom.

Two years and three months after her grandson's disappearance, Elvira **regrets the fact that the crucial first hours were wasted.** First, because another family member and the press insisted that Elliot was among the victims killed, so they took him for dead for almost one day. It was then that one of his uncles filed a report, but the authorities only issued an Amber alert three days later.

[15] REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México. 2022. Violencia contra infancia y adolescencia en Guanajuato (May 2022). https://blog.derechosinfancia.org.mx/2022/05/13/violencia-contra-infancia-y-adolescencia-en-guanajuato-mayo-2022/

[16] Vázquez, Luciano. March 9, 2022. Violencia no para en Guanajuato: asesinan a 16 personas en un día. El Financiero. https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/estados/2022/03/09/violencia-no-para-en-guanajuato-asesinan-a-16-personas-en-un-dia/

"They didn't issue the Amber Alert on Saturday. It was only when my daughter arrived [on Monday] that she was told an Amber Alert would be issued. But they made another mistake –the photo, because in those days another kid went missing and they made a mistake: they put the photo of the other kid on Elliot's missing poster. And many people had already shared it by then. We learned about it and my daughter went there [to ask] that the photo be changed. Valuable days were lost. A lot of time was wasted. I didn't know what an Amber Alert was, I only found out about it while I was there."

ALERTA AMBER GUANAJUATO

Reporte Núm: FGEG-AAGTO-013/2019
Alerta AMBER Guanajuato

Fecha de los hechos:	**22/Marzo/2019**
Lugar de los hechos:	Celaya, Gto.

Elliot Janick Barrios Molina

Nombre:	Elliot Janick Barrios Molina
Fecha de nacimiento:	23/10/2004
Edad:	14 años
Sexo:	Hombre
Nacionalidad:	Mexicana
Tipo de cabello:	Corto y lacio
Color de cabello:	Negro
Tipo de ojos:	Medianos
Color de ojos:	Café obscuro
Estatura:	1.55 mts.
Peso:	45 kgs.
Vestimenta:	Sin dato.

Señas particulares

Perforaciones oído derecho.

Hechos por los cuales se considera que el o los menores están en inminente peligro de sufrir un grave daño: quién lo acompañaba por última vez, lugar de desaparición, etc.

El menor Elliot Janick Barrios Molina salió de su domicilio el día 22 de marzo del año en curso con rumbo a la casa de un familiar, sin que a la fecha se conozca su paradero.

Se teme por su integridad dada su minoría de edad y que pueda ser víctima de algún delito.

En caso de ver o localizar a la persona no localizada, no debe tomar ninguna acción. Le solicitamos se comunique a la Fiscalía General del Estado a los números:

01 800 DNUNCIA (368-62-42) y 911

Alerta AMBER Guanajuato alertaambergto @AAmber_gto

Elvira, a well-informed woman who is very active in her community, did not know that system existed. She remembers she did not know where to go or who to go to. Days of hospitals and police offices. To identify the alleged remains of her grandson, she was only shown a photo of a face-down body covered in blood, and when she returned to tell them she wanted to see the body, she was denied access to the morgue, she was only allowed to see images on a computer. She spent those days arguing with forensic experts and authorities:

"The persons in charge of missing person cases mistreated people. I got into an argument with one of them, because they were yelling at my daughter [the missing child's mother] and I said, 'Don't yell at her, don't you see her situation?' And he said, 'That's just the way I am'"

Elliot was 14 when he went missing. Today he's 17. His grandmother says he loves soccer and animals.

"He liked to rescue animals, little dogs. He would bring stray dogs and say, 'Spay or neuter the dog' and we will put it up for adoption'. He would also bring me kittens, and it was exactly the same. He still slept with stuffed animals when he was 14. He liked to make jokes, be at home and do household chores. Sometimes I would forget to do the laundry and he would to it for me.'"

Dogs are barking while Elvira talks. She believes her grandson is still alive, that he is being held somewhere against his will, and she is completely dedicated to searching for him. She joined a collective and participates in meetings, protests and searches for clandestine graves. And all of that has increased her interest in supporting the families of other girls, boys and adolescents like Elliot:

"I don't see a lot of searches for people who may still be alive. In my opinion, there are many little ones still missing who must be alive. Because I have been out there in the field and we don't find many adolescents or women [buried in clandestine graves]. *So, where are they? We should be searching for people who are still alive."*

And we should also search for them with law enforcement, considering a case reported in 2021 raised a lot of red flags in that regard.

Dulce Melissa Mendoza Ramírez, a 12-year-old girl, was the victim of an unlawful detention, assault and threats at the hands of the Municipal Police of the city of León, Guanajuato. On October 16 2021, she was unlawfully arrested while she was on a street together with one of his younger brother, age 6, who was abandoned by police officers in the street, putting him at risk. Dulce was detained, but her family was never informed about it. Her mother, Reina Ramírez, only learned about it when she called the west police precinct, known as Cepol, which confirmed her daughter was there, but she had to pay a bond to be released. Twenty hours later, the time it took her mother to get the money, and still within the term indicated by the authorities, Reina Ramirez arrived in the police precinct, but her daughter was no longer there.

She was told she had been released, **without a family member being present, which violated her right to due process and the best interest of the adolescent.** Dulce Melissa had gone missing.

She was found two months later, on December 11 2021, during a raid in response to an anonymous report. But far from prioritizing the best interest of the child, in Dulce María's case she and her family had to face a State that disappears, and allows the disappearance of, children.[17]

Photo: Miguel Tovar

[17] Madres Guerreras de León and Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México (REDIM). Monday, December 13, 2021 ¡Justicia para Dulce Melissa! https://derechosinfancia.org.mx/v1/justicia-para-dulce-melissa/

Mother's Day protest in Mexico. Mexico City, 2015. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

There is not a recipe or a single form of searching for girls, boys and adolescents in Mexico. All the heads of search commissions coincide on that aspect.

There is not a recipe because there may be different reasons behind those disappearances or different ways of perpetrating them, but also because we do not have sufficient elements to comprehend or identify the contexts in which they occur. While the law establishes that specialized Prosecutor's Offices and commissions must have a context analysis unit, this does not occur in practice. This eliminates

the possibility of conducting what is known as "pattern-based searches", an alternative described in the Standardized Search Protocol, according to which:

> *"We must ask ourselves, 'Is there another case similar to this one?'. Because experience in other countries shows that if I look at one case and then another, and another, that may lead us to somebody else if we lack information, but it can also help us from a preventive standpoint. If I identify an action pattern, we can develop public policies aimed at prevention."*

The person explaining this is Sonja Perkic-Krempl, Director of Search Actions at the National Search Commission and an expert in context analysis. Last year, her office released a guide entitled *El ABC del análisis de contexto* ("The ABC of context analysis") to facilitate search tasks in all Mexican states.[18]

Perkic-Krempl, a blunt and very direct woman, has a lot of experience in topics related to disappearances. She has a master's degree in human rights, worked for several years documenting cases in Guatemala, and prior to joining the National Search Commission she worked for the State of Jalisco Specialized Prosecutor's Office for Missing Persons. She also knows a lot about missing persons and red tape, and that is why she insists on the importance of context analysis and pattern-based searches. That is her personal battleground.

Reality shows there is still a long way to go: in recent months, of the 32 local search commissions –because all Mexican states now have one–, **only 2 published the results of context analysis studies: the State of Mexico and Nayarit.**

What do we need to replicate the tool? Perkic responds right away and without hesitation: "political will". We need to convince the authorities of the need to create new posts, allocate budgets and hire more people, because at the federal level, at the National Search Commission, for example, the context analysis unit only has three staff members, and the situation in the rest of the country is literally the same, except for the State of Mexico and Jalisco, which have between 30 and 40 staff members in that area.

> *"That area should provide assistance to all the Prosecutor's Office units, because if we're talking about criminal systems, we're talking about patterns of activities, about criminal enterprises where disappearances are one of different expressions, but also car theft, extortion, homicides. And if I understand that interrelationship, I will go out on a targeted search [based on patterns].*
>
> *If we speak about how it should be done, there should be not only a criminal, but a context analysis unit, assisting the entire Prosecutor's Office. That would be the ideal situation, because at the end of the day, what are the disappearances of persons we eventually find under the ground [in burial pits]? Once they're found those cases will be labeled separately as homicides A, B and C."*

Karla Quintana, the head of the National Search Commission, adds the following:

> *"The law is very clear on the need to create context analysis units in every state."*

We need to go beyond individual searches.

If we don't understand that the disappearance of 100,000 persons in Mexico is contextual and should be understood that way, we will not be able to make progress in terms of truth or justice.

[18] SEGOB, Secretaría de Gobernación, El ABC del Análisis de Contexto. Herramientas básicas del análisis de contexto orientado a la búsqueda de personas desaparecidas. https://www.gob.mx/cnb/documentos/el-abc-del-analisis-de-contexto-herramientas-basicas-del-analisis-de-contexto-orientado-a-la-busqueda-de-personas-desaparecidas

"We have identified three main universes: one is that of abduction, another is forced recruitment, and the third is that of persons running away from violence."

"I cannot only focus on the search for Karla. I need to search for all of those who went missing in the same context as Karla. ***And that's crucial in the case of children.*** *They don't take those girls away just because they're Karla Quintana, but a 17-year-old woman in the State of Mexico, just like they take away a vulnerable boy in the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán.*
That requires an assessment. A context analysis for search purposes not only prevents you from going in blindly, it can give you specific information."

Studies carried out in the State of Mexico and Nayarit show that the reasons behind disappearances are varied. In the State of Mexico, for example, the National Search Commission and REDIM's joint report identifies three main causes: human trafficking for sexual exploitation, human trafficking for criminal activities and illegal adoptions.[19]

Sonja Perkic, who coordinated that research together with Adriana González Veloz, affirms that, in her experience, one of the things she finds shocking is the existence of other patterns identified in the disappearance of girls, boys and adolescents:

"It has a lot to do with abduction of minors, guardianship and patria potestas situations. Even with a final court judgment, one of the spouses will often abduct a child.
And you also have illegal adoptions and forced recruitment. Male adolescents are forced to join organized crime, and girls are usually recruited as lookouts. We have identified three main universes: one is that of abduction of minors, another is forced recruitment, and the third is that of persons running away from violence."

An analysis of the context in the state of Nayarit showed there is a larger number of female adolescent victims and an emerging trend in the case of male victims of disappearance: retail drug dealing and addictions.

"In eight years, the use of this type of substances increased significantly, both in the general population and among men, whose use prevalence went from 10.8% in 2008 to 20.2% in 2016.
And this information cannot be underestimated in the context of disappearances in Nayarit, considering a total of 1,829 drug retail-related crimes were reported, 51.28% (938) of which were perpetrated between 2017 and 2019."[20]

This characterization, considering the percentage of addiction among adolescents in the state is above the national average, says commissioner Quintana, should be a starting point to gain a better understand of the vulnerability of girls, boys and adolescents in the state of Nayarit.

Another finding of research and context analyses in both states is that of stigmatization, which has a significant impact on children, and adolescents in particular, once they go missing. This is how Karla Quintana and Sonja Perkic, respectively, explain it:

"Missing children become the target of stigmatization. There are two types of stigmatization, especially in the case of adolescent men and women. What they usually say about men is that they're part of organized crime and what they say about girls is that they ran away with someone."

[19] REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, 2021, Desaparición de Mujeres Adolescentes, Niñas y Niños en el Estado de México. https://issuu.com/infanciacuenta/docs/informe_edomex_versio_n_pu_blica#:~:text=De%20las%2036%2C%20135%20personas,632%20son%20ni%C3%B1as18%20y%20adolescentes.

[20] SEGOB, Secretaría de Gobernación, y CNB, Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda, 2021, Análisis de Contexto. Informe sobre las Acciones Urgentes Caso Nayarit. https://www.dropbox.com/s/y44hoz1ehmj9v05/VERSI%C3%93N%20P%C3%9ABLICA,%20AN%C3%81LISIS%20DE%20CONTEXTO%20CASO%20NAYARIT.pdf?dl=0

"Why is this important? Because the law doesn't distinguish between a 17-year-old, a 7-year-old or a 7-month-old baby when it comes to the State's obligation to immediately conduct a search, open an investigation or issue an Amber alert, and the response from government officials varies significantly."

"The main obstacle to an immediate search for an adolescent is the criminalization of young people. They [the authorities] will often say, 'He must have been doing something bad' or 'He must be out there still drinking. Don't get hysterical, he'll come back'. I say it because that's something we often hear from their family members.

The authorities won't pay attention to it or sometimes have other priorities, because they're understaffed, so they'll often say, 'That person has already been reported missing five times in the past, but he was simply partying and there's another case we believe is more important; we need to make progress.' That's also a reality."'

The experience is devastating: **one of the reasons why Mexican authorities are less likely to search for adolescents could be this stigma.** And they exonerate the actual perpetrators even if, either as a result of acquiescence or direct actions, are members of the State.

Karla Quintana has grown a thick skin, because she gives several interviews a day and is used to criticism. But her attitude changes when she talks about stigma and children. She raises her voice, talks faster and her emotions come out:

"We have almost 100,000 persons officially reported as missing, but my perception is that the Mexican society doesn't care about it. This issue should be a scandal, a reason for outrage or mass protests. That's what we would expect from the excessively large number of persons missing and families affected in our country.

My perception is that this idea that society doesn't care also includes the authorities, so we have a vicious circle that causes the general population not to demand a different response. I'm not trying to evade our obligation as authorities, it's a sociological observation. The lack of response from a society doesn't mean that we, the authorities, do not have an obligation to respond, but there is a strong vicious cycle of stigmatization. And an aspect that is often overlooked is that of the person, the individuals gone missing. In addition to the age factor, you have the aspect of racial discrimination, which I believe is something that has not been addressed.

We're talking about kids from low-income backgrounds, kids who have probably not completed secondary education, kids who are vulnerable. I have the impression that the State doesn't care about these kids, and especially in the case of men I see a lot of racial discrimination. I believe it's important to bring more attention to this issue and attempt to understand why society doesn't care."

Sol Salgado, the woman who has been searching for missing persons in the State of Mexico for over a decade, also believes that the solution should not only involve the authorities and family members:

"It's essential to make citizens aware that this is not the sole responsibility of parents, that protecting all children is everyone's responsibility. If we know they're in danger, whether we're their neighbors or are blood related to them or not, it's important to make our society aware that we need everyone's support.

Because a child who suffers violence won't show up at a Public Prosecutor's Office to report it to a police officer. That's our responsibility as a society,

"We, adults, must provide the means, and once we see a problem we shouldn't simply wait or say, 'It's my neighbor's problem', but 'It's a problem we're identifying that affects all of us'.

We need more campaigns. I remember that, when I was a child, there were several campaigns in Mexico with the slogan Mucho ojo *("Keep a watchful eye"). We no longer have these types of campaigns, but they would be of great help, because they teach people how to react.*

The State's action [is important], but we also need to inform society and their immediate collaboration. That's the perfect combination that, in all cases involving children, has had a significant impact, because missing persons have been found thanks to this timely advice. It has to do with society's shared responsibility to bring them back home.

Andrés Díaz Fernández also believes it is important to run campaigns, spread the message and issue alerts to society to promote shared knowledge and prevent children from disappearing. This is consistent with the views of different experts and organizations working for children; in fact, this was part of the recommendations made this year by the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances after their visit to Mexico in 2021.

"We need an awareness raising campaign with a focus on education and pedagogical elements, etc. How can that campaign be more effective? We must eradicate stigmatization and disseminate information in schools. And it's also important to figure out how to do it, because the disappearance of persons is a serious matter.

Maybe REDIM or another organization should help to produce that content, because how can the State educate people if it refuses to talk about this issue?"

"We can address both the meaning of disappearance and our rights from that perspective –always within the context of human rights–, and the perspective of impunity and justice, what justice is all about and how it must operate. (...) And we should not forget about prevention, an aspect we must strengthen.

This is an education effort that would require an intervention that could be led or developed by the State."

"But we're growing desperate, because cases continue to occur. We're not talking one or two-year programmes, but 20-year programmes to educate about disappearances, and see what we can achieve."

"We need an awareness raising campaign with a focus on education and pedagogical elements, etc. How can that campaign be more effective? We must eradicate Stigmatization and disseminate information in schools. And it's also important to figure out how to do it, because the disappearance of persons is a serious matter."

Laws, protocols, instruments

There is an area where efforts have been fruitful: laws and protocols. Mexico currently has concrete and operational legal instruments that were developed from the perspective of, or include, the best interest of the child. These instruments are the following:

* The Amber Alert, a system to launch immediate search operations, since 2010.[21]
* The Alba Protocol, a system for the specific search for women and girls, implemented in 2003 in Ciudad Juárez and in 2012 in the rest of the country, in those states adopting its implementation.[22]
* The General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons and Disappearances Committed by Individuals, enacted in 2017, which also created the National Missing Persons System.[23]
* The Standardized Protocol for the Search for Missing Persons and Investigation of the Crime of Forced Disappearance (PHB) in operation since 2020.[24]
* The Additional Protocol for the Search for Girls, Boys and Adolescents (PABNNA), the most comprehensive protocol for cases of missing children, in force since July 2021.[25]

Acknowledging gains made in that area, including the advantage of having a legal and operational framework, it is time to assess its efficacy in practice, as well as its execution and results achieved so far.

All the experts consulted agree on the positive results of the Amber Alert which, in their opinion, has the additional advantage of being well known by the population. However, the Amber Alert system must be further publicized, as shown by the case of Elliot in the state of Guanajuato. Also, its implementation is still deficient, as will be described below with Monse. However, many persons know about the alert, and while they may not know all the details, they know it is a tool specifically designed to search for missing children. Therefore, more and more people are demand its application in a larger number of cases, which is not currently the case.

"It has been of great help here in the State of Mexico", says Sol Salgado, the Search Commissioner and former Prosecutor for Disappearances in that State:

> *"The first alert, which was issued in 2013, had to do with a little 4-year-old abducted in Texcoco and found in El Salvador two weeks after she went missing.*
>
> *"It taught us a great lesson in the sense that searches must be launched immediately, but also that children cannot provide much information, their facial features may change or they may be adopted illegally, all of which increases the need to make processes more agile."*

[21] Gobierno de México, *Alerta Amber*. http://www.alertaamber.gob.mx

[22] Gobierno de México, Comisión Nacional para Prevenir y Erradicar la Violencia contra las mujeres, *Protocolo Alba: la búsqueda inmediata de mujeres y niñas desaparecidas*. https://www.gob.mx/conavim/articulos/protocolo-alba-la-busqueda-inmediata-de-mujeres-y-ninas-desaparecidas-262178

[23] Cámara de Diputados del Honorable Congreso de La Unión, 2017-2022, *Ley General en Materia de Desaparición Forzada de Personas, Desaparición Cometida por Particulares y del Sistema Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas.* https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGMDFP.pdf

[24] Gobierno de México, 2020, *Protocolo Homologado para la Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas y la Investigación del Delito de Desaparición Forzada.* https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/342262/Protocolo_Desaparici_n_Forzada_agosto_2015_Espa_ol.pdf

[25] Gobierno de México, Diario Oficial de la Federación, 15 de julio de 2021, *Protocolo Adicional para la Búsqueda de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes,* PABNNA. https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/653978/2021-07-15_PANNA_versi_n_DOF.pdf

"When the Amber Alert system was launched in the State of Mexico, it was considered a very important tool that would get rid of the formal judicial procedures required in the past.

Also because it shows that the immediate search for children is not only the responsibility of all institutions, but also of the people, all citizens. We should be informed about children who are no longer with their parents or the persons with whom they are supposed to be."

Based on the cases they have worked on, Jennifer Haza, Director of *Melel Xojobal*, a CSO in the state of Chiapas, also reports some progress:

"We've seen improvements in recent years, for example, in the case of the Amber Alert. It's becoming less common to hear, in response to reports filed by families, comments such as 'Just wait, she may have eloped with her boyfriend' or 'We need to wait for 72 hours'. This is becoming less common."

However, **in the case of searches in the southeast of the country, she says, discrimination against persons speaking indigenous languages still persists,** because the State doesn't have sufficient interpreters. Sometimes there is no one available to translate for families experiencing the disappearance of a child or there is no assistance available for them to understand complex legal, formal or operational processes. The same occurs in the state of Chiapas.

Gabino Gómez Escárcega, a human rights defender from the organization Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres A.C. (CEDEHM), [26] adds that in the state of Chihuahua, the state where he lives and works, the Alba Protocol has also been of great help.

"I know it's being used, but only if there is pressure, a lot of pressure, from the media, the public opinion or associations."

As one of the founders of CEDEHM in 2005, he has been helping relatives of victims in Chihuahua for 16 years. He has also worked as a social justice activist for several decades. Gabino knows the ordeal experienced by families, including having to go from one office to another, stacks of documents and lethargic bureaucracy. And that is why he is more critical when he speaks about existing laws and protocols. With his heavy northern accent, he says:

"They don't want to work. Every time there's a problem, they're like, 'Let's make a law', which leads to endless discussions. And once the law is passed, then they say, 'Let's approve its regulations', which takes even more time. And then, 'Let's approve the protocol', which may take years and years, and it's never done.

"As long as they refuse to address this issue, nothing important will happen, impunity will continue, and this type of crime will continue to be committed."

Many people have their hopes set on the PABNNA, but they also agree that, considering it was launched less than one year ago, it is too soon to evaluate it. Instead, considering the existence of the protocol represents a major achievement for children, we made an attempt to identify some blind spots, that is, aspects to improve or address.

Experts identify three areas of improvement. The first is working to ensure the protocol is known and used by government officials and families. The second is training those in charge of implementing it. The third is harmonizing current rules and laws in all the territories in the country. To promote its use, it would also be important to first overcome the differences that still persist between prosecutors'

[26] Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres A.C. (CEDEHM). https://cedehm.org.mx/es/

offices and search commissions, because "there is literally no coordination between them", says Karla Quintana, the National Commissioner. "On several occasions we requested a meeting with the Prosecutor General's Office, specifically to discuss the issue of the Amber Alert [during the process of creation of the PABNNA], but we never received an answer." But beyond that incident and the Mexican State's internal problems, Quintana affirms that the most important thing now is to inform people about the protocol, because "protocols end up becoming rather complex, and I say this as an act of self-criticism".

Representatives of civil society organizations providing assistance in missing person cases, in particular *Melel Xojobal* and CEDEHM, from the states of Chiapas and Chihuahua respectively, affirm that the PABNNA is virtually unknown in their states, and they have not heard of its application or it making a difference compared with past government administrations.

However, several institutions are currently working to promote the use of existing tools. The National Search Commission and the National System for the Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA) are organizing training courses, discussion panels and workshops (where REDIM has also collaborated).

Gabriela Polo Herrera, SIPINNA's Director of Violence Prevention and Care Policies, explains what they are doing to spread the word about these activities:

> *"We have a 22-hour course. It's a hybrid course, because we are making an effort to adapt to people's different needs, schedules and possibilities. We have made it available to different authorities to replicate it. It has a maximum capacity of a hundred users, who have access to an interactive platform where they will find content and documents and education activities. Once they have gone through that content, we have a synchronous session where we go through additional materials and clear up doubts so they can put that knowledge into practice in their everyday work.*

> *The content they go through includes the general rights framework, the focus on children and adolescents, identifying the different types of violence {including disappearance} and specific mechanisms."*

Four officials from SIPINNA's National Executive Secretariat were interviewed for this report. These officials were Gabriela Polo, Verónica Valero Arce, Alejandro Villa Ceballos and Jovita Aguilar Ponce, all of them from the Violence Prevention and Care Policies Unit. They explained that the training course on child violence prevention and care, which includes the issue of disappearances, is currently being held for a group of professors from the National Professional Education College (CONALEP), a distance education alternative for millions of youths. Shortly before this course, they also ran a hybrid course in the state of Hidalgo for law enforcement officials and administrative and support telephone services staff.

They also affirmed that the effectiveness of the course can be evaluated in two areas:

> *"On average, we have a completion rate of almost 60%* [that is, six out of every ten participants complete it]. *But completion rates in the case of distance education are always low. Comments posted in discussion forums show a high level of acceptance. because once the participants identify the different forms of violence against children and adolescents, who are rights holders, we receive comments on how they, in their childhood or adolescents, were also victims of violence. And that's where they become aware of the need to do a better job and work in coordination with the authorities."*

Gabriela Polo Herrera has the patience it takes to coordinate the efforts of different institutions in 32 states and their corresponding municipalities. But, beyond teaching people about a law or protocol, she kindly points to another challenge.

"The challenge lies in creating a cultural change so people can understand the issue of children and adolescents, that is, denormalizing different forms of violence, such as sexual violence and corporal punishment. We should make it visible."

According to several officials of SIPINNA's Executive Secretariat, since the PABNNA and the Standardized Protocol were approved during the pandemic, they are not well known among government officials. And while it is still too early to evaluate the PABNNA, that is precisely their next priority: during the rest of 2022 and throughout 2023, the CNB will conduct an assessment of the efficacy of the PABNNA and the Alba Protocol.[27] In 2023 they will also attempt to bridge the above-mentioned gap:

"The lack of assessment is one of the gaps we have found. While we've already identified a series of underlying factors, including armed violence, organized crime, drug trafficking, gender inequality and other associated forms of violence such as poverty and migration, we still lack a specific assessment."

Jovita Aguilar adds the following to Gabriela Polo's comment:

"The idea is to study the causes, their geographical distribution, the frequency of these crimes. This should include statistics, historical and evolution trends, behavior patterns. These assessments are of great help for the design of appropriate and realistic public policies. And we don't have that, but we have plans to do it this and next year."

A total of 639 persons signed up for SIPINNA's hybrid course between February and June 2022.

The National Search Commission and REDIM have also developed and provided online training on the Standardized Search Protocol and the PABNNA. And the results have been positive: 900 persons signed up for the first course (second half of 2021) and more than 1,100 for the course that began in July 2022. Most of the participants were public officials from agencies or bodies such as local search commissions, ministerial authorities and public security bodies.[28]

Commissioner Sol Salgado, from the State of Mexico, says her team was already applying several of the practices included in the PABNNA, such as including photos of suspects in missing persons' bulletins. But that is not a widespread practice, and that is why we must still insist on "the constant and permanent training of all related authorities and stakeholders, because many of them ignore these practices, and if the authorities ignore them, that only leads to more delays and obstacles to the procedure as a whole."

Finally, "it is urgent to harmonize existing protocols, because it is in the case of children that we find the largest number of protocols," says Sonja Perkic. And she adds that the National Search Commission is working together with the National Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women (CONAVIM) in that regard. They are currently working on the harmonization of the Alba Protocol in Mexico, because each state has its own protocol, and while many of them are similar, small differences can make it difficult to carry out some actions.

---

[27] Gobierno de México, Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (SIPINNA) y Comisión para poner fin a toda forma de violencia contra Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (COMPREVNNA), 2019, Plan de Acción 2019-2024 de México en la Alianza Global para Poner Fin a la Violencia contra la Niñez. https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/643741/PLAN_DE_ACCION_2019-2024.V2021.pdf

[28] CNB, Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda, y REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, 2022, Curso en línea: Protocolo Homologado para la Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas y Protocolo Adicional para la Búsqueda de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes. https://twitter.com/Busqueda_MX/status/1532454594579775533?t=7-kt-dPibKnH6kgAQgtR2ow&s=08

As part of their efforts to standardize documents (and criteria), they have already held two meetings with liaison officials from 32 state search commissions, prosecutors and specialized Prosecutor's Offices. And this is something Quintana does not hesitate to refer to as "an achievement". However, it is not a State policy yet, but a particular initiative promoted by some government officials.

In addition to these three blind spots, there is another situation that limits those actions – the conflict that exists at the national level between Prosecutor's Offices and search commissions.

It is a level of tension that permeates everything and is still present despite the existence of the different protocols approved. According to Sonja Perkic:

> *"[The protocol] is the guiding principle for all search commissions. I can assure you that all of them follow these protocols, but it is also well known that Prosecutor's Offices are reluctant to apply them. Why? Because it goes beyond their standard investigation protocol and makes them a primary actor in search actions. Prosecutor's Offices focus on those responsible but not on finding the person.*
>
> *In some states Prosecutor's Offices do not have any communication with local search commissions, and there are others where there is good coordination. It is difficult to generalize. But that obstacle has not been overcome yet."*

Impunity

The issue of impunity is key to understanding the disappearance of girls, boys and adolescents. It is a structural dynamic: the level of impunity in the case of disappearances is almost 100%; only 36 in every 100,000 cases end in a conviction, according to official data from the UN Committee on Forced Disappearances. And if we look at the number of cases of disappearance of girls, boys or adolescents that have been properly investigated, in how many the responsibility of private individuals or public officials has been established, and how many of them have ended in a conviction, the level of impunity is unquestionable: zero.

However, the issue of impunity should also be addressed as part of the broad social dialogue necessary in this regard. We often say that 'nothing happens in Mexico', and every time we repeat that phrase, that perception comes alive. And that perception is, without a doubt, a reflection of what happens, but it does not increase our trust in the authorities, which can find a comfort zone for their lack of action. It is imperative to continue to demand justice and an end to impunity in cases of disappearance, including those of children.

Door 2:

Searching children

I also want to search

Fernando combs the hills together with his uncle, Mario Vergara. They are searching for another of his uncles who went missing. Guerrero, 2020. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

Fernando

"My uncle was the one who invited me and I wanted to go. I liked it and I've been going with him ever since, because I find it interesting and I know missing persons will go back home to their families. You know they'll go back to their families.

It doesn't make me sad.

It's not sad, because you have fun, it's like an adventure."

A long-sleeve shirt to protect his arms, thick fabric pants, a fabric sun hat to protect himself from the sun, good tennis shoes, preferably boots, and a duffle bag with a flashlight and a water bottle in it. That is what Luis Fernando carries with him every time he leaves for the hills to look for clandestine burial pits.

He is only ten years old, is in fifth grade and began doing it at the age of 5, while he was still a kindergartener. He is searching for his uncle, Tomás Vergara, who went missing in Huitzuco, Guerrero, in 2012.

Fernando was only a baby when his uncle was taken away, but he grew up listening about him, because he would buy him milk, diapers, and not a day goes by without his family talking about *Tomy*, as they call him. News, laws, incompetent authorities or information received via WhatsApp telling them where persons were buried: that is the Vergaras' everyday life. Those are the things they discuss over lunch, when they get up, before going to bed. That is the everyday life of a family hit by absence that reacts to that information right away; all of them are pure energy.

Mayra, Fernando's Mom, and his uncle Mario are two relentless searchers. They were among the first members in their family to go out to the hills to recover human bodies illegally buried. And they continue to search every day. They join national brigades and search parties, but they also venture out to comb new territories. Their family says that searching is something "natural". And one day Fernando asked if he could join them.

For Fernando, the saddest part is that he did not get to know his uncle, as well as seeing the sadness in his family. Going out to search with them, on the other hand, makes him feel useful.

Fernando combs the hills together with Mario Vergara, his uncle. They are searching for another of his uncles who went missing. Guerrero, 2020. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

"[Children] can be of help because they're more agile. They can walk up the hills more easily than adults. And they can carry things, although not so heavy. They can carry, for example a shovel or a pickax, they can help with that."

Fernando looks older for his age, 10. He is tall, muscular and articulate. He talks a lot outside of the interview, but giving a testimony makes him a little nervous. He felt pretty anxious the day before, especially upon preparing his answers, says his Mom.

He likes to watch TV with his grandmother. Both of them are experts in old movies, like those of *Cantinflas* and *La India María*. He "kind of" likes going to school, and his favorite subjects are history and geography. He practices karate every afternoon. He usually rides his bike with his friends, and his favorite game is *los toros* ("the bulls"), a game where a child pushes a wheelbarrow while other children try to rope or dodge him.

The pandemic changed his life and that of his friends, like everywhere else. Those were times of lockdowns, loneliness, boredom. Fernando missed going out to the street, but COVID-19 is not the only reason why he has stayed home: in Huitzuco there is often a self-imposed curfew due to current levels violence. That was the case during the interview. It is March 2022 and children are going back to school. Classes were suspended back in November due to street shootings. Her Mom tells us about it:

"On November 2nd [2021] there was a violent shootout. I didn't send him to school. That was right after the pandemic; they were supposed to go back to school, but they had to wait for about three weeks. Then they went on school holidays, and it was only recently that they went back to school.

There are disappearances and violence, and that's the biggest problem. Right now there are shootouts, and I tell him, 'You're not going out, because things are ugly. Children shouldn't go out if there are shootouts in the streets or a person was killed. I'll let you go out only once all of this ends'. Once things calm down again, children go out, but that only prolongs the lockdown."

This is not the time to go out to play. Not even to run errands, says Mayra. She has "lived in fear" for more than one decade.

She has allowed her son to join searches, but she admits she is still scared. She is a searcher herself, but she does not always take him with her. Her son's participation as a searcher is kind of contradictory:

"For him, it's natural, like it was something normal for his generation. He has lived with searches ever since he was a baby. We have never discussed it with him openly, but he has lived it. My sister says I shouldn't let him join the searches because he's only a child. But I say he needs to learn; more people need to learn, because how could we find them if we don't know how to do it? Yes, I'm afraid they may do something to him, because we don't have the right conditions for the searches, but I also want him to learn, because otherwise nobody would search anymore."

Her brother, Mario Vergara, Fernando's uncle and one of the pioneers of this movement in Mexico, is of the same opinion:

"We're still learning how to search. And we're teaching them what we have learned. I say our children will become the country's great searchers. They will unearth what we were unable to find, because they have a lot of search experience and technology in their hands. They're really good with technology, so that combination... wow! I find that wonderful.

He's already flying a drone.

He may not like searching in the future, but he has a seed in him that may grow."

Fernando walks up the hills together with his uncle, Mario Vergara. They are searching for Tomás, another of his uncles who went missing. Guerrero, 2020. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

Mario and Fernando, his nephew, look up to each other, often look at each other, and their love is evident. When they are on the hill, the child alerts him every time he sees garbage or something unusual, such as a spot without plants or soil with a strange color. He has learned to read the ground.

His uncle, who taught him how to do it, cannot hide his pride every time he hears him. 'Great, my little son', he says. 'Great, Satur'" as he lovingly calls him. Mario Vergara has back problems due to the physical strain of searching all these years. He had a business and he was doing well, but he shut it down to search for his brother. Those times of prosperity are long gone; today he dedicates his time to fight with authorities and comb the hills. He is soft-spoken but blunt at the same time, and he always has a big smile.

Mayra Vergara is also soft-spoken, but shy. She is 42 and it is kind of difficult to talk with her because she is never quiet. She divides her day between her recycling small business –which has cost her a lot of effort–, the sale of handicrafts and caring for Fernando. She is a single mother.

At the Vergara's household every search can lead to an argument, because Mayra always evaluates the security conditions before giving Fernando permission to go. Sometimes she has said no, and he gets angry.

In 2019 Fernando joined the National Search Brigade in the city of Iguala. He spent a significant part of his school holidays working with his uncle Mario, search organizations and families. It was more fun that staying at home, he says.

Fernando, 10, has participated in at least nine searches since the age of 5:

"We went to this place, which is like a hill, it's huge. It will take you four hours to get to the top. It is believed that persons were buried there, because there was a church at the top, which the army set on fire. There's nothing left there. We also went to Los Timbres, Iguala, and other hills."

He remembers many details about his first search at age 5.

"It was a day like today [sunny and warm]. I had never walked up a hill, so it was very difficult for me, because it was slippery. I was a little nervous and afraid of falling, because we were in the middle of the rainy season, and the soil was loose.
My uncle told me that a person had been buried there, and we dug out the body. Yes, it was right there. We found it thanks to information we received from other people. We dug with a shovel and a pickax.
I began removing the soil.
I didn't think of anything else. I was only thinking about that person and the fact that he had been buried. Because he was tied up and had three bullet holes right here. 'How was he tortured?', I thought. [How did you feel?] *"I simply thought that another missing person would go back home to his family."*
That's basically all I remember about the first time I went there, because it's still stuck in my mind. He was severely tortured.
But that doesn't scare me anymore, I don't find it intriguing. How can I explain it?... The first time it was really difficult, because that was the first time I saw a body, but not anymore, now I'm used to it. I began to see more bodies, but there's nothing like the first time."

Fernando walks up hills together with Mario Vergara, his uncle. They are searching for another of his uncles who went missing. Guerrero, 2020. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

He says that what he vividly remembers is not the smell, but the image of that person tortured, with bullet wounds, tied up. He has seen bodies at funerals, but it is not the same. He has also seen dead people in movies, but it is not the same. "Dead bodies in movies don't look that ugly". Fernando doesn't seem overwhelmed upon talking about it, but he does not talk about it with morbid curiosity either. He says that every time he sees persons who were tortured and buried, he thinks:

"They must have suffered a lot. Innocent people were killed. That's unfair, because they didn't deserve it, they were killed. People are afraid [of those who kill]. Because they're out there free, they don't have any rules, they can go to your home and kill you."

Mayra says she feels happy every time he comes back and tells her everything they did in detail. She says he expresses a lot of interest in search activities, and that interest is only growing, and adds that her son is not afraid of bones, because he says, "They're already dead, the only thing that scares me are the things that happen here [in his town]. And he also insists on watching the photos of bodies found, and even though she refuses, he always ends up convincing her. And adds that he does not stop thinking about pieces of information, strategies and spots, which is how they refer to possible clandestine graves.

"At night he tells me, 'At this hill, such and such thing happened'... And I tell him, 'Shut up and get to sleep'.
And then he starts talking, 'We're going to such and such hill with my uncle, can I go?'. And I tell him, 'Shut up and go to bed', but no matter what I say, I know he's still thinking about it. He really wants to do something. He's thinking about the route. It's like if they find something it will be a victory."

If his Mom had to describe Fernando in one word, that would be "noble". She says he always participates in charity events and she often has to tell him to hold his horses because he wants to change the lives of everyone he knows. He is a very supportive child. And she gives us an example, something that happened a few days ago:

"He went out with other kids, and he said, 'We're going to take care of Mrs. Mary, because she was mugged the other day'. She has a store down there [far]. And I told him, 'What the fuck are you going to do there, Fernando?' And he said, 'We're going to take care of Mary'. He has this thing about defending others."

Children who spend the afternoon riding their bikes back and forth to take care of a woman who was mugged. In Huitzuco, where executions, shootings and disappearances occur in the local market, the street and everywhere.

But Fernando does not talk to anyone about his searches and his missing uncle. "No, nobody talks about that." Those issues are not even discussed at school. Silence grows as more people go missing.

The Vergara family searching for Tomás. Huitzuco, March 13 2022. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

According to official records, 28 persons have gone missing in Huitzuco, a municipality with close to 20,000 inhabitants. But that does not include the number of cases not reported. And nobody speaks about it in this municipality, where bullets are heard flying so often that schools are forced to shut down.

When he grows up, Fernando wants to be a heavy machinery engineer, "which is some sort of mechanic repairing heavy machines", or a forensic expert: "I would like to work with people who have suffered. People are killed, and you need to conduct an investigation to find out how they died."

Photo: Maria José Martínez, Redim

Valentina

Today is May 10, Mother's Day, a sacred date in Mexico whose meaning has changed to some extent since 2011. It used to be all about crowded restaurants, flowers and mariachis to celebrate. Today, on Mother's Day, protests are also held in several cities in the country, painful walks of women showing photos of their missing children. And there are thousands of mothers who can no longer celebrate.

They are accompanied by young people and children. They used to be only a few, but now there are lots of them. In the early years, the children and adolescents participating in the protest were only a few. In 2022 we have seen tens of them, possibly more than 100. We have seen strollers with babies, babies in their mothers' arms, toddlers holding their parents' hands, girls carrying placards.

Valentina Gámez' straight dark hair is covered by a cap that clearly identifies her as a Marvel Comics fan. But she is also wearing a green shirt, the uniform of *Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos* ("Forces United for Our Disappeared") an organization from the state of Coahuila in which her grandmother, Esther Contreras, participates. They have come all the way from Torreón. This is not her first protest: they have brought Valentina to the June 10 protest every year.[29]

"My uncle is Jesús Antonio Mena. He went missing on June 29 2010. It's been almost twelve years... of searching. Coming here, doing this, seeing my Grandma, is kind of sad... I would love it if we could be here all together, to be honest."

With her typical Coahuila accent, she responds with her sweet voice. A few steps away we find Esther, her grandmother, Mariana, her mother, and Fátima Alejandra, her aunt. The family group traveling from the north of the state to the capital is only made up of women.

[29] Mónaco, P. May 12 2016. Madres de desaparecidos claman justicia en México. El Telégrafo, Ecuador. https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/mundo/8/madres-de-desaparecidos-claman-justicia-en-mexico

"– How do you feel as a girl and a missing person's niece?

– To be honest, it's not easy to live knowing that you're not there with your uncle, that somebody in your family is missing. And yes, I have more uncles and aunts, but he's also important to me, and I'd love to have him here.

– Does coming to these marches make you feel good, or how does it affect you?

– Well. I don't know if it's good or bad, but I like to come with my grandma, so she won't be alone, because sometimes my mom cannot come. I find it interesting to some extent.... but I don't know, I'm kind of moving away from it.

– Does it get difficult sometimes?

– Yes, it does sometimes."

Protest marches, meetings, talks. Valentina has been searching for her missing uncle together with her grandmother, Edith, but she does not talk about it anywhere else. She does not talk about it at school, not a word. She only talks about it with her best friend, "It's not the kind of topic you want to talk about with everyone".

Valentina likes to paint, read, dance all kinds of music, and has a particular interest in ballet, although she has not been able to take any classes yet. She also likes to go to the movies – only superhero movies– and her Mom, Mariana, says she's very tidy. She is also a dedicated student who does her homework ahead of time to avoid doing things at the last minute.

She eats lots of fruits and vegetables. Her favorite dish is *picadillo* (a dish made of ground beef and potatoes).

"When I grow up I want to be a doctor, at least that's the plan for now."

Photo: María José Martínez, Redim

The dark, the gray

Monse and Jade searching for their missing sister. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: Paula Mónaco Felipe

Monse and Jade

Both on their T-shirts and one placard, Monse and Jade carry the photo of their sister, Andrea Michael Dávila Martínez.

> *She went missing in Ecatepec on August 6 2014 at age 15. Her current age is 23.*
> *We miss you.*

That is what the placard with Andrea's photo says. The three of them look very similar: curly black hair, slanted eyes, almond skin tone and a kind of nostalgic look.

While they walk amid the May 10 protest march, they do not hesitate to give an interview. Monse does the talking, but Jade nods every time her sister speaks. They say things have not been easy ever since Andrea went missing.

> *"It's a very big problem, because nobody sees beyond that. Society is too used to seeing missing person bulletins.*
>
> *People see a missing person bulletin as 'just another one', so what you're seeking is more publicity around your missing family member, because somebody may have seen her. But you also have those who think you're only looking for money to heal your pain. And they'll say things such as 'Ah! You gave that interview because you're only after the money!' But we don't want any money, we're not profiting from our pain. All we want is publicity for our missing family member's case, because we don't know the situation they are in, where they are or what they're being subjected to."*

An uncertainty that hurts, overwhelming possibilities. That is how Monse, Jade and their family live their days.

On August 6 2014, after her mother accompanied her to enroll in a preparatory school, Andrea went to run an errand. In broad daylight. One street away from her home. All they know is that a neighbor saw her walk by, and she was suddenly nowhere to be found.
Andrea is their oldest sister. She was 15 when she went missing. Monse and Jade, who were 13 and 3 respectively at the time, are now 20 and 11.

> *"We don't have such a big age difference, so we always spent time together, we were always together. And when my sister went missing it was like, 'What do I do know?' They take away an essential part of you.*
> *Accepting that new reality, figuring out how to move on with my life without my sister, was a very difficult process. It was really difficult, because my sister and I helped each other in every aspect. If I was busy, she would go get stuff for me or things like that. I had to become more independent, because I said, 'There's nobody to help me with that anymore'.*
> *It was really difficult, because my Mom was also absent. That's where, if you will, darkness descends on you and you say, 'What do I do now?' You feel like... Personally, I felt really lonely."*

"Darkness descended on us", says Monse.
In the absence of her oldest sister. In her own sadness. In an empty home, because her parents were out there looking for her.

> *"When my sister [Jade] went missing, Andrea was only three years old. It was really difficult for my sister and I, because my parents were absent, they were dedicated to searching for her, going to hospitals, associations, centers. So, to some extent... our parents also had to abandon us, although that's understandable, because they're searching for my sister. You feel like there's a big void in your family.*
> *And when one of your family members disappears, you're left with that void, that absence, that sadness."*

A home full of absences...and fear.

Because if one of your sisters is missing, you're afraid of being the next one, because in addition to being a woman, in Mexico that means living at risk of being one of the ten women killed each day. And it's even more difficult to be an adolescent in the state of Mexico, where disappearances, femicides and violence are an everyday certainty.

Monse had to live her entire adolescence submerged in this period of darkness, as she calls it.

Her parents began to fight, and they later divorced. Her family disintegrated, she says. They lost their joy, and everything turned into darkness, sadness, fear.

> *"We used to go out with my sister, we went everywhere together, and we were happy. When my sister went missing, my Mom was always with me, she would always go out with me, and I felt frustrated, because she was always all over me. And I told her, 'I need my space'.*
> *It was difficult for my Mom to let go off me, because I had to learn to go out on my own.*
> *My sister went missing two weeks after her* quinceañera *party, and my Mom was really scared, so when I turned 15 I didn't have a* quinceañera *party. My parents postponed it out of fear, but I wanted one. I didn't get a party. When my sister went missing, I was really scared, because you didn't know how to go out or if you would be the next one. You didn't even know who to trust. I had a lot of fear. I was afraid of anybody walking in the street. I would say, 'What if that person does something to me?' Regaining that trust, going out to the street, was a very difficult process. I felt the streets were unsafe, knowing that my sister had disappeared on the street behind our home. It was really difficult to regain that trust in people, in the streets, in yourself.*
>
> *It was a very difficult process. Today I know danger is still out there, but I'm no longer afraid of going out. I have sought support from several persons and, fortunately, I took shelter in feminism."*

Her voice gets loud. She does not hesitate to talk about her feelings, her pain, her wounds. And she even goes beyond that: her conversation now revolves around social aspects, other girls, she gives us a context.

She says she is searching for her sister on social media which, in her opinion, is the most effective way of throwing messages in bottles into the sea. And she is very active. She posts videos on TikTok and content on Facebook. She participates in the collective her Mom is a part of: *Red de Madres Buscando a sus Hijos* ("Network of Mothers Searching for their Children").[30]

Monse's short hair is fixed with two golden hair clips, and she has a small eyebrow piercing. She carries a black backpack decorated with a rainbow flag, pins and other items that point to an unmistakable identity: she is a feminist chick.

Many girls, boys and adolescents are currently going through those dark times Monse talks about. Many have experienced the disappearance of a sister, a father, an aunt, a friend. It is that pain that hits them hard but also leaves them behind. How many? It is difficult to know, we lack data. But all you have to do is add their number to the number of adults missing and do the math. They are hundreds of thousands.

After the Ayotzinapa case, which involved the disappearance of 43 teacher's college students (2014), a group of social psychologists and experts studied the psychosocial effects produced by this sad event. In the report entitled *Yo solo esperaba que amaneciera* ("I was only waiting for dawn"), there is a specific section on children. The authors provide details about the "traumatic impacts of family losses and changes, including the ambiguous loss and changes in family dynamics around the search for the missing students". The multidisciplinary group, coordinated by Ximena Antillón, held interviews and led sessions that included activities such as games, drawing, talks and other techniques. The following were some of the findings:

[30] Red de Madres Buscando a Sus Hijos, Estado de México. https://facebook.com/RedDeMadresBuscandoASusHijos

"Parents and family members refer they have noticed changes in their children's behavior, low school performance, sudden mood swings, irritability and concentration problems. Children are concerned or uneasy. They try not to give trouble to their families, but they no longer enjoy activities they used to like, they cry when they talk about their missing family members, they dream that they come back but suddenly leave, they show this ambivalence between wanting to know and not wanting to know what's happening with their missing family members, and express concern over their relatives searching for them."[31]

An important piece of information: traumatic impacts not only affect the children of the Ayotzinapa missing students, but also their nieces, nephews and siblings: their whole family and children in particular.

Karla Quintana, the national Search Commissioner, travels around the country participating in searches and meetings with family members of missing persons. As part of her work, she witnesses the efforts of those parents carrying shovels and pickaxes, and she lives their everyday life, tensions and pain up close and in different forms. She refers to many situations similar to those shared by Monse and Jade.

"I've met mothers who are really hurt because their other children complain about being abandoned and accuse them of preferring the family's missing son or daughter. I remember something that really shocked me, the case of a woman who said she used to go back home at a certain time after the searches, but one day she arrived home two or three hours later than usual, only to find her little daughter had shaved her eyebrows and pulled out her eyelashes. She was in shock thinking, 'I'm going to be left alone'. I also met another woman who was searching for her missing daughter, who was around 20. And she had a son, 16, who had accompanied her and was waiting for her. And he told her, 'Hey! Come on, let's go Mom!', and the Mom said, 'Wait, wait, we're talking about your brother'. Suddenly, right in front of me, the boy approached her and said, 'What? Do I have to go missing too for you to pay attention to me?'

Disappearances are a cataract that devastates everything, destroys everything. Quintana remembers another search where she heard a woman giving instructions over the telephone. The children's homework, preparing food, 'Don't forget about that drawing'. And in the background she also heard the voice of a child and she asked her about it. The woman, who was on the ground looking for burial pits in hopes of finding the body of her oldest son, a 17-year-old, was talking to her two children. They were alone at home, and her 10-year-old was caring for her younger brother, a 3-year-old.

[31] Antillón Najlis, X., Cortez Corona, O., Escareño Granados, E., González Marín A., Mora Bayo, M., Díaz Taboada, J.R., Ríos Cortázar, V., Tolentino Mayo, M.L., Gómez Melgarejo, R.A., Nava Lozano, G., Ruiz Tovar, A., Landaverde Martínez, A. 2018. Yo sólo quería que amaneciera. Impactos Psicosociales del Caso Ayotzinapa. Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación A.C. https://fundar.org.mx/mexico/pdf/InformeAyotziFin.pdf

They were alone, taking care of each other, because that day their mother could not get anybody to help her, she did not have a support system or network, and there was no way for her to be there with her three children.

Why is it that searching mothers must solve these problems and why should they and their children be out there all alone? Why have we been incapable of seeing that multiplicity of absences resulting from a person's disappearance?

"This problem about the circle of care [is a real issue]. These women must support each other to take care of their children. And since many of them cannot go out because they're primary caregivers, they care for other children while the other mothers go out to search. I don't think there's an analysis of that situation; we must admit it. And that's something we need to pay attention to."

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: María José Martínez, Redim

That is what psychologist Edith Escareño says, and she adds that caregivers should also be cared for.

"Ask them what they need, approach them to ask questions. Because that transmission is stuck. And institutions should do their job. Because there are assessments out there. The last training course organized by the Federal Executive Commission of Assistance to Victims several years ago was horrible. The reason was their conception of children as individuals without problems and concerns. We don't need welfare, but effective support. Institutions responsible for assistance to victims should have the human and financial resources they need to do the work.

We also need to launch a social call: How do we turn caring for children into a collective effort? Because they're left alone."

And how do we support those women "excluded from the signifier" of their own motherhood, as described by Argentinian psychologist and activist Laura Bonaparte, one of the founders of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, a woman whose three of her four children were disappeared?

"I know this is difficult to hear, but a mother ceases to exist if her son or daughter is no longer alive. It is that son or daughter who gives the mother a meaning. A mother whose son or daughter goes missing is expelled from that signifier. She ends up becoming a shadow of her former self. She is referred to as "the mother of the missing one" in a language that names her and deprives her of something at the same time. A language that erases everything she was and gives her a name for who she no longer is. That's the reason why I speak about the cruelty those despicable people have even managed to embed in our language."[32]

In her work as a psychologist, Escareño often participates in workshops and meetings with family members. She remembers several online meetings held recently both with children and

[32] Mary, C. 2010. Laura Bonaparte. Una Madre de Plaza de Mayo contra el olvido. Marea Editorial.

caregiving-searching mothers, where they were encouraged to talk about the fears, concerns and mutual blaming that affect them:

> *"A son of one of the participants attended a workshop, and at some point several mothers said they felt bad because 'We abandon them, we make the decision to join the searches, but who else is going to search for them if it's not us?'. And the boy told them, 'Yes, but you don`t know, you don't ask us about it, you just leave and we're left alone with our thoughts and feelings'. And he told them [the mothers participating in collectives], 'You have a space to cry and talk, we don't'.*
> *I was shocked to see mothers who also said, 'We don't have spaces to talk about our concerns about our children, the ones still here, or our grandchildren'. Because they're completely focused on the organization side, which is essential, but are unable to talk about it.*
> *And then you have the mutual blaming between children and caregivers, for not being able to deal with everything. That precarization, the changing roles, the mothers who must search. All of this grows in magnitude.*

Taking care of children to prevent them from going missing. Searching for girls gone missing, helping each other to bring them back. Taking care of teenagers to prevent them from being recruited. Taking care of all of them when their parents are absent because they are searching for somebody else. All of that is missing.

We should also consider that parents need our support so they can go out to search.

And in a country with more than 100,000 missing persons, with a State that has been a *"disappearer"*, it is essential to create those networks, to develop and strengthen bonds between us as a society. Otherwise, we will continue to fuel the cataracts of pain and destruction multiplied in every household in Mexico.

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Credit: Paula Mónaco Felipe

Caring, an important verb nowadays. In it there may be another way out.

Sebastián between burial pits and human remains found by the 6th National Search Brigade. Morelos, 2021.

Sebastián

Sebastián is standing next to a big hole on the ground. He watches the work of a bulldozer, that machine that in many places is used to build roads or houses but, in Mexico, has become an instrument to dig out buried, hidden bodies.

Others come and go, but Sebastián does not move. He is so focused that it would seem like he does not feel the relentless October sun in Cuautla, in the state of Morelos. He covers his arms with a long-sleeve white shirt and his head with a sun hat. He is also wearing thick fabric jeans and boots. Those clothes have become the uniform of those looking for clandestine burial pits.

Sebastián, 14, lives in Puebla and this is the first time he participates in a mass grave digging. Together with his Mom he joined the 6th National Search Brigade, a joint effort of families and organizations to venture into dangerous terrain he is not allowed to explore on his own. He looks focused and does not reveal his feelings. But his Mom, María Luisa Núñez Barojas, looks happy.

María Luisa is happy to hear what her son just told her: "Mom, Mom! See?

Sebastián and his mother, María Luisa, during the 6th National Search Brigade. Morelos, 2021. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

I found it! I helped to find a missing person, see? He may not be my brother, but he's somebody else's son, somebody else's brother. See, Mom? My life is useful, I'm useful." In Maria Luisa's eyes, in that precise instant, Sebastián has regained his essence, a part of him he had lost.

She is also happy to know her son finally understands her. He has stopped questioning her, he no longer says her missing son is her favorite or blames her for abandoning him for days at a time to search for his older brother.

Right in front of this clandestine grave in Cuautla, in October 2021, the relationship between Sebastián and her Mom is gradually being rebuilt.

"I like to play soccer and basketball, and when I'm at home and have free time or I'm alone I use my cellphone. I either look up information to clear up doubts I get at school or I watch YouTubers or funny videos.

Sometimes I just watch videos, for example, about the situation in Ukraine or current events. I also watch funny videos.
[At school] I don't have bad grades. I find English and physics more difficult. But I'm always first in Spanish, and I like mathematics. I'm learning. Also history. Those are my three favorite subjects.
I'd like to join the Navy.
I always liked it, ever since I was a child I liked the army and law enforcement.
The Navy is the one with the best training, and that's all I want to be able to defend my family. Before what happened to my brother, I already liked it because I wanted to defend others, innocent people unable to fend for themselves. And now, after what happened to my brother, to prevent more things like this from happening."

Sebastián speaks with a surprising level of equanimity and certainty. He expresses himself with precision and well-structured ideas, but also seeks to go beyond the questions: the underlying facts and complex issues he does not shy away from and which he even addresses with a provocative tone. For example, upon responding to an apparently simple question like "Who do you talk to?"

"And call me crazy, but I speak to myself when I'm alone, when I'm by myself, because my Mom goes to work. When I was alone because of what happened to Juan [his brother], my Mom left, and she abandoned me to some extent. But I understood, I understood.
I have realized that my Mom no longer knows me, she doesn't know me. She doesn't know what I like or which my favorite soccer team is. She doesn't know almost anything about me. She says I don't like to talk, but the reason for that is that my Mom thinks my things and my decisions are absurd, and that's what hurt me the most. Because of what happened to my brother, sometimes I would do things that were absurd to her, but they made sense to me, not to her, so I said, 'I'd better not tell her'".

Sebastián looks angry and hurt in many ways by the disappearance of his brother Juan de Dios, but also for everything his life has become since then. Because amid the urgency to search for their missing son, his parents lost track of the days; they wouldn't even stop to eat or rest. And at some point they stopped noticing that Sebastián and his other brother, David, were there. They took them to their hometown and asked their grandparents to take care of them in a rural community in the state of Puebla that unfortunately is trapped in what today is known as *zona huachicolera* ("a fuel theft zone").

And while Sebastián loves his grandparents and a cousin with whom he spent time there, he felt alone. He remembers the day his brother disappeared, the days full of uncertainty and the shock he experienced when they realized he had gone missing. This is how he describes those times:

"It's like the world turned completely gray for my family".

– 'While your brother was missing, was it always gray or were there some moments of joy? I don't know, birthdays, Christmas, parties. Were there moments where you forgot your brother was missing? Or you just couldn't forget? How was it?', we ask him.
– No, no. We could never, never, never forget. And we'll never forget. There were happy times, but that was all against a gray backdrop, a black background, because some smiles, especially mine, were false. I haven't really laughed in a long time, in more than one year. I faked those smiles, and they may seem real, but deep inside I was not laughing. It's like I didn't have a soul.
I smile a lot on the outside. I like to tell jokes, but only to make them feel good. My Mom has become stronger, everybody has become stronger, but you must always stay alert just in case. It may not be that [the fact that more persons are disappearing], but the death of somebody close to you, you need to be prepared, right? If everything comes crashing down, you need to be the last pillar to support the whole family, right?

Sebastián with a photo of his brother Juan de Dios. Puebla, March 18 2022. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

From ages 8 to 10, Sebastián felt he had to be the pillar of the family. He was not doing well in school and was getting bad grades, because he was unable to focus. He was also the victim of bullying due to his skin color, but he made the decision not to tell anyone. He would not tell his teachers, classmates or family. He built walls of silence.

He thought he just had to hold it back. And he made the decision not to cry and stay strong as a way of caring for his parents.

"After only a few years, I realized that if I broke down her [his Mom's] breakdown would be a lot worse. And my brother would also express his feelings openly. So I tend to hide my emotions. I don't know if they think it doesn't hurt me. It hurts me, but more than anything, I do it to resist, because sometimes I see my mom cry, and I need to stay strong, because if I break down nobody else will be able to console her.

At night I would sometimes cry until I fell asleep. But then I said, 'No, [I can't cry]', because if I broke down my Mom would break down, my Dad would break down, my brother would break down, my Grandma, everybody, everybody. And that's when I made the decision to be strong and prepare, prepare in case he was already dead or was found. I was already prepared."

His "preparation" can encompass many things. First, bearing the pain, because he did not have any certainty his brother Juan was dead: being strong as a survival strategy. And then an overexposure to the cruelest things: watching movies and series, looking up censored images and *narcovideos* with stories about dehumanization and torture. The possibilities of his brother's fate were many: being recruited by force by a drug cartel, losing his memory, being the victim of the horrible things he saw on those videos, becoming a homeless person, having lots of debts and not coming back out of fear that somebody would retaliate against his family.

Sebastián, who was 8 at the time, could not stop thinking:

"Yes, it was really tough.

Those years were really tough, because I didn't know anything. To some extent I had to lie to myself because my mind was already saying, my subconscious was telling me, 'He's dead, he cannot be taking that long'. But after the collective [La voz de los desaparecidos de Puebla ("The voice of the disappeared of Puebla")] was created, and hearing that others had waited for as long as seven years before they found their loved ones, I said, 'Yes, yes, he may be alive'.

And now that weight has been lifted off me.

Because I know he came back. He didn't come back the way we wanted, he didn't come back unharmed, his soul and his smile didn't come back... but he's back. I would have loved to find him

alive, I mean, my whole family would have loved it, but it's better that way, because I no longer have that doubt about where he is, how he is, or why, why him. I had all these doubts in my mind, and they wouldn't let me sleep. But all that is behind now that I have a place to visit him, to talk to him, to take his son to say hi to him, to talk to him.

Juan de Dios' body was found and positively identified in February 2022. That was one month before our conversation with Sebastián. He and his family are trying to absorb what happened, to figure out how they want to do things from now on and how to rebuild their bonds. The certainty of Juan de Dios' fate brought them some relief, but now they must deal with the aftermath as a family, a family undermined by four years and ten months of uncertainty, pain and a desperate search.

Fernando's portrait during the 6th National Search Brigade in the state of Morelos in 2021. Photo: Marañón-Núñez family archive.

María Luisa, his Mom, is very remorseful for what happened all these years. It was a void that began on April 28 2017, the day her son Juan de Dios went missing.

"I went out to search for him together with my dad, and I didn't even turn to see Sebastián and David. That day we left pretty early without even having breakfast, saying 'We'll be right back' or explaining to them that their brother had not come back.

And I came back home really late, almost at dusk. I don't remember seeing them, I don't remember seeing them that day or the next day. I didn't talk to them again. I didn't tell them what was really happening, that we were worried, I just didn't see them.

I don't remember if they were eating or not. I just left without having breakfast.

I focused on searching for my son like crazy, and I forgot about them. I never thought about it, I never took a moment to ask what they were thinking, what they were feeling, not to mention what they were suffering and how the situation was affecting them.

For them, as children, their brother was not the only one missing, their mom had also gone missing. I stopped paying attention to them, I stopped feeding them. They no longer went to school. I don't even remember how much time went by.

The disappearance of a son somehow becomes the center of your life, and we unwillingly disappear those who are left behind.

I didn't know how to find a balance between searching for one of them without neglecting or forgetting about the others.

María Luisa is extremely blunt, and so is Sebastián. She and her husband, Hugo Marañón, are litigating attorneys. Before Juan de Dios went missing they practiced law, but then everything collapsed.

Theirs is the story of thousands of families. They could not go back to work because they lost their energy and focus; they spent all their savings and more; they began fighting and having problems as a couple. "*But what hurts me the most is that the communication broke down.*" In the absence of news, they ran out of words, there was nothing left to say.

"The only image of my Mom I remember is one of her sitting on the stairs when we arrived. I was hoping they would tell me, 'He's here, he's here!', and she was hoping we would bring her good news –'We found him, he's back with us!' But we only stared at each other.
We didn't talk, we didn't talk. I didn't know what to tell my parents. I didn't know what to talk about with my husband. I didn't know what to tell my children. We didn't talk."

Hugo Marañón, a shy and very thoughtful man, says that "silence hurts". That is how he remembers the beginning of an almost 5-year loop:

"Those days were tough. We couldn't find the right words to explain things to them. I never thought about talking about it or explaining to them something I couldn't understand either.
The main problem is the disappearance, but the consequences are diverse. Everybody's feelings change, the way of seeing life life changes, and the family's relationships change.
The part I find most difficult is that of learning how to live, feel and laugh again, without thinking that you're disrespecting him [the missing person].
My biggest concern is the long-term impact this could have on my children's personal life, on their life as a couple once they have a spouse, and also with their children.
I'm hoping this won't affect them anymore so they can learn how to laugh, how to be happy."

Sebastián is slender; he has an athletic body and a strong implacable gaze. A tough face that changes completely when she smiles.

He grabs his mom's cellphone and then his own cellphone to show the many ways he searched for his brother. He shows images of protests, a sit-in with crosses in the background, and another time they made rag dolls. Images showing him at age 8 and in other moments until he turned 14, his current age.

He liked to join his Mom, a fierce fighter from the organization *La voz de los desaparecidos de Puebla*. In the beginning he would ask María Luisa, his mom, for permission to join the searches, but she wouldn't let him. She takes advantage of the opportunity to make a recommendation to other mothers:

"Don't exclude them, let them get involved and join at an early age so they're prepared, because excluding them will only affect them even more."

In fact, neither Fernando nor the rest of the girls, boys and adolescents who provided testimonies for this report know it, but in theory article 138 of the General Law on Forced Disappearance, establishes that in their capacity as "family members", they have the right to:

“It’s like the world turned completely gray for my whole family”.

"I. Provide support and be timely informed of search actions implemented by the competent authorities to find the Missing Person; II. Suggest actions to be carried out by the competent authority as part of search programmes and procedures, and express their opinions regarding measures suggested or planned by said authorities. (...) V. Have access to information about assistance and support measures, particularly those that facilitate their participation in search actions, including psychosocial support; VI. Benefit from protection programmes or actions to protect their physical and emotional integrity implemented or promoted by the National Search Commission before the competent authorities”, (among other rights).

Sebastián remembers his first experience at a burial pit, a search in the city of Cuautla. He says he was not that impressed, because he expected to do more, to have more action. But he liked the fact of meeting people, listening to their experiences, attending “awareness raising” talks and learning “to put himself in other people’s shoes”.

When his mom invited him to join that first search he was hesitant about it, because he did not want to miss his online classes. So, even though he had Internet access, he preferred to participate in the brigade instead of connecting to his online classes.

The interview with him is over, but we can still hear Sebastian and Maria Luisa laughing while we interview his Dad. They are in another room playing UNO.

Sebastián with his Mom, Maria Luisa and Hugo, his dad. Puebla, March 18 2022. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

The right to search

Fernando and Sebastián are two searching children who have been on the ground, seen burial pits and been to that place many times. That is also the case of Rosa Alexandra Castro, a 15-year-old and the youngest member of *Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte*, a group from Sinaloa. She is searching for her father, Bladimir Castro Flores, who went missing in 2013. And she has also combed the hills with a shovel and a pickax for several years.

During a press interview she basically repeats Fernando's words to explain how she feels every time she finds a body: "*I feel happy every time another missing person's body is found, because that means they will go back to their families, who will have a place to bring them flowers, and rest in peace."*[33]

Mario Vergara, a searcher and the brother of a missing person, says that "hundreds of children go out to search using rustic tools". He says he has seen them in Tijuana, Mazatlán and the states of Veracruz and Guerrero.

Photo/Miguel Tovar

> *"I've seen many children in this country dragging a shovel, asking their Mom if the person found buried there is their dad. It's something horrible. Many people say children shouldn't participate in searches, but that's the situation we're living in Mexico: children waiting for their dads, they know their dad hasn't come back and they ask where he is. He hasn't come back, so they need to go out to search."*

Those children are hoping to find their dad, and you can see the joy on their face. They don't even know the world or the country we live in. Maybe the world they see is different as a result of their innocence.

There are children and adolescents walking those convoluted paths. We don't know how many they are, and we have barely listened to them, which is even worse.

Psychologist Edith Escareño is concerned about "adults now telling their children, 'When I die, you'll have to search for me'", because that type of pressure can be dangerous. But she also admits that the phenomenon is already here, it occurs, and "It's not necessarily harmful. It's not bad as long as they receive support."

Andrés Díaz began reflecting, based on his observations, about other alternatives to approach the reality of searching children:

[33] Bautista, A. February 16 2022. Rastrea a su papa desde niña. El Heraldo de México.

"The question is what the best interest of the child means vs. the right to search and be searched for. Because it doesn't necessarily mean joining brigades with a shovel and a pickax. If a girl or a boy expresses his or her interest in participating, they should be allowed to do so. There are no limitations or regulations, but it [that right] must coexist with other rights. Searches not only require a pickax and a shovel, they can also require reading materials, dockets, observations. The question is how to address the fact that children are leading the struggles related to searches."

In the above-mentioned report on the psychosocial effects of the Ayotzinapa case, a team of experts explained the effect of disappearances and those waits on children and adolescents:

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: María José Martínez / Redim

*"It's a complicated mourning process, considering that absence cannot be seen as a definitive loss, because they face the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to their missing family member or if he or she is dead or alive, because there is no information to confirm any of the two possibilities. **While adults join searches, children live a permanent wait.**"*[34]

A wait that bogs you down, bogs you down.

Studies carried out in Argentina with victims of military dictatorships –referred to in the Ayotzinapa report– show that children face the dilemma "of the melancholy caused by the loss or finding a way out by giving absences a meaning."

Therefore, allowing them to join the searches, which is what they're asking for (or doing directly) and supporting them in different ways can facilitate their transition in these times without time.
But we haven't figured out how to do that yet: we need to do that.

[34] Antillón Najlis, X., Cortez Corona, O., Escareño Granados, E., González Marín A., Mora Bayo, M., Díaz Taboada, J.R., Ríos Cortázar, V., Tolentino Mayo, M.L., Gómez Melgarejo, R.A., Nava Lozano, G., Ruiz Tovar, A., Landaverde Martínez, A. 2018. Yo sólo quería que amaneciera. Impactos Psicosociales del Caso Ayotzinapa. Fundar, Centro de Análisis e Investigación A.C. https://fundar.org.mx/mexico/pdf/InformeAyotziFin.pdf

Speaking and keeping quiet

Rubí is searching for her aunt. Mexico City, March 5, 2022. Photo: Miguel Tovar.

Rubí and Emiliano

Rubi, 4, is still learning to talk, and *missing* is one of the first words she learned to say.

And *missing* is the status of Claudia Morales, her aunt, who disappeared before she was born, on August 16 2016. And Rubí's Mom, Nayeli Téllez Vargas, has not stopped searching for her a single day. Protest marches, rallies, sit-ins: Rubí goes everywhere with her. Like today, a sunny day of March 2022 when, next to other activists, they are attending the reopening of the Roundabout of the Women who Fight, on Reforma avenue in Mexico City.

"–'Where's your aunt?', I ask Rubí.
–I love her. Away from home. She's alive."

That is the extent of her words, a few, because she is still a baby. She has almond-shaped black eyes. Her black hair is tied in two buns that look like round antennas. A pink T-shirt, a silver color little bracelet and her little hands holding a photo of Claudia, her aunt. She looks at the camera with a serious face.
During the conversation she says she and her mom sometimes feel sad.

"–Is there something you want to tell me?
–About my mom.
–What do you want to tell me?
–My mom searches for missing persons.
–Your Mom searches for missing persons. And you like that?
–Yes.
–Why?
–My Mom will find them."

While Rubí is running around, without taking her eyes off her, Nayeli, her mother, says she does not talk much but she likes to sing. And she adds that she knows by heart the anthem of the collective *La voz de los desaparecidos de Puebla*, of which she is a member, that she sings it with pleasure and shouts its slogans.

"She's with me all the time. I'm a single mother, I live alone, my mom is very old and I cannot leave her with my mom. Rubí was born after she went missing. She didn't get to meet her, but I talk to her about my sister, her aunt. My sister literally became my mom, because I lived with her and she looked after me.

[Rubí] didn't understand, so I had to talk to her. I told her we were going [to a protest] because I'm searching for my sister, her aunt. Children must be told the truth. I told her she had gone out and bad men had taken her away, because she was in the street. She has seen me cry, she sees me when I talk to my sister, to her photo, and she hugs me. And that's what I believe encourages her to become part of this pain, I don't know, of continuing the struggle of searching for my sister."

Nayeli's eyes, which do not stop looking at Rubí, are just like her daughter's –almond-shaped and black. She has nice eye makeup. Her hair is tied up in a big green bow. And she laughs a lot. She looks strong, but she is also sad, behind the typical veil of those searching for others: with something dead inside.

We talk about the decision to talk or remain silent when someone goes missing, what to say and what not to say, if she thinks it is better to hide things to protect themselves.

"We need to make them understand that there are good people and bad people everywhere. And also that she should not leave with strangers or do what they say. Because she, at some point, God forbids, could be in danger and she may

have to yell. She should be aware of the danger she faces. As a woman, as a girl, she'll grow up, and all women are exposed to that danger.

That`s the way I see it. I may be wrong, but I feel I need to tell her the truth.

I don't think I'm doing anything wrong. On the contrary, I'm teaching her what life is all about. Why lie to her or sugarcoat things?

I need to teach her she cannot expect things to fall from the sky or somebody to do something for us, the family members. Teach her that she must fight for what she wants. I want my sister back, and that's what I'm fighting for.

Nayeli is not only sharing an opinion; she speaks from her own experience. Firmly but without losing her warmth. And when she hugs Rubí, her daughter, the two of them smile.

From Chihuahua, where violence, killings and disappearances have occurred for decades, Gabino Gómez says that speaking up or remaining silent can have a strong impact on children. He adds that in his work as an agrarian leader and ever since CEDHEM was created in 2005, they have seen the different impacts that can have:

"We've had two types of experiences. One where we hide information about disappearances from children and they're told, 'Your dad is traveling, your dad is in the US, he will call, he hasn't been able to call', and another where we tell them what actually happened. They are two completely different attitudes. We learned that from the psychosocial support sessions for the first families that joined us. We followed up on the children who attended them and those who didn't. I still remember a young man who refused to attend and another who did.

The young man who attended is now married and has a family. He developed, quote unquote, normally. He currently works and has a family. The other one, who is also a young person, is now married but has serious addictions."

We have learned that you can hide the truth from them, but they know, they know. They end up telling you they already knew, because they can access that information in many different ways, for example, through social media.

It's essential to support them so that, from the very first moment, they're aware of the situation they are immersed in, that they're the victims."

Repercussions, trust, truths, a situation consistent with what the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) stated and documented in their recommendation No. 87:

"The transgenerational impacts of disappearances and the situation of the children of missing persons are particularly concerning. Multiple testimonies included references to cases of depression and suicide. As affirmed by a grandmother: 'My grandchildren cannot understand that their parents were disappeared. They're convinced that they abandoned them. This makes them feel hopeless, it's like they're not from this world anymore [...] My 11-year-old grandson has joined organized crime. He thinks he will be able to get information about his parents from them. I'm desperate. The children of missing persons are the system's forgotten children.'"

And if the children of missing persons are *forgotten*, the situation of missing persons' sisters, grandchildren, nephews and nieces is even worse. For them, who are often believed not to have been affected directly, there are no public policies, even though the General Law on Forced Disappearance of Persons considers them "family members" by consanguinity or affinity "in an ascending or descending line without limitation of grade, in a transversal line, up to the fourth degree" (which also includes spouses and domestic partners).

And despite the existence of the law, the general situation is also one of abandonment by institutions, which are overwhelmed. In 2018 a group of non-government organizations and collectives of

victims reported that "there is not a policy with a psychosocial approach to support the families of victims of disappearances, not to mention a specific approach to work with children and adolescents, even though that is provided for in the General Victims' Law."[35]

During our interview with Rubí, the 4-year-old walking next to her Mom searching for her aunt, we hear Emiliano's voice in the background. He is 5, only one year older. He is running around but does not go too far. At times he sits next to her, paying close attention to her friend's interview. As soon as the conversation with Rubí is over, he approaches us and says, *I, I want to. Is it my turn? Is it my turn?*

Emiliano is eager to talk.

He is a boy with dark golden skin and hazel eyes. His hair is straight and perfectly cut. He wears a wine-colored shirt, jeans and little boots. You can tell he is mischievous, but once he sits down for the interviewer his gestures change completely. He becomes serious and even introverted. He wants to talk but, at the same time, there is something that makes him feel uncomfortable, a contradiction.

While he speaks, Emiliano holds a photo of his Dad, Juan de Dios Núñez, who went missing in the state of Puebla when Emiliano was only a few months old. His absence, which extended for more than four years, has now taken a different form: his father's body was found and properly buried in February this year. That was a couple of weeks before our interview.

Now his gaze takes on an intensity difficult to counter. The conversation consists of only a few words because he is only 5. And he tells us about his Dad:

"They took him away.
Some bad men did it.
He's in heaven now.
I like to carry my dad's photo, because I like it.
They call me 'Little Juan'."

They call him Little Juan because he looks a lot like his father, the one in the photo. The one he did not get to know, the one who went missing and is now in the cemetery in a grave with many flowers. Emiliano brought him flowers and a beer.

He says his father's body was at the Prosecutor's Office and he was found by his grandmother, Maria Luisa. Today he came to the capital with her to join a protest. She cares for him two weekends a month.

"–Now that you know that your dad is no longer missing, that he died, how do you feel?
–Well.
–Better?
–Yes.
–Because you're not sad anymore?
–Because I found my dad."

Emiliano experiences some sort of relief when he says his dad is now in the cemetery. Something in his gaze reflects more calmness, he is less alert.

He is in kindergarten now. He says that his favorite activity at school is going to the playground. The seesaw is his favorite.

[35] CEDEHM, Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres A.C; CEPAD, Centro de Justicia para la Paz y el Desarrollo A.C.; Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios A.C.; CADHAC, Ciudadanos en Apoyo a los Derechos Humanos A.C., CMDPDH, Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos A.C., FUNDENL, Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en Nuevo León, Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho A.C., REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México. 2018. Este sexenio tiene los más altos índices de desaparición de niños, niñas y adolescentes; México sin políticas públicas eficaces para asistir a esta población. https://cmdpdh.org/2018/04/este-sexenio-tiene-los-mas-altos-indices-de-desaparicion-de-ninos-ninas-y-adolescentes-mexico-sin-politicas-publicas-eficaces-para-asistir-a-esta-poblacion/

Silence, and then what?

Psychologist Edith Escareño remembers that at the clandestine graves in Tetelcingo, Morelos, the authorities of the State Victims' Assistance Commission (CEAV) were horrified when they saw family members bringing their children with them. And she adds:

"Why do we show them the most horrible side of the world? Because this is a horrible world. The question is how to present it, without creating a paralyzing effect.

She is an expert in the field of psychology, but not only in its theory; she has also helped many missing persons' relatives and is a member of *Espacio Psicosocial por los Derechos Humanos*, a group of psychologists, social workers and anthropologists. Based on her trajectory, Escareño recommends the following:

"[We should speak up], because silence is stronger.

A disappearance is not something easy to digest. He's not here, but he didn't die, and if he didn't die, where can he be? And because you cannot digest it, information becomes the only vehicle, considering the family was not responsible for the disappearance. And dialogue is essential to achieve results. We should allow ourselves to be touched by the questions children ask.

It's important to understand that disappearance is a ghost present all the time. It's the new bogeyman: I get lost and you cannot find me, I'll leave and I'm not coming back. And that's when children are brought to the psychologist. We have patients with nightmares and really afraid of all of that."

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: María José Martínez / Redim

We can see our daughters' pale face if they cannot find us in the park. We find them crying under the table if it takes us two minutes longer than expected to come back. From the moment they learn to talk, Mexican children cry because they are afraid somebody will go missing.

We may still need more research in the fields of psychology and social psychology, but Edith Escareño does not hesitate when asked about how disappearances have affected children and adolescents in Mexico:

> *"Significantly. At our private consultations, they tell us they're afraid their parents will go missing and not come back. And seeing that circle of terror directly is brutal.*
> *In these contexts of continuous war, we should be able to figure out, for example, the causes behind children's suicides and the pressure they experience. Violence is having a big impact at a distance, geographically and over time".*

The question is what to do about it.

We need to move away from adult centrism, a term we repeat a lot. But what does that mean in this case and in terms of concrete actions?

Edith Escareño says:

> *"As a society, we hadn't paid close attention to them, but we hear these cries for help in the searches they're conducting. They're already here, so what should we do?*
>
> *What we can do is look into it a little more, in more detail. We must move away from adult centrism to be able to listen to them. We need to see them as individuals. They can make decisions regarding the searches, convince their moms and join search parties. With the knowledge they have, they can help other children."*

There is a heavy silence around children and adolescents.

Fernando, Sebastián, Valentina, Monse and Jade say they prefer not to talk about the disappearances they live, suffer or carry on their shoulders. They may do it with their families, in their households, but never with neighbors or friends (unless they are best friends).

They do not talk about it at school either. They have not been offered classes or workshops that address current forms of violence such as disappearances. They do not talk about the things they are going through and know well, the elephant in the room.

We used the National Transparency Platform to ask the Ministry of Public Education if there is a subject, seminar, workshop or content to address the issue.

By means of official letter No. DGANCLyT/UT/62397/2022, and after having consulted its different branches, the Ministry of Education responded that:

- At the preschool level, "the current curriculum does not include any content related to the disappearance of persons."
- In the case of primary education there is a subject: civic and ethics education. "In the case of basic education programmes, specifically for primary education, the culture of peace, which opposes all forms of violence, is proactively promoted as established in article 3 of the Constitution". They also affirmed that, for that reason, they work to ensure that children and adolescents are "recognized as rights holders" and "participate in the promotion of a culture of peace". And while human rights and the right to be protected from any form of ill-treatment, abuse or exploitation are addressed in fourth, fifth and sixth grades, the words "disappeared" or "disappearance" are not mentioned. The only term used is that of "sexual abuse and violence". The History subject in fourth grade, on the contrary, encourages teachers to address the question "How is violence currently lived in our country? What are its causes?"

- In the case of secondary education, “The current curriculum does not include any content related to the disappearance of persons”.
- In the case of middle-higher education, "There is not a subject, seminar, talk or content that provides general information, statistics or detailed information about the disappearance of persons". However, a document attached to their letter (Memorandum 220(02)035/2022) states that during the 2021-2022 school year, from February 1 to 4 and 21 to 25, they addressed the issue of “disappearance of persons” in the hybrid system as part of an extra-curricular campaign.
- In the case of preparatory education, “they did not find any documents with the characteristics indicated”.

It is rather obvious that Mexican schools lack a comprehensive approach to address the disappearance of persons in Mexico, a country with more than 100,000 persons missing where approximately 8 girls, boys and adolescents go missing every day.

The issue is not covered in the mandatory curricula for secondary and middle-higher education, a stage during which Mexican adolescents become victims of disappearance and are generally more vulnerable, as shown by statistics.

Nothing about it is said in a country with 36,518,712 students, between public and private schools, according to official data (SEP, 2020). More than 36 million opportunities missed. More than 36 million possibilities to raise awareness, provide support, protect and prevent.

But nothing about it is said. Mexican schools remain silent about the issue. After their visit to Mexico, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances made reference to children in two of their 117 recommendations:

54. In addition, the State party must urgently implement a broad national information and awareness raising campaign that reaches all the sectors of the population and, among other aims, counters the stigmatization victims face on a daily basis.

55. The campaign must disseminate, including in schools and through the most widely used media outlets, clear and accessible messages about disappearances, mechanisms available to address them, their results and challenges.[36]

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: María José Martínez / Redim

[36] ONU, Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada, Informe del Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada sobre su visita a México al amparo del artículo 33 de la Convención. https://hchr.org.mx/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Informe-de-visita-a-MX-del-Comite-contra-la-Desaparicion-Forzada-abril-2022.pdf

Valentina, the 10-year-old girl searching for her uncle in Coahuila, believes these topics should be discussed in schools:

"I think we should, because all of this issue about disappearances is an important topic, and also to be careful with everything".

Sebastián, the child-adolescent who hid his feelings to support his family for almost five years, preferred not to talk about the disappearance of his brother Juan de Dios either. Initially he said he did not have an opinion about the need for that discussion in classrooms, but then he changes his mind:

"Yes, especially in secondary school, because kids in primary school would laugh about it.

It would be great, but the issue should be only addressed with certain people, with students who you know are mature and will be receptive, because the rest, in my opinion, are very childish. Maybe it would be necessary to wait until they become a little more mature. I was forced to mature very quickly due to the situation.

[Some of them] are still very childish. They talk and laugh about that problem [the war] in Ukraine without knowing that people are dying, thousands of children have lost their parents and children are dying. They only think about the things they see on the Internet, memes and videos, but they don't know. If they knew the real reasons, maybe they wouldn't laugh, but you may also rob them of a part of their childhood, because they laugh about everything. And that's the good part, to a certain degree, of secondary education. You don't care about anything."

Psychologist Escareño says the following:

"What kind of training is the SEP, an important government agency –considering these children go to school– providing to support these girls, boys, adolescents and families? They don't need a special treatment; they just need to understand what's happening.
We should convince them to talk about these issues. That has already been done, to some extent, in the case of sexual abuse.
Create safe spaces where children can speak about what's happening. And also, in certain geographies, consider the fear experienced by teachers."

Speaking up would seem to be a crucial step to overcome this dark and gray present, as Monse and Sebastián, two of the children featured in this report, call it. We need to talk about it because, if the issue of missing persons continues to be seen as something that does not affect us, that pertains to others, that only helps to justify violence.

"As if it is only happening to others and each photo only represents another missing person that does not matter," says Monse while she searches for her sister amid that indifferent world of names we no longer read and faces we no longer remember.

We erase them when we decide not to look at them.

At the time of writing of this essay, the number of persons missing in Mexico had reached 100,000. A couple of weeks later the number had increased to 100,515, 16,589 of whom were girls, boys and adolescents. They went missing. How many others are still submerged in pain, absence and loneliness? How can we bring them back from this dark present into a happier world?

Doors will be necessary to help them find a way out.
We need to look for them. Find them.
And if they don't exist, create them.

Girls, boys and adolescents participate in the Mother's Day protest. Mexico City, 2022 Photo: María José Martínez / Redim

Conclusions

Fourteen girls, boys and adolescents go missing in Mexico every day. And while 8 out of 10 missing persons are found, 1,896 of those who went missing in 2021 have not been found yet. But the number of persons affected by this situation is significantly higher: thousands have seen –and continue to see– their lives impacted, darkened, turned gray by the disappearance of a loved one.

This is how they describe their present: gray and dark. And that is how Fernando, Sebastián, Monse, Jade, Valentina, Emiliano and Rubí describe it. We went there to meet them, ask questions, hear directly from them how disappearances affect missing persons' siblings, nephews and nieces; children and adolescents who experience the absence of a loved family member. Those who are absent are not the only ones missing, Mexican children say with an increasingly louder voice. I am also a victim, they say. And they force us to rethink that category: who does the word victim refer to and who should it refer to today? Only the missing person?

There is a broad concept in the law to refer to victims, but in everyday life only the missing person's children, partners and parents are seen as victims. But the children and adolescents consulted tell us they are not receiving the support they need.

How many children are in the same situation? If we use the number of 100,000 persons missing to do a calculation, we can conclude there are hundreds of thousands of girls, boys and adolescents who are also victims, touched by the darkness resulting from the disappearance of a loved one.

If we consider that, according to the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI), in 2020 there was a total of 35,219,141 households, assuming each missing person lived in a different household, one out of 352 households in the country could have a family member missing. In addition, if we assume that there is at least one child per household, one out of 352 girls, boys and adolescents experiences the reality of a disappearance in his/her own home.

But these are only estimates. There are no accurate statistics; they simply do not exist: there is not a specific census of these children. But this exercise can be a first step to move in that direction, to think about them, to name them, to listen to them. To look at those children who experience the absence of their parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, who live in empty, silent homes, sitting alone around a table at breakfast time, with nobody to check their homework or buy groceries, taking care of the house, taking care of themselves. Girls, boys and adolescents left alone because their relatives rush out to search for those who went missing. Trying to move ahead, although that sadness is also theirs.

"I lost my sister and my mom too", they say. "My mom won't even look at me. It's like I'm also kind of missing."

Disappearances multiply in households in Mexico and their impact is exacerbated in schools, schools of silence, where nobody talks about them. They are thousands of children growing up on their own, at times abandoned, who feel like they are invisible.

In the process of losing track of their children, of looking for a missing family member without the help of other adults, we find the ripple effect created by disappearances on children, concrete, palpable effects tantamount to what, in theory, is considered a felony or a crime against mankind. It is in this darkness that invades their lives that we can find the true extent of those words.

And we also find that, despite their loneliness and sadness, they manage to find the colors missing in their lives. Fernando, Sebastián, Monse, Jade, Valentina, Rubí and Emiliano are searchers. And all of them are active. They participate in different forms and work hard to contribute to the searches for their loved ones.

They participate in protests. They carry photos. They coordinate efforts on social media, a world they know quite well. They comb hills with a shovel and a pickax, looking for clandestine burial pits. Those who grow amid absences thus find a way to feel useful, spend time with their families and make a contribution with their efforts.

They want adults to listen to them, to let them participate, and tell them "not to exclude children, but let them participate" in search processes.

Thanks to the research presented here we also identified current data and new forms of approaching the issue of missing children deprived of liberty and their right to life.

In 2021, children and adolescents went missing in all Mexican states, although the largest numbers correspond to the State of Mexico, Tamaulipas and Jalisco. Those three states account for 40% of the cases; four out of ten girls, boys and adolescents have disappeared there.[37]

80% of missing children and adolescents are found, which is a high percentage compared to missing adults. But there is an important aspect: we do not know what happens while they are missing and, therefore, there is little we can do to prevent that number from increasing. And it is here that we also find an area where it is urgent to produce and disseminate more information.

Despite this obstacle, statistics are shedding more light on who the victims are: the vast majority are adolescents, more women than men at the national level, although in some states the trend is the opposite (for example, in the states of Jalisco and Nayarit).

We are also beginning to identify some of the ways in which they go missing, and reality is dispelling myths, because it does not always happen at night or in lonely streets. And it is important to pay attention to the way people live in those communities where more girls, boys and adolescents have been and are still going missing. They grow up amid poverty, marginalization and few opportunities for the future. They drop out of school or do not even enroll in it (close to two million girls, boys and adolescents). They grow up amid deprivation, a situation that, without a doubt, makes them more vulnerable and often the target of human trafficking and recruitment by criminal organizations.

In the quest to understand how, when and why children go missing, we see the emergence of a new category: the so-called "intermittent disappearance" and, once again, a reason for disappearing that we already know and must continue to analyze: disappearing to run away from violence.

Some of the missing children and adolescents who are later found reveal they ran away to escape the reality they lived in, which poses a complex problem: how can we protect them if the danger they face is within their own household, neighborhood or community? To prevent this problem, it is necessary to address, to a large degree, those structural causes.

As far as the disappearance of children and adolescents is concerned, on the other hand, we can conclude that, in general terms, progress has been made in recent years from the standpoint of increased access to quantitative data and statistics. In this regard, it is also important to mention the efforts of the RNPDNO, which still faces the challenge of increasing the number of variables reported by those responsible for providing information.

[37] REDIM, Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México. June 30, 2022 Niñez desaparecida en México. https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/indicadores.redim/viz/NiezdesaparecidaenMexico/Desaparecidas

Because, after a series of consultations with different authorities and experts, we found that when girls, boys and adolescents are reported missing or found, important details about their captivity or the perpetrators are not reported; the same applies to possible acts of violence experienced by those children while they were missing. There is very little information about it despite the existence of a form that contains almost 400 checkboxes the authorities can use every time a new case is reported. It is essential not to close investigations once a child is found, because that prevents us from gaining access to information about the dynamic and motive of the disappearance, and contributes to impunity in these cases. That is, without a doubt, an area of improvement.

It is urgent to increase the amount of quantitative data and continue to collect qualitative information that search and justice administration officials find in their everyday work. Statistical data and accounts of people working in the field, participating in search commissions and non-government organizations, shed light on this issue.

And we must continue to design strategies to find people alive, because data shows a higher percentage of children and adolescents are found compared to adults, but also because, as stated by Elvira, Elliot's grandmother, who went missing in Guanajuato, bodies of persons under the age of 17 are not found in clandestine burial pits.

An area where undeniable progress has been made is that of legal instruments and search guidelines with a focus on the particular characteristics of children. One particular tool is the Additional Protocol to Search for Missing Children and Adolescents (PABNNA),[38] approved in 2021. Given its recent approval, it is too early to evaluate it, especially because not many officials have been trained compared to the total universe. However, all the persons consulted for this report agree on the importance of: 1) spreading the word about its existence and its possibilities; 2) training more government officials and the general population; 3) harmonizing the different mechanisms available.

After having listened to children, experts, activists and government officials, we have concluded that the current scenario is complex. We are talking about an increasingly dark and gray scenario, but also one where many girls, boys and adolescents are trying to bring more light and color. They are beacons we need to watch and follow. Because in the process of searching for their loved ones, they are figuring out ways to fight back and move ahead while contributing to the construction of a better, fairer and happier world. As adults, we have an opportunity to support their efforts.

[38] Gobierno de México, Diario Oficial de la Federación, 6 de octubre de 2020, Protocolo Adicional para la Búsqueda de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, PABNNA. https://www.gob.mx/sipinna/documentos/protocolo-adicional-para-la-busqueda-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-panna-sistema-nacional-de-busqueda-de-personas

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this and previous studies carried out by REDIM, we make the following recommendations:

- Create context analysis units in all specialized Prosecutor's Offices and Local Search Commissions;

- Include Local Search Commissions in state Amber Alert coordination mechanisms, and the National Search Commission in the National Committee of the Amber Alert Programme, so that those institutions can issue Amber Alerts without having to wait for the corresponding Prosecutor's Office to do so.

– Increase training for all authorities involved in the application of the Additional Protocol to Search for Children and Adolescents, through the use of distance learning and in-person tools (where necessary), in addition to allocating sufficient human and financial resources for initial and continuous training;

- Implement mass campaigns to share information and promote the use of the Additional Protocol to Search for Children and Adolescents, targeted to children, adolescents and their families, especially in rural, indigenous and migrant communities and other marginalized and discriminated-against groups;

- Harmonize the three protocols for missing children and adolescents (PABNNA, Amber Alert and Alba Protocol) to avoid duplicating actions and procedures.

-

Develop guidelines for the participation of girls, boys and adolescents in search operations to find their family members, allowing their involvement in a friendly manner that is also respectful of their best interest and their right to participation, according to their age.

- Include the issue of missing persons and, in particular, the situations and risks faced by girls, boys and adolescents, in the contents covered by the Ministry of Public Education, with the aim of creating opportunities for dialogue and bringing attention to the issue. Also, train teachers through the use of tools designed to help them with a more targeted approach;

- Take a census or carry out a statistical study to identify the number of girls, boys and adolescents with missing family members;

- Develop and disseminate content to prevent the stigmatization of adolescents by authorities and society. Raise awareness of the realities faced by missing adolescents;

- Develop comprehensive care strategies to address cases of intermittent or repeated disappearance of girls, boys and adolescents, led by the Prosecutors' Offices for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, including psychosocial support both for children and their families, as well as educational and social reintegration options.

- Provide training for data entry officials at the RNPDNO to help them understand the importance of filling out all the items required in reports on disappearances and persons found, with

the aim of having more accurate information for purposes of assessment, identification of patterns and design of prevention policies;

- Inform the population (and entities or bodies responsible) that missing person reports can be filed through different channels (formal complaints, reports, calls), that filing a report with the Public Prosecutor is not necessary, and the corresponding information and cases will be handled in a comprehensive fashion;

- Develop a guide on good childrearing practices specifically targeted at searching families, including support and orientation tools to reconcile searching and care tasks, in a way that prioritizes the healthy development and well-being of girls, boys and adolescents, and taking into consideration their best interest and their right to family life.

- Improve the operational capacity and policy of SIPINNA and its Commission to end all forms of violence against children and adolescents (COMPREVNNA) with the aim of addressing the serious crisis of violence and improving the implementation of public policies to ensure children's survival and dignified life.

- Evaluate the operation of current protocols to address violence and provide shelter for children and adolescents running away from violence and risks within their households or communities, for whom living in those spaces poses a danger. Adapt the Public Prosecutor's the DIF system's mechanisms so they have appropriate spaces, support and specialized approaches to support children running away from violence.

- Promote legislative harmonization for the recognition of child victims, in addition to promoting the collection of disaggregated information on child victims, once the "direct" victims have received appropriate support, with the objective of formulating public policies in the areas of education and mental health to support children experiencing missing family member contexts.

- Promote a public dialogue around the idea of “victims” in a broad sense, that is, the fact that the children of missing persons are not the only ones affected by their absence. Include, listen to and make efforts to support the hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents in that situation.

We also draw on the following recommendations made by the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances to the Mexican State in the *Report of the Committee on Forced Disappearance’s Visit to Mexico.*[39]

52. The Committee highlights the urgency for authorities to establish agile, interoperative, efficient and transparent mechanisms to submit to the National Registry of Disappeared and Unaccounted-for Persons, as well as state record keeping mechanisms, detailed and up-to-date information, to avoid duplicated information and correct errors in data entered.

53. The Committee considers a priority that the National Registry of Disappeared and Unaccounted-for Persons is permanently kept up-to-date by all the competent institutions in order to identify, in a transparent and reliable manner, those cases where there is suspicion of involvement of public officials, individuals or groups of individuals acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, that clearly point to cases of forced disappearance. The process of keeping information up to date must be combined with periodic analyses to adapt the National Policy to the changing reality.

[39] ONU, Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada, Informe del Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada sobre su visita a México, CED/C/R.9

54. In addition, the State party must urgently implement a broad national information and awareness raising campaign that reaches all the sectors of the population and, among other aims, counters the stigmatization victims face on a daily basis.

55. The campaign must disseminate, including in schools and through the most widely used media outlets, clear and accessible messages about disappearances mechanisms available to address them, their results and challenges.

56. The information and awareness raising campaign should also have an international reach in order to spread information about the situation faced by the Mexican society as a whole and sharing lessons learned.

65. The State party must develop a comprehensive training programme on disappearances that includes continuous and coordinated training processes and ensures the appropriation of national and international institutional, legal and normative frameworks related to disappearances and the fight against impunity. This programme should promote the use of existing tools, such as the Standardized Protocol to Search for Disappeared and Unaccounted-for Persons and the Standardized Protocol for the Investigation of Crimes of Forced Disappearance and Disappearance Perpetrated by Private Individuals; the Amber Alert; the Alba Protocol; the Additional Protocol to Search for Missing Children and Adolescents; guides to search for persons, searches with a gender perspective, and context analysis during the search phase, as well as for the use of habeas corpus or a so-called *amparo buscador* (the order of a judge to another authority to present a person in their custody and provide information about him/her).

74. In view of the above, the Committee recommends the State party to guarantee access by the victims, on an equal footing, to searches, justice, truth and redress, in addition to reviewing, where applicable, the distribution of competencies between the federation and federal bodies or agencies responsible for providing assistance to victims.

75. Within this context, the State party must take into account and address the specific needs of victims, with a differential approach. The State should also address the causes of existing obstacles, including through prevention and anti-discrimination campaigns.

109. The Committee urges the State party to adopt comprehensive prevention measures to address and combat the causes of the disappearance of persons with the aim of eradicating it. From this perspective, it must take into account the context analyses conducted during search and investigation processes, with the aim of identifying risk factors, patterns and criminal practices. From the same perspective, federal and state authorities must strengthen the analysis of information related to persons found alive (profile, time elapsed between their disappearance and the moment they were found, the circumstances in which they were found, etc.).

111. The Committee reiterates its recommendations[31] and urges the State party to: a) facilitate immediate access by any competent authority to all records of detention and persons deprived of liberty, especially search commissions; b) create a unified registry of all persons deprived of liberty, including those in immigration detention centers, which must be comprehensive, reliable, up-to-date and confidential, including control and supervision mechanisms to give certainty regarding its information; and c) establish effective controls for the registration of persons deprived of liberty in private institutions such as hospitals, psychiatric residences, day centers, detoxification and rehabilitation centers for drug users, assistance institutions, and alternative care for children and adolescents and persons with disabilities. These controls should include a census of said institutions and records of the persons housed in them.