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## **Extortion: The Backbone of Criminal Activity in Latin America**

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**EXTORTION:  
THE BACKBONE OF  
CRIMINAL ACTIVITY IN  
LATIN AMERICA**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Extortion is a phenomenon that can be understood from various disciplines, such as economics,<sup>1</sup> criminology,<sup>2</sup> the political sciences,<sup>3</sup> and sociology.<sup>4</sup> Each of these fields of knowledge emphasizes either the system or economic models under which extortionists and victims operate, the short- or long-term relationship sought by establishing simple or complex extortion mechanisms, the political relationship between extortionists and victims, or citizens' perceptions of the institutional framework, which can serve as a gateway for criminal groups to create ties of protection through extortion.

The complexity of extortion, given the different forms it can take and the ease with which it can be confused or linked with other crimes, such as kidnapping or corruption, calls for an open discussion and the establishment of research agendas. This report sheds light on the importance of extortive practices in Latin America. It is based on qualitative research since 2019 that includes 36 interviews of academics, public officials, police, professionals, and victims of extortion in 10 countries,<sup>5</sup> along with a review of all official public information and newspapers in five countries during 2019.<sup>6</sup>

The research also focuses on working groups and reviews official and civil society documents related to extortion as a criminal phenomenon throughout Latin America. The report is part of a long-term research project that focuses on the importance of this criminal activity, its possible links to organized crime organizations, and the policies designed to tackle its impact on businesses and citizens alike.

The report shows that extortive practices are a regionwide trend, albeit with national, specific characteristics. Although it is primarily a non-violent crime, an increasing tendency—specifically linked to practices against women—should make it a priority for the public security agenda. Furthermore, extortion could be depicted as the “perfect crime” since it is hardly reported, let alone investigated. High levels of impunity have allowed for this practice to move into criminal organizations, prisons, and street gangs; also, state officials and even business partners use extortive practices to finance their activities. There is a clear impact on democracy

since corruption, fear of crime, and a general sense of freedom from punishment corroborate the idea that there is no rule of law.

Efforts toward understanding extortion remain limited and need to take a central role in most national and regional public security policies.

## AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT

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In European and North American scholarship, the literature on extortion is abundant.<sup>7</sup> Considered the defining activity of organized crime,<sup>8</sup> extortion is strongly linked to territorial control and illegal activities. Scholars view extortion as an activity aimed at controlling territory (i.e., power syndicate) and maximizing profits by organizing and implementing illegal businesses and trafficking (i.e., enterprise syndicate). Scholars point out that extortion is an easy crime to commit since “it does not require any high initial investments, it carries low managing costs and, in areas where State protection is not regarded as adequate or reliable, it is also a low-risk operation, because people at large usually prefer to pay a low kickback than go to the police.”<sup>9</sup> Also, a criminal group needs to demonstrate a working monopoly on the territory in which it operates, thus creating the potential for conflict with competing groups.

Extortion became the backbone of the “territorial sovereignty” of the Mafia.<sup>10</sup> It gave it a local presence, did not require financial startup costs, and relied on a complex network of relationships rather than a wealth of knowledge of the locale.<sup>11</sup> When the Mafia consolidates its territorial control over a locale, this blurs the line between legal and illegal businesses. Regular citizens are often subject to extortory practices, but extortion can also involve individual criminals or non-organized crime groups. Nevertheless, as Schelling<sup>12</sup> indicates, territory-bound groups seek monopolies in the activities they pursue, and extortion is not an exception.

Several factors facilitate the development of extortive practices. At the institutional level, the role of the state is critical; in fact, there is little possibility for extortion to thrive in a territory with a strong state presence. In other instances, the state “may choose to accommodate,

collaborate with, or use the consolidating criminal organization for its own ends, or for various reasons, including the desire to “top-up” wages or because of a significant crossover in membership with criminal organizations.<sup>13</sup> At the social level, the development of organized criminal organizations requires the availability of a web of individuals with the capacity and willingness to engage in violence and a social and political context in which they can be recruited. Third, at the economic level, a sudden boom in a local market typically opens the door for the need for protective networks that could replace those not implemented by the state.<sup>14</sup>

By researching the Camorra in Italy, Scaglione<sup>15</sup> identifies three types of organizational modalities: (1) gangs of thieves (people intimidating small neighborhoods), (2) extremely violent young people located in specific territories to commit crimes, and (3) highly skilled groups specialized in predatory crimes such as extortion and robbery. All three types of organized criminal groups developed territorial control; however, maximizing profits is the primary goal of the second and third groups. One important element needing further analysis is the increasing involvement of women in extortive practices, specifically in managing racket activities and illegal traffic.<sup>16</sup>

## EXTORTION IN LATIN AMERICA

There is no official information that would allow for a solid characterization of the problem in the region. Still, there is ample qualitative information on the profound presence and complexities of extortive practices and limited survey data on self-reported extortion victimization. Over the years, criminal organizations have diversified their activities in the region, and extortion is perhaps the most widespread of these new criminal ventures.<sup>17</sup> When organized criminal groups launch extortive practices in Latin America, they run little risk that victims will report the crime to the police, particularly when extortion targets illegal markets like prostitution, black market trading, or illegal gambling. Even regular citizens engaged in legal business activities are unlikely to report the crime to the police due to fear of reprisals and police complicity or ineffectiveness. Extortive practices have become entrenched in the region and are the main ave-

nues for criminals to acquire cash.<sup>18</sup>

While researchers have only recently begun to study the prevalence and impact of extortion in Latin America, extortion has important effects at the institutional, societal, and economic levels, further undermining state capacity to effectively control widespread violence and corruption. Indeed, a recent estimate identified extortion as a key factor for migration and displacement in Mexico, impacting more than 44,000 internally displaced person.<sup>19</sup>

The first key conclusion from a review of all available information is that extortive practices are a region-wide phenomenon. For instance, LAPOP data for 2016-2017 shows that victimization affected 19.1 percent of responders in Mexico, 75 percent in El Salvador, 7.2 percent in Guatemala, 8.5 percent in Honduras, and 14.8 percent in Peru. However, in each country, it takes its own forms and differs regarding the actors who practice it, its frequency, the type of protection, the capacity of the police and institutions to address it, and the consequences for the victims. It ranges from paying a few coins to someone to keep an eye on a parked car to kidnap ransoms to the long-term extortion of storekeepers.

Only in Mexico did a recent study show that extortion calls to businesses increased 22 percent between 2013 and 2019.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in 2018, other researchers estimated that more than 3.7 million extortion calls were made from just seven prisons.<sup>21</sup> In Bolivia, there is an increasing link to Colombian networks that use Venezuelan migrants as collectors of extortive payments.<sup>22</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, several gangs in El Salvador and Guatemala announced they would pardon or waive all charges for informal vendors and small businesses due to the health crisis. However, there is anecdotal evidence that in countries like Guatemala and Peru, intimidation has continued from those in charge of the “*gota a gota*” (high-interest loan schemes).<sup>23</sup>

This section presents findings from interviews that reveal the phenomenon’s daily nature. Companies, small and medium-sized storekeepers, the residents of underserved neighborhoods, and prisoners live with this practice, having to pay an illicit tax to reach their homes or work at their businesses. Although extortive

methods have been studied in Central America and Colombia, they are present in multiple other countries. The following analysis highlights the importance and specific dimensions of extortion in some of these countries.

In Argentina, interviewees report extortive practices related to bribery and corruption on the part of state agents and that extortion also occurs in certain unions and social movements. However, they recognize it is less common than in other Latin American countries. The case of one female victim is striking; she was asked to protect someone guilty of medical malpractice rather than money. An everyday action like writing a complaint about poor medical attention led to a threat that forced her to withdraw the complaint so she would not lose her job as a public official: *"So I asked for the complaint book, made the corresponding complaint, and went home peacefully. I left my name and my phone number because I'm making a complaint that I consider fair. I receive a call from a person who introduces herself as the wife of the doctor against whom I am making the complaint telling me that they habitually eat with the governor and that, if I did not withdraw the complaint, I don't know, they gave me two days to withdraw the complaint, or I would lose my job that week."* (female victim of extortion)

In Chile, one of the people interviewed alluded to the figure of the "moneylender" as an extortive practice that occurs daily in street markets and consists of a person lending money to another at high interest, leading to a debt which, if not paid, is followed by threats. Another interviewee in Chile was the sister of an extortion victim who had lost her phone and was threatened with disclosure of her personal information: *"He [the extortionist] told her he was someone who worked in the technology sector and had received a stolen phone and did she want it back, and my sister obviously said yes, and the guy said, "Well, you know it's not that easy, the phone is broken, it seems the thief dropped it, so I need to unlock it because you know you don't want people to see your photos. I see here that you go out with a girl," and he began to name my daughter. And he told her, "Here you have your bank accounts, your credit cards, it would be wrong for someone to get your phone and steal them from you."* (sister of extortion victim)

In Costa Rica, interviews revealed various forms of extortion, but with a lower prevalence than in other Central American countries. One type of extortion identified is political extortion, which occurs in the case of vice-mayors. Women who are elected are forced to resign for the sake of their personal safety, creating a vacancy for a man. This is a clear example of gender extortion.

In Peru, there was consensus among those interviewed that extortion is a daily practice that occurs mostly in the north of the country, in cities such as Trujillo or Chiclayo, affecting predominantly small and medium-sized storekeepers who must "pay a fee" to pursue their activities. This extortion is practiced in an organized way by bands with territorial control.

In the case of actors, three types of extortionists were identified in Peru. First, unions or gangs linked to civil construction extort money from companies by requesting jobs (a real or "ghost" job)<sup>24</sup> or the payment of protection money. For the companies involved, this practice has become normalized and is part of their cost structure. Second, criminal bands mostly dedicated to crimes such as drug trafficking use extortion as a permanent source of financing; most of their victims are related to such "commerce." Finally, there are extortionists not linked to criminal gangs who find extortion provides an occasional opportunity to boost their income.

Interviewees in El Salvador agreed that a broad and complex extortion network exists in their country, involving state agents, civilians, and people linked to crime. They estimate that extortion began to become prevalent in 2005, occurring principally in prisons, impoverished neighborhoods (where there are different levels of fees), and small and medium-sized businesses. In the latter, employees, neighborhood gangs, or businesspeople from the same sector practice it.

As in the case of El Salvador, a broad extortion network is found in Guatemala, but with different characteristics. Here, it is practiced principally by criminal gangs linked to crimes such as hired killings and homicide and, therefore, involves a high level of violence against the victims. These gangs carry out both telephone and in-person extortion. In telephone extortion, 10 percent of victims are studied beforehand, and 90 percent are randomly selected. Copycats also con-

duct this type of extortion to try their luck with this crime. In-person extortion by these gang members affects mostly the inhabitants of lower-income neighborhoods, those who transport goods, and storekeepers. Second-order actors also appear in Guatemala's extortion scenario. It is widely recognized that judges and public officials are "bought" to not obstruct criminal activity and serve as gang accomplices.<sup>25</sup> To further complicate matters, there are also false victims in the form of people who claim to suffer extortion to obtain a migration permit to leave the country.

In Guatemala, one interviewee recounted being a permanent victim of extortion, a woman with a stationary business who had paid protection money for a decade. The gangs gave her a mobile telephone to communicate with her. The extortion was systematic and, if she failed to pay, put her life at risk. She has become "accustomed" to the situation and does not see a way out. *"So that you can work in your store, you have to pay a tax to be able to work; if you don't, they kill you. I have escaped being killed several times. It is very difficult. You can say, 'Ah, I've got used to living like this and it's what I have to do to survive,' but each consequence causes very strong effects on your personal and family life. You will never know how they are going to attack you."* (female victim of extortion)

In Colombia, interviewees reported various types of extortion that have traditionally been linked to the financing of guerrillas and paramilitaries and occurred in localities near guerrilla settlements as a means of financing the life and activity of these groups. It subsequently began to be practiced by criminal organizations and copycats,<sup>26</sup> affecting both companies and individuals. In the latter case, there is the so-called "drop by drop," in which extortionists obtain a permanent income by exacting small amounts (drops). In other words, there are two extortion systems in Colombia. Although both offer protection in exchange for money, they have different purposes; the guerrillas aim to change the model of society, while criminals or gangs seek to increase their income or expand the territory they control. Extorting storekeepers is also a feature of everyday life. Anyone can appear at a business and demand protection money, which the business owner pays without knowing whether that person is really part of a criminal organization and if protection would actually

be provided. Similarly, extortion occurs among storekeepers themselves relating to the sale of a particular product, a practice known as "exporting the model to other sectors." According to Colombian experts, extortion brings security to parts of the country where the state does not exert territorial control.

As mentioned by an expert "extortion related to the Colombian guerilla movement has also affected the border area of neighboring Ecuador, where false guerillas sowed terror". In other parts of Ecuador, extortion is practiced by those linked to drug trafficking to complement income obtained from drug sales. There is also an elevated level of extortion practiced in prisons as a mechanism for survival in confinement. In other words, in Ecuador (as in Colombia), there are two extortion systems; one linked to Colombian activity but with "imitators," and another associated with drug trafficking.

In Mexico, there is an extensive extortion network practiced principally by criminal bands for which it is their primary activity. State agents also extort ordinary citizens who seek protection. Extortion can be conducted by phone, from prison, or in person. The victims vary depending on the region and could be business travelers, Indigenous groups, local inhabitants, formal and informal shopkeepers and vendors, or ordinary citizens.

According to interviewees from the non-governmental organization (NGO), "México Unido Contra la Delincuencia," criminal bands practice four types of extortion:<sup>27</sup>

- (1) Between 2011 and 2014, they used telephone calls to demand a ransom from a family member, with a (supposedly) kidnapped child crying in the background.
- (2) The extortionist pretends they are a relative visiting from the United States, who has run into a problem on the border that they need money to resolve. The extortionist claims they are in a dangerous situation with little time to talk and asks for money.
- (3) *Cobro de piso*—or literally, "fee for the floor"—is the illicit tax levied on storekeepers by representatives of drug cartels or copycats.



(4) Business travelers staying at hotel chains can be extorted in their room with the complicity of hotel workers and are asked for money against a threat of surveillance, which could lead to abduction.

Interviewees in Mexico also described extortion by the police, which, they say, “has happened all their lives,” as well as the extortion of storekeepers and Indigenous people in places where the extraction of natural resources takes place.

In Mexico, a large part of the economy is informal, a risk factor for extortion. Within this informality, there is a “formalization” of extortion through symbols, such as stickers on taxis to indicate protection by extortion bands. Interviewees also referred to the trend’s invisibility; as a mid-level albeit permanent issue, it does not appear on the public agenda. The permanent—yet inevitable—existence of extortion in Mexico is reflected in such phrases as “like a mushroom that grows” or “like lemons in agriculture.”

It can be concluded from the accounts of the interviewees in this study that extortion exists in all the countries analyzed but with important differences. It can be infrequent, as in the cases of Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica, or part of complex networks that involve a series of actors and crimes, such as in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. Its purpose can range from “trying their luck” for people who use it as a quick way to make money to the criminal bands for whom it is a permanent livelihood and means of controlling residential and commercial neighborhoods.

In addition, the interviews indicate that extortion is an understudied phenomenon with little visibility in some countries such as Argentina and Ecuador. Its characterization, therefore, provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about it. This next section will analyze the different types of extortion.

## TYPES OF EXTORTION

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Extortion is a chameleonic crime. During fieldwork, it was possible to identify different actors, frequencies, forms, territories, victims, and

consequences. Our research found three types of extortive practices:

- **Episodic:** There is a presence of opportunistic crime that develops when a citizen without significant ties to criminal activity decides to “try their luck” through telephone calls to obtain money. The victim, selected at random, suffers extortion only once, and the crime is rarely reported to the police. An example is the extortion of specific online celebrities to avoid the release of personal information.
- **Intermittent:** This type of extortion is mostly related to practices that have small and medium businesses as victims of frequent extortion. For instance, in Peru, most construction companies refer to standard extortive methods during the development of a project.
- **Systematic:** This is the case in neighborhoods and businesses in which extortion is a daily practice. Examples include exacting payment to enter a neighborhood in Guatemala or protection money paid by storekeepers and taxi drivers to pursue their activities. Residents and storekeepers who are the victims feel threatened and pay a double tax to the extortionists.

Extortion also takes different forms. It can be by telephone as in the calls made by bands or prison inmates, online as in the case of sextortion, or in-person when the extortionist approaches the victim to demand money, whether at the victim’s home, workplace, or in the street. Moreover, it can be simple when it involves just an extortionist and the victim, or complex, involving a network with different actors operating through various mechanisms involving criminal organizations specialized in this crime. Examples of the latter include the systems of extortion identified in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico.

In terms of location, there are important differences between countries, however, the extortive practices have some similar features.

- Underserved neighborhoods where the state does not have a strong presence create an opportunity for bands or gangs to take control of the territory.
- Prisons in which extortion occurs among

the inmates (Ecuador) and through telephone calls to the outside world (Guatemala and Mexico).

- Commercial areas where the victims own small or medium-sized businesses and are offered certain protections in exchange for a daily or monthly payment (Colombia and Peru).
- Sectors in Colombia and parts of Ecuador where guerrillas or paramilitary groups operate.
- Places where economic activities occur, such as Peru (civil construction), Argentina (oil unions), and Mexico (areas for the extraction of natural resources and tourism).

Extortion may or may not be related to other crimes, but some are dedicated exclusively to it. In other cases, there is a link to drug trafficking (Colombia), express kidnapping (Ecuador), homicide (Guatemala), or mugging (Peru). In the Mexican case, it is interesting to note that extortion arose from kidnapping when the latter proved insufficiently profitable, as described by one interviewee: *"There was a time when kidnapping was contained, then the bands dedicated to kidnapping began to venture into extortion. They were bands that already had experience in other types of criminal activities. Extortion is faster because, in kidnapping, you have to invest in security with the people who are going to watch [the victim]; as a criminal, you expose yourself much more because, in extortion, you can make 10 calls at the same time and someone will fall for it, two or three fall for it. I get money much faster and there is not as much exposure."*

Finally, the consequences of extortion depend on its level of complexity and range from a one-off payment to sustained payments over time, as well as serious physical and psychological consequences for the victims. The victim from Argentina recounts that, when threatened with losing her job, she decided to withdraw her complaint against the doctor who had performed a substandard surgery on her daughter: *"I got home, gathered my children and told them, 'This is what is happening to me!' I have always said that you have to be consistent with principles but, at this moment, it is either bread on the table or being true to my principles, and I went and withdrew the complaint. But I took it as a lesson for my children too, that morality some-*

*times confronts us with situations where one has to decide, and it is very difficult to say what is moral and what is not."*

In other words, extortion is a diverse world. Protection payments have countless characteristics such as those described in interviewee accounts and raise questions that call for further investigation.

## IMPUNITY

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The diversity of forms that extortion takes also implies difficulties in its handling by the police and the judicial system. The interviews conducted for this study and the review of databases with official information indicate that the most critical limitation is that extortion is minimally reported or not reported at all in some countries.

According to Colombia's 2019 Survey of Coexistence and Citizen Security,<sup>28</sup> extortion was the country's second least frequent crime, with a victimization rate of 2.3 percent but an estimated non-reporting rate of 81.4 percent. One interviewee referred to the reasons for not reporting: *"There is very great distrust of the authorities. And the authorities are not very effective in counteracting this type of crime. So, the population decides not to report it because it seems to them that there are no immediate or effective actions that can counteract the crime. Reports exist but are minimal. Above all, they appear when it affects large businesses, when it affects private companies that are being asked for exorbitant amounts, when it affects the state itself, and when it affects some actors in the territory with a certain level of power. But in everyday life, when the armed actor knocks on your door to ask for money because they are watching you or when they ask public transport to pay so many times a week, it really is a small amount but gets bigger and bigger. Before, it was very difficult to acknowledge this publicly; in private everyone experienced it ... although the way it is denounced is insignificant."*

Although data about extortion in Mexico is available from surveys,<sup>29</sup> interviewees asserted that "it is not something that is reported, investigated, and pursued," citing a high level

of non-reporting, which reaches 97.9 percent according to the 2018 National Survey of Victimization and Perceptions of Public Security survey<sup>30</sup> and 97.4 percent per the 2017 National Victimization Companies Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización de Empresas or EN-VE).<sup>31</sup> Interviewees from the México Unido Contra la Delincuencia NGO pointed to differences in data for the country's different states: *"The figures fluctuate a lot. They rise violently in one month and fall sharply in another. One of our hypotheses has to do with the fact that these are the cases that are reported and lead to an investigation; it is not that we are seeing the criminal phenomenon per se, but simply what reaches the ears and hands of the authorities, and what the authorities decide to pursue."* Similarly, they add: *"There is very little reliable information from official records. The executive secretary of the national public security system has appalling records for this crime."*

In Peru, the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Información or INEI) conducts the National Survey of Budget Programs.<sup>32</sup> In 2018, INEI reported that 0.3 percent of those surveyed had been a victim of extortion in the previous 12 months, representing a total of 153 cases. However, it also showed that only 24.5 percent of those suffering extortion reported it, since the victim felt it was a waste of time (29.3 percent), they could not identify the offender (26.8 percent), it was a minor crime (16.3 percent), distrust of the police (11.4 percent), fear of retaliation by the offender (8.9 percent), and other reasons (7.3 percent).

Similarly, the *Extortion Report*<sup>33</sup> provides data for 2010 to 2016 and indicates that less than 1.26 percent of the national population suffered extortion. In 2015 at the national level, 30,807 women and 21,918 men were victims of extortion; in 2016, these figures were 25,794 and 26,308, respectively. As of 2016, of those in prison for extortion, 89 percent were men and 11 percent were women; the reporting rate reached 12.3 percent in 2016.

This data is consistent with the comments of the academics interviewed. The low rate of extortion reflects a reporting/recording problem: *"In Peru, there is no evidence in statistical terms that the crime of extortion is a major problem. It is a recording problem. However, it is true that,*

*especially since 2014, there has been an increase in data on victims of the crime of extortion associated with the use of cellphones, social networks, and public transport too, among other mechanisms."* The elusive form of extortive practices has a clear impact on a general sense of impunity and lack of protection by all victims.

Both official statistical data and the accounts of different interviewees show there is more we do not know about extortion. Current statistics are a gateway to a world for which numbers are largely lacking. The frequency, quality, and level of complexity of surveys and the capacity to produce generalizable information are challenges in this area.

A second limitation in addressing extortion is the position taken by some of its actors. In the case of telephone extortion from prisons in Guatemala, the telephone companies do not collaborate by restricting telephone signals from prisons or identifying the origin of calls. Their motives are economic—they make money from the calls: *"The key link in extortion is telecommunications, mostly cell phones. I would say that, if there is a card that should be removed from the house of cards of extortion, it would be to control the telephonic aspect"* (police officer, Guatemala). Also in Guatemala, we identify another problem linked to the co-opting of government officials such as judges and prosecutors and people from civil society who, as described by interviewees, have ties to gangs and receive benefits for covering up extortion: *"With the resources, they pay lawyers, judges, and prosecutors; they buy them."*

A third limitation lies in the connection between extortion and economic informality. This can be seen in Chile in the moneylenders who operate in street markets and, in Peru, in the fee paid by informal vendors to continue their trade. According to one Peruvian interviewee: *"Here extortion meets informality because we have mayors who have been detained for charging fees through groups, for giving a square meter in the best shopping center for the installation of an informal business, a cart on the street but, even for that square meter, you have to pay a fee."*

Finally, another aspect revealed by interviewees is the lack of sound criminal investigation, even when reporting takes place. In Mexico, where extortion is carried out primarily by tele-

phone, it is unusual for an investigation to result in arrests. Trial and impunity rates are as high as 99 percent. *“Impunity has exacerbated the phenomenon. The possibility that they will be punished, that they will be found is very low. The black figure is very high. There is a lot of fear. Citizens in Mexico move around fearfully.”* (consultant, Mexico).

The lack of proper criminal investigation in Peru is also behind an increase in extortion. Although it is a practice that has been developing for 10 to 15 years, it has not led to more complex levels of organization or violence. Considering this, one academic interviewed argued: *“My hypothesis is that the networks behind this phenomenon have clear criminal niches and subsist within this target range. They do not aspire to be a giant cartel or a complex organization. This small-scale extortion generates profits and grows at that level, like a mushroom that advances.”* This is consistent with the arguments of another interviewee, according to whom extortion in Peru: *“Is like lemons in agriculture. In agriculture you plant, I don’t know, avocados once a year, but you have to plant lemons because they are your petty cash, it comes in constantly all year round”.*

## CONSEQUENCES

The impact of extortion has numerous dimensions, not only for the victims but also for the economy, state, and judiciary. This section examines three types of effects. First, it highlights gender issues by looking in greater depth at the relationship between women and extortion, based on interviews and research. Second, it assesses the consequences for the companies and economies that are victims of this crime and, finally, its implications at the institutional level.

### Impact on democracy

Extortion has a negative impact on democratic systems due to the involvement of state agents in extortion practices. It also affects the country’s tax burden and harms ties and trust among the actors in society. In interviews, various people mentioned the deep damage extortion causes to the foundations of society.

Extortion is traditionally understood as the payment of money in exchange for protection, protection that should be guaranteed by the state, given its monopoly on the use of force. But when the state structure is weak, groups step in to offer what it does not provide. One interviewee said, *“From fear to acceptance, there is but one step. That is where extortion occurs. It becomes protection.”* In other words, mafias linked to extortion begin to compete with the state. A Mexican interviewee referred to this as double statehood: *“The extortion of citizens by security agents (the police, traffic, and immigration services) and illegal networks of organized violence (telephone extortion, telephone scams, ‘cobro de piso’) arises from two different types of statehood. Illegal statehood operates where the state is not present or has a very weak presence, coexisting as mechanisms for the illegal distribution of income, generally associated with types of violence such as threats or homicide.”*

In addition to this competition in places where the state has a weak presence, state actors can be involved in extortion processes, creating a feeling of helplessness among the population. A victim from Guatemala said: *“You can also see that the state is involved because they know everything. I don’t know how they know everything. They find out about everything and sometimes I think that the state, the police are involved in all this.”* Similarly, according to an interviewee in Ecuador, *“Extortion is where crime begins to eat away at one’s feelings about what citizenship is, the concept of living under the rule of law. It’s basically because there are people who, suddenly, in a feeling of helplessness, may be motivated to accept extortion and not have any capacity to denounce it to the states ... The effect of extortion, beyond fear, is that it begins to eat away at the principles of daily life under the rule of law.”*

An interviewee in Uruguay also argued that: *“There are economic consequences that have to do with the criminal modality itself, but there is also a set of consequences in terms of weakening the social fabric in the communities, of fear, of weakening public institutions and the state because, when there is extortion, the law is not prevailing. It’s not the legal or legitimate authorities who are regulating these social relations, it is imposition. It is a phenomenon of violence in which one individual prevails over another and applies his actions. It weakens beliefs and the tie*

*that exists between citizens and the state.”*

### **The Feminization of Extortion**

This research indicates that women can occupy different positions in the extortion process: as a victim, intermediary or facilitator, or offender. There are some types of extortion where women tend to be the main victims, principally sextortion, extortion of sex workers, and political extortion.

In a patriarchal society, women who participate in crime or violent groups can also suffer or be exposed to practices against them by members of their own criminal bands. In Central America, women who join a gang are subject to several rituals of a sexual nature, ranging from fidelity to a partner who does not have to comply with the same norm to having sex with different gang members.<sup>34</sup> Women gang members are, in general, “discriminated, paralyzed and subordinated through the generation of events of injustice, exploitation, and misogyny.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, there is a gender-based division of labor between men and women. One of the roles that women gang members fulfill is that of “mules,” guarding weapons and drugs, keeping watch, and serving as a communications bridge by collecting fees for services.<sup>36</sup> This role is fundamental for the gang’s survival because men, as outlaws, have a more restricted field of action. This increased presence of women does not necessarily imply an expansion of their power within the organization.

Analyzing the participation of women in extortion bands or groups is complex. Although it has been studied, the literature is mostly qualitative, with some dominant discourses about the motivation or role of women within these organizations.<sup>37</sup> Still, women’s participation in the crime of extortion is high. *InSight Crime*, a non-profit journalism and investigative organization, reports that in Guatemala, extortion is the most common crime among women in prison, and the figures have increased since 2009. In 2014, there were 382 women in prison for extortion. By 2017, this figure had doubled to 791, out of a total of 2,612 women in jail countrywide, according to official data.<sup>38</sup> The singularity of Guatemala is that it typifies women’s participation in extortion as a crime, but in many cases, they are unaware of this.

The interviews conducted reveal the participation of women in extortion practices in Guatemala and El Salvador, but with different characteristics. First, they show that women may be forced to participate in extortion because of an emotional or family tie with an imprisoned extortionist: *“Many women who were partners, sisters, mothers of gang members were used for the process of collecting extortion money and we believe that, with the closure of communications from prisons, they are no longer pressured to get involved. Consequently, fewer people are going to jail.”* Another interviewee said, *“There are cases where they are asked for ‘proof of love’; that, if a girl wants to show her love for her boyfriend, she had to go to bed with him. Now, the proof of love is to extort money for my love, a gang member who is in jail.”* Vulnerable adolescents are also used to transport telephones.

The interviews also show that women can be tricked into participating in extortion operations without realizing they are committing a crime. For instance, this occurs when a woman allows her bank account to be used to deposit money and is subsequently arrested. In Guatemala, for example, this is typified as a crime and has resulted in an increase in the number of incarcerated women.<sup>39</sup> One interviewee noted: *“Increasing numbers of women are imprisoned because they lend to relatives, gang members, or criminals, or people who are already in prison and who, from prison, are involved in some way in extortion.”*

Moreover, some women participate in extortion voluntarily and even take leadership roles in criminal organizations. In El Salvador and Honduras, interviewees indicate that women have moved from being simple receivers of extortion payments to administering complex extortion circuits and may even have ties to other crimes such as hired killings.

A second way of investigating the woman-extortion relationship is to analyze the crime of sextortion. This consists of blackmail or a threat of a sexual type in which the offender has intimate material about the victim, such as photographs of a sexual nature, and demands money to prevent their publication.<sup>40</sup> Extortion of this type can occur between adolescents or adults and men or women and is a form of sexual exploitation. In this case, it is the image of the victim for which protection is provided, although

the extortion may also be related to other phenomena such as grooming, sexting, and even pornography.

Another form of sexual extortion is the phenomenon known as sexual corruption, which occurs in a situation of abuse of power in which the victim is required to provide a favor or benefit of a sexual nature. This has occurred, for example, in the case of sex workers in Chile<sup>41</sup> and Argentina,<sup>42</sup> in which the police have been accused of institutional violence by exacting sexual favors or bribes as an alternative to arrest. When sex work is undertaken in a context of illegality, women are vulnerable to extortion and sexual abuse.

Transparency International<sup>43</sup> conducted a study in 2019 on institutional violence related to corruption where sex is the currency for paying bribes or accessing government services, education, or healthcare. In Central America—particularly in the Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala)—sexual extortion occurs in two forms: either the manner of payment or a sexual threat behind the extortion. According to *InSight Crime*, “For women living in gang territory, the threat of sexual violence is ubiquitous. Gangs are known to pressure their victims to pay, threatening them with sexual violence against their wives and daughters. In other cases, when the victim cannot satisfy the extortionists’ monetary demands, the payment can be made in-kind.”<sup>44</sup> The characteristic of this type of extortion is that it occurs in neighborhoods where gangs and organized crime are present.

A review of the official data on sextortion from the countries studied did not yield results. Where there are records, the data is not classified separately from other possible types of extortion. Moreover, not all countries classify reports of extortion according to the gender of the person reporting it. In Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala, for example, most reports are made by men. The information available on sextortion is, therefore, mostly qualitative in nature.

## Impact on Businesses

The economic effects of extortion and its impact on companies are enormous, affecting both the resources of poor people and private sector opportunities for economic development in various countries. Based on interviewee accounts and official data, it is possible to characterize these consequences.

In Argentina, one interviewee alluded to the problems faced by oil companies due to their extortion by unions: *“It creates economic problems, problems for companies and workers because they cannot do their business and it causes great economic damage. The problems at oil companies are also notorious. Even in the case of the oil industry, which is a strategic sector. Mafia union groups have threatened it.”*

In Guatemala small storekeepers who are extorted face a double tax burden and obstacles to starting a business. *“There are people who are starting a business or want to start a business and, based on what they have heard, extortion stops them or reduces their interest in starting one. That has a clear impact on the country’s economy.”* Similarly, the account of an extortion victim, a small business owner, shows it is a tax from which she has no escape: *“I pay extortion for my business, and I do it because [the business] is a source of income that helps me cover expenses with my children.”*

In El Salvador, interviewees noted that the high rate of non-reporting makes it difficult to estimate the annual revenue generated by extortion. However, the Business Competitiveness Survey<sup>45</sup> looks at how it affects local companies. One important result concluded that crime is the main situational factor affecting corporate competitiveness, despite a significant decrease between 2015 (28.7 percent) and 2017 (20 percent). Extortion is the main crime suffered by companies (48 percent), followed by the theft of vehicles or merchandise (42 percent). Out of the companies affected by extortion in the last quarter of 2017, most were medium-sized businesses (11.6 percent), followed by large companies (9.8 percent), small businesses (3.3 percent), and micro-businesses (8.8 percent).

The 2015 National Survey of Victimization of Companies in Central America (ENVECA<sup>46</sup>) covered 360 companies in Honduras. Including various types of extortion, it demonstrated

that 47.1 percent of the companies surveyed were victims of this crime. The principal measures they adopted were to stop handling cash (44 percent), reduce hours of production/sale of services (29.4 percent), and cancel product distribution routes (26.5 percent).

Interviewees in Mexico mentioned the different economic consequences that extortion has for the entire population due to its nature as a double tax and the threat it poses in places that depend on trade, such as tourist areas. The effects on these areas are evident in the account of one interviewee: *"If you like something and want to buy it again, the store is no longer there. What happens is that businesses cannot withstand the 'cobro de piso,' on Quinta Avenida, everyone pays it. It affects companies and small storekeepers who live off their business."* Similarly, the ENVE<sup>47</sup> survey, which analyzes economic units, found the most common crimes in 2017 were theft or assault on merchandise, followed by pilfering and, in third place, extortion, with a rate of 544 cases per 10,000 economic units, down from 666 in 2015. Regarding crimes reported to the police, there were 525,000 cases of extortion in 2017, equivalent to a rate of 1,150 per 10,000 economic units. In 86.9 percent of cases, the extortion was by telephone, and in 8.3 percent of the cases, the demands were paid. The average annual monetary loss in 2017 was 8,584 Mexican pesos (US\$431 as of 2017), the lowest figure among all the crimes recorded.

Peru's Extortion Report<sup>48</sup> for 2015 shows that 15 percent of 192,762 companies suffered extortion. In 2016, the figure fell to 9.1 percent out of 226,116 companies. By economic sector, the incidence of extortion in 2015 was highest in construction (55.5 percent), followed by commerce and vehicle repair (18.4 percent), and manufacturing (18 percent). In 2016, it was highest in fishing (31.1 percent), followed by mining (28.8 percent), and construction (23.2 percent).

Interviewees in Peru highlighted the case of civil construction where extortion payments are incorporated into a project's cost structure. One interviewee explained: *"What has this implied? In the case of civil construction, the hiring of security companies that act as an intermediary between the company and the criminal syndicate. In other cases, the person who puts up a*

*stall has to make daily or weekly payments to the owner of the territory in order not to have problems. Beyond safety, which is important, I feel that the main problem is an economic issue because the cost of not having problems ends up being transferred to the cost structure of those small entrepreneurs. It does not affect all citizens, just small and mid-sized entrepreneurs."*

## A COURSE OF ACTION

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One of the main weaknesses identified by this fieldwork is the availability of official information about extortion in the countries studied. The high percentage of non-reporting and the scarcity of comparable figures make it difficult to reach conclusions as a basis for defining clear measures to address this crime. However, it is possible to establish some basic recommendations regarding the data:

- **Use national surveys to measure extortion.** Since non-reporting is high and interest in reporting low, a useful approach is to use national surveys on security, victimization, and the characterization of households and companies.
- **Present extortion data in percentages or rates.** Some countries present extortion data in absolute numbers, making it difficult to compare different contexts.
- **Differentiate data by the gender of the respondent.** Together with sextortion, this would help shed light on forms of violence against women not currently considered in studies.
- **Include types of extortion in questions.** The interviews conducted for this study showed that extortion could range from a phone call to a kidnapping, with different levels of violence exercised by the extortionists. As a result, the word "extortion" alone could refer to a variety of crimes that each warrant specific analysis.
- **Identify the temporality of the extortion.** The interviews also showed that extortion could be episodic, as in a telephone call, or sustained over time as experienced by storekeepers in some countries.

- **Identify the non-monetary consequences of extortion.** It is necessary to estimate the economic impacts of extortion to demonstrate the phenomenon's great magnitude. At the same time, it is crucial not to lose sight of its non-economic consequences, such as a feeling of insecurity, its effect on values, or, when extortion is sustained over time, even serious psychological problems.

it must be paid every day but is, nonetheless, not reported. This makes specialization in the investigative work undertaken by the police, together with government ministries, of fundamental importance.

As the information on extortion increases in quality and coverage, it will be possible to better investigate it, identifying the diversity of forms it takes in different contexts and temporalities and considering that, at present, what we do not know about this crime exceeds what we do know.

Another critical aspect of approaching extortion is to understand its multiple forms and generate specific mechanisms for addressing each of them. In the case of telephone extortion, preventive initiatives or campaigns can be applied. This already occurs in some countries, such as Guatemala, where the police implement preventive campaigns and educate the population on how to answer cold calls and, thus, avoid falling for scams.

Extortion may be creating a parallel state by providing the protection needed to live in a community and collecting taxes to support a system of crime. Its low visibility on the public agenda of several of the countries studied is concerning.

If state agents are involved in extortion systems or the authorities do not prioritize extortion because they consider it a minor crime, its understanding is diminished, and the victims' perception of helplessness grows. This is also the case when addressing gender issues, geographical factors, how it affects Indigenous peoples, and other issues about which little is known in either the literature or institutional framework.

To conclude, extortion is far more closely related to structural phenomena and organized crime than to opportunistic or common crime. Therefore, it calls for more intelligence and a specialized approach from the police and government ministries. In underserved neighborhoods in Latin America, extortion is a constant;



## END NOTES

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