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Kidnappings in Mexico City: A Social Problem

Jared Liamos

ABSTRACT
This paper examines criminal kidnappings in Mexico City, Mexico. While numerous types of crime are prevalent in Mexico’s capital, kidnapping remains a constant social problem affecting not only wealthy individuals and families, but also members across all types of social class. From the victims and their families, individuals living in fear, to criminal organizations, and local gangs, to the local, state, and federal government, everyone is impacted by this interconnecting social problem. This paper explains how kidnapping for ransom began in Mexico City, how methods of kidnappings have evolved overtime, the different types of kidnapping, and the preventative measures individual citizens, and Mexico City’s local and federal government are taking to combat this crime.

Consisting of one of the world’s largest metropolitan populations, technological advancements and globalization has transformed Mexico City into a prosperous economic global hub. While Mexico’s capital has gained positive notoriety throughout the world, a major social problem within Mexico City continues to undermine and threaten the safety of residents across every social class. Criminal organizations and local gangs have long terrorized Mexico City throughout the past several decades. Kidnapping is a well-established method of terrorizing citizens while simultaneously financing notorious criminal enterprises within Mexico City, and throughout the country of Mexico. Kidnapping for financial gain is defined as, “the taking of a person or persons against their will and holding them captive conditioning their release on the fulfillment from a third party- of a set of demands” (Ochoa 2011). In fact, Mexico suffers from the second highest kidnapping rate of any country in the world (Dickinson 2011) and, Mexico City accounts for 30% of the total reported kidnappings in the country (Ochoa 2011). What is more disturbing is how underreported kidnappings are. “Mexico’s Human Rights Commission believes that fewer than one in three kidnappings are ever reported to Mexican authorities,” (Mascareñas 2008). Kidnappings are a significant social problem that affect individuals from all walks of life within Mexico City. This analysis will examine different methods of kidnappings employed by criminal organizations in Mexico City, who kidnappers typically target, and preventative measures taken by citizens and government officials, while addressing why kidnappings in Mexico City are a major social problem.

HISTORY
Kidnapping first became a social problem for Mexico City in the early 1970s. At the time, political turmoil ran rampant throughout the country with escalations of violence between the Mexican government and radical left-wing groups. These radical groups resorted to kidnappings for two purposes: to generate revenue to finance their attempt to overthrow the government, and as a means for political protest by targeting economic elites (Ochoa 2011). Today, abductions are no longer used to make political statements: However, the financial incentive for criminal organizations and local gangs remain.

METHODS OF KIDNAPPING
Methods of kidnapping have evolved over the past several decades. Presently, the most common form of abduction is “express kidnappings” (Beaubien 2010). Express kidnapping begins with one or multiple individuals forcing themselves into the motor vehicle of their selected victim. Armed abductors then force the victim to drive from one bank or ATM to another until the victim’s bank accounts are
depleted (Thompson 2004). Usually, the victim is held captive anywhere between a couple hours up to a few days. Express kidnappings generally produce several thousand dollars in profit for the abductors (US Department of State 2012). Often the victim is returned unharmed, however instances of physical assault have occurred and it can be a psychologically traumatizing experience for the victim. Although this method of abduction appears random, criminal organizations often choose affluent looking individuals (Ochoa 2011).

Another method of kidnapping is the ‘traditional’ kidnapping for ransom. The wealthy and upper class are most often victims of abduction for ransom. The victim is usually abducted against their will, held for a lengthy period of time (much longer than express kidnappings) until a third party, usually the victim’s family pays the agreed upon ransom set by the abductors (Ochoa 2011). Abductions for ransom are the most profitable for the abductors, and the most dangerous for the victims. Kidnappings for ransom potentially conclude with the victim either being tortured or murdered. Since 1994, fatality rates for traditional kidnapping have increased, from 3-5% to 18-20% (Blears 2012). One explanation for the rise in abduction-related deaths is increased competition amongst local gangs in Mexico City: thus gangs use violence against victims to gain territory and increase dominance (Associated Press 2008).

Lastly, gangs often employ virtual kidnappings to generate a profit. Virtual kidnapping involves a scheme where the criminal organization contacts an individual by telephone claiming they have abducted a family member or close friend of that person. In an effort to confuse the victim, the abductors will attempt to imitate the voice of the allegedly abducted person (U.S. Department of State 2012). Then, the individual being exploited is instructed to pay a ransom in order to see their loved one again. In reality, no one is ever physically taken in virtual kidnappings (Ellingwood 2008).

While methods and sophistication of tactics may vary between different criminal organizations, the underlying trend remains constant: kidnappings are viewed as a legitimate business for gangs and criminal enterprises. It was once believed that only members of the upper class could be abducted, however, this no longer the case. Now, members of the middle and lower class (farmers, street vendors, small business professionals) have become targets of every method of abductions (Ochoa 2011). The fear of potentially being abducted is collective among every socioeconomic class in Mexico City.

**PREVENTATIVE MEASURES**

Authority figures and politicians are well aware of the ongoing challenges that contribute to the growth of the informal economy that support kidnappings and place citizens in fear. The Mexican Government has attempted to combat the frequency of kidnappings by passing several pieces of legislation. In 2011, the National Program to Prevent, Prosecute, and Punish Kidnapping went into affect. The purpose of this plan was to improve Mexican law enforcement by creating specially trained investigators to handle abduction cases, improving technological communication between local, state, and federal agencies across Mexico, increasing intelligence capacities, building new judicial procedures to try suspects, and increasing assistance available to victims of the crime (Dickinson 2011).

The Mexican government also passed the Anti-Kidnapping Law in 2010, which increased the severity of penalties for convicted kidnappers and created special units within police departments to handle such crimes (Dickinson 2011). Additionally, the mayor of Mexico City, Marcelo Ebrand, has implemented strategies to curtail the increasing rates of kidnappings. By imposing legislation to cut down on small crimes, Mayor Ebrand believes more severe crimes, such as abductions, would also decline. Mayor Ebrand has amplified the amount of surveillance cameras in public locations and on police cars in an effort to reduce abductions and combat police corruption relating to kidnappings (Ellingwood 2008).
PUBLIC CONCERN

Despite efforts across the local, state and federal government, confidence in prevention efforts remain low among Mexico City residents. There are two factors driving the displeasure among residents kidnapping rates remaining high, and the lack of faith in law enforcement due to police corruption (Associated Press 2008). Mexico City’s public safety secretary, Manuel Mondragon, acknowledged that, “a spider web of corruption has penetrated many parts of our department,” (Associated Press 2008). In fact, there have been numerous cases across the country, and within Mexico City, where the police have been found in aiding criminal organizations complete the abductions. One case that made worldwide headlines was the abduction of 14-year-old Fernando Marti in Mexico City. Marti, the son of a wealthy businessman, was with his bodyguard when they were stopped at a police checkpoint just outside of Mexico City. While they were stopped, individuals posing as police officers abducted them for ransom. Marti’s father paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to retrieve his son. Unfortunately, the 14-year old boy and his bodyguard were murdered -- their bodies were discovered in the trunk of a car. Days following the murders, prosecutors concluded that a police detective was a key participant in the abduction plot (Associated Press 2008).

Due to conception that the police are potentially involved, rates of kidnappings are drastically underreported. Even victims of abductions are extremely hesitant to report their ordeal to the authorities (Beaubien 2010). It is believed that only 25% of all crimes are reported in Mexico, and that only 1% of reported abductions end in convictions (Dickinson 2011). Since there has been a breach of trust between Mexico City residents and their police force, members of the middle and upper classes are taking their own security precautions. Armored vehicles were once thought to be specifically for wealthy businessmen and politicians. However, over the past twenty years, bulletproof vehicles have become a necessary commodity for individuals of the upper class and even some members of the middle class (Argen 2010). Other individual protective measures include hiring a private security team or bodyguard (Argen 2010).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that extortive kidnappings in Mexico City are a significant inter- connective social problem for everyone residing in Mexico’s capital. From individuals living in fear, victims of abductions, criminal organizations and local gangs, to the local, state, and federal government, everyone is affected by this problem. No longer are only the wealthy targeted in abductions, the middle and lower class are now potential victims. While the method of abduction varies, kidnappings are a function of organized crime and abductions are executed with precision and strategic planning. The government of Mexico City is well aware of the ongoing social problem kidnapping presents to residents. Although the government has attempted to reduce the rising rates of abductions, their efforts have not shown to be successful. Many people have modest confidence in their government’s ability to prevent kidnappings and in the police department’s ability to resolve abduction cases, especially with the notion that the police have been involved in aiding criminal organizations in executing kidnappings. Finally, citizens in the upper and middle class have taken preventive measures to protect themselves from being targets.

It is necessary for future research to examine how new strategies to combat organized crime, imposed by newly elected Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto, effect the social problem of kidnapping. President Peña Nieto’s plan is to shift Mexico’s anti-crime strategy, placing greater emphasis on reducing crimes against ordinary citizens (such as kidnappings) instead of pursuing leaders of violent drug cartels (Fabian 2012). President Peña Nieto’s plan also includes “creating a ten-thousand person paramilitary force to patrol areas where local law enforcement failed to deter widespread crime, re-organizing the nation’s police forces, and disbanding Mexico’s Public Security Ministry, which has been corrupted,” (Fabian 2012). Time will tell if these new strategies will sufficiently reduce kidnappings. Future research should also focus
on possible shifts in methods of kidnapping. With technology becoming more sophisticated could there be a transition from express kidnapping to virtual kidnapping as the most prevalent form of kidnapping?

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