

## **Elections and Enforced Disappearances: Enforced Disappearance of Candidates in Mexico between 2006 and 2023**

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## Methodology

To comprehend the intersection between elections and the enforced disappearance of candidates, we documented cases of enforced disappearance of candidates during electoral processes in Mexico between 2006 and 2023. With this objective in mind, we built a database of events with variables pertaining to the identity of the victims (gender, ethnicity, minority), type of position and locality (state, position and level of government, type of municipality) as well as the context surrounding the disappearance (date, location status, period of disappearance, involvement of armed groups, electoral period).

Before analysing the database, we checked that each case had at least two consistent and reliable sources. Subsequently, we systematised each source manually to capture relevant data and apply a thematic analysis on the cases documented. Finally, we cross-referenced the information obtained with a map of actors in the states where cases were documented to understand who participated in the dynamics of control and territorial struggle that took place on a local level and directly impacted the electoral processes.

It is important to point out a bias that exists in this study. As this is an analysis that has as its main source of information media outlets, it is possible that we are faced with underreporting, since news networks do not fully document the analysed universe.

## Profile of Missing Candidates

We found that between 2006 and 2023, 18 candidates suffered an enforced disappearance during an election. Of these 18 people, 14 are men (78%) and 4 are women (22%). It is important to consider that women have been an underrepresented group in electoral terms. It is reported that the stage in which female candidates suffer the highest levels of violence is during the pre-campaign period and from within the political parties<sup>1</sup>, thus they face barriers that inhibit their participation prior to the campaigns.

Regarding the intersections that cross the candidacies, we could not identify any case of disappearance linked to the sexual orientation or gender identity of the contenders. It is important to note that this may be due to the lack of visibility of the LGBTTTIQ community's political-electoral rights. Although affirmative action have taken place to combat the above, there is still a low representation of this community in electoral contests<sup>2</sup>. As an example, it is estimated that despite the affirmative actions implemented by the National Electoral Institute (INE, by its acronym in Spanish) in 2021, only 2% of the candidates in the midterm elections belonged to the LGBTTTIQ community<sup>3</sup>.

When it comes to ethnicity, we could not find a record of missing candidates during active electoral periods; however, there is a documented case of an enforced disappearance of a former indigenous candidate in Sinaloa, deprived of his freedom and subsequently murdered on July 20th, 2021, which occurred 44 days after the midterm elections. José Román Rubio was an indigenous leader, defender of the Taramari people, who had received threats prior to his murder for his work defending indigenous peoples' rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Aparicio Castillo, Francisco (coord.). *Participación política de las mujeres a nivel municipal: Proceso electoral 2017 - 2018*. Mexico City: ONU Mujeres, 2018.

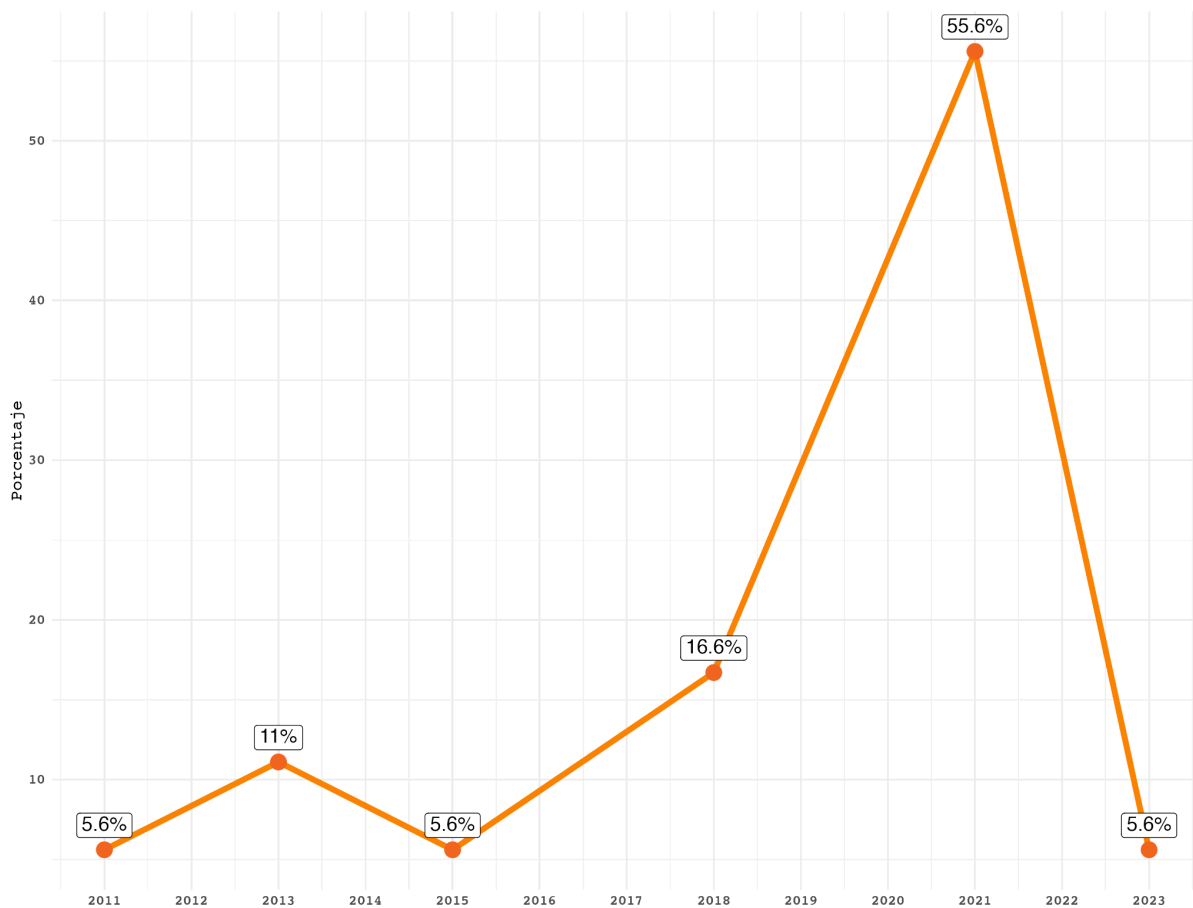
<sup>2</sup> Lizama Carrasco, Guillermo, and Abril Zuñiga Martínez. "Acciones afirmativas en materia electoral en México: el caso de los grupos y personas de la comunidad LGBTTTIQ+." *Transdisciplinar* 2, No. 4 (2023): 7-48.

<sup>3</sup> Álvarez Reyes, José A., and Rodrigo Castro Cornejo. "A propósito del mes del orgullo, ¿quién votaría por una candidatura LGBT+ en México?" *Nexos*. Can be consulted at: <https://datos.nexos.com.mx/a-proposito-del-mes-del-orgullo-quien-votaria-por-una-candidatura-lgbt-e-n-mexico/>.

### Year and Electoral Period

Regarding the timing of the disappearances, it can be understood in two ways: year and electoral period. As evidenced in Figure 1, 2021 was the year with the most disappearances, with 10 cases in total (55.6%), followed by 2018 with 3 cases (16.6%) and 2013 with 2 cases (11%). 2011, 2015 and 2023 document only one case of enforced disappearance per year.

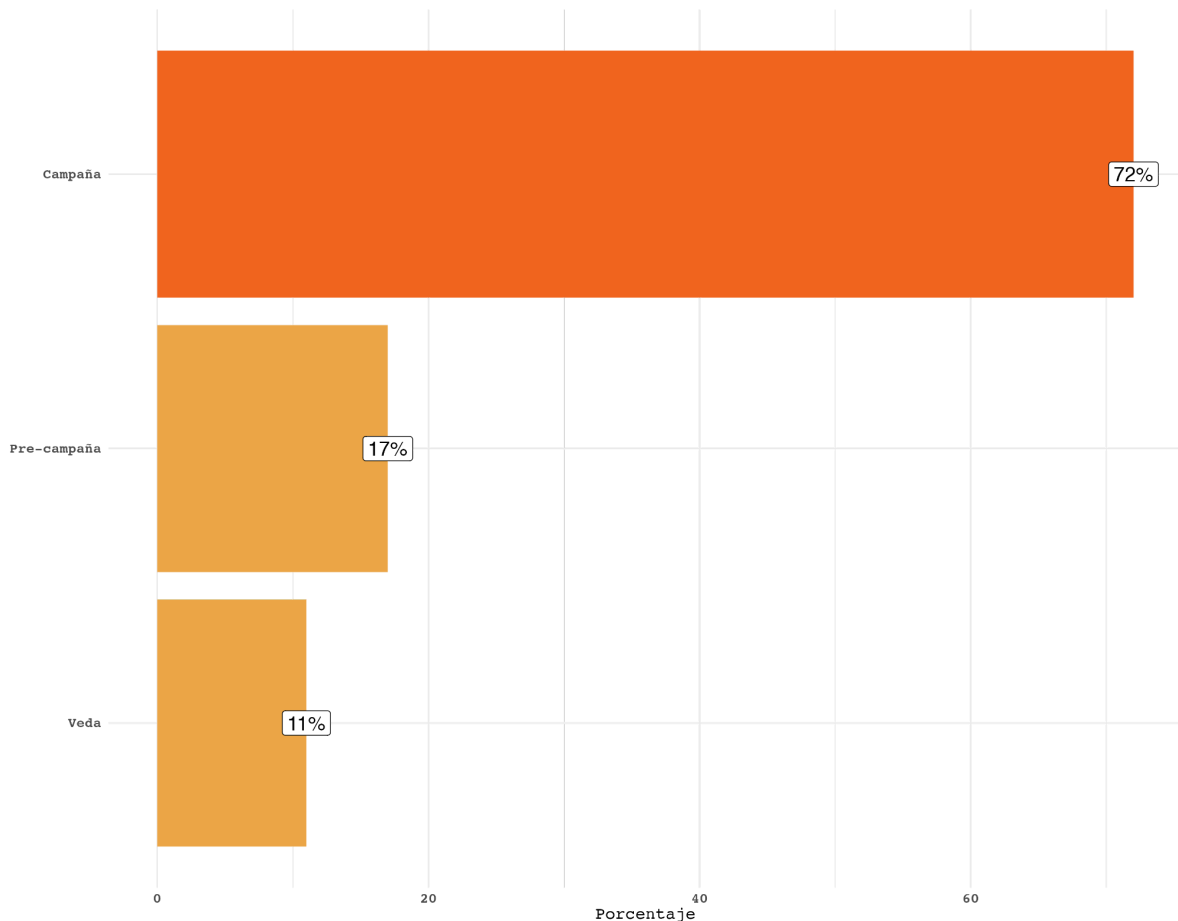
**Figure 1. Percentage of Missing Candidates According to Year of Disappearance (2006 - 2023)**



In relation to the specific stage of the electoral process, we find that enforced disappearances occur mostly during the campaign period. As shown in Figure 2, of the 18 documented cases, 13 occurred during this period (72%), while 3 cases (17%) occurred during the pre-campaigns and 2 cases (11%) during the electoral

ban. This is relevant since it shows that candidates are more likely to be victims of this crime when they gain greater public visibility.

**Figure 2. Percentage of Missing Candidates According to the Electoral Period (2006 - 2023)**

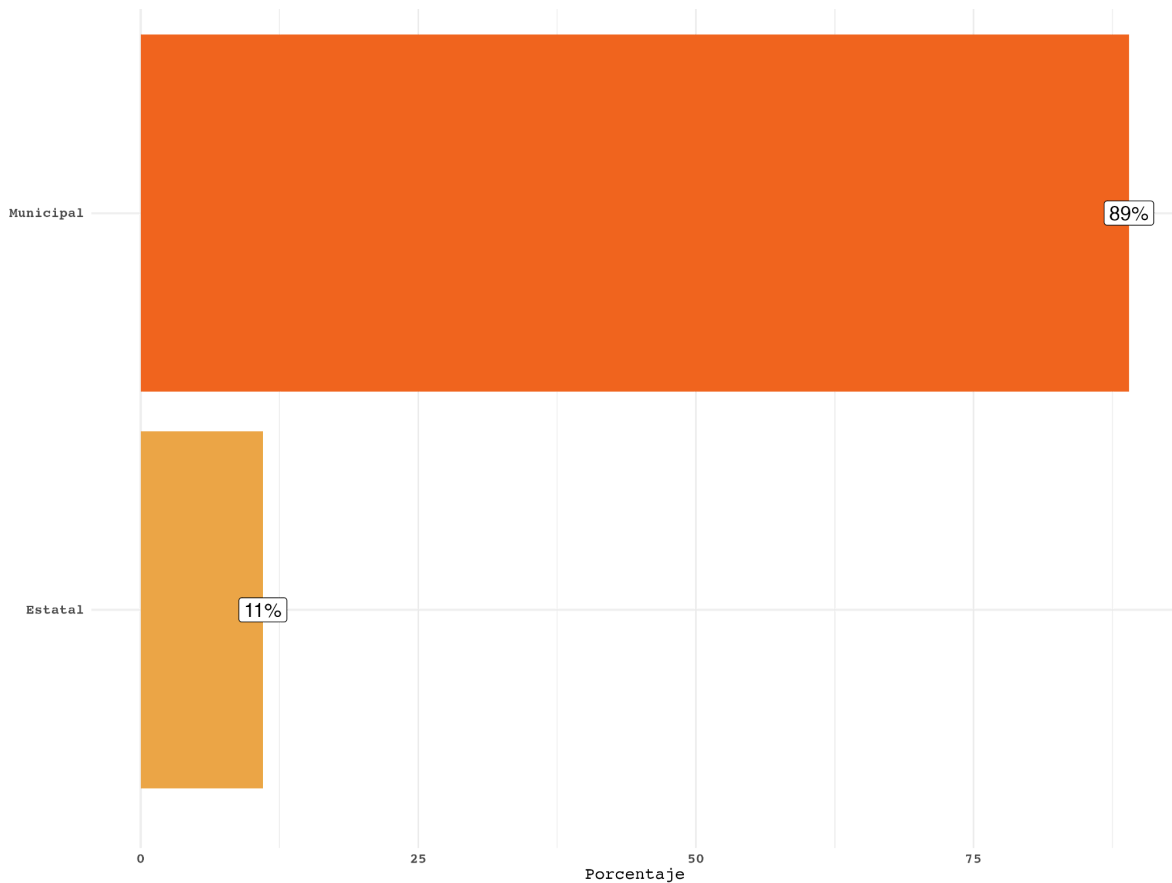


### Space of Struggle and Local Authoritarianism

We define space as an area or territory, not delimited exclusively by political lines, but by the interest of control by actors participating in violent dynamics on a local level. These territories are in constant conflict as criminal cells and local elites seek to control these spaces in an authoritarian manner. In this sense, it is no coincidence that 89% of the candidates that suffered an enforced disappearance contended for a position at the municipal level (Figure 3), since, as mentioned above, authoritarian dynamics occur at the micro level. Thus, enforced disappearances become a tool

used by political, economic and social actors who seek to access and exercise power and persuade the support for a specific control group<sup>4</sup> through terror<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Missing Candidates According to Government Level (2006 - 2023)**



It is relevant to note that in 72% of the cases, the position to which the candidates aspired was a municipal presidency. This percentage leads us to assume that this is the most vulnerable type of position as it is the one with the greatest visibility at the local level. Likewise, it is the one that has the most interference in the bureaucracy and decision-making capacity over the management of the city council. The above

<sup>4</sup> Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Susan D. Hyde, and Ryan S. Jablonski. "When Do Governments Resort to Election Violence?" *British Journal of Political Science* 44, No. 1 (2013): 149-179; Ley, Sandra. "To Vote or Not to Vote: How Criminal Violence Shapes Electoral Participation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, No. 9 (2018): 1963-1990; Lizama Carrasco, Guillermo. "Delitos y violencia electoral: desafíos para la democracia mexicana (2006-2017)." *Folia*, No. 32 (2018): 199-220.

<sup>5</sup> Robben, Antonius C. G. M. "Exhumations, Territoriality, and Necropolitics in Chile and Argentina" in *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights*, 53–75. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015

suggests that the struggle for territories at the local level prioritises its strategy of intimidation and control through the enforced disappearance of decision makers at the lowest level of government.

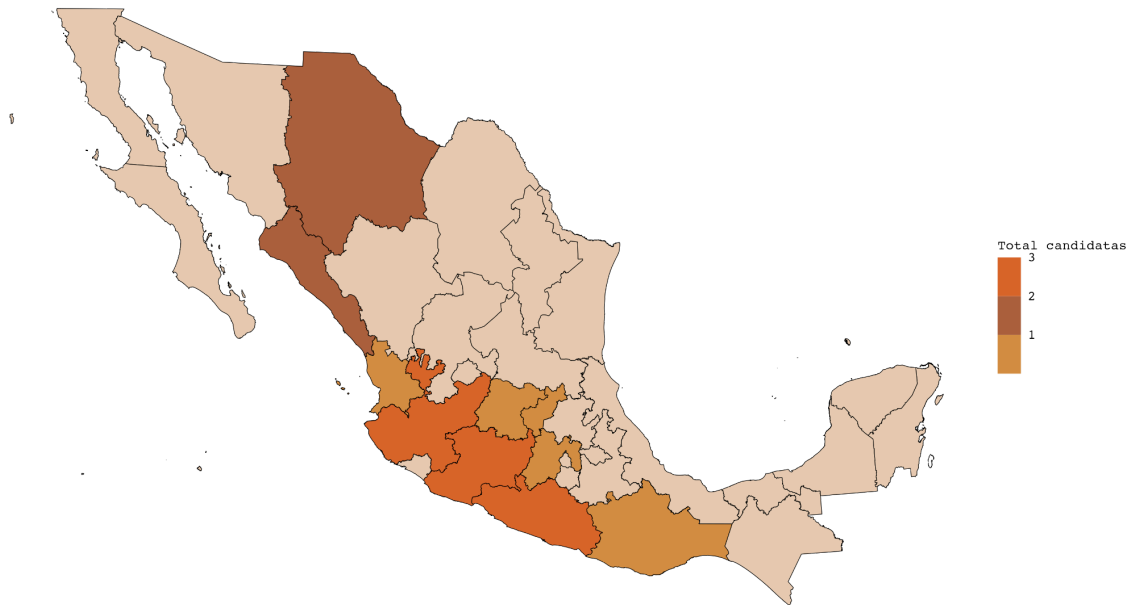
At the state level, we only identified two enforced disappearances, which took place in Guerrero and both candidates were contending for a local council, one during the 2015 electoral period and the other in 2018. The candidate that was a victim of this type of crime in 2018 was Abel Montufar Mendoza, a licensed mayor, who had previously reported threats. The enforced disappearance and subsequent murder of the candidate was linked to organised crime, especially with floor rights (“derecho de piso” in Spanish)<sup>6</sup>, a common local practice for controlling territories.

Although we do not consider territories to be defined by political lines, when we analyse the cases of enforced disappearance using the territorial limitations of the Mexican State, we can observe a trend towards the western area of the country. The Bajío region – conformed by the states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, Michoacán, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas – has the highest number of disappearances (44%), followed by the state of Guerrero (18%) with 3 cases. We can also note that the cases create a strip, which extends from Oaxaca through the Bajío region and reaches Sinaloa (12% of cases) and Chihuahua (12% of cases).

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<sup>6</sup>It is a type of extortion in which organised criminal groups demand a tax for any commercial activity, to be collected each week, to avoid being attacked.

**Figure 4. Total Missing Candidates by State (2006 – 2023)**



It is also relevant to observe the illicit and licit activities that occur in the states that document cases of enforced disappearance, since they are a factor behind local struggles for territories and, in some cases, they could be the cause behind the enforced disappearance of a candidate. As can be seen in Figure 5, the licit activities with the greatest presence in the national territory are mining, manufacturing, and agroindustry, while the most frequent illicit activities are the cultivation of opium and marijuana, illegal logging, and human trafficking.



**Figure 5. Licit and Illicit Activities in the States that Documented at Least One Enforced Disappearance**



**Motivation Behind the Enforced Disappearances of Candidates**

By carefully reviewing the documented cases of candidates’ enforced disappearance, we can surmise that in Mexico the deprivation of liberty during electoral processes is intended to intimidate contenders with the purpose of reducing the number of candidacies and distorting the results in favour of a specific political party or coalition. This is observed in 12 of the 18 documented cases of disappearance, where the candidates are deprived of their freedom by a group of armed men, and subsequently tortured and threatened with the aim of making them withdraw from the electoral race.

This hypothesis is reinforced when we observe the duration of the deprivation of liberty of the people who were found alive. In 8 of the 12 cases indicated (66%), the detention period was 24 hours or less, in 3 of the cases (25%) it was 48 hours and only in one of the cases it was 16 days. Additionally, in none of the 12 cases analysed a type of reward was requested in exchange for the freedom of the candidates, so it is possible to conclude that there was no immediate economic incentive behind the disappearances.

As a result of the above, we can see that in 5 of the 12 cases, the candidacies were formally cancelled or public appearances and proselytising events were completely stopped. Such is the case of Zudikey Rodríguez, candidate for the municipal presidency of Valle de Bravo for the *Va por México* coalition, who, after being deprived of her freedom in the middle of a rally to promote her candidacy, cancelled the events scheduled for the last week of her campaign.

Of the remaining cases, five people were found dead and one remains missing. All six victims are male candidates. In the five cases where they were found dead, the bodies showed signs of violence, they were tied up and had gunshot wounds, and they were located in open spaces, such as roads and ravines. Similar to the cases where candidates were found alive, the periods of disappearance for candidates that were killed are short: in three of the cases (50%), the candidates were found 24 hours after their disappearance, another case 48 hours later and another case 5 days later.

In the case of the candidate who remains unaccounted for, Omar Plancarte, his disappearance occurred in the 2021 midterm elections in Uruapan, Michoacán. Plancarte's disappearance could be linked to his work as a human rights defender, given that the candidate has been part of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD) since the disappearance of two of his children at the hands of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG, for its acronym in Spanish) in 2012.

At the time of his disappearance, Plancarte was with Luis Humberto Bueno, who is also missing and was looking for his nephew, who also disappeared in 2021. Another possible motive behind the enforced disappearance is the direct confrontation with the organised crime groups that operate in Uruapan, since days before Plancarte had declared that crime controlled the municipality and assured that the municipal and state police were colluded.

Finally, we consider it relevant to highlight the places where the candidates were deprived of their freedom. Of the 18 documented cases, in 7 cases (39%) the people were taken from their home or property, in 4 cases (22%) during proselytising events, campaign centres or their work spaces, in 2 cases (11%) on the road or on their way somewhere, in 2 cases (11%) in other public spaces such as a restaurant and, finally, in 3 cases (17%) the location prior to the disappearance is not clear.

## Main findings and conclusions

Although the number of cases of enforced disappearance of candidates during electoral processes may not seem as significant as other types of violences such as murder and physical attacks, when it is cross-referenced with other dynamics where enforced disappearance is used as a mechanism of terror and control, as is the case of the enforced disappearances of human rights defenders, we can see that our findings are relevant. As an example, according to an investigation carried out by Mongabay Latam, Quinto Elemento Lab and A donde van los desaparecidos, in a similar period of time (December 1st, 2006 to August 1st, 2023), 93 defenders of the land suffered an enforced disappearance. Likewise, it is essential to remember that violence during electoral times undermines the strength of Mexican democracy, so any enforced disappearance is a direct attack on the rule of law and the freedom of citizens to elect their public servants.

From this study, we can conclude that:

1. Candidates are more vulnerable to being victims of enforced disappearance during electoral campaigns, so it is extremely important to implement measures and concrete actions to safeguard their integrity during this time.
2. The level of government that presents the greatest risk of this crime is the municipal presidency. We consider that the very nature of the position, particularly its decision-making capacity in the organisation of local territories, is a key piece in the dynamics of territorial struggle and local authoritarianism.
3. The Bajío region and surrounding states are the ones that present the highest number of cases of enforced disappearance. We consider it relevant that local authorities and political party leaders take into consideration the dynamics of violence in this particular area, such as the enforced disappearance of candidates, which may take place during nearby electoral processes.
4. Almost all the candidates who were deprived of their liberty were found, alive or dead, during the first 24 hours of their disappearance. In this sense, it is essential that the authorities take urgent action to find the victim of this crime when they receive the report of their disappearance.

5. In addition to the above, in 61% of cases, candidates were taken from a known place, in 39% of cases they were taken from their homes or private properties, which is why it is necessary to implement security measures in these spaces.