

**PROFMEX Award to José de Córdoba y Juan Montes for this Reportage on Mexico**

**'It's a Crisis of Civilization in Mexico.' 250000 Dead. 37400 Missing.**

By **José de Córdoba and Juan Montes**

Photographs by **Yael Martinez V.**

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A student with a Mexican flag defaced with the numbers “43” and “68” to represent the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students and the 68 who lost their lives in the Tlatelolco massacre, during a memorial march in Mexico City on October 2, 2015. *Eduardo Verdugo/AP*

EL FUERTE, Mexico—One recent day, a line of grieving mothers armed with picks and shovels worked their way across a muddy field looking for Mexico’s dead and missing, their own children among them.

“It smells bad here,” said Lizbeth Ortega, a member of *Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte*, or the Trackers of El Fuerte, a group of mothers who look for missing people.

The mothers literally wear their pain. Some don white T-shirts, like Ms. Ortega’s, which has a blown-up photograph of her daughter Zumiko, kidnapped almost three years ago and still missing. On the back, her shirt says “I’ll search for you until I find you.”

[Continue reading below:]

Other mothers wear green shirts with the words “Promise Fulfilled.” They are the ones who have found the bodies of their missing children.

That day, the mothers scoured the site outside El Fuerte, a town in Sinaloa state, on Mexico’s northern Pacific Coast, looking for one of two men presumably kidnapped by cartel gunmen in recent weeks. One body had already been found in a field. The women believed the other may be nearby. In the end, they came up empty.

“This is my life,” said Mirna Medina, a forceful woman who holds the group together. “Digging up holes.”

Her son, who sold CDs by a gas station, was kidnapped in 2014. Three years later to the day, she and the other mothers of the search group dug up his remains. “I felt his presence,” she said, remembering the day and breaking out in tears. “I wanted to find him alive, but at least I found him.”

Some 37,000 people in Mexico are categorized as “missing” by the government. The vast majority are believed to be dead, victims of the country’s spiraling violence that has claimed more than 250,000 lives since 2006. The country’s murder rate has more than doubled to 26 per 100,000 residents, five times the U.S. figure.

Because the missing aren’t counted as part of the country’s official murder tally, it is likely Mexico’s rate itself is higher.

The killing and the number of missing grow each year. Last year, 5,500 people disappeared, up from 3,400 in 2015. Mexico’s murders are up another 18% through September this year.

[For the original WSJ charts and statistics presented correctly according to Mexican State, see

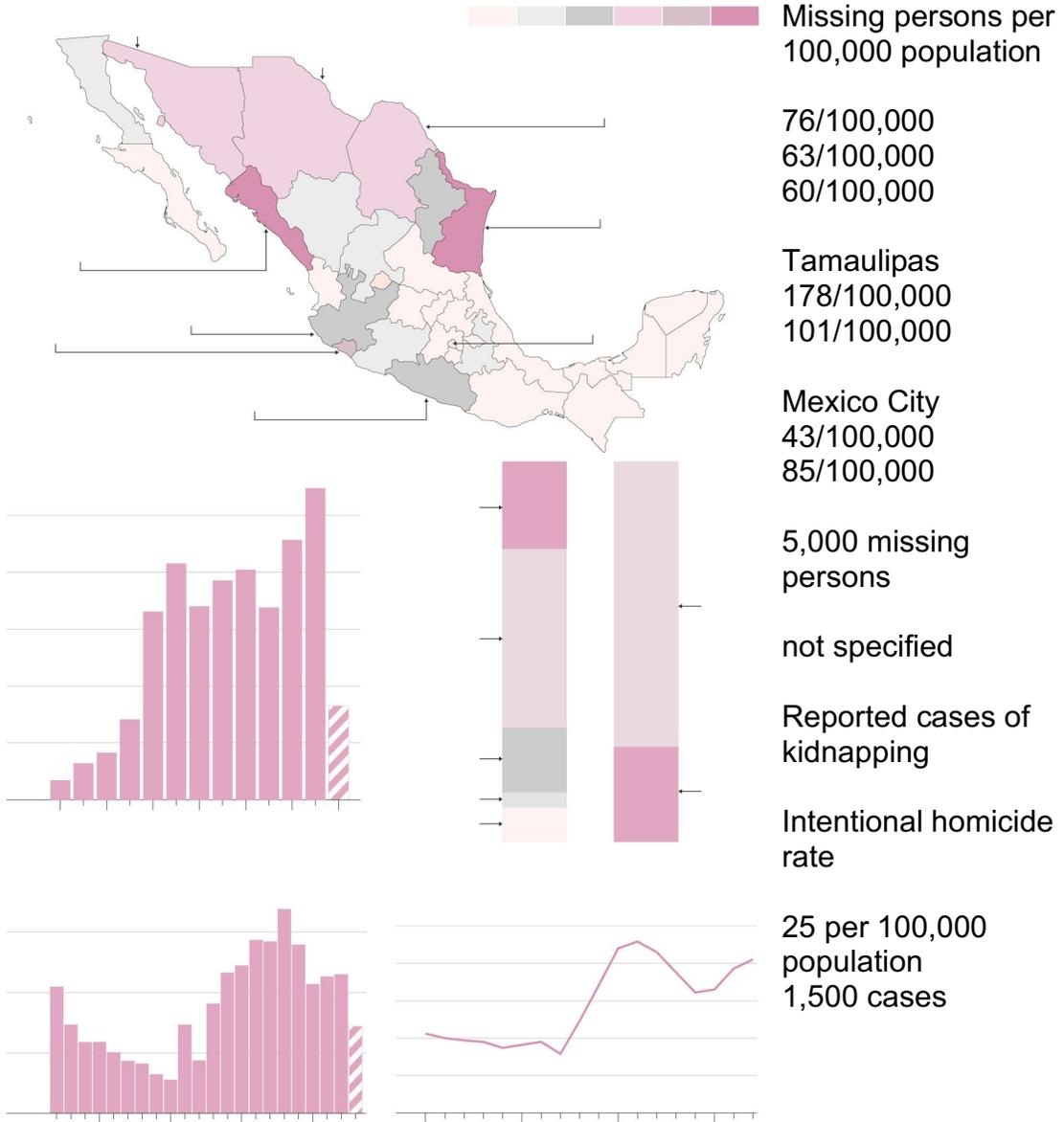
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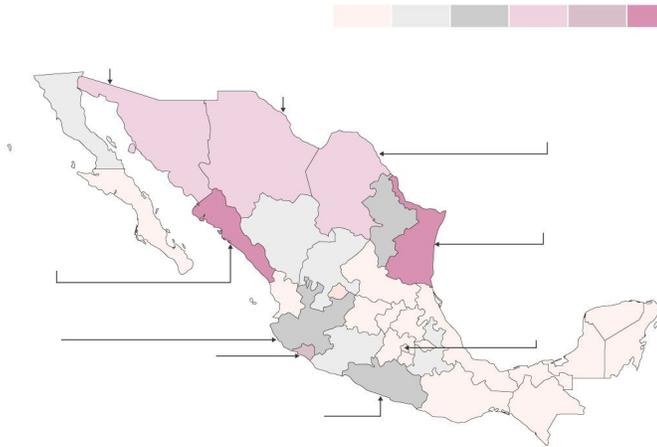
[THE TEXT OF THE WSJ ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW THE FOLLOWING CHARTS AND STATISTICS]

[Continue reading below:]

# CHARTS AND STATISTICS

37,435 persons missing, as of April 2018





37,435 persons missing,  
as of April 2018

Missing persons per  
100,000 population

76/100,000

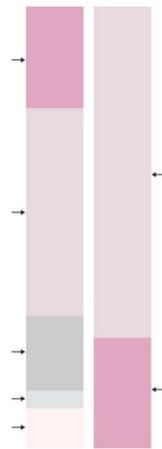
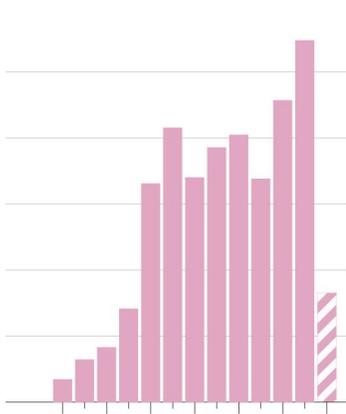
63/100,000

60/100,000

Tamaulipas

178/100,000

101/100,000



Mexico City

43/100,000

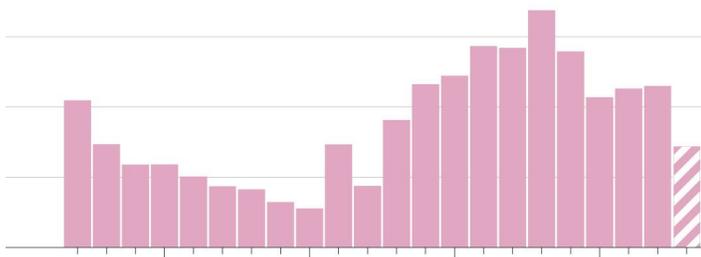
85/100,000

5,000 missing persons

not specified

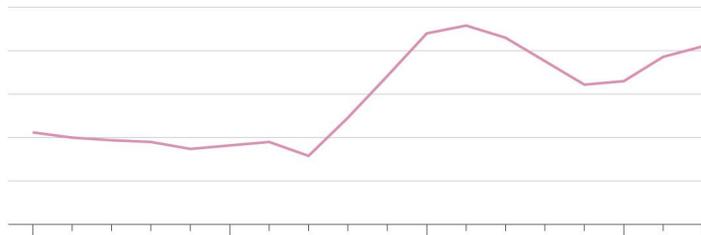
Reported cases of  
kidnapping

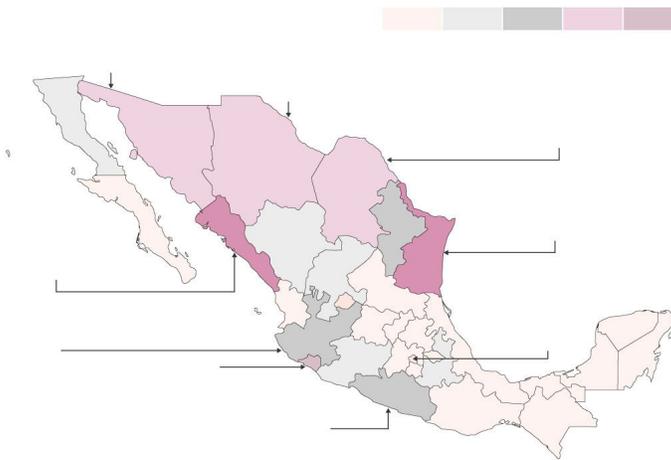
1,500 cases



Intentional homicide rate

25 per 100,000 population





37,435 persons missing,  
as of April 2018

Missing persons per  
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76/100,000  
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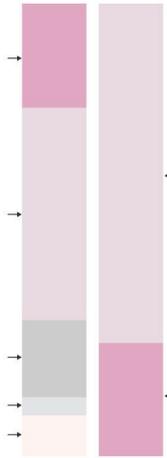
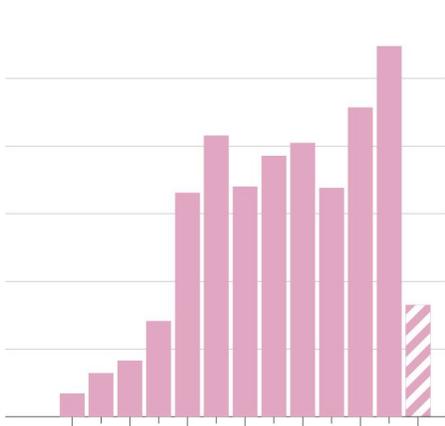
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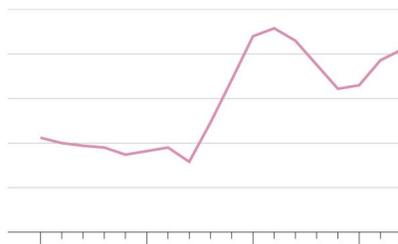
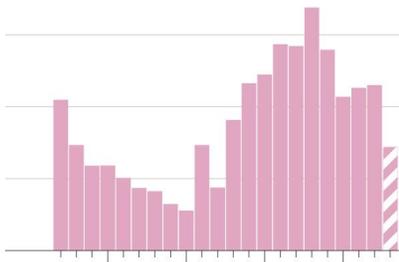
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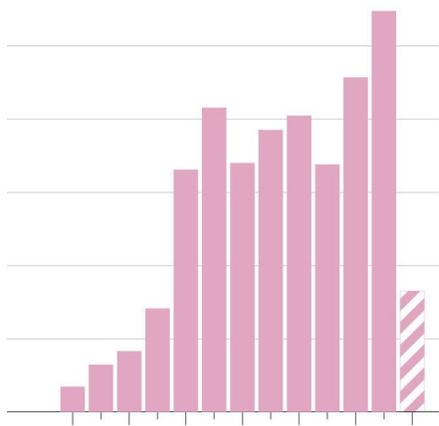


Intentional homicide rate

25 per 100,000  
population

1,500 cases





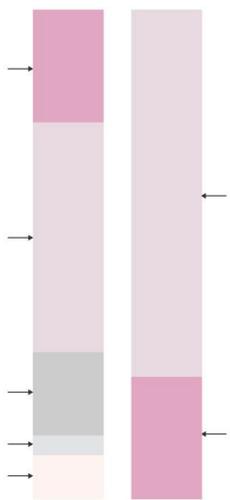
37,435 persons missing, as of April 2018

5,000 missing persons

not specified

Reported cases of kidnapping

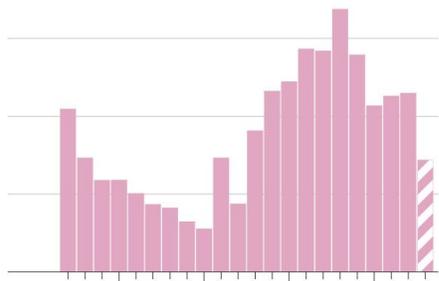
1,500 cases



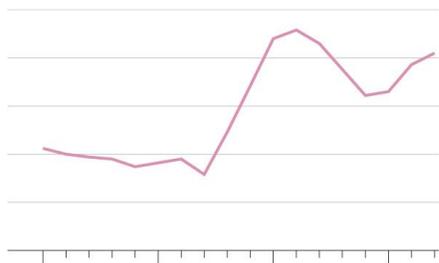
Intentional homicide rate

25 per 100,000 population

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[Continue reading below:]



Victims' families, mostly mothers, organize search parties, climbing down ravines or scouring trash dumps. Their technique is crude. Sometimes they hire laborers to hammer steel rods into the soil and haul them up to see if they smell like decomposition. Other times, they simply look for an exposed body part or shallow grave.

The sheer numbers of the disappeared now rival more famous cases of missing people in Latin American history.

The Disappeared, or *Desaparecidos*, became a chilling part of Latin America's vocabulary during the Cold War, when security forces kidnapped, killed and disposed of the bodies of tens of thousands of leftist guerrillas as well as civilian sympathizers. The most infamous case is Argentina's "Dirty War," where at least 10,000 people vanished from 1976 to 1983. In Buenos Aires, mothers of the missing organized weekly vigils in front of Argentina's presidential palace, gaining world-wide prominence.

Mexico fought its own far-smaller war against Marxist guerrillas during the 1970s. According to the government human-rights commission, 532 people went missing, and at least 275 people were summarily executed by security forces.







This time around, the horror in Mexico is bigger and its causes more complex. Many of the disappeared in recent years are believed to be the victims of violence unleashed by criminal gangs fighting to control drug routes and other lucrative businesses such as extortion, kidnapping and the theft of gasoline from pipelines, often with the complicity of police forces, government officials say.

“It’s a crisis of civilization in Mexico,” said Javier Sicilia, a poet and victims’ advocate whose son was murdered in 2011. “It’s diabolical—an unprecedented perversity to disappear human beings and erase any trace of them from the world.”

The trauma of Mexico’s missing is an open wound in the nation’s psyche. Families who can’t grieve for their loved ones spend the day alternating between doubt and despair, praying for, and dreading, the blessing of certainty.

“We don’t sleep nights, we have nightmares wondering what happened, where can he be,” said Maria Lugo, 62, whose son disappeared in 2015.

[Continue reading below:]



Lizbeth Ortega's youngest daughter, Liliana, stopped talking when Zumiko went missing.

The search for the missing frequently becomes an obsession for families, a mission sometimes handed down from one generation to the next.

In Huitzuco, a town in the lawless state of Guerrero, Mario Vergara, a slightly built, voluble man nicknamed the Atomic Ant, pores over medical books, training himself to recognize bones of the human skeleton. In six years of searching for his brother, a taxi driver kidnapped in 2012, Mr. Vergara and his crew have dug up some 60 clandestine graves and found the remains of some 200 people, he said.

Mr. Vergara believes he too will be disappeared by criminals who don't want their sins unearthed. He has made a cast of his teeth so searchers will find it easier to identify him when he's gone. He sometimes takes his 7-year-old nephew Saturnino, a silent, shy boy, on his digs, and plans to train his 2-year-old daughter in the macabre arts of digging up Mexico's missing.

"My idea is that someday my girl, Julietita Salomé, will be a great searcher," he said. "She and Saturnino will dig up those we have been unable to find."

Since 2007, more than 1,300 clandestine graves have been discovered, according to Mexico's human-rights commission. On Monday, a group of investigative journalists said the government number was far too low. Based on data obtained through freedom-of-information requests from 24 of Mexico's 32 states for the years 2006 to 2016, the group said at least 1,978 clandestine graves had been discovered.



A complex of graves located last year near the Gulf Coast port of Veracruz has so far yielded the remains of 296 people. In September, at least 174 cadavers were found in another clutch of graves in the same state. Images of children's clothing found on the gravesite, including that of a 6-month-old infant, were put online, clues for parents searching for lost ones.

While most victims are young, male and poor, anyone can be disappeared in Mexico. Central American migrants hoping to illegally enter the U.S. are targets. At a recent protest to raise attention to the issue at Mexico's independence monument, relatives of a federal tax collector stood shoulder to shoulder with relatives of businessmen, a baker, and college students, each holding up large signs with photographs of their missing relatives and phone numbers where they could be reached.

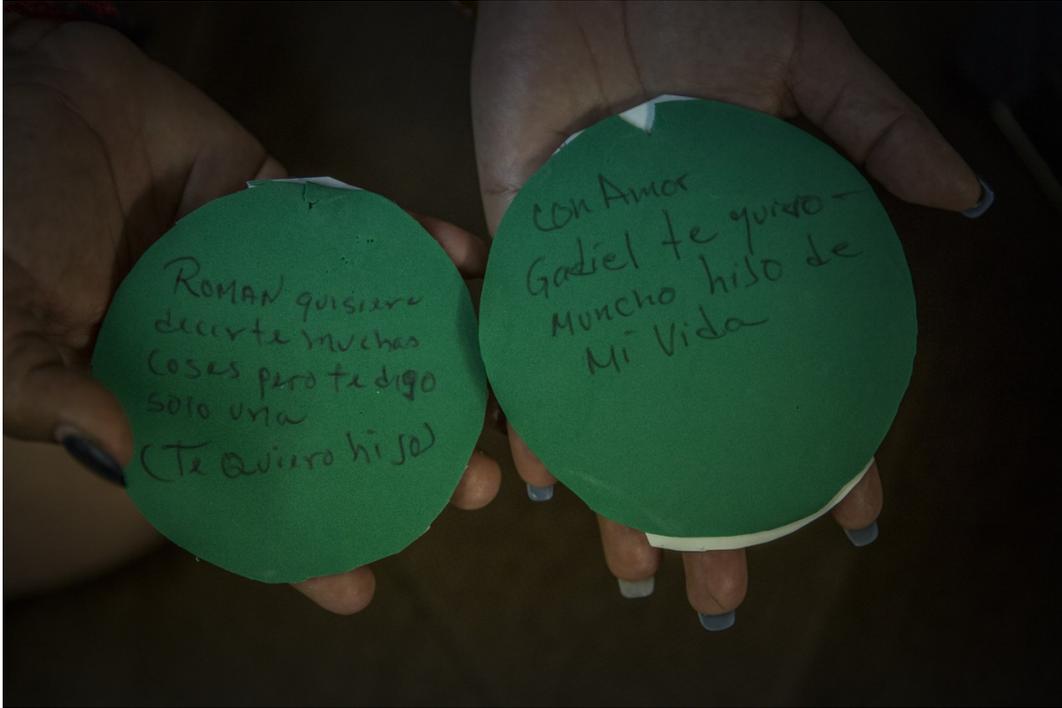
Mother's Day in Mexico, traditionally one of the country's most festive days, has become a somber affair with a now-annual silent march down Mexico City's elegant Reforma boulevard by mothers holding posters of their missing children. Billboards offering rewards for information on the missing mark some of the nation's highways; the pleas also appear on television as public-service ads.

No one knows with certainty how many Mexicans have disappeared. Victims' families as well as outside experts and government authorities all say the number is probably much higher than the official tally of just over 37,400.

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Nancy Gocher, spokeswoman for Serapaz, a group that helps coordinate survivor and search groups throughout the country, said they believe only four in 10 disappearances are reported to authorities. Michael Chamberlin, who consults for several human-rights organizations, said the total number of disappeared could be four times the official figure.

The main reason for not reporting is fear of reprisals by judicial authorities, criminals, and police, especially municipal police, who in many parts of Mexico collude with criminal gangs. The entire municipal police force in Acapulco was recently suspended on suspicion of cooperating with local gangs. Mexico's navy now patrols the port city.

"In more than a third of all disappearances, the perpetrators are identified as agents of the state," said Karina Ansolabehere, a researcher at México's National Autonomous University, citing studies of some 1,500 disappearances in the border states of Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas. The studies draw from testimony by relatives of the victims who were able to identify the kidnappers.

[Continue reading below:]



Mirna Nereida Medina, leader of the Trackers of El Fuerte, takes information for a new case.

The heavy involvement of Mexican government forces in the disappearances clashes with the image the government has long painted of the country's murder epidemic: that of gangs killing each other.

In 2016, Human Rights Watch produced a study that documented the involvement of security forces on 149 cases of what are known as "enforced disappearances" where the armed forces and Mexican police were involved.

Earlier this year, the U.N. accused Mexico's navy, whose marines work closely with U.S. counternarcotics intelligence and are often on the front lines of the drug war, of disappearing at least 23 people in the state of Tamaulipas, including five minors in the city of Nuevo Laredo, across from Laredo, Texas. The bodies of at least six of the disappeared were later found.

[Continue reading below:]



The area in Sinaloa state where mothers searched for bodies earlier this month.

Residents say many of the disappearances and killings took place when the marines went on a rampage after cartel gunmen attacked three navy patrols, killing a marine captain and wounding 12 marines in the predawn hours of Palm Sunday.

Miriam Villegas, 37, who works the night shift in a factory making auto parts, recently recounted in a halting voice how marines in a convoy of pickups stopped her 14-year-old son Adolfo, who had gone out to buy some food for a family party on Easter Sunday. The next day, she went out to the navy base where she had been told he had been taken, carrying with her a photograph of her son.

“Our captain has been killed, and now the innocent will pay for the sinners,” Ms. Villegas said an angry officer at the base told her, while denying the navy had taken her son. She said Adolfo wasn’t involved with any criminal gangs.

In response to the allegations by the U.N. and Mexico’s human-rights agency, the navy said in a statement it had brought all the 257 officers and men who were based in Nuevo Laredo to Mexico City. It said it would cooperate with all investigations and proceed “rigorously.”

The most notorious case of disappeared in Mexico laid bare the links between local security forces and criminal gangs. In 2014, 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teachers college in violent, heroin-producing Guerrero state were detained by police in the city of Iguala. A government investigation determined that the police turned the students over to gunmen from a local cartel who killed them, burned their bodies and threw the ashes into a nearby river.

After an independent probe, an international group of experts theorized that the students, who were taking part in an annual protest against a 1968 student massacre, unwittingly commandeered a local bus containing heroin bound for the U.S. Local police, meant to protect the shipment, believed the students were members of a rival cartel.

Until that case, Mexico's disappeared were mostly ignored. But the mass abduction shocked the nation, and gave them a public face. Since then, a loosely knit network of more than 50 *colectivos*—searchers' groups mostly composed of grieving mothers—has cropped up around the country.

“Ayotzinapa was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” said Ángela Buitrago, a former Colombian prosecutor who served on the international commission of experts.

[TEXT CONTINUES BELOW PHOTO]:



The search goes on for hidden graves in Sinaloa.

Only one bone fragment belonging to a missing student has been positively identified. In the months following Ayotzinapa, searchers looking for the lost students found remains belonging to more than 130 people who had previously disappeared, including a Ugandan-born Catholic priest.

The scandal forced Mexican authorities to enact a new law on disappearances in late 2017. The law orders the creation of a national registry of forensic data, which would include DNA information from unidentified and unclaimed bodies as well as DNA from relatives of the missing. The law prohibits the incineration or burial of unidentified bodies. A government-financed national search commission is supposed to search for the missing, a task that relatives have done, almost alone.

The new law is largely unfunded and barely operating. Advocacy groups say at least \$250 million is needed to implement it, but this year's budget grants only \$25 million. Some \$15 million of that sum was transferred to Mexico's 32 states.

So far, Mexico's government has managed to put a name to only 340 out of the 35,000 unidentified corpses in morgues and public cemeteries across the country, according to top government officials.

In September, residents found an 18-wheeler refrigerator truck rented by Jalisco state stuffed with 157 cadavers parked in an unused field. The morgue in the state capital of Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city, was crammed with unclaimed bodies that, under the new law, couldn't be buried. Bad smells and dripping blood from the truck led to the neighbors' gory discovery. Officials later acknowledged that a second truck was also being used to store bodies.

"Authorities have no political willingness to tackle this huge problem. We cannot enforce the law because we don't have the money," said Ismael Leyva, who is in charge of the unit for disappeared people at the government human-rights commission.

Ms. Buitrago, the former Colombian prosecutor, said identifying all the disappeared in Mexico is a job that conservatively could take 60 years.

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Los Mochis, Mexico.

The herculean task of searching for the missing will be the responsibility of Mexico's newly elected president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who takes office on Dec. 1.

Mr. López Obrador and his top officials went on a national tour to hear from victims' families. At a recent gathering in a full auditorium, the anguished cry of a grieving mother shattered a moment of silence called to honor the dead and missing. "We don't want any more silence," shouted Irinea Buendia, a gray-haired woman whose daughter was kidnapped and killed in 2010. "We want justice!"

"Justice! Justice! Justice!" shouted the relatives who filled the cavernous auditorium as Mr. López Obrador, dressed in an open-necked white shirt, sat stoned-faced while the crowd poured out its grief.

A moment later, the father of a missing girl exploded in loud shouts. "Mr. López Obrador, this is probably the last time I'm going to see you because they have told me they are going to kill me," said Fabián Sánchez Ordaz, waving papers that he said contained clues to the whereabouts of his 19-year-old daughter, a college student kidnapped in January in Iguala, the same town where the 43 students were disappeared. Mr. Sánchez fainted and was taken out of the auditorium.

Since that incident, Mr. Sánchez has continued to make the rounds of government offices. On a recent day, he called on the local state attorney's office in Iguala, where 11 prosecutors work in tiny cubicles surrounded by mountains of

case files stacked on the floors and desks. The office has about 700 criminal cases, 100 of them homicides.

“I’ve been knocking on doors for eight months,” Mr. Sánchez told the prosecutor. “I’m desperate.” Abraham Guerrero, the prosecutor, called the clerk to check the case file, but it has been transferred to Chilpancingo, the state capital, some 70 miles away.

Mr. Sánchez believes Dafne, his daughter, is still alive, since her body wasn’t found. He believes, and finds himself hoping, that she has been forced into prostitution, or doing other work for the cartel that snatched her.

The same day, Mr. Sánchez, carrying his folder with the photos of his daughter, made his first visit to the local morgue. It was a visit he’d been dreading.

Sitting on the morgue’s front desk was Lisseth Melchor, a young woman with a round face and a big smile. Ms. Melchor recognized Dafne immediately as a high-school classmate, and knew she was missing. She said she has Dafne’s photograph in her cellphone to check with every female corpse that comes in.

Mr. Sánchez broke down in tears. “I have a lot of faith that my daughter is alive,” he told Ms. Melchor.

Other families share that belief. Ms. Ortega from Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte, still remembers the night her daughter Zumiko vanished in 2016. Ms. Ortega was on the telephone with Zumiko, who was in a car driven by a friend named Eduardo when it was apparently stopped by local police in the nearby city of Los Mochis.

[Continue reading below:]



“She told me everything was going to be all right” as a police siren wailed in the background, Ms. Ortega said. “She told me she loved me and hung up.”

That was the last conversation Ms. Ortega had with her daughter.

The next morning she rushed to a neighborhood of Los Mochis after receiving a call from a family acquaintance saying she might find Zumiko there. She didn't.

"I believe she is alive, taken captive by a powerful narco," said Ms. Ortega.



Lizbeth Ortega shows one of the last photos she has of Zumiko.

For the first four months after the disappearance, Ms. Ortega's younger daughter Liliana, now 18, stopped talking, only nodding yes or no. She had slept in the same bed as Zumiko all her life.

As time went by, a friend of her daughter has told Ms. Ortega she spotted Zumiko, a baby in her arms, in the city of Guadalajara. She has also heard that the Zumiko and Eduardo were killed and buried in Los Mochis.

Each year, the family celebrates her birthday. "We buy her a cake, we have a party," she said.

In her cramped house, Ms. Ortega keeps Zumiko's room as if she had never left. The bed is full of Zumiko's stuffed animals. In one corner of the tiny dining room, there is a makeshift altar dedicated to Zumiko where her photograph is framed by images of St. Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patroness.

In Ms. Ortega's dreams, Zumiko is alive.

"I always dream she arrives at the house or at a family party. I run to her and hug and kiss her. She said everything is fine and that she needs to rest, and not to

ask where she's been. She goes to her room. I go to see that she's asleep, but she's not there. That's when I wake up," she said.



Lizbeth Ortega wears a shirt with her missing daughter's photo.

**Write to** José de Córdoba at [jose.decordoba@wsj.com](mailto:jose.decordoba@wsj.com) and Juan Montes at [juan.montes@wsj.com](mailto:juan.montes@wsj.com)

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See also:

**Hundreds of people in Mexico are kidnapped every year. And the problem's getting worse.**

<https://www.vox.com/2018/5/11/17276638/mexico-kidnappings-crime-cartels-drug-trade>

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A member of the 'Trackers of El Fuerte' holds human bones the group found in a clandestine burial site.

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