



House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on  
Human Rights Challenges in Mexico

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Statement of Stephanie Brewer  
Director for Mexico and Migrant Rights  
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

My name is [Stephanie Brewer](#) and I am Director for Mexico and Migrant Rights with [WOLA](#), the Washington Office on Latin America. I thank the Commission for convening this important hearing on human rights in Mexico.

Mexico faces numerous human rights challenges, which disproportionately impact groups affected by poverty and different forms of discrimination. I will not seek to mention all of these challenges. I will focus my testimony today on some of the most pressing human rights issues related to state and non-state violence, public security policies, and access to justice.

As my fellow panelists described, Mexico's human rights crisis includes both violence and abuses committed directly by state agents and the government's failure to provide justice and protection against widespread violence perpetrated by criminal groups. The central human rights problem facing Mexico is the lack of a reliable system to prevent and punish abuses and crimes by state and non-state actors. In this environment, violence is used as a low-cost tool of power by perpetrators who believe, often correctly, that Mexico's institutions will not investigate or prosecute them.

Mexico has now reached over 100,000 disappeared people. A 2021 [investigation](#) by WOLA found that only a handful of cases result in charges. Data provided by the Mexican government to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances in November 2021 indicate that only [2-6 percent](#) of disappearances have led to prosecutions. Impunity is also near-absolute for torture. Despite receiving [thousands](#) of criminal complaints for torture in recent years, the annual number of cases in which the National Prosecutor's Office brings charges are routinely counted in the single digits. At the state level, of 25 state judiciaries that responded to WOLA's information requests last year, only one reported torture convictions in 2020, and none reported convictions in the first half of 2021.

Human rights violations occur against a backdrop of record levels of lethal violence in Mexico, with over [36,000](#) annual homicides from 2018-2020. In 2021, 966 murders were classified as [femicides](#) by authorities, or murders of women for gender-based motives, with thousands more women murdered. According to the government's national [victimization survey](#), only about 10 percent of crimes against the population are reported. This is due largely to lack of trust and confidence in authorities. Between underreporting, lack of investigation, and lack of prosecution, overall impunity for crimes against the population is roughly 99 percent.

Mexico's federal government's response to crime has been to deploy the military in policing tasks. This strategy increased sharply—with U.S. support—during the presidency of Felipe Calderón beginning in 2006. Militarization was announced as a temporary measure while civilian institutions were reformed. Over 15 years later, annual homicides have more than tripled, disappearances have skyrocketed, and using the military to confront crime, while targeting kingpins in criminal structures, has led to the fragmentation and evolution of criminal groups. This has led to the diversification of their illicit activities and greater lethal violence as groups reconfigure. Mexico's population has suffered the consequences.

Current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has deepened the military model by replacing the civilian Federal Police with a National Guard that reports to a civilian ministry on paper, but is operationally controlled by the Ministry of Defense and composed overwhelmingly of military personnel. Military deployment in security tasks is at an all-time high. [Hundreds of thousands](#) of army, navy, and National Guard troops participate in policing and other domestic tasks and the armed forces have seen [budget](#) increases even amid austerity measures for other institutions.

Militarization fails to address Mexico's low rates of effective investigations of crimes and human rights violations. Mexico cannot militarily deploy its way out of this fundamental problem. It is this climate of impunity that perpetuates violence, corruption, and collusion between state and non-state criminal actors. It is thus vital that Mexico build capable, trustworthy and sufficiently resourced civilian security and justice institutions, especially at the state level. Such institutions require effective control mechanisms, and agents must reliably be held accountable for human rights violations and other crimes.

What does this mean for U.S. cooperation with Mexico? U.S. assistance has evolved and must evolve further to address these challenges. The Merida Initiative, the [over \\$3 billion](#) U.S. cooperation framework in place from 2008 to 2021, initially invested heavily in supporting a militarized, war-on-crime strategy, paying for aircraft and equipment. Under the Obama administration, the focus shifted increasingly to strengthening the rule of law. Late last year, the Mexican and U.S. governments replaced the Merida Initiative with the Bicentennial Framework. The new framework pledges a focus on violence reduction and a public health approach to problematic drug use. It is too early to judge the new Framework's success, but initial results [announced](#) by U.S. and Mexican officials in April focused largely on traditional actions such as targeted arrests and drug interdiction, showing that continued monitoring will be essential.

We recommend that the United States ensure that its cooperation with Mexico focus on improving the work of civilian institutions and the criminal justice system; accountability for corrupt and rights-violating agents; and support for the work, protection, and rights of victims, families, human rights defenders, and journalists, who face high levels of risk, as we have heard today. Ongoing focus areas of U.S. [human rights assistance](#) that should continue to be prioritized include implementation of Mexico's laws against torture, disappearances, and femicides; forensic identification capacity to help respond to the more than 50,000 unidentified bodies in government custody; and working with Mexican partners to improve the operation of Mexico's young adversarial [criminal justice system](#). We urge Congress to exercise its oversight capabilities to assess the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Mexico, ensuring that the stark lessons of the Merida Initiative lead to evidence-based improvements within the new Bicentennial Framework that will truly increase the population's safety and access to justice. Thank you.

### **Mexico's disappearance crisis**

In May 2022, Mexico reached the tragic [figure](#) of 100,000 disappeared and missing people, with more than 80 percent of these cases occurring since 2006, including almost 10,000 in 2021. Roughly a quarter of these more than 100,000 people are women and girls. Over 16,000 are children, and among these, the majority are girls. In the case of migrants, there is notable underreporting of these crimes in official databases, despite the high risk of disappearance they face.

For years, relatives of Mexico's disappearance victims—led especially by [women](#)—have been walking the streets and scouring the countryside in search of the tens of thousands of people who have been disappeared by private individuals, state agents, or people acting in collusion with authorities. Families turn to one institution after another and even conduct their own investigations to search for their loved ones alive, devoting time and resources to a search that can be as [dangerous](#) as it is difficult and exhausting. Grouped in the many collectives

that have sprung up across the country, families have also led the [forensic](#) search. Working with picks and shovels, they have discovered clandestine graves and extermination sites, facing risks, lack of resources, and extreme conditions. Groups of [Central American families](#) have arrived to search for their migrant relatives who have been disappeared in Mexican territory.

Disappearances generate continuous impacts on families, who experience both the pain of absence and the uncertainty of the fate of the disappeared person. Seeking to put an end to this cycle of violence and rupture of everyday life, families and collectives, in addition to going out to search, have not stopped demanding that the Mexican government provide truth, justice, and an end to these crimes. Their demands and participation have led in recent years to the adoption of important [norms](#) and the creation of [institutions](#) to address disappearances.

Despite the progress made, including hundreds of [discoveries and identifications of remains](#), today the absence of 100,000 people—a number that keeps growing—continues to have a devastating impact on Mexican society. This reality was exhibited, among others, in November 2021, when the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED Committee) [visited Mexico](#). The Committee visited 13 of Mexico's 32 states (Chihuahua, Mexico City, Coahuila, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, State of Mexico, Morelos, Nayarit, Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz), holding 48 meetings with more than 80 authorities and 33 meetings with hundreds of victims and dozens of victims' collectives and civil society organizations. Based on the information received, the Committee found that "the phenomenon of disappearance continues to be widespread over much of the territory of the State party in the face of which, as we have stated in the past, 'impunity and revictimization prevail'".

Following its visit to Mexico in November 2021, the UN CED Committee [stated](#):

During these two weeks, the victims with whom we spoke conveyed the image of a society overwhelmed by the phenomenon of disappearances, the systemic impunity and their powerlessness in the face of the inaction of some authorities. They pointed out that day by day, in their search for answers and justice, they suffer the indifference and lack of progress. They have vehemently expressed to us their pain and that disappeared persons are not numbers, but human beings. The search, the investigation, the establishment of responsibilities, the uncovering of the truth and comprehensive reparation are not always a priority for some of the authorities.

Each of these cases is an indescribable human drama. Their dimensions are such that they are leaving deep and irreparable marks for the victims, but also for society at large.

In the face of this reality, the root causes of disappearances have not been addressed. The security approach that has been adopted is not only insufficient, but also inadequate.

In this context, the fight against impunity cannot wait.

The impunity that exists in the overwhelming majority of cases contributes to more disappearances. WOLA's 2021 campaign [For Disappearances to End, Justice must Begin](#) highlighted how justice is failing the disappeared in Mexico from the very first step of the process: recognizing and investigating this crime. Despite the 2018 entry into force of the [General Law](#) against disappearances, in various states, the number of people who were disappeared from 2018-2020 [far exceeds](#) the number of investigations opened for disappearance crimes by the respective state prosecutors' offices. At the federal level, the Superior Audit Office (*Auditoría Superior de la Federación*, ASF) [found](#) that in 2020, the National Prosecutor's Office (*Fiscalía General de la República*, FGR) had more than 1,600 disappearance investigations pending; the ASF found that such cases remained in the investigation phase for years and were not prosecuted. The FGR's Special Prosecutor for disappearances [informed](#) WOLA that it had obtained no convictions for disappearance crimes from 2018-2020. Authorities have yet to establish some of the investigative and identification tools mandated by the General Law against disappearances, including the National Forensic Database (*Banco Nacional de Datos Forenses*).

As the CED Committee also noted following its visit to Mexico, “we received worrying information, both from authorities and victims, about varying patterns in the commission of enforced disappearances in different regions of the country, which operate simultaneously and evidence scenarios of collusion between State agents and organized crime.”

The crisis of disappearances is accompanied by a forensic crisis. An August 2021 report by the Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico reports more than [52,000 unidentified deceased persons](#) in public cemeteries and other state institutions, according to official data. The [Extraordinary Forensic Identification Mechanism](#) (*Mecanismo Extraordinario de Identificación Forense*, MEIF), proposed by families and civil society and [created](#) by the Mexican government, seeks to address the backlog in forensic identification, but its success will depend on receiving the full cooperation of prosecutors’ offices. At the same time, Mexican institutions must continue improving their forensic capacity and the operation and interconnection of their databases.

### **Impunity for torture in Mexico**

Torture has long been a widely documented practice in Mexico at the local, state, and federal levels. Police, military personnel, and prosecutors have been among the most commonly implicated authorities due to their use of torture to coerce confessions and statements from detainees (which may be entirely false). Torture impacts victims, families, and communities, as well as undermining the Mexican justice system itself, since it corrupts investigations, leads to the imprisonment of innocent people (with corresponding impunity for guilty parties), and teaches and normalizes the use of government institutions to commit and cover up crimes.

Impunity for torture in Mexico remains almost universal. According to the latest official human rights census, during 2020, the national and state-level human rights commissions [recorded](#) 2,128 acts of torture and 3,938 acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in complaints classified as presumed cases of human rights violations (a figure that does not purport to include all the cases that actually occurred in the country that year). However, of 25 state judiciaries that responded to WOLA’s information requests in mid-2021, only one reported torture convictions in 2020 (Sonora, with three convictions, all on appeal), and none reported convictions in the first half of 2021. The lack of convictions is due primarily to prosecutors’ failure to bring charges. At the federal level, the Special Prosecutor for torture within the National Prosecutor’s Office (FGR) reports having brought charges in [one](#) or [two](#) cases annually in recent years, despite [thousands](#) of federal torture complaints. Regarding the exclusion of evidence obtained under torture, only Baja California’s state judicial branch identified cases in which such evidence had been excluded in 2020 and 2021; the remaining 24 judiciaries that responded to WOLA either failed to provide data or reported that no evidence had been excluded or that they did not keep track of this information. The FGR has still not made the [National Registry of Torture Cases](#) operational, nor has the government adopted the National Program to Prevent and Punish Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; both are tools mandated by the 2017 [General Law](#) against torture.

### **The militarization of domestic policing tasks in Mexico**

Upon taking office in December 2006, president Felipe Calderón declared an [all-out war](#) on crime. Although military participation in policing and anti-drug tasks in Mexico was not new, the Calderón presidency ushered in the military’s current, central role in the anti-crime strategy. His government initiated a series of [militarized security operations](#), leading to [thousands of armed clashes involving military forces and tens of thousands of arrests](#) by military troops.

Calderón also oversaw [reforms](#) to the country’s civilian policing structure; he [stated](#) that his long-term objective was for civilian authorities to take over public security tasks. However, those reforms did not bring about the level of change needed to achieve police effectiveness and accountability. In the end, militarization continued throughout the Calderón administration. President Enrique Peña Nieto would [repeat, with some differences, the](#)

[same cycle](#) during his 2012-2018 presidency: he touted the creation of a new federal security force called the [Gendarmerie](#), ended up incorporating this force into the then Federal Police, and [maintained military deployment](#) throughout his term. Under current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the territorial deployment of security forces includes roughly [100,000](#) National Guard troops (a force that is primarily military in nature and operational structure). The army and navy also continue to participate directly in security tasks.

In short, despite some variations, militarization has morphed from a supposedly temporary measure into a long-term strategy. This perpetuates a cycle in which, instead of prioritizing efforts to address civilian institutions' weaknesses and deficiencies, the government cites these flaws to justify long-term militarization. This cycle leaves under-addressed the urgent challenges faced by police institutions at the state and local level, including corruption and human rights violations, but also such basic capacity issues as resources and professionalization.

As another component of the anti-crime model, successive Mexican administrations have targeted criminal kingpins for arrest, a tactic in which [Navy special forces](#) (belonging to the *Secretaría de Marina*, SEMAR) have played a leading role [with United States support](#). López Obrador initially [distanced himself](#) from the kingpin strategy, but there have been [examples](#) of kingpin arrests during his time in office, and in April 2022 Mexican authorities [announced](#) a series of recent, high-profile arrests as part of the initial results of the Bicentennial Framework, which in 2021 replaced the Merida Initiative as the framework that encompasses U.S.-Mexico security and rule of law cooperation.

The results of the militarized war on crime have been catastrophic. Annual homicides have more than tripled from the Calderón presidency onwards. Arrests and killings of kingpins have fostered the [fragmentation](#) of criminal groups, [leading to increased violence](#). Shoot-outs with security forces [trigger increases](#) in local homicide rates. The overwhelming majority of the over 100,000 cases of disappeared and missing people recorded by the government have occurred since 2006. A significant percentage of [homicides](#) and [disappearances](#) in recent years are concentrated in certain regions of the country, including several of Mexico's most [populous states](#).

The López Obrador administration has overseen a reduction in Mexican federal security forces' levels of frontal combat against criminal groups. Scaling back the use of warlike tactics that have increased violence without controlling insecurity can, in itself, be considered a positive step. However, this modification in the strategy has not been accompanied by appropriate and sufficient measures to address ongoing violence in the country. Today, a range of criminal groups continue to victimize the population. The foregoing confirms that authorities have not used these over 15 years of militarization to put in place sustainable and effective anti-violence measures at the national level. Instead of buying time for authorities to implement solutions, militarization has become the addiction that postpones those solutions indefinitely.

Mexico's militarized war on crime has also triggered high levels of [serious human rights violations](#). [Enforced disappearances](#) committed by the [army](#), the [navy](#), and other security forces (including at the state and municipal level) soon became one of the most high-profile expressions of this human rights crisis. Another widely documented pattern has been the [arbitrary detention and torture](#) of civilians, including the torture of innocent people subsequently charged for crimes they did not commit. Although torture was already widespread before the Calderón administration, [militarization](#) and the war-on-crime model were important [aggravating](#) factors in its commission. According to an [analysis](#) by the World Justice Project based on data from the 2016 National Survey of People Deprived of Liberty, 88 percent of people detained by the navy and 85 percent of people detained by the army from 2006-2016 reported torture or ill-treatment. According to the same official survey, 41 percent of women detained by the navy, 21 percent of women detained by the army, and 10-13 percent of women detained by police forces reported having [survived rape](#) in the context of the detention.



Finally, there are numerous documented [cases](#) of the armed forces killing civilians who posed no imminent threat and/or who were not participating in any crime, thus constituting [extrajudicial or arbitrary executions](#). The perpetrators have repeatedly altered the scenes of these crimes. In a 2010 example, soldiers arbitrarily killed [two students from the Monterrey Institute of Technology](#) and planted weapons on the victims. Another example of scene alteration is the 2014 [Tlatlaya](#) case, in which it was also revealed that the soldiers responsible for killing a group of civilians had been operating under orders to “[take out criminals](#)” during nighttime hours. In July 2020, part of an extrajudicial execution committed by soldiers was [captured on video](#) in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas—one of a series of civilian deaths at the hands of soldiers in that city over the past two years, according to documentation by the non-governmental [Nuevo Laredo Human Rights Committee](#). In March 2021, the dangers of militarizing Mexico’s southern border were illustrated by the arbitrary killing of a [Guatemalan citizen](#) by a soldier in Chiapas. Over the past year, the National Guard has been implicated in arbitrary killings of civilians including a [student](#) and a [Cuban migrant](#).

Serious violations committed by authorities, coupled with militarization’s failure to curb violence, have led many actors to [call on successive administrations](#) to demilitarize and transform the country’s security model. Both human rights [organizations](#) and [families](#) who have [experienced firsthand](#) serious military abuses or the criminal violence unleashed by the war on crime have demanded an end to State violence and a change in strategy.

In this context, it is vital that Mexico’s authorities address the structural factors driving violence—starting with the State’s own role in violent phenomena. As [exemplified](#) in a series of [high-profile cases](#) over the last decade and a half, criminal groups routinely benefit from the tolerance or participation of State actors. The power exercised at different levels by criminal networks today can be understood only in light of [this reality](#), whose consequences include a lack of effective investigation of both regional and local patterns of violence (which go well beyond the activities of transnational cartels). An effective security model also requires prioritizing the true reform and professionalization of civilian police institutions, breaking the cycle of militarizing indefinitely as a failed response to police corruption and local forces’ lack of capacity. Achieving this requires overcoming once and for all the historic lack of commitment to police reform at all three levels of government.

Despite all the foregoing, the López Obrador administration continues to deepen different forms of [militarization](#) and [militarism](#) in Mexico. Today, military deployment in security tasks in Mexico is at its highest level, including both army and navy troops and the National Guard. The government also plans to [convert](#) the National Guard into one of the armed forces under the command of the Defense Ministry (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA), a role that it already fulfills in practice. Another expression of militarization under past Mexican governments has been the designation of military officers to occupy civilian positions. This pattern not only continues today, but López Obrador has publicly [recommended](#) to incoming governors that they consult with the heads of SEDENA and SEMAR before appointing their state public security ministers. According to [media counts](#) in late 2021, at least [nine](#) state public security ministers came from the armed forces. At the federal level, among other examples, the National Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos*, CNDH) and numerous migrants’ shelters [expressed](#) their serious concern in December 2020 because “in 18 states, people with a military background have been placed in charge of the state branches or offices” of the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM).

Another indicator of the growing role of the military is the growth in its budget. According to an [analysis](#) by NGO *México Evalúa*, funding for the armed forces (counting the National Guard) has gone “from being only 18% higher” than funding for relevant civilian federal institutions in 2018 “to being 271% higher” in 2022.

#### **U.S.-Mexico cooperation under the Merida Initiative (2008-2021)**

[The Merida Initiative](#), a framework for security, rule of law, and drug control cooperation, was adopted in [2008](#) following a series of talks between then-presidents Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush. While it included technical assistance and other support for civilian police and justice institutions, the Merida Initiative initially embraced a war-on-crime approach, investing significant resources in equipping and supporting Mexico's federal security forces, including the military. From fiscal years (FY) 2008 to 2010, the U.S. Congress appropriated [more than USD\\$420 million](#) in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) under the Merida Initiative. Merida funding provided [over \\$590 million](#) worth of aircraft to Mexico's federal security forces during these three years.

Starting in FY2011, the Merida Initiative [evolved](#) to focus on four priority "pillars" of action, namely:

1. Combating transnational criminal organizations through intelligence sharing and law enforcement operations
2. Institutionalizing the rule of law while protecting human rights through justice sector reform, forensic equipment and training, and police and corrections reform
3. Creating a 21st-century U.S.-Mexican border while improving immigration enforcement in Mexico
4. Building strong and resilient communities by piloting approaches to address root causes of violence and reduce drug demand

Under the four pillars, Merida Initiative [projects](#) over the last decade have aimed to professionalize security and justice institutions, support Mexico's transition to an adversarial criminal justice system, combat corruption, and promote human rights, among other objectives. Such projects are [managed](#) by the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In total, Congress appropriated more than [\\$3 billion](#) under the Merida Initiative.

As for military support, FMF funding for Mexico fell drastically beginning in FY2011, and after that, the FMF account was no longer considered part of the Merida Initiative. In FY2022, Congress appropriated [\\$6 million](#) in FMF for Mexico. For its part, the U.S. [Department of Defense](#) provides [assistance](#) to Mexico separately. In FY2019, military cooperation with Mexico totaled some [\\$55.3 million](#). Based on WOLA's monitoring of information from the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the Department of Defense provided more than \$630 million to Mexico from FY2008-FY2018.

### **The new U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework**

On October 8, 2021, the governments of Mexico and the United States announced a new security and rule of law cooperation plan: the [Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities](#). The new agreement replaces the Merida Initiative, which was pronounced "[dead](#)" by Mexican authorities in July 2021. The [Joint Statement](#) announcing the Framework proposes "a modern approach of public health and development." The two governments pledge to work together towards three main objectives:

- **Protect our people** by investing in public health as related to the impacts of drug use, supporting safe communities, and reducing homicides and high-impact crimes.
- **Prevent transborder crime** by securing modes of travel and commerce, reducing arms trafficking, targeting illicit supply chains, and reducing human trafficking and smuggling.
- **Pursue criminal networks** by disrupting illicit financiers and strengthening security and justice sectors.

To achieve these objectives, according to the Joint Statement, authorities will implement strategies in the following areas (our summary):

- Reduce "substance abuse disorder and associated harms."
- Address the transportation and regulation of precursor chemicals used to manufacture drugs such as fentanyl.

- Create a Network for Homicide Prevention to exchange best practices and work with communities and at-risk youth, with the possibility of multidisciplinary Homicide Task Forces to support investigation and prosecution of high-impact crimes.
- Combat arms trafficking from the United States to Mexico.
- Expand binational cooperation against human smuggling and trafficking.
- Address cybercrime and promote security in cyberspace.
- Strengthen forensic cooperation to help solve and punish disappearance cases in Mexico.

## **Recommendations for the implementation of the Bicentennial Framework**

To improve security in Mexico, it is necessary to transform the environment of impunity that enables current levels of violence. Several existing areas of bilateral cooperation remain relevant to increasing Mexico's institutional capacity to provide access to justice to its population. In particular, we recommend that the United States ensure that its cooperation with Mexico under the Bicentennial Framework focus on improving the work of civilian institutions and the criminal justice system; accountability for corrupt and rights-violating agents; and support for the work, protection, and rights of victims, families, human rights defenders, and journalists, who face high levels of risk. Ongoing focus areas of U.S. [human rights assistance](#) that should continue to be prioritized include implementation of Mexico's laws against torture, disappearances, and femicides; forensic identification capacity to help respond to the more than 50,000 unidentified bodies in government custody; and working with Mexican partners to improve the operation of Mexico's young adversarial [criminal justice system](#).

We also echo recommendations made at a prior [hearing](#) of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in which family member Grace Fernández highlighted the importance of U.S. support for Mexico's new Extraordinary Forensic Identification Mechanism (MEIF) and the relevance of information-sharing by the U.S. Department of Justice and other U.S. agencies with information on potential victims or perpetrators of disappearances in Mexico.

To improve access to justice, it is also crucial to support the operation of databases such as those ordered by Mexico's laws against disappearance and torture, and to strengthen broader efforts to ensure that criminal investigations analyze patterns of violence and make full use of [context analysis](#). Beyond building capacity, security and investigative bodies require effective internal and external accountability mechanisms. In this area, [lessons learned](#) from the United States' broad range of experiences with external [police oversight](#) can continue to inform discussions and incipient [initiatives](#) to construct external supervision mechanisms in Mexico.

In addressing transborder crime, a topic that requires urgent bilateral attention is the [kidnapping and extortion](#) of migrants, a crime that tends to victimize people on both sides of the border: kidnapped migrants in Mexico and relatives in the United States who receive ransom demands. The two governments should establish protocols that allow families to report kidnappings to U.S. authorities without fear of deportation and that set out appropriate responses by Mexican authorities, prioritizing the liberation and security of the kidnapped migrants as well as the investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

All areas of the Bicentennial Framework will require clear indicators to measure results, recalling that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) [identified](#) deficiencies in monitoring the Merida Initiative's impacts with reference to its goals, objectives, and risks.

Finally, the fact that the Bicentennial Framework's initial documents speak of a public health approach rather than a "war on drugs" is not just the product of an evolving dialogue between two governments: it reflects U.S. and Mexican civil society documentation and proposals over many years. Victims, collectives, and organizations play a fundamental role in achieving real-world advances in health, security, and justice. Their voices and recommendations should be taken into account by both governments.