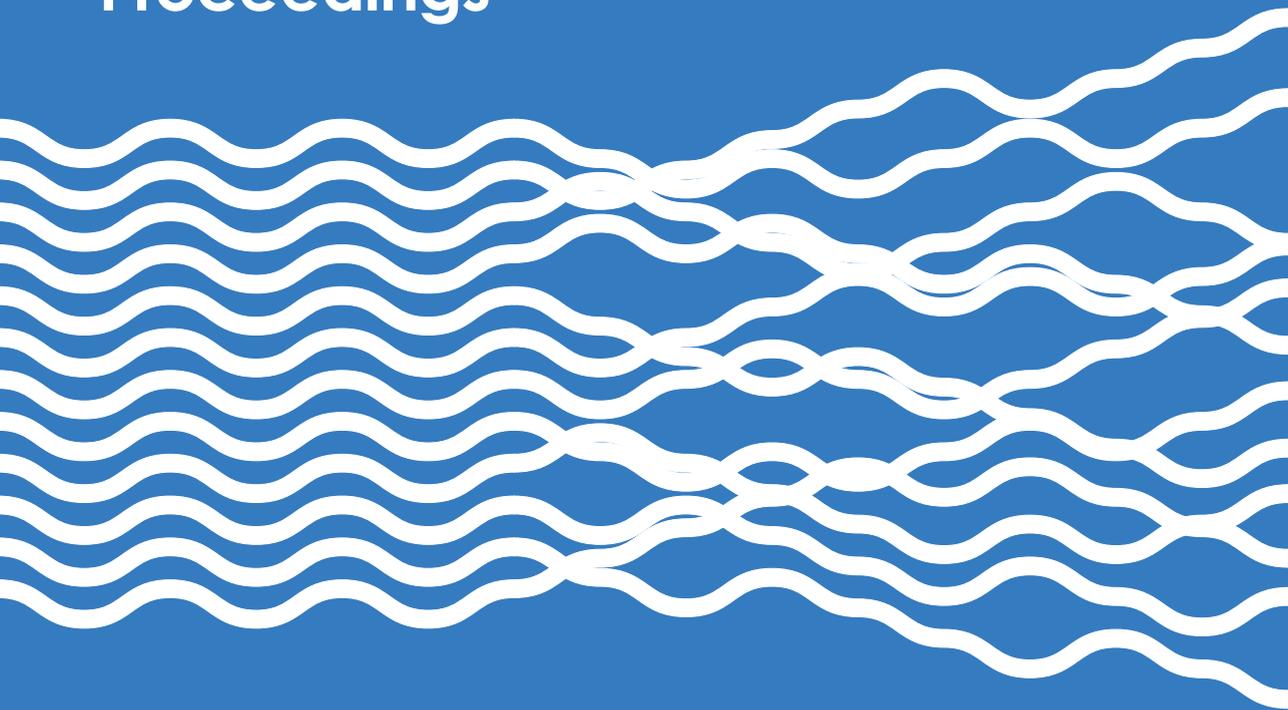


Conference Proceedings

 Sharing Society



International Conference

Sharing Society

**The Impact of Collaborative Collective Actions
in the Transformation of Contemporary Societies**

May 23-24, 2019 • Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea • Bilbao, Spain

Benjamín Tejerina, Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Ignacia Perugorria
Editors



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Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic (MAKE). Beyond Elite Counter-Measures towards Citizen-Led Innovation

Conor O'Reilly and Camilo Tamayo Gomez
University of Leeds

Abstract: *This paper presents an overview of the project Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic (MAKE): Beyond Elite Counter-Measures towards Citizen-Led Innovation. This initiative has charted the shifting topography of the Mexican kidnapping epidemic and examined various 'mobile solutions' that have emerged to counter it. The purpose of this research intervention has been to shed new light on this illicit industry and its effects, to provide a deeper understanding of kidnapping that informs and innovates citizen-led responses. The project has two aims. First, to engage with activists, victims and their families to explore the potential of citizen-led counter-kidnapping. Second, to track the complex mobilities triggered by kidnapping, examining those 'mobile solutions' that have emerged in response to it. Aware that activist-citizens are developing their own strategies to address this threat, this initiative not only sets out to document and to understand their approaches, but also to explore how everyday practices and technologies can be adapted into them. It spotlights how kidnapping both reiterates and exacerbates social and security inequalities, our analysing the strategies deployed by elites and subalterns, as well as the transborder and migratory effects of kidnapping.*

The key research question at the core of this project is: how do you counter kidnapping when you cannot access private solutions or rely on the state? Answering this question, we are working to develop a portfolio of counter-kidnapping resources that build community resilience and strengthen civic action against this pervasive threat to Mexican society. Working collectively with civic-action groups, victims groups, human rights defenders and technology specialists, this initiative is currently co-producing a counter-kidnapping toolkit that we will make available to ordinary Mexican citizens. This project is designed to not just build counter-kidnapping capacity in Mexico from the perspective of citizen-led innovation. Its ultimate aim is to leave a legacy of empowered Mexican citizens who will continue to collectively confront this threat, bringing forward much needed social change, and contributing to more sustainable security across Mexican society.

This initiative echoes ongoing Latin American debates about how social justice can be achieved 'from below', as well as how security can be achieved in states of impunity. In the realm of counter-kidnapping policy interventions, we are conscious of the 'hard' policy transfers of military tactics and security expertise that are flowing from Colombia to Mexico in relation to kidnapping. However, this project sets out to open new channels for 'soft' transfers; to facilitate and forge connections between civic activists that hold the potential to catalyse and inspire innovative counter-kidnapping approaches that are both citizen-led but also tailored to context.

Keywords: *Kidnapping, mobile solutions, citizen-led innovation, insecurity, Mexico*

1. Introduction

Kidnapping has emerged as a major source of societal insecurity in Mexico, with public authorities recording 1,698 kidnappings in 2013. However, despite this being the highest number on record, official statistics reflect only a small fraction of incidents and the majority of kidnappings go unreported. Police complicity, high levels of impunity, failure to uphold the rule of law; all have eroded public confidence in state capacity to combat this illicit practice. Thus the insecurity born of kidnapping pervades Mexican society and the so-called 'democratization' of this threat ensures that it is no longer just the rich who are exposed (Ochoa, 2012). This criminal phenomenon also manifests extra-territorial reach as its ramifications seep across the US-Mexico border.

In this context, the project *Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic (MAKE): Beyond Elite Counter-Measures towards Citizen-Led Innovation* is charting the shifting topography of the Mexican kidnapping epidemic and examining various 'mobile solutions' that have emerged to counter it. These include strategies such as internal/external migration, cross-border security services, escort security, and, even personal GPS locator chips. However, the ambitions of this initiative extend beyond these multiple mobilities and the protection of wealthy elites, to engage with innovative 'citizen-led' responses. Working with activist-citizens, NGOs and human rights defenders, this transnational academic collaboration is building capacity within Mexico by developing a portfolio of counter-kidnapping resources.

One of the principal aims of this project is to provide answers to the key question: *how do you counter kidnapping when you cannot access private solutions or rely on the state?* For this reason, and through Participatory Action Research (PAR) with activists and victims' groups, this academic initiative is exploring the potential of different resources to address the kidnaping epidemic in Mexico from a citizen led perspective. These resources included a counter-kidnapping handbook, a support-network that links the families of kidnap victims with civic activists, and a mobile-phone 'app' developed with various features, including the capacity to act as both a secret alerting system and also as a secure, confidential and anonymous reporting mechanism.

Harnessing the potential of new technological resources through our collaborators at the Artificial Intelligence Lab of Tec de Monterrey, the project *MAKE* is exploring new mechanisms through which to foster strategies of peer-to-peer security planning, to strengthen victims' independence and to improve their capacities to assist others. Within our project, we work to integrate new technology into citizen-led counter-kidnapping, fusing personal security protocols with technological advances to bring forth much needed social change. Whilst the connection between security and technology is often framed in terms of social or mobility control in academic debates, this research takes an alternate approach. The project examines how technology can facilitate, rather than restrict, mobility, as well as how it can both protect human rights and those who defend them.

By making smartphone technology available to participants and engaging and training them through the co-production of our counter-kidnapping app, this research initiates a feedback process through which socio-technical intervention is targeted towards the specific challenges of kidnapping in Mexico. Drawing on the research team's expertise in participatory action



research ('PAR') with a technological dimension, this project harnesses the transformative potential of PAR to innovate technology for social impact. Our project is ambitious in seeking to not only track this illicit phenomenon across Mexico's social classes and territorial boundaries, but also to harness deeper understanding of kidnapping to both inform and innovate citizen responses. By extending counter-measures against kidnapping beyond entrepreneurial private security solutions for wealthy elites towards wider societal benefit through citizen-led action, this project pioneers new thinking on how to guarantee security when states fail to uphold the rule of law. Furthermore, as kidnapping is a regional problem across Latin America, this research is not only building Mexican capacity, it is also providing a template that can be adapted for other contexts.

The paper is set out in three sections. The first part traces the illicit phenomenon of kidnapping across Mexico. It emphasises the challenges of delivering kidnapping research and the relationship between kidnapping, insecurity and (im)mobility for this particular context. The second part examines the aims, purposes, and methodology of this Citizen-Led Counter Kidnapping project. The final part concludes with some views on understanding how valuable avenues to counter-kidnapping exist outside the orthodox response channels of state interventions or private security actions (the citizen-led perspective), and proposes some recommendations for research-informed policy.

2. Kidnapping in Mexico. The Research Challenges¹

Kidnapping has long been a neglected topic for academic research (Tzanzelli, 2006). However, this lack of scholarly attention rests even more surprising given kidnapping's contemporary prevalence across the Global South (IKV Pax Christi, 2008), especially in countries such as Mexico where the rule of law is weak and the rate of impunity high. Although there have been a number of thoughtful reflections on this phenomenon and potential ways to address it (Bailliet, 2010), these studies have tended towards broad analytical approaches that lack contextual nuance. Indeed, it is only in recent work by Ochoa (2011; 2012), on the self-protection strategies used by residents from a wealthy neighbourhood in Mexico City, that context-driven empirical analysis has been brought to scholarship on this illicit practice.²

Kidnapping is also bound-up with issues of insecurity and immobility. It entails deprivation of liberty but is also a crime threat that travels. It is a source of mass insecurity across diverse states where impunity reigns, but is also an emergent feature of smuggling discourse. In some cases, kidnapping represents a violent and parasitic by-product of irregular migration. It has been charted across transit routes through countries such as Mexico and Libya where migrants' precarious mobility leaves them vulnerable to criminal exploitation. The scale of this illicit practice is communicated in public representations of kidnapping that present its pervasive prevalence through terms such as 'epidemic,' 'industry,' and even 'business' (the latter reflecting how both licit and illicit private actors derive profit from kidnap and ransom scenarios) (Lakhani, 2017; Leutert, 2016; Yates & Leutert 2018).

However, despite the significant media attention that highlights kidnapping victimisation –whether in terms of domestic citizens or smuggled migrants– this phenomenon remains comparatively under-examined, under-theorised and neglected in terms of policy intervention.

Certainly, the increased incidence of violent, exploitative abductions –both in Mexico and across the globe– is acknowledged, but the sources informing debate around kidnapping are highly problematic and media representations are often characterised by a sensationalist focus on its violence. In terms of research attention, a tendency still remains to focus upon more orthodox kidnapping forms –kidnap for ransom of wealthy elites or the more politically and ideologically-oriented kidnappings conducted by terrorist organisations– to the neglect of other, more complex mutations of this illicit practice. Quite simply, kidnapping is an age-old criminal phenomenon but its contemporary manifestations are shaped by both local dynamics and global patterns.

Kidnapping has emerged as a massive source of societal insecurity in Mexico. In a context of fear, mass distrust of law enforcement, failed state initiatives and high-levels of impunity, the insecurity born of kidnapping has become pervasive and the country is viewed as a global kidnapping hotspot. As Ochoa remarks in one of the more empirically-robust investigations of kidnapping in Mexico City, it is ‘Not just the rich’ who are now targeted; victimisation having undergone a process of ‘democratisation’ (Ochoa, 2012). Whilst wealthy elites insulate themselves from kidnap risk through private security measures, as well as leveraging political and economic capital to enhance their protection, cash-rich (but mobility poor) targets from within the middle/lower classes are increasingly targeted– sometimes multiple times. The threat is such that many non-victims are aware that they may be kidnap prospects and take this risk into account as a matter of daily routine.

Of course, other contextual specifics also shape the topography of kidnapping across Mexico, not least ongoing narco-violence and the resultant insecurity, exacerbated by interventions such as the Mérida Initiative and its militarizing impact. Mexico’s location as a transit country for Central American refugees and migrants travelling to the United States, has also witnessed them become kidnap targets for criminal groups and cartels such as Los Zetas who derive massive profits from migrant kidnapping. These abductions represent one of a range of predatory crimes to which migrants may fall victim during their arduous travel North (Vogt, 2018).

The entry point for much commentary on kidnapping is, all too often, disturbing statistics or graphic accounts of the human suffering it causes. Making a spectacle of kidnap-related violence and suffering, or promoting problematic statistical claims, are unhelpful entry-points to an illicit practice that remains poorly understood. We must look for stronger empirical foundations to better comprehend and address kidnapping. This is easier said than done. To pursue impactful research, we must first acknowledge the unique combination of challenges that are posed by kidnapping research.

Kidnapping is a highly-sensitive research subject. It is taboo for many Mexicans, who even if they have not personally experienced its effects, are aware of, and inhibited by, its threat. For those who have been directly affected –whether as a kidnap victim or their relative or friend– this is a heavily traumatic experience which they may constantly relive, but have little wish to re-visit. Even before engaging with research into kidnapping, we must recognise that many of those affected will not report this crime to the authorities: whether through fear of reprisal by kidnapers; through fear of law enforcement complicity; or, through the lack of confidence in state capacity to effectively address this threat. In the case of irregular migrants, they may also fear deportation. These concerns all render issues of access, consent and ethics especially challenging.



Underreporting inevitably renders statistical claims regarding kidnapping problematic. However, public commentary on kidnapping still betrays a desire for quantification and there are multiple attempts to impose form onto this opaque criminal practice. Albeit that to do so is, to try and measure the unmeasurable (Merry, 2016). Public security agencies, public research organisations, human rights NGOs, anti-kidnapping activists or private security companies, all compile kidnapping statistics. However, these diverse sources are marked by huge disparities, as well as methodological blind spots. For example, the 2014 collation of official reports by the *Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública* placed the number of kidnappings at 1,395 whilst the victimisation surveys of the *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública* estimated 102,883 kidnappings for the same year. Figures from other groups fall between this range.

Official reports/statistics are also shaped by variable police reporting patterns. In Mexico, there are concerns about inconsistencies in reporting practices across the country, as well as general under-reporting. In the United States, domestic kidnapping statistics in Phoenix were manipulated and linked to exacerbated insecurities around irregular migration from Mexico (Sanchez, 2015). Even victims' families may intentionally corrupt kidnap statistics in their pursuit of missing loved ones who have disappeared without a trace; they may report a disappearance as a kidnapping to trigger police investigation. Kidnapping statistics must therefore be subject to significant *caveats* and more effective ways to collect/compile kidnap statistics explored. Kidnapping research must also account for the multiple, and mutating, manifestations of this criminal phenomenon. In the Mexican context, kidnapping is not a distinct criminal activity but one that both takes different forms and is also part of a spectrum of criminality. It may be carefully planned or it may be opportunistic. It may be a traditional case of extorting ransom, or it may be a form of revenge, threat or intimidation, a mechanism of extracting labour for the drug-trade or sex-trade, it may even be a mechanism of recruitment into cartel activity.

Moreover, there is a temporal dimension to kidnapping that must also be recognised; kidnapping events can have different endings (most commonly release; disappearance; or, death) and victim status may therefore evolve. This is manifest in the memorial-plaques to victims placed at the top of Mexico City's Paseo de la Reforma, some of which read '*Fui secuestrado y estoy desaparecido*' ('I was kidnapped and I am disappeared'). To truly understand the problem of kidnapping in Mexico, we must also consider the relationship between kidnapping and disappearance. Approached from a different angle, the boundaries between extorting smuggled migrants and kidnapping them may also be difficult to discern.

To sum up this first part, it is important to highlight that kidnapping cannot therefore be researched in isolation from other overlapping criminal activities. The patterns which these will take, inevitably, vary by context. For example, in the case of migrant kidnapping – and also speaking to aforementioned sensationalised media coverage – recent attention has focused on the linkage between migrant kidnapping and slave markets in Libya and other African settings. We also know little about the micro-economies that support kidnapping: victims must be held captive – housed, fed, secured; negotiations must be conducted; ransom payments must be made/transferred. Kidnapping has its own eco-system and again the research around this is limited.

3. Citizen-Led Counter Kidnapping. A Better Way Forward

Confronted with this dearth of academic research, the project *Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic (MAKE): Beyond Elite Counter-Measures towards Citizen-Led Innovation* is examining the range of ‘mobile solutions’ that have emerged to counter the problem of kidnapping (as well as its transborder effects in Mexico’s northern borderlands). Across Mexico, activist-citizens are developing their own protection strategies (Shirk, Wood and Olson 2014), gathering kidnap-related intelligence and forging counter-measures against this threat. Such civic responses are already linking social media and GPS technologies in ways that have witnessed victims’ relatives share knowledge and even uncover the tracks of kidnappers. In some exceptional cases, these efforts, which combine engagement with new technology and the determination to find loved ones, have even resulted in the liberation of victims (BBC World Service 2014).

Such sporadic successes rest in striking contrast to the limited impact of a decade of close cooperation between Mexican and US criminal justice agencies; their elite cooperation has not

translated into either kidnap-reduction or increased trust in public security agencies (Olson, Shirk and Wood, 2014). Indeed, current policy packaging of capacity building and technology-transfer has privileged a state-centric approach to this problem; a questionable move in a context where some local governments have strong ties to organised crime; as demonstrated by the ‘disappearance’ of 43 students in Iguana Guerrero following collaboration between local police and drug-traffickers in 2014. In this context, the project *MAKE* is giving citizen-activists the opportunity to reinforce their own security networks and to innovate tools to confront kidnapping. To deliver this, the initiative is working with new technologies such as panic button apps. Creating alternative knowledge infrastructures, outside the state, this collaborative project is offering new forms of political engagement and contestation to defend human rights and protect liberty.

By focusing on, and working to strengthen civic responses to kidnapping in Mexico, the project *MAKE* is connecting with wider citizen-led initiatives against crime and violence in Mexico (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago, 2016). The project echoes ongoing Latin American debates about how social justice can be achieved ‘from below’, as well as how security can be achieved in states of impunity. The fact that kidnapping is a major regional problem also signals wider relevance of this initiative. Indeed, the focus on ‘mobile solutions’ is engaging with initiatives emerging from other Latin American contexts. Moreover, whilst the project is conscious that ‘hard’ policy transfers of military tactics and security expertise are flowing from Colombia to Mexico in relation to kidnapping, *MAKE* is opening channels for ‘soft’ transfers amongst civic activists that hold potential to catalyse and inspire innovative counter-kidnapping approaches tailored to the Mexican context.

3.1. Research Objectives and Methodology

The research objectives for this project are:

- 1) To explore diverse non-state counter-kidnapping strategies in Mexico; to identify what can



be achieved independent of state intervention in circumstances of impunity, weak rule of law and mass distrust of law enforcement agencies.

- 2)** To develop a portfolio of citizen-led counter-kidnapping resources that both strengthen victims' independence and improve their capacities to assist others and bring forth much needed social change.
- 3)** To test the potential for innovative deployment of modern technology in counter kidnapping by providing activist-citizens with smartphone tech and training in a co-produced counter-kidnapping app; to not only disseminate this tool, but to use it as a catalyst for peer-to-peer security planning and as a platform for developing a secure reporting mechanism.
- 4)** To engage with both transnational security consultants and local counter-kidnapping activists to integrate knowledge from contrasting approaches to this threat; to facilitate exchange between entrepreneurial (private security), communitarian (social movements) and citizen-led (victims' groups) efforts to address this problem.
- 5)** To trace the impact of kidnapping across and beyond the Mexican context, not least its transborder effects; to understand how a crime problem centred on deprivation of liberty catalyses multiple mobilities and 'mobile solutions'.
- 6)** To further strengthen Mexican capacity to combat kidnapping by forging a transnational community to counter kidnapping; to connect with NGOs, human rights defenders and civic-action groups from other Latin American contexts.

Through a structured programme of participatory action research workshops, this project is providing a forum where a counter-kidnapping toolkit can be co-produce, where training can be provided and where knowledge-exchange can be fostered. These activities are helping to tailor counter-kidnapping to the needs and expectations of those most affected by it. Through a process of co-producing and co-governing counter-kidnapping resources, the methodology of this initiative is focusing on citizen-led intervention to assist those at the frontline of kidnapping response. This research is highlighting how valuable avenues to counter-kidnapping exist outside the orthodox response channels of state interventions or private security actions. To date such initiatives in the Mexican context, have centred on the emergence of activist-citizens, but they may also be detected in migrants' resistance mechanisms to predatory violence on migration routes through Mexico (Vogt 2013; 2016; 2018).

Through ethnographic inputs and engagement in the participatory elements of this research, users from Mexican NGOs and victims' groups concerned with kidnapping are both shaping, and directly benefitting from, the methodology of this project. Their involvement in the cycle of PAR events have ensured ongoing feedback into research design and execution. Their contributions to group work are facilitating knowledge-exchange on counter-kidnapping. In addition, their engagement in training exercises had stimulated peer-to-peer security planning. In other words, all these activities have contributed to the development of all three key non-academic outputs of this project: a citizen-led counter-kidnapping handbook, a support network for victims/their families, and, a counter-kidnapping smartphone app.

Whilst this project has relevance for those activist groups already engaged in the struggle against kidnapping, this project is also becoming relevant for Mexican federal institutions, as well as for international organizations actively combatting kidnapping in Latin America and further afield. Whilst the international community's efforts to date have focused on state action and/or international co-operation, our project is addressing calls for parallel efforts to promote

and strengthen citizen-engagement. Working with our collaborators from Mexican civil society and our consultant technology developers, this project sits at this nexus between human rights and technology. It offers potential benefits to both spheres and is highly relevant for groups exposed to risks of abduction, kidnapping and disappearance, for example, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, and investigative reporters.

As a result, both experiential and technological elements of this research are taking interest of global risk professionals that are active in the kidnapping field. Security consultants, providers of emergency assistance, and insurance specialists are seeing value in our findings on Mexican kidnapping patterns. As our research agenda is raising awareness of what citizens can do in the face of kidnapping, the citizen-led approach, it is important to express that open access resources are integral to the impact strategy of this initiative. That is the reason why we are working with local communications experts to maximize project impact via a context-tailored website that is hosting our key findings, research briefings, project outputs, media information, and, a discussion forum.

4. Conclusions

Drawing upon ongoing research into kidnapping in Mexico, this paper has spotlighted the acute research challenges that confront those investigating this phenomenon, as well as potentially more effective means to respond to its threat (the Citizen-led approach). It has reviewed the main aims, methodology and characteristics of the collaborative project *Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic (MAKE): Beyond Elite Counter-Measures towards Citizen-Led Innovation*. It has been argued that this research seeks not only to shed new light on this illicit practice, but also to foster new strategies of intervention to counter and respond to kidnapping from a citizen and collaborative perspective. Whilst this project has been designed towards promoting more sustainable security in the face of kidnapping in Mexico, its ambitions have wider relevance. Promoting a more nuanced, less sensationalised, understanding of kidnapping; capturing more useful data regarding this evasive criminal practice; co-producing counter-kidnapping resources that assist those most affected by this insecurity: these objectives all offer new possibilities to shape effective policy responses towards kidnapping from a citizen-led perspective.

As explained in earlier paragraphs, this citizen-led project on kidnapping in Mexico is constructed around one key question: *how do you counter kidnapping when you cannot afford private solutions or rely on the state?* In a context of impunity and pervasive kidnap threat, this project is aware that both Mexican citizens and irregular migrants are developing self-protection strategies and collective resilience to kidnapping. In this citizen-led initiative, it is clear that rather than focussing upon collaboration with state-actors, we prioritise engagement with such activism. This is why the objectives of this project are to share the knowledge and skills that these actors have already developed in counter-kidnapping, as well as to co-produce a portfolio of new resources that can be disseminated more widely across Mexican society.

As a main conclusion, and recognising that kidnapping is a threat encountered in states of impunity and increasingly parasitic upon irregular migrant flows, the following recommendations for research-informed policy, from a citizen-led perspective, are proposed:



1) That kidnapping be recognised as under-researched, and counter-kidnapping as under-resourced, despite this illicit practice's prevalence, increasingly within smuggling contexts. 2) That policy attention to counter-kidnapping strategies be re-evaluated and consideration of increased resources directed to micro-strategies of counter-kidnapping, rather than macro state-focused initiatives. 3) That a forum for comparative exchange on kidnapping, not least as a predatory crime on human smuggling, be established to facilitate both deeper understanding of this illicit practice and how to best mitigate kidnap risk.

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Notes

- 1** This section draws upon the presentation ‘Capturing (Im)mobility: The Challenges of Kidnapping Research’ that was delivered by Conor O’Reilly at the UNODC/EUI workshop ‘When Smuggling Goes Wrong: From a Crime Against State Sovereignty to a Crime Against Persons’ at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy in October 2017.
- 2** Although it should be noted that there have also been recent works focused upon the issue of migrant kidnapping in Mexico which have shed important light on this dimension of the kidnap industry (see, for example: Slack, 2016; Vogt, 2013; 2016; 2018).

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