



With thousands of abductions in Mexico, families keep searching for the 'disappeared'

Mexican families seeking answers in wake of abductions

By Jason Buch | September 19, 2015 | Updated: September 21, 2015 3:56pm





Photo: JERRY LARA, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

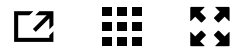


IMAGE 1 OF 22

Ana Maria Sandoval talks about her son outside her house in Allende, Mexico, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2015. Allende is a small town southwest of Piedras Negras, Mexico and is the site of a massacre by the drug cartel, ... [more](#)

PIEDRAS NEGRAS, Mexico — Members of a special state police force grabbed Billy Martinez last year as he left home to visit his girlfriend, and he never was seen again, his sister said.

That same police force dragged Victor Manuel Guajardo Rios, 37, out of his house in 2013, then denied ever arresting him, Guajardo's mother said.

And 11 members of the Tapia de la Garza family, including five children ages 12 to 19, disappeared from their house in 2012 after a birthday party for the youngest, relatives said.

This border city, across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass, has seen an epidemic of forced abductions that human rights advocates say are just as often carried out by criminals as they are by the heavily armed police unit sent here to fight the drug cartels.

“The government knows all about this; the press, too,” said María Hortensia Rivas Rodríguez, Guajardo’s mother and the president of a group that advocates on behalf of the families of the disappeared. “They know what’s happening, but they don’t do anything to stop it. There’s no security in Piedras Negras.”

Disappearances at the hands of drug traffickers and authorities, and sometimes the two acting in concert, are a problem across Mexico. The border states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Chihuahua and Coahuila, where Piedras Negras is located, are among the worst in the country, Mexico’s Ministry of Government reports.

Coahuila authorities said municipal police officers aided traffickers in a mass abduction from a town near here, and the state government has blamed local officials for disappearances in southern Mexican states.

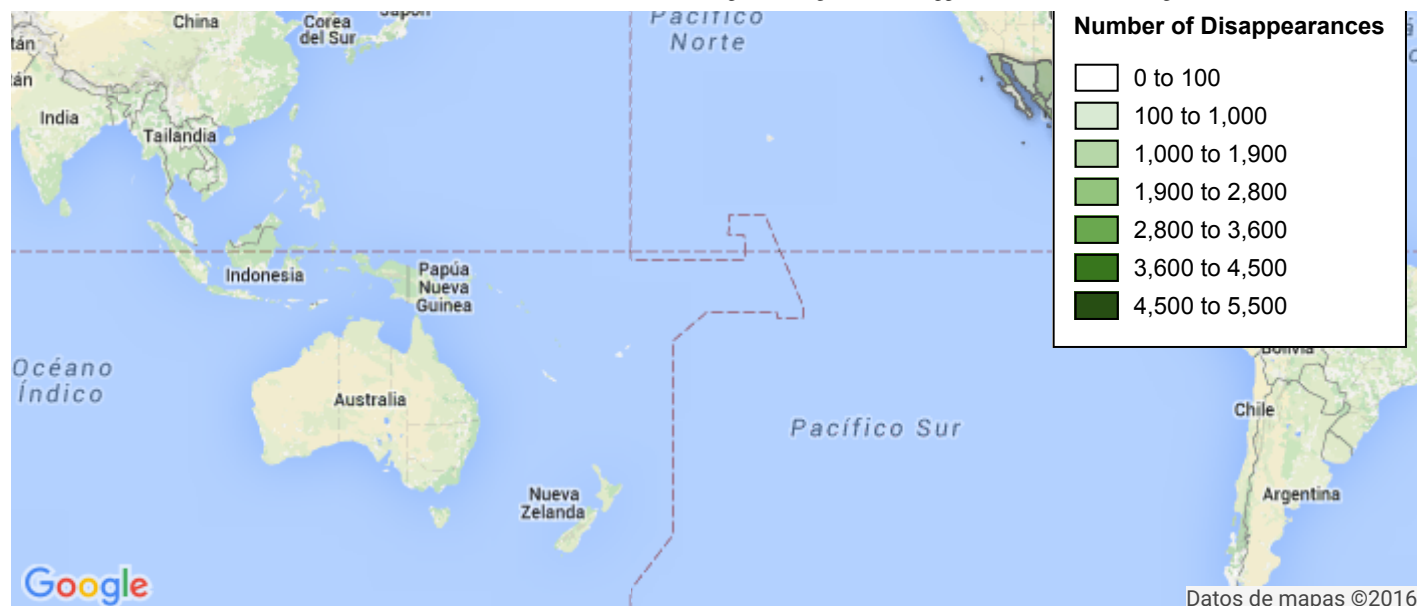
Of the more 25,000 people the Mexican government says have gone missing since 2007, more than 5,000 — the most of any state — are from Tamaulipas, which borders Texas from Laredo to the Gulf of Mexico. In Coahuila, which stretches along the Rio Grande from just west of Laredo to the Big Bend, 1,400 people are missing, the federal government’s database of missing persons shows.

Ariana García, a human rights lawyer who works with Rivas’s group, said the numbers are likely much higher. Families are afraid to come forward, she said, and those that do often face roadblocks to reporting disappearances. Across the country, families are in limbo, wondering what happened to their loved ones and unable to grieve and move on with their lives.

In Piedras Negras, Rivas said about 190 families have come forward and joined her group Families United in the Search and Discovery of Disappeared Persons, or Familias Unidas. She thinks there are thousands more.

On Aug. 30, the International Day of the Disappeared, about 50 relatives of the disappeared marched through Piedras Negras to call attention to the their loved ones. They carried pictures of the missing and chanted messages saying their children aren’t forgotten, and demanding justice from the government.

Hover over the Mexican states to see the number of disappearances since 2007.



The families, led by a municipal police escort, wound their way from City Hall to the river walk that runs between this city's two international bridges. A priest there read the names of 120 disappeared.

Before the march, Rivas turned her ire toward Coahuila's government and the state's Special Arms and Tactics Group, known by its Spanish acronym GATE, which she said took her son and has been accused of detaining without charges young people who subsequently disappear.

"Here we are, demanding the authorities return to us our children," she said. "Tell us where they are prisoners and if they committed an offense, why they are hidden, why they disappear. This is what we demand of the authorities."

A spokesman for the state of Coahuila didn't respond to questions for this report. During an interview last year in the state capital of Saltillo, then-Secretary of State Armando Luna said Coahuila's government was making an "unprecedented investment in security" that included hiring more than 1,000 new police officers a year.

Among the state's priorities, said Luna, who now is a congressman, is providing protection to the 50,000 U.S. residents who travel through Coahuila every Christmas to visit family for the holidays. The state reduced homicides by a third, he said.

The government has created a special prosecutor to investigate forced disappearances and built a database of the missing, Luna said. He said investigators were in Piedras Negras last spring collecting DNA samples from victims' family members.

Last year, the disappearance of 43 students who were protesting in the southern state of Guerrero made international headlines. The Mexican government said they were kidnapped by local police then handed over to gangsters who executed them, an account that has been disputed. The students' parents were better organized and better at drawing attention than those in Piedras Negras, Rivas said.

Four years ago, Piedras Negras and its outlying communities were the scenes of a mass disappearance that, by some counts, involved several hundred people. Yet that massacre, carried out by members of the ruthless Zetas drug cartel, received scant attention for years.

Allende Massacre

The trouble for Ana Maria Sandoval's son started in early March 2011, when he was arrested by municipal police where they lived in the town of Allende.

Allende, population 22,000, along with Morelos, Nava, Villa Unión and Zaragoza, make up the Cinco Manantiales, or Five Springs region, in the brushland outside of Piedras Negras. Like many in the area, Sandoval and her family work at nearby industrial parks.

Jose Willyvaldo Martinez Sandoval, known as "Willy," was arrested on a public intoxication charge, which Sandoval said was just a pretext. The police held Willy for several days she said, then turned him over to a local organized crime leader known as "El Canelo."

When he finally showed up at their house, Sandoval said, her son was badly beaten and running a fever.

"He told me the police officers allowed El Canelo to beat him up in prison," Sandoval said earlier this year, standing outside her house in Allende. "Then they took him to work. He said, 'They beat me and then they took me so I escaped.'"

Sandoval said she slept by her son's bedside that night, then went to work in the morning. When she returned that evening, Willy and another son, Luis Angel, were missing. Family members and neighbors described how El Canelo and two of his thugs beat Luis Angel with a pipe, grabbed hold of the delirious Willy and dragged them both away.

The next day a police officer, a cousin of Sandoval's, showed up with Luis Angel. He too was beaten, she said, and his feet had been burned.

"I asked, 'Where is my other son?'" she said. The cousin "didn't answer me. My son told me, 'Don't bother looking for Willy. He's already dead.'"

Willy was killed during a period of extreme violence in Piedras Negras, Cinco Manantiales and even as far away as Melchor Múzquiz, a two-hour drive southwest.

"My case is not the only one. I know somebody who had four (family members) disappeared," Sandoval said. "It was the most difficult time that we've lived. There was no security. El Canelo was running the town and everyone was afraid of him. He had total control of the town."

Four years after the abductions, it's still unclear what happened or how many were killed.

'Lots of deaths'

In a report to the state legislature earlier this year, the Coahuila attorney general's office said the killings happened over one day in mid-March 2011. The Zetas, working with the help of municipal police, kidnapped 28 people, the prosecutors said.

During a 2013 money laundering trial in Austin, trafficker Mario Alfonso Cuellar and his lieutenant Hector Moreno described a much more gruesome sequence of events.

The leaders of the ruthless drug gang the Zetas were upset about an unusually large number of drugs being seized, Moreno testified.

"Lots of deaths," Moreno said when a prosecutor asked him to describe the Zetas' response. "They even started killing families in Allende and Piedras Negras and Múzquiz and Sabinas."

Moreno said he fled across the border with his family and turned himself in to U.S. authorities."

"Because of this, they killed (200 or) 300 people in Allende, Coahuila," he testified.

Cuellar, too, surrendered to U.S. authorities and pleaded guilty during a secret hearing in a North Texas courtroom. Word leaked back to the Zetas, he said, after U.S. anti-narcotics agents told their counterparts in Mexico.



"They knocked everything down, just broke it into little pieces, the houses, the apartments," Cuellar testified. "They stole my horses. Everything that I had, they took away from me. And

they killed a lot of people.”

The burned-out buildings, including one across the street from a grade school, still can be seen in Allende.

In its presentation to the legislature, the Coahuila state prosecutors said they arrested one person and issued warrants for three others, including two former Allende police officers. Two other suspects have been killed.

Of the 28 people who the state says went missing, 11 are confirmed dead. The whereabouts of the other 17 are unknown. State officials say they found more than 3,000 bone fragments as part of their investigation into the Allende Massacre, but could retrieve DNA from fewer than 500 of those.

Only 30 families from the Cinco Manantiales area have come forward, said García, the civil rights lawyer, but she believes there are others who are afraid to talk. Some families have fled to Eagle Pass and San Antonio.

Piedras Negras has seen the same type of drug-related violence that has hit other border cities. The fighting peaked in 2012 with grenade attacks and street fighting so bad that on one occasion the international bridge with Eagle Pass was shut down.

Since then, things have been more quiet, in part because of the heavily armed security forces patrolling the street. Because the state relies heavily on foreign investment in the manufacturing industry, the government has cracked down on the cartels.

“But they’re doing it the wrong way,” García said. “They lost control of what they’re trying to do. They thought (the GATEs) would come here to clear the area, but in fact what they’re doing is creating the same organized crime that existed.”

‘Dead while living’

Among those whose family members say they were taken by the GATEs are U.S. citizens. Juan Rios said his brother Salvador was one of the lucky ones — he’s in a prison in the Pacific coast state of Nayarit.

In December, Salvador Rios, a resident of Eagle Pass, and several friends were arrested by the

GATEs, Juan Rios said. They were taken to a ranch and beaten and then, while the others were released, the police tortured his brother, said Juan Rios, who thinks police targeted his brother because he was driving a nice pickup.

His family made frantic calls to the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo, trying to get out word about Salvador Rios's arrest before he could disappear. He eventually was charged with possession of guns and drugs, allegations his family says are false.

Since then, his brother has been held in inhumane conditions, Juan Rios said. Earlier this month, Salvador Rios went on trial. Now his family is waiting for the judge's decision.

"I can only imagine there are so many people that are not able to do anything because of their resources, or lack of," Juan Rios said. "We're fortunate enough to have some people in Mexico who are family members, some here in the States (who can help). Without that, there's no way you could lend any sort of help with that person who's going through that."

Earlier this month, a U.S. State Department official told a congressional panel that last year, 146 U.S. citizens were kidnapped in Mexico and 100 killed. So far this year, 64 U.S. citizens have been reported kidnapped and 89 killed, said Sue Saarnio, the deputy assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs.

When the GATEs detain someone in Piedras Negras, Familias Unidas puts the word out on social media and messenger apps. Members converge on the unit's headquarters, hoping to publicize the arrest and force the police to make formal charges, much like the Rios family did.

García said about 70 people have been released since 2013. The strategy doesn't always work.

Rivas, the group's president, said she watched as a pickup carrying her son, his head flopping side-to-side as if he were unconscious, drove through the sally port at the GATEs headquarters the night he was taken from his home while his family watched in July 2013. The police denied ever having arrested him, and she hasn't seen him since.

"It's like being dead while living," Rivas said. "I don't know if he's alive or dead, or if he's hungry, if he's cold. And the hours pass, the despair, and you don't know what's happening. It's the worst thing that can happen to a mother, to have a son disappear and the authorities won't give you any information."

For some families, their main provider has disappeared. To address that issue, the Coahuila legislature last year passed a law that gives the state the ability to declare someone absent, but García said government officials often put up barriers and claim missing people actually are in hiding.

For the families of the disappeared, their lives are put on hold. The new state law protects the rights of the disappeared, but can work against the people left behind, García said.

“While they’re missing, they’re presumed to be alive,” she said. “Their spouses can’t divorce them or have them declared dead.”

In most of Mexico, there’s no publicly available record of who’s been arrested, and most police don’t have cameras on their vehicles or GPS trackers showing where they’ve been, García said, creating a system rife for abuse.

She said the government at all levels in Mexico needs to abandon the use of secretive special police forces, devote more resources to finding those who are missing, protect the rights not only of the disappeared but of their families and make create a safe, secure process for reporting disappearances.

“The truth is, this is something very difficult for the families,” she said. “The government doesn’t listen when they go to make a report, the government doesn’t look for their disappeared. The government does not help them feed their children.”

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Photographer Jerry Lara and Staff Writer Bill Lambrecht in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.



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