

# Warring Criminal Groups Are Targeting Civilians in Chiapas, Mexico



An intensification of violence in the southern Mexican border state of Chiapas is pushing the number of displaced and missing people to new highs. Thousands of residents have now been forced from their homes, and organized crime groups are increasingly targeting civilians.

There were 12,771 victims of displacement in Chiapas during the first seven months of 2024, according to data from a human rights organization accessed by InSight Crime, a sharp uptick from the 4,562 victims recorded for the whole of 2023.

In recent days, criminal groups in Chicomuselo, a border municipality, used drones to drop explosives on homes and displaced 400 people. A courthouse and even an army base were also targeted.

In July, 580 Mexicans fled the nearby municipality of Amatenango de la Frontera and crossed into Guatemala, according to Guatemalan authorities. The incident was a rare example of migrants from Mexico moving south into Central America to escape the impacts of violence, rather than the other way around, as is the norm.

In several municipalities, gunmen rounded up residents and forced them to participate in blockades of key roads to impede the approach of rival crime groups and the security forces.

Criminal groups “have started to use the civilian population as a shield,” a human rights worker, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime. “In some cases, they threaten [residents] and force them to stay and collaborate.”

The Mexican military deployed 200 soldiers to Chiapas on August 16, though the move did little to quell the violence.

## InSight Crime Analysis

Chiapas has long been a hotspot of criminal violence among groups competing to control territory on Mexico's southern border, a major smuggling hub of both drugs and migrants.

But violence there has been on a sharp upward trajectory since 2021, coinciding with the incursion of the [Jalisco Cartel New Generation](#) (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG) into border municipalities that were once strongholds of the rival [Sinaloa Cartel](#), [according](#) to internal Mexican army reports.

The involvement of larger, more powerful criminal networks has also fueled conflict among a disparate array of local armed groups that operate in the region.

## DataInSights

This article is part of our DataInSights coverage, which analyzes complete datasets and quantitative data related to organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean.

[See all articles](#)



“Paramilitary groups created to combat indigenous insurgencies in the 1990s never disbanded,” the human rights worker said. “Cartels are now allying themselves to these smaller local groups.”

To maintain the fighting, criminal groups are turning to civilians to support or join their criminal armies and inflicting violence against those who refuse. In May, gunmen in Nuevo Morelia, a hamlet in Chicomuselo, killed 11 people in a massacre, including two [religious leaders](#). The victims had called for peace and refused to support either of the two criminal groups that were fighting in the region, according to the human rights worker consulted by InSight Crime.

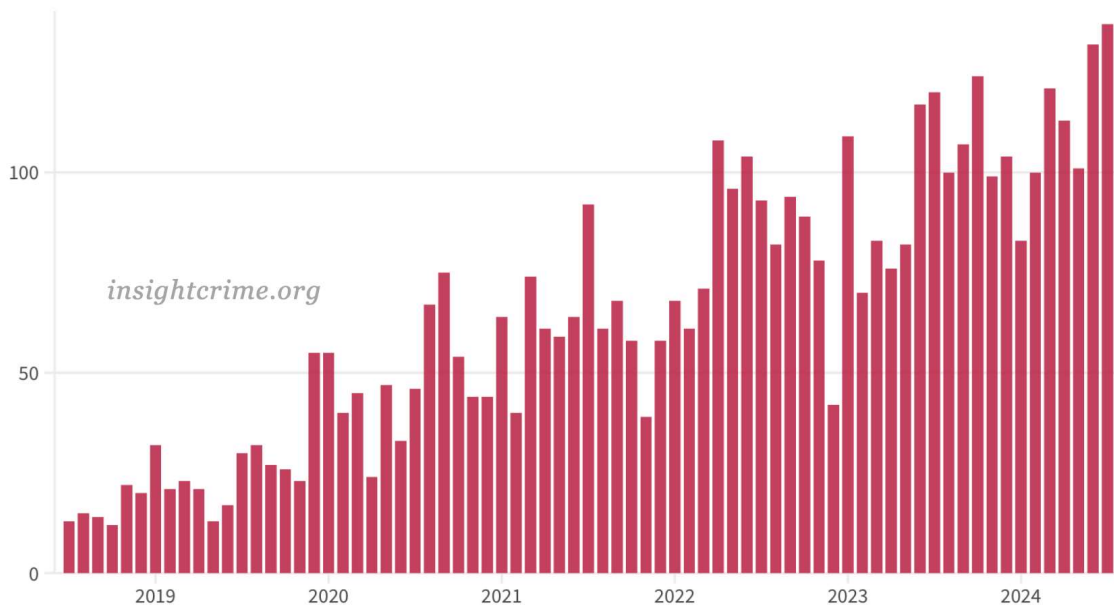
“Civilian populations have practically been taken hostage,” the human rights worker said. “They are being forced to collaborate with criminal groups.” They added that there were cases where civilians “wanted to be displaced” to avoid forced recruitment, but were told that if they left, they would be killed.

A [report](#) published in February 2024 by a group of human rights organizations recorded how organized crime not only forced thousands of civilians into committing acts of violence but also increasingly poached skilled workers including “electricians, lathe operators and plumbers” to support day-to-day criminal operations.

## Between 2019 and 2023, disappearances in Chiapas tripled

Number of disappearances by month (Jul 2018 - Jul 2024)

August 2024 | Source: Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda



A spike in missing persons is also helping to sow terror. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of missing people reported in Chiapas tripled, according to data from the National Search Commission (Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda), an upward trajectory that shows no sign of slowing.

Residents regularly [tell](#) local reporters that the presence of the security forces does little to prevent organized crime. Instead, several municipalities have created [self-defense groups](#) to repel criminal organizations.

“When criminal groups come to certain territories, the population does not even consider going to the authorities.” Carlos Juárez, Mexico Director at the Institute for Economics and Peace, told InSight Crime. “Their options for being safe don’t include governments.”

There is widespread distrust of the security forces in Chiapas, which have historically been implicated in human rights abuses committed predominantly against the state’s large indigenous populations. In the 1990s, the Mexican government used the military and armed paramilitary groups to crack down on an uprising led by the Zapatistas, an armed group fighting for better conditions and autonomy for indigenous people. The legacy of that conflict still simmers today.

The human rights worker said that they felt state security forces were “complicit” in the terror perpetrated in certain communities which had silenced the population. If people had the confidence to report crime and violence to the authorities, they added, Chiapas’ security crisis would almost certainly look worse.