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# Business Extortion and Public Security in Tijuana: who is protecting who?

*This report presents the findings of a research project on commercial extortion and racketeering (cobro de piso) conducted in Tijuana. While this phenomenon can affect any entity that forms part of a value chain, our work focused on large entrepreneurs, small and medium-size businesses, and merchants in the formal and informal sectors of this border city. We conducted immersive fieldwork in various zones of Tijuana, including semi-structured interviews and systematic exercises of observation in which we approached merchants and entrepreneurs who were victims and observers of extortion and/or racketeering, competent authorities, and other complementary profiles. We found that a central aspect of forging “racketeering-protection” relationships consists in constructing an ambience of violence that foments the need for protection and obliges people to accept an offer from one criminal provider of protection. Thus, we show that racketeering is a crime that escalates, and represents the first step in what may be a long chain of violence, and that failure to attend to this crime nourishes the soil where it grows.*



Extortion has become a central crime in the public security debate in Mexico. Yet, the reality of the phenomenon lies behind a severe dark figure of crime. In fact, at the national level, 97,4% (ENVIPE 2022) of extortion cases go unreported or undiscovered. How can a crime be rigorously documented when the main source of information is “an unspoken secret”?

This report presents a qualitative research project that analyzes extortion and racketeering through a case study conducted in Tijuana that focused on entrepreneurs, (small and medium businesses), and actors in the city’s formal and informal economic sectors. From Mexico Evalúa, and in alliance with the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (USMEX), and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), we chose Tijuana to examine the topic of “criminal taxes” with the goal of understanding the specific dynamics of this phenomenon, its incidence, its impact on the economy and daily life of businesses and industries in the municipality, and responses by public authorities and civil society.

To date, our work in Tijuana has produced three key findings. First, it demonstrates that extortion and racketeering are systematized across broad zones of the municipality, affecting thousands of small business owners. This confirms the “criminal tax” hypothesis posited by *México Evalúa*. Second, it documents the difficulty, for civil society and public authorities, to confront a criminal phenomenon linked not only to organized crime but to delinquent groups of all sizes and, even more worrisome, to collusion with public agents and the formation of a political-criminal, mafia-like domain. Third, it elucidates a central concern that makes it possible to overcome an apparent analytical and institutional paralysis derived from the absence of official data.

We demonstrate that although extortion and racketeering spread silently in the shadows of victims and authorities alike, these crimes can escalate quickly and be accompanied by more visible crimes, such as physical violence, property damage, arson, and even murder. Indeed, our study reveals that racketeering is often the first link in a long chain of violences. We can assume, then, that if this invisible crime were combatted with the necessary public effort, attention, and dedication through a structural response to the challenges of insecurity in Tijuana, reducing it could bring a systemic decrease in several high-impact crimes. We are convinced that if racketeering were tackled with the seriousness required, a broad range of indices of criminal activity could be lowered and the severely deteriorated relations of trust between authorities and citizens in this municipality could be restored.

Based on intensive fieldwork in Tijuana, this report first elucidates the concepts of “extortion” and “racketeering”, before examining how racketeering occurs in Tijuana, identifying its victims, describing the *modus operandi* of perpetrators, and exploring the role of violence in this crime and its consequences. Third, we analyze how the population, civil society, and the authorities attempt to respond to racketeering, both individually and collectively. We conclude by proposing several hypotheses that seek to clarify the lessons that the case of Tijuana has for the country as a whole.

## I. DEFINING THE “CRIMINAL TAX” IMPOSED ON ENTREPRENEURS AND MERCHANTS

### a. Extortion or racketeering?

No consensus exists on precise definitions of extortion and racketeering. Some authors emphasize the predatory nature of these crimes (Becker, 1968); but others stress their association with threats and, hence, violence (De la Calle, 2020). Still others underscore the variants defined in laws or the role of the authorities (Moncada, 2021; Monzini, 1993).

For our research, we adopted a definition of extortion/racketeering as offers of protection from a threat of material or physical harm in scenarios where the same individuals who offer the service are the source of the threat; that is, both the threat and the offer of protection come from the same provider (Volkov, 2002; Varese, 2002; Gambetta, 1993; Schelling, 1984 [1971]), creating a form of protection that, far from offering relief, is deeply ominous (Tilly, 1985).

Focusing on the concept of “ominous” or “threatening” protection allowed us to identify key aspects for deeper study. First, unlike other predatory crimes, like theft or fraud, the delinquents who practice extortion and racketeering do not simply obtain gains; rather, they establish a relationship –asymmetrical and forced– that allows them to continuously extract a “rent” in exchange for protection. Second, while the State should be the main, perhaps only, provider of protection, in Mexico’s reality this condition is rarely fulfilled, so a market has emerged with multiple offerings of public, private, or hybrid protection, some legal, some not.

Second, we confronted the tasks of distinguishing between “extortion” and “racketeering” and determining if we were dealing with one or the other, or if these terms could be used generically or interchangeably. Though both extortion and racketeering offer “protection that alarms”, we found that their implications for victims are distinct, as are their operations, documentation, and measurement. Thus, they



must be approached differently by public authorities and civil society.

Extortion consists in episodic offers of protection that may occur only once. This category includes perpetrators who threaten potential victims by telephone –whether they obtain payment or not– but likely never contact them again. These criminals may act alone or in loosely-organized bands that take advantage of the broader context of violence to give credibility to their threats and their capacity to provide protection.

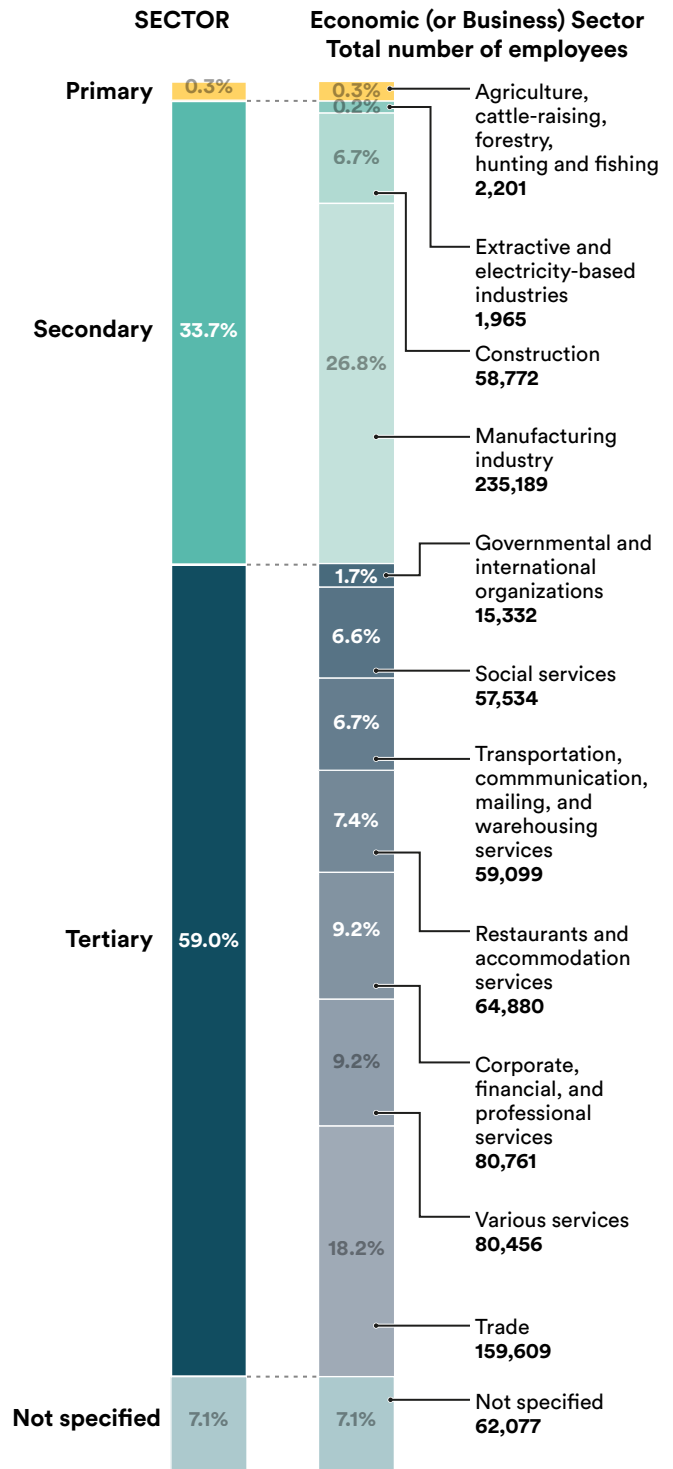
In racketeering, in contrast, victim(s) and victimizer(s) establish a sustained, medium- or long-term relationship that affects the former’s commercial or productive activity. Each week or month, the “protection providers” visit their “clients” to collect their share of the business’ earnings. The more powerful agents –the potentially violent ones– impose the rules of the game and enforce or adjust them at their own convenience, perhaps raising the fee, making a show of force, or extending the “offer” of protection to cover additional activities. Racketeers are usually members of a structure that can exert sustained pressure through an agent who periodically contacts the victim to collect the “rent” exacted. The perpetrator’s real or perceived capacity to carry out the threat is usually great, so each “visits” she/he finds the victims waiting fee in hand, not with the police or some other form of protection.

The *modus operandi* of racketeering is, therefore, more complex for victims and the authorities. First, victims must cope with a constant pressure while striving to maintain their economic activity. Second, telling anyone what is happening increases the risk that the threat of violence will become real, so they have no option but to “suffer in silence”. The challenge for the authorities is to neutralize these criminal competitors in the protection market, but they are hindered by limited resources, scarce information, citizen distrust, and (almost) no reports or accusations. Although in this study we mention both extortion and racketeering, our lens is focused squarely on the latter in an effort to elucidate its applicability to the case of commercial activities in Tijuana.

**b. Entrepreneurs, merchants, and authorities in Tijuana: three pillars of analysis**

We began our work by approaching some of Tijuana most important entrepreneurs. In Mexico, the label “entrepreneurial sector” encompasses everything from a few central families in the economy of a certain region to a

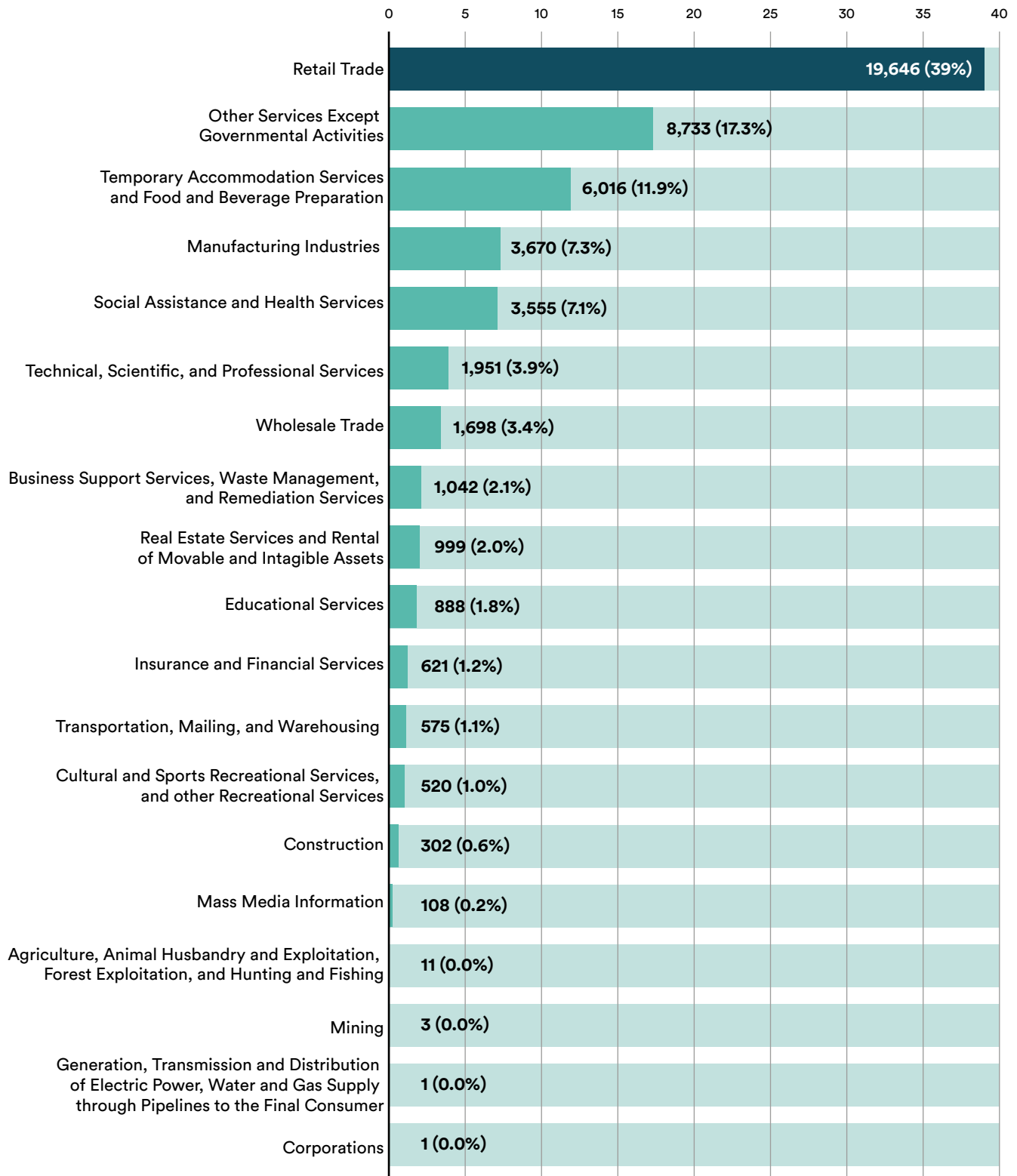
**Graph 1. Number of employees by economic sector, Baja California**



Source: Own elaboration made with the information available from the National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE), for the second quarter of 2022, available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/enoe/15ymas/#Documentacion>



Graph 2. Economic units by sector, Tijuana



Source: Own elaboration made with the information available from the 2019 Economic Census, available at: [https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ce/2019/#Informacion\\_general](https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ce/2019/#Informacion_general)



diverse, more horizontal, group of proprietors of industries, businesses, or services.

We are not interested here in discussing this category but, rather, in establishing the fact that these actors form a heterogenous category, which means that their vulnerability to the dynamics of racketeering and their ways of confronting it are diverse. Attributes such as the size of the business, profit levels, the economic sector, and the degree of (in)formality in their operations reflect this heterogeneity clearly and reveal distinct levels of risk of being victimized by racketeering and different capacities of (re)action to manage this threat.

Using a category as broad as the “entrepreneurial sector” obscures nuances in the broad arena of economic production, which includes Pymes, small merchants, and economic activities carried out in the informal sector. For this reason, we chose to study economic actors in Tijuana in two large groups that we classify as “entrepreneurs” and “merchants”. We do not deny the diversity that exists within each group, but this first separation provided a good starting point for our analysis.

In the category of entrepreneur we included large business owners or representatives of corporate groups and associations involved in the economic activities that carry the greatest weight due to the size of the business or the economic value of the sector.

In the category of merchants we merged operations that conduct economic and commercial activities on the micro, small, and medium scales, family businesses, and those in the subsistence or informal economy, including flea markets (*tianguis*) and junkyards. Clearly, this category presented a greater challenge in terms of measuring their relative weight in the economy, especially for informal operations where earnings, by definition, tend to be estimates rather than exact reports. In any case, according to the 2019 Economic Census, nearly 39% of the economic units registered in Tijuana correspond to the ‘retail’ category, which resulted to be the most numerous. Therefore, focusing in this component of the economy supposes paying attention on a central part of the economy.

Finally, we assume that these two groups are not on an equal footing in relation to racketeering, so our approach included observing differences and points of convergence in order to reach the best understanding possible of the

situation in the municipality of Tijuana, while also giving full importance to the variable of territory. Tijuana’s entrepreneurs and merchants do not live the same reality as those in Mexico City, Chiapas, or the Riviera Maya, so aspects like the social space, the set of actors that conform it, the profile of criminal actors, and the role of local, state, and national authorities will all be crucial for understanding how extortion occurs and how it is confronted.

### c. Characterization of the territory

In addition to being the most populated municipality in Mexico<sup>1</sup>, Tijuana is widely known for two attributes: it is the most crossed border area in the world and has high levels of insecurity and violence. Tijuana houses the two most-heavily transited border crossings on the planet,<sup>2</sup> as over 35,000 people travel between the U.S. and Mexico every day, a total of some 30 million crossings annually. Because of this, the area is known as the “binational region of CaliBaja”. This reality affects residents’ lives and defines important characteristics of the economic space. During fieldwork, one interviewee told us “There’s no unemployment here”. And, indeed, despite Tijuana’s high index of economic informality (34.48%)<sup>3</sup> and high rate of personnel turnover, its unemployment rate of just 2% is among the lowest in the country. In this context, the role of the industrial sector, where maquila operations predominate, is crucial, as is reflected in official figures, the highly-visible industrial parks that dot the city’s landscape, and the constant pressure to further develop this sector.

However, Tijuana’s economic dynamism is just one face of the city. Another face is marked by levels of insecurity and indices of criminality that make Tijuana one of the most violent cities in Mexico. Murder rates in the municipality increased consecutively from 2016 to 2018 but decreased in the following three years. If the current year confirms this trend, we will see another reduction. This history is nothing new for the city’s inhabitants, who vividly remember various crises of insecurity in recent decades. Our interviewees spoke, for example, of the time when Tijuana was the “gringos’ brothel”, of the period of the “junior *narcos*” in the 1990s, and of “when the Arellano Félix [brothers’] cartel broke away from the Sinaloa cartel”, while expressing nostalgia upon recalling the “cleansing” effectuated by the chief of police, Julián Leyzaola, after the explosion of violence in 2008-2009.

<sup>1</sup> Censo 2020, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI).

<sup>2</sup> The Chaparral-San Ysidro border point.

<sup>3</sup> Compared with a national rate of 55.7% (Second quarter of 2022 - ENOE, 2022).



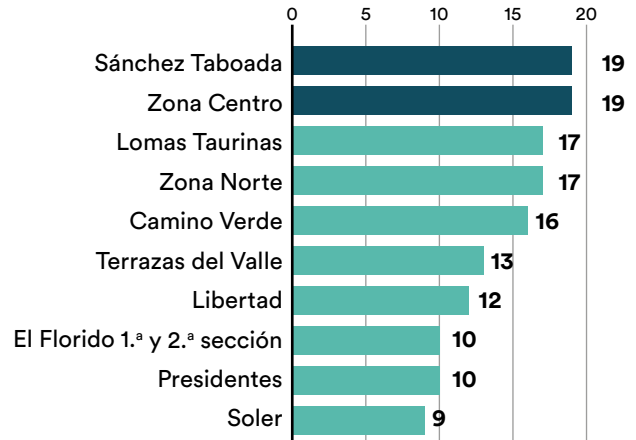
### d. The history of the many Tijuanas

Characterizing the city and the study of its dynamics of violence cannot be achieved through a view that analyzes only homicide rates or indices of economic growth. Far from a homogeneous territory, Tijuana is crisscrossed by complex delinquent tendencies that trace internal frontiers and invisible limits inside the municipality's borders, but that appear with clarity through the study of extortion and racketeering. Tijuana is divided into nine administrative delegations: Otay Centenario, La Presa, Cerro Colorado, La Mesa, San Antonio de los Buenos, Playas de Tijuana, Centro, La Presa Este, and Sánchez Taboada, with seven sub-delegations.

Daily life, however, is not constrained by these official delimitations, not in economic terms and certainly not with respect to the dynamics of insecurity. In our first interviews (autumn 2021) we began to perceive the emergence of a distinct sociospatial design that revealed a city divided into three zones. First is the “River” or “Western zone”, described

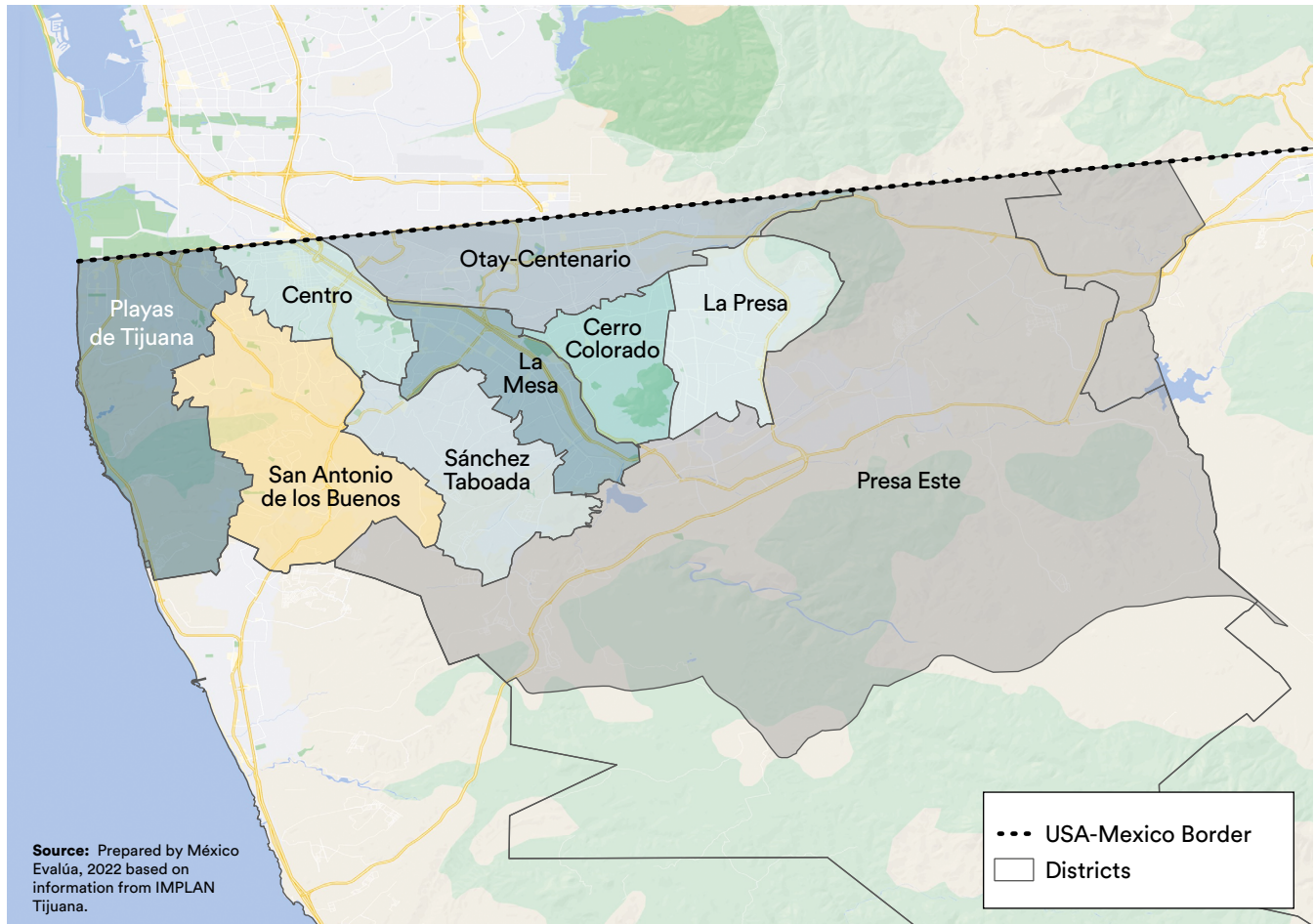
Gráfica 3. Residential areas with the most lethal violence in Tijuana

(Intentional homicides or feminicides)



Source: Own elaboration with data obtained through the public information request with folio number 022756622000101.

### Map 1. Tijuana Districts





as a space of stability and economic growth, dynamics confirmed by the number of real estate development projects there and the presence of restaurants and bars that are emblematic of Tijuana’s diverse, creative gastronomy. This space is considered a safe zone free of property crimes, violence, and even racketeering.

At the other extreme is the “Eastern zone”, a label that, more than a geographic referent, is an umbrella term for all the “dangerous” areas of the city; that is, those with a common reputation as popular, marginalized zones. That area includes neighborhoods like Sánchez Taboada, Presidentes (or the “second Sánchez Taboada”), Campos, and La Presa, among others.

In addition to “danger”, residents speak of the area as the “forgotten Tijuana”. Their stories describe the State’s presence as intermittent because it appears only in certain kinds of action –deploying soldiers or the National Guard,

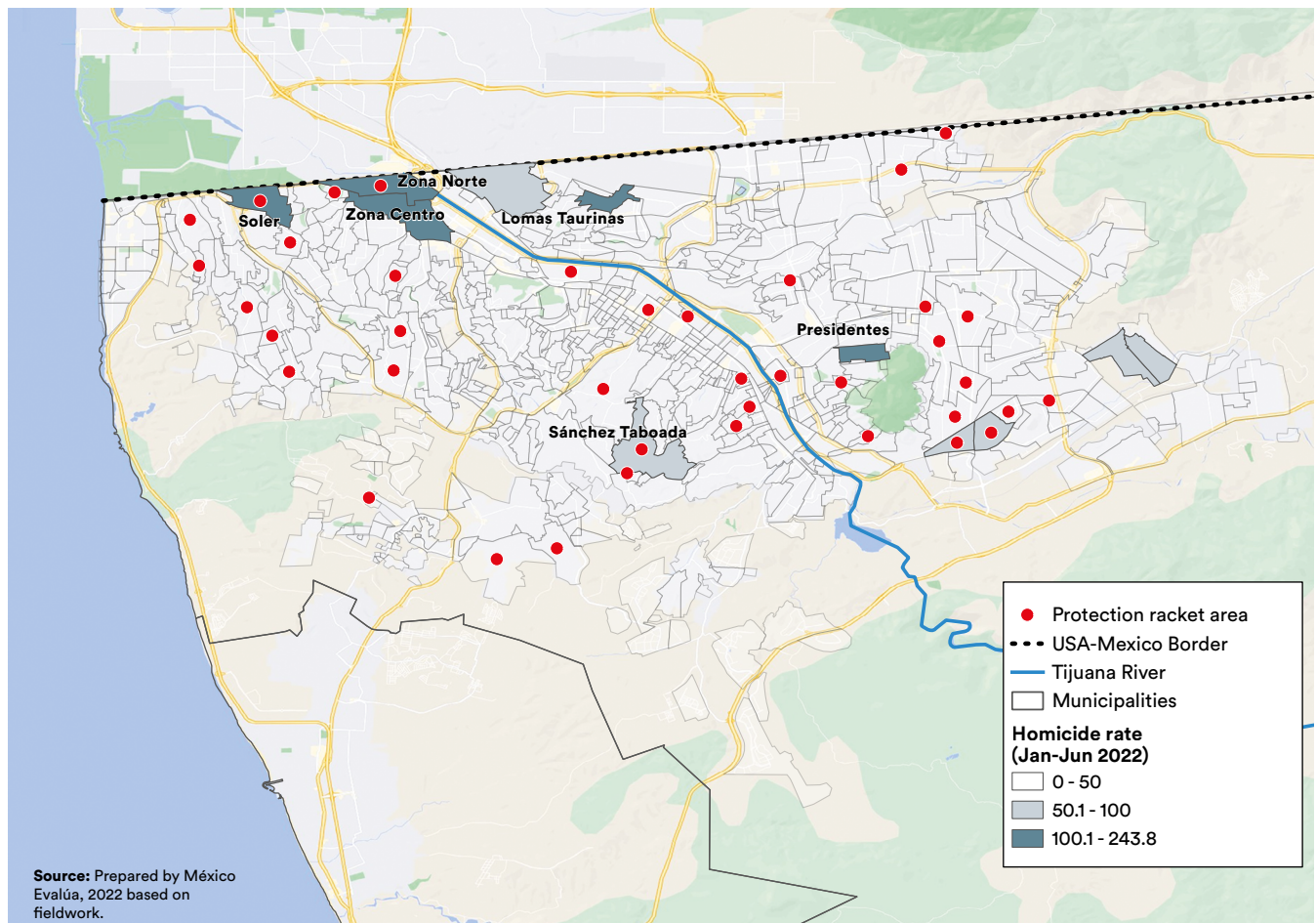
for example– but is conspicuously absent when it comes to providing basic services. Streetlights are weak, streets are poorly-paved or unpaved, crosswalks are flooded, and complaints of a scarce police presence are constant:



There’s no quality of life or access to services in these neighborhoods... [they] don’t have water [and] not everyone has electricity [...] mudslides started on one street there [some] neighborhoods started to sink because they began as irregular settlements in zones that were never planned...<sup>4</sup>

Finally, there is the “Central zone”, represented by the *Coahuila*, *Primera*, *Segunda*, and *Tercera* streets. Also known as the “red-light district”, neighborhoods there

**Map 2. Protection racket area**



<sup>4</sup> Antonio, small retail establishment, Colonia Sánchez Taboada, Tijuana, 2022.



were historically embodied by the businesses along *Avenida Revolución* (the *Revo*) and a vivid nightlife with discotheques, cabarets, and vast offerings of drugs and prostitution for Mexican citizens and foreigners alike, especially North Americans who “crossed the line” (*i.e.*, the border) to enjoy those sources of entertainment.

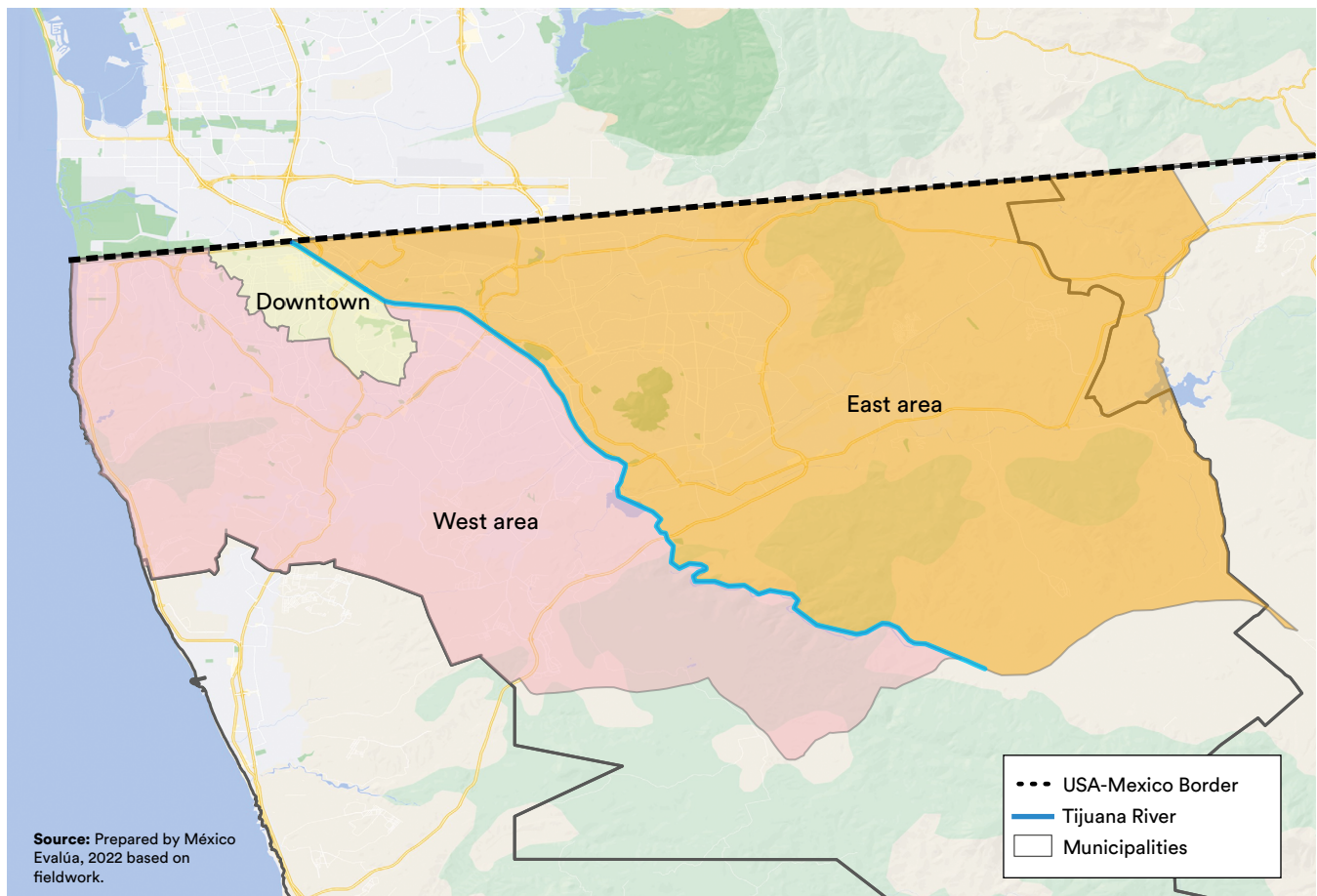
These delimitations are what we refer to as Tijuana’s “invisible borders”. In addition to their contrasting economic components, these three zones are characterized by distinct dynamics of violence. Residents in the Eastern zone, for example, describe an environment marked by the activity of delinquent groups that run from neighborhood gangs to structures that boast of their affiliation with national-level criminal organizations like the Sinaloa Cartel and the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG). The first consequence of the territorial presence and social control exerted by these groups is the creation of “zones of influence” (turfs) that residents must recognize and respect to carry out everyday activities and live with some semblance of normality:



There are invisible borders, like zones of influence, here it’s already sectorized, zoned so the [different] groups don’t fight... If there were no sectorization it would be like looking at a board, a checkers’ table, you can move around, y’know, I’m here now, ahhh but later I could be over there, so what it does is it avoids this, tries to make things immovable... *‘this piece of the neighborhood is mine, they say...’*<sup>5</sup>

These delimitations influence the transit of people both actively and passively. Residents of the River zone, especially the entrepreneurs we interviewed, told us that out of precaution or fear they “don’t go to the Eastern zone” and prohibit their children from doing so. They consider it a space where “you never know what might happen”. More

### Map 3. Invisible boundaries



<sup>5</sup> Gabriel, medium retail establishment, Colonia Sánchez Taboada, Tijuana, 2022.





coercively, social and territorial control is imposed, for example, on the pushers and users of illicit substances that are not openly available in other zones. Our interviewees cited buying drugs from a rival of those who control the local market as a frequent cause of murders in their neighborhoods. It is well known that punishment for such “disloyalty” can be death, a sanction that we will encounter once again in relation to racketeering:



Buyers may think it’s easy to go to some other point [but] that’s a serious crime. You can’t just go elsewhere, there’s war because they’re trying to take away [your clients], so they start killing pushers, on one side and the other. If they show up again where they shouldn’t the killing goes on.<sup>6</sup>

According to our interviewees, these limits are elements of practical knowledge that must be acquired, mainly by talking with neighbors and listening to “gossip”. Through these means, people come to know –and actualize– the rules in force at any time in the neighborhood and municipality. In one delegation in the Eastern zone we witnessed how the limits of influence of distinct criminal groups led to a neighborhood being divided in two parts between one street and the next with far-reaching implications for the lives of residents due to the imposition of a systematic regimen of extortion, as we will see below.

## II: EXTORTION AND PROTECTION-RACKETS IN “THE TWO TIJUANAS”

In our work we approached the everyday practices of extortion and racketeering in Tijuana and attempted to break the silence imposed on victims. One of our first findings was that although structural racketeering is severely under-reported, the practice was not unknown to our interviewees. To the contrary, they perceive this crime as a present, constant concern, whether it affects them directly or not.

The group of entrepreneurs in the River zone, the merchants in the Eastern zone, and the municipal authorities all recognize racketeering as part of city life. In fact, people who have not been victims assume they will be sooner or later:



It hasn’t touched us here, around here we don’t know, or haven’t heard, of anyone paying, but you never know tomorrow.<sup>7</sup>

According to the data we have gathered for Tijuana, geographic location, socioeconomic level, and informal commercial activity are key factors for victimization. Merchants in the Eastern zone describe themselves as the most affected sector, a view that reflects the city’s economic structure. They consider that the Center and Western zones have an accompaniment by the authorities that is closer and more effective, while the presence of the State in their neighborhoods is distant and rarely transparent. This vision underscores, once again, the distinction between “two Tijuanas”.

The Eastern zone is also characterized by greater informality in law and work. Because they are not officially registered, informal businesses have no access to the services of public protection that –at least in theory– attend to establishments in the formal sector. As a result, precariousness and the absence of public services, to mention just two elements, generate the conditions that allow alternative offers of protection to emerge, embodied in criminal cells that target a long list of businesses – formal and informal– where we have done research: grocery stores, stationery stores, convenience stores, *taquerías*, *tortillerías*, the vehicle repair and auto parts sector (including junkyards), and restaurants, regardless of the economic profits they generate. These are among the businesses most directly affected by extortion and racketeering in Tijuana.

People in neighborhoods subjected to extortion emphasize that remaining neutral is foolhardy. They know they will be forced to side with the band that operates where their home or business is located, even though they do not agree with the rules imposed on them. They explain that once a band consolidates its control and territorial domination, the only alternative is to obey. Far from that reality, from our earliest interviews with entrepreneurs –most of whom live and/or work in the River zone or *on the other side* (i.e., in the U.S.)– they expressed the view that “there’s no racketeering in Tijuana”, though often correcting themselves by adding: “well, in the Eastern zone, yeah, but not here [River zone]”.

<sup>6</sup> Luis, small food and drink establishment, Colonia Sánchez Taboada, Tijuana, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Trinity, small food and drink establishment, Colonia Módulos Otay, Tijuana, 2022.



Our work confirms the absence of systematic racketeering in the most prosperous zones of Tijuana (in relation to restaurants and businesses), but this does not mean there are no isolated or individual cases. When incidents do occur entrepreneurs usually have direct –often personal– contacts with personnel local government or representatives of the forces of order, who attend to, and resolve, the affectations they may suffer. This help may take the form of an “express” search for a stolen SUV, the immediate deployment of police or National Guard patrols in their residential or work area, or an active investigation that achieves a solution distinct from those attained in other sectors of the city.

This context has important consequences. First, the fact that large entrepreneurs are not systematically affected by racketeering discourages any strong conscientization or mobilization by the entrepreneurial community to increase the visibility of a crime that impacts the rest of the municipality. Second, the State protection to which, theoretically, all citizens have equal access, emerges as a personalized, individualized service; that is, people who possess sufficient, cultural, social, and economic capital enjoy direct access to the authorities, a reality that effectively transforms a public service into a form of private attention.

For this reason, it seemed fundamentally important to broaden our focus from entrepreneurs to include small and medium businesses and merchants. First, as we came to understand that smaller-scale activities involve individuals in social circles less well-related to public authorities, it became evident that they had no access to such “personalized” State protection. Second, this broader focus led us to shift our geographic focus to include areas where some episodes of racketeering are denounced and examine in greater detail the concrete modalities of this crime.

The *modus operandi* of racketeers in a city as large as Tijuana cannot be reduced to one sole pattern of behavior. Some common elements vary depending on how the territorial control tax is imposed by different criminal groups. Others follow distinct patterns for the “simple” extraction of value depending on whether the actors involved are private or public. The stories collected reveal certain patterns associated with groups involved in drug-trafficking, other approaches adopted by smaller gangs, and still others involving public officials. Our interviewees shared the view that territorial control is the “merchandise” that delinquent organizations covet, described as consisting in a constant presence, the establishment of relations of domination, and the imposition of norms that regulate access to certain spaces or activities. Because this type of control is applied not only to dominate illegal markets, but also to establish

relations of collusion with public actors, it fosters the imposition of racketeering as an enduring practice.

Yet, our fieldwork allows to extract, describe and analyze the dynamics that are attached to extortion and protection-rackets both in the Eastern and the Western zones.

### ***a. Protection-rackets in the “forgotten Tijuana”***

The tragedy lived by those who suffer extortion does not start when the perpetrator knocks on their doors, but a moment before that. It is when they fall under “surveillance” and become a potential victim in the eyes of the protector. How does that happen?

During a normal day, while the future victim follows its routine, there is an individual monitoring him/her, taking notes of how many clients come and go, what they are buying, and how much they are spending. This person is known as the “flagger” (*bandera*). The mission consists in watching potential victims, then to present a detailed report to a boss who will decide the amount of the fee, and the frequency with which it is to be collected. The amounts extorted vary because they are set in accordance with the extortionist’s knowledge of the victims’ commercial activity, and its revenue. Moreover, victims may be followed on social networks or other communications media to monitor their behavior, learn their family structure, and their way of life. That knowledge is important for the extortionist because it augments his capacity to exert pressure.

In that sense, our interviews reveal that extortionist tend to possess a very clear picture of the merchants’ earnings by collecting intel through informal discussions in the neighborhood, as well as direct contact with employees. In fact, it is also important to note that a business may find itself subjected to various schemes because the same extortionist may charge the owner, managers, or employees, forcing each victim to pay a proportion of their salary or wages. For example:



I’m not the owner of the locale, but they came saying they were the turf bosses and they knew I was doing well, so I’d have to pay 800 pesos a week; the same as the owner.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ignacio, small food and drink producing establishment, Colonia Nido de las Águilas, Tijuana, 2022.



The testimonies compiled show great heterogeneity in the amounts extorted, from relatively low figures (\$400 pesos every Friday) to substantial payments (\$1,000, \$2,000 or \$3,000<sup>9</sup> USD a month after an initial payment of \$5,000 USD). Payments are in cash (we have no evidence of bank transfers or deposits) and may be a percentage of the business' net earnings or a fee applied to certain products (sodas, kilo of tortillas, etc.). Ironically, this may mean that consumers in marginalized zones of the city pay higher prices for basic products than residents of more privileged areas. Finally, the periodicity of payments can vary, though there is usually a fixed timetable based on the days with highest income, usually Fridays, weekends, or when *tianguis* are held.

Once the victim is selected, and the amount that will be collected is fixed by the perpetrators, the proper "contact phase" initiates.

Our interviewees said that in some cases –the minority– racketeering began with telephone calls, followed by "visits" or the delivery of letters or pamphlets that explained the "reason" and rationality of paying. The individual who "visits" presents the offer using a discourse that stresses protection, concern, and care, while emphasizing that "exchange" is the route that leads to supposed assurances of safety that will allow victims to carry on their commercial activity without interference, as long as they pay the tax:



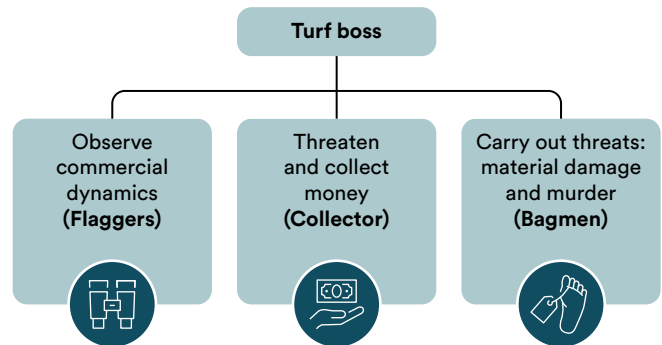
They arrived saying 'we're going to take care of your business and we'll take care of you, [make sure] you're not robbed, that nothing happens to you.'<sup>10</sup>

If the extortion-protection scheme is imposed, and accepted by the victim, visits and payments occur periodically. When a merchant refuses to pay, the usual result is a cycle of material damage or physical attacks, as we will see below.

When the delinquent presents himself as an active member of a drug cartel, for example, our interviewees told us that they could distinguish just how real the threat really was, based on operating mechanisms they could interpret, such as levels of command or hierarchies, the manner of the approach, the references that the extortionist offered, and the presence, physical or referred to, of a man presented or known as the "turf boss" (*jefe de plaza*).

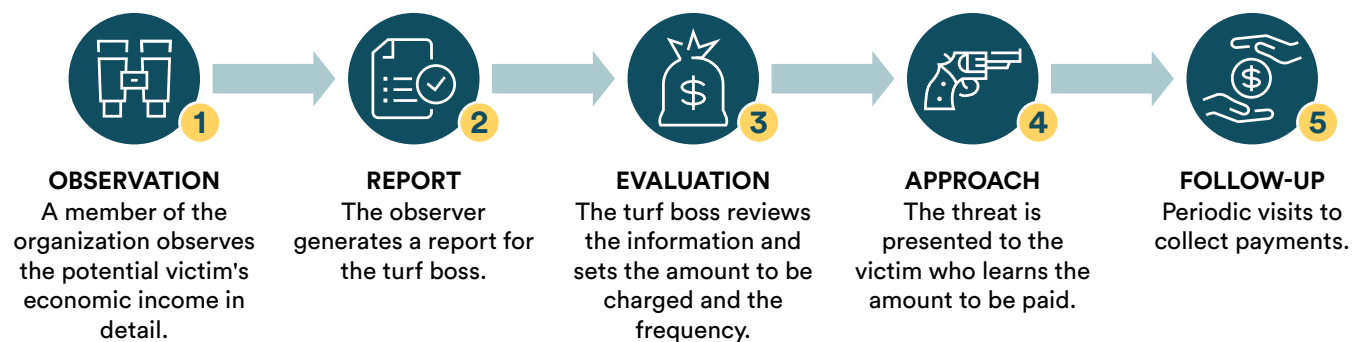
In fact, in most of the cases we have analyzed the structure of the operation included this "boss" who directed his "employee's" actions (Figure 1). These include "flaggers" (*banderas*), who keep watch and give the signal (*pitazo*)

Figure 1. Structure of the figures responsible for racketeering



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on fieldwork and interviews.

Figure 2. Schematization of the extortion dynamics observed in the eastern zone of Tijuana



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on fieldwork and 48 interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Payment in Mexican pesos or US dollars due to the border dynamics of the city.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio, small service establishment, Colonia Campos, Tijuana, 2022.



when a situation “gets hot”, and “bagmen” (*batacas*) who perform the operations on the street. Our interviewees stated that these are usually males, often minors, who have firsthand knowledge of the profile of the residents that they can turn into victims of extortion.

People understand that a command structure and planning are elements of the classic way of imposing a regimen of extortion in which those who collect the money through a face-to-face relation with the victim are lower-level members.

Moreover, during his approach, the initial “collector” (*cobrador*) may present this hierarchy in order to make his offer more serious and convince the merchant that he is facing an organized operation. Then, he might give the merchant “advice”, such as indicating that all dialogue will be with him, that he “can’t be jumped over”, the importance of “staying in line” because the “boss” has “his turf well-controlled”, and “it’s best if everyone follows the rules”. In cases of disobedience, the “collector” may apply punishment himself or have one of the bagmen do so. The latter generally resort to violence: damaging materials in the business, setting fires, physically assaulting the victim, or even murder, to “get the client back in line”. The frequency of collection is set by a boss higher in the hierarchy who, it seems, also determines the pattern of each operation (Figure 2).

The versions gathered clearly indicate that members in the higher echelons do not necessarily have direct contact with the “base” population. They are usually individuals known in the neighborhood by name, by nickname, or even physically. The boss’ reputation is fundamental in making threats credible. Evidence further suggests that “bosses” rarely live in isolation or are foreign to the neighborhoods where they operate. Indeed, a boss may choose to make himself so visible that her/his identity is anything but a secret among his victims, the authorities, and competitors in the protection market.

## **b. Construction of a violent environment: a crime that escalates**

Besides the boss’ reputation, the establishment of a longstanding relationship of racketeering lies on the construction of a violent environment. This in order to stimulate the necessity for protection, and therefore to constrain the merchant to accept the criminal offer. The

more the perpetrators are able to show a credible capability to use force, the more likely it is for the merchants to obey the orders, and fall under their protection. This might be the beginning of a cycle: the violent environment calls for protection; a window of opportunity opens for criminal actors to appear as protectors, while they keep on imposing violence and terror in order to make sure the population has no option but to accept and obey their rule. This is also important when it comes to sanction those who disobey, paving the way for retaliation measures such as burning down shops, kidnapping people, or even assassinating people.

Yet, during the initial approach, the victim receives a “cordial invitation” to establish the protection relationship. This presentation may be made quite amiably with explanations of the “whys” and “wherefores” of the fee or may arrive in the form of a letter that includes, for example, the name of the turf boss and the criminal organization that allegedly supports him. The second step may be more intimidating so as to succeed in coopting the victim’s behavior through warnings that refusal could bring violent consequences:



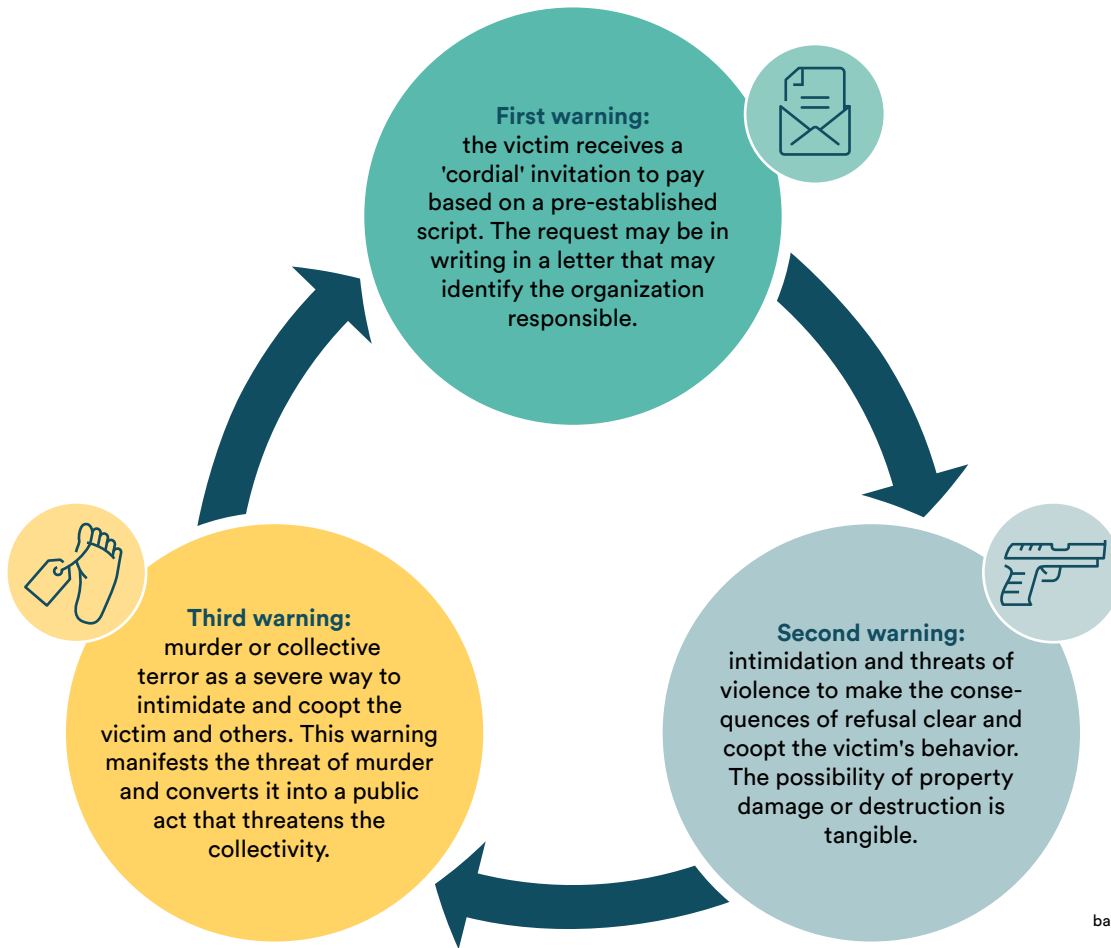
If you don’t pay, their first message tells you again and [if you still don’t pay] your store may be robbed, they may say *‘we aren’t going to protect you, then we’ll see how you get along’* (...) the next message is *‘I know which school your kids go to.’*<sup>11</sup>

In extreme cases where victims refuse to “get in line”, the situation can quickly escalate to direct violence. Arson and murder are among the punishments that may be inflicted on the merchant individually or on the surrounding community. This places collective pressure on the merchant to comply and serves as a lesson for people in the neighborhood who find out, usually through gossip, “why” the violence occurred:

Our research led us to analyze the climate of uncertainty and fear in settings where some entrepreneurs and merchants in Tijuana live, especially in the Eastern zone, and to trace a link from the dynamics of racketeering to other crimes, such as arson, strafing storefronts, or even murdering someone who refuses to pay or a family member. The aim is to impose a reign of terror on the whole community:

<sup>11</sup> Roberto, medium-size general service establishment, Colonia Villas de Baja California, Tijuana, 2022.

Figure 3. Protection racket area: The crime cycle



Source: Own elaboration based on the field work carried out.



The turf boss started a goddamn slaughter because he said he didn't want them paying others or refusing to pay the fee (...) He just started killing [people], four or five to make sure that everyone got the message that whether you buy here or there, pay or don't pay, they send the message by murdering someone, so everybody understands.<sup>12</sup>

Some crimes are extremely cruel (for example, tossing mutilated bodies in public spaces) so as to leave no doubt regarding the credibility of the threat and reinforce the fact that people need to seek protection. Though the versions collected seem to show an apparent desensitization to violence – interviewees said they are “accustomed” to ultraviolent acts and generally make “sense” of them (it happened for such

and such a reason)– they did not deny its impact on local environments. In fact, they coincided in denouncing the excessive cruelty and brutality that extortion can trigger and expressed anger towards the criminal organizations and their operators who are responsible for such acts.

### c. Extortion and its actors: from narcos to the State

Our inquiries also led us to analyze the role and responsibilities of groups involved in drug-trafficking in contexts of extortion and racketeering. Far from confirming the predominant “narco-based explanations”, our testimonies outlined nuances of fundamental importance.

Though actors allegedly affiliated with the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG are present, we cannot affirm that one practices

<sup>12</sup> Gil, medium-size establishment, other activities, Colonia Nueva Esperanza, Tijuana, 2022.



extortion and the other does not based on a supposed moral criterion. According to the conditions of neighborhoods, levels of State presence, collusion between criminal groups and authorities, and criminal's willingness to harden social and territorial control, both groups may participate in racketeering. But there are also individuals and small cells that can control a street or two and whose protection can be significant for local people. Another local figure that appeared is a kind of neighborhood "boss" (*patrón*, often an ex-police officer or public authority) who offers protection in exchange for payment due to her/his ability to dominate and grant favors.

We have also heard of "loose" or "free" actors who "pass themselves off" as members of a "large cartel" to inspire fear and charge fees. In some of those cases we learned that residents contacted real members of a criminal organization to complain or to corroborate that an order for extortion had been issued. In one case we were told that the criminal group denied giving permission to collect fees in a *tianguis* in the city and vowed to teach the individuals who were using their name for their own purposes a harsh lesson. Stories like this taught us the importance of not blindly following the trail of "narco-narratives" but, instead, to develop the ability to discern, at a very local level, precisely who was capable of imposing and maintaining a regimen of extortion and how she/he went about it.

Then, another issue consisted of accusations lodged against members of labor unions for charging fees outside established normative frameworks (that is, for formal membership in, or association with, a union), utilizing the threat of imposing their own racketeering network that would operate parallel to one enforced by a delinquent group. This revealed that the modalities of racketeering are not mutually exclusive; that is, any economic operation could be subjected to extortion by distinct actors, such as an organized crime group and a union leader. Moreover, the offers of protection from different extortionists may be interwoven as a way to control more activities and territories and their multiply economic returns. As a result, the organizers of commercial events –local markets, "swap meets", flea markets, stands, peddlers, *tianguis*– where sellers offer their wares may be victimized by individuals performing the role of "coordinators" in the structure who demand fees under the guise of charging for permits and providing security during the event.

Another fundamental aspect involves the conditions in which public authorities intervene and the roles that the government's will, the use of force, and the justice system play as protagonists in taking action, or not. Our interviewees

denounced that agents of public order sometimes participate directly in these crimes, while in other cases they simply turn a blind eye to the many and varied forms of corruption; that is, collusion, neglect, or an inability to "serve and protect". In general, people who have no personal contacts in public offices agree that the obligation to impose order is not exercised with transparency. The performance of the authorities and forces of public order at all three levels of government is evaluated as "lacking" when it comes to combatting corruption (since they often organize it or participate in it), maintaining a presence that coordinates security in neighborhoods, or carrying out efficient operations against delinquents. Interviewees even mentioned municipal and state police as participants in structures of extortion, stating that they charge fees. Others alleged that authorities were responsible for beatings, threats, theft of their belongings, and demands for money. Members of the army and National Guard have a better reputation among merchants, not because they are considered particularly "honest", but because their sphere of activity is usually external to the local context. In all cases, our fieldwork left no doubt that local authorities have full knowledge of the rules of the racketeering game in Tijuana and of the dynamics that daily affect commercial activities in the city's Eastern zone.

### III. ACTIONS AND REACTIONS: THE MANAGEMENT OF RACKETEERING

Once we obtained a solid description of racketeering, the next step was to explore the (re)actions that this crime triggers. In this section, we first elucidate some preventive actions that have been implemented in Tijuana, before analyzing an array of measures developed to confront and control extortion at the individual and collective levels.

#### a. Prevention

In a context of high insecurity, entrepreneurs and merchants often implement self-protection strategies, such as installing security equipment (protective bars, closed-circuit cameras, alarms) in attempts to prevent predatory crimes like robbery and assault. In the case of racketeering, however, the main goal is to present an image of solidity that impedes extortionists from making their first contact because "unlike kidnappings, racketeering requires greater territorial proximity"<sup>13</sup>. In these conditions, common mechanisms adopted by entrepreneurs and merchants include occulting their status as owners, keeping a low profile, and feigning that they have little decision-making power in the operation.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, 7 June 2022, Tijuana, B.C., with members of the Citizens' Public Security Committee.



Actors with greater purchasing power often hire private security services for themselves and/or their businesses. One guild leader in Tijuana stated that the hiring of private security services (armored vehicles, armed bodyguards) by his affiliates tends to increase after each episode of major violence in the city, saying “if the authorities don’t protect me, I’ll protect myself”, echoing the words of other entrepreneurs he represents<sup>14</sup>. These patterns obey a logic in which those with greater resources have access to diverse sources of protection, including buying firearms on the black market:



Because we’ve suffered so much from racketeering, threats, and my kidnapping... I bought guns too because you feel alone. I (...) keep them at home for my use and I’ve taught my children to use them. Once a friend was here and I taught him to shoot too, because of everything that’s happened to us.<sup>15</sup>

Juan’s story reveals not only a blurry dividing line between preventive and reactive actions, but also that the availability of guns is an attractive option that in a scenario of constant fear can honorably be shared with friends. When we find that access to guns has increased in recent years, we can assume that bearing arms will be an option that becomes increasingly common in diverse population sectors.

### **b. Individual Reactions**

When threats of racketeering occur, entrepreneurs and merchants want to react, but face a basic dilemma: to pay or not to pay. Who decides to pay for criminal protection? How can these decisions be explained, and what are their implications?



We usually agree to pay, sometimes out of fear, since well... how can I put it ... It’s not like you’re free to choose between paying or not. If you denounce it, the police may grab the money themselves. I mean, for example, you see patrol cars making their

rounds, and suddenly they stop at a certain house [or] little store, get paid and then go on their way... Everybody knows they get paid and then go on [but] nobody sees anything, nobody says anything [...] I can tell you it’s just something normalized in those neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup>

Acceding to an extortion-protection scheme may result from fear or of distrust of the authorities, or both. If victims perceived that denouncing this crime gave them access to alternative, reliable, and efficacious forms of protection, it would be more feasible to refuse to pay, but the consensus among our interviewees was clear: “the remedy may often be worse than the disease”. So, while the authorities insist that the most important action in combatting the crime of extortion is for victims to press charges, this is only one element of an equation that remains incomplete as long as reports fail to trigger rapid, effective action by the authorities accompanied by services of protection and justice that can put criminals away through effective judicial procedures. Where these conditions do not exist, denouncing extortion can be pointless, counterproductive, even dangerous. As we have explained, the crime of racketeering entails a long-term relationship, so accusations can spur the extortionist to intensify the use of violence to impose his regime.

It is important to understand that the lack of reports does not mean that State authorities ignore the reality that people live on Tijuana’s streets. In fact, some of the public officials we interviewed recognized the severity of the problem of racketeering but could not present any plan for dealing with it. These findings echoed citizens’ stories of distrust and their resignation in the face of what they perceive as the State’s incapacity to act. We must also recognize, however, that even in the most marginalized zones, there have been occasions when successful interaction with the authorities occurred, though often through informal, personal pathways, not official institutional trajectories:



When they came to collect, I grabbed [the phone] and called my friend who has a business like mine. He said ‘*Motherfucker, the bastards saw you*’. I said, ‘*Hey, why don’t you give me a hand and call that friend of yours*’. He said, ‘*Okay*’. That friend

<sup>14</sup> Interview, 9 June 2022, Tijuana, B.C., with the President of an entrepreneurial chamber.

<sup>15</sup> Juan, large transportation establishment, Colonia Las Águilas, Tijuana, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Yadir, small retail establishment, Tijuana, 2022.



was a *narco* here in Tijuana. He said: ‘*Look, you kill poison with poison, he’s the guy that can help you*’. Well, I said to myself, ‘*Wherever [help] comes from, as long as it gets us out of this*’. After that, a [guy] from the public institution contacted me [and] gave me instructions: ‘*If they call again, don’t answer, don’t give the bastards a red penny, not a penny*’. Two days later, he told me: ‘*Y’know what?. It’s all settled, they just answered, I called and called, finally they answered, I told them to stop fucking around, that that business is mine, and if they keep fucking around I’m gonna go and finish the bastards off. I told ‘em; go home, there’s no problem [but] if something happens and you send us, the bastards’ll get what’s coming to ‘em*’. See, they know each other and everything they do.<sup>17</sup>

This interview shows that, just as in the Western zone, access to the authorities is often individual through the intermediation of acquaintances, but most people say they do not have such privileged access to officials, so they are left unprotected. Aldemar’s story also illustrates how the decision to pay protection can be conditioned by another actor’s capacity to provide that protection and thus counteract the first. When an authority confronts an extortionist informally, she/he becomes a supplier of protection for the merchant and frees her/him from making the payment demanded. This testimony does not indicate whether the service was provided in exchange for some kind of benefit or favor for the public servant. As Benjamín, owner of a small business in the Las Águilas neighborhood, stated: “It turns out to be easier to give the police [the payment] I’m asked for than anything else”. Finally, Aldemar’s testimony portrays an authority who can decide (and may) sanction certain extortionists but cannot combat them in any systematic way.

The case of a small-scale female entrepreneur that we interviewed—we call her Alma—offers an interesting contrast. When Alma received the first threat from extortionists, her reaction was to contact a lawyer friend who promised to investigate if she was really in danger. Through his contacts on both sides—authorities and alleged members of criminal groups—her friend confirmed that the threat was credible and that she had to address it. Unfortunately, the lawyer’s diagnosis was not accompanied by a counterproposal that might suggest a solution. Because she had no other offer of protection, Alma had to pay or suffer the consequences, a dilemma to which we will return below.

This shows that offers of protection are, indeed, a kind of poison often combatted with another poison. When a public actor is involved, interlocution rests upon individual trust, not an institutional protocol, but these are the kinds of links that entrepreneurs and merchants generally forge with public officials:



We trust the prosecutor (*fiscal*), but not really the institution, because the structure is corruptible. The National Guard and SEDENA [could] inspire more trust, but they’re so exposed they become vulnerable [...] so exposed that people may lose respect for them.<sup>18</sup>

### c. Living with extortion

Finally, once they begin making payments, these merchants and entrepreneurs usually take measures to absorb the impact of the criminal tax since the relationship with the provider of protection is a long-term one.

This has several implications that need to be explained. The first is that “deals” of this kind are very difficult to break. Second, as a result, victims are forced to accept any changes that the extortionist may impose. If, in addition to charging the fee, the criminal actor proposes installing a sentinel (*halcón*) or *bandera* in the establishment, the proprietor can hardly refuse, even though this could mean participating in illicit activities. Another danger is that the extortionist may decide to simply appropriate the business and use it for his own purposes, such as conditioning an area to store or distribute drugs that operates parallel to the establishment’s usual, legitimate commercial activity:



You can go and buy normal things [like] a soda, potato chips, or candy, but on the side they sell other things. They look for businesses to act as fronts to facilitate other kinds of transactions. The deal is ‘*You won’t pay protection but pay me this way, got it? [I mean] with the business itself, but selling drugs*’.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Aldemar, medium-size food and drink producing establishment, Colonia Torres Bajas, Tijuana, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Joaquín, large industrial company, representative of an entrepreneurial association, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> David, large establishment, general services, Colonia Sánchez Taboada, Tijuana, 2022.





As time passes it becomes harder –virtually impossible, perhaps– to denounce the crime. Our interviews produced information and anecdotes which suggest that the best policy is simply to continue paying:



The guy who always comes said, *‘the boss wants the fee’*. I was stuck in the situation. You can’t denounce it because you’ve seen the guy’s face [...] from the moment you look the guy in the eye, be careful because you’re in a situation that’s... real delicate. You know who he is, and he knows you’re a potential witness who could accuse him... He coopts you one way or another, with a gun or by making an example of you, like that woman business owner. They pumped five shots to kill her after she denounced them...<sup>20</sup>

Finally, though seemingly counterintuitive –and extremely difficult to document systematically– the criminal tax can be an essential, perhaps even attractive, investment, for when one provider can neutralize the threat(s) that an entrepreneur or merchant receives from another violent actor, paying for criminal protection may mean investing in the best –or only– protection available. In such cases, the threats and services offered can vary and may hinder the establishment’s legitimate business activities:



The worst thing is when people come to trust the collecting agent. Maybe you talk to him and say *‘Y’know what, some kid is messing with my son in the secondary school’*, and the collector says *‘Don’t worry, we’re here to help’*. The collector offers something real... *protection!* (...) The problem is that racketeering becomes an investment not just a [simple] payment, because now there’s somebody else in the competition that I dislike, so I hire these guys to resolve the problem. And that’s happened, y’know, guys hiring some other guy to get somebody in the market out of the way.<sup>21</sup>

#### **d. The decision not to pay**

What options exist for those who do not pay? The first is to confront the materialization of the threat of violence. We received abundant stories about men *“who were killed because they say he didn’t want to pay”*. During one period of fieldwork we learned that a woman had been shot at point-blank range in her store in broad daylight, while it was full of clients, because she refused to pay. Another incident involved Alma, the businesswoman mentioned earlier. She narrated how her refusal to pay brought death threats, and then she was kidnapped right off the street. Once free, she decided to close her business and move away because, she remarked, no one offered the guarantees or protection she needed to denounce the crime.

These stories, disseminated in circles of friends, become elements that strengthen the credibility of threats and convince entrepreneurs and merchants to pay. As we have mentioned, criminal groups boast of their use of violence to make their threats credible and maximize the tendency of entrepreneurs and merchants to accept extortion-protection schemes so they will not be forced to close their businesses, abandon the activity, change to a different sector, move to a new neighborhood, or even leave Tijuana altogether. In a border setting, the latter option is more feasible for citizens with the financial capacity to relocate to San Diego, leaving their local operations in the hands of employees. But the truth is that few can assume the costs of starting over in a new place, perhaps because their branch of business does not permit mobility or because they lack the economic conditions or social networks that would make a move possible:



They started by demanding a thousand dollars because they knew we sold diverse things near the garita of Otay, but then it wasn’t \$1,000, it was \$5,000, and we had to leave home and never go back to selling... (Marisela, medium-size retail establishment, Colonia Bellas Artes, Tijuana, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Alenkar, medium-size retail establishment, Presidentes, Tijuana, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Personnel of the Citizens’ Public Security Committee.



I had to leave the neighborhood. Why would we stay? Though I grew up there and we had everything, family, friends (Andrés, small food and drink business, Colonia Campos, Tijuana, 2022).



We were lucky enough to cross over to San Diego when we decided not to pay the fee. Life is different over there, and though we had a lot of things here in Tijuana, we sold the business. It was real easy, [we're] luckier than those who can't leave Tijuana"... (Aida, large wholesale business, Colonia 20 de noviembre, Tijuana, 2022).

### e. Collective measures

All the variations described up to now involve actions that tend towards the individual end of the scale, perhaps involving close networks of friends and acquaintances. However, since racketeering is a crime that can affect numerous merchants in the same neighborhood we can assume that collective (re)actions to deal with it also exist. To investigate this, the most eloquent trail we found were the labors of, on the one hand, entrepreneurial chambers and associations and, on the other, Citizen Public Security Councils and Committees.

As spaces of representation, entrepreneurial chambers support medium and large entrepreneurs in dealing with diverse problems and challenges in their sector. Their direct interlocution with public authorities –in areas like public safety, among others– gives them a privileged role. Through these channels, entrepreneurs can access other sources of protection, such as State agencies (police, prosecutors, the army, or the National Guard) or private security firms. In a setting where few entrepreneurs or merchants trust the authorities, intermediation by these chambers is essential.

In some cases, chambers have supported the massive implementation of security apparatuses in their members' establishments; for example, one representative mentioned a donation of emergency buttons for

warehouses that connect directly to the authorities. Devices of this kind are attractive for those who trust that the authorities will intervene efficiently and honestly as first responders, but those who assume that authorities participate in extortion schemes argue that emergency buttons actually increase their vulnerability by visibly alerting criminals to the possible presence of the authorities. They say that this can potentially intensify threats, so they may be forced to pay more.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, some companies prefer not to install safety devices, even in public spaces (on the street, for example), because they are afraid they will be seen using them. Due to people's broad distrust of the authorities, preventive devices tend to benefit only those sectors that maintain some faith in public actions.

Finally, chambers, associations, and groups of entrepreneurs and/or merchants organize work sessions with local, state, and federal authorities to compile firsthand information on the conditions of criminality and discuss measures that can be implemented to improve them. Exchanges of this kind can generate ideas for action among those who have access to such circles, and it is clearly important to monitor their advances, but their deliberations leave out groups of merchants that cannot participate or that are informed only after the fact. This offers additional evidence of the existence of the "two Tijuanas".

In fact, not all entrepreneurs belong to chambers or associations, and not all members benefit equally from their interlocution. This reality has, once again, led to the consolidation of schemes of selective protection. For example, Alma, the proprietor who was forced to flee, stated that belonging to a chamber did not bring her any benefits. Because she was not deemed sufficiently "important", she was left to act on her own. No one in the chamber offered help. After closing her business, her situation became so precarious that she was unable to continue paying the membership fees and was definitively shunned from that social circle.

In the same vein, several interviewees complained that some chambers help only small internal cliques, a fact that impedes creating trust in these sectors. In one discussion, a representative confirmed that she/he knew of members who paid protection but did not share their stories out of fear of the possible consequences. Finally, and even more concerning, the reality of racketeering is not always a topic of interest in the meeting rooms of the city's larger chambers. While we in no way mean to disparage the value

<sup>22</sup> Informal conversation during a visit to a popular neighborhood in Tijuana, 9 June 2022.



of those entrepreneurial circles, it seems that because racketeering does not severely impact the most powerful sectors in Tijuana the attention they pay to this problem stays at a purely individual, perhaps selective, level with no response that suggests the capacity or willingness to support victims. Thus, collective efforts of this kind pass through Security Councils and Committees usually made up of representatives of the entrepreneurial sector, citizens with certain, well-defined profiles, and authorities linked to the domain of public security.

In the late 1990s, the government created the National Public Security Council (*Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública*), followed by the formation of state-level Security Councils. Around the year 2000, the Citizens' Public Security Committee (*Comité Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública*) emerged as a materialization of the law that established the bases for coordination among public security agencies at the national, state, and local levels and incentivized and institutionalized citizen participation. Made up of 6 NGOs, 6 entrepreneurial organisms, and 15 security sectors, that Committee sought to forge links among merchants, entrepreneurs, and authorities.

During interviews, members of the Tijuana Committee carried themselves more as citizens than entrepreneurs, though some of them are important figures. This is relevant because it helps explain the closeness they show with residents of popular neighborhoods where racketeering is a constant:



What happens first? [Residents] contact one or two of us [and] tell us firsthand what's going on. It starts with anecdotes. The first thing we do is listen, that's the really tough part, because they let it all out, they curse you ten times, berate you, *there's a terrible catharsis* (...), the part that some authorities just can't take. We listen to the real voices, only listen and take notes (...) With the help of advisers and the Committee's experience we then make an analysis. After that, the Committee prepares the scenario for a meeting [with authorities], *another catharsis!*, to prepare them for complaints, train them, even training on how to approach complainants socially. Then the meeting takes place.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Omar, personnel of the Citizens' Public Security Committee.

<sup>24</sup> Federico, Committee member, Colonia Presidentes, Tijuana, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Leandro, medium-size retail establishment, Colonia La Gloria, Tijuana, 2022.

The work of listening to residents is not only a space where they espouse their problems, but also a source of information that Committee members call "social intelligence", a concept rooted in gathering information from residents to better understand situations and attempt to address them. During this process, members seek spaces of cooperation and collective care among neighbors. Clearly, for this link to function, the organisms involved must have legitimacy, for if people do not trust them it will be very difficult for the Committee to collect the information it needs:



Right now, there are formal committees, neighborhood watch groups, and vigilant merchants (...) people who have nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with religion or soccer teams, just citizens. They stay alert, attend to whatever happens around them, and foment communication based on trust with the authorities to warn them of anything they feel is suspicious. They have a coordinator, secretary, hold neighborhood meetings to discuss topics. What they tell us and what we see is handled anonymously. It's usually very sensitive information [so] we deal with it in total anonymity. We never pass along information that indicates [the source]. We work with what's called citizen intelligence.<sup>24</sup>



At first it's not easy to trust somebody when it happens to you. From the State on up everything's corrupt. Imagine a scene where you call someone you don't know to tell what happened to you. But a friend told us about the committee. We decided to call the number on those neighborhood watch signs and tell them [what happened]. We're still afraid. though it happened two months ago, but decided to tell them. They helped us bring anonymous charges. We never entered a police station because we didn't want anything to do with that and they understood. They gave us some peace of mind, nothing's happened yet, they're looking into it, but at least you can speak and not get killed.<sup>25</sup>



For some people, approaching the Committee is the only safe, reliable path to the authorities. Concretely, the Committee can follow-up on denouncements and participate in the process in representation of victims. In a setting where everyone assumes that government collusion exists, the Committee's intervention is greatly appreciated. Efficacy is a second dimension of the Committee's work that merchants in popular neighborhoods evaluate. Some testimonies narrate that the Committee's actions have resulted in police operations in certain neighborhoods as follow-up to denouncements that articulated its actions with public responses. In fact, thanks to its normative mandate and daily operations, the Citizen's Committee maintains close links with diverse authorities, so it is not dependent on the good offices of any single one.



The Citizen's Committee doesn't make [people] dependent on one [agency] to guarantee their security, because [it] contacts the [National] Guard, state authorities, the Prosecutor's office, even the army. When 911 calls are made and the police don't show up, we get called, request the support of other institutions, and they go.<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, the Committee gives citizens a form of access to State agencies that is usually denied them. At the very least, this is part of a shared imaginary:



Large entrepreneurs can resolve everything with one phone call, but people like us, street-sellers, peddlers, we call 911 or 089 and wait for months without receiving any help. At least the Committee responds and operates.<sup>27</sup>

This popular perception of the Committee as trustworthy and efficient brings with it a broad expectation that instances of this type will "operate" and make protection an affordable commodity. However, without denying the value of initiatives of this kind, there will always be the challenge of tracing limits of responsibility among citizens, entrepreneurs, and public authorities, and how

to forge these initiatives into institutionalized processes, not just personal, individual, or punctual forms of attention.

In other words, although chambers, associations, commissions, and committees perform crucial labors to provide non-criminal options of protection, the central goal must always be to secure the involvement of State agencies as the sole provider of protection for the citizenry.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Our work in Tijuana has shown that the crimes of extortion and racketeering are today systematic in the municipality and that they victimize, especially, Pymes and small businesses in popular or marginalized neighborhoods. While the city's entrepreneurial sector has rarely been impacted directly by these crimes in recent years, the violent events of August 12, 2022, showed that public insecurity can upset the apparent tranquility of prosperous delegations, affect residents, and paralyze local and state authorities.

What is at stake is, literally, nothing less than the protection and physical security of citizens, based on the question posed at the outset: in Tijuana, *who protects whom?* We describe various "protection providers" who operate in the municipality in terms of their social, financial, and personal resources and demonstrate that responsibility for protecting entrepreneurial and commercial activities in Tijuana –formally assigned exclusively to the competent authorities– is currently handled as a private good with various modalities of service. Those services, however, are available only to people who have the wherewithal to acquire them; for example, private security "negotiated" through contact with public officials. Meanwhile, other population sectors are abandoned, highly vulnerable to being victimized by actors who assume roles as "protector-extortionists" and impose a "criminal tax" to exert their "protection that alarms".

Above all, this report indicates the need to escape from a sphere of "political convenience" attributable to the invisibilization of racketeering in Mexico due to scarce reporting which means that this crime does not appear significantly in official statistics. Beyond the concrete reality of the municipality where, despite a reporting index below 1%, our interviewees characterized crimes of extortion/racketeering as common occurrences, it is

<sup>26</sup> Omar, personnel of the Citizens' Public Security Committee.

<sup>27</sup> Small retail establishment, Colonia Centro Urbano 70-76, Tijuana, 2022.



now incumbent on the authorities, the entrepreneurial sector, and organized civil society to open their eyes to the systematization of this form of criminal behavior and its impact on the local economy and the escalation of violence.

Our research further reveals that, far from crimes that live and grow in obscurity, extortion and racketeering encompass highly-visible acts of violence that include assault, arson, death threats, and even murder (in extreme cases). These crimes initially remain shrouded because victims, though terrorized, distrust the authorities. Moreover, since –conveniently for the organs of public administration– these crimes barely appear in official statistics, they have been allowed to reach levels of high impact. Despite the difficulty, or impossibility, of documenting a direct correlation between the expansion of racketeering in Tijuana and the city’s broader dynamics of violence, it is clear to us that these crimes can only be addressed through an integral focus that understands and addresses the features of escalation of these crimes and goes beyond simple efforts to persuade victims to report them.

One goal of our study was to place on the discussion table the urgent need to efficaciously combat extortion and racketeering because they are the root of many other violent events in Tijuana and throughout Mexico. We must recognize that the challenge is enormous, but we are convinced that if government assumes its role as protector, then not only the crimes of extortion and racketeering, but a whole series of violent affectations that derive from them, can be reduced in the medium and long term.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The complexity of this crime, as demonstrated in our report, implicates diverse actors and indicates routes of action that correspond to each one. Dealing with this crime effectively requires contributions by at least 4 groups: authorities at all three levels of government, entrepreneurs and merchants, the communications media, and organized civil society.

We present the following recommendations:

### *For authorities at all three levels of government*

1. Consider extortion/racketeering crimes that form part of, and can detonate a series of, broader impacts and violences that can only be fought through integral crime prevention proposals.
2. Avoid focusing efforts only on promoting reporting by victims, unless they bring responses in the form of efficient, reliable protection by security forces, especially local police.
3. Invest in strengthening capacities of investigation and administration of justice, emphasizing the particularities of extortion and racketeering as a solution to the lack of reports; that is, cease placing responsibility for initiating processes on the victims of these crimes.

### *For the entrepreneurial sector and merchants*

1. Utilize the existing capacities of organized guilds (periodic meetings, privileged interlocution with authorities, power to convoke peers, etc.) to design

effective intermediation mechanisms between affected populations and trustworthy authorities who can attend to their needs.

2. Participate in generating measures to attend to public security problems that respect the importance of cooperation between society and authorities but recognize the line that separates them so that activities that correspond to the latter are not delegated to the former. Such initiatives must pursue two goals: 1) underscoring the responsibility of the State as the sole provider of desirable protection; and 2) avoiding measures of selective attention and insisting on the development of institutional responses that protect all victims, whether members of a city's key entrepreneurial/commercial sectors or not.

### *For organized civil society*

1. Promote long-term qualitative work to accumulate empirical knowledge on how extortion and racketeering operate in Tijuana, and in Mexico more generally.
2. Based on systematic, qualitative work, design intervention strategies "made-to-measure" for each locality. Other experiences in Mexico and abroad will be fundamental in attaining success.
3. Take action to increase the political costs for authorities who fail to seriously confront the crimes of extortion and racketeering by dismantling arguments (or pretexts) based on (i) the lack of reporting; and (ii) reporting as the sole detonator of government action.



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