



# Intimate Crimes: Kidnapping, Gangs and Trust in Mexico City by Rolando Ochoa

R. V. GUNDUR 

**REVIEW**



## **ABSTRACT**

This is a review of the 2020 IASOC Prize Winner Intimate Crimes: Kidnapping, Gangs and Trust in Mexico City by Rolando Ochoa. Ochoa provides a masterful account of how private citizens understand risk, as kidnapping continues to be a significant problem in Mexico, and manage their private security in an attempt to reduce that risk.

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Kidnapping is a massive topic that has several manifestations that frequently capture the public imagination. Examples include, *inter alia*, child abduction, when a stranger or parent takes a child without the right to do so; tiger kidnapping, when assailants hold victims as hostages to facilitate a crime (Noor-Mohamed 2014); express kidnapping, when a victim is kidnapped and forced to withdraw money from an automated teller machine or gather other easily obtained assets for their kidnappers; political kidnapping, when kidnappers hold hostages in an effort to extract concessions from a government; and, the primary focus of Rolando Ochoa's *Intimate Crimes: Kidnapping, Gangs and Trust in Mexico City*, kidnapping for ransom, when a victim is held until a ransom is paid.

Kidnapping for ransom is a crime that is serious, personal, and of significant concern in several countries around the world, especially in countries where high inequality and ineffective policing exist. Nonetheless, kidnapping for ransom does not receive frequent criminological attention. Ochoa's *Intimate Crimes* is an important response to this deficit. Ochoa's clearly written and focused book does exactly as it claims in the title: it profiles the history of kidnapping in Mexico City; elucidates the natures of the gangs who have and continue to perpetuate kidnappings; and, most significantly, discusses the trust signals used by those who face the risk of being kidnapped, to establish a semblance of personal security.

In the first half of *Intimate Crimes*, Ochoa makes his work accessible by profiling Mexico's social and political dynamics. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis of the book and outlines the concept of signaling – how employers and employees understand their suitability for this sensitive role of personal security. Chapter 1 also discusses the role of wealth and contracted labor, in middle-to-upper class Mexican families. Paid assistance, in the form of housekeeping, childcare, and chauffeuring, is readily accessible, depending on one's financial situation. Ochoa indicates that middle-class Mexican families who cannot contract for around-the-clock services may be, in the contemporary context, more susceptible to being kidnapped.

Chapter 2 is an important contribution on its own. Although some work exists on the liberalization of the Mexican economy and its impact on criminal enterprise in the drug trade (e.g., Gundur 2022; Durán Martínez 2018), Ochoa's chapter describes how the liberalization of criminal enterprise has far ranging consequences. Ochoa's analysis shows that the failure to sustain state-led control mechanisms in times of transition provides opportunity to criminal entrepreneurs of all varieties. In addition, this chapter unpacks the ongoing difficulties that the Mexican government has had with governance and, relatedly, crime control.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the history and evolution of kidnapping in Mexico. Kidnapping has been a visible crime in Mexico for at least five centuries. Early kidnappers were interested in making political statements; however, zero tolerance policies eventually ended the viability of kidnapping as a political strategy. Subsequently, corrupt police spearheaded professionalized kidnapping gangs that focused on extorting ransom from elite victims. Then, as the middle-class grew in Mexico, they too became suitable targets, especially for less professionalized and opportunistic kidnappers. Nevertheless, kidnapping for ransom remains a core concern of Mexico's elites.

The second half of *Intimate Crimes* focuses on the dynamics between these elite actors and their household employees. Chapter 4 underscores how the Mexican state has failed to establish a sense of security among much of its population. In light of this security deficit, high-status Mexican families use several strategies to establish protection mechanisms for themselves. The security that people trust is largely privatized; thus, people turn to these privatized security companies when seeking to create safe and secure staffs of household employees. This chapter also shows how the securitization activities of wealthy actors impact middle-class Mexicans, who, to an extent, benefit from these activities.

Chapter 5 is an in-depth consideration of the attributes, or signals, that prospective employers look for when hiring their staffs. This rich discussion delves into what trust is and how employers identify and monitor trust. Several elements emerge that would not be obvious to a non-Mexican. Ochoa does a brilliant job of pointing out employers' stereotypical attitudes and their provenance. Chapter 6 considers the employees' perspectives and explores how employees understand obligation along with signal generation and maintenance.

Through its analysis of the people who are potential kidnapping victims and the household servants recruited to prevent that outcome, *Intimate Crimes* provides an analytical tool kit through which to analyze protection mechanisms. Ochoa considers what private household employers look for as they contract for protection and how private vendors respond to those demands. Ochoa also shows how state protection failure can influence these dynamics. Mexico is not the only young democracy with weak state-led protection. Thus, this case study is important for those who are developing schematics to assess the public's views of these themes in similar environments. Given the amount of foreign aid that is spent to securitize such spaces, Ochoa's contribution has the potential to make a meaningful impact within policy circles.

*Intimate Crimes* is masterful in its consideration of the dynamics on which it focuses. However, Ochoa could have explored three issues further. First, though the author recounts several examples of kidnappings gone wrong, where the kidnapped person was ultimately murdered, he does not explore factors that would predict this outcome. More importantly, I failed to understand how killing a victim would be good business practice. While I recognize that the book's focus is on the licit business practices of those establishing security rather than the illicit business practices of the assailants, some further discussion of anticipated outcomes, should a kidnapping occur, would have helped the reader better understand how security mechanisms designed to protect individuals could go wrong. Second, further to that point, though some victims of kidnapping were interviewed, it is not clear how these victims view their security decisions in the wake of victimization, and how the experience of victimization changed the way in which they establish or maintain security over time. Finally, since an increasing number of victims comes from middle-class backgrounds, more information about how these middle-class communities negotiate trust and security would have been helpful.

Despite these reservations, some of which are the clear consequences of funding and temporal limitations that impact all research, I can wholeheartedly recommend *Intimate Crimes* as an examination of how individuals construct and interpret trust around them. *Intimate Crimes* makes a substantial analytical contribution to the realm of protection mechanisms and should be read by those interested in illicit enterprise, the risks that violent actors pose, and how people respond to those risks.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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