



Venezuela - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Wednesday 5 April 2017

Information on kidnappings including: prevalence between 2013 and 2017; areas of country affected; police assistance and impartiality

In March 2017 *Traackimo* notes:

“The recent police report shows that kidnapping in Venezuela has surged to an alarming rate of 88 percent this year. The government’s unwillingness to make the crime statistics public didn’t help either. Based on the report obtained by RunRunes, there were 411 reported cases of kidnapping in Venezuela within the period of 8 months from January to September last year. The number is almost double if you compare it to the reported number of abduction during the same period in 2015. However, more than 91 percent of the 411 victims were freed, compared to only 208 in 2015, while the number of victims killed was 18 in contrast to 9 in 2015. The increasing number of reported cases of kidnapping in Venezuela and the declining number of hostages freed without ransom reflect the police’s incapability to end the alarming security problem. Kidnapping has been one of the biggest worries in Venezuela for some years now. But RunRunes could not give the exact numbers as the government refuses to release the actual statistics that would better indicate the seriousness of the country’s security crisis. RunRunes noted that the statistics is considerably underrated as most of the victims chose to have an agreement with their kidnapers rather than file a report to the police. Moreover, the numbers do not include the victims who were held for less than 48 hours after paying the ransom. The report also shows that kidnapping in Venezuela is not only rampant but also highly intensive with 216 cases of kidnappings reported in the state of Miranda alone while 123 incidents occurred in the Capital District of Caracas. The combined numbers in these two areas account for over 80 percent of kidnapping in Venezuela” (*Trackimo (28 March 2017) Disturbing 2016 Reports of Kidnapping in Venezuela*).

In March 2017 the *Venezuelan* states:

“According to Fermín Mármol García, a lawyer specializing in criminal affairs (the government doesn’t publish figures as part of their censorship efforts), there are over 3,000 kidnappings in Venezuela every year, and 2016 saw a 170 percent increase in kidnappings” (*Venezuelan (10 March 2017) Venezuela's spiraling violence*).

A report released in February 2017 by the *United States Overseas Security Advisory Council* notes that:

“Kidnapping remains a major criminal industry. Kidnappings in Caracas happen primarily during the nighttime hours but are not uncommon during the day. The Venezuelan government officially does not track total kidnappings, but it is believed that kidnapping cases remained constant during 2016, as with 2015. Criminologists continue to report that 80% or more of kidnappings go unreported to officials for fear of retaliation by kidnapers and include “express kidnappings” and traditional kidnappings for ransom. Investigations by the Criminal, Penal, and Scientific Investigation Bureau (CICPC) have identified multiple heavily-armed criminal gangs specializing in express kidnappings that operate in the wealthier neighborhoods of Caracas. CICPC’s specialized unit aimed at combating kidnapping has had limited

successes but has failed to reduce significantly the number of kidnapping incidents. Kidnappers continue to operate with little fear of arrest, prosecution, or incarceration. Police officers and security officials are often implicated in acts of kidnapping and other crimes. A majority of kidnappings are “express kidnappings” that usually last less than 48 hours (sometimes as short as two hours). Victims have been driven around by their kidnappers and forced to withdraw various amounts of cash from multiple ATMs until the accounts balances were zero or the card was locked by the bank. However, changes in Venezuelan law and banking practices have restricted daily withdrawal amounts, making the old practice less lucrative. In recent years, it has become more common for kidnappers to drive their victims around for several hours, disorienting the victim and giving the victim’s family/friends time to gather a ransom payment. Paying a ransom is against Venezuelan law” (Overseas Security Advisory Council (17 February 2017) *Venezuela 2017 Crime & Safety Report*, p.9).

BBC News in February 2017

“Most of those kidnapped for ransom in Venezuela are released within 24 hours, a study by the Institute of Criminal Science and Criminology at the University of Santa Maria in Caracas suggests” (BBC News (15 February 2017) *Venezuelan kidnapping chronicled on Twitter touches a nation*).

A report published in January 2017 by *IRIN News* points out that:

“Venezuela is now one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Its homicide rate is second only to El Salvador, according to a recent report by the Observatory of Venezuelan Violence (the government no longer releases regular crime statistics), and cases of kidnapping for ransom reportedly doubled in 2016” (IRIN News (9 January 2017) *Fleeing a broken Venezuela*).

The *Economist Intelligence Unit* in January 2017 states:

“Kidnapping for ransom has increased significantly in recent years...There is no data since 2011, but kidnapping is estimated to have risen sharply. Private-sector research groups estimate the number of actual kidnappings as much higher (as high as 17,000), stating that the vast majority of cases go unreported, reflecting weak public confidence in the security services. Around one-third of kidnap-for-ransom cases occur in Caracas, the capital, while the western states of Zulia, Lara and Barinas have also been particularly affected by the increase in abductions. The phenomenon of 'express kidnapping', where victims are forced to withdraw money from automated teller machines, is also on the rise and now accounts for most kidnappings, particularly as the sentence for this crime is much less than for conventional kidnapping. Robberies and express kidnappings are a particular problem at Caracas's international airport, Maiquetia. Kidnapping is also a problem in the area that borders Colombia, and foreigners have been among the victims” (Economist Intelligence Unit (5 January 2017) *Venezuela risk: Security risk*).

In March 2017 a document issued by the *United States Department of State* reviewing events of the preceding year notes that:

“Societal violence remained high and continued to increase...Criminal kidnappings for ransom were widespread in both urban centers and rural areas. Kidnappings included both "express kidnappings," in which victims were held for several hours and then released, and traditional kidnappings. The Public Ministry reported 793 cases of kidnapping or extortion in 2015. NGOs and police noted many victims did

not report kidnappings to police or other authorities due to fear of retribution or lack of confidence in the police and that the actual occurrence was likely far higher” (United States Department of State (3 March 2017) *2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Venezuela*).

In September 2016 *InsightCrime* states:

“The number of recorded kidnappings in Venezuela has increased by 88 percent over the last year, according to new figures, which help to quantify a security crisis that has all too often been obscured by the government's reluctance to release damning crime statistics. There were 411 reported kidnappings in Venezuela between January and the second week of September 2016, compared to 219 over the same period in 2015, according to police figures obtained by Runrunes...Of these victims, 375 were liberated in 2016, compared to 208 in 2015, while 18 were killed, compared to nine in 2015. While kidnappings have been rising, the police's ability to resolve them has been falling. According to Runrunes, internal police reports show that 82 percent of reported cases last year ended with the freeing of the hostage without a ransom being paid, but in 2016 this has dropped to 62 percent. Over 80 percent of the kidnappings were concentrated in just two zones: the state of Miranda, where 216 incidents were reported, and the Capital District of Caracas, where 123 kidnappings were recorded” (InsightCrime (30 September 2016) *Reports of Kidnapping in Venezuela Nearly Double in 2016*).

InsightCrime in September 2016 notes:

“There is little doubt that kidnapping is a major problem in Venezuela, which is suffering from a wider breakdown in law and order amid a worsening economic crisis. There are no reliable statistics on how widespread kidnapping is, as these cases often go unreported and the Venezuelan government's crime data is notoriously suspect. One recent study, however, which was based on citizen perceptions and anecdotal evidence, suggested the number of kidnappings rose by 170 percent during the first semester of 2016. InSight Crime field research conducted in 2011 found that many people in the capital city of Caracas knew someone who had been a kidnapping victim. The most common form of the crime is known as express kidnapping, in which the hostage is held for less than 48 hours” (InsightCrime (27 September 2016) *Venezuela Announces Plan to Combat Rampant Kidnapping*).

In June 2016 the *International Crisis Group* states:

“According to a crime expert, murders were up 8 per cent in the first three months of 2016 and kidnappings 170 per cent. One reason, according to the source, is a 70 per cent deficit in police patrolling the streets. This has worsened in recent years, partly as a result of the growing number of officers murdered, on- and off-duty. Another reason is the impunity violent criminals enjoy” (International Crisis Group (23 June 2016) *Venezuela: Edge of the Precipice*, p.6).

InsightCrime in June 2016 notes:

“Kidnappings in Venezuela have risen 170% in 2016 according to a new report based on citizen perceptions, highlighting the inability of the state to provide security as economic and political crises continue to engulf the nation. The study, published by the Institute of Criminal Science and Criminology at the University of Santa Maria in Caracas, says the number of kidnapping cases has quintupled over the past 150 days, *El Nacional* reported. However, the statistics in the report were based on

anecdotal evidence and perceptions, as there are no official statistics and kidnapping is hugely underreported. The study estimated that only 8 percent of cases are reported to the police. According to the report, the overwhelming majority of kidnappings are brief, with 94 percent concluding within 24 hours, and most take place at times and on days of reduced police activity. The report also noted that violence and brutality during kidnappings has increased, and stories of sexual abuse, physical torture, and executions have proliferated” (InsightCrime (14 June 2016) *Report Claims Huge Rise in Venezuela Kidnappings*).

A document published by the *United States Department of State* in April 2016 reviewing events of 2015 points out that:

“Societal violence remained high and continued to increase...Criminal kidnappings for ransom were widespread in both urban centers and rural areas. Kidnappings included both "express kidnappings," in which victims were held for several hours and then released, and traditional kidnappings. The Public Ministry reported 599 cases of kidnapping or extortion in 2014. NGOs and police noted many victims did not report kidnappings to police or other authorities due to fear of retribution, and that the actual occurrence was likely far higher” (United States Department of State (13 April 2016) *2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Venezuela*).

The *United States Department of State* issued a report in June 2015 which included commentary on 2014 noting that

“Criminal kidnappings for ransom were widespread in both urban centers and rural areas; kidnappings included both "express kidnappings," in which victims were held for several hours and then released, and traditional kidnappings. On August 18, former minister Rodriguez Torres reported kidnappings so far in the year had decreased by 52 percent nationwide--from 245 in 2013 to 117. NGOs and police noted many victims did not report kidnappings to police or other authorities. The former minister also stated the Safe Homeland Plan was responsible for a 21 percent reduction in homicides nationwide during the year. He attributed 76 percent of the year's homicides to clashes between gangs and security forces. Rodriguez Torres reported the Safe Homeland Plan resulted in arrests of 9,523 persons linked to murder, 507 to kidnappings, and 3,015 to robbery and theft of vehicles between May 2013 and August 2014, adding that 255 gangs had been dismantled, and 814 individuals linked to criminal organizations had been arrested by security forces. Conversely, local news reports stated homicides and crime in Caracas had increased since the plan's inception” (United States Department of State (25 June 2015) *2014 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Venezuela*).

In a document issued in February 2014 by the *United States Department of State* reviewing events of 2013 notes that:

“Societal violence remained high and continued to increase. The NGO Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV) reported morgues received 17 cadavers per day of individuals killed in violent acts, compared with 13 cadavers per day in 2012. Based on these numbers, the OVV estimated at least 25,000 homicides nationwide during the year. On March 21, the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace reported 16,072 homicides in 2012, compared with 14,092 in 2011. Criminal kidnappings for ransom were widespread in both urban centers and rural areas; kidnappings included both "express kidnappings," in which victims were held for several hours and then released, and traditional kidnappings. According to the press (using police data), there were 309 kidnappings between January and October. NGOs and police noted

that many victims did not report kidnappings to police or other authorities. On October 30, Minister of Interior, Justice, and Peace Miguel Rodriguez Torres stated that the Safe Homeland Plan was responsible for a 28 percent reduction in homicides nationwide since the plan's implementation. In addition, Minister Rodriguez Torres stated there was a 33 percent reduction in "serious crimes" such as homicides and kidnappings in the areas where the plan was implemented" (United States Department of State (27 February 2014) *2013 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Venezuela*).

No further information on this issue could be found among sources available to the RDC.

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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