

---

## **Higher education and the Ayotzinapa disappearances: institutional responses, memory work, and accountability in Mexican universities**

**Adriana Vanessa Blanes Ugarte<sup>1\*</sup>, Oscar Coronado Rincón<sup>2</sup>, Sonia Sujell Velez Baez<sup>3</sup>, Joel Martínez Bello<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Huehuetoca

\* **Corresponding Author Email:** avblanesu@uaemex.mx - **ORCID:** 0000-0003-3065-9335

<sup>2</sup>Universidad de Sonora, México

**Email:** oscar.coronado@uson.mx - **ORCID:** 0000-0003-3651-6896

<sup>3</sup>Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, México:

**Email:** ssvb@uaq.mx - **ORCID:** 0000-0001-5168-5183

<sup>4</sup>Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Toluca

**Email:** jmartinezb@uaemex.mx - **ORCID:** 0000-0003-3315-691X

---

**Abstract:** This paper examines how the enforced disappearance of 43 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College (Ayotzinapa, Iguala, Guerrero, 26–27 September 2014) has shaped the roles, responsibilities, and governance practices of higher-education institutions in Mexico. Using a mixed-methods documentary approach, the study triangulates official registry data (RNPDO), civil-society syntheses (Red Lupa and regional observatories), investigative reconstructions (Forensic Architecture; GIEI-related outputs) and contemporary journalism to analyse (1) the scale of disappearances in Mexico and selected trends relevant to university contexts and (2) how universities function as sites of memorialization, legal and psychosocial assistance, public pressure and, at times, institutional constraint. Two tables present registry snapshots and a timeline of institutional responses; interpretations of those tables are complemented by extracts from key informants (family members, lawyers, and academic actors) published in the public record. Findings indicate that the Ayotzinapa case has had enduring effects on campus life and governance: universities provide crucial spaces for memory and family-led advocacy, they are intermittent partners in forensic and legal efforts, and they face recurring tensions between academic autonomy and political pressures. The paper concludes with governance recommendations to enhance universities' capacity to support victims and hold public authorities to account.

**Keywords:** higher education; enforced disappearance; Ayotzinapa; university governance; memory; RNPDO

**Received:** 11 August 2025 / **Revised:** 05 November 2025 / **Accepted:** 10 November 2025 / **DOI:** 10.22399/ijnasen.27

---

### **1. Introduction**

On the night of 26–27 September 2014, students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College (Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos, Ayotzinapa) were attacked in Iguala, Guerrero. Six people were killed, dozens were injured, and forty-three students were forcibly disappeared—an event that rapidly transcended Guerrero to become a national and international emblem of enforced disappearance, institutional complicity and impunity in Mexico (Forensic Architecture, n.d.; GIEI findings). The Ayotzinapa case has not only driven demands for truth and justice from families and civil society but has also reshaped how higher-education institutions are experienced: campuses have become arenas for commemoration, legal support, grassroots mobilization and contested memory. Universities have sometimes acted as service providers (legal clinics, psychosocial care), at other times as

defenders of the right to protest, and in certain contexts as targets of political pressure or internal constraint when their governance bodies face state actors [1].

This paper explores the relationships between higher education and the Ayotzinapa disappearances by asking: How has the Ayotzinapa case affected university governance and campus practice in Mexico? What institutional roles have universities assumed in response to enforced disappearances (memorialization, technical assistance, legal accompaniment)? And what tensions arise between university autonomy, public accountability and the families' search for truth? To answer these questions we combine national and state-level registry data with civil-society reporting and with published extracts from family members, lawyers and academic actors. By centring both quantitative registry evidence and qualitative testimony, the study seeks to map how the phenomenon of disappearance intersects with the institutional landscapes of Mexican higher education.

## 2. Method

This is a mixed-methods, document-based study that triangulates three primary sources of evidence:

1. **Official registry data.** We used the public dashboard of the Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas (RNPDO) and government reports to establish national totals and to extract state-level patterns relevant to campus contexts (e.g., concentration of disappearances near urban university clusters). RNPDO is updated regularly and provides microdata on year, municipality, sex and age of disappearance; where appropriate, we used authoritative published overviews (e.g., Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda reports) as complements to dashboard snapshots.
2. **Civil-society syntheses and investigative reconstructions.** Red Lupa's National Report (2024) and regional observatory reports were used to detect recent trends, notable surges by state and the distribution of cases across years. For the reconstruction of the Ayotzinapa events and the role of security forces and institutional actors, we relied on Forensic Architecture's investigative output and reports connected to the Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (GIEI). These reconstructions provide contextual anchors for understanding family demands for access to state-held files and for academic participation in technical review [2].
3. **Journalism and key-informant extracts.** We systematically consulted national and international reporting (e.g., El País, The Guardian, Reuters, AP) and NGO publications to capture public statements from family members (e.g., Cristina Bautista and other mothers and fathers), legal representatives (e.g., Isidro Aguilar), and university actors who have publicly discussed campus roles in commemorations or assistance. Extracts included in the Results section are direct quotations or paraphrases previously published in those outlets, cited to their original reporting [3].

**Analytic approach.** Quantitative registry data were summarized into tables that present national totals and selected state-level figures (Table 1) and a brief timeline of institutional responses (Table 2). Because RNPDO and civil-society sources use different snapshot dates and definitions, the tables always indicate the source and cut-off date. Qualitative material—public extracts from families and lawyers—was used interpretively to illuminate the institutional meaning of the observed registry patterns (e.g., why campus memorialization matters in places that report rising numbers of disappearances). Ethical care was taken to rely only on statements already in the public record; no new interviews were conducted and no sensitive personal data beyond quoted public statements were reproduced.

## 3. Results

**Summary of sources and load-bearing facts.** As of late 2024, scholarly syntheses and institutional reports documented that more than 100,000 persons had been registered as disappeared or not located in Mexico since 2006 (a widely cited figure is 103,522 as of November 2024 in a recent scholarly overview and UN/academic syntheses). The RNPDO dashboard provides continually updated microdata; civil-society aggregations (e.g., Red Lupa's National Report, May 2024) highlight that the majority of reported disappearances are concentrated in a subset of states and that the period 2018–2024 accounted for a particularly high share of new entries. These national and state-level contours are the backdrop for universities' institutional responses [4].

**Table 1.** Selected registry snapshots and state distributions (representative sources and cut-off dates)

Indicator	Value (representative figure)	Source and cut-off
National registered disappeared / not located (cumulative since 2006)	~103,522	Scholarly overview citing official data (Nov 2024) [4].
RNPDNO public dashboard	(microdata accessible; updated daily)	RNPDNO public dashboard (government).
Red Lupa National Report observations	48% of missing cases concentrated in 2018–May 16, 2024; high concentration across particular states (e.g., Estado de México prominent among top states).	Red Lupa (National Report, May 16, 2024) [2].
State-level surges (examples)	Querétaro: noted surge 2024 (Red Lupa state notes); Sonora: marked increases documented in 2024–2025 local reporting; Estado de México: consistently among the highest totals.	Red Lupa state syntheses and regional press [2].

*Interpretive note on Table 1:* The table intentionally reports representative figures and source cut-off dates rather than single immutable counts because RNPDNO and civil-society compilations are periodically updated; exact numbers vary by snapshot. The key analytic fact is that disappearances are numerically large and concentrated in particular periods and states, creating sustained civic demand that often engages universities as civic actors [4].

**Table 2.** Timeline of select institutional responses and public moments (2014–2024)

Year	Select institutional / civic moment	Representative source
2014	Night of attack and disappearance (26–27 Sep 2014); immediate national outcry; campus protests and memorials begin.	Forensic Architecture reconstruction; early reporting [1].
2015–2016	Formation of family collectives and national mobilizations; universities host commemorations and solidarity actions.	Amnesty and press coverage [5].
2015–2019	Independent investigations (GIEI) and platform-based reconstructions (Plataforma Ayotzinapa) provide alternative reconstructions, involving academic allies.	GIEI and Forensic Architecture outputs [1].
2022–2024	Renewed calls for military files, family–government tensions; universities continue to host anniversaries and legal clinics; civil-society reports (Red Lupa) highlight increases in some states.	El País, Red Lupa, national reporting [3].
2024–2025	Continued family demands; academic and forensic participation sought by families for file review; universities’ campuses remain key public spaces for commemoration.	Press coverage and NGO statements [3].

*Interpretive note on Table 2:* The timeline shows that universities’ engagement with the Ayotzinapa families and with memory work is persistent across years: campuses are recurrent spaces of commemoration and civic mobilization, and they are increasingly proposed as partners for technical review (forensic, archival) by families and civil society [1].

### 3.1 Qualitative extracts from key informants (public record) and their institutional meaning

Below are selected public extracts (published statements) and a brief analytic comment for each, illustrating how families and lawyers frame universities' roles:

1. **Cristina Bautista (mother of one disappeared student).** Published interviews repeatedly convey the families' insistence on presence and memory: "We can never forget our children. For us as mothers, they are always present" [6]. This framing explains why campuses remain central: they are accessible public spaces where the absence is made visible and communal [6]. *Analytic comment:* Bautista's appeals underscore universities' symbolic function. Campus memorials and anti-monuments become part of a civic architecture of remembrance that sustains legal and political claims.
2. **Family legal representatives (e.g., Isidro/Isidoro Aguilar and team).** Legal actors have publicly demanded access to military folios and independent review; they have also argued for technical review beyond prosecutorial channels (press syntheses, 2023–2025). Such demands point to a potential role for academic forensic collaboration—provided independence is preserved [3]. *Analytic comment:* Lawyers' requests for external academic review highlight how universities can supply technical credibility (e.g., forensic anthropology, archival science) that families lack within state prosecutorial channels.
3. **Forensic Architecture and allied technical actors.** Investigative reconstructions (Plataforma Ayotzinapa; Forensic Architecture) have used academic-technical methods (mapping, spatial reconstruction, victim testimony) to contest official narratives and demonstrate contradictions in the "historic truth" advanced by earlier state-led reports. These efforts exemplify how academic institutions can provide methodological tools for truth-seeking [1]. *Analytic comment:* Forensic-technical interventions performed by research groups demonstrate universities' potential to contribute rigorous, peer-reviewed technical scrutiny, which can buttress families' claims for access and transparency.
4. **Families' civic framing (multiple statements).** Family spokespeople repeatedly emphasize two linked demands: truth (access to files, forensic evidence) and non-forgetting (public memory). "We want the truth" is a recurrent phrase across anniversary coverage and campus commemorations. This rhetorical pairing explains why universities are both technical partners and symbolic spaces for remembrance [3]. *Analytic comment:* The families' twin demands position universities to act simultaneously as technical allies and as civic hosts, a dual role that generates governance challenges (how to be independent technical partners while also sustaining campus as civic memory space).

## 4. Discussion

The combined quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests several interrelated dynamics concerning higher education and the Ayotzinapa disappearances.

**1. Universities as civic memory sites and the politics of remembrance.** Campus memorialization (anti-monuments, vigils, assemblies) functions as cultural infrastructure that keeps the Ayotzinapa case visible within public life. As Cristina Bautista and other family members have insisted in public statements, memory is itself a form of political action that leverages campuses' visibility to sustain pressure for truth and justice. Universities thus bear responsibilities for upholding freedom of expression and sacredness of commemorative spaces. However, memory work is not neutral: it implicates institutional governance because universities must decide whether to formally recognize, host or regulate protests and memorials and how to protect students and families involved in them [6].

**2. Technical and forensic capacities: potential and limits.** Forensic Architecture, GIEI-linked outputs, and independent academics have demonstrated the capacity of research teams to produce alternative reconstructions and to identify contradictions in official accounts. Universities with forensic anthropology, archaeology, or legal clinics could theoretically support families' evidentiary review. Yet this role requires meaningful institutional protections to guarantee independence (to avoid co-optation by state-sponsored forensic teams) and sustained resources for long-term forensic, archival and psychosocial work. The families' repeated insistence on access to

military folios exemplifies both the demand and the institutional obstacle: universities can analyze files, but only if those files are made available and if universities are protected from political pressures [1].

**3. Governance tensions: autonomy, co-optation, and political pressure.** University governance bodies frequently navigate competing pressures: to protect campus order and safety, to uphold academic freedom and protest rights, and to preserve relations with state actors (for funding, accreditation, or security). When campuses host sustained protest activity, governance bodies may face external pressure from local governments or internal pressure from donors or boards to limit demonstrations. The families' skepticism toward government-affiliated institutional offers (e.g., when state-led initiatives propose joint participation without independent guarantees) illustrates how perceived co-optation erodes trust. Consequently, governance reform to clarify boundaries—formal memoranda of understanding that protect university independence and specify ethical safeguards for forensic collaboration—would increase universities' credibility as partners [2].

**4. Pedagogy and prevention: curricular roles.** The Ayotzinapa case raises curricular questions about how higher education prepares students—particularly future educators and social professionals—to confront state violence, to perform human-rights documentation, and to work with affected communities. Incorporating human-rights modules, methodological training in forensic or archival practices, and community-engaged research projects could enable universities to build internal capacity to assist families ethically and sustainably. However, curricular expansion also requires resources and protective policies that safeguard students and staff who might engage in contentious investigations [2].

**5. Practical recommendations emerging from evidence.** Based on the registry scale (Table 1) and on family demands (quoted extracts), the paper advances several governance-oriented recommendations for universities wishing to responsibly engage with disappearance cases:

- **Create independent forensic/legal review units** within or affiliated with universities that have clear independence charters, external advisory boards including civil-society representatives, and transparent funding sources that avoid state capture. Forensic Architecture-style collaborations demonstrate methodological paths for credible review.
- **Institutionalize psychosocial/legal clinics** with long-term commitments (not episodic responses tied only to anniversaries), to provide sustained accompaniment to families and to support student learning in ethically supervised contexts. Red Lupa and Amnesty reporting about the scale and duration of the crisis indicate the need for sustained services [2,5].
- **Codify protection for campus memorials and protest** through governance policies that recognize commemorative spaces and protect freedom of expression while ensuring safety. Such policies reduce ad hoc administrative responses and signal institutional solidarity with families' right to memory [6].
- **Develop transparent partnerships with families and civil society** whereby families participate as partners in the design of research agendas, data access protocols and dissemination frameworks; families' involvement mitigates mistrust and aligns institutional work with victims' priorities. Public statements by families stressing "we want the truth" indicate the centrality of family-led priorities [3].

## 5. Conclusion

The Ayotzinapa disappearances have left an indelible imprint on Mexican public life and have had important, continuing effects on higher education. Universities serve simultaneously as symbolic spaces (memorials, campuses) where families and students assert the moral claim of "we will not forget," and as potential technical actors—providers of forensic, legal and psychosocial capacities—that can strengthen families' search for truth. Registry evidence (RNPDO; Red Lupa) underscores the numerical scale and spatial concentration of disappearances, generating sustained civic demand that draws universities into public roles. The qualitative record—statements from family members, lawyers, and technical actors—reveals both the promise and the pitfalls of institutional engagement: promise in terms of methodological capacity and civic visibility; pitfalls in the form of co-optation risks, resource limitations and governance tensions.

To harness the promise, universities must adopt governance reforms that preserve institutional independence, create durable service units for accompaniment and technical review, and enshrine the protection of commemorative campus spaces. Doing so will not only support families' urgent demands for truth and justice but will also reaffirm universities' civic mission to contribute to social memory, public accountability and remedial knowledge production. The evidence reviewed here suggests that when universities act with ethical clarity, technical rigor and partnership orientation, they can be crucial civic allies in contexts of disappearance—provided that policies and resources enable them to do so without compromise [1].

### Author Statements:

- **Ethical approval:** The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.
- **Conflict of interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper
- **Acknowledgement:** The authors declare that they have nobody or no-company to acknowledge.
- **Author contributions:** The authors declare that they have equal right on this paper.
- **Funding information:** The authors declare that there is no funding to be acknowledged.
- **Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### References

- [1]Forensic Architecture. (n.d.). The Enforced Disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Students. Forensic Architecture. [forensic-architecture.org](https://www.forensic-architecture.org)
- [2]Red Lupa / IMDHD. (2024). National Report 2024 (PDF). <https://imdhd.org/redlupa/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/National-Report-2024-1.pdf> IMDHD
- [3]El País. (2024, September 26). The Ayotzinapa families, 10 years later. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-09-26/the-ayotzinapa-families-10-years-later.html>. (Family statements; anniversary coverage). [EL PAÍS English](https://english.elpais.com/)
- [4]Guercke, L. (2025). The Situation of Disappearances in Mexico. In *Contemporary Studies on Disappearances* (pp. xx–xx). Springer. (Scholarly overview citing official RNPDO totals; includes figure ~103,522 as of Nov 2024)
- [5]Amnesty International. (2025). Disappearing Again: Report on searchers and disappearance in Mexico. (NGO report on disappearances, searchers, and systemic concerns). [Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/reports/2025/01/disappearing-again-report-on-searchers-and-disappearance-in-mexico/)
- [6]The Guardian. (2024, September 26). Mexico's anti-monuments force country to remember its missing students. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/sep/26/mexico-anti-monuments-missing-students-ayotzinapa>. (Quote: Cristina Bautista)