

## *Amor Secuestrado* ('Kidnapped Love')

Merging science and soap-operas to combat kidnapping in Mexico



Kidnapping in Mexico has reached epidemic proportions. The latest national victimization survey states that 79,315 people were kidnapped in Mexico in 2018. Whilst the country is now recognised as a global hotspot for this violent crime phenomenon, its effects are even deeper than the trauma delivered to many thousands of victims and their relatives. Threat of kidnapping has a wider paralysing effect on everyday life across Mexican society, creating widespread fear and anxiety. To assist those affected by kidnapping, academic experts from the Universities of Exeter and Leeds are collaborating with Mexican filmmakers to develop new approaches to raise public awareness about this crime problem and trigger new strategies to confront it by merging science with soap operas.

Following their recent three-year Newton Fund M.A.K.E. project to develop innovative tools to help ordinary Mexicans counter kidnapping,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Conor O'Reilly (University of Leeds) and Dr. Ernesto Schwartz-Marin (University of Exeter) have taken this research further through an innovative project to co-produce a *Telenovela* ('soap opera') about kidnapping. Funded by joint-ESRC Impact Acceleration Account awards from their universities, they have collaborated with the grassroots Mexican filmmakers, VerdeAzul Produccionnes, to create a web-series that depicts diverse kidnapping scenarios to engage, and to educate, the Mexican public about kidnap risk.

The scripts and episode-design for this *telenovela* –called *Amor Secuestrado* ('Kidnapped Love' in English)– has been informed by extensive research experience, drawing upon over 100 interviews

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Newton Fund project, 'M.A.K.E. – Mobile Solutions to the Mexican Kidnapping Epidemic: Beyond Elite Counter-Measures, Towards Citizen-Led Innovation' see the project webpage at: <http://www.makemx.org>

with kidnap victims, their relatives, anti-kidnapping NGOs, public authorities, law enforcement actors, and even perpetrators of this crime. A remarkable finding from project workshops was that 85% of participants struggled emotionally with imagining that kidnapping could happen to them. Many refused to make contingency plans for such a traumatic incident. In addressing this challenge of getting ordinary Mexicans to confront kidnap risk, the research team employ the popular Latin American medium of the *telenovela* ('soap-opera') to blend education and entertainment to communicate lessons in counter-kidnapping. Whilst breaking taboos around kidnapping is an important first step to combatting this threat, the *Amor Secuestrado* project looks further to encourage Mexican citizens to embrace new counter-kidnapping tools. Not least the M.A.K.E. app that was developed through the Newton Fund project to help create security plans to reduce kidnap risk.

*Amor Secuestrado* is an innovative and ambitious UK-Mexico collaborative research project that blends academic expertise from the Universities of Exeter and Leeds with the social justice passion of the grassroots filmmakers, VerdeAzul Produccionnes, in Mexico. Working together they push the boundaries of how academic research is communicated effectively and, also, how it can make a real difference in a country beset by huge problems of violence and insecurity.

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*Amor Secuestrado* will launch on May 27<sup>th</sup> via social media (details below). As well as showcasing the first three episodes of this web-series, a series of anti-kidnapping tools for Mexican citizens will also be launched, including the M.A.K.E. app and the graphic novel *Pariato Las Dumas*. Together these resources work to combat kidnapping by: (i) raising awareness about this crime problem; (ii) shifting the public narrative about kidnapping away from victim-blaming; and, (iii) providing practical assistance and guidance to Mexican citizens confronting this phenomenon.

**Launch:** [www.youtube.com/channel/UCIlgSX1jgoFB8bYr47KCsAWw?view\\_as=subscriber](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIlgSX1jgoFB8bYr47KCsAWw?view_as=subscriber) at 2000 on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (CDT, Mexico City).

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IMAGES BELOW:

*Amor Secuestrado* 'Behind the Scenes'

