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Research Article

University governance and the ripple effects of the Ayotzinapa disappearances: comparative evidence and testimonies from Estado de México, Querétaro, and Sonora

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Abstract: This paper analyses how the enforced disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College (Iguala, Guerrero, 2014) has influenced university governance, academic autonomy, and institutional responses to enforced disappearances in three Mexican states outside Guerrero: Estado de México (Edomex), Querétaro and Sonora. Drawing on official disappearance registries, regional monitoring reports, contemporary journalism and statements by family-members and human-rights defenders, the study triangulates quantitative trends in reported disappearances with qualitative extracts from key informants to probe how universities act (or fail to act) as sites of memory, protest and institutional accountability. Results show that Edomex concentrates a disproportionate share of registered disappearances and that both Sonora and Querétaro have experienced worrisome increases in recent years; universities in these states have played varied roles—from providing spaces for family-led memorialization and legal aid to being the target of institutional pressure and co-optation by local authorities. The paper concludes with reflections on governance reforms universities can adopt to protect students, support families, and demand transparent investigations.

Keywords: university governance; enforced disappearance; Ayotzinapa; Estado de México; Querétaro; Sonora; memory; institutional accountability

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1. Introduction

The disappearance of 43 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' School in Ayotzinapa (Iguala, Guerrero) on 26–27 September 2014 shocked Mexico and produced a broad social movement demanding truth, justice and institutional accountability. The case has become emblematic of systemic problems in state institutions, including collusion between security forces and criminal actors, impunity, and the weakness of investigative capacities. Beyond Guerrero, the political and symbolic reverberations of Ayotzinapa have affected universities and local governance across Mexico: campuses have become sites of protest, memory and contestation; families and student organizations have pressed universities to take public positions or provide legal and logistical support; and state-level patterns of disappearances have pressured university governance structures to respond to student

safety, curricular debates, and community relations. This paper examines how these dynamics play out in three states with distinct profiles—Estado de México (Edomex), Querétaro and Sonora—combining registry data and regional reports with contemporaneous quotes from relatives, lawyers and activists to situate institutional responses within local political economies and university governance arrangements.

2. Method

This is a mixed-methods, document-based study that triangulates (1) official registry and monitoring data on disappearances, (2) regional analytic reports produced by civil-society observatories, and (3) published interviews and press accounts containing statements by relatives, human-rights lawyers, and university actors. Quantitative counts are taken from the National Registry of Disappeared and Not Located Persons (RNPDNO / public dashboard) and from Red Lupa (Institute for Monitoring and Social Data), which publishes state-level syntheses and timelines; where state-level civil-society reports exist (Edomex, Querétaro, Sonora), these were consulted for yearly trends and localities. Qualitative material comprises direct extracts published in national and regional press outlets and human-rights organizations (selected on the basis of authoritativeness and availability). Because the study relies on secondary sources, all citations include the primary source consulted and the date; where registries differ, the paper notes the variation and the date of the registry snapshot used. Ethical care was taken not to re-publish sensitive personal identifiers beyond what is already public in journalistic and NGO sources.

3. Results

3.1. Aggregate and state-level trends (2014–2024)

Table 1 summarizes comparative registry counts and selected indicators for the three states under study, based on RNPDNO public data and civil-society syntheses (state reportings and Red Lupa national report 2024). Because national registries are periodically updated and sources sometimes apply different cut-offs, counts are presented as registry tallies reported by civil-society monitoring organisations and official dashboards as of mid-2024/early-2025.

Table 1. *Registered missing / not located persons — selected states (registry snapshots referenced in text)*

State	**Noted registry snapshot (source)**	**Representative figure (approx.)**	**Observations**
Estado de México (Edomex)	CEAV / Red Lupa / RNPDNO (2024–2025)	High — Edomex remains among the top states by total reported disappearances; civil-society reports document thousands of cases (figures vary by source and cut-off).	Edomex concentrated a large share of nationwide reports; monitoring notes both urban (Toluca, Naucalpan) and municipal clusters.
Querétaro	Red Lupa state report (2024–May 2025)	Moderate — 2024 was the year with the greatest concentration in the recent series (93 cases in 2024 reported by Red Lupa for Querétaro).	Trend of increasing reported cases since 2010; numbers rose through 2024.
Sonora	Red Lupa / regional monitoring (2024–2025)	Moderate–High — regional monitoring reports document marked increases in 2024 and early-2025 (e.g., over 1,000 new registry entries for Sonora in 2024–early 2025 period cited by local press).	Concentration in Hermosillo, Cajeme, Nogales, Caborca; notable rise in reported missing minors in 2024.

Notes: RNPDNO's public dashboard is the authoritative source for microdata (year, municipality, sex, age), but NGOs' compilations (Red Lupa, regional observatories) are often easier to read for trends and are used here for state-level comparisons; numbers differ somewhat depending on the snapshot date.

3.2. University responses and governance patterns

Qualitative material shows three recurring institutional patterns in the sampled states:

1. **Campus memorialization and protest spaces.** Universities have frequently opened campus spaces to commemorate Ayotzinapa and host relatives' visits, allowing student assemblies and demonstrations that keep the case visible. Families and student movements continue to chant and display the slogan "Vivos se los llevaron y vivos los queremos," a refrain repeated in numerous accounts of anniversaries and marches. Testimonies from mothers and family spokespeople repeatedly emphasize the emotional and political centrality of such campus actions (e.g., Cristina Bautista's long-term public presence as a family representative).
   Provision of legal and psychosocial support. Some universities have collaborated with legal clinics, human-rights centers and research groups to provide assistance to families and to support forensic and archival work. Civil-society actors reported that offers from "academic institutions" to help with file review were discussed in government–families meetings, showing an institutional niche in investigative and memory work. However, families have often been skeptical of official-led institutional collaborations if the institutions are perceived as politicized or lacking independence.
2. **Tensions with state authorities and constraints on institutional autonomy.** In several instances, university governance bodies have faced pressure when their campuses became sites of protest or when faculty engaged in critical research; these pressures take the form of administrative attempts to limit demonstrations, political pushback from local governments, or reluctance to publicly challenge military or police actors. The families' demand that military documents be released exemplifies the institutional friction between security forces and civilian academic actors.

3.3. Voices from families, lawyers and university actors (extracts)

Below are selected extracts (publicly reported) that illuminate the human and institutional dimensions:

- "We won't give up, nor will we forget that night in Iguala," — a characterization of family resolve summarized in reporting on family marches and campus commemorations. This sentiment has been articulated repeatedly by relatives who travel to Mexico City and university campuses to demand truth and transparency.
- "If my son is under the ground, I want to know the truth," said Cristina Bautista, mother of one of the disappeared, in a 2023 interview that has been cited in later anniversary coverage; her statement exemplifies the demand for factual clarity and access to investigative files. Such declarations often occur at commemorative events that include university-affiliated gatherings.
- Isidro (Vicario) Aguilar, a legal representative for families, has lamented the stagnation of the investigation and stressed the need for independent review and academic participation to examine withheld files—remarks that underscore families' calls for external institutional oversight beyond prosecutorial units.

These extracts are used here as key-informant windows (already public) that illuminate how families and lawyers view the role of academic institutions: as spaces for memory and potential technical allies in truth-seeking—provided those universities maintain sufficient independence and technical capacity.

4. Discussion

The comparative picture that emerges from registry data and qualitative testimonies suggests several linked dynamics:

Scale and local governance capacity. Edomex's large absolute number of registered disappearances places extraordinary demands on local governance and on universities as civic actors. Universities located in populous municipalities (e.g., Toluca, Naucalpan) are often drawn into broader civic responses: they host legal clinics, memorial events and student-led coalitions. However, because universities in Edomex are many and heterogenous (public research universities, technological institutes, private institutions), governance responses are uneven. The

concentration of cases in Edomex creates conditions in which campus governance must contend both with student safety concerns and with the logistic and ethical challenges of assisting large numbers of affected families.

Emerging pressures in Querétaro and Sonora and the role of smaller university systems. Although Querétaro historically recorded fewer cases than the largest-affected states, Red Lupa's synthesis indicates that 2024 marked a surge for Querétaro. Universities there—often smaller state universities or technical institutes—face new pressures to incorporate human-rights curricula, to open their clinics for families, and to defend students who protest. Sonora's profile, with a marked rise in reports (including an increase in missing minors in 2024), pushes universities in urban centers (Hermosillo, Cajeme) into dual roles as service providers (legal, psychosocial) and as platforms for public visibility. The varied capacities of university governance bodies in these states mediate how effectively they can support truth-seeking and protection efforts.

University autonomy vs. politicization. A recurring tension is whether universities can remain credible independent actors. Families and civil-society groups often request "academic review" of files and forensic data; however, when universities accept government-funded roles without clear guarantees of independence, families become wary. This skepticism was visible in family–government meetings where offers for institutional participation were discussed but met with mixed reactions. For university governance, the challenge is to design transparent partnerships that combine institutional autonomy, forensic/technical capacity, and community-centered ethics.

Memory, pedagogy and prevention. Beyond immediate support, universities can help build curricula and research programs that link human-rights education with community engagement. The Ayotzinapa case has spurred curricular debates about the role of rural teacher education, the politicization of normal schools, and the responsibilities of higher education in fragile contexts. Campus memorials and annual commemorations serve pedagogical functions, but governance structures must also codify protective policies (safe reporting mechanisms, emergency coordination) for students and staff. The testimonies of relatives—whose presence on campuses keeps the demand for truth alive—underscore the pedagogical power of memory to inform institutional reform.

5. Conclusion

The Ayotzinapa disappearances remain a catalytic event for Mexican civil society and higher education. In Edomex, Querétaro and Sonora, universities have been pulled into roles that combine commemoration, service provision and, at times, investigatory collaboration. Registry data indicate that Edomex carries a heavy burden of reported disappearances, while Querétaro and Sonora have recorded important recent increases that require institutional attention. Families' public statements—repeatedly calling for truth, transparency and access to files—point to a concrete, actionable niche for universities: to offer technically rigorous, independent and ethically grounded forensic and archival review; to provide sustained psychosocial and legal supports; and to safeguard academic autonomy so that institutional contributions are credible and centered on victims' needs.

To fulfill these roles, university governance bodies should consider the following reforms: formalize independent legal-forensic partnerships with safeguards for non-partisanship; establish permanent service units (legal clinics, psychosocial care) dedicated to disappearances and family support; codify policies that protect campus protest and memorialization as legitimate academic functions; and expand curricula to incorporate forced disappearance, transitional justice, and community-engaged research. Doing so would strengthen universities as civic anchors and help translate the families' demand—"we want the truth"—into sustained institutional action.

Author Statements:

- **Ethical approval:** The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.
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World Organization / Research syntheses: WOLA and others' synopses on Ayotzinapa as a national emblem of state-level impunity and forced disappearance phenomena.