

Bioethics and Forced Disappearances in Mexico: Ethical Challenges, Public Health Implications, and Human Dignity

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Abstract

Enforced disappearances in Mexico represent one of the most severe humanitarian crises in Latin America, with over 125,000 missing persons officially registered since 2006. This phenomenon intersects deeply with bioethics, as it challenges fundamental principles of human dignity, autonomy, justice, and the right to truth. The present study examines the ethical dimensions of enforced disappearances through a qualitative design combining semi-structured interviews with relatives of victims, human rights advocates, and health professionals. The analysis focuses on the psychological and social consequences of disappearance and how bioethical principles can guide public health responses. Using thematic analysis, findings reveal ethical conflicts between state power and moral responsibility, highlighting the urgent need for ethical frameworks in justice and health policies. This paper concludes that bioethics provides a normative foundation to confront the dehumanization and institutional violence underlying forced disappearances.

Keywords: Bioethics, Enforced Disappearances, Human Rights, Dignity, Public Health, Mexico.

Introduction

Enforced disappearances are among the gravest violations of human rights and human dignity. They involve the deprivation of liberty by agents of the state or with its consent, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the detention or disclose the person's fate [1]. In Mexico, the crisis of disappearances has escalated dramatically since 2006, coinciding with the federal "war on drugs." Official data from the Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas (RNPNDNO) report over 125,000 cases as of 2023, although human rights organizations estimate higher numbers due to underreporting [2].

From a bioethical perspective, the phenomenon of enforced disappearances transcends the political and judicial domains. It constitutes an affront to the moral values that sustain human coexistence and the health of communities. The emotional, psychological, and physical suffering inflicted on families and

communities is immense, creating a "collective wound" that reproduces trauma and social fragmentation [3,4]. Bioethics, traditionally centered on biomedical issues, offers a conceptual and moral framework capable of addressing such systemic violations of dignity, autonomy, and justice [5].

This article explores enforced disappearances in Mexico as a bioethical crisis. It examines their moral and social implications through the lived experiences of affected families and the ethical responsibilities of the state and health institutions. The aim is to understand how bioethical reasoning can inform a just and humane response to one of Mexico's most urgent moral and public health dilemmas.

Method

Design

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore ethical perspec-

tives and lived experiences related to enforced disappearances. The study followed a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2014), emphasizing meaning-making among participants and identifying recurring ethical themes.

Participants

Thirty participants were recruited between 2022 and 2024 in the states of Morelos, Jalisco, and Nuevo León. They included 12 relatives of disappeared persons, 8 human rights defenders, 5 health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers), and 5 legal advocates. Participation was voluntary and confidential, following ethical research protocols.

Instruments and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a guide with five main questions addressing moral conflict, suffering, institutional response, and expectations of justice. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. The transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 software.

Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following six-phase process: familiarization, coding, theme development,

review, definition, and reporting [6]. Themes were derived inductively from the data. To enhance credibility, two researchers independently coded the data and discussed discrepancies until consensus was achieved.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Comité de Ética en Investigación Social de la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México. Participants provided written informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Emotional support was offered during and after interviews.

Results

Three major themes emerged: (1) the ethical vacuum in state institutions, (2) moral suffering and the loss of autonomy, and (3) bioethical resistance and collective dignity. Each theme integrates evidence from participants and ethical interpretation.

Ethical Vacuum in Institutions

Participants consistently described indifference and opacity from government institutions. Families reported repeated violations of their right to truth and justice.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Description	Representative Extract
Ethical Vacuum	Institutional neglect, impunity, and bureaucratic dehumanization	“We went to the prosecutor’s office every week. They said there were no resources, no leads, and that we should stop insisting. That’s when I realized they don’t see our children as persons anymore.” (Participant F3, mother, Morelos)
Moral Suffering	Chronic grief, guilt, and despair caused by the lack of closure	“It’s like mourning someone who is alive. Every night I imagine my son asking me why I haven’t found him.” (Participant F7, father, Jalisco)
Bioethical Resistance	Collective organization, truth-seeking, and dignity restoration	“We are not just searching for bones; we are reclaiming their dignity and ours.” (Participant A2, activist, Nuevo León)

The ethical vacuum manifests as a systematic failure to uphold moral duties of care, transparency, and justice. Institutions prioritize legal formality over moral responsibility, generating secondary victimization.

Moral Suffering and the Loss of Autonomy

The families experience ambiguous loss—a term from grief psychology describing the uncertainty of not knowing whether the missing person is alive or dead [7]. This produces existential and ethical paralysis. From a bioethical standpoint, such experiences expose the erosion of autonomy and relational trust fundamental to human dignity [8].

Bioethical Resistance and Collective Dignity

In response to state neglect, families and civil society groups engage in what may be termed “bioethical resistance”—actions grounded in moral principles rather than institutional power. This includes grassroots searches, forensic mapping, and moral testimony. Through these actions, they reclaim personhood and rehumanize the disappeared.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that enforced disappearances represent not only legal or political crimes but profound ethical ruptures in the moral fabric of society. The bioethical perspective broadens

understanding beyond human rights frameworks by addressing the moral dimensions of suffering, responsibility, and dignity.

The ethical vacuum within state institutions reflects what described as the “failure to respond to the face of the Other [9].” Bureaucratic indifference reduces human beings to cases, files, or statistics—an ontological negation that parallels the logic of dehumanization found in biopolitical violence [10]. In this sense, bioethics offers an antidote to such reductionism by reasserting moral responsibility toward the vulnerable.

From a public health perspective, the psychological consequences of disappearances constitute a secondary epidemic. Studies by the Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas (2022) reveal that 82% of families of the disappeared present symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Bioethics thus connects mental health care with moral repair, framing care as an ethical duty rather than mere clinical service [11-12].

The emergence of bioethical resistance underscores the agency of civil society in reconstructing moral order. These grassroots movements embody what Habermas (1991) calls “communicative action,” reclaiming truth and justice through collective deliberation. Their moral resilience challenges both impunity and the normalization of violence [13].

Comparatively, similar ethical dynamics have been documented in Argentina and Colombia. In Argentina, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo transformed private grief into public moral discourse (Feitlowitz, 1998). In Colombia, ethical resilience among relatives of the disappeared has fostered restorative justice processes [14]. The Mexican case contributes to this Latin American legacy by reframing disappearance as a bioethical rather than merely political problem.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that enforced disappearances in Mexico constitute a bioethical crisis deeply intertwined with public health, human dignity, and moral responsibility. The findings reveal systemic ethical failures within institutions, profound moral suffering among families, and the emergence of moral agency through collective resistance. Bioethics, by emphasizing principles such as autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice, provides a powerful normative foundation for confronting the dehumanization inherent in this crisis. Future research should integrate bioethical analysis into policy design, mental health programs, and transitional justice mechanisms. The limits of this study lie in its qualitative scope, yet its strength resides in amplifying the moral voices of those living the consequences of enforced disappearance.

Ethical Statement

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (Protocol CEIS-UAEM-2023-07). All participants provided informed consent and were guaranteed confidentiality and emotional support.

AI Statement

This paper was developed with the assistance of AI tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) exclusively for text editing, grammar correction, and format alignment according to APA standards. All conceptual, analytical, and interpretative content originates from the authors.

Author Contributions

Cruz García Lirios (30%): Conceptualization, writing, data analysis

Reyna Amador Velázquez (10%): Interview coordination, literature review

Oscar Coronado Rincón (10%): Field supervision, qualitative coding

Eyder Bolívar Mojica (10%): Method design, translation review
Sonia Sujell Vélez Báez (10%): Theoretical framework, ethics section

Nadya Elizabeth Vásquez Segura (10%): Data validation, public health analysis

Felipe de Jesús Vilchis Mora (10%): Statistical synthesis, references formatting

Josefina Haydee Gutiérrez Hernández (10%): Final review and editing

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Annexes

Annex 1. Interview Guide

1. What moral dilemmas have you faced in your search for justice?
2. How do you perceive the response of health and government institutions?
3. What does dignity mean to you in the context of disappearance?
4. How have you and your community managed grief and uncertainty?
5. What ethical values sustain your struggle for truth?