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Embedded Chips Help Track Kidnap Victims

Wealthy Mexicans, wary of a rise in abductions, implant ID chips so satellites can pinpoint their locations.

Mica Rosenberg, Reuters

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QUERETARO, Mexico (Reuters) - Wealthy Mexicans, terrified of soaring kidnapping rates, are spending thousands of dollars to implant tiny transmitters under their skin so satellites can help find them tied up in a safe house or stuffed in the trunk of a car.

Kidnapping jumped almost 40 percent between 2004 and 2007 in Mexico according to official statistics. Mexico ranks with conflict zones like Iraq and Colombia as among the worst countries for abductions.

The recent kidnap and murder of Fernando Marti, 14, the son of a well-known businessman, sparked an outcry in a country already hardened to crime.

More middle-class people also are also seeking out the tiny chip designed by Xega, a Mexican security firm whose sales jumped 13 percent this year.

The company injects the crystal-encased chip, the size and shape of a grain of rice, into clients' bodies with a syringe. A transmitter then sends signals via satellite to pinpoint the location of a person in distress.

Cristina, 28, who did not want to give her last name, was implanted along with seven other members of her family last year as a "preventive measure."

"It's not like we are wealthy people, but they'll kidnap you for a watch ... Everyone is living in fear," she said.

The chips cost \$4,000 plus an annual fee of \$2,200.

Most kidnappings in Mexico go unreported but independent analysts say there were 6,500 abductions last year, many of them "express kidnapping" where the victim is grabbed and forced to withdraw money from automatic cash machines.

Growth Industry

Official statistics show 751 kidnappings in Mexico last year but most abductions go unreported and the crime

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research institute ICESI says the number could have been as high as over 7,000 in 2007.

Xega, based in the central Mexican city of Quererato, designed global positioning systems to track stolen vehicles until a company owner was kidnapped in broad daylight in 2001. Frustrated by his powerlessness to call for help, the company adapted the technology to track stolen people.

Most people get the chips injected into their arms between the skin and muscle where they cannot be seen. Customers who fear they are being kidnapped press a panic button on an external device to alert Xega which then calls the police.

"Before, they only kidnapped key, well-known economically successful people like industrialists and landowners. Now they are kidnapping people from the middle class," said Sergio Galvan, Xega's commercial director.

President Felipe Calderon has come under heavy pressure in recent weeks to stamp out violent crime. He is to host a high-level meeting on Thursday of security chiefs and state governors.

Outside of Mexico, U.S. company Verichip Corp uses the same kind of implants to identify patients in critical condition at hospitals or find elderly people who wander away from their homes.

But Xega sees kidnapping as a growth industry and is planning to expand its services next year to Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela.

(Editing by Vicki Allen)