



*Fixing
Journalism*



**FRONTLINE
FREELANCE
MÉXICO**



Welcome to Frontline Freelance Mexico's guide to hiring a fixer or local producer in Mexico. Mexico is full of interesting stories to report on, and local journalists working as fixers have played an essential role in facilitating international reporter's coverage of the country.

When women's bodies started showing up in the desert in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, local fixers helped foreign journalists report on these femicides.

When 43 students were kidnapped by Mexican police, local fixers helped connect reporters with the family members of the disappeared whom they had spent months building trust with.

When Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman went on trial in the US for drug trafficking, local fixers connected correspondents with members of the Sinaloa Cartel.

When thousands of Central American migrants caravanned across Mexico, fixers walked alongside them, translating their stories of how they were fleeing violence and hunger for foreign journalists.

Mexico is currently one of the most dangerous countries in the entire world to be a journalist. In just the first five months of 2022, eleven communication workers have been murdered, and since 2000, 153 have been murdered, according to press freedom group Article 19.



As part of our project Fixing Journalism, we have worked with dozens of local journalists, fixers and producers across the entire country to strategize together how to improve the relationship between foreign and national correspondents and the local people they hire to be able to report their stories. We discovered that the majority of Mexican journalists who have worked as fixers never received credit for their contributions, and a small percentage had worked as fixers without realizing it and received no compensation beyond a complimentary coffee or meal.

We also discovered that many journalists made a series of security recommendations that were not adhered to, often putting the entire team's lives at risk. You can read some of these testimonies in this guide.

In this guide, we share best practices aiming to improve the relationships between foreign correspondents and local fixers and eliminate the inherent inequality that exists between the two. We believe that shifting these dynamics can only lead to a win-win situation, where the stories of foreign journalists, largely hailing from the west, can be further enriched by the insights and knowledge provided by the fixer, and the local journalists can be direct collaborators adding to diversity within traditional media outlets and breaking the hegemony that dominates the global news.

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REPORTING IN MEXICO

What kind of story are you interested in reporting on in Mexico? How developed is your investigation? Is it character-based, issue-based or regionally based? Is it inspired by an article or video that was already published? Why will you be hiring a fixer? Will you want the fixer to work with you for the entire duration of your reporting or just one part? Are you going to do more than one story? If so, do you want to work with different fixers depending on the location and the issue, or do you prefer to work with one?

Often, reporters come to Mexico and think that in one week they can report on detained migrants on the Guatemala border, mothers searching for their missing daughters in Juarez and avocado growers in Michoacan. As you can see in the map below, Mexico is a vast country, and even if you are flying you can spend an entire day traveling from one end to the other. Please take into account these geographic considerations when planning your coverage.

We also recommend that you always leave more time than you think you will need to report your story. A large portion of the most interesting stories in Mexico occur in rural areas where the rhythm of life is much slower and distances are much longer. At times you may have to drive many kilometers on dirt roads or even hike to reach the people you want to interview. Depending on the area you are working in, there are often road blockades, sometimes from protests, other times from accidents and occasionally from warring criminal groups.

We also encourage you to go beyond the traditional stereotypes that occur in reporting in Mexico, simplifying the violence our country experiences to a Wild Western with warring narcos, hooded hitmen and good politicians arresting kinkpins to eliminate drug trafficking. The members and partners of Frontline Freelance México possess a vast knowledge of current events, social phenomena and politics in Mexico and can help you go beyond the stereotypical stories about violence in our region.



FIXER VS LOCAL PRODUCER

We understand that “fixer” has become an all encompassing term for the person that you will work with on the ground, but we encourage you to evaluate what services you hope this person will provide and consider whether they are also working as a producer or collaborating reporter.

A fixer may provide any combination of the following tasks related to logistics and sources:

- General logistical support
- Recommend lodging
- Provide or recommend transportation
- Facilitate access to key sites
- Facilitate press passes
- Schedule interviews with sources
- Assist with creating the schedule
- Provide translation
- Make security recommendations
- Request necessary permissions

A producer or collaborating reporter may provide any combination of the following tasks in addition to all the tasks that the fixer provides:

- Help develop story angle
- Choose sources for interviews
- Choose regions best suited for story
- Conduct interviews
- Help coordinate the team that will produce the story
- Complete a Risk Assessment
- Develop an agenda and call sheets
- Photograph, record video, audio or drone footage
- Assist with final edition

“A journalist from Sweden Public Radio had done an extensive investigation of large development projects in Mexico and their impact on various communities and just needed me to facilitate certain contacts, recommend a few other sources and help her schedule the interviews. In this case, I felt that the title of fixer was fair as she knew the exact angle of the story she wanted to do.

A journalist from Italian TV planned to travel to Mexico and was looking for a fixer to help him report on crime, migration and COVID. He did not have specific angles nor locations where he wanted to film. I suggested which cities and perspectives we could report on, and together we developed the stories. However, I explained that this level of involvement made me the local producer.” comments Andalusia K. Soloff, a freelance journalist from NYC based in Mexico City.

SECURITY RECOMMENDATIONS

While Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist, there is no full-blown war with trenches or green zones. In some of the riskiest places you will still see children playing in the street and smiling vendors selling tacos on the street corner. The person you hire as a fixer is essentially your lifeline, as they will use their local knowledge and contacts to make sure the team stays safe.



It is essential that there exists a fair exchange between you as the client and the fixer in terms of security and that you trust their instinct and protocols. If they recommend that you leave the area, it is important to evacuate, as your lives may be at risk.

When reporting in areas where there is a heavy presence of organized crime groups, the vehicle you drive, the hotel you stay in, the clothes you wear, your security personnel and the equipment you wear all play a key role in your safety.

Jesús Bustamante is a photojournalist in Culiacán, Sinaloa and has worked as a fixer for numerous international outlets covering The Sinaloa Cartel and forced displacement. When he was working for a well-known international outlet, he recommended that they not bring their armed guard to the community La Tuna, where Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán is from, but they responded that it was protocol.

"If they see an armed person on the road that leads to their community, and the person does not look like they are from Sinaloa, they are not going to believe that we are journalists. ... They told me that I was exaggerating and provoking fear. Maybe they thought that I was saying these things so that they would pay me more, but I told them that this is how things are in Sinaloa and that we had to be really careful."

As they arrived at the town of Badiraguato, they spoke to their source who responded, "You are in the white truck, right, with another vehicle with a bodyguard behind it, right?" The team asked Jesús if he had told them which vehicles they were in, and he responded that he had not, but that "they know where you are from the moment you arrive at the airport and the hotel you are staying in.... At that moment they started to believe me and realized that I was not exaggerating."

DIMINISHING RISKS

Margarito Martinez was a veteran crime beat photographer in the northern border city of Tijuana who published with numerous local outlets. His vast knowledge of the local criminal world led him to work as a fixer for their investigations in Tijuana. However, this same knowledge led him to be a target of local criminal groups who eventually took his life in January 2022. We are not insinuating that he was murdered for his work as a fixer, but it is believed that his reporting about criminal groups led to him being a target.

The risks that you and your team will face depend on the story you are reporting on and the region in which it unfolds, but it is also important to note that while you may be doing a story on culture, nature or sports, there may still be a level of danger. You may be reporting on the reopening of national parks, but someone doesn't like that you are filming their family swimming in the river, and they threaten your life and equipment. This is why we recommend having a check-in specifically about security issues before embarking on your trip.

Frontline Freelance México is a member of the ACOS Coalition which is composed of 129 news organizations, freelance journalist associations and press freedom groups working together to embed a culture of safety in news organizations and freelance journalists working practices and protect their vital role in global society.



news organizations should be prepared to take comparable responsibility for the well-being of freelancers and local journalists in case of kidnapping or injury as they do for staffers, and for their families in case of death."

"International news organizations have a moral responsibility to support the journalists they commission and to show the same concern for the welfare and safety of freelancers, local journalists and media workers as they do for their staff. In making assignments in a conflict zone or dangerous environment international

"International news organizations should also factor in the additional costs of working in a hostile environment, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), insurance, secure communications, hazard pay, and contingency cash for entire teams, including local producers, translators and drivers. Ensuring fair and

prompt payment and providing agreed upon expenses in advance is essential."
- ACOS Alliance

We recommend the Safety Management resources available on The ACOS alliance website (<https://www.acosalliance.org/>) that will allow you both to assess your media outlet's current safety practices and protocols as well as a Freelance Safety Checklist that you can go over with your fixer or local producer before embarking on your trip...

Fortunately, we do not know of any fixer or local producer who was murdered while working with an international team, but we do know of cases where teams have been kidnapped, shot at, robbed, threatened and forced to immediately leave areas they were reporting in. As recommended in the ACOS documents, we highly recommend developing a contingency plan beforehand, including a communications strategy and protocols of what to do in the emergency situations named here.

We also recommend that you have a person at your media outlet or a colleague from home monitoring you and the fixer or producer you are working with while on assignment. The team that will be reporting in Mexico should have some kind of Hostile Environment training if they will be stories related to crime and violence. Also, if your media outlet offers HEFAT (Hostile Environment First Aid Training) and has open spots for freelancers or scholarships, we encourage you to offer these opportunities to the fixers you work with in Mexico. Currently there are very few opportunities for local journalists to participate in a HEFAT in Mexico, although we are working to change that.



SOURCES

We recognize that connecting journalists to sources and providing contacts are the most essential service that a fixer can provide. As the majority of fixers in Mexico also work as journalists, they spend years cultivating these relationships. When their sources agree to do interviews with you as a journalist, they are generally agreeing to speak with you based on the trust that they have in the fixer and the prior work that they have published.

Many of the victims of violence in Mexico have a deep mistrust of the media and at times this mistrust translates to a mistrust of journalists themselves. Additionally, many are tired of repeatedly telling their story or how they dig in the hillsides to search for their missing son or how many times they have gone before the Mexican judicial system to demand that their daughter's assassin be brought to justice.

When the fixer or producer schedules an interview with one of these victims of violence, it is very important to carry out the interview and not cancel unless an absolute emergency comes up.

"A production contacted me to work on a documentary about femicides, but the angle they wanted to cover was tabloid-like. The producer wanted me to get them access to film an autopsy of a murdered woman and then contact her family members. This would have been a violation of the victims' human rights. I instead offered an interview with a woman who was a victim of gender violence, and I scheduled it when they agreed to it, but then they canceled deciding it wasn't sensational enough."- Melissa, independent journalist.

In this case, Melissa not only damaged a relationship she had built, but also didn't receive any payment for the work she had done. While it may seem that we are stating the obvious, we also recommend that you carry out the interview in the most respectful manner possible. It is essential that you don't revictimize people who have already suffered so much trauma and violence while interviewing and documenting them.

In Mexico, high value is placed on politeness, proper greetings and patience. While it may seem that the fixer is wasting time making small talk before an interview, it is most likely that they are helping the source feel comfortable and prepared for the interview.

CRIME BEAT REPORTING

Generally speaking, the stories that get the most clicks and views from Mexico have direct access to the criminal world. We understand that you may be interested in doing a similar story that will have a similar impact. Many journalists and fixers in Mexico have been able to cultivate relationships with criminal elements, but these stories are still high-risk as those within the criminal world call the shots.

A significant percentage of stories, TV specials and documentaries that show fentanyl labs, drug trafficking operations or hitmen talking about how many people they have killed have paid for access to the criminal organization. Therefore, if you are insisting that your fixer obtain this kind of access, please understand that this comes with a high price tag, both in terms of money and also questionable journalism ethics.

Alicia Fernández is a multimedia journalist in Ciudad Juárez who has worked as a fixer facilitating access to the criminal world but without paying for it. She arranged an interview with a drug dealer but the reporter wanted more.

"He requested that I schedule another talk with the dealer. I told him that I couldnot do that. He took a 100 dollar bill and told him he would pay me more. He waved it in front of me as if I was a starving dog. I grabbed the bill and dropped it in his drink. ... This lack of solidarity and ethics where he tried to convince me as if he was showing a treat to a dog. It's degrading and sad."

Jesús Bustamente from Sinaloa has had similar experiences. "They have a very weird vision, they think everything is very simple. All of sudden they tell you, 'we have a few free hours, do you think we can go visit a fentanyl lab?' They think that I can just get on the phone and call someone and they will open the door to their fentanyl lab."



RESPECTING ANONYMITY

Victims of violence, people with a vulnerable migration status, members of organized crime and even regular business owners often request anonymity in the stories that will be published with their testimonies. Sometimes they may just want their last name left out, other times that their face doesn't appear and at times that their voice is distorted. We recommend that you discuss this issue with your fixer or local producer, as we understand that some media outlets do not allow for anonymity or have certain rules around it.

However, we would like you to understand that the issue of anonymity can be an issue of life or death both for the sources and the journalists. Numerous journalists that we interviewed for this project expressed their concern that the outlets promised that they would blur faces or not publish names and were not sure they would keep their word.

One journalist from Tamaulipas, one of the most dangerous states in all of Mexico, on the northern border, told us that her worst experience as a fixer occurred when someone they had interviewed was murdered a few days later. She didn't attribute his death to the lack of anonymity, nor can she prove that it was directly related to the report that was published, but regardless, this anecdote helps us understand the gravity of the situation.

Lenin Mosso is a documentary photographer who works as a fixer in the Southern Mexican state of Guerrero and specializes in issues in indigenous communities and poppy production. "I contacted a hitman, who was the cousin of the cousin of a friend. When I met with him at a store to propose the interview, I realized that I was putting my life at risk to achieve the story that they wanted. ... I told them if anything happens, he knows where I live." This of course includes the issue of anonymity. The hitman told him, "If my boss finds out, you don't have a way out of this." Lenin later repented having arranged this situation as a fixer. "It's when I realized that in exchange for a few pesos I was putting myself in a really heavy situation."

Once the story is published, you may be very far away from the place it occurred, but it is most likely that the fixer and their entire family are living or working in that same region and can suffer from whatever blowback there is from the story.



PRE-PRODUCTION AND LOGISTICS

Whether you are hiring a fixer or a local producer, we recommend that you allot budget and resources for pre-production. If you want to be able to interview a family of poppy growers, the fixer will most likely have to travel through difficult terrain many hours to reach the family, confirm that they have a current harvest of flowers, and will agree to receive and speak with a journalist crew. The fixer should be compensated both for their time and expenses regardless if you end up doing the story or not.

Also, please understand that the more specific your subject requests are, the more time the fixer will need to identify them. One journalist shared an anecdote with us where he spent weeks identifying migrants that were in economic crisis due to climate change and were planning on migrating in the following days and would let a team document it. Additionally, if you will need subjects to speak English, this will add a lot of time to pre-production, as it is fairly difficult to find people in Mexico that speak English fluently enough for an interview. A lot of bureaucracy is involved with acquiring interviews with government officials, so please allot more pre-production time for that.

In addition to the traditional services associated with the job of a fixer or local producer, what other services are you hoping to contract?

Will you need a driver? Will you want them to use their own vehicle or will you rent a vehicle?

Will you need them to assist in filming you while you do stand-ups, put lavalier microphones on subjects, hold lights or any other combination of activities to assist with the production?

Will you need them to do simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English or another language? Will you also need them to help translate interviews after they have been conducted?

We recommend that you discuss all of these services with your fixer or local producer beforehand and pay in accordance.

PAYMENT AND EXPENSES

We do not have a standard rate that we recommend outlets to pay fixers, as it depends on many factors, but we do recommend that you never pay below \$150 USD for the day and that you pay more if you are going to need them to drive, translate or engage in other extra activities..



As we have detailed in this guide, journalists and fixers in Mexico face many challenges that put their lives and that of their families at risk. We believe that the riskier the assignment the more money the fixer or local producer should receive. This includes stories about crime and violence but also those that have biomedical implications, such as covering the global pandemic and directly documenting people who have COVID-19. We also encourage you to reference our list of activities for fixer and local producer or collaborator, and pay accordingly as the latter should receive a higher day rate.

How long will your work days be? We recommend that if they are longer than nine hours that you pay overtime. We also recommend that you pay for travel days and agree on what payment will be if flights are canceled or other glitches in the production.

We also highly encourage you to pay all the costs of production instead of making the fixer or local producer pay up front and later get reimbursed. To put costs into perspective, many local journalists make less than \$350 USD per month, which means fronting the money for a over \$100 USD per night hotel is out of the question. If this is your company's policy we recommend that you advise the fixer beforehand, to see if it is within their possibilities.

We also recommend that you pay in cash at the end of the production to avoid delays and transfer fees. If you will require an invoice, tax documents and a possible onboarding process, please let the fixer know beforehand so they can set that up and receive a prompt payment.

FAIR CREDITS

One of the main concerns of fixers is the lack of credit that they get for their work. It is very rare to see a media outlet name the fixer even though they were completely essential for them to report their entire story. This practice of leaving the fixers out of the credits, further invisibilizes their work.

Francisco Robles is a photojournalist and producer in Acapulco, Guerrero. "I think it is important that they take into account the work that one does as a fixer. Without us they would not be able to do their work and win prizes in their home countries or in international contests... That is why I think it's important for them to not just consider us fixers, but instead local producers. The term fixer makes us seem like we are just assistants or negotiators when really we are local producers. Sometimes it makes you sad to see that these people won awards for a story or documentary and your name is not in the credits." states Robles.

Awards can play a significant role in a journalist's life, helping advance their career, receive better pay in their work, be recommended for other jobs, purchase better equipment with the prize money, among other benefits. We believe it is of utmost importance that you include the fixer or local producer's name in the credits of your published work. We also encourage you to really evaluate the role they played and whether they should receive credit for being a local or field producer or contributing reporter. If you think you are going to submit the work for awards, we also recommend that you discuss how you will divide the award money amongst the members of your team.



Additionally, once you return to your home country, the fixer will continue to work as a journalist reporting on interesting stories from Mexico. If you are happy with their work as a fixer or local producer, we encourage you to invite them to continue collaborating with you or your media outlet in the future.

Speaking of Credits, Thank you to all who contributed to this project

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Fixing  Journalism

Fixing Journalism

Frontline Freelance Mexico's guide to hiring fixers and local producers

Over the past 15 years, the surge in crime, migration and social conflicts in Mexico have filled headlines across the globe. Often, the people behind these stories are fixers, local journalists who are hired by foreign journalists to guide them in their reporting. These fixers engage in invisible labor, rarely receive credit in publications and live straddling precarity and danger in one of the world's most deadly countries to be a journalist.

In this guide, we seek to shift the balance of the correspondent-fixer relationship, recommending a series of best practices aimed at eliminating the inherent inequality in this reporting dynamic that often manifests itself between journalists hailing from the Global North and journalists in the Global South.



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