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Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations

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SUMMARY

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Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) significantly influence drug trafficking in the United States and pose the greatest drug trafficking threat, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA's) annual *National Drug Threat Assessment*. These organizations control the market and movement of a wide range of illicit drugs destined for the United States; for this reason, they are commonly referred to as *drug cartels* and *drug trafficking organizations* (DTOs). These poly-criminal organizations also participate in extortion, human smuggling, arms trafficking, and oil theft, among other crimes. Homicide rate increases in Mexico are widely attributed to heightened DTO-related violence, often tied to territorial control over drug routes and criminal influence.

Congress has tracked how Mexican TCOs affect security on the U.S.-Mexico border, perpetrate violence, and contribute to the U.S. opioid crisis. A major concern is the organizations' trafficking of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, marijuana, and synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl. Many analysts assess that Mexican TCOs' role in the production and trafficking of synthetic opioids into the United States has significantly expanded since 2018. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 106,000 overdose deaths occurred in the United States in 2021, more than 70% of which involved opioids, including fentanyl.

Evolution of Mexico's Criminal Environment

The leadership and organizational structures of Mexican DTOs remain in flux. In 2006, four DTOs were dominant: the Tijuana/Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez/Vicente Carillo Fuentes Organization (CFO), and the Gulf Cartel. Government operations to eliminate cartel leadership increased instability among the groups and sparked greater violence. Over the next dozen years, Mexico's larger and more stable DTOs fragmented, creating at first seven and then nine major groups.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected in 2018, has advocated policies that focus on the root causes of crime, but his government has not carried out counternarcotics operations consistently. Despite reform promises, the president appears to rely on a policy of using the military and a military-led national guard to address narcotics- and TCO-related concerns. He campaigned on addressing high levels of criminal impunity and official corruption, long-standing problems in Mexico. However, more than halfway through López Obrador's six-year term, he arguably has achieved few of his anti-corruption and criminal justice aims.

Congressional Action

Many in the 117th Congress remain concerned about DTO-related violence in Mexico and its impact on border security. Some Members have been evaluating the amounts and effectiveness of U.S. counternarcotics and security assistance to Mexico and assessing the overall U.S.-Mexico security relationship. Additional concerns focus on how DTO-related violence has imperiled some licit economic sectors, negatively affected U.S.-Mexico trade, and contributed to the internal displacement and outmigration of Mexican citizens. Congress has engaged regularly with these issues, holding hearings, appropriating funds to support Mexico's anti-crime efforts, and issuing directives and reporting requirements to U.S. agencies.

The Biden Administration and the government of President López Obrador are shaping a new bilateral security program, the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework on Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities. Introduced in fall 2021, the framework, as announced, seeks to address insecurity inside Mexico and the U.S. opioid overdose crisis. Congress would play a role in overseeing the funding and effectiveness of this framework, which would replace the Mérida Initiative as the primary bilateral partnership for U.S.-Mexico security cooperation.

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Introduction

This report analyzes Mexico's criminal landscape, including pervasive violence and corruption. It also discusses categories of illicit drugs in Mexico and profiles nine major criminal organizations in Mexico, as well as the phenomena of fragmentation and competition among these major drug trafficking organizations (DTOs).[1] An **Appendix** to the report summarizes the evolution of Mexican governmental efforts to combat DTOs.

Mexico shares a nearly 2,000-mile border with the United States, and the two countries have long-standing and close trade, cultural, and demographic ties. Mexico's transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) supply illicit drugs to the United States and engage in a wide variety of other lucrative transnational criminal activities. TCOs' illicit activities have contributed to a spike in U.S. drug overdoses, have provided a push factor for migration out of Mexico, and may have driven internal displacement.[2] Mexican TCOs also contribute to high levels of violence and corruption in Mexico. TCO-related violence in Mexico affects U.S. individual and commercial interests as well as the stability of Mexico's governing institutions. Despite years of effort, including substantial U.S. assistance, Mexican TCOs and their violence remain difficult to suppress. The TCOs' evolution and activities have therefore remained of sustained concern to U.S. policymakers. Over the past decade, Congress has held numerous hearings on U.S. counternarcotics assistance and border security issues, which often highlight TCO-perpetrated violence.

Both the total number of reported murders (intentional homicides) each year and the homicide rate (per 100,000 persons) in Mexico have risen and then stayed at or near record levels in the past five years. Many analysts attribute the biggest factor in Mexico's current homicide level rise to organized crime-style killings.[3] According to an annual assessment by one Mexican think tank, five Mexican cities topped the list of the 50 most violent cities globally in 2019.[4] (For the top 10 most violent Mexican cities in 2020 and their homicide rates, see **Figure 4**.) This increase in violence and the Mexican government's response are of interest to some Members of Congress.

The increasing DTO-related violence has had political implications in Mexico. Political violence leading up to Mexico's mid-term elections in 2021—when reportedly more than 100 politicians

[1] This report uses the terms *drug trafficking organizations* (DTOs), *transnational criminal organization* (TCOs), and *drug cartels* interchangeably to refer to Mexican crime groups (unless otherwise delineated). For example, some crime organizations evolve from more localized cartel fragments into full-blown TCOs, which commit drug trafficking and other illicit crimes across international borders.

[2] Mary Beth Sheridan, "The War Next Door: Conflict in Mexico Is Displacing Thousands," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2022.

[3] The government data published have changed over time. The government of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) published tallies of "organized-crime-related" homicides until September 2011. The administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) also issued such estimates but stopped in mid-2013 and switched to publishing data on all intentional homicides. The Justice in Mexico project has identified an average (over many years) of homicides linked to organized crime by assessing several sources. Of total homicides reported by the Mexican government, between 25% and 50% of those killings likely were linked to organized crime. Laura Y. Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence: 2021 Special Report*, Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA, October 2021. (Hereinafter, Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021).

[4] El Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal (Citizen's Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice), "Boletín Ranking 2019 de las 50 Ciudades más Violentas del Mundo," June 1, 2020. The council survey found in 2019 that the five Mexican cities as the top of the list of the 50 most violent cities were Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Uruapan, Irapuato, and Ciudad Obregon. In 2020, the council survey identified the top 6 of the 50 most violent cities in the world in Mexico. Julian Resendiz, "Body Count from Drug Cartel Wars Earns Mexican Cities Label of 'Most Violent in the World,'" *Border Report*, April 21, 2021.

were killed and many more were threatened—led some analysts to assert that Mexican cartels have taken direct electoral interference to new levels.[5] DTOs' intimidation of Mexican politicians, candidates, and their families through threats of violence or actual homicides has raised alarm among many victims' groups and other human rights organizations in Mexico, among Mexico's political and trade partners, and others.

Assassinations of journalists and media personnel have made Mexico one of the world's most dangerous countries in which to practice journalism.[6] Between 2017 and 2020, a journalist was murdered in Mexico nearly once a month on average. In the first five months of 2022, 11 journalists were murdered in Mexico.[7] By contrast, nine Mexican journalists were killed in 2021, according to the watchdog group Committee to Protect Journalists.[8] Most reporters and media personnel who have been killed covered violent crime or public corruption in Mexico.[9]

Violence has spread from the border with the United States into Mexico's interior. TCO-related violence has flared in the Pacific states of Michoacán and Guerrero; in the central states of Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Morelos, and Colima; and in the northern border states of Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, and Baja California, where Mexico's largest border cities are located (for map, see **Figure 1**). Organized crime groups have splintered and diversified their criminal activities, turning to extortion, kidnapping, oil theft, human smuggling, sex trafficking, retail drug sales, and other illicit enterprises.

Flagrant violence in central Mexico, in the major Mexican cities along the U.S.-Mexico border, and in the Pacific states in a region known as the *Tierra Caliente* (Hot Land) has remained high. In April 2022, Mexico's instability in the Tierra Caliente region was reported to be persistent and worsening.[10] In February 2022, after a crime group made a death threat to a U.S. inspector of avocados in Michoacán (see **Figure 1**), the U.S. Department of Agriculture temporarily halted all of Mexico's U.S.-bound avocado exports to protect inspectors and reject attempted extortion by Mexico's criminal organizations.[11] In March 2021, Head of U.S. Northern Command General Glen VanHerck stated that 30%-35% of Mexico constitutes an "ungoverned space," where TCOs thrive.[12]

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[5] See, for instance, Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "La Operación Electoral del 'Cártel de Sinaloa,'" *El Financiero*, June 21, 2021.

[6] For background on Mexico, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke. See also Juan Albarracín and Nicholas Barnes, "Criminal Violence in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (June 23, 2020), pp. 397-406.

[7] Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul and Kevin Seiff, "Why Do Journalists in Mexico Keep Getting Killed?," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2022. The authors maintain more journalists have been killed in Mexico since the start of 2022 than in Ukraine, a war zone.

[8] Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "45 Journalists Killed in 2021/Motive Confirmed or Unconfirmed," accessed on February 14, 2022. The CPJ considered the 2020 total to be nine journalists killed, with slightly over half of those confirmed to be related to the journalist's profession based upon an investigation.

[9] Sandra Pellegrini and Adam Miller, "Journalists Under Attack in Mexico," Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, April 11, 2022, at https://acleddata.com/2022/04/11/journalists-under-attack-in-mexico/.

[10] Falko Ernst, *On the Front Lines in the Hot Land: Mexico's Incessant Conflict*, International Crisis Group (ICG), April 26, 2022, at https://facesofconflict.crisisgroup.org/on-the-front-lines-of-the-hot-land-mexicos-incessant-conflict/.

[11] Matt Rivers, "Why Avocado Shipments from Mexico to the U.S. were Stopped: A Death Threat to a Safety Inspector," CNN Business, February 16, 2022.

[12] Glen VanHerck stated, "Counternarcotics, migration, human trafficking, they're all symptoms of transnational criminal organizations who are operating oftentimes in ungoverned areas—30 percent to 35 percent of Mexico—that is creating some of the things we're dealing with at the border." General Glen VanHerck, Commander, NORAD and USNORTHCOM, USNORTHCOM-USSOUTHCOM, Commander's Joint Press Briefing Remarks, March 16, 2021.

This heightened violence inside Mexico coincides with a transition to synthetic drug production and trafficking, including both the synthetic opioid fentanyl and methamphetamine. Mexican authorities reportedly seized nearly six times the amount of synthetic drugs in 2019 and 2020 than were seized from 2016 to 2018. This rise in seizures has stoked renewed concerns among U.S. policymakers about the effectiveness of Mexico's anti-cartel and anti-fentanyl strategies.[13]

In March 2022, a large weapons seizure convinced some analysts of an accelerating "internal" war within the Sinaloa Cartel, Mexico's oldest and most dominant TCO.[14] Reportedly, police found in safe houses in Sonora gear that included millions of rounds of high-powered ammunition, what appeared to be fully automated machine guns, bulletproof vests, and other weaponry. Police suspected this gear had been stashed for combat between cartel factions (see below, "Sinaloa DTO" section), as well as for the ongoing power struggle with external competitors.[15]

Figure 1. Map of Mexico

Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

[13] *Economist*, "Latin America's Drug Gangs Have Had a Good Pandemic: A Resilient Industry Shrugs Off Supply-Chain Problems," December 29, 2021. The State Department's 2022 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, Volume I, released on March 1, 2022, maintains that Mexican authorities seized some 1.3 metric tons of fentanyl in 2020, a 596% increase over seizures made in 2019.

[14] Parker Asmann, "What Does Massive Weapons Seizure Say About Sinaloa Cartel Feud in Mexico," *InSight Crime*, March 7, 2022.

[15] Associated Press, "Mexico Finds 3 Million Rounds of Ammo in Biggest Bust So Far," March 3, 2022.

The State Department's March 16, 2022, U.S. travel advisory for Mexico, which cautioned against travel to Mexico due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic concerns, also cautioned against travel to Mexico due to significant violent crime, such as homicide, kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery. In an April 20, 2022, update, the State Department recommended that U.S. citizens refrain from travel to Colima, Guerrero, Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas.[16] The State Department also added an advisory for U.S. government employees not to travel to Zacatecas State due to the state's homicide rate doubling between 2020 and 2021, reportedly based on a cartel turf war.[17]

Congressional Concerns

Over the past decade, Congress has held numerous oversight hearings to address TCO-perpetrated crime and violence. Topics have included whether Mexican TCOs should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), TCO control of the U.S.-bound illicit drug supply, U.S.-Mexico security cooperation, including U.S. counternarcotics assistance for Mexico, and related border security concerns.

Some Members of Congress are concerned about persistently high levels of violence in Mexico and the ineffectiveness of several efforts to curb that violence or prosecute offenders. In 2012, after U.S. consulate staff and security personnel working in Mexico came under attack, congressional concern spiked.[18] Occasional use of car bombs, grenades, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers—such as the one used to bring down a Mexican army helicopter in 2015—continues to spark alarm among security analysts and policymakers.

Incidents such as the late-2019 massacre of dual U.S.-Mexican citizens near the U.S.-Mexico border have prompted some Members of Congress to consider whether Mexican drug traffickers may be adopting insurgent or terrorist techniques.[19] In October 2019, following the murder of an extended family that included young children in the Mexican border state of Sonora, some Members of Congress questioned whether the U.S. Secretary of State should declare the Mexican organizations to be FTOs. For example, the Drug Cartel Terrorist Designation Act (H.R. 1700) was introduced in the 116th Congress, as was the Identifying Drug Cartels as Terrorists Act of 2019 (H.R. 5509). The incident drew the attention of then-President Trump, who urged the Mexican government to accept more U.S. assistance to vanquish the DTOs.[20] In the 117th

[16] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Mexico Travel Advisory," April 20, 2022, at https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html. The advisory concludes, "Violent crime—such as homicide, kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery—is widespread and common in Mexico." An added prohibition on U.S. government worker travel for Zacatecas is at https://mx.usembassy.gov/security-alert-for-u-s-citizens-new-restrictions-on-u-s-government-employee-travel/.

[17] *Mexico Daily News*, "U.S. Embassy Issues Security Alert for Zacatecas," April 19, 2022.

[18] In 2011, a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent was killed and another was wounded in a drug gang shooting incident in San Luis Potosí, north of Mexico City. See BBC News, "U.S. Immigration Agent Shot Dead in Mexico Attack," February 16, 2011. In another incident, two U.S. officials traveling in an embassy vehicle were wounded in an attack allegedly abetted by corrupt Mexican police. C. Archibold and Karla Zabludovsky, "Mexico Detains 12 Officers in Attack on Americans in Embassy Vehicle," *New York Times*, August 28, 2012.

[19] See U.S. Congressman Chip Roy, "Reps. Chip Roy and Mark Green Request Drug Cartels Be Added to Terror List," press release, February 20, 2019, at https://roy.house.gov/media/press-releases/reps-chip-roy-and-mark-green-request-drug-cartels-be-added-terror-list. See also U.S. Congressman Chip Roy, "Congressman Roy Introduces Legislation to Designate Cartels as Terrorist Organizations," press release, April 15, 2021, at https://roy.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-roy-introduces-legislation-designate-cartels-terrorist.

[20] David E. Sanger, Michael D. Shear, and Eric Schmitt, "Trump's Pentagon Chief Quashed Idea to Send 250,000 Troops to the Border," *New York Times*, updated November 9, 2021. In the memoir of former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, published in May 2022, Esper alleged that President Trump proposed firing missiles into Mexico to

Congress, the Security First Act (H.R. 812) was introduced; it would, among its provisions, require the U.S. Secretary of State to report to certain congressional committees on whether certain Mexican cartels meet the criteria for designation as FTOs.[21]

When Congress has considered whether crime syndicates should be designated as FTOs, the question arises whether the scale, purpose, and types of violence attributed to Mexican TCOs have morphed into terrorism.[22] The criminal groups do not appear to be politically or ideologically motivated, which is one element of a widely recognized definition of terrorism. In December 2021, the State Department's annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* maintained there was no credible evidence that international terrorist groups had bases in Mexico or "worked directly with Mexican drug cartels, or sent operatives via Mexico into the United States in 2020."[23]

The primary harm to the United States identified by several security analysts and policymakers caused by the TCOs is the organizations' control of movement of illicit drugs. Since the early 1990s, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has worked closely with Mexican authorities to investigate and prosecute Mexican trafficking organizations. DEA now identifies the TCOs' expanded production and shipment of heroin, synthetic opioids, and methamphetamine as the major criminal threat to the United States. In May 2022, in what was perceived as a blow to U.S.-Mexico antidrug cooperation, Mexico denied DEA the landing rights for its aircraft to conduct anti-narcotics operations inside Mexico. As a result, DEA withdrew its aircraft, limiting its operational capacity.[24]

Current illicit drug production and trafficking trends correspond to the growing epidemic of opioid-related deaths in the United States and continued high demand for other illicit drugs. This demand was especially acute during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when U.S. demand for illicit opioids and black market painkillers spiked.[25]

In addition, some Members of Congress are concerned about corruption and Mexico's justice system failures that lead to impunity and failed prosecutions, arguably allowing criminal power to go unchecked.[26] Cartel control of human smuggling related to irregular migration and the

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remove the "drug labs." This allegation, if true, does not appear to have been publicly discussed or considered by Members of Congress. Maggie Haberman, "Trump Proposed Launching Missiles into Mexico to 'Destroy the Drug Labs,' Esper Says," *New York Times*, May 5, 2022.

[21] For a discussion of some of the policy impacts from the TCO designation, see CRS Insight IN11205, *Designating Mexican Drug Cartels as Foreign Terrorists: Policy Implications*, coordinated by Liana W. Rosen.

[22] Ibid.

[23] U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020*: *Mexico*, at https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/.

[24] Drazen Jorgic, "EXCLUSIVE-U.S. Anti-drugs Agency Pulls Plane from Mexico in Fresh Cooperation Blow," Reuters, May 11, 2022.

[25] Steven Dudley et al., "Mexico's Role in the Deadly Rise of Fentanyl," Wilson Center Mexico Institute and *InSight Crime*, February 2019. According to a report of the Stanford-Lancet Commission, in the United States, individuals who had become addicted to prescription opioids first turned to heroin and. after illicit synthetic opioids flooded heroin markets, many turned to synthetics, such as fentanyl. See Keith Humphreys et al., "Responding to the Opioid Crisis in North America and Beyond: Recommendations of the Stanford–Lancet Commission," *Lancet*, vol 399, February 5, 2022.

[26] Judicial and policing deficiencies have allowed about a 95% impunity level for the resolution of crimes, on average. For decades, roughly 90% of crimes in Mexico have gone unreported, while only 4%-6% of those reported crimes reach conclusion or case closure. México Evalúa, *Hallazgos 2020. Evaluación del Sistema de Justicia Penal en México*, 8th ed., October 5, 2021; Juan Antonio Le Clercq, "Mexico: Measuring Impunity Through the 2020 Global Impunity Index," Global Americans, January 11, 2021; Animal Político, "To Murder in Mexico: Impunity Guaranteed," September 30, 2018.

exploitation of migrants awaiting immigration hearings in Mexico's violent border cities is of concern to certain Members.

The U.S. Congress provides oversight on U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. Congress may continue to evaluate how the Mexican government is combating the illicit drug trade, addressing violence, and monitoring the effects of drug trafficking and violence on the security of both the United States and Mexico. Section 7211 of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92, §7211) required unclassified and classified reporting to Congress on foreign opioid traffickers, such as Mexico's TCOs. A provision associated with FY2022 Defense Department appropriations further directed the Secretary of Defense, in cooperation with the Secretary of State, to submit an integrated security cooperation strategy for Mexico.[27] Pending legislation, such as the Dark Web Interdiction Act (H.R. 7300 and S. 3782), also would target fentanyl traffickers in Mexico.[28]

The Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities, announced by the U.S. and Mexican governments in October 2021 (see **text box**), focuses on the growing problems of synthetic drugs, prevention of transborder crime, and pursuit of criminal networks.[29] In January 2022, an early element of the new Bicentennial Framework appeared to be combating the illicit trafficking of high-caliber arms used by crime groups in Mexico.[30]

The Mérida Initiative and Beyond

The Mérida Initiative was a U.S.-Mexican antidrug and rule-of-law partnership lasting 13 years for which Congress provided $3.3 billion through FY2021. Many analysts observed the need for more reporting on Mérida Initiative outcomes to help Congress oversee the funds it had appropriated. The State Department has pointed to some indicators of its success, such as improvements in intelligence sharing and police cooperation that helped to capture and extradite high-profile criminals. Escalating violence in Mexico and drug overdose deaths in the United States, and instances of police corruption at high levels, led many observers to question the Initiative's efficacy.

In 2019, President López Obrador announced he planned to discontinue the Mérida Initiative. In December 2020, he supported a change in the National Security Law approved by Mexico's Congress restricting the activities of U.S. law enforcement officials working in Mexico, which was later eased. In October 2021, the Biden and López Obrador governments announced a new Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities to replace the Mérida Initiative. The new framework remained in development in early 2022.

Sources: Carin Zissis, "ALMO and Biden Have Quietly Put U.S.-Mexico Relations Back on Track," *World Politics Review*, December 6, 2021; and CRS Insight IN11859, *New U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy: Issues for Congressional Consideration*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Liana W. Rosen

[27] See H.Rept. 117-88, the House Appropriations Committee report accompanying H.R. 4432, the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022. Defense Department appropriations for FY2022 ultimately were enacted as Division C of H.R. 2471, the FY2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-103). The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying Division C of H.R. 2471 specifies that "[u]nless otherwise noted, the language set forth in H.Rept. 117-88 carries the same weight as language included in this joint explanatory statement and should be complied with unless specifically addressed to the contrary in this joint explanatory statement" (p. 1).

[28] President Biden's December 2021 Executive Order declared a national emergency with respect to international trafficking of illicit narcotics, including fentanyl. For more, see CRS Insight IN11902, *Illicit Fentanyl and Weapons of Mass Destruction: International Controls and Policy Options*, by Paul K. Kerr and Liana W. Rosen.

[29] CRS Insight IN11859, *New U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy: Issues for Congressional Consideration*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Liana W. Rosen.

[30] Sol Prendido, "Mexico and the U.S. Seek to Stop Ammunition and Firearms Trafficking Between the Two Countries, *Borderline Beat*, January 28, 2022; Julian Resendiz, "Mexico Sending Agents to U.S. to Probe Gun Smuggling, Foreign Minister Says," ABC News, January 31, 2022.

Mexico's Criminal Landscape: Extreme Violence, Corruption, and Impunity

The evolution of Mexico's cartels into more influential transnational crime syndicates has produced a higher intensity of violence, a broader range of criminality, and organizational proliferation.[31] While Mexico had comparatively larger and more stable DTOs prior to 2005, the groups have fragmented into nine major groups, with potentially hundreds of smaller local crime groups and mafias.

Some level of violence is a common feature of how the illicit drug trade operates in Mexico. Traffickers may commit acts of violence to settle disputes and to serve as a credible threat of future violence to coerce cooperation. Such violence may provide a semblance of order with suppliers, creditors, and buyers, and it may intimidate potential rivals and government authorities tasked with combating organized crime and drug trafficking. According to the U.S. State Department's 2021 annual human rights report, "organized crime groups were implicated in numerous killings, acting with impunity and at times in collusion with corrupt federal, state, local and security officials."[32] Some observers contend the scale and magnitude of drug-trafficking-related violence in Mexico are significantly greater than the type and amount of violence experienced in the United States due to TCO operations. Unlike in the United States, violence in Mexico appears to be routinely directed toward government officials, political candidates, and the media.[33]

Levels of violent crime in Mexico have risen and ebbed over the years but have been heightened since the mid-2000s, followed by two spikes. Although tallies differ, homicides rose in 2007-2008 and appear to have increased through 2011. They plateaued during the first two years of the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), and began to decline before spiking again in the last two years of the Peña Nieto administration, from 2016 through late 2018.[34]

During Peña Nieto's six-year term, traffickers exercised significant territorial control in parts of the country over drug trafficking routes and production hubs. Despite the early decline in homicide rates, total homicides reportedly grew by 22% in 2016 and 23% in 2017, reaching a record level, according to government data published by the Justice in Mexico program at the University of San Diego.[35] Government sources reported in 2018 that homicides exceeded

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[31] Mary Speck, "Great Expectations and Grim Realities in AMLO's Mexico," *Prism*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019), pp. 69-81.

[32] U.S. Department of State, *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*: *Mexico Country Report*, April 12, 2022. (Hereinafter, Department of State, *2021 Human Rights Practices Report: Mexico*.)

[33] For a discussion comparing cartel violence in the United States and Mexico, see CRS Report R41075, *Southwest Border Violence: Issues in Identifying and Measuring Spillover Violence*, by Kristin Finklea. See also Calderón et al, *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021; Justice in Mexico, "Violence Against Police in Guanajuato Highlights Complex Security Situation," April 21, 2021, at https://justiceinmexico.org/police-guanajuato-security/.

[34] From Calderón et al, *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021:

> There have been two large surges in the number of intentional homicides in Mexico in recent decades. The first surge began with a steep increase in 2008, peaked in 2011, and was followed by a relatively sharp decrease over the next few years. The second surge began in 2015, when SNSP first began reporting the number of individual murder victims alongside the number of homicide case investigations. Both the number of cases and victims reached record highs in 2018 and 2019. In 2020 and into 2021, Mexico's murder rate has remained at historically high levels, even amid the significant social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

[35] Ibid. and prior editions of the Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego, annual reports.

33,000, for a national rate of 27 per 100,000 persons.[36] In 2019, Mexico saw more than 34,500 intentional homicides, for a national rate of 29 per 100,000.[37] In 2020 and 2021, the homicide levels remained at historic high levels.

Murders have continued at such high levels during the administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. At its midpoint, some observers estimated López Obrador's term in office (2018-2024) likely would be be the most violent in recent Mexican history.[38] Through different analytic approaches, some scholars assess between 40% and 65% of all homicides in Mexico are organized crime-related. Thus, they attribute the biggest factor in Mexico's growing homicide rate to the power and violence of crime groups.[39]

The Mexican government and Mexican media outlets often tally casualty numbers (or homicides) differently.[40] Restricted government reporting and crime groups' attempts to cover up the numbers and identities of casualties also make precise reporting difficult.[41] Criminal actors sometimes publicize their crimes in displays apparently intended to intimidate their rivals, the public, and security forces, leaving signs reporting their acts of violence or broadcasting the acts via the internet. Conversely, TCOs may seek to mask their crimes (removing all crime scene evidence) or may structure the incidents to implicate a competitor cartel. In addition, some shootouts are not reported due to media self-censorship or cartel threats against local journalists.

The large number of disappeared and missing persons, and the estimated 90% of crimes in Mexico that go unreported, suggest deaths attributed to organized crime in Mexico may be far higher than officially reported.[42] Homicide victim tallies do not include thousands who have been reported missing or disappeared or those found in unmarked graves. The cumulative total of Mexico's disappeared and missing reportedly exceeds 100,000 in 2022, with 90% of disappearances reported to have taken place since 2007, according to the Mexican government.[43] Some analysts maintain that enforced disappearances are a preferred cartel tactic to maintain political control.[44]

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[36] Chris Dalby and Camilo Carranza, "InSight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up," *InSight Crime*, January 22, 2019.

[37] Testimony of Richard Glenn, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, in U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade, *Assessing U.S. Security Assistance to Mexico*, February 13, 2020.

[38] Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021.

[39] The Justice in Mexico project has identified an average (over many years) of homicides linked to organized crime by assessing several sources. Of total homicides reported by the Mexican government, between 25% and 50% of those killings were likely linked to organized crime. Some analysts point to a higher percentage of murders linked to organized crime, such as Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, "Violent Mexico: Participatory and Multipolar Violence Associated with Organised Crime," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2016), p. 46; Julio Ríos, "Violencia en México en Vías de Superar a las Victimas de Guerra Civil en Colombia," University of Guadalajara, November 29, 2020.

[40] The Mexican news organizations *Reforma* and *Milenio* both keep a tally of "narco-executions." For instance, in 2014, *Reforma* reported 6,400 such killings, the lowest it has reported since 2008, whereas *Milenio* reported 7,993 organized crime-related murders. Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2015*, University of San Diego, April 2016.

[41] See for instance, Christopher Sherman, "Drug War Death Tolls a Guess Without Bodies," Associated Press, March 26, 2013.

[42] *Mexico News Daily*, "Tijuana Journalist Believed Killed over Stories About Drug Traffickers," March 8, 2022.

[43] Mary Beth Sheridan, "Mexico's Plague of Disappearances Continues to Worsen," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2020; United Nations, "Mexico: Over 95,000 Registered as Disappeared, Impunity 'Almost Absolute,'" U.N. News, November 29, 2021; *LatinNews Daily*, "Mexico: Concerns as Disappearances Reach New Milestone," May 17, 2022.

[44] See, for instance, Ivan Briscoe and David Keseberg, "Only Connect: The Survival and Spread of Organized Crime in

Official efforts to accurately count the missing or disappeared have been limited. In 2019, the López Obrador government established a National Search Commission to assess the problem.[45] The discovery of new mass graves continues.[46] In the Gulf Coast state of Veracruz, one vast mass grave unearthed in 2017 contained some 250 skulls and other remains.[47] According to the State Department's human rights report covering 2021, Mexico's states with the highest reported disappearances from the start of 2019 through June 2020 include many where the TCOs are most active: Guanajuato, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, and Mexico City.[48]

Mexican government data about homicides have not been reported consistently or completely. In some cases, data are incomplete due to what the president of the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances decried in November 2021 as Mexico's "forensic crisis," which she attributed in part to an inadequate security strategy and poor investigations.[49] According to a 2018 investigation by anti-corruption watchdog group *Animal Político*, many states in Mexico lack equipment to investigate violent crime adequately, with a majority of states lacking biological databases needed to identify unclaimed bodies.

According to the Switzerland-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, about 380,000 people were forcibly displaced in Mexico between 2009 and 2018 due to violence and organized crime. In 2020, the center reported 9,700 newly displaced Mexicans. The U.S. State Department noted 15 incidents of mass forced internal displacement (of at least 10 families or 50 individuals) within the first seven months of 2021.[50] Some Mexican government authorities have said the number may exceed 1 million, but in such a count the definition of the causes for displacement is broad and includes anyone who moved due to fear or threat of violence. Displaced Mexicans often cite clashes between armed groups or with Mexican security forces, inter-gang violence, and fear of future violence as reasons for leaving their homes and communities.[51]

A Competition for Turf and the Geography of Violence

The major feature of the current criminal landscape in Mexico, according to several observers who monitor organized crime in Mexico, is the battle between an emergent *Cartel Jalisco Nuevo Generación* (CJNG), whose primary business is synthetic drugs (both methamphetamine and fentanyl), and Sinaloa Cartel, the historically dominant and most extensive crime organization.[52]

Latin America," *PRISM*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019). For context, see CRS In Focus IF11669, *Human Rights Challenges in Mexico: Addressing Enforced Disappearances*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Rachel L. Martin.

[45] For more on the López Obrador administration's security approach, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[46] *Mexico News Daily*, "11 Bodies Found in Clandestine Graves in Sonora," March 8, 2022.

[47] Patrick J. McDonnell and Cecilia Sanchez, "A Mother Who Dug in a Mexican Mass Grave to Find the 'Disappeared' Finally Learns Her Son's Fate," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 2017; BBC News, "Mexico Violence: Skulls Found in a New Veracruz Mass Grave," March 20, 2017.

[48] Department of State, *Human Rights Practices Report: Mexico*.

[49] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Mexico: Prevention Must Be Central to National Policy to Stop Enforced Disappearance, UN Committee Finds," press release, April 12, 2022, at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/mexico-prevention-must-be-central-national-policy-stop-enforced.

[50] International Displacement Monitoring Centre, database accessed February 24, 2022, at https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/mexico; Department of State, *2021 Human Rights Practices Report: Mexico*.

[51] Juan Arvizo, "Crimen Displazó a 380 Mil Personas," *El Universal*, July 24, 2019. See also Parker Asmann, "Is the Impact of Violence in Mexico Similar to War Zones?" *InSight Crime*, October 23, 2017.

[52] See, for instance, Sugeyry Romina Gándara, "Mexico Ablaze as Jalisco Cartel Seeks Criminal Hegemony," *InSight Crime*, January 5, 2022.

(For more about CJNG's split from Sinaloa, see "Cártel Jalisco Nuevo Generación," below.) According to some analysts, the structure is a reassertion of the "bipolarity" between two significant crime networks in Mexico's organized criminal environment that existed in earlier parts of the 21st century.[53]

Figure 2 maps the territories dominated and disputed by major cartels from data gathered by Latin America regional analyst James Bosworth from open sources and journalist interviews. The figure shows five major competitors or large cartels: CJNG, Sinaloa, Juárez, Gulf, and Los Zetas, each by their areas of dominance and contested areas. Local group challenges shown in central and western Mexico come from cartel fragments or new offshoots of groups that are among the nine organizations profiled in this report, such as *La Familia Michoacana*. For another way to envision the TCO territories and conflicts, the political risk firm Stratfor Worldview (previously Stratfor) provides a geographic mapping (see **Figure 3**) of Mexico's 12 major cartels. This depiction has evolved from a previous Stratfor conceptualization of cartel territories within regional groupings.

Figure 2. 2021 Mexican Cartel Territory and Conflict Zones

Source: Created by CRS. Data provided by James Bosworth, Hxagon LLC
Notes: CJNG = *Cartel Jalisco Nuevo Generación.* Map data was compiled through open-source research and interviews with journalists and analysts operating in Mexico. Only major organizations are shown. Updated as of late 2021.

Many analysts contend that conflicts among rising splinter groups or cartel fragments are behind some of Mexico's most virulent violence. Smaller groups, according to some analysts, may be less able to challenge the national government or engage in some types of transnational crimes, including international drug trafficking. However, cartel splinter groups continue to fight to retain the lucrative drug trafficking business, since it remains one of the most high-profit criminal

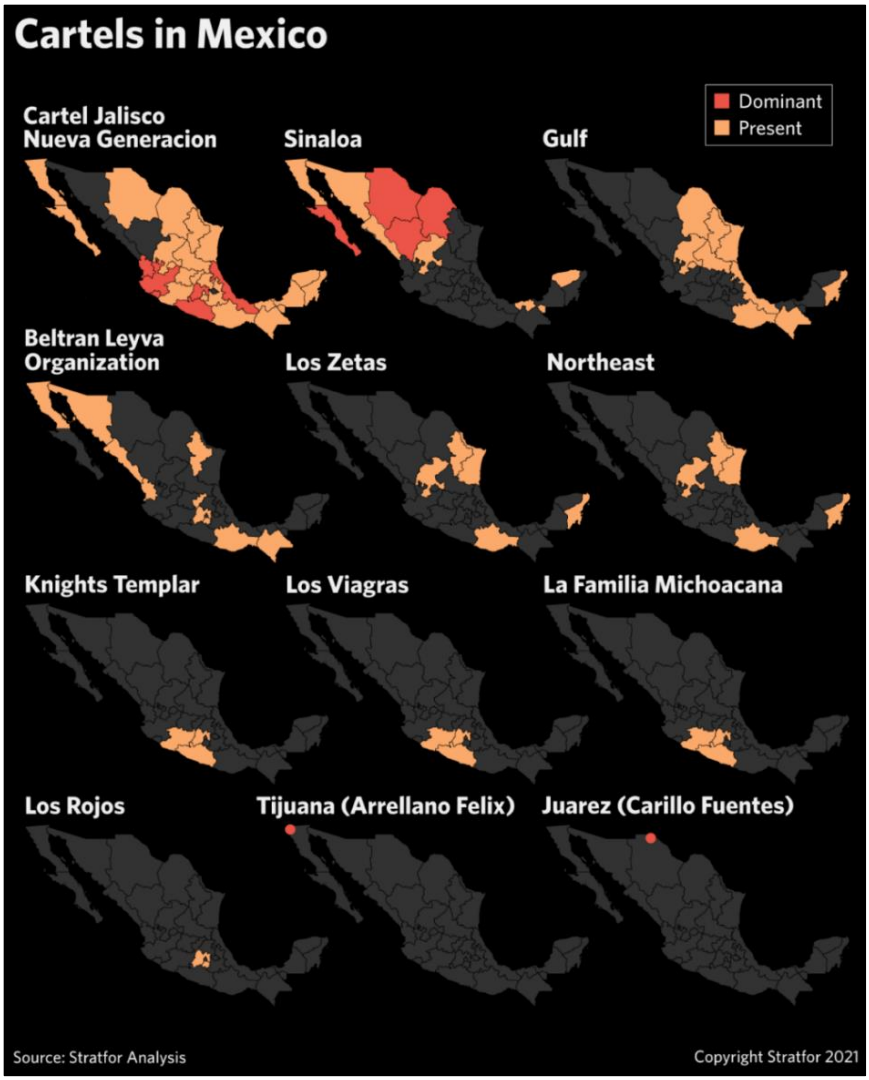
[53] Nathan P. Jones et al., *Mexico's 2021 Dark Network Alliance Structure: An Exploratory Social Network Analysis of Lantia Consultores' Illicit Network Alliance and Subgroup Data*, Center for the United States and Mexico, Baker Institute for Policy Studies, April 22, 2022. (Hereinafter, Jones et al., *Dark Network Alliance Structure*.

activities. Some analysts report that the largest cartels have engaged in a "proxy war," using smaller groups to control drug supply chains.[54]

CJNG is intensely expansionist, using displays of extreme violence to intimidate. CJNG is widely believed to be responsible for the June 2020 killing of a federal judge in Colima who had supervised a case involving the son of the CJNG leader, Rubén "El Menchito" Oseguera, himself reputedly a top cartel figure. The judge had ruled in favor of El Menchito's 2020 extradition to the United States and had delivered judgments in significant Sinaloa Cartel cases.

Figure 3. Cartel Territory by Areas of Dominance and Presence in 2021

(Stratfor Worldview)



Source: Rane: Worldview Powered by Stratfor, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2021," August 6, 2021, at https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/tracking-mexicos-cartels-2021?app=old.

[54] See, *Economist*, "Latin America's Drug Gangs Have Had a Good Pandemic: A Resilient Industry Shrugs off Supply-Chain Problems," December 2021.

A few weeks after the judge's killing, Mexico City's police chief and secretary of public security, Omar García Harfuch, was ambushed in an armed attack that seriously wounded him and killed two bodyguards and a bystander. García Harfuch, from his hospital bed, accused the CJNG of launching the attack.[55] As of late 2021, there had been no public reporting on the investigations of the judge's killing in Colima or the assassination attempt in Mexico City.[56] Some judges reportedly declined to accept organized crime cases, citing the Mexico City attack.[57]

In contrast to the experience in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, where the sequential dismantling of the Medellín and Cali Cartels led to less overt violence, Mexico's dismantling of major DTOs has led to a fragmentation associated with widespread and brutal violence.[58] A kingpin strategy implemented by the Mexican government has largely incapacitated numerous top- and mid-level leaders in all the major TCOs by means of arrest or killings in arrest efforts. However, this strategy may spark succession struggles that reconfigure external alliances. In this process, somewhat stable criminal groups are often replaced by ones that are more violent. According to an analysis by the International Crisis Group, between 2009 and late 2020, "at least 543 armed groups operated in Mexico"; the analysis largely attributed this situation to the failures of the kingpin strategy.[59]

The Administration of President López Obrador and Security

On December 1, 2018, President López Obrador, the populist leftist leader of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) party, took office after winning 53% of the vote in the July elections. The new president pledged to make Mexico a more just and peaceful society and vowed to govern with austerity. He said he would not pursue a war against the TCOs but would target the social conditions that allow criminal groups to thrive, a strategy he summarized as "hugs, not bullets."[60] After three years holding office, as of January 2022, López Obrador has avoided large-scale police actions against the cartels and U.S.-Mexico cooperation on law enforcement has declined.[61]

In his first year, President López Obrador backed constitutional reforms to authorize continued military involvement in public security for five years, despite a 2018 Mexican Supreme Court

[55] Kevin Sieff, "Mexico's Bold Jalisco Cartel Places Elite in Its Sights," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2020 (hereinafter Sieff, "Mexico's Bold Jalisco Cartel"); Jacobo García, "Omar García Harfuch, the Mexican Police Chief Who Survived Being Shot at 414 Times," *El País*, June 21, 2021.

[56] Twenty-five individuals were arrested in connection with the attack on Harfuch and some 80 bank accounts were frozen. Ibid.

[57] See, for instance, Gustavo Castillo García, "Va el 'Narco' por el Control Político y Territorial: Gertz," *La Jornada*, July 7, 2020.

[58] In Colombia's case, successfully targeting the huge and wealthy Medellín and Cali Cartels and dismantling them meant that a number of smaller DTOs (*cartelitos*) replaced them. The smaller organizations have not behaved as violently as the larger cartels, and thus the Colombian government was seen to have reduced violence in the drug trade. However, there were critical factors in Colombia that were not present in Mexico, such as the presence of guerrilla insurgents and paramilitaries that became deeply involved in the illegal drug business. Arguably, the Colombian cartels of the 1980s and 1990s were structured and managed very differently than their contemporary Mexican counterparts.

[59] International Crisis Group, *Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs,' Explained*, Visual Explainer, May 5, 2022, at https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/crime-pieces-effects-mexicos-%E2%80%9Cwar-drugs%E2%80%9D-explained.

[60] Gladys McCormick, "'Abrazos no Balazos'—Evaluating AMLO's Security Initiatives," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 13, 2019, at https://www.csis.org/analysis/abrazos-no-balazos%E2%80%94evaluating-amlos-security-initiatives.

[61] Drazen Jorgic, "Mexico Shuts Elite Investigations Unit in Blow to U.S. Drugs Cooperation" Reuters, April 19, 2022.

ruling that prolonged military involvement in domestic security violated the constitution. He secured congressional approval to stand up a new National Guard (composed of former military, federal police, and new recruits), ostensibly to combat crime. The creation of the National Guard and the continuation of an active domestic role for the military alarmed many in the human rights community, who had persuaded Mexico's Congress to modify López Obrador's proposal to try to ensure the National Guard would be under civilian command. In 2019, the National Guard was primarily assigned migration enforcement in response to Trump Administration demands for Mexico to stem irregular migration. In 2020 and 2021, the National Guard could not certify some 90% of its force was fit for duty.[62] López Obrador contends that Mexico's National Guard was unprepared to handle the violent tactics of the TCOs because the National Guard lacked training to conduct such a difficult domestic security task. Critics note government investment in both state and local law enforcement has declined since 2018.[63]

Some analysts also question López Obrador's commitment to combat corruption in a way that could help curb Mexico's persistent organized crime-related violence.[64] During his first three years in office, López Obrador has said he pursued unconventional antidrug approaches, such as legalization of some drugs such as cannabis, and targeted oil theft by attacking cartels that are known to steal petroleum. However, several observers maintain the administration has not issued an effective or comprehensive security policy to combat the TCOs.[65] Stratfor Worldview illustrates the cartels' widespread activity and presence throughout much of Mexico's territory in 2021 (see **Figure 3**)—and how little of the country has been spared from significant activity. (See **Appendix** for an overview of prior government efforts to quell the cartels during Mexican administrations since 2007.) Some analysts maintain that progress to implement an anti-corruption system required by a 2017 constitutional reform has not materialized under the López Obrador administration.[66]

Mexico's Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection cited a decline in homicides in January and February 2022, compared with those same months in the prior year, as evidence that President López Obrador's anti-crime and anti-corruption strategies were working.[67] Some critics who follow the homicide trends have questioned the methodology used to arrive at such a conclusion. They contend that the first two months of the year's decline in homicides in a limited number of municipalities, reported by the Mexican government, do not constitute a significant decline.[68] López Obrador has made headway on some stalled investigations, such as establishing a

[62] Arturo Angel, "80% en Guardia Nacional Carece de Certificación Como Policía, Predominan en esta Fuerza Militares y Marinos," *Animal Politico*, July 7, 2020; Stratfor Worldview, "Three Years In, Lopez Obrador's Cartel Strategy Has Not Succeeded in Mexico," September 13, 2021.

[63] CRS In Focus IF10578, *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[64] Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021; Gina Hinojosa and Maureen Meyer, *The Future of Mexico's National Anti-Corruption System: The Anti-Corruption Fight under President López-Obrador*, Washington Office on Latin America, August 2019.

[65] For more on the President Lopéz Obrador's evolving approach, see CRS Insight IN11859, *New U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy: Issues for Congressional Consideration*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Liana W. Rosen, and CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[66] See for additional background, see CRS In Focus IF10578, *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[67] Isabel González, "Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad Funciona y Así Se Pacifica al País: SSPC," *El Excelsior*, March 17, 2022.

[68] See, for example, James Bosworth and Lucy Hale, "Mexico - Q1 2022 Homicide Data," *Latin America Risk Report*, April 25, 2022; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Opinion, Crime & Anti-Crime Policies in Mexico in 2022: A Bleak Outlook," *Mexico Today*, January 21, 2022.

commission to address a long-unsolved case from 2014 in which a drug cartel was suspected of murdering 43 youth in Guerrero State with collusion from Mexican security authorities. In June 2020, arrest warrants were issued for more than 40 municipal officials in Guerrero in that case; information released in March 2022 indicated the Mexican Navy was involved in a cover-up concerning the students' deaths. The government had alleged that a crime group had killed the students.[69]

Corrupted by the Cartels: Mexican Police, Prison Wardens, and Public Officials

Police and other public officials in Mexico cooperating with the TCOs are rarely investigated. However, most violent crimes such as homicide, whether committed by corrupt police officers or others, are never fully prosecuted. Police corruption has been so thorough, some argue, that some law enforcement officials reportedly carry out violent assignments from TCOs. Police are considered poorly paid compared with other occupations, especially at the local level, and, as a result, could be susceptible to TCO pressure; some police officers may occasionally moonlight for crime groups. Police security tests and purges have not rid the police of these types of corruption, and the threat of TCOs undermining police and the rule of law continues.

The capture and escapes of the Sinaloa Cartel's notorious longtime leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán Leora indicate the power of cartel influence in prisons. After El Chapo Guzmán escaped from a federal maximum-security prison in 2015 (his second escape from a Mexican prison), scores of Mexican prison personnel were arrested. The prison warden was fired. Guzmán was captured a third time and extradited to the United States. In February 2019, he was convicted in federal court in New York for multiple counts of operating a continuing criminal enterprise. Some of the trial's most incendiary testimony alleged that senior Mexican government officials took bribes from Guzmán. One prosecution witness alleged that then-President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) received a $100 million bribe from Guzmán, an allegation Peña Nieto disputed. Some observers maintain this allegation was far-fetched. El Chapo is serving his life sentence in a maximum-security prison in Colorado.

In December 2019, U.S. authorities arrested Genaro García Luna in Texas on a U.S. indictment for taking multimillion-dollar bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel while holding top law enforcement positions. García Luna headed Mexico's Federal Investigation Agency from 2001 to 2005 (under President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party, or PAN). Later, under President Felipe Calderón, also of PAN, Garcia Luna became secretary of public security. García Luna left Mexico in 2012 and sought to become a naturalized U.S. citizen. In 2019, President López Obrador claimed García Luna's U.S. arrest revealed corruption in the prior Calderón administration and demonstrated how an openly aggressive enforcement strategy had failed in combating Mexico's TCOs. In late 2020, U.S.-Mexico counternarcotics cooperation was buffeted by the U.S. arrest (and subsequent release) of former Mexican Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos on drug and money-laundering charges and by the Mexican Congress's imposition of restrictions on U.S.-Mexico law enforcement cooperation.

In 2020, under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which renders designees ineligible for U.S. visas, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated former Nayarit Governor Roberto Sandoval Castañeda (2011-2017, PRI Party) and his immediate family for corruption in misappropriating state assets and accepting bribes from the CJNG and the Beltrán Leyva Organization. Some Members of the U.S. Congress have criticized the Mexican attorney general for failing to go after corruption conscientiously and for selectively prosecuting only those in the political opposition to the López Obrador government.

Sources: Steven Dudley, "The End of the Big Cartels: Why There Won't Be Another Chapo," *InSight Crime*, March 18, 2019; James Bosworth and Lucy Hale, "Mexico-State Police Strike in Zacatecas," *Latin America Risk Report*, April 11, 2022; U.S. Department of Justice, "Former Mexican Secretary of Public Security Arrested for Drug-Trafficking Conspiracy and Making False Statements," press release, December 10, 2019; U.S. Department of Justice, "Former Mexican Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna Charged with Engaging in a Continuing Criminal Enterprise," press release, July 30, 2020; Joshua Goodman, "Democrats Blast Mexico's President for Assailing Judiciary," Associated Press, April 7, 2022; CRS Report R46362, *Foreign Officials Publicly Designated by the U.S. Department of State on Corruption or Human Rights Grounds: A Chronology*, by Liana W. Rosen and Michael A. Weber; María Novoa, "The Wheels of Justice in Mexico Are Failing. What Can Be Done?," *Americas Quarterly*, July 9, 2020.

[69] Associated Press, "New Arrest Warrants Issued in Case of Mexico's Missing 43," June 30, 2020; *Guardian*, "Mexico Armed Forces Knew the Fate of 43 Disappeared Students from Day One," March 29, 2022.

In 2021 and early 2022, several violent incidents occurred in tourist areas that traditionally have low levels of violence, including on the coast of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, known as the *Maya Riviera*. In these incidents, some tourists were killed—usually unintentionally, or not because tourists were the targets—on exclusive beachfront properties.[70] The López Obrador government dispatched National Guard convoys to the Cancún-area resorts numerous times during 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 to curb TCO violence.[71] This violence could affect the Mexican economy's vital tourism sector. In mid-February 2022, Quintana Roo's governor convened a meeting with U.S. and Canadian officials to identify crime groups in the state and establish a joint anti-crime strategy.[72] According to some reports, killers have employed jet skis to approach victims and there is growing concern about cartels using weaponized drones to attack police and rivals.[73]

During the six-year term of President Peña Nieto, Mexico fell 32 places in the watchdog group Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI).[74] Mexican respondents' perceptions of corruption improved slightly in 2019 and in 2020, possibly due to the popularity of President López Obrador. In 2021, however, Mexico's overall CPI score stayed the same as in 2020. In the CPI's measurement of perceptions of corruption for 2021, released in January 2022, Mexico ranked in the bottom third regionally with a score of 31.[75] Some critics maintain this ranking shows "stagnation" on a critical area of the president's platform to address corruption.[76]

According to Transparency International, "despite the president's strong anti-corruption rhetoric, major corruption cases in the country have gone unpunished." Mexico's score in the CPI partially reflects that a growing number of scandals, some controversially involving money laundering and the DTOs, has touched close associates of President López Obrador. The president has remained popular despite the historically high levels of homicides, a situation that he frequently discounts. López Obrador is also a frequent critic of the press in his daily morning briefings, especially of investigations or reporting that denounces the administration or his family. He has been known to label journalists during these morning briefings as enemies intent on defaming him and his anti-corruption efforts. In early 2022, López Obrador's continued attacks on the media (and other corruption watchdogs) sparked international concern following the violent deaths of eleven journalists. According to an investigation cited by media accounts, one reporter killed in January was a crime scene photographer who was murdered by a drug cartel.[77] Lourdes Madonado López,

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[70] David Marcial Pérez , "Extortion and Murder in the Riviera Maya: The Dark Side of Mexico's Tourist Paradise," *El País,* February 8, 2022. See also U.S. Mission to Mexico, "Security Alert – US Consulate General Merida," January 25, 2022.

[71] Laura Gamba Fadul, "Mexico to Deploy 1,500 National Guard Troops to Cancun Resorts after Shooting," January 18, 2021.

[72] *Mexico Daily News*, "Quintana Roo to Host North American Security Summit," February 15, 2022.

[73] Scott Mistler-Ferguson,"Sicarios of the Sea-Gunmen Ride Jet Skis in Mexico," *InSight Crime*, February 7, 2022; *InSight Crime*, "Tepalcatepec, Mexico: A Staging Ground for Drone Warfare," January 14, 2022.

[74] See Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2018*, January 29, 2018, at https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018 and https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/cpi-2018-regional-analysis-americas.

[75] Scores are on a scale of 0 to 100, where zero is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. The Americas Ranking, a subset of the global scoring, includes Latin American and Caribbean countries, Canada, and the United States.

[76] *LatinNews,* "Corruption Levels Stagnate, Casting Doubt over López Orbrador's Key Pledge," *Security & Strategic Review-March 2022,* March 4, 2022.

[77] *LatinNews Daily,* "Mexico: U.S.-Mexico Tensions Rise over Killings of Journalists," February 24, 2022; *San Diego Union Tribune*, "Killers of Tijuana Journalist Thought He Was Responsible for Report on Criminal Group, AG Says," March 7, 2022.

a Tijuana reporter found dead in her car in mid-January, had previously petitioned President López Obrador that she needed protection due to her dangerous work. Mexican authorities had detained suspects in her case as of mid-February 2022.[78]

In February 2022, the Inter-American Press Association called for President López Obrador to end his series of anti-journalist rants in the wake of a spate of journalist deaths since the beginning of the year.[79] José Miguel Vivanco, a longtime director at the global human rights advocacy group Human Rights Watch, stated President López Obrador is someone who "manipulates public opinion in a magisterial fashion," and he characterized Mexico's president as "an authoritarian" who delegitimizes free press.[80]

A report by a law-focused organization assessing anti-corruption efforts in Latin America ranks Mexico extremely low for implementation of what observers generally describe as a comprehensive anti-corruption legal framework. In a March 2022 report, the authors maintained, "Insufficient political will for its implementation (despite being one of the priorities of the current president), inadequate economic and human resources for anti-corruption agencies, insufficient judicial independence ... [result in] ... selective justice and impunity."[81]

Crime also has increased in connection with recent migration developments between the United States and Mexico. During the pandemic, a health policy known as Title 42 increased the number of asylum seekers sent back to Mexico, mainly to border cities.[82] A significant number of migrants seeking asylum hearings reside in temporary shelters or provisional encampments in Mexico's northern border states of Baja California, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas under the U.S. Migrant Protection Protocols.[83] These border states have homicide rates exceeding the national average. Two of the U.S.-Mexico border cities with the highest incidence of violent crime were Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez (the first- and second-most violent Mexican cities from 2018 to 2021).[84] Migrants and border city residents were frequent victims of predatory crime, such as kidnapping, robbery, and extortion, in addition to homicide. The turf battle between the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG spawned chaotic violence from the Pacific border city of Tijuana to Mexico's east coast (see **Figure 4**).

[78] Wendy Fry, "Remnants of the Arellano Felix Cartel Responsible for Tijuana Journalist Killings, Mexico Says," *San Diego Union Tribune,* April 28, 2022: CRS Report R45199*, Violence Against Journalists in Mexico: In Brief,* coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[79] Associated Press, "Press Group Calls on Mexican President to Stop Attacks," February 14, 2022.

[80] Michael Stott, "Crisis of US Democracy Emboldens Latin American Populists, Says Rights Chief," *Financial Times*, January 26, 2022.

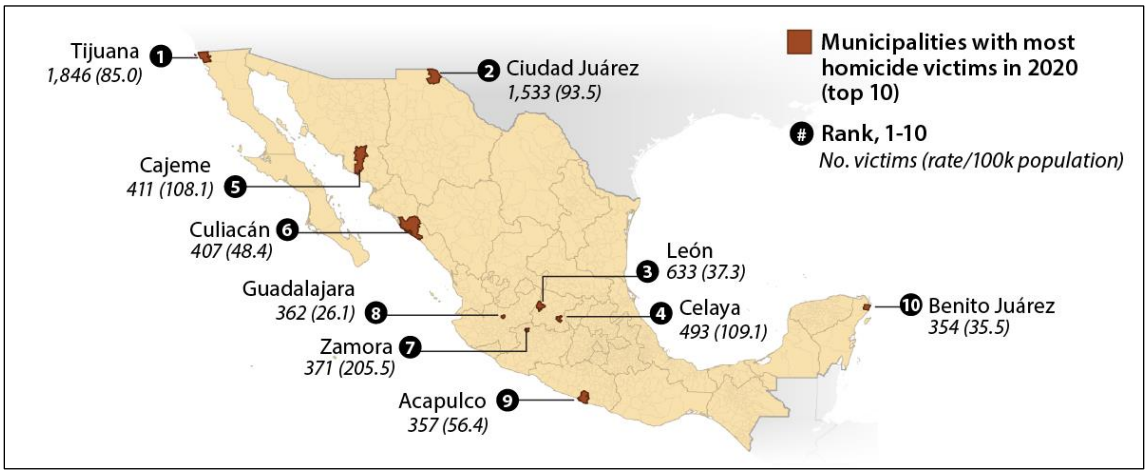
[81] Lawyers Council for Civil & Economic Rights, *LAAA 2021/2022 Latin America Anti-Corruption Assessment*, Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice, March 16, 2022.

[82] See CRS Infographic IG10031, *U.S. Border Patrol Encounters at the Southwest Border: Titles 8 & 42*.

[83]The Trump Administration's Migration Protection Protocols allowed for persons seeking asylum in the United States to be returned to Mexico to await their U.S. hearings; the protocols were reinstated at the end of 2021. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Court Ordered Reimplementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols," updated January 20, 2022.

[84] Data provided by the University of San Diego's Justice in Mexico project to CRS, January 2022.

Figure 4. Top 10 Cities for Most Homicide Victims in Mexico in 2020



Sources: Created by CRS. Data from Laura Y. Calderón et al. (eds.), *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico, 2021 Special Report*, October 2021, p. 14. This report tracked homicide data from the Mexican government's National Public Security System.

Note: Under each city name is the absolute number of homicides and the homicide rate per 100,000 people.

Crime Trends During the COVID-19 Pandemic[85]

Fragmentation of Mexico's TCOs continued during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly because of increased intra-cartel competition.[86] However, the largest TCOs, such as CJNG, managed to consolidate expansion across Mexico. As noted earlier, CJNG's willingness to attack Mexican government officials and its aggression in battling its primary competitor, the Sinaloa Cartel, have forged its fierce reputation. In addition, police and other security force personnel engaged in fewer frontal attacks to curtail cartel violence during the pandemic. Reasons for this include the Mexican security forces being required to conduct curfew enforcement and other pandemic-related duties, as well as to participate in irregular migration control; illness among security force members and police; and a decision by the López Obrador government not to make engagement to counter the cartels a priority.[87] Despite early supply-chain disruptions, U.S.-bound illicit drug supplies appeared to revert to pre-pandemic levels in 2021. Illicit fentanyl flows in particular appeared to thrive.

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the International Monetary Fund, caused the Mexican economy to contract deeply in 2020. After a mild recovery in 2021, Mexico experienced low growth (2.0%) in the first quarter of 2022.[88] The full effects of the pandemic's economic and social disruption over the medium and longer terms on drug trafficking, crime group recruitment, and violence in Mexico remain unknown. Its impacts on

[85] For further background, see CRS Insight IN11535, *Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19*, by June S. Beittel and Liana W. Rosen.

[86] Jane Esberg, "More Than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings," International Crisis Group, May 8, 2020, at https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/more-cartels-counting-mexicos-crime-rings.

[87] Ioan Grillo, "How Mexico's Drug Cartels Are Profiting from the Pandemic;" July 7, 2020; Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "La Seguridad con AMLO: Balance Preelectoral," *El Financiero*, April 11, 2021; *Economist*, "Latin America's Drug Gangs have had a Good Pandemic: A Resilient Industry Shrugs off Supply-Chain Problems," December 2021.

[88] See *LatinNews Daily*, "In Brief: Mexico's Private Sector Lowers 2022 Growth Forecast," March 4, 2022; International Monetary Fund, "Mexico, At a Glance," at https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/MEX#ataglance.

government revenues, security spending, and cartel adaptation to logistics and enforcement challenges continue to evolve.[89]

In 2020, homicide levels remained elevated during Mexico's comparatively brief pandemic lockdown, but crimes of opportunity, such as robbery, appeared to decline.[90] According to homicide data by state released in 2022, murders (intentional homicides) stayed elevated, near record levels throughout 2020 and 2021. The three most violent states in Mexico for 2020, using the rate of homicides per 100,000 persons, were (1) Colima, (2) Baja California, and (3) Guanajuato; in 2021, they were (1) Zacatecas, (2) Baja California, and (3) Colima, from data published by Mexico's National System of Public Security. In both 2020 and 2021, all these states had homicide rates greater than 80 per 100,000 persons.

Some U.S. policymakers have expressed concerns about the extent of territory in Mexico not under central government control. In such places, criminal groups and their fragments attempt to seek dominance and secure impunity from government authorities.[91] The CJNG, for instance, was involved in violent clashes with rivals to control border crossings and smuggling routes into the United States, according to observers tracking the TCOs' expansion.[92] Sinaloa and CJNG reportedly are competing to dominate the sport fishing and seafood production industries on both the east and the west coast of Mexico.[93]

Illicit Drugs in Mexico and Components of Its Drug Supply Market

The major Mexican TCOs are polydrug traffickers, handling more than one type of drug, although they may specialize in the production or trafficking of specific products. According to the U.S. State Department's 2022 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (INCSR), Mexico is a significant source and transit country for heroin, marijuana, and synthetic drugs (such as methamphetamine and fentanyl) destined for the United States. Mexico remains the main trafficking route for U.S.-bound cocaine from the major supply countries of Colombia and, to a lesser extent, Peru and Bolivia.[94] DEA, in its *National Drug Threat Assessment* (NDTA) published in March 2021, maintains that traffickers and retail sellers of fentanyl and heroin combine the drugs in various ways, such as pressing them into highly addictive and extremely powerful counterfeit pills (appearing to be OxyContin or other prescription and over-the-counter drugs).[95] The DEA has said that fentanyl provided by Mexican traffickers to certain U.S. drug

[89] Many analysts have made observations about the near-term impacts of the pandemic, but there is a diversity of perspectives on the long-term effects on drug supply and other illicit criminal activity.

[90] See robbery data on National System of Public Security (SESNSP), at https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/victimas-nueva-metodologia?state=published; Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence,* October 2021.

[91] See Ernst Falco, "On the Front Lines of the Hot Land: Mexico's Incessant Conflict*," International Crisis Group: A Visual Journey Through Latin America (series)*, April 26, 2022.

[92] Luis Chaparro, "Mexico's Powerful Jalisco Cartel Is Flexing Its Muscles at the Opposite Ends of Latin America," October 18, 2021; Sugery Romina Gándara, "Mexico Ablaze as Jalisco Cartel Seeks Criminal Hegemony," *InSight Crime*, January 5, 2022.

[93] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Organized Crime Is Taking over Mexican Fisheries," Brookings Institution, February 21, 2022.

[94] U.S. State Department, *2022 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 1, 2022. Hereinafter, State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

[95] U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) 2020*, March 2021. Hereinafter, DEA, *NDTA 2020*. For additional background, Celina B. Realuya, "The New

markets may supplant "white powder" heroin. Still, 97% of heroin traced from U.S. seizures is sourced from Mexico, according to the 2022 INCSR. Furthermore, the State Department report maintains that addiction rates inside Mexico are rising, including the abuse of synthetic drugs.

The west coast state of Sinaloa, with its long coastline and difficult-to-access areas, is favorable for drug cultivation and remains the heartland of Mexico's drug trade. Marijuana and opium poppy cultivation have flourished in the state for decades.[96] It also has been the home of Mexico's most notorious and successful drug traffickers.

Categories of Illicit Drugs

Cocaine. Cocaine of Colombian origin supplies most of the U.S. market, and most of that supply is trafficked through Mexico. Mexican drug traffickers are the primary wholesalers of U.S. cocaine. The international influence of Mexico's TCOs is growing. The ability of Mexico's cartels to transport Colombian cocaine in the 1990s was a major factor in their growth (for more, see the **Appendix**). In April 2022, press reports noted Mexico's cartels appeared to be a new source of guns for Colombian insurgents and crime groups. Caches of weapons discovered by Colombian authorities included high-powered assault weapons (that appeared to be U.S.-made) provided to Colombia's armed groups as payment for cocaine shipments. According to press reports, Mexico's largest cartels are starting to demand coca growers in Colombia plant hyper-productive coca strains to increase their cocaine output.[97]

According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia increased to a record 951 metric tons (MT) of pure cocaine in 2019 and exceeded 1,000 MT in 2020.[98] Cutting cocaine with synthetic opioids (often unbeknownst to users) reportedly has become commonplace and increases the danger of fatal overdose. Mexican government seizures of cocaine in the first six months of 2021 increased by 90% compared with the same period in 2020.[99]

Heroin and Synthetically Produced Opioids. In its 2020 *National Drug Threat Assessment*, DEA warned that Mexico's crime organizations, aided by corruption and impunity, present an acute threat to U.S. communities given their dominance in heroin and fentanyl exports. Mexico's heroin traffickers, which traditionally provided black or brown heroin to the western part of the United States, began to change their opium processing methods in 2012 and 2013 to produce white powder heroin, a purer and more potent product.

The DEA maintains that no other crime groups, foreign or domestic, have a reach comparable to that of Mexican TCOs to distribute white powder heroin and fentanyl within the United States. With Mexico being the leading source of fentanyl and fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills to the U.S. market, DEA warns that Mexican TCOs have established clandestine laboratories "for the synthesis of fentanyl."[100] The State Department maintains that Mexico has not succeeded in

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Opium War: A National Emergency," *PRISM*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019).

[96] The region where Sinaloa comes together with the states of Chihuahua and Durango is a drug-growing area sometimes called Mexico's "Golden Triangle," after the productive area of Southeast Asia by the same name.

[97] Reuters, "Pushing Productive Seeds, Mexican Cartels Reshape Colombia's Drug Industry," May 9, 2022; Luis Jaime Acosta, "Mexican Cartels Swap Arms for Cocaine, fueling Colombia Violence," Reuters, April 12, 2022.

[98] White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), "Updated: ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Potential Cocaine Production in the Andean Region," July 16, 2021.

[99] State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

[100] ONDCP, "New Annual Data Released by White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Shows Poppy Cultivation and Potential Heroin Production Remain at Record-High Levels in Mexico," press release, June 14, 2019.

sufficiently reducing the flow of dangerous drugs across the border. It cites Mexico's failure to deter TCOs or successfully prosecute them in court and the slowing of Mexico's responses to U.S. extradition requests for defendants on drug-related charges.[101]

Mexican heroin is with increasing frequency laced with fentanyl, according to DEA, and Mexico's potential production of pure heroin rose to 106 MT in 2018. Subsequently, Mexican heroin production fell for three years through 2020, according to the State Department.[102] The extent of Mexico's role in the production of fentanyl, which is 30-50 times more potent than heroin, is less well understood than its role in fentanyl trafficking.[103] What is known is that seizures of fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, and methamphetamine—the leading synthetic lab-produced drugs entering the U.S. illicit drug market—have been steadily rising along the Southwest border since 2017. (For U.S. Customs and Border Protection seizure data, see **Figure 5**.)

Illicit imports of fentanyl from Mexico involve Chinese-produced fentanyl or fentanyl precursors sourced from China, but TCOs are reportedly seeking supplies from other sources, such as India. Many analysts contend that synthetic drugs might gradually replace plant-sourced drugs in the criminal market. Synthetic drug trafficking with distribution arranged over the internet via the Dark Web or other social media is replacing buying drugs derived from plants, such as opium or marijuana, and many Mexican farmers of opium crops have become unemployed as demand declines.[104] Several analysts predict a continuing decline in Mexico's heroin exports as synthetics continue to attract TCO interest and investment.

Methamphetamine. Mexican-produced methamphetamine has overtaken U.S. sources of the drug, a more traditional source. Mexico's illicit supply has expanded into new markets inside the United States, allowing Mexican traffickers to control the U.S. wholesale market, according to the DEA. The expansion of methamphetamine seizures inside Mexico, as reported in the 2022 INCSR, grew to 29 MT in the first six months of 2021.[105] U.S. methamphetamine seizures at the Southwest border increased almost fourfold between 2016 and 2021, as shown in **Figure 5**. The purity and potency of methamphetamine has driven up methamphetamine overdose deaths in the United States. In addition, demand for amphetamines, especially methamphetamine, has increased inside Mexico, where use has doubled since 2017, according to the U.S. State Department.[106]

Cannabis. According to the State Department's 2022 INCSR, U.S. seizures of imported marijuana began to decline in 2019. Authorities are projecting a continued decline in U.S. demand for Mexican marijuana because drugs "other than marijuana" will likely dominate the cross border traffic. This is partially due to legalized medical and nonmedical/recreational

[101] State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

[102] For background on Mexico's heroin and fentanyl exports, see CRS In Focus IF10400, *Trends in Mexican Opioid Trafficking and Implications for U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation*, by Liana W. Rosen and Clare Ribando Seelke.

[103] Steven Dudley, "The End of the Big Cartels: Why There Won't Be Another El Chapo," *InSight Crime*, March 18, 2019.

[104] For more discussion, see Dudley, "The End of the Big Cartels"; testimony of Bryce Pardo, RAND Corporation, in U.S. Congress, House Homeland Security on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations, *Homeland Security Implications of the Opioid Crisis*, hearing, July 25, 2019; Claire Fetter, "The U.S. Opioid Epidemic," Council on Foreign Relations, May 12, 2022, at https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-opioid-epidemic.

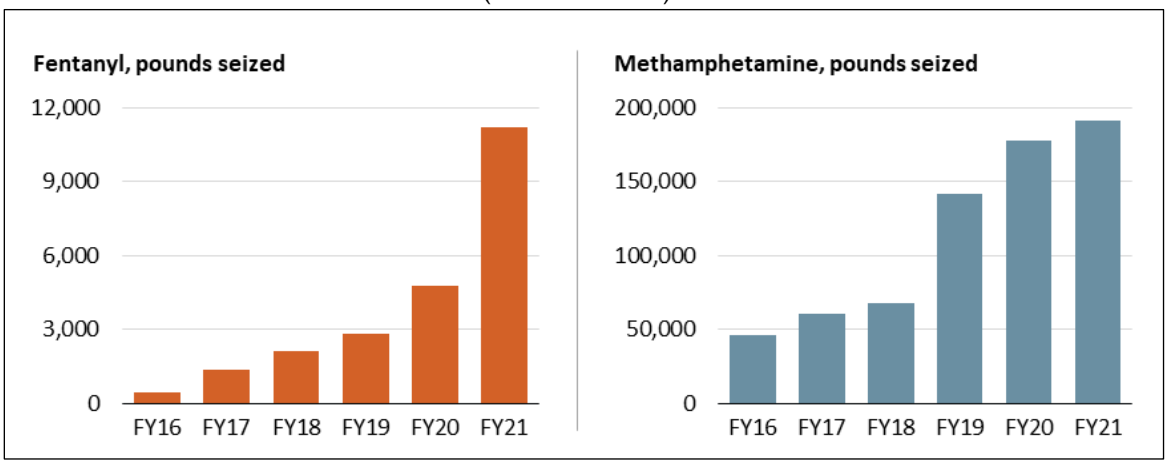
[105] Arthur DeBruyne, "An Invisible Fentanyl Crisis Emerging on Mexico's Northern Border," *Pacific Standard*, February 6, 2019; State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

[106] State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

cannabis in many U.S. states and Canada, reducing its value as part of Mexican trafficking organizations' portfolio. Mexico's Congress is continuing to consider legislation to legalize adult use of cannabis.

A shift in the drug supply is underway, especially in terms of synthetic drugs displacing heroin and cocaine, but its implications remain unclear.[107] Some analysts are exploring why violence has continued to rise in rural areas as Mexico's drug trade moves away from plant-based drugs (e.g., marijuana and opium poppy) to laboratory-made synthetics, with less need to control farmers and land.[108] In the rural western state of Michoacán, for instance, crime groups have used explosive devices, such as improvised explosive devices, to destroy army vehicles and drones to bomb police infrastructure and rivals.[109] These tactics expand beyond existing TCO tools ranging from lengthy underground tunnels, use of cartel branded armed tanks, submersible crafts, ultralights, and cryptocurrencies.[110]

Figure 5. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol Seizures of Fentanyl and Methamphetamine
(FY2016-FY2021)



Sources: CRS. For FY2019-FY2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Office of Field Operations "Drug Seizure Statistics," at https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics. For FY2016-FY2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Office of Field Operations, "CBP Enforcement Statistics FY2018," at https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics-fy2018.

[107] See Vanda Felbab-Brown, *China and Synthetic Drugs Control: Fentanyl, Methamphetamines, and Precursors*, Brookings Institution, March 2022.

[108] For background, see U.S. Senate et al., *Commission on Combatting Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, Final Report*, February 2022, pp. xi, 19-20.

[109] Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "Tepalcatepec, Mexico: A Staging Ground for Drone Warfare," *InSight Crime*, January 14, 2022.

[110] See, for instance, "Drug Smuggling Tunnel with Rail System Uncovered on US-Mexico Border," Associated Press, May 16, 2022, at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/16/california-drug-smuggling-tunnel-us-mexcio-border; Sol Prendido, "Pimp My Ride, The Cartel Tanks of Mexico," *Borderland Beat*, May 8, 2022.

Evolution of the Crime Groups

The TCOs have been in constant flux since the middle of the 20th century.[111] This section focuses on the nine TCOs that are currently most prominent (and about which the most information is available). For several years, DEA identified the following seven organizations as dominant: Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Tijuana/ Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), Juárez/ Carrillo Fuentes Organization (CFO), Beltrán Leyva, Gulf, and La Familia Michoacana. In some sense, these seven might be viewed as the "traditional" DTOs.

Many analysts suggest those seven "traditional" groups have fragmented. The current wave of splintering of the large DTOs into competing factions and gangs of different sizes started in 2008. Reconfiguration of the major DTOs—preceding the contemporary fragmentation—was common. For example, the Gulf Cartel, based in northeastern Mexico, had a long history of dominance at the end of the 20th century, with the height of its power in the early 2000s. However, the Gulf Cartel's enforcers—Los Zetas, who were organized from highly trained Mexican military deserters—split in 2010 to form a separate DTO and turned against their former employers, engaging in a particularly violent competition for territory.[112] As discussed below, the Gulf Cartel now lacks its former power and reach.

In the past decade, as many criminal groups and their splinters proliferated, groups expanded the range and diversity of the criminal businesses they pursued, often forming powerful poly-crime syndicates. Some crime groups specialize in one illegal business. Other crime groups target licit businesses to hide their criminal earnings and launder their profits. Many groups in their territories extort businesses in agriculture, mining, seafood, and timber and provide security from other criminal groups. Their evolving status illuminates the fluidity of all the crime groups in Mexico as they face new challenges from competition and changing drug market dynamics. Some analysts maintain the true scale and impact of the fracturing of organized crime in Mexico remains unknown and contend that making effective policy requires maximum comprehension of the character of these changes.[113] One analyst assessed in 2015 that the smaller organizations are "less able to threaten the state and less endowed with impunity."[114]

The emergence of new crime groups, ranging from TCOs with their international reach to small domestic mafias, has made the crime situation in Mexico diffuse and arguably has made it more difficult to suppress or eradicate violence. The older, large DTOs tended to be hierarchical, often bound by familial ties and led by hard-to-capture cartel kingpins. Those DTOs have been replaced by flatter, more nimble organizations that tend to be loosely networked and to outsource certain aspects of trafficking. The various smaller organizations or splinter groups also have resisted norms that might limit violence. Rivalries among a greater number of organized crime "players"

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[111] See Patrick Corcoran, "How Mexico's Underworld Became Violent," *InSight Crime*, April 2, 2013. According to this article, constant organizational flux, which continues today, characterizes violence in Mexico. Patrick Corcoran, "Mexico Government Report Points to Ongoing Criminal Fragmentation," *InSight Crime*, April 14, 2015; Jane Esberg, "More Than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings," International Crisis Group, May 8, 2020.

[112] George W. Grayson, *The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an Instrument of Cartel Warfare* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014).

[113] Jane Esberg, "More Than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings," International Crisis Group, May 8, 2020. Esberg notes when small cartels disappear due to their special, localized niche or their intimidation of media to prevent public notice of their presence, they may become unseen and yet play "a large role in Mexico's rising rates of violence and hold sway over many people's lives."

[114] Patrick Corcoran, "Mexico Government Report Points to Ongoing Criminal Fragmentation," *InSight Crime*, April 14, 2015.

have led to chaotic violence and criminal impunity equivalent, according to some observers, to "open war zones."[115]

Open-source research about the traditional DTOs and their successors, as mentioned above, is more available than information about smaller factions. No steady, open-source information is available about most of the 200-400 current criminal groups. It is difficult to ascertain these groups' longevity or assess which qualify as major actors. The enduring major organizations and their successors are still operating, at times either cooperating or in internecine conflict with one another.

Profiles of Nine Major Criminal Groups Operating in Mexico

The major cartels operating in Mexico today are arranged below in terms of roughly when the organization rose to prominence. The identification of each as a "major" crime group or DTO draws from the *2020 National Drug Threat Assessment* published by DEA in March 2021.

Tijuana/Arellano Félix Organization

The Tijuana/Arellano Félix Organization (AFO) historically has controlled the important drug smuggling route between Baja California (Mexico) and Southern California.[116] The cartel is based in the border city of Tijuana. Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, a former police officer from Sinaloa, created a network of paramount drug traffickers that involved the Arellano Félix family, including Rafael Caro Quintero, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, and El Chapo Guzmán. The seven "Arellano Félix" brothers and four sisters inherited the AFO from their uncle, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, after his arrest in 1989 for the murder of DEA Special Agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena.[117]

The AFO was once one of two dominant criminal groups in Mexico, infamous for brutal control of the drug trade in Tijuana in the 1990s and early 2000s.[118] The other was the Juárez Cartel, also known as the Carrillo Fuentes Organization. The Mexican government and U.S. authorities took vigorous enforcement action against the AFO in the early 2000s, which saw the arrests or killings of the five brothers involved in the drug trade, the last of whom was captured in 2008.

In 2008, the AFO split into two competing factions when Eduardo Teodoro "El Teo" García Simental, an AFO lieutenant, broke from Fernando "El Ingeniero" Sánchez Arellano (the nephew of the Arellano Félix brothers who had taken over the group's management). García Simental formed another faction of the AFO, reportedly allied with the Sinaloa Cartel.[119] Tijuana became one of the most violent cities in Mexico, as other criminal groups sought to gain control of the

[115] See commentary in James Frederick, "Mexico's Journalists Speak Truth to Power, And Lose Their Lives for It," National Public Radio, September 4, 2021. See also Mary Beth Sheridan, "The War Next Door: Conflict in Mexico is Displacing Thousands," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2022.

[116] John Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations and Democratic Governance," in *The Politics of Crime in Mexico: Democratic Governance in a Security Trap* (Boulder: FirstForum Press, 2014), p. 121 (hereinafter Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations").

[117] Special Agent Camarena was an undercover DEA agent working in Mexico who was kidnapped, tortured, and killed in 1985. The Guadalajara-based Félix Gallardo network broke up in the wake of a U.S.-led investigation of its role in the murder.

[118] Mark Stevenson, "Mexico Arrests Suspected Drug Trafficker Named in U.S. Indictment," Associated Press, October 24, 2013.

[119] Steven Dudley, "Who Controls Tijuana?," *InSight Crime*, May 3, 2011. Sánchez Arellano took control in 2006 after the arrest of his uncle, Javier Arellano Félix.

profitable plaza (or trafficking route) between Tijuana and San Diego, CA, filling a power vacuum left by the arrests of the AFO's key leaders.

Some observers suggested the arrest of García Simental enabled the Sinaloa Cartel to gain control of the Tijuana-San Diego smuggling corridor.[120] Despite its weakened state, the AFO appeared to maintain control of the route through an agreement between Sánchez Arellano and Sinaloa's leadership, with Sinaloa and other criminal groups paying a fee to use the plaza.[121] DEA identified a nephew of the Arellano Félix brothers, Sánchez Arellano, as one of the six most influential traffickers in the region in 2013.[122] Following his arrest in 2014, Sánchez Arellano's mother, Enedina Arellano Félix, reportedly took over. It remains unclear if the AFO retains enough power through its trafficking and other crimes to continue to operate as a "tollgate" cartel.[123] Some analysts assess that the 2019 resurgence of violence in Tijuana and the spiking homicide rate in the nearby state of Southern Baja California are linked to the CJNG forging an alliance with remnants of the AFO (in direct competition with the Sinaloa DTO).

Tijuana was the city with the highest number of homicides in the country from 2018 to 2021. Due to the strategically important Baja California trafficking corridor, Tijuana's importance to crime organizations has grown. This arguably may empower the group or groups that control the key trafficking route, and the related law enforcement corruption, to facilitate cross-border smuggling. AFO may yet serve as either a useful ally or a significant obstacle to other trafficking groups. Mexican law enforcement has focused on Tijuana cartel splinter groups, known collectively as *AFO holdouts*. The holdouts appear to be playing a role in the Tijuana drug market, and these residual cells reportedly have been linked to homicides taking place in the Tijuana drug distribution area. Some analysts maintain that AFO also may be involved in a simmering Sinaloa Cartel internal conflict between two factions: the sons of El Chapo and the faction that is loyal to El Chapo's former co-leader and partner, "El Mayo," described below.[124]

Sinaloa DTO

Sinaloa, considered Mexico's most enduring criminal organization, comprises a network of smaller organizations. The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated each of Sinaloa's major leaders a kingpin in the early 2000s. At the top of the hierarchy was El Chapo Guzmán, listed in 2001; Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada García, listed in 2002; and Juan José "El Azul" Esparragoza Moreno, listed in 2003. In April 2009, then-President Barack Obama designated the Sinaloa Cartel as a drug kingpin entity pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (P.L.

[120] E. Eduardo Castillo and Elliot Spagat, "Mexico Arrests Leader of Tijuana Drug Cartel," Associated Press, June 24, 2014 (hereinafter, Castillo and Spagat, "Mexico Arrests Leader").

[121] Stratfor Worldview, "Mexico Security Memo: Torreon Leader Arrested, Violence in Tijuana," April 24, 2013, at http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/mexico-security-memo-torreon-leader-arrested-violence-tijuana#axzz37Bb5rDDg. In 2013, Nathan Jones at the Baker Institute for Public Policy asserted that the Sinaloa-AFO agreement allows those allied with the Sinaloa DTO, such as the CJNG, or otherwise not affiliated with Los Zetas, to use the plaza. For more information, see Nathan P. Jones, "Explaining the Slight Uptick in Violence in Tijuana," Baker Institute, September 2013.

[122] Castillo and Spagat, "Mexico Arrests Leader."

[123] A "tollgate" cartel takes a fee for providing access to a trafficking route; the fee permits entry through an area under its control for the shipment of contraband and sometimes legal goods. Mexican political analyst Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez of the Mexican firm Lantia Consulting defines a *toll-collector* cartel or DTO as one that derives much of the organization's income from charging fees to other DTOs using its transportation points across the U.S.-Mexican border.

[124] Justice in Mexico, "Remnants of Arellano-Félix Organization Attracting Renewed Interest in Baja California," March 11, 2021, at https://justiceinmexico.org/remnants-afo-baja-california/.

106-120).[125] Frequently regarded as the most powerful drug trafficking syndicate in the Western Hemisphere, the Sinaloa Cartel was an expansive network at its apex. By some estimates, Sinaloa had grown to control 40%-60% of Mexico's drug trade by 2012 and had annual earnings estimated to be as high as $3 billion.[126] DEA has long identified the Sinaloa Cartel as the primary trafficker of drugs to the United States. In 2020, DEA estimated the Sinaloa Cartel, active in 15 of 32 Mexican states, remained the Mexican crime organization with the largest international footprint.[127] Sinaloa leaders successfully corrupted public officials from the local to the national level inside Mexico.[128] The cartel's operations spanned more than 50 countries, according to several analysts and journalists.[129]

The corruption of top officials—especially in Mexico but also in Central America and Colombia—is the modus operandi of Sinaloa, which arguably was disinclined toward violence initially in favor of bribery to avoid greater state repression.[130] In 2008, a federation dominated by the Sinaloa Cartel (which included the Beltrán Leyva Organization and the Juárez Cartel) broke apart, leading to a battle among the former partners that sparked one of the most violent periods in recent Mexican history.

The United States has attempted to dismantle Sinaloa's operations by targeting individuals and financial entities associated with the cartel since its designation as a kingpin in 2009. The Sinaloa Cartel's most visible longtime leader, El Chapo Guzmán, escaped twice from Mexican prisons—in 2001 and again in 2015. The July 2015 escape, after his rearrest the year prior, was a major embarrassment to the Peña Nieto administration, and that incident may have convinced the Mexican government to extradite Guzmán rather than try him in Mexico after his recapture. After Guzmán's trusted deputy El Azul Esparragoza Moreno died (unconfirmed) in 2014, El Mayo Zambada continued his leadership role, at least for a major faction.[131] However, Sinaloa may operate with a more horizontal leadership structure than previously thought. Some observers dispute the extent to which Guzmán made key strategic decisions for Sinaloa. They contend that El Chapo was a figurehead whose arrest had little impact on Sinaloa's functioning, as he had ceded operational tasks to El Mayo and Esparragoza long before his arrest.[132]

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[125] Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, P.L. 106-120. At the same time, President Barack Obama identified two other Mexican DTOs as kingpins: La Familia Michoacana and Los Zetas. The kingpin designation is one of two major programs by the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposing sanctions on drug traffickers. Congress enacted the program sanctioning individuals and entities globally in 1999.

[126] For several years, cartel leader El Chapo Guzmán was ranked in *Forbes Magazine*'s listing of self-made billionaires. Patrick Radden Keefe, "Cocaine Incorporated," *New York Times*, June 15, 2012; Patrick Radden Keefe, "The Hunt for El Chapo," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.

[127] DEA, *NDTA 2020*.

[128] Patrick Radden Keefe, "Cocaine Incorporated," *New York Times*, June 15, 2012, at https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/magazine/how-a-mexican-drug-cartel-makes-its-billions.html.

[129] *InSight Crime*, "Sinaloa Cartel," last updated May 4, 2021; Cecilia Anesi and Giulio Rubino, "Inside the Sinaloa Cartel's Move Toward Europe," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, December 15, 2020.

[130] See, for example, description of the Sinaloa Cartel in Reynell Badillo and Victor J. Mijares, "Politicized Crime: Causes for the Discursive Politicisation of Organized Crime in Latin America," *Global Crime*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2021), pp. 312-335.

[131] Kyra Gurney, "Sinaloa Cartel Leader 'El Azul' Dead? 'El Mayo' Now in Control?," *InSight Crime*, June 9, 2014. Juan José Esparragoza Moreno supposedly died of a heart attack while recovering from injuries sustained in a car accident.

[132] Sinaloa operatives control certain territories, making up a decentralized network of bosses who conduct illicit activities through alliances with each other and local gangs. Local gangs throughout the region specialize in specific services for which they are they contracted by the Sinaloa criminal network. *Excélsior*, "Revelan Estructura y Enemigos de 'El Chapo'," March 26, 2014; Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations," p. 119.

In January 2017, the Mexican government extradited Guzmán to the United States. He was indicted in New York's Eastern District Federal Court in Brooklyn and tried from November 2018 to February 2019. His lawyers maintained he was not the head of the Sinaloa enterprise.[133] Nevertheless, a federal jury convicted him in February 2019 on 26 drug-related charges, including a murder conspiracy charge.[134] A U.S. district judge in July 2019 sentenced him to a life term in prison, with the addition of 30 years, and ordered him to pay $12.6 billion in forfeiture.[135]

Since El Chapo's most recent imprisonment, the Sinaloa Cartel reportedly has broken into four key factions. One is led by El Mayo; another by the brother of El Chapo, Aurelio "El Guano" Guzmán Loera; a third by a cofounder of the founding mega-syndicate, the Guadalajara Cartel; and a fourth by El Chapo's four sons, known collectively as "Los Chapitos."[136] In October 2019, Mexican security forces seized a son of Guzmán, until the Sinaloa Cartel quickly reacted with overwhelming force that brought chaos to Sinaloa State's capital, Culiacán. This reaction prompted police and military authorities (based on high-level governmental direction) to release him.

The Sinaloa Cartel appeared to face many challenges in 2020 and 2021. Sinaloa's rivals inside and outside the group saw a formidable drug empire built on the proceeds from trafficking South American cocaine and smuggling methamphetamine, marijuana, fentanyl, and heroin into the United States, and they arguably sought to supersede the once-hegemonic criminal syndicate. Some analysts have warned that Sinaloa remains powerful given its dominance internationally, its infiltration of the upper reaches of the Mexican government, and its resilient "networked alliance" structure.[137] Other analysts maintain that Sinaloa is in decline, citing its breakup into battling factions and its conflict with CJNG. Numerous authorities consider CJNG to be the most expansive cartel (although not necessarily the most powerful) inside Mexico (see **Figure 3**).[138]

Friction between two factions—Los Chapitos and the faction under El Mayo—was intense during 2021.[139] The U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned El Mayo in December 2021, and the State Department announced a reward of up to $15 million for information leading to his arrest or conviction. El Chapo's sons also are sanctioned as specially designated narcotics traffickers and are indicted on federal drug charges; the State Department has offered a reward of up to $5 million for each son.[140] DEA estimated in the 2020 NDTA that the Sinaloa Cartel demonstrated the greatest capacity to manufacture fentanyl in hidden laboratories; therefore, DEA estimates it is a major driver of fentanyl trafficked to the United States.

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[133] Alan Feuer, "El Chapo May Not Have Been Leader of Drug Cartel, Lawyers Say," *New York Times*, June 26, 2018.

[134] DEA, "Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, Sinaloa Cartel Leader, Sentenced to Life in Prison Plus 30 Years," press release, July 17, 2019.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "How the Sinaloa Cartel Rules," *Mexico Today*, April 4, 2022.

[137] For more background on alliance structure analysis, see, Jones et al., *Dark Network Alliance Structure*.

[138] See also, *InSight Crime*, "Territorial Presence of the CJNG," May 2020; Victoria Dittmar, "Why the Jalisco Cartel Does Not Dominate Mexico's Criminal Landscape," June 11, 2020. Published prior to CJNG's activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article may not capture CJNG's present status.

[139] See, for instance, 'The Fuse Is Already Lit': Officials Expect Full-Blown War to Replace Aging Sinaloa Cartel Kingpin 'El Mayo,'" *Mexico Daily News*, December 30, 2021; Sinaloa Cartel, Profile Update, *InSight Crime*, May 4, 2021.

[140] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Uses New Sanctions Authority to Combat Global Illicit Drug Trade," press release, December 15, 2021.

Juárez/Carrillo Fuentes Organization

Based in the border city of Ciudad Juárez in the central northern state of Chihuahua, the once-powerful Juárez Cartel controlled the smuggling corridor between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas, in the 1980s and 1990s.[141] By some accounts, the Juárez Cartel controlled at least half of all Mexican narcotics trafficking under the leadership of its founder, Amado Carrillo Fuentes. Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, Amado's brother, took over the leadership of the cartel when Amado died during plastic surgery in 1997 and reportedly led the Juárez organization until his arrest in October 2014.

In 2008, the Juárez Cartel broke from the Sinaloa federation, with which it had been allied since 2002.[142] The ensuing rivalry between the Juárez and Sinaloa Cartels helped turn Ciudad Juárez into one of the most violent cities in the world. Reportedly, of Mexicans displaced by drug-related violence inside Mexico between 2006 and 2010, more than 10% came from Ciudad Juárez, which had less than 1% of Mexico's population. As a result, the border city experienced a significant decline in its population due to individuals and families fleeing violence.[143]

Traditionally a major trafficker of both marijuana and cocaine, the Juárez Cartel also controlled opium cultivation and heroin production, according to the DEA. Between 2012 and 2013, violence dropped considerably, which some analysts attributed to both police actions and former President Calderón's socioeconomic program *Todos Somos Juárez*, or We Are All Juárez.[144] Some analysts posited Sinaloa won its battle to dominate the city as a drug trafficking route, leading to its relatively peaceful and unchallenged control for some years, despite the Juárez Cartel's continued presence in the surrounding state.[145]

However, the transit route between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, TX, has experienced regular violence with the rise in killings on the Mexican side of the border since 2016 (see **Figure 4**). Some observers consider the violence largely a proxy battle for control between Sinaloa and CJNG, whereas others contend the Juárez Cartel split and began fighting for its own control of Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua.[146] Although not as expansive as other Mexican cartels, Juárez and its powerful affiliate, La Linea, retain wide influence in the border state of Chihuahua.

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[141] Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations," p. 121.

[142] Some analysts trace the origins of the split to a personal feud between El Chapo Guzmán of the Sinaloa DTO and former ally Vicente Carrillo Fuentes. In 2004, Guzmán allegedly ordered the killing of Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes, one of Vicente's brothers. Guzmán's son, Edgar, was killed in May 2008, allegedly on orders from Carrillo Fuentes. See Alfredo Corchado, "Juárez Drug Violence Not Likely to Go Away Soon, Authorities Say," *Dallas Morning News*, May 17, 2010.

[143] For an in-depth narrative of the conflict in Juárez and its aftermath, see Steven Dudley, "Juárez: After the War," *InSight Crime*, February 13, 2013. For a discussion of out-migration from the city due to drug-related violence, see Viridiana Rios Contreras, "The Role of Drug-Related Violence and Extortion in Promoting Mexican Migration: Unexpected Consequences of a Drug War," *Latin America Research Review*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2014).

[144] Calderón launched *Todos Somos Juárez* and sent the Mexican military into Ciudad Juárez in an effort to drive out DTO proxies and operatives. "Calderón Defiende la Estrategia en Ciudad Juárez en Publicación de Harvard," *CNN Mexico*, February 17, 2013.

[145] See Steven Dudley, "How Juárez's Police, Politicians Picked Winners of Drug War," *InSight Crime*, February 13, 2013.

[146] Associated Press, "El Chapo's Sons vs. 'El Mencho': Mexico Sees Rising Cartel Bloodshed," March 19, 2020. See also Victoria Dittmar, "The Three Criminal Fronts Sparking Violence in Sonora, Mexico," *InSight Crime*, January 7, 2022.

This position on the border facilitates drug smuggling of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, according to the 2020 NDTA.[147]

Gulf Cartel

Based in the border city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, with operations in other Mexican states on the Gulf side of Mexico, the Gulf Cartel was a transnational smuggling operation with agents in Central and South America.[148] The Gulf Cartel was the main competitor challenging Sinaloa for trafficking routes in the early 2000s, but it now battles its former enforcement wing, Los Zetas, and Zeta Cartel splinter groups over territory in northeastern Mexico.

The Gulf Cartel reportedly has split into several competing gangs. Some analysts no longer consider it a whole entity, and one argued in 2018 that it had become so fragmented that its original factions were fighting.[149] Notorious Gulf Cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén reportedly corrupted the elite Mexican military forces known as Los Zetas to become his hired assassins. Gulf remained one of the most powerful Mexican DTOs until Mexican authorities arrested Cárdenas in 2003, though he continued to run his drug enterprise from prison until his extradition to the United States in 2007.[150]

Tensions between the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas culminated in their split in 2010. Antonio "Tony Tormenta" Cárdenas Guillén, Osiel's brother, was killed that year, and leadership of the Gulf Cartel went to a high-level Gulf lieutenant, Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sánchez, also known as "El Coss," until his arrest in 2012.

Mexican federal forces identified and targeted a dozen Gulf and Zeta bosses they believed responsible for the wave of violence in Tamaulipas in 2014.[151] An analyst said in 2014 that the structures of both the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas were decimated by the federal action, do not communicate with each other, and take on new names.[152]

From 2014 through 2016, Tamaulipas state reported daily kidnappings, daytime shootings, and burned-down bars and restaurants in towns and cities in many parts of the state, such as the port city of Tampico. Fragmented cells of the Gulf Cartel and of Los Zetas have expanded into other criminal operations, such as fuel theft, kidnapping, and widespread extortion. In the 2020 NDTA, the DEA maintained that the Gulf Cartel, which traditionally focused on the cocaine and marijuana trade but now specializes in heroin and cocaine, has its "power base" in Tamaulipas and the central state of Zacatecas, and may have alliances in some states with CJNG.[153] Factional fights continue, however, and the Mexican Army continues its efforts to take out Gulf leaders.[154]

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[147] *2020 NDTA*, March 2021.

[148] Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations," p. 120.

[149] Scott Stewart, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2018," Stratfor Worldview, February 1, 2018.

[150] George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

[151] Jorge Monroy, "Caen Tres Lideres de Los Zetas y Cartel de Golfo," *El Economista*, June 18, 2014. In June 2014, Mexican marines captured three of those identified.

[152] CRS interview with Eduardo Guerrero, June 2014. "Balkanization," or decentralization of the structure of the organization, does not necessarily indicate that a criminal group is weak but simply indicates that the group lacks a strong central leadership. Reportedly, Tamaulipas news outlets became among the most threatened by DTO cells, so they were reluctant to report on criminal violence, its sources, and its consequences.

[153] *2020 NDTA*, March 2021.

[154] Santiago Caicedo, "State Police: Mexican Gulf Cartel Leader among those Killed in Deadly Matamoros Shooting," KRGV, Channel 5 News, October 23, 2021.

Los Zetas and Cartel del Noreste

Los Zetas originally consisted of about 30 former elite airborne special forces members of the Mexican army who defected to the Gulf Cartel and became its hired assassins.[155] Although Zeta members are part of a prominent transnational criminal syndicate, their main skillset is not drug smuggling but organized violence. They evolved to form an organization of their own lucrative illicit activities such as fuel theft, extortion, human smuggling, piracy, arms smuggling, and kidnapping.[156]

Los Zetas held a significant presence in several Mexican states on the Gulf side of the country and extended their reach to Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua) and some Pacific states in the beginning years of the second decade of the 2000s. They also operated in Central and South America. More aggressive than other groups, Los Zetas maintained control of territory by publicly displaying and posting on social media mutilated bodies to intimidate Mexican security forces, the local citizenry, and rival organizations. Sometimes smaller gangs and organizations use the "Zeta" name or brand to tap into the benefits of the Zeta reputation.[157]

Unlike many other TCOs in Mexico, Los Zetas have appeared less inclined to attempt to win local populations' support in the territory in which they operate. They are linked to a number of massacres, such as the 2011 firebombing of a casino in Monterrey that killed 53 people and the 2011 torture and mass execution of 193 migrants who were traveling through northern Mexico by bus.[158] Los Zetas are known to kill those who cannot pay extortion fees or who refuse to work for them, often targeting migrants.[159]

In 2012, Mexican marines killed longtime Zeta leader Heriberto Lazcano (alias "El Lazca"), a cofounder of Los Zetas, in a shootout in the northern state of Coahuila.[160] The capture of his successor, Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales (alias "Z-40"), in 2013 by Mexican federal authorities was a second blow to the group. Some analysts date the beginning of Los Zetas' loss of coherence as a single cartel to Lazcano's killing. According to Mexico's former attorney general, federal government efforts against the cartels through April 2015 hit Los Zetas particularly hard, removing more than 30 leaders.[161]

Los Zetas are known for their dominance in various criminal activities, such as fuel smuggling. They siphoned off billions of dollars of oil annually from Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex), Mexico's state oil company.[162] In 2017, the Atlantic Council released a report estimating that Los

[155] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), pp. 96-98.

[156] Bailey, "Drug Trafficking Organizations," p. 120; CRS interview with Alejandro Hope, July 2014.

[157] George Grayson, *The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an Instrument of Cartel Warfare* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), p. 9.

[158] Ibid.

[159] According to Grayson's book, Los Zetas also are believed to kill members of law enforcement officials' families in revenge for action taken against the organization, reportedly even targeting families of fallen military men.

[160] Will Grant, "Heriberto Lazcano: The Fall of a Mexican Drug Lord," BBC News, October 13, 2012.

[161] *Southernpulse.info*, "Los Zetas Are the Criminal Organization Hardest Hit by the Mexican Government," May 13, 2015.

[162] Reuters, "Mexico Fuel Theft Crackdown Sparks Shortages, Puts Government on Defensive," January 7, 2019.

Zetas controlled about 40% of the market in stolen oil.[163] By early 2018, oil theft was costing the government oil company more than $1.6 billion annually.[164]

One author reviewed the history of Los Zetas and its split into major factions.[165] This evolution influenced the organization's once-coherent prospects, so that its power declined from the peak of its dominance in 2011 and 2012.[166] A prominent faction is Cartel del Noreste (Northeast Cartel), a rebranded version of the traditional core of Los Zetas. One scholar characterized how Los Zetas as succeeding in spinning off powerful franchises or cells after leadership decapitation.[167]

According to the 2020 NDTA, Los Zetas and Cartel del Noreste continue to traffic a range of drugs, including heroin and cocaine, through distribution hubs in Laredo, Dallas, and New Orleans.[168] According to one analyst, the Zetas "model" of extreme violence to achieve dominance continues to be widely emulated.[169] Press reports in March 2022 indicated that gunfire in Nuevo Laredo resulted from the arrest of a Cartel del Noreste leader, and that during the violence U.S. consulate buildings were hit.[170]

Beltrán Leyva Organization

Before 2008, the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO) was part of the Sinaloa federation and controlled access to the U.S. border in Mexico's Sonora State. The Beltrán Leyva brothers developed close ties with Sinaloa head El Chapo Guzmán and his family, along with other Sinaloa-based top leadership. The January 2008 arrest of BLO's leader, Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, through intelligence reportedly provided by Guzmán triggered BLO's split from the Sinaloa Cartel.[171] The two organizations have remained bitter rivals since.

BLO suffered a series of setbacks at the hands of the Mexican security forces, beginning with the 2009 killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, followed closely by the arrest of Carlos Beltrán Levya. In 2010, the organization broke up when the remaining brother, Héctor Beltrán Leyva, took the remnants of BLO and rebranded it as the South Pacific (*Pacifico Sur*) Cartel. Another top lieutenant, Edgar "La Barbie" Valdez Villarreal, took a faction loyal to him and formed the Independent Cartel of Acapulco, which he led until his arrest in 2010.[172] The South Pacific Cartel

[163] Ian M. Ralby, *Downstream Oil Theft: Global Modalities, Trends, and Remedies*, Atlantic Council, January 2017.

[164] *Markets Insider*, "Mexico's Drug Cartels Are Stealing Oil Again," July 17, 2021.

[165] Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017).

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid.

[168] DEA, *NDTA 2020*.

[169] Steven Dudley, "The Zetas' Model of Organized Crime is Leaving Mexico in Ruins," *InSight Crime*, August 30, 2021.

[170] Associated Press, "Mexican Border Shootings Close US Crossing After Capo Arrest," March 15, 2022.

[171] See *InSight Crime* profile, "Beltrán Leyva Organization." The profile suggests that Guzmán gave authorities information on Alfredo Beltrán Leyva to secure the release of Guzmán's son from prison.

[172] Edgar Valdez is an American-born smuggler from Laredo, TX, and allegedly started his career in the United States dealing marijuana. His nickname is "La Barbie" due to his fair hair and eyes. Nicholas Casey and José de Córdoba, "Alleged Drug Kingpin Is Arrested in Mexico," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2010. La Barbie, a former Beltrán Leyva Organization operative and Sinaloa Cartel ally, was arrested in Mexico in 2010 and was extradited to the United States in 2015. After initially pleading not guilty, he eventually reached a plea deal with U.S. prosecutors and in June 2018 was sentenced to nearly 50 years in prison. Parker Asmann, "Was Mexico Cartel Enforcer 'La Barbie' a U.S. Informant?" *InSight Crime*, June 15, 2020, at https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-la-barbie-informant/.

appeared to retake the name Beltrán Leyva Organization and achieved renewed prominence under Hector Beltrán Leyva's leadership until his arrest in 2014.

BLO splinter organizations have arisen since 2010, such as the *Guerreros Unidos* and *Los Rojos* (see Los Rojos section, below), among at least five others with roots in BLO. The Guerreros Unidos traffics cocaine as far north as Chicago but reportedly operates primarily in the central and Pacific states of Guerrero, México, and Morelos. The Guerreros Unidos, according to authorities in the Peña Nieto government, murdered 43 Mexican teacher trainees in Ayotzinapa, who were handed to them by local authorities in Guerrero, and then burned their bodies.[173]

Like other TCOs, BLO was believed to have infiltrated the upper levels of the Mexican government for at least part of its history, but whatever reach it once had likely declined significantly after Mexican authorities arrested many of its leaders. According to the NDTA published annually by DEA, BLO splinter factions rely on loose alliances with the CJNG, the Juárez Cartel, and elements of Los Zetas to move drugs across the border. Those drugs include heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana.[174]

La Familia Michoacana

Based originally in the Pacific state of Michoacán, La Familia Michoacana (LFM) traces its roots to the 1980s. Formerly aligned with Los Zetas before the group split from the Gulf Cartel, LFM announced its intent to operate independently from Los Zetas in 2006, declaring that LFM's mission was to protect Michoacán from drug traffickers, including its new enemies, Los Zetas.[175] From 2006 to 2010, LFM acquired notoriety for its use of extreme, symbolic violence, military tactics gleaned from Los Zetas and a pseudo-ideological or religious justification for its existence.[176] LFM members reportedly donated food, medical care, schools, and other social services to benefit the poor in rural communities to project a populist "Robin Hood" image.

By 2010, however, LFM played a less prominent role. In November 2010, LFM reportedly called for a truce with the Mexican government and announced it would disband.[177] A month later, spiritual leader and cofounder Nazario "El Más Loco" Moreno González was reportedly killed, although authorities claimed his body was stolen.[178] The body was never recovered, and Moreno González reappeared in another shootout with Mexican federal police in 2014, after which his death was officially confirmed.[179] Moreno González had been nurturing the development of a new criminal organization that emerged in early 2011, calling itself the Knights Templar and claiming to be a successor of LFM.[180]

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[173] According to the profile of Guerreros Unidos on the *InSight Crime* website, an alleged leader of the group is the brother-in-law of the former mayor of Iguala, the town where the 43 students disappeared in 2014 and likely died.

[174] *2020 NDTA*, March 2021.

[175] *Nexos*, Alejandro Suverza, "El Evangelio Según La Familia," January 1, 2009. For more on its early history, see *InSight Crime*'s profile on La Familia Michoacana (LFM).

[176] In 2006, LFM gained notoriety when it rolled five severed heads allegedly of rival criminals across a discotheque dance floor in Uruapan. LFM was known for leaving signs (*narcomantas*) on corpses and at crime scenes that referred to LFM actions as "divine justice." William Finnegan, "Silver or Lead," *New Yorker*, May 31, 2010.

[177] Stratfor Worldview, "Mexican Drug Wars: Bloodiest Year to Date," December 20, 2010.

[178] Dudley Althaus, "Ghost of 'The Craziest One' Is Alive in Mexico," *InSight Crime*, June 11, 2013.

[179] Mark Stevenson and E. Eduardo Castillo, "Mexico Cartel Leader Thrived by Playing Dead," Associated Press, March 10, 2014.

[180] The Knights Templar was purported to be founded and led by Servando "La Tuta" Gómez, a former schoolteacher and a lieutenant to Moreno Gonzáles. However, after Moreno González's faked demise, taking advantage of his death in the eyes of Mexican authorities, Moreno González and Gómez founded the Knights Templar together in the wake of

Though officially disbanded, LFM remained in operation, even after the 2011 arrest of leader José de Jesús Méndez Vargas (alias "El Chango"), who allegedly took over after Moreno González's disappearance.[181] Remaining cells of LFM reportedly remain active in trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion in Guerrero and Mexico States, especially in the working-class suburbs around Mexico City.[182] Observers report that LFM was largely driven out of Michoacán by the Knights Templar, although a group calling itself the New Family Michoacán (*La Nueva Familia Michoacana*) reportedly has been active in parts of Guerrero and Michoacán.

LFM has specialized in methamphetamine production and smuggling, along with some trafficking of other synthetic drugs. It has also been known to traffic marijuana and cocaine and to tax and regulate heroin production. DEA maintains that, in some cases, LFM has developed ties to the CJNG. According to a study of alliances in the current Mexican crime landscape conducted by Rice University's Baker Institute for Policy Studies, LFM derivative groups and others of the Tierra Caliente region have alliances with either of the center poles of the two major TCOs, CJNG or Sinaloa, which the study described as dense and complex.[183]

Los Rojos

As noted above, Los Rojos split from the Beltran Leyva Organization in 2010. Los Rojos has operated primarily in Guerrero and has relied heavily on kidnapping and extortion for revenue as well as trafficking cocaine, although some analysts have disputed the scope of its drug trade involvement. In early 2022, a Mexican judge handed down a 48-year sentence to eight Los Rojos gang members for kidnapping and forced disappearances (breaking laws regarding burials and exhumations).[184] DEA maintains that Los Rojos operates in Guerrero, Morelos, and other Mexican states. Although this cartel is identified as a major TCO in DEA's annual NDTA published in March 2021, some analysts contend it is not a significant drug trafficking organization.

Cártel Jalisco Nuevo Generación

Originally known as the Zeta Killers, the CJNG made its first appearance in 2011 with a roadside display of the bodies of 35 alleged members of Los Zetas. The group is based in Jalisco State with operations in central Mexico, including the states of Colima, Michoacán, México, Guerrero, and Guanajuato.[185] It has grown into a dominant force in the states of the Tierra Caliente, including parts of Guerrero, Michoacán, and the state of Mexico. The CJNG has early roots in the Milenio Cartel, which was active before 2010 in the Tierra Caliente region.[186]

The CJNG reportedly served as an enforcement group for the Sinaloa cartel until the summer of 2013.[187] Analysts and Mexican authorities have suggested the split between Sinaloa and the

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a dispute with LFM leader José de Jesús Méndez Vargas, who stayed with LFM. See Falko A. Ernst, "Seeking a Place in History—Nazario Moreno's Narco Messiah," *InSight Crime*, March 13, 2014.

[181] Adriana Gómez Licón, "Mexico Nabs Leader of Cult-Like La Familia Cartel," Associated Press, June 21, 2011.

[182] CRS interview with Dudley Althaus, June 2014.

[183] For more background, see Jones et al., *Dark Network Alliance Structure*.

[184] Marguerite Cawley, "Murder Spike in Guerrero, Mexico Points to Criminal Power Struggle," *InSight Crime*, May 30, 2014; Associated Press, "Mexico Nabs Drug Gang Leader in State of Guerrero," May 17, 2014; "Judge Hands Out 48-Year Prison Term to 8 Members of Los Rojos Cartel," February 22, 2022.

[185] *El Siglo de Torreón*, "Se Pelean el Estado de México 4 Carteles," March 2, 2014; CRS interview with Dudley Althaus, 2014.

[186] Stratfor Worldview, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2017," February 3, 2017.

[187] Reportedly, the CJNG's leadership was originally composed of former associates of slain Sinaloa DTO leader

CJNG is one of the many indications of a general fragmentation of crime groups in Mexico. The Mexican military delivered a blow to the CJNG with the July 2013 capture of its leader's deputy, Victor Hugo "El Tornado" Delgado Renteria. He was replaced by the current leader, Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as El Mencho. In January 2014, the Mexican government arrested El Mencho's son, Rubén "El Menchito" Oseguera, believed to be the CJNG's second-in-command. However, El Menchito, who was released by Mexican judges twice, was rearrested by Mexican authorities and later extradited to the United States in February 2020.[188]

In 2015, the Mexican government declared the CJNG one of the most dangerous cartels in the country. In 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury echoed the Mexican government when it described the group as one of the world's "most prolific and violent drug trafficking organizations."[189] According to some analysts, the CJNG has operations throughout the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The group is allegedly responsible for distributing cocaine and methamphetamine with its significant international reach, which was described as early as 2016 as "10,000 kilometers of the Pacific coast in a route that extends from the Southern Cone to the border of the United States and Canada."[190]

The CJNG built its dominance internationally first through extending its presence through a rapid expansion inside Mexico. In 2016, many analysts maintained the CJNG controlled a territory equivalent to almost half of Mexico. The group has battled Los Zetas and Gulf Cartel factions in Tabasco, Veracruz, and Guanajuato, as well as the Sinaloa federation in the Baja Peninsula and Chihuahua.[191] The CJNG's ambitious expansion campaign was characterized by high levels of violence, particularly in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana.[192] The DTO also has been linked to several mass graves in southwestern Mexico and was responsible for shooting down a Mexican army helicopter in 2015, the first successful takedown of a military asset of its kind in Mexico.[193]

The CJNG's battle to dominate the key ports on both the Pacific and the Gulf Coasts have allowed it to consolidate important components of the global narcotics supply chain. In particular, the CJNG maintains reported control over the ports of Veracruz, Manzanillo, and Lázaro Cárdenas, which has given the group access to precursor chemicals that flow into Mexico from China and other parts of Latin America.[194] As a result, according to some analysts, the CJNG has pursued an aggressive growth strategy underwritten by U.S. demand for Mexican methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl.[195] According to reporting in 2022, the CJNG, whose base of operations is Jalisco State, "holds" the coastal tourist city of Puerto Vallarta, an important

Ignacio "Nacho" Coronel, who operated his Sinaloa faction in Jalisco until he was killed by security forces in July 2010.

[188] Juan Carlos Huerta Vázquez, "'El Menchito', un Desafío para la PGR," *Proceso*, January 15, 2016; Andrew Denney, "'El Menchito,' Son of Feared Mexican Drug Kingpin, Extradited to U.S.," *New York Post*, February 1, 2020.

[189] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Individuals Supporting Powerful Mexico-Based Drug Cartels," press release, October 27, 2016.

[190] Luis Alonso Pérez, "Mexico's Jalisco Cartel—New Generation: From Extinction to World Domination," *InSight Crime* and *Animal Político*, December 26, 2016.

[191] Stratfor Worldview, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2017," February 3, 2017.

[192] Deborah Bonello, "After Decade-Long Drug War, Mexico Needs New Ideas," *InSight Crime 2016 GameChangers: Tracking the Evolution of Organized Crime in the Americas*, January 4, 2017 (hereinafter Bonello, "After Decade-Long Drug War").

[193] Angel Rabasa et al., *Counterwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks*, RAND Corporation, 2017.

[194] Stratfor Worldview, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2017," February 3, 2017.

[195] Bonello, "After Decade-Long Drug War."

node of its synthetic drug trafficking operations and source of revenues from extortion, money laundering, and human trafficking.[196] In addition, the CJNG and other DTOs are frequently reported to be imposing "extortion rackets" on legal agricultural products, such as limes and avocados.[197]

Despite leadership losses, the CJNG has extended its geographic reach and maintained its own cohesion while exploiting the infighting among factions of the Sinaloa organization. It is considered an extremely powerful cartel, with a presence in 27 of 32 Mexican states in 2020. Its reputation for extreme and intimidating violence continues. The previously described daylight ambush of Mexico City Chief of Police Omar García Harfuch in late June 2020 was preceded by publicized threats that targeted him and the Jalisco State governor.[198] Press reports indicate the CJNG's attacks on Jalisco public officials exceeded 100 murders, with victims including lawmakers; federal, state, and local police; soldiers; and, allegedly, Jalisco's minister of tourism.

DEA considers the CJNG a top U.S. threat and Mexico's best-armed criminal group. It has offered a $10 million reward for information leading to the arrest of El Mencho, who is believed to be hiding in the mountains of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Colima. He is a former police officer who once served time for heroin trafficking in California. The CJNG was the target of a major DEA operation in March 2020, which resulted in some 600 arrests.[199] While searching for El Mencho in late 2021, Mexican authorities arrested his wife, Rosalinda González Valencia; the arrest was presumed to be an indication of continued efforts to maintain pressure on the CJNG leader by the López Obrador government. She is under investigation for her role in money laundering.

Fragmentation, Competition, and Diversification

TCOs are more fragmented and more competitive than in the past 10-20 years. Analysts disagree about the extent of cartel fragmentation and about whether the smaller organizations will be easier to dismantle. In response to the Calderón government's strong anti-drug efforts, fragmentation that began in 2010 and accelerated in 2011 brought new actors into the criminal environment, such as Los Zetas and the Knights Templar. By 2018, an array of smaller organizations was active, and some of the once-small groups, such as the CJNG, had filled the space left after other criminal groups had been disrupted by arrests, deaths, and internal dynamics.

As noted above, several flagrant incidents of violence involving the DTOs in Sinaloa State, the Tierra Caliente region, and the Mexican border states (such as in late 2019) were committed by fragments of formerly cohesive criminal groups. Some gangs and small DTOs burn brightly for a few years and then disappear. The ephemeral lifespan of some DTOs can unsettle the power

[196] Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "Booming Mexico Resort Town of Puerto Vallarta Is Hostage to CJNG," *InSight Crime*, February 22, 2022.

[197] Emily Green, "A Drug Cartel War Is Making Lime Prices Skyrocket," *VICE*, January 31, 2022; Mark Stevenson, "Mexico's Avocados Face Fallout from Violence, Deforestation," Associated Press, February 16, 2022; María Luisa Paúl, "United States Lifts Mexican Avocado Ban—Averting What Could Have Been a Costly Crisis," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2022.

[198] Marco Fragoso, "Omar García Harfuch Revela que Sabía de su Atentado Meses Atrás," *24 Horas*, March 30, 2022, at https://www.24-horas.mx/2022/03/30/omar-garcia-harfuch-revela-que-sabia-de-su-atentado-meses-atras-2/.

[199] Juan Montes and José de Córdoba, "Cartel Becomes Top Mexico Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 2020; Sieff, "Mexico's Bold Jalisco Cartel." See also U.S. Department of Justice, "DEA-Led Operation Nets More Than 600 Arrests Targeting Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación," press release, March 11, 2020.

balance and equilibrium among remaining DTOs. These shifts reorder allegiances and influence the stability of the criminal environment.

Some analysts contend that the diversification of the DTOs' criminal repertoire, and their evolution into poly-crime outfits, may be evidence of organizational vitality and growth. Other analysts maintain that diversification signals that U.S. and Mexican drug enforcement measures are cutting into profits from drug trafficking, or that the diversification efforts are a response to shifting U.S. drug consumption patterns. Changes in the illegal drug markets in the United States and Canada from marijuana legalization; increased demand for opioids, especially synthetic opioids; and changing patterns of use of methamphetamine and other drugs have contributed to the DTOs' continuing evolution.[200] The cartels' broad reach and control of large territories inside Mexico, as well as their production of illicit drugs, has been termed "alarming" by the U.S. State Department.[201]

Outlook

Successive Mexican governments have sought to diminish the extent and character of the DTOs' activity from a national security threat to a law-and-order problem. If this is accomplished, domestic security enforcement responsibilities may be returned from the military to Mexican law enforcement. President López Obrador continued the militarized security strategy of the two Mexican administrations before him. He authorized the Mexican armed forces to continue their role in domestic law enforcement through the remainder of his tenure. The National Guard, which President López Obrador began deploying in mid-2019, has had fewer abuse allegations than the military under the prior Peña Nieto government, but the militarized strategy to combat the TCOs has not effectively weakened the crime groups.[202]

The continued revelation of high-level corruption linked to the crime groups and their apparent control of Mexican territory demonstrates that the TCOs are more deeply entrenched than ever. Moreover, in 2022, U.S.-Mexico law enforcement cooperation remains weaker than during the previous 15 years.[203] The López Obrador government faces some allegations of DTO-related corruption of public officials, its party's politicians, and members of the nation's police forces. The growing diversity of cartel criminality, the continuing high global demands for narcotics, and weak cooperation between Mexican and U.S. law enforcement all point to a continued TCO threat to both the United States and Mexico.

Despite DEA activities becoming more limited inside Mexico, the DEA has offered rewards of up to $45 million for information about the top leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel.[204] On May 11-12, 2022,

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[200] Morris Panner, "Latin American Organized Crime's New Business Model," *ReVista*, vol. 11, no. 2 (winter 2012). The author comments, "the business is moving away from monolithic cartels toward a series of mercury-like mini-cartels. Whether diversification is a growth strategy or a survival strategy in the face of shifting narcotics consumption patterns, it is clear that organized crime is pursuing a larger, more extensive agenda." U.S. Senate, et al., *Commission on Combatting Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, Final Report*, February 2022.

[201] State Department, *2022 INCSR*.

[202] Testimony of Maureen Meyer, in U.S. Congress, House Committee of Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade, *Strengthening Security and Rule of Law in Mexico*, hearings, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., January 15, 2020; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Crime and Anti-Crime Policies in Mexico in 2022: A Bleak Outlook," Brookings (blog), January 29, 2022.

[203] Air Force General Glen D. VanHerck, Commander, U.S. Northern Command; Navy Admiral Craig S. Fuller, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, USNORTHCOM-USSOUTHCOM Joint Press Briefing, March 16, 2021; Mary Beth Sheridan, "The War Next Door: Conflict in Mexico is Displacing Thousands," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2022.

[204] Telemundo, "DEA Launches New Reward Campaign Targeting Cartel Leaders," May 11, 2022.

the Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs traveled to Mexico to work with Mexican authorities to restore and strengthen joint efforts to reduce the flow of dangerous narcotics, including fentanyl, from Mexico and to improve border security.[205]

Many analysts have questioned the utility of the kingpin strategy, or a high-value targeting approach to enforcement, to combat the TCOs or reduce TCO-perpetrated violence.[206] The kingpin strategy has often been encouraged by the U.S. government and has been adopted by Mexican officials in different administrations. López Obrador initially rejected (but then sporadically embraced) a kingpin strategy.[207] Some analysts endorse a modified strategy that would target the middle operational layer of each major criminal group to handicap the groups' regeneration capacity.[208]

Structural factors plaguing Mexico's struggle for security and stability include persistent criminal impunity, entrenched corruption, and consistent demand for illegal drugs by U.S. and European drug users. The demise of the traditional kingpins, who had long associations, often familial, and were understood to have ruled their cartel armies in a hierarchical fashion from a central position, has led to smaller, highly fractured, competitive, and often ultra-violent groups.[209] Two causes of the current violence may be erosion of Sinaloa Cartel's dominance and the heightened competition to profit from increasing production and distribution of heroin, synthetic opioids, and methamphetamine. Some observers remain convinced of the capacity of both the Sinaloa organization and its primary competitor, the CJNG, to retain significant power by backing their well-established bribery and corruption networks with their demonstrated capacity for violence.[210]

[205] U.S. Department of State, "Assistant Secretary Robinson's Travel to Mexico," media note, May 10, 2022.

[206] See *Latin America Daily Briefing*, "The Failures of the Kingpin Strategy in Mexico," May 5, 2022; Calderón et al, *Organized Crime and Violence*, October 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels," last updated February 26, 2021.

[207] Mary Beth Sheridan, "Violent Criminal Groups Are Eroding Mexico's Authority and Claiming More Territory," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2020.

[208] See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, *AMLO's Security Policy: Creative Ideas, Tough Reality*, Brookings Institution, March 2019.

[209] Patrick Corcoran, "Why Are More People Being Killed in Mexico in 2019?," *InSight Crime*, August 8, 2019.

[210] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "How the Sinaloa Cartel Rules," *Mexico Today*, April 4, 2022.

Appendix. Government Efforts to Combat Drug Trafficking Organizations

The relationship of Mexico's drug traffickers to the government and to one another is rapidly evolving, and any snapshot (such as the one provided in this report) must be continually adjusted to current realities. In the early 20th century, Mexico was a source of marijuana and heroin trafficked to the United States; by the 1940s, Mexican drug smugglers were notorious in the United States. The growth and entrenchment in Mexico of drug trafficking networks occurred during a period of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed the country for 71 years. During that period, the government was centralized and hierarchical. To a large degree, the PRI government tolerated and protected some drug production and trafficking in certain regions of the country, even though it did not generally tolerate crime.[211]

Other transformations of the drug trade took place during the 1980s and early 1990s. As Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) were forcibly broken up, Mexican traffickers gradually took over the highly profitable traffic in cocaine to the United States. Intense U.S. government enforcement efforts led to the shutdown of the Caribbean trafficking route used by the Colombians. Colombian DTOs subcontracted the trafficking of Andean cocaine to the Mexican DTOs, which they paid in cocaine rather than cash. These already-strong Mexican organizations gradually took over the cocaine trafficking business, evolving from being couriers for the Colombians to being the wholesalers they are today.

Numerous accounts maintain that for many years the Mexican government largely pursued a policy to accommodate the DTOs. Under this framework, arrests and eradication of drug crops took place, but with widespread corruption; a system "characterized by a working relationship between Mexican authorities and drug lords" prevailed through the 1990s.[212] Mexico is a longtime recipient of U.S. counterdrug assistance, but cooperation was limited between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s due to U.S. distrust of Mexican officials and Mexican sensitivity about U.S. involvement in the country's internal affairs.

As Mexican political power decentralized and the push toward democratic pluralism began, the system's stability started to fray in the 1990s, first at the local level and then nationally, with the election of National Action Party candidate Vicente Fox as president in 2000.[213] The process of democratization upended the equilibrium that had developed between state actors (such as the Federal Security Directorate, which oversaw domestic security from 1947 to 1985) and organized crime. No longer were certain officials able to ensure drug traffickers' impunity to the same degree and to regulate competition among Mexican DTOs for drug trafficking routes. To a large extent, DTO violence directed at the government appears to be an attempt to reestablish impunity, whereas the inter-cartel violence seems to be an attempt to establish dominance over specific drug trafficking routes. The intra-DTO violence (or violence inside the organizations) reflects a reaction to suspected betrayals and the competition to succeed killed or arrested leaders.

[211] Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, *Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies*, University of California-San Diego, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, working paper 10-01, 2010, p. 5.

[212] Francisco E. González, "Mexico's Drug Wars Get Brutal," *Current History*, February 2009.

[213] Shannon O'Neil, "The Real War in Mexico: How Democracy Can Defeat the Drug Cartels," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009).

As Mexico's DTOs rose to dominate the U.S. drug markets in the 1990s, the business became even more lucrative. This shift raised the financial stakes, which encouraged the use of violence in Mexico to protect and promote market share. The violent struggles among DTOs is now over strategic routes and warehouses where drugs are consolidated before entering the United States, reflecting these higher stakes.

The number of homicides and Mexico's homicide rate began to grow substantially in 2007 and remain at elevated levels. In Mexico, the sharp rise in absolute numbers of deaths in the past 14 years is unprecedented, even compared with other Latin American countries with high rates of crime and homicides.[214] This increase not reversed during the years of bilateral efforts under the Mérida Initiative, according to several observers.[215]

Former Mexican President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) initiated an aggressive campaign against criminal groups, especially the large DTOs. He made it a central administration policy that he sustained throughout his term in office. His government sent several thousand Mexican military troops and federal police to combat the organizations in "hot spots" around the country. His government made some dramatic arrests, but few of the captured kingpins were convicted. President Calderón and President Bush developed much closer U.S.-Mexican security cooperation and launched the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral anticrime assistance program, in 2008. The initiative initially focused on providing Mexico with hardware, such as planes, scanners, and other equipment, to combat the DTOs. The Mexican government significantly increased extraditions to the United States, with a majority of the suspects wanted by the U.S. government on drug trafficking and related charges. The number of extraditions grew through 2012 and remained steady during President Enrique Peña Nieto's term (2012-2018).

A consequence of the militarized strategy used in successive Mexican administrations was an increase in accusations of human rights violations by the Mexican military, which was largely untrained in domestic policing. According to a press investigation of published Mexican government statistics, Mexican armed forces injured or killed some 3,900 individuals in domestic operations between 2007 and 2014. Significantly, the military's role in injuries and killings ceased to be made public after 2014, according to the account.[216] Few incidents of suspected police and security force torture are reported in Mexico (less than 10%), according to several estimates, in large part because of a belief that nothing will be done. Impunity for Mexico's military and police is likely to follow an established pattern of high levels of impunity for most crimes.

Peña Nieto pledged a new direction in his security policy, with a focus on reducing criminal violence that affected civilians and businesses rather than on removing the leaders of the large DTOs.[217] Ultimately, that promise was not kept. Peña Nieto's attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, said in 2012 that Mexico faced challenges from some 60-80 crime groups, a proliferation he attributed to his predecessor Calderón's kingpin strategy.[218] However, despite Peña Nieto's

[214] This finding appears in several annual reports from the University of San Diego's Justice in Mexico program.

[215] Mary Beth Sheridan, "Facing Stunning Levels of Deaths, U.S. and Mexico Revamp Strained Security Cooperation," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2021.

[216] Steve Fisher and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Mexico Sent in the Army to Fight the Drug War. Many Question the Toll on Society and the Army Itself," *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2018.

[217] The Peña Nieto government's emphasis on crime prevention, which received significant attention early in his term, ended prematurely due to budget cutbacks. See, See CRS In Focus IF10578, *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[218] Patrick Corcoran, "Mexico Has 80 Drug Cartels: Attorney General," *InSight Crime*, December 20, 2012.

pledge to alter his approach, continuity largely prevailed. The Peña Nieto government recentralized control over security and continued the strategy of taking down top drug kingpins, adopting Calderón's list of top trafficker targets, updating it as needed.[219] The resulting fragmentation appears to have continued to splinter Mexico's criminal groups with attendant violence and instability.[220]

Following some reorganization, Peña Nieto continued to cooperate with the United States under the Mérida Initiative However, the focus on crime prevention, which received significant attention early in Peña Nieto's term, ended prematurely due to budget cutbacks.[221]

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office in 2018. He made broad promises to fight corruption, reduce violence, and promote socioeconomic programs.[222] With the onset of economic and fiscal shocks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many observers questioned whether López Obrador's social goals were attainable.[223] He announced he would shift away from the Mérida Initiative and joined the Biden Administration in a new security approach, the Bicentennial Framework, which remains under development in 2022.

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Research Librarian Carla Davis-Castro provided invaluable research for this report.

[219] Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Changing the Game or Dropping the Ball? Mexico's Security and Anti-Crime Strategy Under President Peña Nieto*, Brookings Institution, November 2014. Velbab-Brown maintains that the government of Peña Nieto "largely slipped into many of the same policies of President Felipe Calderón."

[220] Scott Stewart, "Tracking Mexico's Cartels in 2019," Stratfor Worldview, January 29, 2019.

[221] With the sharp oil price declines in 2014 onward, the administration was forced to impose budget austerity measures, including on aspects of security. See CRS In Focus IF10578, *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

[222] For more background, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Joshua Klein; Laura Weiss, "Can AMLO End Mexico's Drug War?," *World Politics Review*, May 16, 2019.

[223] Nathaniel Parish Flannery, "Is Mexico's López Obrador Latin America's Newest Autocrat?," *Forbes*, April 19, 2021; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Crime and Anti-crime Policies in Mexico in 2022: A Bleak Outlook," *Mexico Today*, January 21, 2022, at https://mexicotoday.com/2022/01/21/opinion-crime-anti-crime-policies-in-mexico-in-2022-a-bleak-outlook/; Ryan C. Berg, "The Bicentennial Framework for Security Cooperation: New Approach or Shuffling the Pillars of Mérida?, Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 29, 2021.

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