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**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
EXECUTIVE OFFICE FOR IMMIGRATION REVIEW
IMMIGRATION COURT
1855 Gateway Blvd., Suite 850
Concord, CA 94520**

	)	
In the Matter of	)	
	)	
Alberto Rodrigues Castillo	)	File No. A. 249-307-473
Claudia Isabel Tamayo Bravo	)	File No. A. 249-307-474
Josefina Navarro Tamayo	)	File No. A. 249-307-475
	)	
In Removal Proceedings	)	
	)	
	)	

Immigration Judge: N/A

Next Hearing Date: N/A

**RESPONDENTS' COUNTRY CONDITIONS IN SUPPORT OF ASYLUM AND
WITHHOLDING OF REMOVAL**

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Exhibit 1

BRIEF EXPLANATION OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS REGARDING CARTEL VIOLENCE, DISAPPEARANCES, AND FAILURES OF STATE PROTECTION IN MEXICO

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mexico currently faces a severe security and human-rights crisis shaped by the territorial power of cartels, widespread disappearances, kidnapping, extortion, and institutional weakness. Reliable country-conditions evidence shows that major criminal organizations, particularly the Sinaloa Cartel and its affiliated regional structures, exercise substantial control in parts of the country through violence, intimidation, and corruption, while state protection remains inconsistent and often ineffective. These conditions are relevant to individuals who face harm from cartel-linked actors, including persons targeted for intimidation, retaliation, kidnapping, forced compliance, or other forms of coercive violence. (Exh. 4 - CC2) (Exh. 5 - CC3) (Exh. 3 - CC1)

2. GENERAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND SECURITY CONTEXT IN MEXICO

The general human-rights context in Mexico is marked by high levels of violence committed by criminal organizations, including homicide, kidnapping, extortion, trafficking, and enforced disappearance. The U.S. Department of State has reported that disappearances remain a persistent problem throughout the country, particularly in areas affected by cartel and gang violence, and that such abuses have become generalized and systematic in practice. At

the same time, impunity remains entrenched, with a large proportion of crimes never resulting in effective investigation or prosecution. (Exh. 3 - CC1)

Recent U.S. government reporting also reflects the extraordinary level of cartel power in Mexico. The White House has described cartels as organizations that exercise control through assassination, terror, rape, and brute force, and that in some regions function as quasi-governmental entities controlling major aspects of social life. In the same vein, the U.S. Department of State has formally designated the Sinaloa Cartel and other Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists, reflecting their reach, violence, and transnational operational capacity. (Exh. 4 - CC2) (Exh. 5 - CC3)

Independent reporting further shows that the security crisis is not limited to isolated incidents or single regions. Criminal groups continue to expand, fragment, and adapt, while using extortion, territorial control, and coercion as methods of governance. These patterns contribute to a national context in which ordinary civilians, migrants, families of the disappeared, journalists, and persons perceived as resistant or disloyal may all be exposed to significant harm. (Exh. 9 - CC7)

3. SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE BY THE MEXICAN CARTELS AND AFFILIATED GROUPS

The country-conditions evidence shows that the Sinaloa Cartel remains one of the most powerful and violent criminal organizations in Mexico, with a documented pattern of murdering, kidnapping, and intimidating civilians, public officials, and journalists. Its operations are not limited to drug trafficking in the abstract; rather, the cartel exerts control through fear, coercion, and organized territorial influence. Reporting concerning cartel use of digital surveillance and phone data also demonstrates that cartel actors may identify and track perceived threats, informants, or persons associated with law enforcement activity. (Exh. 5 - CC3) (Exh. 13 - CC11)

The updated reporting on Los Salazar shows how the Sinaloa Cartel operates through regional armed structures and affiliated family-based networks. That evidence explains that Los Salazar emerged as an armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel in Sonora and Chihuahua, helped secure strategic trafficking routes, and became involved in violent disputes tied to cartel expansion and internal fragmentation. (Exh. 17 - CC15)

The risk environment is further illustrated by the scale of disappearances and retaliatory violence. Reuters has reported that the number of missing persons in Mexico

surpassed 100,000 and continued to rise, with many cases tied to drug-related violence and with the true number believed to be even higher. In practice, families often search for missing loved ones themselves because of a deep lack of confidence in the authorities' willingness or ability to respond effectively. The State Department's human-rights reporting reinforces this picture by documenting that even relatives and searchers may themselves become targets, including in the case of a woman who disappeared after prior threats connected to her efforts to search for her missing brother. (Exh. 10 - CC8) (Exh. 3 - CC1)

Kidnapping and coercive control also remain widespread features of the Mexican security environment. Reporting from Reuters describes organized mass kidnappings, ransom schemes, confinement of victims in unsafe conditions, and routine targeting of migrants and other vulnerable persons by criminal groups. (Exh. 11 - CC9) (Exh 12 - CC10)

4. STATE INABILITY OR UNWILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE PROTECTION

The evidence strongly indicates that the Mexican state often cannot or does not provide effective protection against cartel violence. The State Department (Human Rights Report) has reported persistent impunity, low prosecution rates, and the complicity of some government agents with criminal organizations. (Exh 3 - CC1)

Other sources likewise show criminal penetration of state structures. Crisis Group reports that criminal groups routinely co-opt police, prosecutors and political actors through bribery and threats, and that in some instances public institutions effectively serve cartel interests. Additional reporting from Chiapas and Veracruz shows authorities arresting police officers accused of using surveillance systems to aid cartel-linked actors, while other reporting describes the use of surveillance and technical intelligence by cartel operatives to identify targets. (Exh. 9 - CC7) (Exh. 13 - CC11) (Exh. 14 - CC12)

5. INTERNAL RELOCATION

The available evidence also indicates that internal relocation within Mexico is often not a reasonable or effective solution where the feared harm arises from cartel-linked actors. Cartels and their affiliated groups operate across multiple states, maintain regional alliances, and exert influence over trafficking corridors, local institutions, and civilian populations. The

evidence regarding Los Salazar illustrates how cartel-affiliated structures can extend the Sinaloa Cartel's reach across broad geographic areas in northern Mexico. (Exh. 17 - CC15)

In addition, internal displacement in Mexico is itself a widespread consequence of organized crime, extortion, and generalized insecurity. UNHCR and related reporting indicate that hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by violence, and that many displaced persons continue to experience insecurity, fear, corruption, and impunity even after relocation. (Exh. 6 - CC4) (Exh. 7 - CC5)

6. CONCLUSION

The country-conditions record demonstrates that Mexico's security crisis is driven in substantial part by powerful cartel organizations that rely on violence, disappearances, kidnapping, intimidation, and coercive territorial control. The Sinaloa Cartel, in particular, has been identified by U.S. authorities as an exceptionally powerful and violent transnational organization, and the evidence concerning Los Salazar further shows that its influence is carried through regional armed networks and affiliated actors. At the same time, enforced disappearances remain generalized and systematic, families of victims face retaliation, and public institutions are frequently unable or unwilling to provide effective protection. (Exh. 4 - CC2) (Exh. 5 - CC3) (Exh. 3 - CC1) (Exh. 10 - CC8) (Exh. 13 - CC11) (Exh. 17 - CC15)

Accordingly, the documentary record supports the conclusion that persons targeted by cartel-linked actors in Mexico face a serious and objectively grounded risk of harm, and that such risk is reinforced by corruption, impunity, and the limited reliability of state protection. The same evidence further supports the conclusion that internal relocation may not be reasonable where cartel influence, institutional weakness, and violence are not confined to a single locality. (Exh. 6 - CC4) (Exh. 7 - CC5) (Exh. 9 - CC7)

Exhibit 2

Claudia Isabel Tamayo Bravo A#249-307-474
Alberto Rodriguez Castillo A#249-307-473
Josefina Navarro Tamayo A#249-307-475

EXCERPTS FROM COUNTRY CONDITIONS REPORTS

CC1

MEXICO 2024 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses; however, impunity and extremely low rates of prosecution remained a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses. There were media reports some government agents were complicit with international criminal gangs, and prosecution and conviction rates were low for abuses involving these agents.

Disappearance

There were reports of numerous enforced disappearances by criminal groups, sometimes with allegations of collusion with authorities. Investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of enforced disappearance crimes were rare. **Enforced disappearance was a persistent problem throughout the country, especially in areas with high levels of cartel- or gang-related violence. According to NGO reports, disappearances were a generalized and systematic practice.**

Federal and state databases tracking enforced disappearances were incomplete and had data-sharing problems; forensic systems were highly fragmented among the local, state, and federal levels; and the volume of unsolved cases was far greater than the forensic systems were capable of handling. In its data collection, the government often merged statistics on forcibly disappeared persons with missing persons not suspected of being victims of enforced disappearance, making it difficult to compile accurate statistics on the extent of the problem.

The National Search Commission maintained a National Registry of Missing and Unlocated Persons, which contained information on more than 115,000 enforced disappearances and missing persons. Members of the Mechanism for Truth and Historical Clarification, a panel of five independent experts, noted the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) refused to grant access to certain information.

Civil society organizations and families who searched for disappeared persons did so at great personal risk, including death. **According to media reports, on January 15, an armed group entered the home of Lorenza Cano Flores, a member of United Salamanca Searching for Disappeared, a group of families searching for missing family members and others. The group killed Cano's son and spouse, and Cano was reported missing following the January incident. Cano had received several threats for searching for her brother José Francisco, who disappeared in 2018.**

**PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS: DESIGNATING
CARTELS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AS
FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS AND
SPECIALLY DESIGNATED GLOBAL TERRORISTS
- THE WHITE HOUSE**

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), 8 U.S.C. 1101 *et seq.*, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), 50 U.S.C. 1701 *et seq.* it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. Purpose. This order creates a process by which certain international cartels (the Cartels) and other organizations will be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, consistent with section 219 of the INA (8 U.S.C. 1189), or Specially Designated Global Terrorists, consistent with IEEPA (50 U.S.C. 1702) and Executive Order 13224 of September 23, 2001 (Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism), as amended.

(a) International cartels constitute a national-security threat beyond that posed by traditional organized crime, with activities encompassing:

(i) convergence between themselves and a range of extra-hemispheric actors, from designated foreign-terror organizations to antagonistic foreign governments;

(ii) complex adaptive systems, characteristic of entities engaged in insurgency and asymmetric warfare; and

(iii) infiltration into foreign governments across the Western Hemisphere.

The Cartels have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere that has not only destabilized countries with significant importance for our national interests but also flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs.

The Cartels functionally control, through a campaign of assassination, terror, rape, and brute force nearly all illegal traffic across the southern border of the United States. In certain portions of Mexico, they function as quasi-governmental entities, controlling nearly all aspects of society. The Cartels' activities threaten the safety of the American people, the security of the United States, and the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere. Their activities, proximity to, and incursions into the physical territory of the United States pose an unacceptable national security risk to the United States.

THE WHITE HOUSE,

January 20, 2025.

CC3

**DESIGNATION OF INTERNATIONAL CARTELS -
U.S DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

The United States remains committed to protecting our nation, the American people, and our hemisphere by stopping campaigns of violence and terror perpetrated by international cartels and transnational organizations.

Today, the Department of State announces the designation of Tren de Aragua (TdA), Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Cártel de Sinaloa, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Cártel del Noreste (CDN), La Nueva Familia Michoacana (LNFM), Cártel de Golfo (CDG), and Cáteles Unidos (CU) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

The Sinaloa Cartel is a transnational organization based in Sinaloa, Mexico. It is one of the most powerful drug cartels in the world and one of the largest producers and traffickers of fentanyl and other illicit drugs to the United States. The Sinaloa Cartel has used violence to murder, kidnap, and intimidate civilians, government officials, and journalists.

CC4

VIOLENCE-DRIVEN DISPLACEMENT IN MEXICO: WHY INCLUDING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN NATIONAL STATISTICS IS NECESSARY TO INFORM A PROTECTION-BASED RESPONSE - UNHCR

In Mexico, internal displacement is an underdocumented issue despite the growing number of people forced from their

homes in recent years. According to the 2020 Census, 262,411 were internally displaced due to violence or insecurity, although it is acknowledged that this is a considerable underestimate as it does not include intra-municipal movements nor movements for multiple reasons.

In this brief, we take a closer look at internal displacement in the case of Mexico. We aim to shed light on how those forced to flee their communities due to crime perceive safety in their new destinations. A key assumption is that displaced persons face unique consequences of insecurity, such as psychological injury due to trauma, which may impact their integration and thus prosperity in their new homes.

The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement makes it clear that, with the number of IDPs globally doubling over the last 10 years, we currently face an untenable situation. Women, children and marginalized groups often face the greatest impact. In Central America and Mexico, the prevalence of organized crime, extortion and generalized insecurity in some regions is contributing to forced displacement and trapping them in a precarious situation for years, if not decades. If we are to meet the Secretary General Antonio Guterres' vision to better resolve, prevent and address internal displacement crises, a clear point of departure is to improve how we measure those displaced from their homes including through the integration of IDPs in national data systems.

In the above analysis, we find that displaced respondents in Mexico continue to have safety concerns within their local communities, and their worries about crime are noticeable greater in comparison to non-displaced respondents.

MEXICO INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE (IDPs) FACT SHEET, AUGUST 2024 – UNHCR

Internal Displacement in Mexico

In the absence of official data, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that by the end of 2023, more than 392,000 people in Mexico were internally displaced due to violence. Estimates from the 2024 National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security (ENVIPE) by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) calculate that some 1,006,800 people had to relocate to protect themselves from crime in 2023.

MEXICO COUNTRY SECURITY REPORT - OSAC

Mexico suffers from high rates of crime, exacerbated by its low rate of criminal convictions. Most crime in Mexico goes unreported or simply cannot be accurately captured due to large number of individuals who have “disappeared.”

Organized criminal groups continue to cause significant levels of violence throughout parts of the country. Mexico continues to experience a combination of conditions that collectively degrade the security environment in certain areas. The government has captured some of its most wanted criminals, which has fragmented criminal groups.

The Sinaloa Cartel, while once the dominant TCO in the country, has its largest presence in the northwestern region of the country and has suffered from internal competition for leadership since the arrests of key leaders Joaquín Guzmán Loera's in 2016 and Ismael Zambada Garcia in 2024.

Crime in the Nogales Consular District, which is comprised of northern Sonora along the U.S.-Mexico border, was more prominent in San Luis Rio Colorado, small towns along highways 2 and 43, and around Nogales to a lesser extent. Crime is widespread in this region and those traveling should do so with caution and during daylight hours only.

San Luis Rio Colorado reached a new record number of homicides in 2024 with 243, an increase on the previous record set in 2023 at 189 homicides. The city serves as a key border crossing for the movement of licit and illicit goods. Additionally, it serves as a key point for human trafficking and smuggling which has become increasingly valuable to organized criminal groups in Mexico. Migrants are regularly kidnapped in the surrounding area.

CC7

CURBING VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA'S DRUG TRAFFICKING HOTSPOTS - CRISIS GROUP

More than 50 years into the “war on drugs”, trade in illicit narcotics continues to flourish in Latin America, often leaving mayhem in its wake. Experience suggests

that a mix of approaches, including smarter policing and enhanced social policy, is the best remedy.

In the mid-1980s, U.S. law enforcement intensified operations against cocaine trafficking through the Caribbean by air and sea, prompting routes to shift toward Mexico. Here, existing smuggling groups with a long history of trafficking alcohol, marijuana and heroin began to export cocaine over the U.S. border. Starting out as junior partners in the business, Mexican groups soon raked in unprecedented profits, and their power expanded. **Around the same time, a joint Mexican-U.S. operation captured the leader of the then-dominant Guadalajara Cartel, a confederation of trafficking clans formed under the wing of the country's erstwhile one-party system. The group split into four: the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel and the Juárez Cartel.**

From these early days, violence was a feature of the drug market, but one that played out in distinct ways across the region. In Mexico, an authoritarian state kept narco-traffickers' ambitions and infighting in check while allowing the market to grow and taking a cut of the proceeds. In Colombia, Medellín Cartel boss Pablo Escobar used violence to wield power over the state, infiltrating its every level, from local police forces to the legislature in Bogotá.

Mexican criminal groups have also found a lucrative new revenue source in the production of synthetic drugs, first methamphetamine and then, beginning around 2014, fentanyl. Production of the latter in Mexico was pioneered by the Chapitos, a Sinaloa Cartel faction headed by the sons of cartel founder Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known as El Chapo, who was extradited to the U.S. in January

2017. The expansion of production has been “exponential”, according to U.S. court indictments. The cartel imports precursors, often disguised as regular commercial goods, from an array of trusted contacts in China and a network of third-party brokers in and outside of Mexico, including in the U.S.

To fend off interdiction, traffickers create wide networks of corruption by paying off officials at various levels, including port workers, pilots, airline and shipping company employees, officers in navies and international law enforcement agencies and senior politicians. Honduras offers an extreme example. After a coup in 2009, the Sinaloa Cartel and other criminal groups invested heavily in ensuring that they would have allies in power, up to the president. As a result, they could count on having Honduras as a transshipment point for most of the cocaine trafficked from South America to the U.S. The chief architect of Mexico’s war on drugs from late 2006 to 2012, Genaro García Luna, was convicted in the U.S. in 2023 of taking bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel to protect the group’s drug shipments to the U.S. He was sentenced to over 38 years in prison in October 2024.

Mexico exhibits a rather different set of arrangements due to the sway of its main criminal groups over not just national trafficking but also the international drug trade. Relationships between the two major crime groups involved in international trafficking, the Sinaloa and New Generation Jalisco Cartels, and smaller regional operations are fluid. At times, these smaller outfits pay to use the routes controlled by the dominant organisations.

Numerous communities across Latin America now confront a fragmented criminal underworld, in which prolonged and

intense violence has become the status quo. Meanwhile, some countries with big user markets, particularly in Europe and North America, are calling for stricter controls on drug trafficking – and, in the case of the U.S. under the Trump administration, a revitalised military-led crackdown. Decades of the “war on drugs” provide plentiful evidence that Latin America’s traffickers are hard to eliminate. Combating them through armed force generates more rather than less criminal profit, violence, corruption and misery.

Latin America has ample practical experience to build upon in reducing violence. Strengthening security systems, above all policing, prisons and criminal investigation, has a proven track record. On their own, however, these policies will not enjoy sustained success without addressing the reasons why drug production and trafficking survive and reproduce in the face of police and military onslaughts, including the lack of economic opportunities and the easy availability of firearms. Where drug-related violence is entrenched, negotiations with critical groups could also be explored under very specific conditions. Not all of these approaches may gain endorsement among governments outside the region. **But so long as Latin America is the source of a large share of the drugs consumed globally as well as the main victim of drug-related violence, it is both unfair to the region and dangerous to the world to intensify a failing war.**

CC8

**IN MEXICO, MORE LOVED ONES GO MISSING.
THEIR FAMILIES KEEP SEARCHING - REUTERS**

Manki Lugo no longer remembers how many dead bodies she has found in the seven years she has searched across northern Mexico for her son.

What she cannot forget are the moments her hopes were dashed and it was - once again - not Juan.

"When we find a body, or parts, I pray that it's him," said the 68-year-old with white hair as she sat on the patio of her wooden home. "So that I can finally find peace."

After Juan, then 33, disappeared in July 2015, Lugo joined a local search group "Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, opens new tab," or the Trackers of El Fuerte - named after the town in northern Sinaloa state where the group found one of its first mass graves.

The group of mostly women spends hours under scorching sun, combing dense vegetation for the clandestine burial sites that hide the missing dead or searching riverbanks for bodies washed up with sewage.

To make identification harder, sometimes only the limbs of several different victims are buried together. Their heads and torsos are hidden elsewhere.

Sometimes, in their hunt, they chase a hopeful putrid stench into a bog or woodland, only to find a dead animal buried under trash.

In May, the number of missing people across Mexico passed 100,000 - many of them victims of the country's relentless drug-related violence.

And the number of missing continues to rise, now reaching 105,879, with many experts and Mexican officials believing the true number is even higher.

The desperate search of groups like Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte sheds light not only on the suffering caused by the violence but also the lack of faith in the ability of authorities to combat it.

Reuters spent four years documenting the work of these groups across 10 Mexican states. In Mexico, around 180 such groups have sprung up, some composed of as few as two people or a single family.

Many family members, afraid of eroding public sympathy, were reluctant to discuss if the missing were involved with drugs or crime. Sinaloa, on Mexico's northern Pacific coast, is home to one of the world's largest drug-trafficking organizations - the Sinaloa Cartel.

Mexican officials would not comment on individual cases in this story, saying investigations were ongoing.

Most of Mexico's missing have disappeared since 2006, when then-President Felipe Calderon declared a "War on Drugs," sending in the armed forces to fight the increasingly powerful cartels and unleashing a wave of violence that continues to roil the country.

Since then, nearly 400,000 people have been murdered.

The women of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte have found 423 bodies, according to their records. But only 218 of those could be identified and returned to families.

Few of the women in the group have found what they are looking for.

One who has is Mirna Medina, who founded the group in the sweltering Sinaloa town of Los Mochis after her son Roberto went missing when he was 21 in July 2014.

Even after finding Roberto, Medina keeps searching. "I made a promise to Roberto, back then, that I would search for him until I found him," she said. "Now we make that promise to each other (as a group), that we won't rest until we find all our children".

CC9

**EXCLUSIVE: SURVIVORS OF MASS KIDNAPPING
IN MEXICO RECOUNT 'TERRIFYING'
EXPERIENCE - REUTERS**

Honduran migrant Noel Castillo heard a volley of shots just after 7:30 p.m. in late December as he and his family traveled on a highway in northern Mexico. Through the window, he saw trucks swarm around the bus, trapping them from all sides.

Armed, masked men in military-style clothing stormed aboard, and demanded identification from the passengers. They then abducted Castillo and 31 other migrants in a mass kidnapping that sparked a vast manhunt by Mexican authorities and underscored the risks faced by the hundreds of thousands of people who traverse Mexico each year en route to the United States to seek asylum.

The Castillo family said they fled Honduras over the summer to escape powerful drug gangs that were trying to

forcibly recruit Dilcia's two teenage daughters, whose names Reuters is withholding at the family's request.

After months in southern Mexico, the family reached the northern city of Monterrey and on Dec. 30 boarded a commercial bus to Matamoros.

They intended to wait there while applying for an appointment on a U.S. government smartphone app, CBP One, that would allow them to legally enter the United States.

The bus passed through two official checkpoints, Castillo recalled, where he said he and other migrants were extorted by officials for 500 pesos, or \$30, per person each time.

Mexican authorities did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the extortion allegation, which Reuters could not independently verify.

Soon after they passed the city of Reynosa, armed men encircled the bus.

The criminals whisked Castillo, his niece and other migrants away in one truck, while Dilcia, her eldest daughter and other members of the group were taken to another location.

For four days, Dilcia had no news of her youngest daughter. All she heard were the kidnappers' threats: If you don't pay up, you'll never see her again.

Days passed without food, without water, the cramped house where they were imprisoned crawling with rats and cockroaches, she said.

Meanwhile, Castillo and his niece were taken to a ranch with a house so packed with dozens of other kidnapped migrants that sometimes there wasn't even enough room to sit down, he said. They were stripped of their phones, cash and even their shoes.

The family sold Dilcia's house and scrapped together other funds to pay about \$7,000 to the kidnappers, who asked that the money be sent to a series of bank accounts, which the family believes were Peru-based.

CC10

MEXICAN AUTHORITIES FREE 31 KIDNAPPED MIGRANTS - REUTERS

Mexican authorities have rescued 31 migrants, including women and children, who were kidnapped over the weekend in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, officials announced on Wednesday.

Gunmen snatched the migrants on Saturday from a bus on a highway in the municipality of Reynosa, close to Mexico's border with the United States.

Mexican Security Minister Rosa Icela Rodriguez said earlier on Wednesday that the kidnapped migrants were from Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico.

The area is the site of an ongoing conflict between two factions of the powerful Gulf Cartel, known as the Metros and the Scorpions, according to a former security official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

He said migrant smuggling and trafficking has become the most lucrative illicit industry in the region.

CC11

NOTORIOUS CARTEL HIRED HACKER TO USE SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS, PHONE DATA TO TRACK AND KILL FBI INFORMANTS U.S SAYS - CBS NEWS

A notorious drug cartel enlisted a hacker who was able to infiltrate phone data and Mexico City's surveillance cameras to help track and kill FBI informants, the U.S. Justice Department has revealed.

The 2018 operation was disclosed Thursday in a 47-page audit by the Justice Department Inspector General, outlining the FBI's "efforts to mitigate the effects of ubiquitous technical surveillance".

The partially redacted report cites a case involving Juaquin "El Chapo" Guzman — the founder of the infamous Sinaloa cartel. "El Chapo" is now serving a life sentence in a maximum security prison in the U.S on multiple conspiracy counts for smuggling vast quantities of cocaine and other drugs into the U.S. for more than a quarter of a century.

According to the newly released audit, an unnamed hacker was recruited by the cartel in 2018. The hacker "observed people going in and out of the United States Embassy in Mexico City and identified 'people of interest' for the cartel, including an FBI assistant legal attaché," the report said.

The hacker was able to use the attaché's phone number to determine incoming and outgoing calls as well as the FBI official's geolocation data, according to the audit.

The Sinaloa cartel, which was designated a terrorist organization earlier this year by the Trump administration, has long been one of Mexico's most powerful and ruthless crime syndicates. The cartel is one of the largest producers and traffickers of fentanyl and other drugs to the U.S. and has been known "to murder, kidnap, and intimidate civilians, government officials and journalists," according to the U.S. State Department.

The revelation about the Sinaloa cartel hacker comes just weeks after the U.S. offered a \$10 million reward for the capture of two of El Chapo's sons — Archivaldo Ivan Guzman Salazar and Jesus Alfredo Guzman Salazar. His other two sons — Joaquin Guzman Lopez and Ovidio Guzman Lopez — are currently in U.S. custody.

El Chapo's sons lead a faction of the Sinaloa cartel known as the "Chapitos," or "little Chapos." The Chapitos and their cartel associates have used corkscrews, electrocution and hot chiles to torture their rivals while some of their victims were "fed dead or alive to tigers," according to a 2023 U.S. indictment.

MEXICO ARRESTS MORE THAN 100 LOCAL POLICE OFFICERS FOR VARIOUS ABUSES AND OFFENSES - AP NEWS

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Authorities in two states in southern Mexico arrested more than 100 local police officers Monday for various abuses and offenses, adding to the long list of police corruption scandals in the country.

In the largest of the two incidents, 92 municipal police officers in the southern state of Chiapas were arrested after they tried to stop state authorities from assuming command of a police surveillance camera office.

Chiapas state prosecutors accused local police officers in the city of Comitán of using the video cameras to inform local groups — some of which are allied with drug cartels — about state and federal raids in the area.

Chiapas state police chief Óscar Aparicio Avendaño said some of the 92 municipal Comitán police officers drew their guns on state officials trying to take control of the video surveillance office, and forced them out at gunpoint.

At issue are local groups that claim to represent farmers in the rural region, but which have often been forced or paid to act in support of drug cartels that have been warring over turf in Chiapas for months.

Having corrupt local police use the surveillance camera network to report the movements of federal troops or state police would be valuable to the farm groups and cartels, which often operate road blockades.

Chiapas has become so overrun by the Sinaloa cartel and the rival Jalisco drug cartel — both of which also

participate in migrants smuggling and extortion — that some residents of Mexican towns have been forced to flee to Guatemala for safety.

Meanwhile, in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz, state prosecutors said they had arrested 13 state police officers implicated in three cases of forced disappearances. That is an offense in which authorities abduct someone who vanishes without a trace.

CC13

EXPANSION OF DRUG TRAFFICKING IN MEXICO TRANSFORMS CARTELS INTO THE COUNTRY'S FIFTH-LARGEST EMPLOYER, STUDY SAYS - O GLOBO

With the expansion of Mexican cartels beyond the illegal drug trade — including sectors such as transportation and food — criminal groups have become the country's fifth-largest employer, with approximately 175,000 members, revealed a new study published Thursday in the journal Science.

Based on an analysis of data on homicides, disappearances, arrests, and disputes between rival factions collected over a decade, the research arrived at an estimate of the total number of people who work for these criminal organizations. According to the article, although many members are not directly involved in violent activities, the results highlight the growing influence of cartels in Mexico —which today has 198 identified criminal groups, many of them contracted by companies to provide other services.

"More than 1.7 million people in Latin America are incarcerated, and adding more people to overcrowded prisons will not solve the problem of insecurity," the authors wrote.

Between 2007 and 2021, the number of homicides more than tripled in Mexico, placing the country among those with the highest rates in Latin America, with almost 27 victims for every 100,000 inhabitants. In 2022, 27.4% of Mexican families reported that at least one of their members had been a victim of a crime, according to the National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety.

Inflationary effect

The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), a global nonprofit research and analysis center, estimated the economic impact of violence in Mexico in 2022 at 4.6 trillion pesos (R\$1.3 trillion). This equates to 18.3% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the same year, the federal government spent 0.6% of GDP on security, the IEP reported.

The per capita impact is even more frustrating. Each Mexican suffered an economic loss of 35,705 pesos—more than double the average monthly salary—and crime in food production chains adds two percentage points to the country's inflation, according to an estimate by the Autonomous University of Mexico.

MEXICAN CARTELS HAVE 30,000 “CHILD SOLDIERS” - GAZETA DO POVO

Most are between 13 and 17 years old and are recruited by the country's largest cartels: Los Zetas, Sinaloa, and La Familia Michoacán.

The youngest act as informants for drug traffickers. After the age of 12, they transport drugs, watch over kidnapping victims, and by the age of 16, they are ready for the most violent actions, such as kidnappings and murders. Organizations estimate that up to 30,000 young people have been recruited by Mexican cartels.

Most of them are between 13 and 17 years old and are recruited by the country's largest cartels: Los Zetas, Sinaloa, and La Familia Michoacán. "Much of what is happening in Mexico today corresponds to a war scenario. Just as soldiers are needed in a war, the cartels need to increase their numbers," said Juan Martín Pérez García, executive director of the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico, in an interview with the reporter.

The most vulnerable, poorest, and most excluded young people are cheap labor and easily discarded – murdered or handed over to the police. "They are like the child soldiers of Africa, since they are on the 'front line of fire' and are the most expendable," says anthropologist Rossana Reguillo, from the University of Guadalajara.

Recruitment begins with threats to the young people's families. Then comes the offer of a salary.

THE SALAZAR FAMILY: HOW THE CRIMINAL GROUP LINKED TO THE SINALOA CARTEL EMERGED - INFOBAE

The criminal group Los Salazar emerged on the border of Chihuahua and Sonora as the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel

The Salazar family has been accused of operating under the orders of the Sinaloa Cartel and of leading the violence in the north of the country.

The criminal group Los Salazar emerged in the mid-2000s as the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel in the Sonora and Chihuahua region, under the leadership of Adán Salazar Zamorano, alias “Don Adán.” The organization was key to the cartel's expansion northward and in the war against rivals such as the Juárez Cartel and La Línea. Its primary business has been drug trafficking to the United States, especially cocaine, and in recent years, the construction of drug tunnels, such as the one recently discovered in Mexico that led to the United States, demonstrating its logistical and technological capacity for the international trafficking of illicit substances.

In addition to Crispín Salazar, other names such as Manuel Irán Fontes Salazar (“El Cabo 10”) and Sergio Alberto del Villas (“El Napoleón,” who died in 2018) have been identified as operators and plaza bosses. The Salazar family has been implicated in forced displacement, murders, arms trafficking, and the murder of journalist Miroslava Breach.

SINALOA CARTEL HISTORY AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS - INSIGHT CRIME

The Sinaloa Cartel, considered the largest and most powerful drug trafficking organization in the Western Hemisphere, is a network of some of Mexico's most important drug lords. Members work together to protect themselves. Its many factions forged connections at the highest levels of Mexico's federal police and military, and has bribed members of both institutions to maintain an advantage over rival organizations.

Currently, the Sinaloa Cartel has at least two leadership structures. The first is commanded by loyalists of El Mayo, who was arrested in July 2024 in the United States. The other is made up of El Chapo's sons, Joaquín Guzmán López, Ovidio Guzmán López, Iván Archivaldo, and Jesús Alfredo, known collectively as "Chapitos".

The Chapitos, for example, are associated with the Ninis, the Salazar, Gente Nueva, and the Chimales. For their part, the networks associated with El Mayo collaborate with the Antrax and the Rusos, among others.

The organization also has cells operating in other Mexican states, such as Sonora, Baja California, Nayarit, Jalisco, and Chiapas.

Exhibit 3 - CC1

Mexico 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Mexico during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists and enforcement of or threat of criminal or civil charges in order to limit expression; and violence or threats against labor activists or union members.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses; however, impunity and extremely low rates of prosecution remained a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses. There were media reports some government agents were complicit with international criminal gangs, and prosecution and conviction rates were low for abuses involving these agents.

Criminal elements, including local and transnational gangs and narcotics traffickers, were significant perpetrators of violent crimes and committed acts of homicide, enforced disappearances, torture, kidnapping, extortion,

human trafficking, human smuggling, bribery, intimidation, and other threats, resulting in high levels of violence and exploitation. The government investigated and prosecuted some of these crimes, but the majority remained uninvestigated and unprosecuted.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were several reports government entities or their agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

Most reports of arbitrary killings involved military and police forces firing on vehicles or structures, resulting in civilian casualties, at times while engaged in firefights with criminal actors. Most incidents did not result in criminal charges. Arbitrary killings were difficult to successfully prosecute.

On March 31, in Chiapas, there was an exchange of gunfire between National Guard agents and an armed group in the community of Niños Héroes. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center and Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez reported 25 individuals were killed, including civilians awaiting ferry transportation; these organizations called for an investigation. Authorities stated a total of 10 individuals, including civilians, were killed. No criminal charges were brought against agents of the National Guard

media outlets and made veiled threats. Activists asserted this behavior resulted in self-censorship in favor of government positions.

An NGO that tracked attacks on journalists reported at least 142 instances of stigmatization of journalists and publication of the personal information of journalists without their consent.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Human rights groups reported some state and local governments censored media. There were reports of journalists practicing self-censorship due to threats from criminal groups and government officials. Journalists reported altering their coverage due to a lack of government protection, attacks against members of media and media outlets, and threats of retribution against their families, among other reasons.

Advertising contracts were sometimes used as a control mechanism by different levels of government. Freedom of expression advocacy groups reported the government, despite reductions in its advertising budgets, continued to exert strong financial influence over the largest media companies. The civil society group Fundar underscored a lack of federal government transparency or equity in selecting media outlets for public advertising, noting 55 percent of the government's advertising budget went to only 10 media outlets in 2023. From January 1 to March 31, there were

three instances of denials or suspensions of public advertising to media outlets in response to editorial content.

In some regions, criminal groups exercised significant influence over media outlets and reporters, threatening individuals who published views critical of criminal groups. Concerns persisted regarding criminal groups' use of physical violence in retaliation for information posted online, which exposed bloggers and social media users to the same level of violence faced by traditional journalists. In its report released in February, Article 19 identified 57 attacks against journalists in 2023 perpetrated by individuals associated with transnational criminal organizations.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions, collectively bargain, and conduct legal strikes, and prohibited antiunion discrimination.

During the year, 2019 labor law reforms continued to facilitate the ability to organize unions and bargain collectively. In addition to providing workers with the right to freely elect union representatives and approve collective bargaining agreements through a secret ballot process, the reforms continued to provide a path to block registration of collective bargaining

A voluntary reporting system allowed formally registered businesses to enroll and self-identify as compliant with the program's requirements related to working conditions. Registered businesses deemed to be complying according to documentation submitted were exempt from routine labor inspections for one year, although this did not prevent the Labor Secretariat from conducting complaint-based labor inspections in these businesses. The Labor Secretariat had the authority to order labor inspections at any time in the event of labor law violations, imminent risk to employees, or workplace accidents. In May, the Labor Secretariat launched a new case management system for inspections. The system used predictive analytics to identify employers at high risk of labor violations, allowing the secretariat to better target its inspections.

According to the National Statistics Institute, informal-sector workers represented nearly 50 percent of total workers in the country. The government generally did not enforce labor laws in this sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were reports of numerous enforced disappearances by criminal groups, sometimes with allegations of collusion with authorities.

Investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of enforced disappearance crimes were rare. Enforced disappearance was a persistent problem

throughout the country, especially in areas with high levels of cartel- or gang-related violence. According to NGO reports, disappearances were a generalized and systematic practice.

Federal and state databases tracking enforced disappearances were incomplete and had data-sharing problems; forensic systems were highly fragmented among the local, state, and federal levels; and the volume of unsolved cases was far greater than the forensic systems were capable of handling. In its data collection, the government often merged statistics on forcibly disappeared persons with missing persons not suspected of being victims of enforced disappearance, making it difficult to compile accurate statistics on the extent of the problem.

The National Search Commission maintained a National Registry of Missing and Unlocated Persons, which contained information on more than 115,000 enforced disappearances and missing persons. Members of the Mechanism for Truth and Historical Clarification, a panel of five independent experts, noted the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) refused to grant access to certain information.

Civil society organizations and families who searched for disappeared persons did so at great personal risk, including death. According to media reports, on January 15, an armed group entered the home of Lorenza Cano Flores, a member of United Salamanca Searching for Disappeared, a group of families searching for missing family members and others. The group

killed Cano's son and spouse, and Cano was reported missing following the January incident. Cano had received several threats for searching for her brother José Francisco, who disappeared in 2018.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, and authorities did not always promptly release those detained unlawfully. The law provided time limits and conditions on pretrial detention, but federal authorities sometimes failed to comply with those time limits and conditions. Caseloads far exceeded the capacity of the federal judicial system. Abuses of time limits on pretrial detention were endemic in state judicial systems.

In June, Brenda Quevedo, who was accused of kidnapping and homicide, was released from prison after more than 15 years in preventive detention without being tried. An investigation by the National Human Rights Commission found Quevedo was tortured while in pretrial detention.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Federal law prohibited torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, as well as the admission of confessions obtained through illicit means as evidence in court. Despite these prohibitions, there were reports security forces abused detainees. Additionally, according to information provided by the National Registry of the Crime of Torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment and sexual exploitation by government agents were reported in detention facilities.

Civil society groups reported torture was a generalized practice. According to official information published by the National Registry of the Crime of Torture, which collected information from the federal government and 28 of the 32 states, there were 1,465 investigations initiated for the crime of torture from January 1 to June 30.

Civil society organizations stated individuals in migratory detention reported cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, including the provision of spoiled food, sensory deprivation, and sleep interruptions due to lights being turned on full time. According to the National Registry of

the Crime of Torture, 2,044 instances of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment were logged from January to July in detention facilities. Civil society groups also reported sexual abuse during detention.

The institutions with the highest number of complaints were the Mexican Institute of Social Security and SEDENA with eight, and the Decentralized Administrative Body for Prevention and Social Readaptation of the Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection with seven. The civil society group Fundar reported impunity for torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment was prevalent among the security forces.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum marriage age was 18, but enforcement was inconsistent across the states. In some states, with a judge's consent, children could marry at younger ages. In 2022, according to the National Statistics Institute, 237,175 girls ages 12-17 were married or living with their partners.

Exhibit 4 - CC2

Designating Cartels And Other Organizations As Foreign Terrorist Organizations And Specially Designated Global Terrorists

 [whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists)

January 21, 2025



[Presidential Actions](#)

The White House

DESIGNATING CARTELS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AS FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS AND SPECIALLY DESIGNATED GLOBAL TERRORISTS

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), 8 U.S.C. 1101 *et seq.*, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), 50 U.S.C. 1701 *et seq.* it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. Purpose. This order creates a process by which certain international cartels (the Cartels) and other organizations will be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, consistent with section 219 of the INA (8 U.S.C. 1189), or Specially Designated Global Terrorists, consistent with IEEPA (50 U.S.C. 1702) and Executive Order 13224 of September 23, 2001 (Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism), as amended.

(a) International cartels constitute a national-security threat beyond that posed by traditional organized crime, with activities encompassing:

- (i) convergence between themselves and a range of extra-hemispheric actors, from designated foreign-terror organizations to antagonistic foreign governments;
- (ii) complex adaptive systems, characteristic of entities engaged in insurgency and asymmetric warfare; and
- (iii) infiltration into foreign governments across the Western Hemisphere.

The Cartels have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere that has not only destabilized countries with significant importance for our national interests but also flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs.

The Cartels functionally control, through a campaign of assassination, terror, rape, and brute force nearly all illegal traffic across the southern border of the United States. In certain portions of Mexico, they function as quasi-governmental entities, controlling nearly all aspects of society. The Cartels' activities threaten the safety of the American people, the security of the United States, and the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere. Their activities, proximity to, and incursions into the physical territory of the United States pose an unacceptable national security risk to the United States.

(b) Other transnational organizations, such as Tren de Aragua (TdA) and La Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) pose similar threats to the United States. Their campaigns of violence and terror in the United States and internationally are extraordinarily violent, vicious, and similarly threaten the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere.

(c) The Cartels and other transnational organizations, such as TdA and MS-13, operate both within and outside the United States. They present an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. I hereby declare a national emergency, under IEEPA, to deal with those threats.

Sec. 2. Policy. It is the policy of the United States to ensure the total elimination of these organizations' presence in the United States and their ability to threaten the territory, safety, and security of the United States through their extraterritorial command-and-control structures, thereby protecting the American people and the territorial integrity of the United States.

Sec. 3. Implementation. (a) Within 14 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of State shall take all appropriate action, in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Director of National Intelligence, to make a recommendation regarding the designation of any cartel or other organization described in section 1 of this order as a Foreign Terrorist Organization consistent with 8 U.S.C. 1189 and/or a Specially Designated Global Terrorist consistent with 50 U.S.C. 1702 and Executive Order 13224.

(b) Within 14 days of the date of this order, the Attorney General and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall take all appropriate action, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to make operational preparations regarding the implementation of any decision I make to invoke the Alien Enemies Act, 50 U.S.C. 21 *et seq.*, in relation to the existence of any qualifying invasion or predatory incursion against the territory of the United States by a qualifying actor, and to prepare such facilities as necessary to expedite the removal of those who may be designated under this order.

Sec. 4. General Provisions. (a) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:

(i) the authority granted by law to an executive department or agency, or the head thereof; or

(ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

THE WHITE HOUSE,

January 20, 2025.

Exhibit 5 - CC3

Designation of International Cartels

 state.gov/designation-of-international-cartels



Fact Sheet

[Office of the Spokesperson](#)

February 20, 2025

The United States remains committed to protecting our nation, the American people, and our hemisphere by stopping the campaigns of violence and terror committed by international cartels and transnational organizations.

Today, the Department of State announces the designation of Tren de Aragua (TdA), Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Cártel de Sinaloa, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Cártel del Noreste (CDN), La Nueva Familia Michoacana (LNFM), Cártel de Golfo (CDG), and Cáteles Unidos (CU) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

- TdA is a transnational organization that originated in Venezuela with cells in Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with further reports of sporadic presence in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil. This brutal criminal group has conducted kidnappings, extorted businesses, bribed public officials, authorized its members to attack and kill U.S. law enforcement, and assassinated a Venezuelan opposition figure.

- MS-13 is a transnational organization that originated in Los Angeles but shifted to Central America as individuals were deported there from the United States. MS-13 actively recruits, organizes, and spreads violence in several countries, primarily in Central America and North America, including El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. MS-13 has conducted numerous violent attacks, including assassination and the use of IEDs and drones, against El Salvador government officials and facilities. Additionally, MS-13 uses public displays of violence to intimidate civilian populations to obtain and control territory and manipulate the electoral process in El Salvador.
- Cártel de Sinaloa is a transnational organization based in Sinaloa, Mexico. It is one of the world's most powerful drug cartels and is one of the largest producers and traffickers of fentanyl and other illicit drugs to the United States. Cártel de Sinaloa has used violence to murder, kidnap, and intimidate civilians, government officials, and journalists.
- CJNG is a transnational organization with a presence in nearly every part of Mexico. In addition to trafficking fentanyl, the group engages in extortion, migrant smuggling, oil and mineral theft, as well as weapons trade. The group has contacts across the Americas, as well as in Australia, China, and Southeast Asia. CJNG has conducted intimidating acts of violence, including attacks on Mexican military and police with military grade weaponry, the use of drones to drop explosives on Mexican law enforcement, and assassinations or attempted assassinations of Mexican officials.
- CDN, formerly known as Los Zetas, is a transnational organization based in northeastern Mexico involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, human smuggling, and other illicit activities. CDN uses violence to exert its criminal control, including attacks against government officials in Mexico.
- LNFM is the successor of the La Familia Michoacana, a violent transnational organization based in the Pacific coast state of Michoacan with operations in the Mexican states Guerrero, Morelos, and Mexico. In addition to drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, LNFM attacks government officials and uses violence, including drone attacks and explosives, to exert its criminal control and terrorize communities.
- CDG is a violent transnational organization based in northeast Mexico involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, human smuggling, and other illicit activities. CDG employs violence, including assassinations of civilians and government officials to intimidate the public and control territory.
- CU is a violent transnational organization that formed from an alliance of multiple cartels and other groups in Michoacán, Mexico. Since its formation, CU has engaged in violent activities which have resulted in numerous civilian, military, and law enforcement casualties.

Terrorist designations expose and isolate entities and individuals, denying them access to the U.S. financial system and the resources they need to carry out attacks. As a result of actions taken today, all property and interests in property of those designated today that are in the United States or that are in possession or control of a U.S. person are blocked, and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions with them. Moreover, designations can assist law enforcement actions of other U.S. agencies and governments.

Today's actions are taken pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, and Executive Order 13224, as amended. FTO designations go into effect upon publication in the Federal Register.

Petitioners requesting removal of those designated today from the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List should refer to the Department of State's [Delisting Guidance](#) page.

Exhibit 6 - CC4

Violence-driven displacement in Mexico: Why including internally displaced persons in national statistics is necessary to inform a protection-based response

May 2024¹

The Latin America and Caribbean region faces an unprecedented forced displacement crisis, in large part because of the Venezuelan situation.² At the same time, the region is home to a considerable number of people displaced inside their own countries due to armed conflict, generalized violence and human rights violations. While Colombia continues to attract the most attention on this topic³ considering the sheer magnitude and its widely praised legal framework towards internal displaced populations,⁴ emerging scenarios of internal displacement due to organized crime, extortion and widespread insecurity in Central America and Mexico are alarming and warrant closer consideration.⁵

Internal displacement in Central America and Mexico is often characterized as an urban phenomenon linked to criminal activity and violence, yet displacement from rural locations is not uncommon.⁶ Comprehensive, up-to-date, data on the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is limited, in part, because of the inherent difficulties in collecting regular data on this “hard-to-reach” population who may be hesitant to report their situation. **Figure 1** shows the official estimated IDP population due to violence, as well as the share of the total population, in Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico.⁷ The variation in the years of reporting illustrates the lack of regular data collection for this population, and thus the importance of their inclusion in the official production of national statistics.

¹ This policy note was jointly authored by Velma Mukheke Mukoro (Fellow at the World Bank – UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, JDC), Craig Loschmann (Senior Economist, UNHCR), Domenico Tabasso (Senior Economist, JDC) and Hisham Galal (Statistics and Data Analysis Officer, UNHCR). The authors would like to thank UNHCR Mexico, as well as CONAPO (National Population Council) and INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), for all their support and comprehensive peer review that contributed to a more contextual analysis within this note. The authors would also like to thank Melany Markham (Senior Communication Officer, JDC) for her support in the production of this brief. The analysis presented relies on survey-based data to investigate respondents’ concerns around crime and other socioeconomic issues, and is not intended to provide any indication regarding the number of IDPs in Mexico.

² See [UNHCR Global Focus Venezuela Situation](#) for more information.

³ See [JDC Literature Review Database](#).

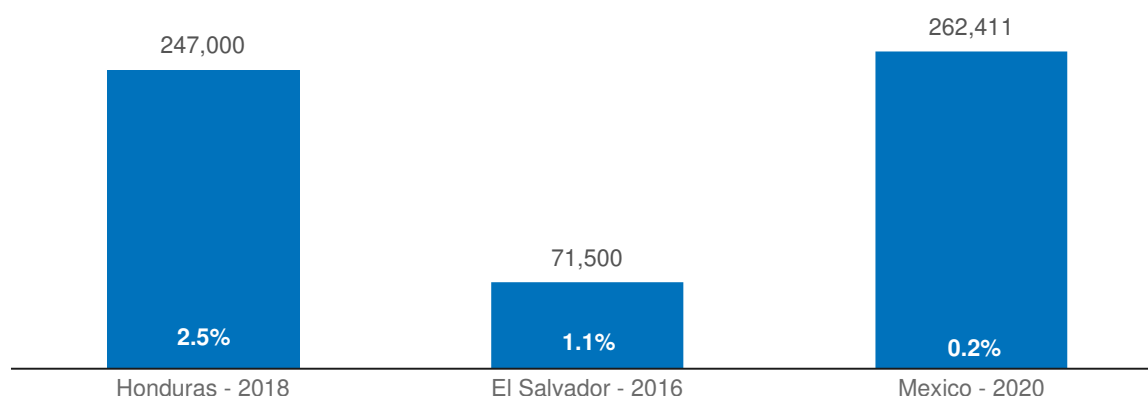
⁴ See Fadnes and Horst (2009). [Responses to Internal Displacement in Colombia: Guided by What Principles?](#)

⁵ See [UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2023](#) for the most updated figures.

⁶ See [UNDP and UNHCR 2021](#).

⁷ See also [IDMC Country Profiles](#) in each country case, as well as [UNHCR Fact Sheet for El Salvador](#).

Figure 1: Internal displacement due to violence and percentage of total population (per year)



Note: The data sources are: 2018 IDP Profiling in Honduras, 2016 IDP Profiling in El Salvador, 2020 Population and Housing Census Mexico's figure is considered an underestimate since the 2020 Census is not designed to fully capture internal movement due to violence because it does not consider multiple causes of movement nor intra-municipal displacement, and only movement taking place five years prior to data collection. UNHCR is currently working with key authorities to fully incorporate the IRIS Recommendations in production of official statistics.

Honduras was the first country in the region to acknowledge internal displacement, and established the Interagency Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence (Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de las Personas Desplazadas Internamente por la Violencia or CIPPDV) in 2013 to give visibility to the issue and work towards solutions. In an effort to document the number of IDPs in the country, CIPPDV conducted a profiling exercise in 2018 which provides the most recent official estimate of 247,000 IDPs. In El Salvador, internal displacement was recognized by the Supreme Court in 2018, and in that year a government-led profiling exercise reported 71,500 persons displaced between 2006 and 2016.⁸ In Mexico, internal displacement is an under-documented issue despite the growing number of people forced from their homes in recent years. According to the 2020 Census, 262,411 were internally displaced due to violence or insecurity, although it is acknowledged that this is a considerable underestimate as it does not include intra-municipal movements nor movements for multiple reasons.⁹

Considering the extent and growth of internal displacement in Central America and Mexico, it is surprising to see the limited scope of research on the topic.¹⁰ While there are

⁸ See [UNHCR's Microdata Library](#) for data in the case of Honduras and El Salvador.

⁹ CONAPO (2021). [Diagnóstico nacional sobre la situación del desplazamiento forzado interno en México](#). Secretaría de Gobernación / Consejo Nacional de Población.

¹⁰ See [JDC Literature Review Database](#) for relevant studies globally, as well as [Sanchez-Mojica, 2020](#) focused on internal displacement in Latin America.

a number of possible explanations for this, one is the fundamental lack of data on the number of IDPs and their socioeconomic situation over time. As such, the integration of IDPs in official statistics based on censuses and nationally representative surveys, as promoted by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS)¹¹, is essential to fully understand the factors driving internal displacement, and the unique vulnerabilities that IDPs face in their day-to-day lives. Only through regularly collected, methodologically sound data can we better measure, and therefore respond, to the needs of IDPs.

In this brief, we take a closer look at internal displacement in the case of Mexico. We aim to shed light on how those forced to flee their communities due to crime perceive safety in their new destinations. A key assumption is that displaced persons face unique consequences of insecurity, such as psychological injury due to trauma, which may impact their integration and thus prosperity in their new homes.

It is worth emphasizing that the analysis is not intended to be comprehensive nor is the goal to estimate an official figure of IDPs which is not feasible with the data source used (see *Data and methods*). For instance, there is a clear limitation in the way IDPs can be defined in the sample resulting in an imprecise measure of internal displacement. This still allows for an assessment of the relationship between the occurrence of having changed ones' residence due to crime with perceptions of safety, but it does not allow for an estimate of the population itself. In addition, we do not incorporate climate-driven displacement into the analytical framework, despite the link between natural disasters, insecurity and poverty more generally.¹² Regardless, the hope is that this brief may provoke deeper reflections about the dynamics of displacement due to violence across Central America and Mexico, and highlight the importance of including IDPs in national data systems.

¹¹ See EGRISS' [International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics \(IRIS\)](#).

¹² See [UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) for more on the intersectionality of these various factors contributing to displacement.

Data and methods

Data for this analysis originates from the National Surveys of Victimization and Perception of Public Security (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública or ENVIPE) of 2021 and 2022, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía or INEGI).¹³ These surveys collect individual-level experiences and perspectives on crime, insecurity, and the socioeconomic and environmental causes of current vulnerabilities. The total number of observations for data collected in the year prior to publication (2020 and 2021) is 92,051 and 92,103, respectively.

This study is based on a regression analysis using ordinary least squares (OLS) of the pooled samples from both years of the ENVIPE. The use of a pooled sample provides greater statistical power due to the greater number of observations. Importantly though, we are not interested in estimating the population cumulatively over multiple years as this would be invalid considering the same person could be counted more than once. The pooled samples from ENVIPE cannot be used to produce population statistics. The unit of analysis is the individual event and the main variable of interest is defined as a respondent having changed their residence due to crime *in the previous year* as captured in ENVIPE questionnaire¹⁴, in relation to those who did not move or perhaps moved for other reasons such as economic ones. Considering that the identification is based on a question that makes explicit reference to a change only in the year prior, and by controlling for the year in the model, we are able to produce valid estimates on the relationship between the outcomes in question and the variable of interest. In all models we control for a range of sociodemographic characteristics: age, sex, location (that is rural, semi-urban and urban), educational attainment, employment status and year.

The outcomes in focus are respondents' perceptions of safety across three distinct geographic areas: their state, municipality and suburb. We complement this with a generated index of an individuals' perceptions of safety. The index is generated using factor analysis, taking into consideration how safe people feel in public spaces including markets, malls, streets, bus stops and public transports, if they had suffered harm and loss due to crime, and if their life routine had been disrupted due to concerns for insecurity. Moreover, we also look at three dimensions of self-reported concerns: 1) crime, which considers concern for drug trade, lack of security, corruption and impunity; 2) economic, which considers concern for poverty, unemployment and inflation; and 3) social and environmental issues, which considers concern for natural disasters, lack of water, education and health.

While the survey provides the opportunity to closely examine the vulnerabilities of people who changed their residence due to crime, there are clear data-related limitations including some

pertaining to the identification issues mentioned prior. We use for our identification a variable that indicates change in residence due to crime in the year prior. However, we are not able to assess directly whether those that did not change their residence due to crime implies no movement or a change in residence for other reasons (e.g., economic). Second, when pooling the samples from the ENVIPE 2021 and 2022, the treatment group (movers due to crime) is a small sub-group of 1,301 people, compared to 182,853 people who did not move. Third, we are not able to assess the nature of the change in residence due to crime, meaning where they moved from and under what conditions. Fourth, the survey does not include retrospective questions on the extent to which households were exposed to crime and insecurity in their previous location, only that they moved to protect themselves from crime. Finally, respondents were not asked about their intentions and preparations to move to other locations due to present vulnerabilities. Overall, more detailed information is crucial to ascertaining the drivers of displacement in order to explain how the decision to move or stay comes about, and to anticipate future internal displacement.

How do people displaced by crime perceive safety and how is security perceived relative to other concerns?

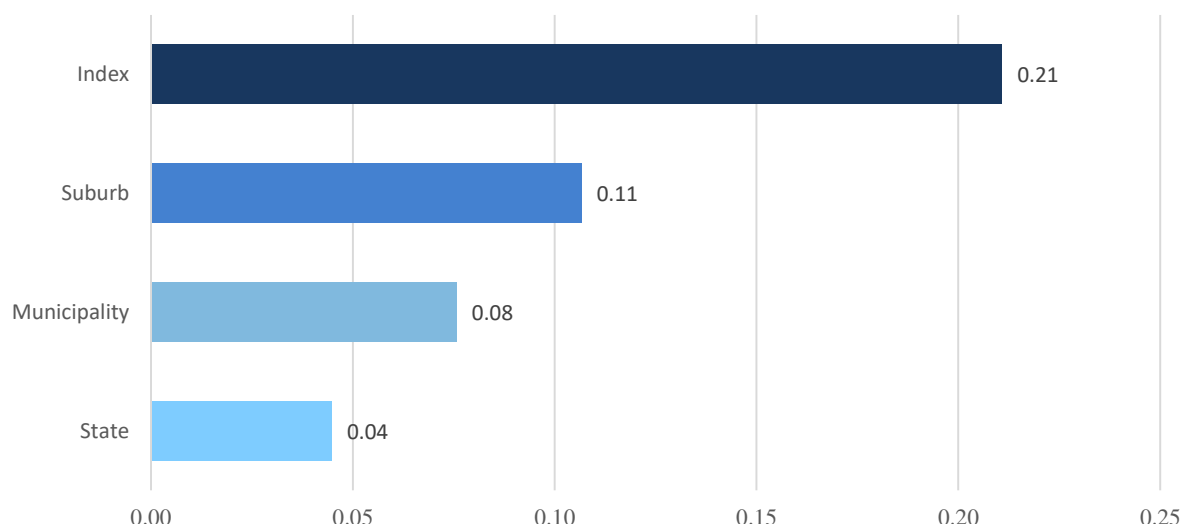
People who changed their residence due to crime have a greater perception of insecurity in their current neighborhoods. [Figure 2](#) shows how respondents who moved for safety reasons perceive insecurity across three distinct geographic areas: their state, municipality and suburb. The comparison group is those who did not change their residence or did so for other reasons, and all results are statistically significant at conventional levels. We find that concerns for safety for those who changed their residence due to crime are highly localized. For example, relative to those who did not move, or those who moved for reasons other than crime, respondents are eleven percentage points more likely to report concerns for safety in ones' suburb, whereas they are eight and four percentage points more likely to report concerns within their municipality and state, respectively.

We also find complementary evidence, based on the generated insecurity index, that takes into consideration how safe people feel in public spaces, if they had suffered harm and loss due to crime, and if their routine had been disrupted due to insecurity concerns. Here, individuals who moved due to crime have a 21 percentage point higher insecurity score compared to those who did not move or moved for other reasons.

¹³ See [ENVIPE 2022](#).

¹⁴ See question 4.11 in the [ENVIPE questionnaire](#).

Figure 2: Perception of safety among respondents who changed their residence due to crime versus those who did not move or moved for non-crime reasons



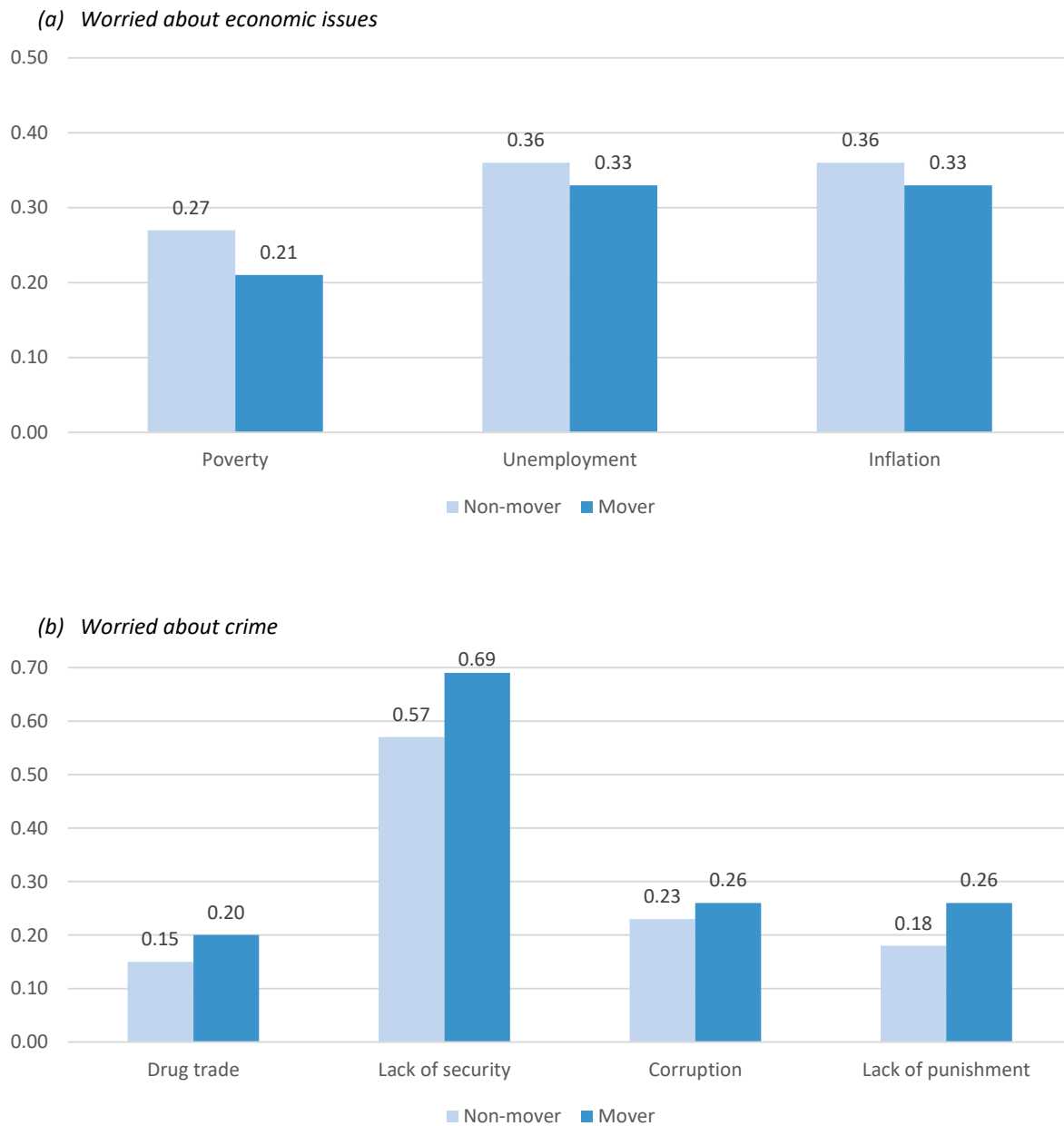
Note: all models control for age, sex, location (urban, semi-urban, and rural), education, employment status and year. The estimated effects report the likelihood of reporting a feeling of unsafety by those who moved residence because of crime with respect to those who did not move or moved for non-crime reasons. All reported coefficients are statistically significant at 1% level. The data source is the pooled ENVIPE 2021 and 2022, with the year included as a control.

Concern for economic hardship and crime, as well as for social and environmental issues, differs for those displaced by crime.

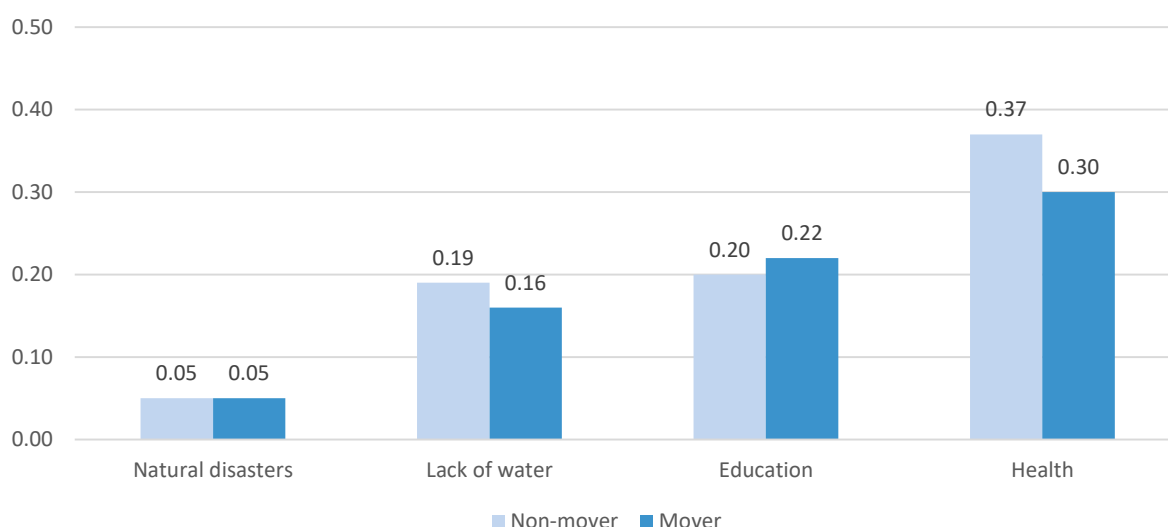
Figure 3 highlights how people who changed their residence due to crime in the previous year are less likely to report being worried about economic hardship (*panel a*) such as poverty, unemployment or inflation, as well as social and environmental issues (*panel c*) such as natural disasters, lack of water, education and health. Conversely, they are more likely to be worried about crime (*panel b*) such as the drug trade, lack of security, corruption and offenders going unpunished. This is not to say that economic or social and environmental issues are unimportant. However, respondents seem to be more concerned about security, which may reflect their experience with crime leading to their movement.¹⁵

¹⁵ All differences in the mean share between the two groups of respondents are statistically significant, with the only exception for those who declare to be worried about natural disasters (*panel c*).

Figure 3: Respondents worried about economic, crime-related, social and environmental issues, by change in residence status



(c) Worried about social and environmental issues



Note: The graphs report the mean share of respondents who report that they are worried about these issues, by those who moved residence because of crime in the previous year, compared to those who did not move or moved for other reasons. The data source is the pooled ENVIPE 2021 and 2022.

Strategic reflections

The [United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) makes it clear that, with the number of IDPs globally doubling over the last 10 years, we currently face an untenable situation. Women, children and marginalized groups often face the greatest impact. In Central America and Mexico, the prevalence of organized crime, extortion and generalized insecurity in some regions is contributing to forced displacement and trapping them in a precarious situation for years, if not decades. If we are to meet the Secretary General Antonio Guterres' vision to better resolve, prevent and address internal displacement crises, a clear point of departure is to improve how we measure those displaced from their homes including through the integration of IDPs in national data systems.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been working, with the support of the World Bank – UNHCR Joint Data Center for Forced Displacement (JDC), with national authorities in Central America and Mexico to aid the inclusion of IDPs in official statistics through the implementation of the [International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics](#) (IRIS). In Honduras a JDC-supported project facilitates the inclusion of IDP identification questions and durable solutions indicators in

the national multi-purpose household survey in order for IDP statistics to become a regular feature of Honduras' statistical publications. Similarly, the National Statistical Office in El Salvador took a first step towards including IDP identification questions in the national multi-purpose household survey to allow data disaggregation by displacement status. More generally, UNHCR supports the Central American Integration System's Commission on Central American Statistics (Comisión Centroamericana de Estadística or CENTROESTAD, de la Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana or SICA) with a migration and displacement working group which has a dedicated workplan to strengthen the production of official statistics on internal displacement (either due to conflict or disaster) in Central American countries.

In Mexico, there have been additional efforts such as capacity building and cross-institutional initiatives. In November 2022, with the support of the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación or SEGOB) and other United Nations agencies and international organizations, UNHCR convened the "Workshop on Internal Displacement, Data Systems, International Standards and Practices, and the Way Forward in Mexico" to promote the international framework and methodologies that produce IDP statistics in accordance with IRIS. As a result of this and ongoing collaboration among INEGI and the National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población or CONAPO), in January 2023 UNHCR submitted a formal proposal through the Public Consultation of the Intercensal Survey 2025 to incorporate questions in its questionnaire to identify IDPs; in January 2024, INEGI announced the incorporation of a question on internal displacement that may allow IDP identification. Although there are still some missing components for a more complete identification of this population, this sets a stepstone in EGRIS implementation in Mexico.¹⁶

While measuring IDPs in a consistent and comparable manner is a necessary first step towards a protection-based response, equally important as the next step is the design of interventions that address their unique needs and vulnerabilities. In the above analysis, we find that displaced respondents in Mexico continue to have safety concerns within their local communities, and their worries about crime are noticeable greater in comparison to non-displaced respondents. Considering that being forced from one's home due to violence is often a traumatic experience and, as the psychological impact is likely to be long-term, a dedicated mental health response is necessary. Interventions that include psychosocial support may contribute to local socio-economic integration of IDPs and help them thrive in their new communities.

¹⁶ See [Consulta Pública Encuesta intercensal 2025](#) for more information.

Today there is widespread recognition that internal displacement is not only due to violence, but that climate change and other natural disasters are also risk factors. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to make a clear distinction between displacement that is due to violence, climate, disasters or other issues as they are often interlinked, leading to a situation where compounding risks makes remaining in ones' home impossible. The response, therefore, needs to be comprehensive bridging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. As the United Nations' Secretary-General himself states:

"The plight of internally displaced persons is more than a humanitarian issue. It takes an integrated approach – combining development, peacebuilding, human rights, climate action and disaster risk reduction efforts."

[-United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#)

Exhibit 7 - CC5



Internal Displacement

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has a commitment to serve and protect internally displaced people dating back over fifty years, as mandated by [General Assembly resolution 428 \(V\)](#). In Mexico, **UNHCR has been working since 2019** at the request of the authorities to provide technical assistance and strengthen existing prevention and response mechanisms to protect internally displaced people. In addition, the governments of Chiapas, Guerrero and Michoacán, to name only a few, have also requested UNHCR's support to enhance protection for internally displaced people.

Who is an internally displaced person?

According to the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), internally displaced people are:

- **Individuals or groups of people who have been forced to flee their homes** as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, human rights violations, or natural or human-made disasters, and **who have not crossed any internationally recognized state borders**.

Internal displacement can cause multiple violations of human rights. Often displaced people face concrete legal or factual barriers that prevent them from accessing their rights.

Lines of Work of UNHCR



Capacity-building and technical support to develop laws and public policies



Technical support to provide protection during emergencies and mass internal displacement events



Promotion of a coordinated response



Information management and methodologies for data production on internal displacement



Support to facilitate durable solutions for internally displaced people



Actions for community-based protection and the effective participation of internally displaced people

Internal Displacement in Mexico

In the absence of official data, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that by the end of 2023, more than **392,000 people** in Mexico were **internally displaced** due to violence. Estimates from the 2024 National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security (ENVIPE) by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) calculate that some **1,006,800 people** had to relocate to protect themselves from crime in 2023.

Legislation

At the national level, a general law on internal displacement has been pending Senate approval since 2020. **At the state level**, there are four laws in Chiapas, Guerrero, Sinaloa, and Zacatecas. Additionally, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Sinaloa, and Sonora have criminalized arbitrary displacement. There are also coordination platforms in Chiapas, Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Sinaloa.



Responses for the protection of internally displaced people



At the federal level, in collaboration with the Migration Policy, Registration, and Identity Unit, UNHCR worked on a guide for registering internally displaced people to aid in their identification and case management. Additionally, a legal and public policy analysis was conducted at the federal level while a specific general law is being approved. With the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNHCR coordinated the development of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation's [Manual on Internal](#)

[Displacement](#) to provide protection tools. In 2023 alone, UNHCR provided technical assistance to develop over **20 instruments** in this area.

In collaboration with INEGI and the National Population Council (CONAPO), UNHCR proposed incorporating questions into the 2025 Intercensal Survey to identify internally displaced people, aiming to obtain official national data.

At the state level, the [Report on the Internal Displacement Characterization Exercise in Chihuahua](#) was published, the first of its kind in Mexico, with the support of over **20 stakeholders**. This tool provides key data to understand the context of internal displacement in the state and the needs of those experiencing it. In this context, INEGI conducted the country's first specific survey on internal displacement ([ECADEFI-CHIH 2021](#)).

In **Michoacán**, authorities responded within 48 hours to mass internal displacement events in Apatzingán, thanks to technical meetings organized with the Secretariat of Migration, the Apatzingán City Council, and civil society actors, with the support of UNHCR. Previously, coordination mechanisms for an immediate response had not been activated.

In **Sinaloa**, UNHCR collaborates with the Secretariat of Welfare and Sustainable Development (SEBIDES) and the Autonomous University of the West to strengthen the State Registry of Internally Displaced People. UNHCR also supported SEBIDES in developing the regulations for the internal displacement law and a care program.

The agency provided its methodology to guide the development of laws and policies on internal displacement to the authorities in **Chiapas**, enabling them to strengthen the specific law in that state and create its regulations. In **Oaxaca**, this methodology was also used to consult with internally displaced people on a proposed law in this area.

In **Guerrero**, UNHCR supported civil society with training in mental health and psychosocial support, legal guidance tools, and supplies. Additionally, it provided technical assistance to the government to develop protection measures for individuals at risk of displacement following the impact of Hurricane Otis, benefiting more than 10,000 people.

For more information: [UNHCR Mexico Webpage](#); [Global Focus Mexico](#); [Data Portal Mexico](#); [Global Appeal 2024](#); [Twitter](#); [UNHCR Mexico Newsletter](#).

www.unhcr.org - **Contact:** Regina De La Portilla, Senior External Relations Officer, delaport@unhcr.org.

Exhibit 8 - CC6

Mexico Country Security Report

 osac.gov/Content/Report/8f3ac9f0-a827-455f-bf61-1c4142378221

4/15/2025 | Report

Published: April 15, 2025

This report is intended to supplement the U.S. Department of State Mexico Travel Advisory and [Mexico Country Information Page](#).

Mexico Travel Advisory

Mexico's [Travel Advisory](#) is unique in that each individual state—as well as Mexico City, which functions like an independent state in many regards—receives its own advisory level. Mexico's Travel Advisory no longer includes an overall level for the entire country. Each state's advisory lists the reason for its designation, as well as areas of particular concern. At the date of this report's publication, 6 states are designated at Level 4 (Do Not Travel), 7 states are designated at Level 3 (Reconsider Travel), 17 states are designated at Level 2 (Exercise Increased Caution), and 2 states are designated at Level 1 (Exercise Normal Precautions). Read the entire Travel Advisory when planning travel to multiple states.

Review OSAC's report, [Understanding Mexico's Travel Advisory](#).

Crime

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Mexico City, Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, and Tijuana as being **CRITICAL**-threat locations; Guadalajara, Hermosillo, and Monterrey as **HIGH**-threat locations; and Mérida as a **MEDIUM**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests.

The U.S. Department of State has included a Crime "C" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Mexico, indicating that there may be widespread violent crime and/or organized crime present in the country, and that local law enforcement may have limited ability to respond to serious crimes.

Mexico suffers from high rates of crime, exacerbated by its low rate of criminal convictions. Most crime in Mexico goes unreported or simply cannot be accurately captured due to large number of individuals who have "disappeared." According to

preliminary data from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security (SESNSP), the national homicide rate increased marginally from 23.29 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2023 to 23.35 in 2024. Although there is no evidence of criminals specifically targeting foreign or U.S. businesses and personnel, criminals will target victims based on the appearance of affluence, vulnerability, or lack of awareness. Armed robbery, kidnapping, car theft, credit card fraud, and various forms of residential/street crime are daily concerns. Criminals can easily resell jewelry (including expensive watches) and cellular phones in illegal markets. Although Mexico has strict gun-control laws, criminals often carry handguns, knives, and increasingly high-caliber weapons.

Be careful of cash transactions on the street. A hurried transaction for merchandise often leaves the customer with shoddy or counterfeit goods, out-of-circulation valueless currency, or incorrect change. Some vendors will accept U.S. dollars, but at their own exchange rate.

Organized criminal groups continue to cause significant levels of violence throughout parts of the country. Mexico continues to experience a combination of conditions that collectively degrade the security environment in certain areas. The government has captured some of its most wanted criminals, which has fragmented criminal groups. The fragmentation of organized criminal groups has led some groups to be less organized and disciplined. The northern half of Mexico has been a higher-threat area, primarily due to organized criminal conflicts and competition for drug trafficking routes to the U.S. However, other regions that see inter-cartel conflict also see increases in violence like in the states of Colima, Zacatecas, and along the Guatemalan border in Chiapas, for example.

Various groups have splintered into smaller gangs, which have branched out into different illegal business activities, leading to associated violence spreading across Mexico. One common practice is for gangs to charge protection fees or add their own tax to products/services, with the threat of violence for those who fail to pay. Charging businesses for the ability to operate is another common scheme. Extortionists have targeted foreign and U.S. companies, attacking some for not responding to demands. Security conditions can significantly increase operating costs. Some criminal groups mandate that individuals or even whole communities work for them as lookouts or couriers. Others will threaten municipal and state administrators into accepting corrupt practices. Beheadings, lynching, torture, and other gruesome displays of violence, as well as high numbers of forced disappearances, have become routine occurrences in some locations. Criminals have killed numerous journalists and bloggers for reporting on these incidents.

Regarding cartel violence, wrong-place/wrong-time incidents present the greatest threat to personal safety. The best ways to reduce the risk is to practice good personal security habits, especially maintaining a high-level of situational awareness and promptly departing from potentially dangerous situations. The Government of Mexico continues to engage in efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). To combat violence, the federal government has deployed military troops and the National Guard throughout the country. The location and timing of armed engagements are unpredictable. The vast majority of those killed in such engagements have been members of TCOs and Mexican security forces, but innocent bystanders have died in shootouts between TCOs and Mexican officials.

At present, the two largest TCOs in the country are the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel. Each group has a nationwide presence, although the CJNG has engaged on a more aggressive campaign to expand into new territory. The Sinaloa Cartel, while once the dominant TCO in the country, has its largest presence in the northwestern region of the country and has suffered from internal competition for leadership since the arrests of key leaders Joaquín Guzmán Loera's in 2016 and Ismael Zambada Garcia in 2024. Other TCOs in the country with a significant presence include the Gulf Cartel and Northeastern Cartel, based in the states of Tamaulipas; and Familia Michoacana, based in Michoacan and Mexico State. Local groups, like the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel in Guanajuato or the Juarez Cartel/La Linea, have smaller geographical footprints but contribute heavily to violence in the areas in which they operate.

The frequency of residential break-ins has declined over the last decade. Homes with heightened security make harder targets. Homeowners should vet domestic staff and avoid keeping large quantities of cash at home.

Credit card security remains a concern, particularly in tourist areas. There have been reports of criminal use of credit cards. There are numerous reports in which criminals skimmed U.S. credit/debit card numbers, stealing the money in their debit accounts, or fraudulently charging their credit cards. In addition to skimming, the risk of physical theft of credit or debit cards also exists. Criminals may also acquire card data manually when cards are handed to or left momentarily with employees of businesses. Try to use ATMs in bank branches during business hours. Portable credit card terminals are commonly used in Mexico. Always request the establishment bring a portable credit card terminal to charge a credit card in your physical presence.

A variety of road conditions exists throughout the region. Toll (*cuota*) highways are comparable to U.S. interstate highway standards with multiple traffic lanes and broad paved shoulders. These toll highways are designated on maps with an "D" after the highway number (i.e. 57D). The *cuotas* generally have better lighting, frequent police

patrols, fewer access points (on/off-ramps), and are generally a safer method of overland transit, but their isolation leaves travelers vulnerable to crime, especially at night. Speed, nighttime travel, weather (especially the summer rainy season), unfamiliarity with the road, lack of lighting, and other elements are contributing factors to serious traffic accidents and incidents on highways. Reduce the risk of carjacking by limiting intercity travel to daylight hours.

Drivers on roads and highways may encounter government checkpoints, which often include a military staff. The government has deployed National Guard and military personnel to combat organized criminal groups. Police also set up various administrative checkpoints in and around cities (e.g., speed control, sobriety checkpoints) and along the highways (e.g., vehicle registration checkpoints). However, criminal organizations sometimes erect their own unauthorized checkpoints and have killed/abducted motorists who fail to stop and/or pay a “toll.” Likewise, self-defense groups have established checkpoints in their communities and have shot and wounded travelers who fail to stop. Additionally, in states like Michoacán and Guerrero, protesters can often set up checkpoints or take over official toll booths and demand motorists pay a fee to cross them. They can get violent if denied. When approaching a checkpoint, regardless of whether it is official, cooperate and avoid any actions that may appear suspicious or aggressive.

It is common for strangers to approach vehicles asking for directions or change, handing out flyers, washing windows, or selling goods. Be alert, lock doors, and keep windows up far enough in case they are not well intentioned. When stopped in traffic, leave adequate distance between vehicles to escape. Do not stop to assist strangers whose vehicles appear broken down. Park inside a residential or hotel compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location of your visit.

Visitors should travel by intercity bus only during daylight hours, and only by first-class conveyance whenever possible. Although there have been several reports of bus hijackings and robberies on toll roads, buses on toll roads have experienced a lower rate of incidents than second- and third-class buses that travel on less secure, libre highways. There have been occasional reports of significant security incidents (apart from theft) on tourist buses in/around Mexico City and to nearby tourist destinations.

The Embassy does not recommend using libre taxis, those that pick-up fares on the street after customers hail them; they may have criminal links. Sitio (radio-dispatched) taxis are far safer, more reliable, and worth the added expense. Patrons cannot hail these types of taxis from the street; they must order them by phone or meet at a designated taxi stand. Sitio taxis in Mexico City most often have meters and government registrations. In addition, the Embassy recommends that

government employees use ride-sharing apps that allow consumers to verify the driver and vehicle number. Note that not all platforms operate in all areas.

The issue of femicide, defined as killing a woman because of her sex (as opposed to any killing of a woman) has been a major issue in Mexico, and is a federal offense punishable by 40 to 60 years in prison. It is also a criminal offense in all states distinct from homicide. According to SESNSP, in 2023 there were 3,429 women and girls murdered in Mexico, with 851 of those cases deemed femicides by authorities. In 2024, femicides declined slightly, with 845. Rape and sexual assault are serious problems in some resort areas. Many incidents occur at night or during the early morning hours, in hotel rooms, on hotel grounds, or on deserted beaches. Assailants have drugged the drinks of victims before assaulting them.

The following section regarding areas of criminal concern is separated by consular district. To locate which consular district a particular location falls within, visit the [Find Your Consular Location](#) webpage. Also consider the [Map of Restricted Areas](#), which reflects the Travel Advisory restrictions.

Mexico City Consular District

Mexico City can be visited without major issue by following travel recommendations that would be applicable in many large Latin American cities. The city has made some gains regarding citizen security in recent years, with overall homicides decreasing since 2019. The homicide rate in 2024 was estimated to be 11.01 homicides per 100,000 residents. This marks a slight increase from 2023 when the homicide rate was 10.42 homicides per 100,000.

Neighborhoods (or *colonias*) of the city that tend to be safer for visitors include Polanco, Santa Fe, Lomas de Chapultepec, Coyoacan, La Condesa, Reforma, San Rafael, San Angel, Roma, Navarte, Juarez, and Cuauthemoc. However, violent crime may occur throughout the city. Therefore, it is recommended to maintain a low profile and exercise increased situational awareness, especially when moving between locations. Many OSAC members navigate the city using rideshare apps, like Uber or DiDi, but it is less common for executive/VIP travelers. The main types of crimes that short-term visitors suffer in Mexico City are petty street crime, including pickpocketing, robbery, mugging, or scams that target tourists. Most of these are crimes of opportunity, so limiting those opportunities is key, by being mindful of the locations you visit, who you engage with, how you transit the city, and how you appear to others.

In Mexico City, municipal buses, rapid transit buses (Metrobus), and the Metro (subway) are generally safe to use. City buses and the Metro may be crowded.

Passengers should be on the alert for pickpockets and other thieves, especially on the most crowded, busiest routes during rush hour. Avoid non-municipal buses (micros).

Review OSAC's Benchmarking Report, [Mexico City Travel SOPs and Executive Protection](#)

The U.S. Department of State lists Guerrero as a Level 4: Do Not Travel location. In Guerrero (incl. Acapulco, Taxco, and Zihuatanejo), homicides increased by about [25%](#) from 2022 to 2023, after seeing decreases from 2019 to 2022. The state homicide rate remained steadily high in 2024 at an estimated 47 homicides per 100,000. Guerrero has areas that are largely controlled by local criminal groups, with turf wars and clashes causing violence. The state maintains control in some tourist destinations, but is in a constant struggle with criminal groups.

Clashes between criminal groups and government security forces or rival criminal groups are not uncommon, especially in rural areas of the *Tierra Caliente*. Inhabitants of rural areas have been displaced due to violence. In the southern part of the state, groups of thieves operate, as well as self-defense groups. They often set up *retenes* (roadblocks) and force drivers to step out for inspection, which can lead to theft or assault. It is advised to avoid driving across Guerrero.

In October 2023, Hurricane Otis rapidly strengthened to a Category 5 storm before making landfall near Acapulco, devastating the city. While infrastructure has recovered somewhat, organized crime maintains a strong presence in the city. Violence may occur throughout, including in the hotel zone, where homicides are not uncommon.

Michoacán (incl. Morelia, Zamora, and Lázaro Cárdenas) remains violent and the U.S. Department of State lists it as a Level 4: Do Not Travel location. Shootouts between security forces and criminal groups are not uncommon, particularly near the border with Jalisco and Guanajuato, as well as in the areas surrounding Apatzingán, Zamora, and Uruapan. Michoacán has a history of armed self-defense groups that engage criminal groups and government security alike. Attempts in 2023 to reassemble some self-defense groups to combat criminal organizations like CJNG and Los Viagras in parts of Michoacan, saw violent responses from organized crime.

In the state of Guanajuato (incl. Leon, Salamanca, and San Miguel de Allende), violence remains high, leading Guanajuato to be the state with the highest number of recorded homicides since 2018. In 2024, Guanajuato led Mexican states in total homicides with 3,167. Efforts by the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) to impose themselves on the state has led to ongoing violence with the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (CSRL) in recent years. Local criminal groups often engage police, with 60

police officers reported killed in the state in 2023 and 61 in 2024, more than any other Mexican state. Fuel theft has also contributed to the high levels of violence in the state of Guanajuato. Popular tourist destinations like San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato City do not experience such high levels of crime compared to other parts of the state. Yet, due to the high levels of violence in other parts of the state, travelers should exercise caution while visiting.

The state of Chiapas (which includes Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristobal de las Casas) has seen a sharp rise in violence since 2022. The Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have maintained an ongoing conflict for control of trafficking routes between Mexico and Guatemala leading to increased violence in areas near the border. Additionally, Chiapas is home to the indigenous political movement known as the Zapatistas, or EZLN, which led an armed uprising in 1994 and still exists in the state, as well as other armed paramilitaries.

The small state of Morelos (which includes Cuernavaca) has also seen sharp increases in violent crime in the past two years, with government officials also caught in corruption scandals. Several municipalities have seen concerning increases in homicide rates as well as increases in vehicular robbery and extortion on roadways heading south, out of Mexico City into Morelos state. Morelos' 2024 homicide rate is estimated at 73.99 homicides per 100,000 residents, the second highest state homicide rate in the country and triple the national average.

The central states of Hidalgo (incl. Pachuca) and Puebla (incl. Puebla, Tehuacán, and San Martín Texmelucan) struggle with TCO conflict and fuel theft, particularly in an area known as the Red Triangle. Reporting indicates municipalities that have pipelines passing through them typically have higher indices of crime.

Veracruz (incl. Veracruz, Xalapa, and Coatzacoalcos), and many states in central Mexico, see higher rates of cargo theft and vehicle robbery are common on highways between the Port of Veracruz and Puebla.

Ciudad Juárez Consular District

Crime and violence remain serious problems throughout the state of Chihuahua, particularly in the south and in the Sierra Mountains, including Copper Canyon. Most of the state is off-limits to U.S. government personnel. While there is no indication criminals specifically target U.S. citizens, violence and crime rates remain at critical levels in this area of Mexico. Those traveling to Ciudad Juárez and the city of Chihuahua must guard against robbery, carjacking, theft, and burglary. A significant number of homicides in each city are targeted cartel/gang-related actions, where the perpetrators generally avoid injuring innocent bystanders. Most violent crime occurs

outside the city center of Ciudad Juárez, especially to the east and south, however it is not uncommon for incidents to occur throughout the city.

While not common, carjackings can occur in the state of Chihuahua. Most carjacking plays out where the assailants block the victim's vehicle with another vehicle. These incidents can occur during the day and at night in all areas of the state. Living or working in a location with access-control measures decreases the chances of carjacking. If you are traveling with a personal vehicle, you should not leave valuables in the vehicle, especially not in plain view.

The Chihuahua state government and Ciudad Juárez city government have taken steps to reduce extortion with mixed results. Large businesses (including manufacturing plants) are not immune to extortion. A frequent method of extortion involves a telephone call in which the perpetrators threaten harm to the person/business if they do not pay for protection. These phone calls are often random and can originate from outside of the state, sometimes from inside Mexican prisons. Overall, about 95% of extortions are thought to go unreported.

In 2024, large migrant flows saw increased stress on Ciudad Juárez as a major port of entry between the U.S. and Mexico. Migrants are common targets of extortion and kidnapping as organized crime groups coerce migrants to use their smuggling services or target victims for trafficking purposes. Migrants do not pose a major threat to travelers, but at times their large numbers and occasional protests have led to disruptions or closures at pedestrian, vehicular, and railroad border crossings. Migrant numbers at the border decreased significantly in early 2025. Travelers moving between the U.S. and Mexico should check CBP's [Border Wait Times](#) webpage and adjust their travel accordingly.

In 2024 the state of Chihuahua (whose border with the U.S. runs from New Mexico to the Big Bend of Texas) recorded an estimated 2,067 [reported homicides](#). This was a decrease from 2023, when the state registered 2,122 homicides. Homicide numbers have been steady over the last three years. About half of homicides in the state occur in Ciudad Juárez, which has the second highest number of homicides among Mexican cities with 988, or about 48% of homicides in the state.

Guadalajara Consular District

From 2018 to 2023, the state of Jalisco saw a 60% decrease in crimes, with vehicular robbery, robbery of businesses, robbery of individuals, home robberies, cargo theft, and bank robbery all seeing at least a 50% reduction. Violent crime has also seen reductions in recent years, however, to a lesser degree. The homicide rate in 2024

fell to 21.06 homicides per 100,000 from 23.13 in 2024. However, the state has one of the highest number of reported disappearances in the country.

Guadalajara experienced high numbers of discoveries of clandestine graves with human remains in 2023. Local authorities attribute these numbers almost exclusively to fighting between and within organized crime groups. Since 2020, the homicide rate in Guadalajara has decreased slightly to about 16 homicides per 100,000 residents.

Robbery, auto-part theft, and virtual extortion are the most frequently reported non-violent crimes in Guadalajara's consular district. Crimes of opportunity are common. Thieves often operate in heavily congested areas to steal bags, electronics, and jewelry. Occasionally, they use motorcycles to escape. In the weeks leading up to the winter holiday season, the Guadalajara metropolitan area typically experiences an increase in crime.

Auto-part theft is prevalent in the Guadalajara Metropolitan area. Thieves usually target easy-to-remove parts (e.g. spare tires, side mirrors), side molding, and grilles. These thefts usually occur after dark from cars parked on the street. Parking in pay lots is the easiest way to reduce the risk of auto-part theft. Carjacking commonly involves the threat of force. Late-model trucks and SUVs are often, but not exclusively, targets. Thieves rarely harm victims who do not resist. Reducing travel in rural areas and non-toll highway roads, especially after dark, can significantly reduce the threat of carjacking.

In the state of Jalisco, violence is primarily concentrated around the border with the states of Colima and Michoacan, where the CJNG (based in Jalisco) is engaged in violent conflict with smaller local groups. High levels of organized crime and violence, with reports of local crime groups running illegal roadblocks and checkpoints remains a key concern. Violent territorial disputes between criminal groups have increased along the corridor between Tuxpan and the border with Michoacan. These confrontations are likely to continue for the foreseeable future or until a truce between local organizations is formed. Lastly, the Altos region of Jalisco, including Lagos de Moreno and Teocaltiche, has seen occasional violent incidents between CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel in 2023 and 2024.

The state of Colima (Mexico's smallest state by population) has received attention due to having the highest state homicide rate in Mexico in 2023 and 2024, falling from 111 to 101 per 100,000 residents, about five times the national average. While the violence largely transpires between rival drug trafficking organizations, there is potential for collateral casualties. Its capital, Colima City, registered an estimated homicide rate of 136 homicides per 100,000 people for 2024, with the port of

Manzanillo also having a homicide rate of over 123 per 100,000. As a result, the U.S. Department of State lists Colima as a Level 4: Do Not Travel location.

Security-related statistics for the state of Nayarit (incl. Tepic) have been improving over recent years, and has seen a change from State Department Level 3 Travel Advisory to Level 2.

Aguascalientes continues to be one of Mexico's safest states. However, disappearances have significantly increased in the state, suggesting a potential shift in security in the state.

Hermosillo Consular District

Violent crime in Sonora and Sinaloa (incl. Mazatlán), particularly involving the illegal drug trade, continues to be a concern. Violent crimes such as armed robbery, homicide, assault, burglary, vehicle theft, economic fraud, and petty crime occur throughout the Hermosillo consular district. Sinaloa remains among the top states in Mexico for TCO violence.

The U.S. Department of State lists Sinaloa as a Level 4: Do Not Travel location. This is due to widespread criminal activity and violence. In 2024, following the arrest of Mayo Zambada, the Sinaloa Cartel's most senior figure, Sinaloa experienced an intense and ongoing period of violence as rival factions in the Sinaloa Cartel fought for control. The state capital of Culiacan has experienced the majority of crimes associated with the conflict, but violence has occurred throughout the state, including in Mazatlán. There have been a large number of homicides, kidnappings, and car thefts associated with the conflict.

Sinaloa saw a sharp 82% increase in homicides in 2024. Increasing from 562 in 2023 to an estimated 1,022 homicides in 2024. The state also saw a 13% increase from 2022 to 2023. The state has a long history with organized crime and drug production, and has served as a base for the Sinaloa Cartel. As a result, the Sinaloa Cartel has a strong presence in the state and impacts the levels of violence. When high ranking members of organized crime are arrested the TCO may exert high levels of violence in retaliation.

The state of Sonora has seen annual decreases in homicides since 2021. In 2024, it registered an estimated 1,443 homicides, or about 45 homicides per 100,000 persons. A large proportion of those homicides occurred in the cities of Ciudad Obregon and Guaymas. Sonora, whose northern border meets the southern border of Arizona, is divided between the Hermosillo and Nogales Consular Districts. Due to its border access, it registers high levels of trafficking-related crime and violence. While rates of violent crime in localities like Ciudad Obregon and Guaymas are

documented to be high, one should not presume other parts of the consular district are immune from the same type of activity. Efforts to assess the security environment using statistics are impeded by the fact that many crimes go unreported. In general, this violence targets those involved in or opposing the illegal drug trade. While victims of this type of violence are typically involved in illegal activity, there is the potential for bystanders to experience collateral damage. Mass clandestine grave sites have been found by volunteer groups and Sonora ranks in the top three Mexican states for the number of these sites. Therefore, use any reported national crimes statistics for trend analyses and not as statistical representation.

Matamoros Consular District

The U.S. Department of State lists the state of Tamaulipas as a Level 4 location, and heavily restricts travel of U.S. government employees in the Matamoros consular district to a small radius around the consulate. Violent crime, such as murder, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion, and sexual assault, including gun battles and blockades, are widespread in the Matamoros consular district. Armed criminal groups are known to target private automobiles traveling through Tamaulipas, often taking passengers hostage and demanding ransom payments. Federal and state security forces have limited capability to respond to violence in many parts of the state.

The primary security threat stems from TCOs and the ongoing turf war between rival factions of the Gulf Cartel, the Northeast Cartel, remaining Zetas cells, and the Mexican security forces. CJNG has also made some moves into Tamaulipas as well. In the past year gun battles have occurred throughout the state of Tamaulipas. Often when engaging with rival criminal groups or Mexican security forces, criminals will create road blockades in order to limit law enforcement response.

The security situation in Reynosa is consistently violent. Rolling gun battles between police elements and TCOs occur daily in Reynosa. Many of these gun battles result in the death of cartel members and police alike. Carjacking and kidnapping occur with similar frequency in Reynosa as well. While Matamoros has been a violent place, criminal control in the city is stronger which has led to lower levels of violence compared to Reynosa where competing criminal factions more regularly come into conflict. The highways from Matamoros and Reynosa towards San Fernando and Ciudad Victoria are frequently the scene of shootouts involving criminal groups. San Fernando and the surrounding area remain a point of contestation for criminal groups.

Generally, crime is underreported and not tracked with any consistency. There were 412 recorded murders in Tamaulipas in 2024. Most of these murders link directly to

TCO violence. Additionally, in 2024 there was an estimated 2,472 cases of aggravated assaults, 104 extortions, and 79 kidnappings. Again, these data likely do not capture all criminal incidents. Lastly, the state has long been a major hub for migrant trafficking and smuggling, with migrants being kidnapped regularly, a practice that has grown in recent years.

Mérida Consular District

According to Government of Mexico statistics, Yucatán (incl. Mérida and Valladolid) and Campeche are among the safest states in Mexico. U.S. companies find these states eager to help them establish business. Reports of extortion or bribery by state and municipal police in either state are rare.

The city of Ciudad del Carmen in Campeche experiences some low-level crime, as it has a high concentration of foreign businesses associated with the oil and gas sectors. Additionally, U.S. military and Mexican Navy report piracy of commercial vessels on an infrequent basis in the Gulf of Mexico.

Security forces are able to maintain law and order in the state of Quintana Roo (incl. Cancún, Cozumel, and Playa del Carmen, and the “Mayan Riviera”). Though, corruption and trustworthiness amongst individual police in Quintana Roo varies greatly. Crime and TCO activity has increased in recent years, including incidents resulting in the injury or death of U.S. citizens.

TCOs often operate with impunity in Quintana Roo and sometimes carry out violent acts in popular tourist locations. The diverse opportunities for illicit enterprise have attracted cells of major organized criminal groups like the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG), Sinaloa Cartel, Los Zetas, and the Gulf Cartel, as well as smaller local groups that maintain operations in the state. These groups engage in violent competition over illicit markets. This violence is specifically targeted against other TCO members, local residents, and local authorities and rarely results in injury or death of the estimated 15 million travelers that visit the state each year. Of note, the Tulum Chief of Police was assassinated by members of a criminal group in March 2025.

Quintana Roo saw a decrease in homicides in 2024 with an estimated 689 total, down from 740 in 2023. Cancun has largely seen marginal changes in violent crime over the past year. Cancun’s airport (CUN) remains a key transit point for human smuggling and trafficking, as well as movement of other illicit cargo. South of Cancun, Tulum has seen continued concerns around crime since 2023. Travelers to the area are advised to exercise increased caution as incidents have occurred in tourist areas, including in central Tulum. Although the groups operating in the state do not target

travelers or members of the private sector, there remains a risk of violent and non-violent crime to visitors in Cancun, Tulum, and Playa del Carmen.

The U.S. Department of State's Mexico [Travel Advisory](#) guidance advises travelers to exercise increased caution in Quintana Roo due to crime, specifically in downtown areas of Cancun, Tulum, and Playa del Carmen after dark, and to remain in well-lighted pedestrian streets and tourists zones. Cancun's Hotel Zone is a built-up stretch of land, approximately 30 km long, separate from the rest of the city and accessible only at the northern and southern ends.

OSAC members operating in Quintana Roo report that TCOs have become more emboldened in recent years. OSAC security staff and their management are forced to tolerate cartel activity or, at the very least, to turn a blind eye to their activities and acquiesce to their demands out of fear for their safety, their coworkers, and family members. OSAC members report having to pay large sums to TCOs to have their permission, or *derecho de piso*, to operate their officially licensed business. TCOs are emboldened enough to meet with human resources staff from large corporations to mandate who is hired to specific positions to facilitate the sale of drugs.

Some visitors to Quintana Roo have reported incidents of being threatened with arrest by street-level police to extort cash in lieu of arrest. Travelers report paying bribes up to \$900 directly to police for actual or perceived violations of local laws.

At times, the Mexican federal government has sent the Army, Navy, and/or the National Guard to Quintana Roo to assist local law enforcement with security in the state, especially around key tourist areas. These increased deployments generally last a few weeks before security presence returns to previous levels.

Monterrey Consular District

There is significant risk of crime in the Monterrey consular district. Violent crime (e.g., homicide, kidnapping, sexual assault, and armed robbery) and non-violent crimes (e.g., financial scams, extortion, vehicle thefts, residential break-ins, and petty drug crimes) continue to be a serious concern for those living or working in the district. Organized criminal elements contribute to the high level of crime in the region. While many of those killed in organized crime-related violence were similarly involved in criminal activity, innocent bystanders have also been harmed.

U.S. travelers have fallen victim to criminal activity including homicide, kidnapping, carjacking, and highway robbery, and have been caught between gun battles. There is no evidence that criminal elements specifically target U.S. citizens or other foreign visitors, unless they have some connection to drug trafficking. However, anyone who

projects the perception of wealth and is unfamiliar with the area can easily become a target of opportunity.

Nuevo Leon saw about a 13% increase in homicides in 2024, with an estimated 1,599 total homicides. Most of those occur in the greater Monterrey metro area and surrounding municipalities. This is fairly consistent with data from recent years. Those traveling on the highways from Monterrey to the U.S. border along highways 85, 54, or 40 should do so with caution and only during daylight hours.

Residential burglary in Monterrey, including more affluent neighborhoods, occurs and is most common during the day and on weekends or holidays when houses are vacant. Thieves often gain entry through unsecured entryways, by tricking domestic employees, or by using force to access homes that appear vacant. Vehicle theft, carjacking, armed robbery, and theft of parts from parked vehicles all remain common in Monterrey and throughout the consular district. OSAC has also received reports of virtual kidnapping and extortion in the consular district.

Within Monterrey's consular district, the state of Zacatecas remains off limits to U.S. government personnel with the exception of air travel to and from the City of Zacatecas. High rates of violence in the state derive from TCO competition between CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel, with most violence concentrated in Zacatecas City, Fresnillo, Valparaiso, Jerez, and Guadalupe. The state has seen significant decreases in homicides from 2022 to 2024, declining by about 60%. The homicide rate in Zacatecas doubled between 2020 and 2021, and the state led the country in assassinations of police officers in 2022.

Coahuila has continued to make progress on improving security in the state. This year saw a further decline in homicides with only 131.

Nogales Consular District

Crime in the Nogales Consular District, which is comprised of northern Sonora along the U.S.-Mexico border, was more prominent in San Luis Rio Colorado, small towns along highways 2 and 43, and around Nogales to a lesser extent. Crime is widespread in this region and those traveling should do so with caution and during daylight hours only.

San Luis Rio Colorado reached a new record number of homicides in 2024 with 243, an increase on the previous record set in 2023 at 189 homicides. The city serves as a key border crossing for the movement of licit and illicit goods. Additionally, it serves as a key point for human trafficking and smuggling which has become increasingly valuable to organized criminal groups in Mexico. Migrants are regularly kidnapped in the surrounding area.

Nogales saw an increase in homicides with 87 total, slightly greater than the 2022 and 2023 totals. Vehicular robbery remains an issue in Nogales and there was an increase in reported extortion, however, extortion likely remains underreported. Other crimes remain a concern but have shown a slight downward trend in recent years. That being said, no area of Nogales is immune from violent crime. In order to remain safe, it is recommended to remain in the area between El Periferico highway and Avenida Obregon, and avoid the outlying suburban areas. The violent crimes that do occur in this area generally happen after dark. Travel through the city only during daylight hours. Avoid walking after dark. Most businesses close by 2200, so there is little reason to be out late. Avoid bars and nightclubs, which provide a dangerous mix of guns, drugs, and cartel personnel.

Reports of residential burglaries in the Nogales consular district remained at a similar level since 2022, with higher rates in San Luis Rio Colorado and Agua Prieta. These crimes are most common during the day and on weekends or holidays, when houses are vacant. Thieves often gain entry through unsecured entryways, by tricking domestic employees, or using force to access homes that appear to be vacant.

The theft of vehicles, carjacking, and theft of parts from parked vehicles remain one of the most prevalent crimes in the Nogales consular district. There were 562 reported vehicle thefts in 2024 in Nogales and San Luis Rio Colorado alone, a 65% increase from 2023. TCOs look to steal heavy-duty pick-up trucks and SUVs for their ability to carry heavy loads at high speed across difficult terrain.

The areas along highways 2 and 43 has also seen several violent incidents in small towns including Caborca, Altar, and Santa Ana. These incidents generally relate to conflicts between criminal groups that are looking to consolidate trafficking routes to the U.S.-Mexico border. Highway 15 serves as the main route between Nogales and Hermosillo and it is only recommended to use this route during the day.

For visitors to Puerto Peñasco, it is advised to utilize the Lukeville port of entry (POE) and arrive via highway 8. If the Lukeville POE is closed, it is generally advised to defer travel to a later time. Taking alternative routes to Puerto Peñasco via highways 2 or 43 is not advised due to increased risks to travelers from local criminal groups operating in the area. When a POE closes, please check with the U.S. Department of State for further guidance.

Mexican laws prohibit ownership of personal firearms. Most firearms belong to Mexican law enforcement and military officers via legitimate means, and narco-trafficking criminal elements via illegitimate means. Most narco-trafficking elements possess weapons of various size, including assault rifles, grenades, and belt-fed

machine guns. However, the most common weapons involved in narco-related crimes are 9-mm pistols and 7.62-caliber assault rifles.

Nuevo Laredo Consular District

There is serious threat of crime throughout Nuevo Laredo's consular district in Tamaulipas and Northern Coahuila. In Nuevo Laredo and surrounding parts of Tamaulipas, armed criminal groups target public and private passenger buses, often taking passengers hostage and demanding ransom payments. Non-violent crimes (e.g. financial scams, vehicle thefts, petty drug crimes) are also a serious concern. Local law enforcement has limited capability to respond to the violence that occurs throughout the region.

Reported homicides have decreased substantially in Nuevo Laredo and some other parts Tamaulipas. However, the absence of municipal police; the inability to form a reliable, vetted state police force capable of maintaining law and order; and an inconsistent presence of federal forces continue to make Nuevo Laredo's security environment volatile. The risk of violent crime, such as murder, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion, and sexual assaults persists. Gang activity, including spontaneous rolling gun battles, is a major concern.

The Northeast Cartel (*Cartel del Noreste*; CDN) is predominant in Nuevo Laredo. In recent years, firefights have taken place throughout the consular district, often directly tied to CDN members. Gun battles generally occur after dark, but some have occurred in broad daylight, on public streets, and close to public venues. Arrests or extraditions of leading cartel figures have led to gun battles with federal security forces. Firefights have included targeted violence against the U.S. Consulate in the city, leading to authorized departure of non-essential staff and family members in 2022. While cartel violence in the city does not specifically target U.S. or other foreign travelers, escalating violence in the aftermath of cartel arrests can lead to greater risks of collateral harm.

Tijuana Consular District

While Tijuana has high levels of reported crime, most visitors and organizations that operate in the city do not regularly report being victims of violent crime. Most violent crime in the city is highly targeted and involves individuals that are involved with local TCO cells. While violent crime is concentrated in Tijuana's outskirts (especially to the south and east of the city center, and the Las Playas de Tijuana neighborhood to the west), targeted violent crime does occur in urban and upscale suburban neighborhoods.

Exhibit 9 - CC7

Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots

 crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/colombia-ecuador-guatemala-honduras-mexico/108-curbing-violence-latin-america-drug-trafficking-hotspots

March 11, 2025



Employees from the Attorney General's Office incinerate seized drugs in Zapopan, Jalisco state, Mexico, 14 July 2022. ULISES RUIZ / AFP

Report 108 / [Latin America & Caribbean](#) **20+ minutes**

More than 50 years into the “war on drugs”, trade in illicit narcotics continues to flourish in Latin America, often leaving mayhem in its wake. Experience suggests that a mix of approaches, including smarter policing and enhanced social policy, is the best remedy.

Executive Summary

Over half a century on from the declaration of a “war on drugs”, Latin America is struggling to manage the eruption of violence tied to the narcotics trade. Though drug-related organised crime has brought notorious peaks of violence in the past, above all in Colombia and Mexico, never has it spread so wide, and rarely has it penetrated so deeply into states and communities. Criminal groups have splintered, multiplied and diversified, adding lethal synthetics like fentanyl to the traditional plant-based supply of marijuana, cocaine and heroin, as well as moving into new rackets like extortion. Where communities are poor and unprotected, criminal groups act as employers and overlords; where state officials are present, they coerce and corrupt them. With Washington pushing for a fresh military-led crackdown on drug cartels, perhaps involving U.S. forces, Latin American leaders face difficult decisions. Despite the pressure to

comply, experience suggests that a balance of improved policing, alternative livelihoods, gun control and, under specific conditions, negotiations would be more effective in reducing violence.

The map of the drug trade in Latin America has been transformed in the decades since supply routes from the Andes to the U.S. first emerged. Demand for narcotics outside the region remains at record highs, with newer markets booming – particularly for cocaine in Europe and fentanyl in the U.S. At the same time, waves of U.S.-backed law enforcement, based on capture and extradition of crime bosses (known as kingpins), drug seizures and forced eradication have revolutionised the supply chain. Although Colombia and Mexico remain at the heart of the drug business, a main route to the U.S. and Europe runs down the Pacific, passing through countries that were largely untouched by illicit trafficking such as Costa Rica and Ecuador. Each of these has seen rates of violence rise sharply; in 2024, Ecuador was South America's most violent nation. Across the region, surges of bloodshed have marked the new hubs of a fast-shifting, hyper-violent drug trade.

Understanding how this rolling crime wave came about is fundamental to arresting it. Drug-related organised crime has adapted to the threat posed by law enforcement by becoming more flexible and resilient. In place of hierarchical syndicates that could be dismantled once their leaders were identified, the trade increasingly functions through networks of providers who subcontract each step of the route to lower tiers of operators. High-level financiers engage sophisticated international traffickers, who oversee drug exports to user markets. These in turn partner with national and local crime groups to meet the orders. National groups manage production or ensure safe passage of the drug along a particular trafficking corridor. At the local level, urban gangs are contracted by larger criminal allies for small-scale logistical services like smuggling drugs through ports.

All the layers of these networks have learned that capturing state officials is a business asset. Using a mix of threats and payoffs, they target police officers, judges, prosecutors and politicians who can ensure that business runs smoothly, without the risk of arrest or seizure of shipments. Likewise, prisons in some of Latin America's roughest settings are run by inmates, who manage their criminal enterprises behind bars and carry out vendettas against rivals inside and outside.

" Violence appears to be a stable feature – and in fact a product of – the way drug trafficking operates in Latin America. "

If profits in this business tend to flow upward, violence festers at the base. Conventional wisdom about illicit markets would suggest that fighting is a sign of instability and disruption. But violence appears to be a stable feature – and in fact a product of – the way drug trafficking operates in Latin America. The highest echelons of the drug business feature a few players who take care to conceal their connections to the trade. At the local level, where small outfits and gangs vie for control, competition to win the trust of larger criminal allies and enter the drug supply chain is usually fierce. Gangs are often paid in drugs and arms, which they then use to extract more revenue from terrified communities, including through small-scale drug retail, extortion and kidnapping. As rival groups seek to defend their territory from attack, invisible urban front lines emerge between them: civilians who dare to cross these in some of the region's worst-hit communities, such as Durán in Ecuador or Buenaventura in Colombia, face violent retribution.

Even so, organised crime's sway over poor communities is not just a function of intimidation. In many poor communities, households exhausted their reserves to survive months of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, while cuts in welfare systems formerly funded by the commodity boom left a deep economic hole. Organised crime offers an alternative to disheartened young people, who join in the hopes of earning income, status and power in their communities. Veneration of local outlaws has become commonplace among teenagers in myriad hard-up communities.

There is no one remedy for Latin America's sprawling criminal ecosystem, though experience offers evidence of what has not worked. Military crackdowns and high-level captures provide short-term victories, but time and again fuel new waves of violence and generate reconfigurations of the drug business that are more resistant to law enforcement. Latin American states, which have long followed Washington's lead in the "war on drugs", will need to rethink these conventional tools to limit drug supply with an eye to which approaches reduce – rather than exacerbate – harm to civilians. The right policy is likely a mix of interventions. These include strengthening investigations, protecting security forces from corruption, improving community policing and reforming prisons. States must also address the acute social distress that criminal groups prey upon to recruit. In specific cases, governments may also consider talks with criminal groups to stem the worst violence and peel off young members who want a fresh start.

Latin America's established role in the drug trade, entrenched inequalities and institutional weaknesses mean it will likely continue to suffer from criminal activity feeding high global drug demand. In a cruel irony, greater law enforcement, more seizures and stronger prohibition tend to raise the price of

drugs – and hence boost the profits for traffickers. The region needs strategies to reduce violence and international partners who are committed not only to stopping drugs from reaching the market, but also to mitigating the fallout. While everyone agrees that organised crime is a scourge to combat, the cost of drug enforcement should not continue to be paid in civilian lives.

Bogotá/Mexico City/New York/Brussels, 11 March 2025



Visit our Visual Explorer which explores the drug trafficking routes, from production to market, for cocaine and fentanyl.

I. Introduction

For the last half-century, the production, trafficking, sale and consumption of illicit drugs have steeped Latin America in violence. Whether in the form of terrorist attacks in Colombia in the 1990s, selective killings during Mexican electoral campaigns, child recruitment or sexual violence, organised crime rooted in the drug trade has threatened millions of lives and upended states and communities. Despite ebbs and flows in its intensity, the harm caused by this illicit business remains a constant, and citizens of Latin American states regularly report criminal violence to be their primary concern – above poverty, inequality and inadequate public services. Today, drugs are far from the only source of revenue for criminal organisations. That said, narcotics production and trafficking continue to be a mainstay of illegal business and the origin of the seed capital that allows organised crime to spread, diversify and prosper.

Since their emergence in the 1970s, Latin America's illegal outfits have expanded into new countries and encroached into emerging markets, some of them legal. Evidence from conversations with security forces, current and former armed group members, state officials and ordinary people indicate that behind this growth are a host of far-reaching changes in form and structure. Transnational criminal networks in the drug supply chain are now arranged in

tiers, with fluid alliances of convenience between them. These layers, each involving a variety of often competing groups, have emerged as part of a process of mutation following the dismantling of larger trafficking organisations and the elimination of many of their leaders. Criminal groups across Latin America have tended to splinter following the capture or killing of their bosses. While large, hegemonic cartels still control much of the Mexican market, drug trafficking elsewhere is mostly in the hands of smaller, nimbler outfits that specialise in particular parts of the production, trafficking and retail process.

With more criminal groups jostling for turf, legal and illegal businesses, and above all lucrative drug trafficking routes, rates of lethal violence have fallen in certain countries, while remaining stubbornly high in others and spiking in formerly peaceful places. Law enforcement crackdowns on one part of the supply chain have pushed violent criminals into others, in a cat-and-mouse game of shifting routes and business relationships. As markets reconfigure, communities that are poor or remote from centres of political power consistently find themselves exposed to the greatest harm. Often, the onus of demanding an adequate response from authorities falls on the shoulders of victims, such as relatives of the disappeared in Mexico or the incarcerated in Ecuador.

“ Rather than focusing on reducing violence ... Latin American governments have tended to concentrate on cracking down on drug supply. ”

Rather than focusing on reducing violence, however, Latin American governments have tended to concentrate on cracking down on drug supply, in compliance with international treaties that have criminalised narcotic drugs since the 1960s and often under pressure from abroad, particularly from Washington. Such pressure has sharply increased since the return to the White House of President Donald Trump, who uses the threat and imposition of tariffs to push Mexico and Canada halt fentanyl shipments and has suggested that the U.S. military might intervene directly to fight drug trafficking groups. Trump has listed several drug trafficking organisations as foreign terrorist organisations. Although such designations do not automatically give Washington authorisation to carry out military strikes, they have in the past pointed the way toward the eventual use of force. In a social media message, Elon Musk, head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, said these groups are “eligible for drone strikes”, echoing earlier messaging from Republicans who have advocated forceful direct intervention.

Trump’s return is also likely to empower Latin American states and citizens who have embraced *mano dura* (“iron fist”) policies for fighting crime, which tend to entail mass arrests, reinforced police and military patrols, the declaration of

states of emergency, and in extreme cases, tacit endorsement of extrajudicial executions.

Over the long term, however, neither attempts to reduce drug supply nor crack-downs on criminal groups have produced much lasting success. Feeding buoyant user markets in the region and beyond, Latin American drug production has continued to expand. Coca cultivation in Colombia quadrupled over the last decade, while global cocaine production doubled. Drug use has also grown steadily, with the UN noting in 2024 that 292 million people worldwide reported having consumed narcotics in the previous year. While the majority of users prefer cannabis, abuse of much more damaging drugs continues to be tremendously harmful: the synthetic opioid epidemic has killed over 600,000 people in the U.S. and Canada alone. Meanwhile, the drug trade remains hugely profitable for violent criminal organisations. Latin American calls for a change in tack in global drug policy have become loud and insistent in recent years, but so far to no avail.

Against the backdrop of a newly invigorated, U.S.-backed war on drugs, this report focuses on the criminal threats deriving from the illicit drug trade affecting numerous communities in Latin America today. It looks at the shifts in the drug supply chain, the rationale for the use of violence by criminal groups and the reasons why bloodshed is so heavily concentrated along certain parts of the trafficking route. It puts forward a series of recommendations that look to curb the insecurity affecting Latin American countries, while recognising that the many roots of this longstanding problem require an approach that encompasses much more than new security initiatives and extends to alternative livelihoods, arms control and, in certain cases, dialogue with illegal groups. It focuses on Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The report does not include Brazil, which deserves a separate analysis. Crisis Group conducted well over 200 interviews, about one third of them with women, with officials, security force officers, current and former criminal group members, and residents of affected communities.

II. Historical Shifts in Latin America's Drug Trade

Latin America is a leading source of organic and synthetic drugs. Over the course of half a century, drug trafficking has evolved and mutated to elude the reach of law enforcement, extending the threat of violence to previously untouched communities and countries across the region.

A. New and Old Drugs

The first large criminal organisations built their wealth on the supply of marijuana, cocaine and heroin. Marijuana to some extent, but especially cocaine, remain major moneymakers for organised crime. The bulk of the world's coca, the raw material for cocaine, is still grown in Colombia, with crops also tended in Peru and Bolivia, and to a much lesser extent in Guatemala, Honduras and southern Mexico. The location of the clientele, however, has shifted. U.S. demand for the drug is high but has stagnated, whereas Europe is the largest growth market, with consumption reportedly rising 60 per cent in the decade leading up to 2022. Traffickers are also pioneering newer markets in Asia and Oceania, where prices are higher. Synthetic drugs, meanwhile, have flooded the U.S. market, first methamphetamines and, now, overwhelmingly, fentanyl, some 96 per cent of which is believed to come over the border from Mexico. The expansion of these markets has fortified traffickers and thrown up immense challenges for law enforcement agencies seeking to stop them.

Meanwhile, the growth of drug consumption in Latin America has largely been ignored by policymakers, despite it reportedly doubling between 1990 and 2010. While surveys of regional drug consumption are not widely available, in 2019 the Organization of American States found that cocaine consumption had risen in about half the countries of Latin America, while methamphetamine use in Mexico, this drug's main producer, has boomed in recent years.

B. The Rise of Trafficking

The first drug trafficking networks connecting South America to the U.S. emerged in the 1970s, when Colombian family clans in the Sierra Nevada and La Guajira, both on the Atlantic coast, began moving cannabis northward. Cocaine soon followed, largely consolidated in the hands of the Medellín and Cali Cartels. These organisations were hierarchical, and they built vertically integrated supply chains stretching from coca cultivators in Peru and Bolivia to processing plants in Colombia to U.S.-based dealers. During the two decades of their domination, the cartels honed models of influence over politicians and capture of political and economic power that persist to this day. They used their immense financial capital, together with a capacity for brutality, to buy and threaten their way toward impunity.

In the mid-1980s, U.S. law enforcement intensified operations against cocaine trafficking through the Caribbean by air and sea, prompting routes to shift toward Mexico. Here, existing smuggling groups with a long history of trafficking alcohol, marijuana and heroin began to export cocaine over the U.S. border. Starting out as junior partners in the business, Mexican groups soon raked in unprecedented profits, and their power expanded. Around the same time, a joint Mexican-U.S. operation captured the leader of the then-dominant

Guadalajara Cartel, a confederation of trafficking clans formed under the wing of the country's erstwhile one-party system. The group split into four: the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel and the Juárez Cartel.

From these early days, violence was a feature of the drug market, but one that played out in distinct ways across the region. In Mexico, an authoritarian state kept narco-traffickers' ambitions and infighting in check while allowing the market to grow and taking a cut of the proceeds. In Colombia, Medellín Cartel boss Pablo Escobar used violence to wield power over the state, infiltrating its every level, from local police forces to the legislature in Bogotá.

Governments spent a decade chasing Escobar, yet his downfall in December 1993 only opened the way for new players to fill the lucrative void. Violent right-wing paramilitary groups forged ties with former Escobar allies, first to finance their fight with leftist guerrilla groups, but soon thereafter primarily to enrich themselves. The rebel Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also sought to control production of the coca leaf to finance its rebellion. In 1999, the U.S. and Colombia signed Plan Colombia, an aid package that reached over \$10 billion in value over fifteen years, mixing drug eradication and interdiction with a military counter-insurgency campaign and an overhaul of local security forces.



Heroin package branded by a local criminal group in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, Marzo 2024. CRISIS GROUP / Angélica Ospina-Escobar

C. The “War on Drugs” and Its Aftermath

The example of Plan Colombia inspired a similar approach in Mexico, where Felipe Calderón declared a “war on drugs” in 2006 soon after winning the presidency. Also backed by the U.S. through the Mérida Initiative, Calderón aimed to deploy the military against organised crime while building more

effective police and judicial institutions. Mexican security forces captured or killed scores of criminal kingpins, but many of the root causes of violent crime, including persistent corruption and poverty, went unaddressed.

Despite apparent law enforcement successes, Mexican criminal operations were able to adapt and grow. Illegal organisations fractured into a plethora of smaller groups that clashed with one another to gain a foothold in various illicit businesses. Over the next fifteen years, the number of criminal groups increased ten-fold, from fewer than twenty in 2006 to more than 200 in 2021. Between 2006 and 2016, at least 73,000 people were murdered in cases that seemingly involved organised crime, while another 70,000 were reported missing between 2006 and 2021.

“ As they fragmented, Mexican criminal networks increased their territorial presence at home and abroad. ”

As they fragmented, Mexican criminal networks increased their territorial presence at home and abroad. The role of Central American countries as transit and storage hubs, particularly Guatemala and Honduras, grew. By 2011, the amount of cocaine seized in Mexico was a small fraction of the total interdicted in Central America, a region already grappling with chronic violence stemming from its legacy of civil wars.

Another pivotal moment in Latin America’s drug trade came in 2016, as the peace agreement that demobilised the FARC also meant losing the most reliable regulator of the raw material for cocaine manufacture in Colombia. Though Colombian groups remain key suppliers for the cocaine market, they have not recovered their role as global traffickers, and almost all armed groups in the country now sell their product at the border or on the high seas, long before it reaches consumers. In effect, Colombian groups have been cut out of the most lucrative parts of the drug trafficking supply chain, with criminal organisations involved in the production of coca and cocaine now relying on their ability to forge international business connections to sell their goods.

D. The Rise of Fentanyl

Well before the FARC’s dominance faded, Mexican criminal organisations had already taken a leading role in shaping the global cocaine trade. Together with a complex network of transnational investors, and at times working with European organised crime, these Mexican groups spread more deeply into South America to build new routes and avoid the risks of interdiction in Colombia. Ecuador, with its ill-prepared law enforcement bodies, proximity to Colombia’s most prolific coca-growing regions and a large container port with preferential trade access to Europe, has most recently fitted the bill.

responsible for expanding coca crops into Central America through investment in Honduras and Guatemala, in the latter case hiring experienced Colombian farmers to set up operations.

Providing capital and coordinating the myriad connections between production sites and consumer markets enables these operators to claim a large share of the profits, which they reinvest either in expanding their drug business or in other illegal or legal markets. Penetrating the business and political elite in key countries along the supply chain, as well as in financial havens such as Dubai and Panama, is fundamental to their ability to launder funds and gain access to the banking system. The footprint of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, for example, is believed to touch business and banking on almost every continent, enabling the group to avoid law enforcement with ease. According to a convict, “The majority of investors in drug trafficking are politicians or businessmen”.

B. International Trafficking

International trafficking begins with the purchase of raw material or precursor substances overseas, goes on to processing and transnational shipment, and ends with delivery to the consumer market, usually in Europe or the U.S. These traffickers can be understood as the “owners” of international routes, for example from Guayaquil to Rotterdam, Cartagena to Miami or Manzanillo to New York. One criminal organisation usually arranges each long trajectory, with sub-contractors filling specific roles such as storage and passage in and out of ports along the way. Only a few criminal organisations can boast of the contacts, as well as the sophistication with maritime, air and land transport, that this stage requires. The bulk of transnational logistics falls to name-brand criminal organisations such as Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and Brazil’s Primeiro Comando da Capital, as well as a limited but increasing number of European criminal groups.

Cross-border trafficking is highly profitable. The price of drugs increases many times over from start to finish. Crisis Group interviews indicate that a kilogram of coca base paste leaving southern Colombia for Ecuador sells for roughly \$550 at the border; \$800 in the Ecuadorian border province of Esmeraldas; and \$1,000 by the time it reaches the port of Guayaquil. After refining, in 2021 the wholesale price of cocaine at exit in Ecuador was roughly \$2,000 per kilo, rising to \$40,000 in Western Europe. The lion’s share of profit in the cocaine market, in other words, ends up in the hands of international traffickers and the investors backing them. Meanwhile, the price of fentanyl sold on U.S. streets can represent a mark-up of 200 to 800 times the cost of the precursor chemicals used to produce it.

In the case of plant-based drugs, the first step in this part of the chain is purchasing the product from a supplier. South American providers move their product into the custody of Mexican international traffickers at maritime ports, airports or on the high seas, including in Colombia and Ecuador. In the case of synthetics like fentanyl, international traffickers such as the Mexican group Los Chapitos, a faction of the Sinaloa Cartel, both control their own labs and also buy from cooks and smaller allied criminal groups, which may have been contracted to protect freelance labs. International traffickers arrange bulk purchases of drugs through emissaries, who explain the conditions to national-level criminal groups. For example, some trafficking groups demand that the supplier be completely loyal and pledge not to sell to rival organisations. " Once international traffickers take possession of the drugs, they use a sophisticated array of methods to deliver their product across borders. "

Product quality is also regulated at this stage. In the case of fentanyl, regulation means overseeing the drug's production, appearance and cost. International buyers of cocaine, meanwhile, increasingly insist on a purity level well above 95 per cent. They have at times set a fixed price to buy the drug, leaving local suppliers to compete in order to see who can best meet the required standards while still turning a profit. Once international traffickers take possession of the drugs, they use a sophisticated array of methods to deliver their product across borders.

Calculating the appropriate tradeoff between profit and risks is fundamental in determining how to route any drug shipment. Large parts of the transnational supply route may depend on outsourcing to other groups, which can take charge of temporary storage, in the case of cocaine trafficking through Central America, or movement across a given land border. Traffickers also appear to be pioneering new way stations in countries with weaker enforcement capabilities. Costa Rica, which had long avoided absorption into international drug routes, is a striking example. Cocaine and marijuana are now arriving in large quantities on both its Pacific and Atlantic coasts, spawning a boom in local criminal groups seeking to partner with larger trafficking operations. The homicide rate skyrocketed 40 per cent in 2023, roughly 70 per cent of it linked to drug trafficking, according to authorities.

With the same profit calculations in mind, traffickers increasingly prefer to move cocaine or its unrefined form, coca paste, in container ships to Europe, rather than via more traditional methods such as small planes, speedboats and submarines (though these are also still used). Containers not only move a high volume of product, but trafficking businesses can mathematically predict how

much on average of their shipments will be seized (2-10 per cent, according to law enforcement), and then adjust the final selling price to take account of these losses.

Traffickers go to extreme lengths to exploit international container shipping. Putting drugs into the container, a process known as “contamination” across South America or “filling the *piñata*” in Mexico, can take a wide range of forms, including hiding cocaine inside another product, inside the container’s structure, or inside the ship itself. In Ecuador, cocaine is frequently hidden inside shipments of bananas – a product chosen because it is loaded into the container at the farm and must move quickly through ports to avoid spoiling. Drugs can also be loaded onto ships in ports by corrupt workers who have access to the unique codes to identify, open and then get into containers. Criminal organisations have also started using chemicals to disguise the distinct smell of coca base paste, so that neither scanners nor dogs are able to detect it; it is then refined in Europe.

“ To avoid port inspections, traffickers load their product onto container ships on the high seas with the collaboration of crew members. ”

To avoid port inspections, traffickers load their product onto container ships on the high seas with the collaboration of crew members. A security source explained: “At first, the traffickers would ask the ship to stop on the high seas to load the product. But navies figured this out, and they would undertake control operations on container ships that had stopped. So, the traffickers started to contaminate vessels at full speed, boarding from small speedboats”.

After being loaded with drugs in Latin America, vessels can be met again on the high seas before they arrive at their final destinations in Europe. Once again, speedboats approach the ship while it is moving, taking packages tossed to them by complicit crew members. Traffickers in Mexico use a similar method to unload cocaine or fentanyl precursors: container ships stop at the maritime border just before entering Mexican waters, where speedboats collect the products and move them to land. From there, precursors are mainly transported by road. If the drugs are to be removed in the arrival port, traffickers may try to hide their tracks by diverting shipments into containers coming from less suspicious locations, such as Costa Rica, Panama or Guyana.

Bulk shipping is a good way to camouflage both precursors and synthetic drugs. Large ports are generally preferred by traffickers because the volume of incoming goods makes it is easier to avoid detection. International traffickers label precursors as legitimate cargo, hide them in other products or even chemically disguise them to avoid detection. In other cases, fentanyl precursors are sent directly by mail to addresses rented by criminal groups for the sole

purpose of serving as discreet delivery points. Shipment north to the U.S. also requires control of certain corridors, such as the roads between these coastal port cities and the U.S. southern border. Mexican trafficking organisations rely on airplanes, submarines and an extensive network of underground tunnels into the U.S. to move fentanyl and other drugs, according to court documents.

To fend off interdiction, traffickers create wide networks of corruption by paying off officials at various levels, including port workers, pilots, airline and shipping company employees, officers in navies and international law enforcement agencies and senior politicians. Honduras offers an extreme example. After a coup in 2009, the Sinaloa Cartel and other criminal groups invested heavily in ensuring that they would have allies in power, up to the president. As a result, they could count on having Honduras as a transshipment point for most of the cocaine trafficked from South America to the U.S. The chief architect of Mexico's war on drugs from late 2006 to 2012, Genaro García Luna, was convicted in the U.S. in 2023 of taking bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel to protect the group's drug shipments to the U.S. He was sentenced to over 38 years in prison in October 2024.



The winding rivers of Guayaquil offer ample opportunities for traffickers to load drugs before containers enter the high seas, in Guayaquil, Ecuador. May, 2024. CRISIS GROUP / Elizabeth Dickinson

C. National-level Production and Trafficking

Except in Mexico, where certain criminal groups are at the heart of international trafficking operations, national-level organised crime has a narrower range of responsibilities in the drug trade. These outfits are typically responsible for guaranteeing the supply of product to international traffickers or managing that product along a particular part of the trafficking route. Often, there are far

more of these national groups than there are international buyers for their product and services. National outfits compete fiercely to secure coveted transnational relationships. In the words of an Ecuadorian naval officer, groups such as the Los Choneros or Los Lobos “want to show the [international] emissaries that they have control, and the way to do that is through violence”.

Bulkier organic drugs require nationally based criminals to maintain territorial control in areas of production, storage and refining. Criminals must ensure that coca fields are safe from security forces and rival organisations, for example. Violent turf wars over raw material are common. In Putumayo, on the Colombian side of the border with Ecuador, jostling to control the buying of coca paste is so rough that members of two rival groups in the area have reportedly dressed as their competitors and entered coca-growing areas in order to identify which farmers are willing to sell coca to the “wrong” group. Criminal groups that manage to secure hegemony over regions or routes, such as Colombia’s Gaitanista Army, also known as the Gulf Clan, are often far more successful in forging stable buying relationships, in this case with the Sinaloa Cartel.

As for synthetic drugs, national crime groups seek to control ports to import precursor chemicals, protect brokers and cooks who make the drug, and provide the final product to international traffickers. These criminal groups must meet buyers’ conditions: fentanyl, for instance, has to be packaged in Ziploc bags with the client international trafficker’s name and a distinctive logo or colouring.

Mexico exhibits a rather different set of arrangements due to the sway of its main criminal groups over not just national trafficking but also the international drug trade. Relationships between the two major crime groups involved in international trafficking, the Sinaloa and New Generation Jalisco Cartels, and smaller regional operations are fluid. At times, these smaller outfits pay to use the routes controlled by the dominant organisations. For example, various local investors may ally to fund a project to ship cocaine or methamphetamine to the U.S., including the cost of paying one of the major groups for port access or safe passage across Mexico. At the same time, smaller groups that have grabbed control of a particular territory, such as La Linea in Chihuahua, the Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima in Guanajuato or the Cartel del Noreste in Tamaulipas, may gain the power to charge national traffickers for operating there.

“ Strategies for controlling production and in-country transport vary greatly from one country to the next. ”

Strategies for controlling production and in-country transport vary greatly from one country to the next, though all involve violence against civilians and rival outfits. Colombian criminal groups involved in the drug trade often seek to physically occupy territory, largely due to their decades of experience in armed conflict. In transit countries, extensive territorial control is less vital. Ecuador's main national crime groups concentrate their activities along trafficking corridors, including roads and rivers. Security forces describe these areas as "sanctuaries", where criminal assets are strategically clustered.

Capturing state power is vital to national groups' ability to meet international buyers' expectations and not lose shipments to seizures or law enforcement crackdowns. Here, the primary targets are local and, to a lesser extent, national authorities; judges, prosecutors, police officers and security forces personnel, as well as major regional merchants. Criminal groups need to combine armed protection with business, legal, state and political links, in order to ensure that they can operate smoothly, a former head of the Ecuadorian national police explained. They may also wield power in prisons, which have long been hubs of organised crime. Behind bars, crime bosses are safer from physical danger, whether posed by security forces or by rivals, and often better able to organise transactions and recruit new foot soldiers (for more, see Section IV.E).

D. Urban Control and Distribution

Many large criminal groups have calculated that, rather than move drugs through cities themselves, it is cheaper, easier and more discreet to strike up partnerships with urban gangs, many of which pre-date the flourishing of the drug trade. These hyper-local groups end up playing two key roles in the supply chain: ushering the product safely through cities en route to export and expanding local drug retail markets.

Local bands are useful because they can control densely populated neighbourhoods, distract or corrupt local police, and generate cash for their larger clients through drug dealing and extortion. Buenaventura, the city hosting Colombia's largest container port facility, is also home to two dominant gangs that receive payments from larger armed groups to safeguard their product as it moves into town and out of the port. Likewise, Ecuadorian gangs operating along Guayaquil's canal leading to the sea store drugs in houses and may be asked to move shipments by speedboat to contamination sites along the waterway. In exchange, larger criminal groups provide neighbourhood strongmen with weapons, lending them prestige and helping them move into predatory activities such as extortion, kidnapping and the regulation of markets such as sex work, gambling and migrant smuggling.

Section IV.D below). Understandably, in many Latin American countries, these local gangs are the part of the narco-trafficking apparatus that sparks the greatest outcry from citizens.



Buenaventura, once the most violent city in Colombia, has experimented since 2022 with negotiations between the two dominant gangs. Homicide rates have fallen, though residents say extortion and recruitment are up.. January 2024.
CRISIS GROUP / Elizabeth Dickinson

IV. Violence

Transnational organised crime preys upon – and prospers from – the needs and vulnerabilities of ordinary people. Although high levels of inequality and inadequate social safety nets were common to almost all Latin American countries before COVID-19 hit the region, the pandemic aggravated these problems, set back gains in reducing poverty and enhanced organised crime’s ability to capture new recruits and territory. Urban hardship, rural poverty and a pool of young people who had either dropped out of school or lacked job opportunities prepared the ground for criminal organisations’ latest geographic spread. Trafficking groups have taken advantage of desperation and failing state services to offer their own forms of employment and governance. Once in place, criminal control further impoverishes most residents, while threatening them with bodily harm as well.

Violence, like profit, is not spread evenly across drug markets, and tends to be concentrated in hotspots – often places where various groups are fighting over territory. Despite a nationwide drop in homicides in Colombia in 2023, for instance, a turf war in the small northern city of Sincelejo made it one of the most violent places in the world. Furthermore, violence is not just unequally distributed inside national borders, but it follows different trajectories from one

country to the next. Whereas Ecuador and Costa Rica are experiencing record spikes in homicides, Mexico's rates of violence appear to have plateaued, albeit at a high level. In Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, meanwhile, rates of lethal violence are far lower than the peaks recorded in recent decades. The end of armed conflict (in the case of Colombia), changes in economic conditions, new illicit or licit opportunities for profit, and efforts to reform and strengthen the security and judicial systems, in addition to luck, all appear to play crucial parts in determining the trends in violence in each country. " Law enforcement operations ... often have the unintended effect of reconfiguring rather than quelling violence. "

Law enforcement operations also often have the unintended effect of reconfiguring rather than quelling violence. As authorities clamp down on one part of a trafficking route, criminals shift their operations to areas that offer enticements, whether opportunities for commercial export, vulnerable communities or corruptible state officials. This "balloon effect" of enforcement is a longstanding feature of supply-side counter-narcotics policies: eradication of coca crops in Colombia, for example, simply led producers to jump to other provinces or countries, as if playing hopscotch. Traffickers have also been moving out of Colombia's ports, where scrutiny is greater, to the lightly monitored facilities of Ecuador. Parts of Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Paraguay are among the other places absorbing the spillover of criminal activity as routes shift.

Against these larger trends, the decision by criminal groups to deploy different types of violence can be understood as a strategic one made with particular intentions. Groups may use violence to coerce politicians and penetrate the state, to extract rents from the local population, or to secure control of trafficking routes and distribution zones. Local communities often suffer the most, which is no accident, but a predictable by-product of the networked configuration of Latin American drug trafficking. Opportunities for profit, intensifying competition to enter the supply chain and easy access to firearms have conspired to make criminal coercion a feature of daily life for many of the region's most impoverished people.

A. Plata o Plomo

Corruption and co-option are the strategies criminal groups choose to penetrate states and institutions so as to gain protection, impunity and profit-making opportunities. For drug-related crime, state capture is an essential element of doing business. It guarantees that all stages of the logistics chain run with limited risk of seizure or arrest. Criminal groups are most comfortable when "they have judges and prosecutors at their disposal", said a resident of a

violence-afflicted community in Honduras. Traffickers seek to corrupt “police and soldiers, who can give the group a heads-up or look the other way if the groups pass by”.

Violence is the frequently used fallback option when payoffs fail to secure compliance or when a rival group has the same state official or politician at its service. Often, the criminals present the option of *plata o plomo* (literally, “silver or lead”) to state officials: either they accept bribes or they pay with their own or their family’s lives. Some officials are willing takers of criminal money, regarding public service as a source of self-enrichment or party financing. Some even join criminal groups. Blurred lines between the state and organised crime pose one of the greatest challenges to efforts to blunt criminal threats. “ Mexico is now Latin America’s emblematic case of corruption and co-option by organised crime. ”

Mexico is now Latin America’s emblematic case of corruption and co-option by organised crime. Court cases and media reports indicate that criminals have in effect captured parts of the security forces, as well as judges, prosecutors, politicians and other state officials, placing entire offices within some institutions at the service of criminal interests. Crisis Group research has shown that armed groups often try to avoid apprehension by dialling down visible forms of violence, while ensuring that the right officers and their superiors are paid off. Yet, with a plethora of criminal groups competing to control state officials, the tide of killings of local mayors and councillors keeps rising.

The 2024 elections in Mexico showed once again how criminal groups compete with one another to capture coveted state offices and attack candidates who either refuse to protect them or are believed to be working for rival outfits. At least 130 candidates for office were attacked and 32 killed in the run-up to elections in June 2024, which turned out to be the most violent in the country’s history. Even before the electoral cycle, these sorts of attacks on candidates or officeholders had become increasingly common, rising by over 200 per cent between 2018 and 2023. The beheading of the newly elected mayor of Chilpancingo, the state capital of Guerrero, days after he took office in October 2024 revealed the extent of criminal control over much of the state. The new mayor had pledged not to forge pacts with illegal groups, in contrast to his predecessor, who had been videotaped meeting their leaders.

Countries that had until recently appeared peaceful now face a similar ordeal in navigating the twin threats of corruption and violence stemming from criminal groups. The so-called Metástasis judicial case in Ecuador revealed the scale of

state penetration by the country's criminal groups, with the courts convicting 32 individuals, including judges, prosecutors and senior members of the security services on charges of collusion with organised crime.

When connivance with officials fails, high-visibility attacks, such as the assassination of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, can serve to send an intimidating political message. On 7 January 2024, prison authorities realised that José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias Fito, leader of the Ecuadorian criminal group Los Choneros, had escaped from prison. President Daniel Noboa declared a state of exception and signalled that the state would move to retake control of the country's jails the next day. Criminal groups responded promptly. On 9 January, armed men burst into a television studio broadcasting live in Guayaquil, riots erupted in several prisons and armed criminals shut down the city. "All the criminal bands came on to the streets, together, on the main avenues. They were days of terror", a resident recalled. Although Noboa adopted even tougher measures in its wake, the mayhem telegraphed criminal groups' ability to disrupt public order and willingness to push back against any attempts by the newly elected government to tighten security or reform prisons.

B. Controlling Territory

Competition among local groups jostling for status in the drug trafficking chain is fierce, and one way to guarantee a place – and even rise up the ladder – is to control territory. Ferocious turf wars in cities and rural areas that impose a heavy toll on local people are not exclusive to groups involved in the drug trade. Sky-high homicide rates in Honduras and El Salvador in the period 2010-2016 were caused largely by rivalry among street gangs, with very limited involvement of international trafficking. That said, the epicentres of lethal violence in Latin America do largely overlap with hubs of drug supply routes at present. Moreover, traffickers sometimes pour fuel on the fire by investing in one group over another or ordering local suppliers to capture a certain route from a rival outfit. Larger national criminal groups can act in similar ways by providing weapons or capital to gangs, thus encouraging clashes among them.

Battle lines between local rivals can be both invisible and absurdly precise. A resident may be labelled as loyal to the dominant armed group of the sector in which he or she lives, and by crossing the unmarked frontier to another area, run the risk of being killed. A youth leader in Guayaquil explained: "In a sector made up of 25 blocks, there are about two or three gangs who divide up the neighbourhood. My brother was from Block 4, and he went to a party in Block 3. They killed him because he was not supposed to enter that area". In Zacapa,

south-eastern Guatemala, a woman hawking lottery tickets was disappeared, neighbours said, probably for having crossed an invisible border to sell in a gang-controlled area.

The inviolability of border rules spares no one, including children. Kids living in areas run by one gang cannot attend classes if their school is in an area run by another group. This logic becomes deeply embedded from an early age: "Kids from ages 7 or 8 start saying, 'It's better not to go here or there'", a youth leader in the Colombian city of Buenaventura said. Crime permeates many daily interactions. Another Buenaventura resident recalled children pretending to be members of the Shottas or Espartanos, the main criminal outfits in the city, splitting into two groups while they were playing.

" Girls and women are often treated as the property of the group in control of the area where they live. "

Girls and women are often treated as the property of the group in control of the area where they live. Those who cross invisible front lines to socialise or go on a date can be violently punished to make an example for others. A resident of Guayaquil explained: "They say that a woman 'belongs' to the gang. She cannot have a boyfriend from another area. Last year, they killed two girls who were at a party in another sector. [Gang members] waited for [the girls] to leave the party, hunted them down and killed them both. It was a clear message that no woman can be seen with men from another area". Femicides can also be used by these groups to mark territory, while gangs can also threaten or kill girlfriends of rival group members as a form of pressure. Trafficking of girls and women has taken hold in many areas; in the Mexican state of Baja California, for example, this business is controlled by the same groups involved in the drug trade.

Criminals also fiercely contest territorial control in rural areas. Groups in Honduras, for example, forcibly displace locals to consolidate new drug routes and territory, as well as to protect their trafficking assets. A resident of the department of Colón recounted how an armed group used escalating pressure on her neighbours' family to kick them off their farmland. First, armed men destroyed their crops; then they returned to ransack the property. Other Colón residents described destroying clandestine airstrips, only to be expelled by the criminal groups that had built them. Economic elites in the area "use those lands for drug trafficking and protect them with criminal groups", residents said.

Residents living in the shadow of powerful drug traders are also punished for transgressing other unwritten rules or for reporting crime to authorities. Allegations as apparently frivolous as gossiping are punishable by death amid

disputes among drug-dealing gangs in the Mexican port city of Manzanillo, while they carry a fine in some areas of Colombia. Selling drugs to an adversary, or dealing drugs from a rival source, also carries violent punishments. Providing information to security forces or an enemy group is “not forgivable”, a clergyman in Putumayo, Colombia, explained of armed groups’ unspoken code. The rules and punishment meted out are arbitrary, depending on the personality and disposition of the local boss, who has the power to exercise or curb violence as he sees fit. Many use their positions to pursue personal vendettas.



A view of the port of Manzanillo, Mexico’s largest container port. Colima, Mexico, Febrero 2024. CRISIS GROUP / Angélica Ospina-Escobar

C. Recruitment

The relentless recruitment of children and young people into criminal groups is a daunting challenge for states and security forces trying to weaken the grip of drug trafficking. Transnational organised crime preys on a constant stream of expendable recruits, who are drawn to these outfits in search of income and status: as a former member describes their hopes, “if they manage to live until their mid-twenties, they can be a commander”. In some of the most crime-affected areas, entire generations of young people have been absorbed into illegal livelihoods that they will likely find hard to replace with legal alternatives. Criminal groups portray themselves as providing opportunity for young people; in many places, working for them is considered “like any other job”.

The glamourisation of profligate spending and criminal life through social media platforms such as TikTok, as well as in popular music, entices young people looking to hold a degree of power in societies where they know there is very little room for upward mobility. As a Honduran explained, “the narcos and

criminal groups show youth a different way of life [than what they know] in order to gain money and power, and this is how they convince them to join their structures”.

“ Attempted recruitment of children is ... a common reason for forced displacement. ”

In these settings, the line between forced and voluntary recruitment is blurred, particularly when it comes to women and girls. A mother in the Colombian city of Buenaventura recounted a common scenario: a man known to be part of a criminal group arrives at a house and says he wants to take a girl from the family, often as young as nine or ten years old. If the parents decline, the family is threatened. Attempted recruitment of children is, in fact, a common reason for forced displacement. In other cases, families will encourage their young daughters to have relationships with gang members as a form of economic sustenance. Criminal groups also pinpoint women heads of households, pressuring them to join the group or to enter a relationship with a member in order to support themselves and their children.

Once inside these groups’ ranks, children realise it is less glamorous than what they had expected. Foot soldiers often receive just enough to survive and nothing more. A former member explained: “The rank and file get nothing. ... They only have enough money to drink [alcohol], and they are paid in arms”. The reality of large numbers of untrained young people bearing heavy weapons raises a constant risk of violent escalation, a former gang member in Ecuador explained. Disagreements that might have led to fistfights in the past are today causing mass shootings: “The massacres are often committed by young kids who have no training. They do not understand the magnitude of the crimes they are committing”.

D. Extortion

As criminal control of territory has strengthened, extortion has become a major source of both illicit income and violence against those who are unable or unwilling to pay. Demanding money in exchange for alleged protection, generally from petty crime and threats posed by the illegal groups conducting the shakedown, is not new to the region. But its sharp growth in recent years owes much to the drug trade empowering predatory local groups and supplying them with arms. Extortion now affects millions in Latin America. For larger criminal organisations, the racket offers an important revenue stream as well as a way to impress upon residents who is in charge. For residents, it is a violent form of governance under which non-compliance results in attacks,

forced displacement or kidnapping. Extortion is also closely linked to the reconfiguration of crime, with lower-tiered groups, especially urban gangs, encouraged to generate their own cash flow independent of the drug trade.

The breakneck growth of the extortion business has turned it into a major security challenge. In Ecuador, 90 per cent of businesspeople said extortion was their primary security threat, even as 70 per cent of victims avoided reporting the crime for lack of trust in state institutions. Cases of extortion reported to the authorities increased by 40 per cent in Colombia in the first trimester of 2023, and then another 27 per cent in 2024; studies indicate that the true number of cases is likely to be higher. Criminal groups responsible for the protection business coerce, threaten and monitor locals. The ELN rebels in Colombia, for example, routinely kidnap extortion targets who refuse to pay. At the same time, competition among criminal groups can lead to direct clashes, often in densely populated neighbourhoods. Alternatively, residents are simply forced to pay repeated bribes to more than one criminal group, to crippling effect.

Businesses are lucrative targets for criminal groups and many owners are forced either to pay, face closure or be killed. “If they do not pay, they burn the place down, which is why many local merchants pay or are permanently shut down”, said a labour leader in the Mexican city of Colima. The poorest are also preyed upon. Small local shops and kiosks are frequently shaken down, as are migrants passing through Mexico. Criminal groups whose drug revenue has fallen, or who have lost important relationships in the supply chain, turn to extortion to fill the gap in income, as is happening across parts of rural Colombia. In Guaviare, in the south west, the dominant criminal group known as Estado Mayor Central has distributed surveys to subsistence farmers to calculate monthly payments based on measures such as how many cattle they own and how big their property is. This group has seen its cocaine trafficking business drop off over the last two years, with international buyers purchasing from other suppliers instead.

E. Prisons

Prison control has become fundamental to drug traffickers’ operations, and jails are now the sites of some of Latin America’s most appalling violence. Criminal leaders “just keep working” while behind bars, a convicted drug trafficker explained. Corruption of prison personnel is indispensable to turning jails into “great business” for everyone involved, in the words of former inmates. Prison guards receive commissions for tasks they carry out for inmates, such as buying equipment, allowing in drugs or purchasing special groceries; a prisoner in Colombia estimated that a guard could make roughly

for violence reduction. An approach that focuses not just on impeding drug flows but also on managing the devastating fallout of trafficking and the campaign to stop it is the only formula likely to get lasting Latin American backing.

VI. Conclusions

While President Trump has reinvigorated a 50-year war on drugs, Latin America is reeling from its failure. Kingpin captures, crop eradication and aggressive seizures have generated stronger, more resilient and more geographically dispersed drug trafficking networks, which are producing ever more lethal illicit substances for a larger global market. Where there were once vertical supply chains and dominant cartels, an array of criminal players now violently compete or profitably collude with one another, while turning their coercive power on officials, journalists, prosecutors or any other civilians who get in their way. These same groups systematically penetrate and corrupt institutions, hollowing out the very states that are meant to combat them.

Numerous communities across Latin America now confront a fragmented criminal underworld, in which prolonged and intense violence has become the status quo. Meanwhile, some countries with big user markets, particularly in Europe and North America, are calling for stricter controls on drug trafficking – and, in the case of the U.S. under the Trump administration, a revitalised military-led crackdown. Decades of the “war on drugs” provide plentiful evidence that Latin America’s traffickers are hard to eliminate. Combating them through armed force generates more rather than less criminal profit, violence, corruption and misery.

Latin America has ample practical experience to build upon in reducing violence. Strengthening security systems, above all policing, prisons and criminal investigation, has a proven track record. On their own, however, these policies will not enjoy sustained success without addressing the reasons why drug production and trafficking survive and reproduce in the face of police and military onslaughts, including the lack of economic opportunities and the easy availability of firearms. Where drug-related violence is entrenched, negotiations with critical groups could also be explored under very specific conditions. Not all of these approaches may gain endorsement among governments outside the region. But so long as Latin America is the source of a large share of the drugs consumed globally as well as the main victim of drug-related violence, it is both unfair to the region and dangerous to the world to intensify a failing war.

Appendix A: Map of Mexico, Central America and the Andes



Exhibit 10 - CC8

In Mexico, more loved ones go missing. Their families keep searching

 [reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-more-loved-ones-go-missing-their-families-keep-searching-](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-more-loved-ones-go-missing-their-families-keep-searching-2022-09-28)
2022-09-28

Stefanie Eschenbacher, Mahe Elipe

September 28, 2022



Item 1 of 34 Manki Lugo, 68, stands in front of a portrait of her missing son Juan, in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, Mexico, December 9, 2021. Juan, then 33, disappeared in July 2015, and a month later Lugo joined a local search group 'Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte', or the Trackers of El Fuerte. REUTERS/Mahe Elipe

[1/34] Manki Lugo, 68, stands in front of a portrait of her missing son Juan, in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, Mexico, December 9, 2021. Juan, then 33, disappeared in July 2015, and a month later Lugo joined a local search group 'Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte', or the Trackers of El Fuerte. REUTERS/Mahe... [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#) Read more

- Summary
- [Photo essay:](#)

LOS MOCHIS, Mexico, Sept 28 (Reuters) - Manki Lugo no longer remembers how many dead bodies she has found in the seven years she has searched across northern Mexico for her son.

What she cannot forget are the moments her hopes were dashed and it was - once again - not Juan.

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The engraved wedding band clinging to the finger of one skeleton. Or the moon-shaped tattoo, by then barely visible on the decomposing skin of an arm.

"When we find a body, or parts, I pray that it's him," said the 68-year-old with white hair as she sat on the patio of her wooden home. "So that I can finally find peace."

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After Juan, then 33, disappeared in July 2015, Lugo joined a local search group "[Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, opens new tab](#)," or the Trackers of El Fuerte - named after the town in northern Sinaloa state where the group found one of its first mass graves.

The group of mostly women spends hours under scorching sun, combing dense vegetation for the clandestine burial sites that hide the missing dead or searching riverbanks for bodies washed up with sewage.

To make identification harder, sometimes only the limbs of several different victims are buried together. Their heads and torsos are hidden elsewhere.

Sometimes, in their hunt, they chase a hopeful putrid stench into a bog or woodland, only to find a dead animal buried under trash.

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In May, the number of missing people across Mexico passed 100,000 - many of them victims of the country's relentless drug-related violence.

And the number of missing continues to rise, now reaching 105,879, with many experts and Mexican officials believing the true number is even higher.

The desperate search of groups like Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte sheds light not only on the suffering caused by the violence but also the lack of faith in the ability of authorities to combat it.

Reuters spent four years documenting the work of these groups across 10 Mexican states. In Mexico, around 180 such groups have sprung up, some composed of as few as two people or a single family.

Many family members, afraid of eroding public sympathy, were reluctant to discuss if the missing were involved with drugs or crime. Sinaloa, on Mexico's northern Pacific coast, is home to one of the world's largest drug-trafficking organizations - the Sinaloa Cartel.



Mexican officials would not comment on individual cases in this story, saying investigations were ongoing.

Most of Mexico's missing have disappeared since 2006, when then-President Felipe Calderon declared a "War on Drugs," sending in the armed forces to fight the increasingly powerful cartels and unleashing a wave of violence that continues to roil the country.

Since then, nearly 400,000 people have been murdered.

The women of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte have found 423 bodies, according to their records. But only 218 of those could be identified and returned to families.

Few of the women in the group have found what they are looking for.

One who has is Mirna Medina, who founded the group in the sweltering Sinaloa town of Los Mochis after her son Roberto went missing when he was 21 in July 2014.

A 52-year-old mother with short, highlighted hair, Medina is often teased by the group for her brightly manicured nails - so out of place when digging for the lost dead.

In her living room, which doubles as a bustling meeting spot for her work, Medina recalled how after three years of searching she unearthed bits of spine and part of an arm, in a remote part of El Fuerte about 100 kilometers (62 miles) from her home. DNA tests matched them to Roberto.

Later the same year, she found part of his foot nearby. And during a third search, three years later, she found the other foot as well as part of his trousers.

Even after finding Roberto, Medina keeps searching.

"I made a promise to Roberto, back then, that I would search for him until I found him," she said. "Now we make that promise to each other (as a group), that we won't rest until we find all our children."

CARTEL HEARTLAND

Jessica Higuera, 43, joins Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte on the days she can take off work at a local gas station.

Her older son Javier, then aged 19, went missing four years ago.

Higuera had just finished ironing his favorite shirt and kissed him goodbye on the cheek, reminding him to "be a gentleman" as he left for the birthday party of a neighborhood girl.

She later learned that Javier and a friend had stolen a motorbike after the party. Then, his friends told her, they were abducted and never seen again.

"Of course, I would like to hope that he walks through this door one day... But I don't think so," she said sitting at the kitchen table. Two dogs scuttled about, strays she rescued off the streets.

For some, the search does not end when a body is found.

Mayra Gonzalez, 48, had searched for her younger sister across three Mexican states with another group for more than two years.

One day while putting up search posters in a remote town far from her home, a group of women told her of a body uncovered in nearby forest.

Local authorities in Hidalgo state had been unable to identify the body, but Gonzalez believed it could be her sister Gloria who had gone missing in 2016, aged 38, while traveling across the neighboring state of Puebla, in central Mexico.

After the body was released from the morgue, Gonzalez demanded authorities do DNA tests. "I was worried they would hand me over any body, just to close the case," she said. The tests confirmed it was her sister Gloria.

But some things still did not quite add up.

After analyzing the case files, Gonzalez said she noticed bones were missing from the body. It turned out authorities had only partially removed Gloria's body from the forest where she was found, leaving some parts behind. She fought to have the rest of the remains recovered.

Gonzalez also requested an independent autopsy, which found inconsistencies with the official report that listed just one bullet impact wound. The independent autopsy found three.

"We didn't trust the authorities," Gonzalez said sitting at a roadside cafe near her home in Mexico State.

Gonzales filed a complaint to the state human rights commission about the way authorities had mishandled her sister's case. An investigation was opened and is ongoing.

A man has been arrested in connection with the disappearance and killing of her sister. The cases have not been made public because the investigations are ongoing.

In 2019, she returned to university to study for a law degree. She is now months away from graduating.

"After seeing so much injustice, I started studying law," Gonzalez said. "It's not just to get justice for Gloria but for everyone who comes after me."

Reporting by Stefanie Eschenbacher and Mahé Elipe; Additional reporting by Jesus Bustamante Editing by Stephen Eisenhammer and Lisa Shumaker

Our Standards: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles.](#), [opens new tab](#)

[Stefanie Eschenbacher](#)

Thomson Reuters

Stefanie covers energy, the environment and climate change across Mexico and Central America - with a particular focus on the troubled Mexican state oil company Pemex and its emissions. A German native, she also spent more than a decade writing about all things finance while based in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. Before that, she worked in microfinance in Ghana. She holds a Master's degree in economics and finance.

Exhibit 11 - CC9

Exclusive: Survivors of mass kidnapping in Mexico recount 'terrifying' experience

 [reuters.com/world/americas/survivors-mass-kidnapping-mexico-recount-terrifying-experience-2024-01-11](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/survivors-mass-kidnapping-mexico-recount-terrifying-experience-2024-01-11)

Laura Gottesdiener

January 11, 2024



Birds fly near the border wall, on the border between Mexico and the United States, during a day of low temperatures, as seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico January 8, 2024. REUTERS/Jose Luis Gonzalez [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#)

MONTERREY, Mexico, Jan 11 (Reuters) - Honduran migrant Noel Castillo heard a volley of shots just after 7:30 p.m. in late December as he and his family traveled on a highway in northern Mexico. Through the window, he saw trucks swarm around the bus, trapping them from all sides.

"We couldn't believe what was happening; there was so much gunfire," said Castillo.

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Armed, masked men in military-style clothing stormed aboard, and demanded identification from the passengers. They then abducted Castillo and 31 other migrants in [a mass kidnapping](#) that sparked a vast manhunt by Mexican authorities and underscored the risks faced by the hundreds of thousands of people who traverse Mexico each year en route to the United States to seek asylum.

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Reuters interviewed Castillo and his sister, Dilcia, who also survived the kidnapping, by telephone on Wednesday evening, hours after they legally crossed into the United States.

Theirs is the first public account by migrants of the events of Dec. 30, when six Hondurans and 26 Venezuelans were kidnapped. All the migrants were freed on Jan. 3.

The Castillo family said they fled Honduras over the summer to escape powerful drug gangs that were trying to forcibly recruit Dilcia's two teenage daughters, whose names Reuters is withholding at the family's request.

After months in southern Mexico, the family reached the northern city of Monterrey and on Dec. 30 boarded a commercial bus to Matamoros.

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They intended to wait there while applying for an appointment on a U.S. government smartphone app, CBP One, that would allow them to legally enter the United States.

The bus passed through two official checkpoints, Castillo recalled, where he said he and other migrants were extorted by officials for 500 pesos, or \$30, per person each time.

Mexican authorities did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the extortion allegation, which Reuters could not independently verify.

Soon after they passed the city of Reynosa, armed men encircled the bus.

An array of warring crime networks control swaths of this border region and commonly extort and kidnap migrants who travel through their territory.

The criminals whisked Castillo, his niece and other migrants away in one truck, while Dilcia, her eldest daughter and other members of the group were taken to another location.

► This town was bad, devastated. It was very bad. 00:0801:00

For four days, Dilcia had no news of her youngest daughter. All she heard were the kidnappers' threats: If you don't pay up, you'll never see her again.

"You imagine the worst: What is happening? What have they done with her?" she recalled. "It was terrifying."

Days passed without food, without water, the cramped house where they were imprisoned crawling with rats and cockroaches, she said.

Meanwhile, Castillo and his niece were taken to a ranch with a house so packed with dozens of other kidnapped migrants that sometimes there wasn't even enough room to sit down, he said. They were stripped of their phones, cash and even their shoes.

Back in Honduras, their relatives received a series of calls in which the kidnappers demanded thousands of dollars in ransom.

The family sold Dilcia's house and scrapped together other funds to pay about \$7,000 to the kidnappers, who asked that the money be sent to a series of bank accounts, which the family believes were Peru-based.

On Jan. 3, all 32 migrants who had been kidnapped together five days earlier were loaded onto a bus by their kidnappers and [abandoned in a parking lot](#) of a shopping center not far from the border.

"They'll come get you here'," Castillo recalls the kidnappers saying. About 10 minutes later, he said, the authorities arrived.

Mexican authorities say they discovered the group after an anonymous 911 emergency call. They say the migrants were released by their captors due to the large deployment of security forces and the ensuing manhunt.

They also said the case was "atypical" due to the large number of migrants kidnapped at one time, though they acknowledged migrants are routinely kidnapped in this part of Mexico.

When they left the ranch, dozens of other migrants remained imprisoned there, Castillo said. Authorities say the investigation is ongoing but no one has been arrested so far.

Reporting by Laura Gottesdiener in Monterrey; editing by Drazen Jorgic and Jonathan Oatis

Our Standards: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles.](#), [opens new tab](#)

Laura Gottesdiener is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist in Reuters' Mexico and Central America bureau. She has covered migration, human smuggling, drug trafficking, and human rights violations from across the region. She was part of the team that won the 2025 Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Reporting for the series "Fentanyl Express."

Exhibit 12 - CC10

Mexican authorities free 31 kidnapped migrants

 [reuters.com/world/americas/migrants-kidnapped-mexico-hail-venezuela-cuba-ecuador-security-minister-2024-01-03](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/migrants-kidnapped-mexico-hail-venezuela-cuba-ecuador-security-minister-2024-01-03)

Reuters

January 3, 2024



Item 1 of 3 Police authorities stand outside a bus transporting the migrants who were kidnapped in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, in the municipality of Rio Bravo, Mexico, January 3, 2024. Mexico Presidency/Handout via REUTERS

[1/3]Police authorities stand outside a bus transporting the migrants who were kidnapped in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, in the municipality of Rio Bravo, Mexico, January 3, 2024. Mexico Presidency/Handout via REUTERS [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#)

MEXICO CITY, Jan 3 (Reuters) - Mexican authorities have rescued 31 migrants, including women and children, who were kidnapped over the weekend in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, officials announced on Wednesday.

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"They are already in the hands of the authorities and are undergoing the appropriate medical examinations," he added, along with a photo that showed men, women and children, including one holding a stuffed animal.

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The migrants were "safe and sound," Mexican Interior Minister Luisa Alcalde wrote on X, citing information from the state's governor.

Gunmen snatched the migrants on Saturday from a bus on a highway in the municipality of Reynosa, close to Mexico's border with the United States. The bus was destined for Matamoros, across from Brownsville, Texas.

Mexican Security Minister Rosa Icela Rodriguez said earlier on Wednesday that the kidnapped migrants were from Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico.

Honduran Foreign Minister Enrique Reina later posted on X that there were six Hondurans among the group, including three teenage girls, whose statements were being taken by Mexican authorities.

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Colombia's consulate in Mexico City said four Colombian nationals were also part of the group.

Asylum seekers and human rights activists have for months been warning of an escalating kidnapping crisis in the Tamaulipas border region, especially in Reynosa.

The area is the site of an ongoing conflict between two factions of the powerful Gulf Cartel, known as the Metros and the Scorpions, according to a former security official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

He said migrant smuggling and trafficking has become the most lucrative illicit industry in the region.

Earlier in the day, Rodriguez said the kidnapping was "unusual" due to the large number of victims, although it's not uncommon for migrants to be pulled off buses and kidnapped in Mexico. Usually, the migrants are forced to beg their relatives to pay ransom money.

She added that authorities were tracking the cell phones of the migrants in efforts to find them.

In May last year, 49 migrants, including 11 minors, were [released after being kidnapped](#) in the south of Mexico while traveling by bus to the U.S. border. A [record number of migrants](#) traveled across Central America and Mexico in 2023 aiming to reach the United States, fleeing poverty, violence, climate change and conflict.

Reporting by Brendan O'Boyle, Stefanie Eschenbacher, Laura Gottesdiener, Diego Ore and Sarah Morland; Additional reporting by Oliver Griffin; Editing by Bill Berkrot and Sandra Maler

Our Standards:

Exhibit 13 - CC11

Notorious cartel hired hacker to use surveillance cameras, phone data to track and kill FBI informants, U.S. says

 [cbsnews.com/news/sinaloa-cartel-hacker-phone-data-cameras-track-kill-fbi-informants-doj](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sinaloa-cartel-hacker-phone-data-cameras-track-kill-fbi-informants-doj)

Stephen Smith

June 30, 2025



A notorious drug cartel enlisted a hacker who was able to infiltrate phone data and Mexico City's surveillance cameras to help track and kill FBI informants, the U.S. Justice Department has revealed.

The 2018 operation was disclosed Thursday in a [47-page audit](#) by the Justice Department Inspector General, outlining the FBI's "efforts to mitigate the effects of ubiquitous technical surveillance."

The partially redacted report cites a case involving [Juaquin "El Chapo" Guzman](#) — the founder of the infamous Sinaloa cartel. "El Chapo" is now serving a life sentence in a maximum security prison in the U.S on multiple conspiracy counts for smuggling vast quantities of cocaine and other drugs into the U.S. for more than a quarter of a century.

According to the newly released audit, an unnamed hacker was recruited by the cartel in 2018. The hacker "observed people going in and out of the United States Embassy in Mexico City and identified 'people of interest' for the cartel, including an FBI assistant legal attaché," the report said.

The hacker was able to use the attaché's phone number to determine incoming and outgoing calls as well as the FBI official's geolocation data, according to the audit.

The report said the hacker also used Mexico City's surveillance camera system to follow the FBI attaché throughout the city and identify people they met with. "The cartel used that information to intimidate and, in some instances, kill potential sources or cooperating witnesses," the audit said.

The report noted that modern technology has made it difficult to protect sensitive operations and sources.

"Advances in data mining and analysis, facial recognition, and computer network exploitation have made it easier than ever for nation state adversaries, terrorist organizations and criminal networks to identify FBI personnel and operations," the audit said.

The report urged the FBI to conduct an enterprise-wide threat assessment to determine where the agency is most vulnerable.

The Sinaloa cartel, which was [designated a terrorist organization](#) earlier this year by the Trump administration, has long been one of Mexico's most powerful and ruthless crime syndicates. The cartel is one of the largest producers and traffickers of fentanyl and other drugs to the U.S. and has been known "to murder, kidnap, and intimidate civilians, government officials and journalists," according to the [U.S. State Department](#).

The revelation about the Sinaloa cartel hacker comes just weeks after the U.S. offered a [\\$10 million reward](#) for the capture of two of El Chapo's sons — Archivaldo Ivan Guzman Salazar and Jesus Alfredo Guzman Salazar. His other two sons — [Joaquin Guzman Lopez](#) and [Ovidio Guzman Lopez](#) — are currently in U.S. custody.

El Chapo's sons lead a faction of the Sinaloa cartel known as the "Chapitos," or "little Chapos." The Chapitos and their cartel associates have used corkscrews, electrocution and hot chiles to [torture their rivals](#) while some of their victims were "fed dead or alive to tigers," according to a 2023 U.S. indictment.

More from CBS News

Exhibit 14 - CC12

Mexico arrests more than 100 local police officers for various abuses and offenses

AP apnews.com/article/mexico-police-arrested-corruption-abuses-cartels-ddd782952811a05c0355d058b3dcb7ee

By EDGAR H. CLEMENTE and ALBA ALEMÁN

17 de dezembro de
2024



By [EDGAR H. CLEMENTE](#) and [ALBA ALEMÁN](#)

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Authorities in two states in southern Mexico arrested more than 100 local police officers Monday for various abuses and offenses, adding to the long list of police corruption scandals in the country.

In the largest of the two incidents, 92 municipal police officers in the southern state of Chiapas were arrested after they tried to stop state authorities from assuming command of a police surveillance camera office.

Chiapas state prosecutors accused local police officers in the city of Comitán of using the video cameras to inform local groups — some of which are allied with drug cartels — about state and federal raids in the area.

Chiapas state police chief Óscar Aparicio Avendaño said some of the 92 municipal Comitán police officers drew their guns on state officials trying to take control of the video surveillance office, and forced them out at gunpoint.

The 92 officers were held pending charges of rioting and abuse of authority.

After they were detained, some local residents blocked streets and destroyed or damaged video cameras; about 30 of them were arrested on riot charges.

At issue are local groups that claim to represent farmers in the rural region, but which have often been forced or paid to act in support of [drug cartels that have been warring over turf in Chiapas for months](#).

Having corrupt local police use the surveillance camera network to report the movements of federal troops or state police would be valuable to the farm groups and cartels, which often operate road blockades.

Comitan is located near the border with Guatemala, on a lucrative route for immigrant smuggling.

Chiapas has become so overrun by the Sinaloa cartel and the rival Jalisco drug cartel — both of which also participate in migrants smuggling and extortion — that some residents of Mexican towns [have been forced to flee to Guatemala](#) for safety.

Chiapas Gov. Eduardo Ramírez Aguilar said the days of local populations collaborating with criminal gangs are over.

“The days are over when they (the gangs) came in, took over, and (said) ‘go do this, go block that, go oppose the armed forces,’” Ramírez Aguilar said. That was an apparent reference to incidents in several Chiapas towns where local residents took to the streets to block army patrols and demand their withdrawal.

However, the cartel problem in Chiapas largely arose under former governor Rutilio Escandón, who like Ramírez Aguilar is also a member of the [ruling Morena party](#). Escandón was recently appointed as Mexico’s consul in Miami, Florida.

Meanwhile, in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz, state prosecutors said they had arrested 13 state police officers implicated in three cases of forced disappearances. That is an offense in which authorities abduct someone who vanishes without a trace.

Prosecutors in Veracruz did not provide details on the alleged victims.

Alba Alemán reported from Xalapa, Mexico

Exhibit 15 - CC13

Expansion of drug trafficking in Mexico transforms cartels into the country's fifth-largest employer, study says.

 oglobo.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2023/09/22/expansao-do-narcotrafico-no-mexico-transforma-carteis-em-quinto-maior-empregador-do-pais-diz-estudo.ghtml

22 de setembro de 2023

With the expansion of Mexican cartels beyond the illegal drug trade—including sectors such as transportation and food—criminal groups have become the country's fifth-largest employer, with approximately 175,000 members, revealed a new study published Thursday in the journal Science.

- **In January:** [López Obrador hosts Biden and Trudeau at a summit marked by the immigration crisis and the war on drugs.](#)
- **Drug trafficking , murders, and extradition requests:** [The history of El Chapo's son in the US.](#)

Based on an analysis of data on homicides, disappearances, arrests, and disputes between rival factions collected over a decade, the research arrived at an estimate of the total number of people who work for these criminal organizations. According to the article, although many members are not directly involved in violent activities, the results highlight the growing influence of cartels in [Mexico](#) —which today has 198 identified criminal groups, many of them contracted by companies to provide other services.

Nationally, the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels are the largest and vie for control of various territories. According to the study's authors, the best way to reduce the high rates of violence in the country would be to eliminate their recruitment methods. Policies focused on increasing the number of arrests may actually boost the homicide rate and benefit these groups, according to the article.

"More than 1.7 million people in Latin America are incarcerated, and adding more people to overcrowded prisons will not solve the problem of insecurity," the authors wrote.

Between 2007 and 2021, the number of homicides more than tripled in Mexico, placing the country among those with the highest rates in Latin America, with almost 27 victims for every 100,000 inhabitants. In 2022, 27.4% of Mexican

families reported that at least one of their members had been a victim of a crime, according to the National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety.

- **Understand:** [New drug trafficking routes in the region have brought Ecuador closer to Mexican cartels.](#)

Map of cartels in Mexico — Photo: Art Department

However, considering that the tentacles of organized crime in the country already control businesses of all kinds—even those originally legal but operated illegally by these groups—the impact on the population could be even greater and more subtle. Even the prices of avocados or the classic tortilla, for example, are becoming more expensive due to the interference of drug trafficking.

In this context, the Mexican Confederation of Employers (Coparmex) will participate in a meeting this Friday to discuss solutions to the problem of violence, called the National Dialogue for Peace. "It is clear that business owners are afraid of seeing more businesses forcibly taken over, afraid of handing the economy over to criminals," the organization said in a statement.

Inflationary effect

The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), a global nonprofit research and analysis center, estimated the economic impact of violence in Mexico in 2022 at 4.6 trillion pesos (R\$1.3 trillion). This equates to 18.3% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the same year, the federal government spent 0.6% of GDP on security, the IEP reported.

The per capita impact is even more frustrating. Each Mexican suffered an economic loss of 35,705 pesos—more than double the average monthly salary—and crime in food production chains adds two percentage points to the country's inflation, according to an estimate by the Autonomous University of Mexico.

- **Colombia:** [Former FARC leader pleads guilty to drug trafficking charges in the US.](#)

Images of an empty market in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero state, went viral on social media last year. According to several media reports, eight people involved in the sale and distribution of chicken for human consumption were killed in one week. An incident was also reported in which a group of armed

men murdered a poultry businessman in full view of shoppers and customers. In the weeks following the incident, chicken became scarce in the area. Markets and poultry shops closed.

In the State of Mexico and Michoacán, there have also been shortages and price increases for chicken due to extortion by organized crime, as vendors have no option but to pass the cost on to consumers to preserve their businesses.

Last March, Congress convened a panel of experts to analyze the causes of illegal fishing. The main cause is the lack of inspection, and the second is the presence of organized crime. It is possible that one includes the other. Seizures of legal and illegal fish are concentrated in the Gulf of California and the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, and Baja California Sur, according to an investigation by the media outlet Contralínea. But, in reality, it affects all coastlines.

Hundreds of immigrants attempt to cross the Mexican-US border after rumors about authorization.



10 photos

Barbed wire, barricades, and police officers with shields contained the advance.

Last year, fruits and vegetables suffered the highest inflation as a result of crime. In just two weeks, tomatoes rose 16.7%, serrano peppers 15%, and avocados 4.73%. This year, the state of Nuevo León recorded a 50% increase in

the price of lemons between August and September, according to data from the Ministry of Economy.

This has its roots in Michoacán, a state that exports and supplies much of the country with agricultural products. On September 11, three lemon cutters were killed in an armed attack that, according to authorities, was perpetrated by organized crime in the municipality of Tepalcatepec. Zamora, another lemon-producing municipality, has become the epicenter of disputes in the state of Michoacán between rival drug cartels, according to the IEP. The same applies to other crops grown in Michoacán.

Transport

The National Association of Carriers (ANTAC) reported in July that cargo theft accounts for 2.3 billion pesos (approximately US\$676 million) in losses annually. However, business owners claim the figure is much higher. According to the company AI27, annual theft is close to R\$1.4 billion. Authorities recorded 13,199 crimes committed against carriers last year, a 6.7% increase compared to 2021.

Public transportation is also a target of these groups. Between July and the first week of August, 14 bus drivers were killed in the municipality of Chilpancingo, in Guerrero, alone. In Michoacán, organized crime collects 21 million pesos in extortion money from public transport passengers, according to information from the newspaper Excélsior. And huachicol, as gasoline theft is known, is such a widespread problem that it has been a focus of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government.

In January, taxi drivers in the Cancún tourist resort reacted with road blockades and violence against drivers, passengers, and even authorities to the permission granted to the Uber app in Quintana Roo to operate legally. Weeks later, unconfirmed reports in local and national media suggested that this was due to the sector being co-opted by organized crime. This coincides with a report by the international security intelligence firm Insight Crime, which, since 2013, has warned that taxi drivers are being targeted by criminal organizations. The goal is to force them to transport and sell drugs, the company reported. *(With El País).*

Exhibit 16 - CC14

Mexican cartels have 30,000 "child soldiers"

G gazetadopovo.com.br/mundo/carteis-mexicanos-tem-30-mil-criancas-soldado-c40t4atvab78hehirby1cfaku

July 18, 2011



Drug trafficking

Most are between 13 and 17 years old and are recruited by the country's largest cartels: Los Zetas, Sinaloa, and La Familia Michoacán.

The youngest act as informants for drug traffickers. After the age of 12, they transport drugs, watch over kidnapping victims, and by the age of 16, they are ready for the most violent actions, such as kidnappings and murders.

Organizations estimate that up to 30,000 young people have been recruited by Mexican cartels.

Most of them are between 13 and 17 years old and are recruited by the country's largest cartels: **Los Zetas, Sinaloa, and La Familia Michoacán** .

"Much of what is happening in Mexico today corresponds to a war scenario. Just as soldiers are needed in a war, the cartels need to increase their numbers," said Juan Martín Pérez García, executive director of the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico, in an interview with the reporter.

The most vulnerable, poorest, and most excluded young people are cheap labor and easily discarded – murdered or handed over to the police. "They are like the child soldiers of Africa, since they are on the 'front line of fire' and are the most expendable," says anthropologist Rossana Reguillo, from the University of Guadalajara.

Recruitment begins with threats to the young people's families. Then comes the offer of a salary. "Studies indicate that in Ciudad Juárez, for example, teenagers receive US\$1,000 per month. They can also be paid for murders,"

says Pérez. According to him, a Mexican worker earns an average of US\$5 for eight hours of work. This information comes from the newspaper O Estado de S. Paulo.

See also

- [Mexico discovers the country's largest marijuana plantation.](#)
- [Disputes between drug cartels kill 40 in Mexico.](#)
- [Ten decapitated bodies are abandoned in northern Mexico.](#)
- [Massacre leaves at least 17 dead in a bar in Mexico.](#)

Exhibit 17 - CC15

The Salazar family: how the criminal group linked to the Sinaloa Cartel emerged

The criminal group Los Salazar emerged on the border of Chihuahua and Sonora as the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel

By Miguel Flores

April 12, 2026 7:00 am EST

The Salazar family has been accused of operating under the orders of the Sinaloa Cartel and of leading the violence in the north of the country.

The criminal group Los Salazar emerged in the mid-2000s as the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel in the Sonora and Chihuahua region, under the leadership of Adán Salazar Zamorano, alias “Don Adán.” The organization was key to the cartel's expansion northward and in the war against rivals such as the Juárez Cartel and La Línea. Its primary business has been drug trafficking to the United States, especially cocaine, and in recent years, the construction of drug tunnels, such as the one recently discovered in Mexico that led to the United States, demonstrating its logistical and technological capacity for the international trafficking of illicit substances.

The Salazar family originated in Chínipas, Chihuahua, and quickly consolidated their presence in Sonora, where they controlled strategic routes for drug and arms trafficking. Their founder, Don Adán, was considered one of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán's closest associates and a key figure in securing the Sinaloa Cartel's operations in the region. After his arrest in 2011 and subsequent extradition to the United States in 2023, leadership passed to his sons, primarily Jesús Alfredo Salazar Ramírez (“El Muñeco”), who was arrested in 2012, and Adán “El Indio” Salazar, who was murdered in 2016. Currently, Crispín Salazar Zamorano (“El Tío”) is considered the main operator.

Drug tunnels and presence on the border

The organization excelled at engineering drug tunnels to smuggle drugs into the United States. On several occasions, Mexican and U.S. authorities have secured sophisticated tunnels along the Sonora-Arizona border, attributed to Los Salazar. These tunnels allow the passage of large volumes of drugs and are considered one of the cartel's main trafficking routes in the region.

Internal rift and dispute with “Los Chapitos”

In 2024, following the arrest of Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, the Sinaloa Cartel fractured into two factions. The Salazar family, who had historically operated in alliance with “Los Chapitos,” El Chapo’s sons, broke with that faction after refusing to comply with the order to halt fentanyl production and trafficking. This disobedience led to an internal war, threats, and clashes in Sonora and

Sinaloa, as well as the emergence of the so-called Independent Cartel of Sonora, comprised of the Salazar family and other splinter groups.

In January 2025, a banner appeared in Hermosillo accusing Natanael Cano, a singer of corridos tumbados, and other musicians of being alleged financial collaborators of Los Salazar. (Instagram)

In January 2025, a banner appeared in Hermosillo accusing Natanael Cano, a singer of corridos tumbados, and other musicians of being financial collaborators of Los Salazar, an accusation that has not been substantiated by any authority. The connection between public figures and the criminal group sparked investigations and protective measures, while the organization continues to operate discreetly, facing rivals and authorities in northern Mexico.

Current leadership

In addition to Crispín Salazar, other names such as Manuel Irán Fontes Salazar (“El Cabo 10”) and Sergio Alberto del Villas (“El Napoleón,” who died in 2018) have been identified as operators and plaza bosses. The Salazar family has been implicated in forced displacement, murders, arms trafficking, and the murder of journalist Miroslava Breach.

Source: <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2026/04/12/los-salazar-asi-surgio-el-grupo-criminal-relacionado-con-el-cartel-de-sinaloa/>

Exhibit 18 - CC16

Sinaloa Cartel History and Criminal Networks

 insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel-profile

InSight Crime

May 19, 2025



The Sinaloa Cartel, considered the largest and most powerful drug trafficking organization in the Western Hemisphere, is a network of some of Mexico's most important drug lords. Members work together to protect themselves. Its many factions forged connections at the highest levels of Mexico's federal police and military, and has bribed members of both institutions to maintain an advantage over rival organizations.

The Mexican drug cartel is primarily involved in the international trafficking of [fentanyl](#), [methamphetamine](#), cocaine, marijuana, and heroin, mostly to the United States. Some factions are also involved in small-scale drug dealing and taxing other criminal networks, including human smugglers.

What is the History of the Sinaloa Cartel?

The history of the Sinaloa Cartel begins in the state of Sinaloa, which has long been a hub for the cultivation of cannabis and poppy, and the smuggling of marijuana and heroin in Mexico. Many of the country's drug trafficking organizations originated in the region as small groups of humble farmers living in rural areas of the state. In the 1960s and 1970s, those families moved into the drug trade, particularly marijuana. One of the first to traffic large quantities of marijuana was Pedro Avilés, who later invited his son's friend, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias "[El Chapo](#)," into the business. Avilés was killed in 1978 during a shootout with police.

In the late 1970s, the families diversified their activities. They began transporting [cocaine](#) for Colombian and Central American traffickers and shifted their activities to

Guadalajara, the capital of the state of Jalisco. Among their leaders were [Rafael Caro Quintero](#), Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo.

Aided by a Honduran drug trafficker [Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros](#), the men began working with Colombia's Medellín Cartel. Matta Ballesteros lived part-time in Colombia, where he operated as the main intermediary between Colombian and Mexican traffickers, who established the drug trafficking patterns that are still present today: the movement of cocaine shipments by air and sea to Central America and Mexico and then overland to the United States.

The audacity of Mexican traffickers became evident in 1985 when they assassinated Enrique Camarena, an undercover US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent. Camarena's death represented the beginning of the end for the Guadalajara Cartel. Pressure from the United States forced Mexican authorities to act, and its leaders fled the country. The remaining factions established bases in various parts of Mexico. The Arellano Félix brothers established their base of operations in Tijuana. Carrillo Fuentes' family moved to Ciudad Juárez. El Chapo and his associate, Héctor Luis Palma Salazar, remained in the Sinaloa area.

During this time, the Sinaloa Cartel established an alliance with the Valencia family in Michoacán, who formed the organization known as the Milenio Cartel. This collaboration not only allowed them to continue to wield power over their rivals, but also to gain access to key Pacific ports and receive precursor chemicals from China to enter the lucrative methamphetamine business.

The battles between these organizations began almost immediately. In November 1992, Guzmán sent 40 armed men to break into a Tijuana Cartel party in Puerto Vallarta, killing nine people. The Tijuana Cartel responded by trying to assassinate Guzmán at the Guadalajara airport in 1993. Instead they assassinated a Mexican Catholic cardinal. Guzmán fled to Guatemala, where he was arrested two weeks later. Palma Salazar was arrested in 1995.

Arturo Guzmán Loera and brothers Héctor, Alfredo, and Arturo Beltrán Leyva, continued to run the Sinaloa Cartel's operations, though El Chapo maintained some control from prison, passing messages through his lawyers. In 2001, Guzmán escaped from prison ahead of an order for his extradition to the United States and quickly regained full control of the organization.

In 2008, the alliance between Guzmán and the Beltrán Leyvas broke down after the brothers suspected that Guzmán had turned Alfredo in to the authorities. This triggered [a bloody war](#) in which the Beltrán Leyva brothers assassinated Guzmán's son, Edgar. The ensuing battles raged across Sinaloa and parts of Chihuahua and Durango, resulting in the forced displacement of hundreds of people.

This period saw Guzmán become the most visible head of the Sinaloa Cartel, alongside Ismael Zambada García, alias “[El Mayo](#),” and Juan José Esparragoza Moreno, alias “El Azul.”

In early 2010, Mexican authorities killed Ignacio “Nacho” Coronel in a gunfight, severing the Sinaloa Cartel’s link to the Milenio Cartel. This resulted in a rift between the two organizations. Further fractures within the Milenio Cartel eventually gave birth to the Jalisco Cartel New Generation ([Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG](#)), which today is one of the Sinaloa Cartel’s main rivals.

Guzmán was arrested again, this time in Mexico, in February 2014, leaving the leadership of the organization in the hands of El Azul and El Mayo. El Azul reportedly [died of a heart attack](#) in June 2014, though [rumors that he is still alive](#) persist. Meanwhile, Guzmán cemented his status as Mexico’s greatest criminal legend when he again escaped from prison — this time using a tunnel in the bathroom of his cell — in July 2015.

Guzmán’s third capture in 2017 and subsequent extradition to the United States sparked an internal struggle for control of the Sinaloa Cartel. Between 2017 and 2021, there were several clashes between armed groups linked to El Mayo and El Chapo’s sons, some of which were allegedly orchestrated by the El Chapo’s former right-hand man, Dámaso López Núñez, alias “El Licenciado.” El Licenciado and his son, Dámaso López Serrano, alias “Mini Lic,” were later [arrested](#) and extradited to the United States. They remain in US custody.

In July 2024, El Mayo and one of El Chapo’s sons, Joaquín Guzmán López, were [arrested by US authorities](#) in the state of New Mexico. The younger Guzmán allegedly deceived El Mayo into attending a meeting in Sinaloa, during which he was subdued and forced onto an airplane that brought him to the United States. After a period of tense calm, a [violent battle erupted](#) between the Chapitos and Mayiza factions of the Sinaloa Cartel over this alleged betrayal.

Who Runs the Sinaloa Cartel?

The Sinaloa Cartel does not have a single leader or a [hierarchical structure](#). It is a network of various cells that cooperate with each other, while the cartel’s operations abroad, and even within Mexico, are generally outsourced to local partners.

Currently, the Sinaloa Cartel has at least two leadership structures. The first is commanded by loyalists of El Mayo, who was arrested in July 2024 in the United States. The other is made up of El Chapo’s sons, Joaquín Guzmán López, Ovidio Guzmán López, Iván Archivaldo, and Jesús Alfredo, known collectively as “[Chapitos](#).”

Each faction of the Sinaloa Cartel has armed branches under its command that allow them to protect and take territories. The Chapitos, for example, are associated with the Ninis, the Salazar, Gente Nueva, and the Chimales. For their part, the networks associated with El Mayo collaborate with the Antrax and the Rusos, among others.

The four Chapitos have become a priority target for Mexican and US authorities. Ovidio Guzmán was [arrested](#) by Mexican authorities in January 2023, following a [failed attempt](#) to capture him in 2019. In September 2023, he was [extradited](#) to the United States. Joaquín was arrested in the United States along with El Mayo in July 2024.

Where Does the Sinaloa Cartel Operate?

The Sinaloa Cartel is based in the state of the same name and in some municipalities of the nearby states of Durango and Chihuahua, which also form a notorious drug producing region known as the Golden Triangle. This area is home to some of the main traffickers and their families, who were previously involved in the cultivation of marijuana and puppy but are now mainly engaged in the production of methamphetamine and fentanyl. In the state capital of Culiacán, the Sinaloa Cartel has also increased its involvement in small-scale drug dealing, particularly of [marijuana](#) and methamphetamine.

The organization also has cells operating in other Mexican states, such as Sonora, Baja California, Nayarit, Jalisco, and Chiapas. This provides them with access to border crossings, drug corridors, and money laundering opportunities. In some areas, such as along the US-Mexico border, the group also collects taxes from other criminal networks, including human smugglers.

The networks associated with the Sinaloa Cartel also have clients on almost every continent, as well as suppliers of precursor chemicals in [China, India, and other Asian countries](#). In addition, they frequently send emissaries to Colombia, Venezuela, and [Ecuador](#) to ensure a steady production and flow of cocaine.

Who Are the Sinaloa Cartel's Allies and Enemies?

The main link between the top leadership of the Sinaloa Cartel is family and *compadrazgo* (kinship). However, the group also forms transactional alliances with local groups to gain access to key territories.

Since its break with the Beltrán Leyva Organization, the Sinaloa Cartel has created other temporary alliances with former enemies in the [Gulf Cartel](#) and the [Familia Michoacana](#), and reportedly negotiated a pact with the [Tijuana Cartel](#).

On the other hand, the Sinaloa Cartel appears to have taken a cue from Colombia's Cali Cartel by establishing strong connections with Mexico's political and economic elite, successfully penetrating the government and security forces. It often opts for bribery over violence and alliances over battles. However, the organization has often used extreme violence to invade areas it seeks to control.

The cartel's most powerful contacts were allegedly formed during National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional – PAN) administrations, which, according to some sources, helped explain its growth in the 2000s and 2010s. Former presidents Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón, both of the PAN, launched numerous offensives against trafficking organizations and some important leaders like Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, head of the Gulf Cartel, and Benjamín Arellano Félix, head of the Tijuana Cartel. The perception that the PAN favored the Sinaloa Cartel was so strong in Mexico that in 2010, officials issued a statement denying any link between the group and the party, and in 2011, the Calderón administration [released a video](#) with a similar message.

Years later, some of these suspicions were confirmed following the arrest in the United States of [Genaro García Luna](#), Mexico's secretary of public security during the Calderón administration. During his trial in New York, several drug traffickers [testified](#) about having bribed the former official with millions of dollars in exchange for official protection.

Currently, the CJNG is the Sinaloa Cartel's main rival. However, the two organizations have come to work together at certain stages of certain drug supply chains. For example, both groups have at times [shared suppliers](#) of precursor chemicals for the production of methamphetamine and fentanyl.

What is the Sinaloa Cartel's Outlook?

The Sinaloa Cartel has been resilient to changes in the international drug landscape and the capture and deaths of its leaders, in part because of its network structure and entrepreneurial approach.

This structure had enabled the cartel to avoid scrutiny regarding the violence it commits, and to effectively replace members it lost.

However, due to their active involvement in fentanyl trafficking to the United States – which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives – its leaders have become priority targets for the US government. This has resulted in increased captures and the dismantling of financial networks, which could force the group to restructure once more.

What's more, the internal war currently raging inside the group has shown no signs of slowing, suggesting that the Sinaloa Cartel's leadership structure may soon undergo a serious transformation that may also impact what other criminal groups it aligns itself with and against.

Claudia Isabel Tamayo Bravo
Alberto Rodriguez Castillo
Josefina Navarro Tamayo

File No. A. 249-307-474
File No. A. 249-307-473
File No. A. 249-307-475

Proof of Service

On this day, I, Natalia Vieira Santanna, served a copy of the following documents:

**RESPONDENTS' COUNTRY CONDITIONS IN SUPPORT OF ASYLUM AND
WITHHOLDING OF REMOVAL**

To the following:

Office Location:	Mailing Address:
Office of the Principal Legal Advisor Department of Homeland Security 100 Montgomery Street, Suite 200 San Francisco, CA 94104	US Immigration and Customs Enforcement US Department of Homeland Security Office of the Principal Legal Advisor P.O. Box 26449 San Francisco, CA 94126-644

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☒ Through the EOIR Courts and Appeals System (ECAS), which will automatically send service notification to both parties that a new document has been filed.

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