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CFR Backgrounders

Mexico's Drug War

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Introduction

In 2006, former Mexican president Felipe Calderón, in conjunction with the United States, launched a massive crackdown against drug trafficking organizations, escalating a conflict that would contribute to the deaths of tens of thousands of people in drug-related violence. While the United States has supplied funding and intelligence to increase Mexico's institutional capacity to address drug trafficking, its primary focus has been on stanching the flow of drugs into the country and domestic law enforcement. Analysts differ on how to address Mexico's festering internal strife, but a growing number agree that the U.S. war on drugs is a failure and necessitates a new approach. Enrique Peña Nieto, who succeeded Calderón as president in December 2012, has tried to reframe Mexico's image as an investment hotspot while emphasizing a strategy to quell violence against civilians. Meanwhile, gradual moves have been made at the U.S. state level toward legalization and decriminalization of marijuana, one of the primary substances involved in the drug war, raising new questions about overall policy.

Mexico's Drug Trafficking

Weak judicial and police institutions, as well as proximity to the world's largest consumer economy, have made Mexico the hub of one of the world's most sophisticated drug networks. For decades, drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) used Mexico's entrenched political system to create "a system-wide network of corruption that ensured distribution rights, market access, and even official government protection for drug traffickers **in exchange for lucrative bribes**," writes **David Shirk**, director of the Justice in Mexico project at the University of San Diego, in a 2011 CFR report. However, it was not until the late 1980s, in the wake of the successful dismantling of Colombia's drug cartels, that Mexican drug organizations rose to their current prominence. As the Colombian route was disrupted, Mexican gangs shifted from being **couriers for Colombia to being wholesalers**.

Today, Mexico is a major supplier of heroin to the U.S. market, and the largest foreign supplier of methamphetamine and marijuana. Mexican production of all three of these drugs has increased since 2005, as has the amount of drugs seized at the southwest border, according to the U.S. **Department of Justice** [PDF]. More than 90 percent of cocaine now **travels through Mexico** into the United States, up from **77 percent in 2003**. Officials estimate that the drug trade makes up 3 to 4 percent of Mexico's $1.2 trillion annual GDP—totaling as much as $30 billion—and employs at least **half a million people**.

Mexico's drug cartels have splintered, forged alliances, battled one another for territory, and evolved over the decades. Some of the most prominent organizations today include the Zetas, Sinaloa Cartel, Juárez Cartel, Tijuana Cartel, Beltran Leyva, and the Knights Templar. Some of these groups, like Sinaloa, are older, more established organizations, while others, like the Knights Templar, have emerged more recently.

Mexico's War Effort Under Calderón

Corruption and weakness in Mexico's judicial and police sectors have largely allowed the drug trade to flourish. The police are easily bought, in part because of their meager earnings (about $9,000-$10,000 a year), which fall below the average salary for public-sector employees. On the website InSight Crime, Patrick Corcoran says "an underpaid officer could double or triple his salary by simply agreeing **to look the other way**." Mexico's judicial system—with its autocratic judges and lack of transparency—is also highly susceptible to corruption.

Drug violence was on the rise by the time Calderón took office in 2006 with a pledge to eradicate trafficking organizations, says Shirk. "Moving very aggressively to promote a law-and-order agenda was a deliberate strategy to cope with this chaotic moment," he says of the Calderón administration. Calderón attempted to counter police corruption and combat the cartels by increasing the role of the military in local security efforts, a trend that first began under President Ernesto Zedillo in 1999. Calderón dramatically intensified this effort, deploying tens of thousands of military personnel to supplement, and in many cases replace, local police forces, as well as to lead civilian law enforcement agencies. Under this strategy, the military has made several high-profile arrests and killings of cartel leaders. Through bilateral cooperation with the United States, the military under Calderón killed or captured twenty-five of the top thirty-seven most-wanted drug kingpins in Mexico.

Escalating Violence

But Calderón's military offensive did little to diminish the cartels' presence. The crackdown on cartel leaders splintered the organizations, **creating between sixty and eighty new drug trafficking gangs**, according to Mexican secretary of the interior Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong. Succession battles and territorial rivalries have also intensified. The violence has also branched out beyond the cartels: More than forty mayors and former mayors have been killed, along with dozens of city council members and other municipal leaders. Kidnappings and **extortion** are commonplace, and massacres of civilians have increased. In February 2014, the government confirmed that 26,000 people remain "**disappeared**."

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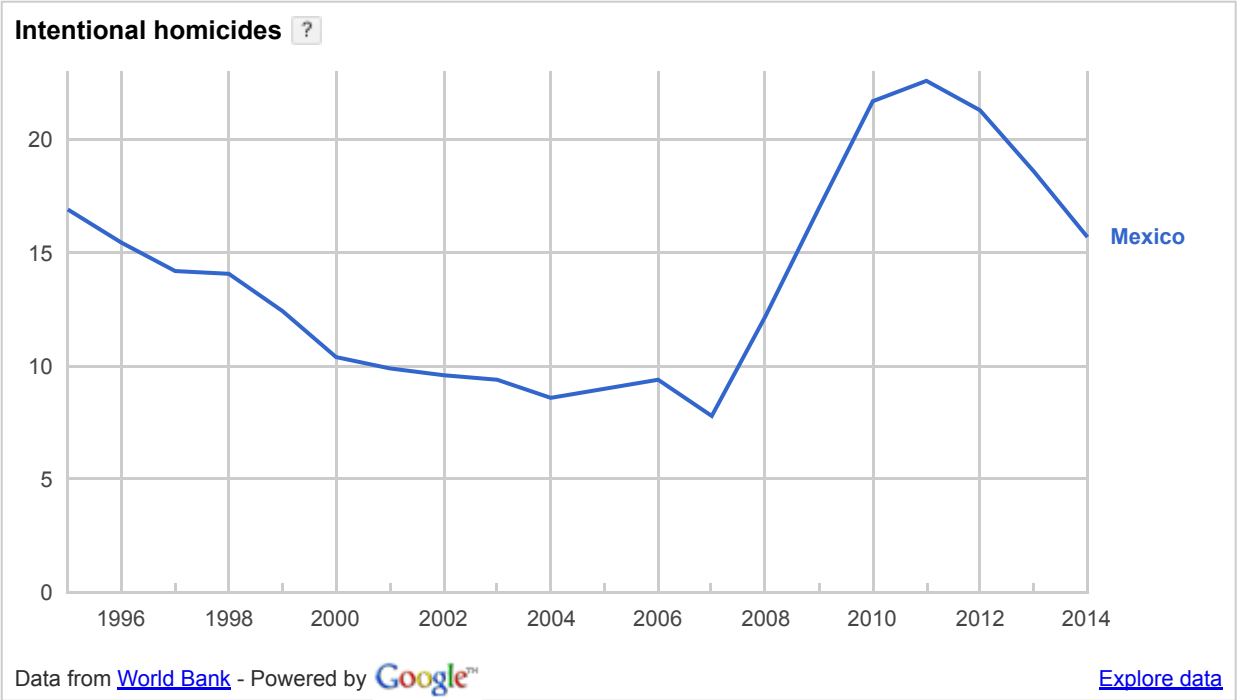
Analysts from the University of San Diego's Trans-Border Institute write that the worst cases of violence are confined to 10 percent of Mexico's municipalities, but observers remain alarmed because of their quick escalation during Calderón's term. According to government figures, total homicides spiked to around 120,000 over Calderón's six-year term—double the figure under the previous president, Vicente Fox.

But because official Mexican government statistics do not differentiate between drug-related deaths and other types of homicides, quantifying the precise toll of the drug war has been a challenge for analysts. The Trans-Border Institute's 2013 report on drug violence in Mexico estimates that during Calderón's term, **organized crime–style killings** made up anywhere from 30 to 60 percent of total homicides in a given year, depending on the sources used to calculate the figures.



Intentional homicides in Mexico from 1995–2011, per 100,000 people. Data does not specify how many homicides are drug-related.

The militarization strategy has also resulted in accusations of serious human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch reports that Mexican security officials **violated human rights** in the offensive against the cartels through killings, torture, and forced disappearances. "Almost none of these abuses are adequately investigated, exacerbating a climate of violence and impunity in many parts of the country," HRW's 2013 report states.

The Committee to Protect Journalists cites Mexico as the **seventh-deadliest country for reporters**. Traditional media outlets have come to fear reprisals for reporting drug-related crimes, which has led to an increased use of blogs and social-media outlets, although these too have been **targeted by the cartels**.

Peña Nieto's Drug War Strategy

Peña Nieto, upon taking office in late 2012, pledged to refocus the government's priorities on curbing kidnappings, extortion, and other forms of violence affecting Mexican civilians on a daily basis. He began his term by centralizing Mexico's security operations under the Interior Ministry, which analysts say improved coordination between intelligence and operations agencies, and calling for judicial reforms. This has resulted in more high-profile captures of drug lords, including Mexico's most wanted kingpin, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán of the Sinaloa Cartel, in February 2014. Shirk writes that one major policy difference between Peña Nieto and Calderón is that Peña Nieto has focused on **shifting the government's rhetoric on the drug war**: "Whereas the Calderón administration was obsessed with security, President Peña Nieto has been obsessed with not being obsessed with security. An aggressive press campaign has tried to make Mexico the new darling of international investors, as the BRIC countries have begun to lose their luster."

> *"Whereas the Calderón administration was obsessed with security, President Peña Nieto has been obsessed with not being obsessed with security." —David Shirk, University of San Diego*

But even while statistics show that the overall homicide rate has dropped during Peña Nieto's first year, InSight Crime notes that **extortion and kidnapping have risen**, reflecting "increasing diversification of criminal activities in the country."

Rise of the Autodefensas

As drug-related violence and criminal activity have continued in many regions, vigilantes known as *autodefensas,* or self-defense groups, began to emerge near the end of Calderón's term. Made up largely of farmers in rural areas, the militias have attempted to fight drug traffickers and restore order to towns, filling in where local police have failed. These groups gained momentum and have become a formidable force against the cartels in states like Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán.

But the *autodefensas* have presented a dilemma for Mexican officials: While vigilante groups are illegal and undermine state security forces, they have provided an effective short-term means of combating the cartels where police have been unsuccessful. Moreover, concerns have arisen over whether some of these groups are tied to organized crime or whether they may **turn on the people** they say they are protecting. "The critics are right that the ultimate solution to Mexico's struggle against organized crime lies in the **modernization of its security sector**," write Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph H. Espach in *Foreign Affairs*. "But in the near term, the Mexican government may not have the ability or the will to effect dramatic institutional changes, such as creating more police forces. Until it does, policymakers cannot overlook the immediate need to keep the country's communities safe."

U.S.-Mexico Cooperation

Security cooperation between the United States and Mexico expanded significantly with the Mérida Initiative, launched in 2007, which designated nearly $1.4 billion in U.S. funds for Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The bulk of the money went to Mexico, with a mandate to "break the power of organized crime, strengthen the U.S. southern border, improve Mexican institutional capacity, and reduce the demand for drugs," according to CFR's **Shannon O'Neil** [PDF]. In March 2010, this partnership was renewed with **Beyond Mérida**, which placed a larger emphasis on addressing the socioeconomic factors underneath the violence.

Over the past few years, the United States has sent unarmed drones to collect **intelligence on traffickers**, and has also sent CIA operatives and retired military personnel to a **Mexican military base**, while training Mexican federal police agents to assist in wiretaps, interrogations, and running informants. The United States has also **ramped up security** on its own side of the border, spending approximately $3 billion annually on patrolling the border. More than twenty thousand border patrol agents have been deployed, double the number from a decade earlier. U.S.-Mexico cooperation has also been effective in targeting drug kingpins: In a 2013 Congressional testimony, O'Neil said that many of the Mexican government's high-profile arrests or killings of top-level drug lords "resulted from **bilateral intelligence** and operational cooperation."

However, O'Neil notes, the United States has not made substantial progress combating some of the domestic issues factoring into Mexico's drug war. U.S. drug consumption and demand remain high, and **firearms continue to be trafficked** into Mexico from the United States. The arms component has been high-profile in recent years due to a controversial U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) gun-trafficking sting known as "Fast and Furious." In 2009, two thousand U.S. weapons were sold to people known to be involved with the drug cartels to track down cartel leaders, but some 1,400 weapons were lost, many of which later turned up at crime scenes, including at the site of a shooting of a U.S. border-patrol agent in **December 2010**.

Policy Options

Decriminalizing the use and possession of drugs—particularly marijuana—is one of the most argued-for policy options. In 2009, a commission of Latin America experts, including three former presidents from the region, concluded that the drug war required a **paradigm shift** [PDF] to focus on decriminalization and health services. A 2011 report by the **Global Commission on Drug Policy** [PDF] advocated treatment services instead of arresting users, noting successful decriminalization programs in Portugal and Australia that did not lead to increased drug use in either country.

In November 2012, two U.S. states passed measures to **legalize the recreational use of marijuana**, signaling growing popular support for decriminalization. Uruguay became the first Latin American country to legalize marijuana use in 2013. Peña Nieto, however, has **opposed** such measures, calling marijuana a "gateway drug."

While acknowledging that decriminalization would result in fewer U.S. incarcerations, drug policy expert Mark Kleiman **questions** this strategy in *Foreign Affairs*, arguing that it would put more drugs into the hands of users and increase the size of Mexico's export market. Instead, he advocates focusing U.S. enforcement efforts on the most violent dealers and dealing organizations while simultaneously working to reduce the drug demand of criminally active heavy users. Frequent drug testing and swift but mild probation and parole for these users has seen remarkable success in programs like Hawaii's **HOPE program** [PDF], which has reduced both drug use and days incarcerated.

A major piece of the U.S. and Mexican strategy against cartels has been to target so-called "high-value" individuals or low-level, highly visible "foot soldiers." But Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution advocates aggressively targeting the middle layer, which is integral to the operational capacity of cartels and not as easily replaceable. Their ouster also does not result in the same number of people violently vying for leadership roles. She and other experts support a more hierarchical approach to targeting traffickers, prioritizing those who are most violent rather than "lashing out in an indiscriminate manner whenever any intelligence comes in."

Aimee Rawlins contributed to this report.

Additional Resources

A **Congressional Research Service** [PDF] report details the sources and scope of violence in Mexico's drug war.

A report from the University of San Diego's **Trans-Border Institute** [PDF] details the challenges of calculating the toll of Mexico's drug violence, and analyzes shifting patterns in the country's organized crime.

A **Wilson Center** [PDF] report compiles various policy proposals on how Mexico should combat the drug trade.

Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph H. Espach write about the rise of Mexico's self-defense forces in ***Foreign Affairs***.

CFR's Shannon O'Neil discusses the United States' bilateral security relationship with Mexico in this June 2013 **testimony** before the Senate subcommittee on Western Hemisphere and global narcotics affairs.

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