

# Major Mexican Cartels: Drug Wars and Business

By [South Front](#)

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*A [previous report by South Front](#) documented the heavy human, social and material costs of the drug wars in Mexico, which have devastated the country since the mid-2000s. In this report some of the major factors in the rapidly shifting environment of the main cartels over the last ten years, and their frequent formations, disintegrations and reconfigurations, are reviewed.*

The markets for drugs: key aspects

Cocaine from Colombia supplies most of the U.S. market, and most of that supply now passes through Mexico, with Mexican drug traffickers the primary wholesalers of cocaine to the United States. According to official estimates, coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia have risen or remained constant over the last couple of years, with the U.S. government estimating that Colombia produced a record 921 metric tons of pure cocaine in 2017. For 2018, the U.S. government reported that Colombia's coca cultivation dropped slightly to 208,000 hectares and its potential cocaine production declined to an estimated 887 metric tons.

In its 2018 *National Drug Threat Assessment* (NDTA), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) states that Mexican trafficking organizations also dominate heroin and fentanyl exports from the country. Mexico's heroin traffickers, who traditionally provided black or brown heroin to U.S. cities west of the Mississippi, began in 2012 and 2013 to innovate and changed their opium processing methods to produce white heroin, a purer and more potent product, which they trafficked mainly to the U.S. East Coast and Midwest. DEA seizure data determined in 2017 that 91% of heroin consumed in the United States was sourced to Mexico, and the agency maintains that no other crime groups have a comparable reach to distribute within the United States.

According to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, Mexico cultivated an estimated 32,000 hectares (ha) of opium poppy in 2016, 44,100 ha in 2017, and 41,800 ha in 2018. The US government estimated that Mexico's potential production of heroin rose to 106 metric tons in 2018 from 26 metric tons in 2013, suggesting Mexican-sourced heroin is likely to remain dominant in the U.S. market.

Illicit imports of fentanyl from Mexico involve Chinese fentanyl or fentanyl precursors mostly sourced from China. In addition, these traffickers adulterate fentanyl imported from China and smuggle it into the United States.

In 2017, Mexico seized 421 metric tons of marijuana and eradicated more than 4,230 hectares of marijuana, according to the State Department. However, it is likely that there will be a significant decline in US demand for Mexican marijuana as more marijuana is grown

legally in several states in the United States and Canada, which have either legalized cannabis or made it legal for medical purposes, thus decreasing its value as part of Mexican trafficking organizations' profit portfolio.

Mexican-produced methamphetamine has overtaken US sources of the drug and expanded into non-traditional methamphetamine markets inside the United States. According to the State Department, in 2017 Mexico seized 11.3 metric tons of methamphetamine, and as of August 2018, Mexican authorities had seized 130 metric tons of methamphetamine, including the seizure of some 50 metric tons of the drug in Sinaloa. The purity and potency of methamphetamine has driven up overdose deaths in the United States, according to the 2018 NDTA. Most Mexican trafficking organizations include a portion of the methamphetamine business in their trafficking operations and collectively control the wholesale methamphetamine distribution system inside the United States.

In stark contrast to the vicious life and death battle between the drug cartels, other illegal armed groups and organized crime networks, and the law enforcement officers who must risk their lives for an apparently futile cause, producing armed clashes on a daily basis which have claimed many thousands of lives and inflicted enormous carnage and suffering on the people of Mexico, is the serene and generous treatment of the white collar criminals who have benefitted most from the proceeds of the illicit trade in drugs, mostly from the US and Europe.

Major banks, such as [HSBC](#) and [Wells Fargo](#), have repeatedly been caught laundering many billions of dollars from the drug cartels in Mexico and getting nothing more than a token slap on the wrist from the financial regulators in the form of a fine.

The entire US financial system is kept afloat by drug money according to some experts (examined in detail by [Michael Ruppert](#) and [Catherine Austin Fitts](#), among many others).

#### Core features of the cartels' evolution and structures

When President Calderón began his term as president in 2006 there were four major cartels: the Tijuana/Arellano Felix organization (AFO), the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez/Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization (CFO), and the Gulf Cartel. Over the following years there were numerous disputes within and between the cartels and a large number of smaller groups were created, many by former members of the large cartels, others forming as smaller and more localised criminal networks grew and consolidated their activities and organization.

The territorial and functional boundaries of the groups, as well as their leadership and membership, are not always clear cut. Moreover, they are constantly changing in accordance with changes in the relations between key figures in each organization as well as relations between groups, which can also change rapidly depending on the area and activity involved. Hence, some analysts suggest that there could be as many as 20 major organizations if emerging factions and largely autonomous localised groups are included. In an analysis that is useful for penetrating the confusing proliferation of groups and activities, and appears to accurately identify some of the constant factors amidst the violence, misinformation and mayhem:

The Stratfor Global Intelligence group contends that the rival crime networks are best understood in regional groupings and that at least three geographic identities emerged by 2015, which essentially endure. Those umbrella groups

are Tamaulipas State, Sinaloa State, and Tierra Caliente regional group. This framework also shows several states and regions of Mexico where the activities of these three regional groups mix, as in the eastern state of Veracruz, which is a mix of elements from the Tierra Caliente and the Tamaulipas umbrella groups. [LINK](#)



Geographic zones of influence of the main cartels in Mexico. By the end of Calderon's term the US Drug Enforcement Administration identified seven major criminal organizations: Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Tijuana/AFO, Juárez/CFO, Beltrán Leyva, Gulf, and La Familia Michoacana. Of these groups, the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels in particular remain powerful despite the arrest of some of their leaders and losing some of their influence to other groups. The Cartel Jalisco-Nueva Generacion (CJNG) rose to prominence after 2010, particularly between 2013 and 2015, and is currently deemed by many analysts to be the most dangerous and largest Mexican cartel. CJNG has thrived since the demise of the Knights Templar, which was successfully targeted and largely dismantled by the Mexican authorities following the capture in February 2015 of its leader, Servando "La Tuta" Gomez, a former schoolteacher

In the Pacific Southwest, La Familia Michoacana—originally based in the state of Michoacán and influential in surrounding states—split apart in 2015. Its power steadily declined as a successor group, the Knights Templar, grew in prominence in the region known as the *tierra caliente* of Michoacán, Guerrero, and in parts of the neighbouring states Colima and Jalisco. As noted above, the Knights Templar group has since declined and has in turn been replaced by other groups in most of its former territories.

La Familia Michoacana and the Knights Templar began as a vigilante groups, claiming to protect the residents of Michoacán from other criminal groups. The Knights Templar was known for the trafficking and manufacture of methamphetamine, but the organization was also involved in the shipment of cocaine and marijuana towards the north. Both groups also preached a version of evangelical Christianity and claimed to be committed to social justice, while others attributed them as being responsible for much of the insecurity in Michoacán and surrounding states.

Up until 2008, the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO) was part of the Sinaloa federation and controlled access to the US border in Mexico's Sonora state. The Beltrán Leyva brothers developed close ties with Sinaloa head Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán and his family, along with other Sinaloa-based top leadership. Following the arrest of the group's leader (Alfredo Beltrán Leyva) in 2008 the BLO broke off the alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel. Over the following years it lost much of its leadership in a series of operations by Mexico's security forces and the group fragmented into a number of smaller groups in 2010.

Several splinter organizations have arisen from the remnants of the BLO since 2010, including the Guerreros Unidos and Los Rojos. Los Rojos operates in Guerrero and is reported to be heavily involved in kidnapping and extortion for revenue as well as trafficking cocaine. The Guerreros Unidos is reported to traffic cocaine as far north as Chicago in the United States and is thought to operate primarily in the central and Pacific states of Guerrero, México, and Morelos. According to Mexican authorities, the Guerreros Unidos were responsible for the execution of 43 Mexican teacher trainees, who were handed over to them by local authorities in Iguala, Guerrero in 2014.

According to the DEA, as of 2018 the BLO comprised a group of factions that work under the umbrella of the BLO name and traffic marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, with specific subgroups relying on alliances with the CJNG, the Juárez Cartel and elements of Los Zetas to move drugs across the border, while maintaining distribution links in the US cities of Phoenix, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta. Inside Mexico, the groups are thought to remain influential in the states of Morelos, Guerrero, Nayarit, and Sinaloa.

### The Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas

The Gulf Cartel, based in north-eastern Mexico, had a long history of dominance in terms of power and profits, with the height of its power in the early 2000s. However, the Gulf Cartel lost a considerable part of its power and in particular its military capability when its ‘enforcers’ —Los Zetas, who were organized from highly trained former Mexican military personnel (including airborne special forces members) —split to form a separate group and turned against their former employers, engaging in an extremely violent competition for territory and markets. The military training, discipline and weaponry of Los Zetas, combined with their absolute ruthlessness and brutality, brought the cartel violence in Mexico to a new level of destruction, lethality and terror that also had a much more devastating impact on communities where they had a significant presence. According to a report by the US Congressional Research Service:

Image on the right: Logo of the Gulf Cartel



“Most reports indicate that the Zetas were created by a group of 30 lieutenants and sub-lieutenants who deserted from the Mexican military’s Special Mobile Force Group (Grupos Aeromóviles de Fuerzas Especiales, GAFES) to join the Gulf Cartel in the late 1990s.” [LINK](#)

Originally based in the border city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, the Gulf Cartel expanded and eventually controlled operations in other Mexican states along the Gulf of Mexico, becoming a transnational smuggling operation with agents in Central and South America. In the 1980s, its leader, Juan García Abrego, developed ties with Colombia’s Cali Cartel as well as with key personnel within the Mexican federal police. García Abrego was captured in 1996 near Monterrey, Mexico. Nonetheless, the group continued to grow and it was the main competitor challenging the Sinaloa Cartel for trafficking routes in the early 2000s before the violent separation of Los Zetas in 2010 which significantly affected its operations.

Los Zetas established a significant presence in several Mexican states along the Gulf, and extended their reach to Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua) and several Pacific states, also operating in Central and South America. Unlike many other groups, Los Zetas never attempted to win the support of local populations in the territories where they operated, and they are widely reported to have killed many civilians. They are linked to several particularly gruesome massacres, including the 2011 firebombing of a casino in Monterrey that killed 53 people and the 2011 torture and mass execution of 193 migrants who were traveling through northern Mexico by bus. Los Zetas are reputed to kill those who cannot pay extortion fees or who refuse to work for them, often targeting migrants.

Image below: Logo of the Los Zetas Cartel



Los Zetas lost a succession of their most important leaders in joint police/ military operations during 2012-2013, and in 2015 Mexican authorities claimed that more than 30 of the group's leaders had been arrested or killed. Nonetheless, at least two factions are still in existence, the 'Old School Zetas' (Escuela Vieja, or EV) and the Cartel del Noreste (CDN). It is thought that other local gangs have appropriated the Los Zetas 'brand' on occasion in an effort to take advantage of their fierce reputation.

In 2014 Mexican federal police targeted a dozen Gulf and Zeta bosses they believed responsible for the wave of violence in Tamaulipas in 2014, and analysts subsequently reported that the structures of both the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas were decimated by federal operations as well as by disputes between competing factions. Both groups now operate largely as autonomous fragmented cells that often take on new names to disguise their identity and the full scope of their activities.

From 2014 through 2016, violence continued in the state of Tamaulipas with regular reports of kidnappings, daytime shootings, and burned-down bars and restaurants in towns and cities such as the port city of Tampico. It appears that the remnants of both groups have expanded into other criminal operations, such as fuel theft, kidnapping, human smuggling and widespread extortion. In 2018 the DEA maintained that the Gulf Cartel continued to operate with its main focus on the cocaine and marijuana trade, but also expanding into heroin and methamphetamine, smuggling the majority of its drug shipments into South Texas through the border region between the Rio Grande Valley and South Padre Island.

### The Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel also has a long history, with its traditional base of support in western Mexico. The cartel also has a reputation for brutality and fought a long campaign to establish control over transport and distribution routes through the border states of Chihuahua and Baja California and maintain its status as the dominant cartel in the country.

For many years the group was widely regarded as the most powerful drug trafficking syndicate in the Western Hemisphere; at its peak, the Sinaloa leadership successfully corrupted public officials from the local to the national level both inside Mexico and abroad, and was estimated to have operations in some 50 countries. As one of Mexico's most prominent and visible (if elusive) criminal organizations, each of its major leaders was designated a 'kingpin' by US authorities in the early 2000s. At the top of the hierarchy was Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán, listed in 2001, Ismael Zambada Garcia ("El Mayo"), listed in 2002, and Juan Jose "El Azul" Esparragoza Moreno, listed in 2003.

According to official estimates, the Sinaloa Cartel controlled between 40%-60% of Mexico's drug trade by 2012 and had annual earnings calculated to be around \$3 billion, and for many years it was identified by the DEA as being the primary trafficker of drugs to the United States. In 2008, a federation dominated by the Sinaloa Cartel (which included the Beltrán Leyva organization and the Juárez Cartel) disintegrated, leading to a battle among the former partners that sparked one of the most violent periods in recent Mexican history.

The Sinaloa Cartel has adopted a more decentralized structure of loosely linked semi-autonomous organizations, which has made it more susceptible to conflict when factions break away under mid-level commanders. However, the decentralized structure has also enabled it to adapt quickly in the highly competitive and unstable environment and



withstand the loss of key personnel following its targeting by Mexican and US authorities.

This was demonstrated in the aftermath of the arrest of the Sinaloa Cartel's founder Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán in 2014, who was extradited to the United States on 19 January 2017. The federal operation to capture and detain Guzmán, allegedly with support from US intelligence, was viewed as a major victory for the government of Peña Nieto. Nonetheless, the arrest did not signify any improvement in either the security situation in the country or in the continued dominance of the major cartels over the illegal economy and territorial and social control in many parts of the country.

Following the arrest of El Chapo and the death of one of his most trusted deputies ("El Azul" Esparragoza Moreno) in 2014, the head of the Sinaloa Cartel was widely assumed to be Guzmán's partner, Ismael Zambada Garcia, alias "El Mayo". It is generally thought that he continues in that leadership role, together with at least one of El Chapo's sons. In accordance with its more decentralized structure, Sinaloa operatives control certain territories through a network of regional bosses who conduct business and violence through alliances with each other and local gangs specializing in specific localities and activities.

Although El Chapo's detention didn't result in the demise of the Sinaloa Cartel or reduce violence and corruption, it does however appear to have encouraged violent competition from the Cartel Jalisco-New Generation (CJNG), which was formed when its leaders split from the Sinaloa Cartel in 2010. During 2016 and 2017 CJNG expanded quickly by displacing or liquidating its competitors in many areas.

There was a major scandal in October last year when Ovidio Guzmán López, one of El Chapo's sons, was briefly detained in the town of Culiacán. Upon his arrest, his associates – widely reported as belonging to the Sinaloa Cartel – effectively took the entire town hostage and threatened to unleash a massacre. Faced with the prospect of an extremely bloody showdown, an emergency meeting of the security cabinet of the national government (headed by the Secretaries of National Defence, the Marines, Public Security and Citizen Protection, and the recently created National Guard) decided to release the captive and the armed bandits melted away, leaving the town with thirteen dead and many more wounded.

[LINK](#)



The town of Culiacan after it was held siege by the CJNG for several hours.

The incident demonstrated beyond a doubt that, although the cartel may have declined in power relative to its peak, it still remains a very formidable force.

Last week the Mexican President provided more details explaining the reasons for the decision to release Ovidio Guzman:

"The members of the national security cabinet met and closely followed the ongoing developments and made decisions that I completely support because the situation became very difficult. Many citizens, many people, many human beings were at risk and it was decided to protect people's lives and I agreed because it is not about (creating) massacres."

He explained that the operation was carried out by the Mexican Army, based on an arrest warrant for a suspected criminal, but "there was a very violent

reaction...”

The arrest triggered an immediate general mobilization of crime groups throughout the city of Culiacán and they even took control of the toll booths on the main roads and openly deployed their forces in other municipalities in the state, such as El Fuerte.

Lopez Obrador reaffirmed that his decision was made to protect citizens because “you cannot put out the fire with fire” and reiterated that his government is pursuing a different strategy than that of the previous governments.

“We do not want more dead, we do not want war, it is difficult to understand for some but the strategy that was being applied previously turned the country into a massive cemetery,” he said of the governments of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012- 2018), which produced more than 250,000 deaths and 40,000 missing (‘forced disappearances’) from the so-called war on drug trafficking.

“It is not easy (fighting crime). It is a process, it is not easy because the problem of violence has become entrenched throughout the country and we have to face two mafias, white collar crime and illegal armed groups, that is what we face.”

The incident in Culiacán has demonstrated the enormous control that the Sinaloa Cartel and its cells still have over the region, which had been relatively calm in the preceding period. [LINK](#)

### The Cartel Jalisco-Nueva Generacion (CJNG)

As described in a previous report, the CJNG is now widely considered to be the most powerful cartel in Mexico. Also known as the Zeta Killers, the CJNG appeared in 2011 with a roadside display of the bodies of 35 alleged members of Los Zetas. The group is based in Jalisco state with operations in central Mexico, including the states of Colima, Michoacán, Mexico State, Guerrero, and Guanajuato, where it has grown to be a dominant force.

The CJNG reportedly served as an enforcement group for the Sinaloa Cartel until mid-2013, and subsequently entered into fierce competition with its former patrons for territory and markets.

The group appears to have been able to maintain a high level of cohesion amidst the widespread fragmentation, dispersal and mutation of its rivals, and its undisputed leader is Ruben Oseguera Cervantes, alias ‘El Mencho’.



‘El Mencho’, undisputed leader of the CJNG

In 2015 and 2016 it was described by Mexican and US authorities respectively as one of the world’s most prolific and violent drug trafficking organizations, with operations throughout half of Mexico’s territory, along the East Pacific coast from Chile to Canada, as well as possessing significant networks and operations in Europe and Asia.

According to a 2019 report by the US Congressional Research Service:

CJNG's efforts to dominate key ports on both the Pacific and Gulf Coasts have allowed it to consolidate important components of the global narcotics supply chain. In particular, CJNG asserts control over the ports of Veracruz, Mazanillo, and Lázaro Cardenas, which has given the group access to precursor chemicals that flow into Mexico from China and other parts of Latin America. As a result, CJNG has been able to pursue an aggressive growth strategy, underwritten by U.S. demand for Mexican methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl. [LINK](#)

The CJNG recently claimed that there is at least one 'State Cartel' operating in Mexico. Although the allegations were extremely vague in many respects, there is no doubt that senior figures in the State have collaborated with one or more cartels, and that this is a common occurrence (as has occurred in Colombia). Indeed, up to 20 former provincial governors are being investigated for varying degrees of cooperation with illegal armed groups; it is certain that a much larger large number of mayors have also been involved in such schemes in some way, given the enormous power of the cartels in many localities – as noted in the previous report by South Front, the 2018 elections in Mexico were the bloodiest on record, with approximately 37 mayors, former mayors or candidates for mayor being assassinated.

The Mexican cartel "Jalisco New Generation" (CJNG) recently released two short videos with denunciations of the San Luis Potosi government. In the videos, they refer to the State's government as the 'Ministerial Cartel', and further claim that the head of the Federal State police, Jose Guadalupe Castillo Celestino, is the head of the State 'cartel'.

The CJNG also asserted that several recent killings in San Luis Potosi were not a result of its activities. To find the guilty party, according to the video statements, authorities had to investigate Castillo Celestino, who struck deals with the cartels of the Northeast, the Gulf and Los Alemanes, 'selling' the criminal organizations the right to operate in specific areas and also arranging for the purchase of real estate with drug money.

The Jalisco cartel also added that it should not be thought that the state governor was not aware of the transactions. The local governments in most of the areas affected are also often either incapable of countering cartel activities, or are on their payroll.

Although the chief of the Federal Police and at least one provincial governor were specifically mentioned in the two videos released by the CJNG, it remains unclear whether the CJNG is alleging that some State officials are collaborating with other cartels, or whether they have established a specific illegal armed group (or groups) throughout the country to take advantage of the breakdown in social order, violence and corruption to take over lucrative illegal markets and, perhaps, terrorize and displace rural and Indigenous communities so that political and economic partners can take over their territories and resources.

Again, any or all of these developments would have precedents and parallels in Colombia, where the Colombian police and US law enforcement and intelligence agencies (primarily the DEA, also probably the CIA) cooperated with the rivals and enemies of the Medellin Cartel, and Pablo Escobar in particular, resulting in the liquidation of the criminal group. However, as with the arrest of El Chapo, the killing of Escobar did absolutely nothing to improve the situation in the country, as the void was rapidly filled by other illegal armed groups. The Colombian military, and to a lesser extent police, have on repeated occasions collaborated with one paramilitary or other illegal armed group in order to take out another



group.

Many aspects of these strategies and interactions between Colombian and US State security forces, military contractors and paramilitary groups are examined in the online book, [In Search of Colombia: Social and political fragments and perspectives from the past to the present](#).

### Community Self-Defence Organizations

One of the initiatives that has emerged from some of the communities most affected by the violence and predation of the illegal armed groups in rural and remote areas in Michoacán is the creation of community-based self-defence groups. Local business owners, who had grown weary of widespread extortion and violent crime that was ignored by corrupt local and state police, provided seed funding to establish the community-based militias in Michoacán, but authorities were concerned that some of the self-defence groups had extended their search for resources and weapons to competing crime syndicates and might develop more enduring relations with them.

While the concept is not by any means a panacea, and can cause even more problems for local communities as has been proven in the case of Colombia where they usually served as armed militias and death squads for local political and economic elites and landlords to terrorize and forcibly displace rural and remote communities in collaboration with military and police forces, if carefully implemented on a case-by-case basis under the control and with the full participation of the relevant communities it can at least provide the communities with an opportunity to be able to defend themselves until reinforcements can arrive.

In early 2014, the Mexican government began to implement a policy of incorporating members of the self-defence groups into legal law enforcement, giving them the option to disarm or register themselves and their weapons as part of the “Rural Police Force,” despite concerns about competing cartels corrupting these forces or the potential for the groups to morph into predatory paramilitary forces, as occurred in Colombia. The federal police and the Rural Police Force had a brief successful period of cooperation, however this ended with the arrests of the two self-defence force leaders (as well as dozens of members) in spring 2014. The arrests caused tension between the self-defence movement and federal police, and contributed to a renewal of high rates of violence in the area.

The concept has thus far not been incorporated into the new security strategies elaborated by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who has created a specialized National Guard in an attempt to eradicate the corrupt elements of the police and military and sever the links that have been developed between many of their personnel and the illegal armed groups, however it is not clear that reorganizing the security forces alone will be able to achieve this as they must inevitably be made of the same basic elements in a new uniform. The concept also appears not to be favoured by the leadership of the conventional security forces.

In some areas however the communities themselves have persisted with the initiative after having found themselves confronted by and at the mercy of apparent, and at times obvious, collaboration between illegal armed groups, police (whether federal or municipal) and military personnel (as well as politicians, landlords and corporate developers in more than a few cases). It could be argued that it is the height of cynicism and hypocrisy to deny communities the opportunity to defend themselves with security forces drawn from and

selected and overseen by those same communities if they should choose to do so, particularly given the failure of the public security forces to protect them and hunt down and capture the illegal armed groups in their territories. In contrast, moreover, the economically well-off are usually very well attended by the security forces if they request assistance, and generally face very few obstacles to hire as many private security guards as they wish.

Even during the 'lockdown' measures implemented since the outbreak of the Coronavirus, in many cases the illegal armed groups have been able to move around freely to undertake their predatory activities and terrorize local communities in rural and remote areas.

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