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U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation Following "El Chapo" Guzmán's Escape

June S. Beittel, Analyst in Latin American Affairs (jbeittel@crs.loc.gov, 7-7613)

Clare Ribando Seelke, Specialist in Latin American Affairs (cseelke@crs.loc.gov, 7-5229)

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The escape of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán on July 11, 2015, from a maximum security federal prison near Mexico City stunned Mexico. The mechanics of the escape—through a mile-long tunnel accessed by a shower stall in his cell—has added to the lore of the notorious drug trafficker who heads Mexico's dominant Sinaloa drug trafficking organization (DTO). Guzman's escape for a second time—he escaped from another Mexican prison in 2001—has underscored the weak justice, law enforcement, and penal systems in Mexico and the entrenched corruption in the country. This incident has raised serious concerns about the security strategy of President Enrique Peña Nieto, and some observers note that it could set back U.S.-Mexican security cooperation.

Sinaloa

"El Chapo" Guzmán is credited with leading the Sinaloa DTO as it became the dominant criminal syndicate in Mexico, controlling roughly 40% to 60% of the [country's drug trade](#). Although some contend that Sinaloa has suffered significant fragmentation like other criminal groups in Mexico, others maintain that it remained Mexico's most cohesive DTO even after Guzmán's capture in February 2014.

The Sinaloa DTO is known for trafficking cocaine, but moves all types of illicit drugs, including heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana, to cities throughout the United States. It has met the rising demand in the United States for heroin, which is popular as a

cheaper substitute for prescription opioids to which many are addicted. In recent years, the reported number of overdoses and deaths linked to heroin [has risen significantly](#). The U.S. market is also flooded with Mexican methamphetamine, also trafficked by the [Sinaloa organization](#).

Known as an innovator, Guzmán embraced novel drug trafficking techniques, such as tunnels, catapults, submarines, and semi-submersibles, to move narcotics from South America or produced in Mexico to the United States. Reportedly, he ordered the construction of some [170 tunnels to smuggle](#) drugs across the U.S.-Mexico border or to evade authorities.

Many analysts have speculated about Guzmán's future plans and potential whereabouts if he is not recaptured quickly or at all. Mexico has deployed 10,000 police, posted a reward of some \$3.8 million for information leading to his capture, and stepped up coordination with Guatemalan and U.S. authorities to prevent his escape across Mexico's southern border. Some speculate that he will disappear like another significant trafficker, [Rafael Caro Quintero](#), did in August 2013, when a Mexican judge released him prematurely from prison. Given his reputation for trying to dominate the Mexican drug business, Guzmán may vie for new territory, which could generate violence, possibly along the [U.S.-Mexico border](#).

Kingpin Strategy

The capture of Guzmán in February 2014 after several near misses was widely seen as evidence of continued U.S. intelligence assistance and cooperation with Mexico's security forces after the Peña Nieto government's [initial preference to limit U.S. involvement](#) in law enforcement operations. It symbolized the capstone of Peña Nieto's "kingpin" strategy, which began under the previous government of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and focused on taking out the top and mid-level leadership of Mexico's largest criminal gangs. According to the Mexican government, [93 of the 122](#) top criminal targets identified by the Peña Nieto government had been arrested or killed during law enforcement operations as of May 2015. Few of those criminals have been successfully prosecuted, which many observers point to as a key weakness in the strategy.

U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation

Experts are weighing in about the potential impact of Guzmán's escape on Mexico's security strategy, Peña Nieto's political future, and U.S.-Mexican security cooperation more broadly. Many experts are concerned that his escape could [set back progress](#) that had been made in the past few years in developing trust and closer collaboration between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Increased U.S. concerns about corruption in Mexico and Mexican mistrust of U.S. motives could hinder bilateral efforts in the short term. For example, the Mexican government has reportedly [not accepted all of the help that the U.S. government](#) has offered to bolster its efforts to recapture Guzmán. Nevertheless, shared concerns about the threat posed to both countries by organized crime should help both governments overcome those differences in the long-term.

Guzmán's escape also could strain future negotiations over extraditions. During the

Calderón government, extraditions increased dramatically; Mexico extradited 112 individuals to the United States in 2012. Since then, extraditions have fallen to 54 in 2013 and 66 in 2014. Some argue that the Peña Nieto government has been trying to show that the Mexican justice system, which is in the process of being reformed (see CRS Report R43001, [Supporting Criminal Justice System Reform in Mexico: The U.S. Role](#)), is capable of trying and convicting drug traffickers. The Mexican government had maintained that it was [unlikely to grant any U.S. extradition request for Guzmán](#) (where he faces multiple charges) until he had served his time in Mexico. Possibly due to Mexican opposition, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) reportedly did not submit a [formal extradition request for Guzmán until June 2015](#). Following the escape, some Members of Congress may call on DOJ and the State Department to push harder for extraditions.

Moreover, the escape may prompt the U.S. and Mexican governments to reexamine the adequacy of Mexico's criminal justice system and anti-corruption efforts. Improving Mexico's prison system has been one goal of the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral rule of law partnership between Mexico and the United States for which the U.S. Congress appropriated \$2.3 billion between FY2008 and FY2014. Guzmán escaped from a [maximum security prison that had been certified](#), with Mérida Initiative assistance, by the American Correctional Association. His escape suggests that prison installations and protocols alone may not be enough to prevent criminal groups from penetrating a system if prison authorities remain susceptible to corruption. Congress may therefore seek to reexamine how the Mérida Initiative could be leveraged to encourage Mexican officials to more forcefully root out official corruption. For more information, see CRS Report R41576, [Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations](#) and CRS Report R41349, [U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond](#).

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