



Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19

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Mexico is a primary producer and transit country for illicit drugs [destined](#) for the United States. Policymakers, including many in Congress, have closely watched how the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is affecting illicit drug flow patterns out of Mexico, including the flow of potent opioids. Any changes could affect the extent to which Mexico-based transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), popularly described as *cartels*, pose a law enforcement and national security threat to the United States. Despite early supply chain disruptions, U.S.-bound illicit drug supplies appear to have returned to pre-pandemic levels; illicit fentanyl flows in particular appear to be thriving.

Illicit Drug Flows

According to various press, [think-tank](#), U.S. government, and [United Nations](#) reports, the pandemic's effect on Mexico-based drug production and trafficking has been mixed. Early COVID-19-related lockdowns and slowdowns in container trade and port activity, particularly in China and India, appear to have caused temporary [shortages](#) in precursor chemicals used to synthesize methamphetamine and fentanyl, short-term [product shortages](#), and [price increases](#). Some reports indicated Mexican traffickers [stockpiled](#) resources, including cash, uncertain of how COVID-19 would affect law enforcement attention on the illicit drug trade. [Several high-profile seizures](#) in 2020 suggested potential trafficker miscalculations, as cartels adapted to the COVID-19 operating environment. Such seizures, however, also indicated that illicit drugs and money continued to flow along U.S.-Mexico trafficking corridors.

Additionally, although Mexico [registered](#) declines in opium poppy cultivation and potential heroin production in 2020 for the third consecutive year, a 2020 [study](#) showed that Mexican heroin production was [largely unaffected](#) by the pandemic. Some analysts warned that pandemic conditions may [motivate](#) Mexico-based drug producers to find alternative precursor sources and further develop domestic production capabilities. In March 2021, the State Department [reported](#) that “there is some law enforcement evidence that Mexican drug cartels are consolidating their involvement in fentanyl production and trafficking, using alternative production methods involving ‘pre-precursor’ chemicals.”

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Cartel Operations

The pandemic does not appear to have diminished the extensive criminal and political power of Mexico's criminal organizations. An October 2020 U.S. Department of Homeland Security [report](#) named Mexican cartels a key threat to the U.S. homeland because of the cartels' ability to control territory and trafficking routes along the U.S. southwest border and to co-opt officials at various levels of government. Mexico's cartels control the movement of most foreign illicit drugs trafficked into the United States, including heroin, fentanyl, cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana. According to a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration report published in early 2021, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) have shown "signs of [expansion](#) in Mexico" and have [increased](#) their production and pill pressing.

Neither the risk of infection nor government-mandated mobility restrictions during the pandemic appear to have significantly deterred cartel activity. Since the pandemic's onset, the [range of criminality](#) by smaller cartels has broadened. Current conditions seem to have intensified inter-cartel competition, favoring larger Mexican [cartels'](#) territorial ambitions to dominate certain transportation corridors. As a result, crimes of assault and homicide have [remained elevated](#) during Mexico's pandemic response, even as crimes of opportunity, such as [robbery](#), appear to have declined.

Mexico's homicide rate remains "stuck" at historically high levels, with roughly [27 murders per 100,000](#) and more than [34,000](#) killings in 2020; with the highest number of homicides recorded in the central state of [Guanajuato](#) and the border state of Baja California. Rival groups have [jockeyed](#) for drug routes, extortion rackets, and control of other illicit markets. Organized crime-related violence also has encroached into the Mexican capital; there was a [sharp increase](#) in murders of public office holders and candidates for Mexico's midterm elections held in June 2021. Although Mexican President Andrés López Obrador retains high approval levels ([above 60%](#) in mid-2021), his handling of the Mexican crime groups and his failure to reduce violence are frequently criticized.

Angling for the Pandemic Advantage

Early in the pandemic, cartels [exploited](#) the pandemic for [profit and territorial gain](#). Press interviews with cartel-aligned traffickers described [directives](#) to increase drug prices. Some observers [speculated](#) that cartels used the pandemic as pretext to collude and set prices. Mexican crime groups reportedly [distributed](#) aid packages to the local populace, branded with cartel insignia, and [enforced](#) COVID-19-related [lockdown measures](#). Such activities, amplified on social media, seemingly were intended to win community support for cartels' criminal enterprises and attract recruits. The aid packages reinforced the perception of a weak Mexican government, unable to exert territorial control, amid an [estimated](#) economic contraction of more than 8% in 2020. Some observers also posit the pandemic has motivated cartels to diversify and expand their use of [submersible craft](#), [drones](#), ultralights, [tunnels](#), and cryptocurrencies. Weaponized drones have been used against police in the Mexican states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán, an emerging [security issue](#) being [investigated](#) by the Mexican military.

U.S. Policy Outlook

As Congress considers the pandemic's effect on Mexican drug flows and cartel activity, the future of U.S.-Mexico collaboration and resourcing of counternarcotics priorities remains to be seen. A key question is how the Biden Administration and the López Obrador government may modify the [Mérida Initiative](#), a joint security and governance partnership supported by U.S. foreign aid to Mexico, to better target transnational crime. Observers also are watching broader [U.S.-Mexico anti-drug cooperation](#), [which](#) was [severely buffeted](#) in late 2020 by the surprise U.S. arrest (and subsequent release) of former Mexican Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos on drug and money-laundering [charges](#) and by the

Mexican Congress's imposition of restrictions on U.S.-Mexico law enforcement cooperation. The fifth North American Drug Dialogue, originally scheduled for late 2020 in Mexico, has not been rescheduled. Meanwhile, a March 2021 State Department report [assessed](#) that, despite some progress, "the volume of dangerous drugs from Mexico and violent crime within Mexico ... remain alarmingly and unacceptably high." In the 117th Congress, the Security First Act (H.R. 812) would, among its provisions, require the U.S. Secretary of State to report to certain congressional committees on whether six Mexican cartels meet the criteria for designation as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).

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