



Mexican Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations amid COVID-19

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Mexico is a primary foreign 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 drug flow patterns out of Mexico, including the flow of potent opioids and other illicit drugs. Any changes could affect the extent to which Mexico-based transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), popularly described as *cartels*, pose a threat to U.S. national security. To date, U.S.-bound illicit drug supplies appear to be returning to pre-pandemic levels, despite early supply chain disruptions.

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. COVID-19-related lockdowns and slowdowns in container trade and port activity, particularly in China and India, appear to have caused [shortages](#) in precursor chemicals used to synthesize methamphetamine and fentanyl, resulting in temporary [product shortages](#) and [price increases](#). Some reports indicate 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 suggest potential trafficker miscalculations as cartels adapted to the COVID-19 operating environment. Such seizures, however, also indicate that illicit drugs and money continue to flow along U.S.-Mexico trafficking corridors. Additionally, Mexican opium poppy cultivation and heroin production have been [largely unaffected](#) by COVID-19-related developments. The pandemic may [motivate](#) Mexico-based drug producers to find alternative precursor sources and further develop domestic production capabilities.

Such reports are consistent with early [predictions](#) that although pandemic-associated global mobility restrictions and trade declines could disrupt illicit drug supply chains and diversify drug trafficking patterns and routes, any disruptions to Mexican production and trafficking likely would be temporary. In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [assessed](#) that the pandemic “has slowed the pace of drug trafficking into the United States” and disrupted some cartel operations but that cartels’ ability to move large quantities of drugs remained “largely intact.”

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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. In 2020, President Trump [exhorted](#) the Mexican government to do more to contain the cartels, which he described as posing "a clear threat to Mexico and the Mexican government's ability to exert effective control over parts of its country." DHS also [considers](#) Mexican cartels a key threat to the U.S. homeland because of their 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 remain the primary source of heroin and fentanyl trafficking into the United States. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) in particular "show signs of [expansion](#) in Mexico" and have [increased their role](#) in 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 expanded as new opportunities for exploitation have appeared. Current conditions seem to have fostered intensified inter-cartel competition, favoring larger Mexican [cartels'](#) territorial ambitions. 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 [27 murders per 100,000](#) in 2020. During 2020, the most homicides in Mexico were reported in the central state of [Guanajuato](#) and the border state of Baja California, where rival groups [jockeyed](#) for drug routes, extortion rackets, and control of other illicit markets. Organized crime-related violence even encroached into the Mexican capital. There was a [sharp increase](#) in murders of public office holders and candidates for Mexico's midterm elections scheduled for June 2021. Although Mexican President Andrés López Obrador retains high approval levels ([above 60%](#) in early 2021), his handling of the Mexican crime groups and his failure to reduce violence are frequently criticized.

Angling for the Pandemic Advantage

As predicted, the cartels seem to have [exploited](#) the pandemic for [profit and territorial gain](#). Press interviews with cartel-aligned traffickers describe [directives](#) to increase drug prices. Some observers [speculate](#) that cartels are using the pandemic as pretext to collude and behave as price-setting cartels. 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, appear to be intended to win community support for their criminal enterprises and attract recruits. The aid packages reinforced the perception of a weak Mexican government, unable to exert territorial control, amid a [forecast](#) economic contraction of some 9% in 2020. Some observers also posit that the pandemic has motivated cartels to diversify and expand their use of [submersible craft](#), [drones](#), ultralights, [tunnels](#), and cryptocurrencies.

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 on drug matters remains a concern for many. Congress may consider whether Mexico can devote sufficient resources to joint counternarcotics priorities. A key question is how the [Mérida Initiative](#), a joint security and governance partnership supported by U.S. foreign aid to Mexico, may be modified by the Biden Administration to target transnational crime. Observers also are watching closely as [U.S.-Mexico anti-drug cooperation](#) 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 restrictions on U.S.-Mexico law enforcement cooperation approved by

Mexico’s Congress. The fifth North American Dialogue on Drug Policy, originally to be held in Mexico in December 2020, has been rescheduled for later in 2021. In March 2021, the State Department [reported](#) that, despite some successes, “the volume of dangerous drugs from Mexico and violent crime within Mexico ... remain alarmingly and unacceptably high.... Mexico must, together with the United States, define shared goals to reduce impunity for TCOs and measure results in support of these efforts.”

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