



Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Violence

June S. Beittel

Analyst in Latin American Affairs

April 15, 2013

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R41576

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Violence is an inherent feature of the trade in illicit drugs, but the violence generated by Mexico's drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) in recent years has been unprecedented and remarkably brutal. The tactics—including mass killings, the use of torture and dismemberment, and the phenomena of car bombs—have led some analysts to speculate whether the violence has been transformed into something new, perhaps requiring a different set of policy responses. Most analysts estimate there have been at least 60,000 homicides related to organized crime since 2006. Some analysts see evidence that the number of organized crime-style homicides in Mexico may have reached a plateau in 2012, while other observers maintain there was a decline in the number of killings. It is widely believed that the steep increase in organized crime-related homicides during the six-year administration of Mexican President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) is likely to trend down far more slowly than it rose.

Former President Calderón made an aggressive campaign against the DTOs a key policy of his government, which the DTOs violently resisted. Of the seven most significant DTOs operating during the first five years of the Calderón administration, the government successfully removed key leaders from each of the organizations through arrests or by death in arrest efforts. However, these efforts to eliminate drug kingpins sparked change—consolidation or fragmentation, succession struggles, and new competition—leading to instability among the groups and continuing violence. Between 2006 and 2012, fragments of some of the DTOs formed new criminal organizations, while two DTOs became dominant. These two are now polarized rivals—the Sinaloa DTO in the western part of the country and Los Zetas in the east. They remain the largest drug trafficking organizations in Mexico and both have moved aggressively into Central America. Many DTOs and criminal gangs operating in Mexico have diversified into other illegal activities such as extortion, kidnapping, and oil theft, and now pose a multi-faceted organized criminal challenge to governance in Mexico.

Similar to the last Congress, the 113th Congress remains concerned about the security crisis in Mexico. The new government of President Enrique Peña Nieto which took office in December 2012 has proposed a new security strategy that builds on the programs that the Calderón government initiated. These include close U.S.-Mexico security coordination under the Mérida Initiative with police training and judicial reform, and use of the Mexican military to prosecute the campaign against the DTOs in the near term. In his first three months in office, President Peña Nieto has proposed some new approaches—such as establishing a 10,000 strong militarized police force or *gendarmarie* within a year, revising and expanding crime prevention programs, and refocusing the strategy on lowering violent crime such as homicide and kidnapping. But President Peña Nieto has also tried to shift the national conversation to a more positive message about economic growth rather than remaining focused on organized crime groups and the violence and mayhem that they cause.

This report provides background on drug trafficking in Mexico: it identifies the major DTOs; examines how the organized crime “landscape” has been altered by fragmentation; and analyzes the context, scope, and scale of the violence. It examines current trends of the violence, analyzes prospects for curbing violence in the future, and compares it with violence in Colombia. For more background, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*; CRS Report R41075, *Southwest Border Violence: Issues in Identifying and Measuring Spillover Violence*; and CRS Report R42917, *Mexico's New Administration: Priorities and Key Issues in U.S.-Mexican Relations*.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Mexico's Evolving Strategy	3
Congressional Concerns	5
Background on Drug Trafficking in Mexico	6
Mexico's Major Drug Trafficking Organizations	9
DTO Fragmentation, Competition, and Diversification	18
Character and Scope of the Increased Violence.....	22
Casualty Estimates for Special Populations	27
Locations of the Violence and Its Impact on Tourism and Business	28
Mexico's Antidrug Strategy and Reaction	33
Public Response.....	35
Trends and Outlook.....	37

Figures

Figure 1. Map of DTO Areas of Dominant Influence in Mexico by DEA	14
Figure 2. Organized Crime-Related Killings (2007-2011)	25
Figure 3. Organized Crime-Related Killings in Mexico in 2011 by State	26

Tables

Table 1. Drug Trafficking Organizations Typology	21
--	----

Appendixes

Appendix. Comparing Mexico and Colombia.....	44
--	----

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	46
---------------------------------	----

Introduction

Mexico's brutal drug trafficking-related violence has been dramatically punctuated by more than 1,300 beheadings, public hanging of corpses, killing of innocent bystanders, car bombs, torture, and assassination of numerous journalists and government officials. Beyond the litany of these brazen crimes, the violence has spread deep into Mexico's interior. Organized crime groups have fragmented and diversified their crime activities, turning to extortion, kidnapping, auto theft, human smuggling, resource theft, and other illicit enterprises. In March 2012, the head of the U.S. Northern Command, General Charles Jacoby, testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that Mexico had at that time succeeded in capturing or killing 22 out of 37 of the Mexican government's most wanted drug traffickers. General Jacoby noted that their removal had not had "any appreciable positive effect" in reducing the violence, which continued to climb in 2011.¹

With the end of President Calderón's term in late 2012, several observers maintained that between 47,000 to 65,000 organized crime-related killings had occurred during his tenure depending on the source cited, roughly 10,000 such murders a year. Some analysts, such as those at the Trans-Border Institute (TBI) at the University of San Diego have also begun to report total intentional homicides. Drawing on data from Mexican government agencies, the TBI has reported that between 120,000 to 125,000 people were killed (all homicides) during the Calderón administration. Addressing the question if violence leveled off or declined in 2012, TBI estimated that total homicides in Mexico fell in 2012 by 8.5%.²

Because casualty estimates are reported differently by the Mexican government from the media outlets that track the violence, there is some debate on exactly how many have perished. This report favors government data, but they have not usually been reported promptly or completely. For example, the Calderón government released counts of "organized-crime related" homicides through September 2011. The Peña Nieto government has resumed issuing such estimates. The Mexican news organizations, *Reforma* and *Milenio*, also keep a tally of "narco-executions." *Reforma* reported that in 2012 there were 9,577 organized crime style homicides (an approximate 21% decrease over their tally for 2011), while *Milenio* reported there were 12,390 for the year (a slight increase over their 2011 tally). Although precise tallies diverge, the trend during President Calderón's tenure was a significant increase in the number of homicides related to organized crime through 2011, and a still high level through 2012. In the first three months of 2013, reportedly homicides related to drug trafficking and organized crime remained stubbornly high at slightly under 1,000 killings per month, indicating little change from the recent monthly tallies under the prior administration.³

¹ General Charles Jacoby Jr., Commander of U.S. Northern Command, Senate Armed Services Committee, Hearing on the Proposed Fiscal 2013 Defense Authorization as it Relates to the U.S. Southern and Northern Commands (transcript), March 13, 2012.

² Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*, Trans-Border Institute (TBI), February 2013.

³ For tallies in 2013, see "EPN Backed by 50% of Mexicans," *LatinNews Daily Report*, April 2, 2013. Most analysts contend that violence levels will not change rapidly, and note that the Peña Nieto government has only been in place a short time. See, Aaron M. Nelsen, "Cartel Violence Continues Unabated Across the Border," *My San Antonio*, April 1, 2013 at http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Cartel-violence-continues-unabated-across-the-4401322.php

Violence is an intrinsic feature of the trade in illicit drugs. As in other criminal endeavors, violence is used by traffickers to settle disputes, and a credible threat of violence maintains employee discipline and a semblance of order with suppliers, creditors, and buyers.⁴ This type of drug trafficking-related violence has occurred routinely and intermittently in U.S. cities since the early 1980s. The violence now associated with drug trafficking organizations in Mexico is of an entirely different scale. In Mexico, the bloodletting is not only associated with resolving disputes or maintaining discipline, but it is directed toward the government and the news media. Some observers note that the excesses of this violence might even be considered exceptional by criminal market standards.⁵

Following national elections held in both Mexico and the United States in 2012, a new Mexican President, Enrique Peña Nieto, will be coordinating bilaterally to combat organized crime with the second-term Obama administration. Mexico's new government, which took office in December 2012, has indicated that many of their security programs will build on efforts initiated by President Calderón including collaboration with the United States under the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral and anti-crime assistance package that began in 2008. (For more, see "Mexico's Evolving Strategy" below). The nearly \$2 billion Mérida Initiative, which initially focused on providing Mexico with hardware such as planes, scanners, and other equipment to combat the DTOs, shifted in later years to focus on police and judicial reform efforts, including training at the local and state level.

During President Calderón's six-year term, the brutal violence carried out by the DTOs and other criminal gangs included widely reported attacks on drug rehabilitation centers; attacks on parties of young people; the firebombing of a Monterrey casino in August 2011, killing 52 patrons and employees; and scores of targeted killings of Mexican journalists and media workers. In September 2010, the leading newspaper in Ciudad Juárez, the former epicenter of DTO violence, published an editorial to seek a truce with the DTOs it identified as the "de facto authorities" in the border city when yet another one of their reporters was killed.⁶ In 2012, TBI's Justice in Mexico Project reported there were 10 journalists and "media-support" workers killed. The tally killed for the entire period of 2006 – 2012, according to TBI's Justice in Mexico Project, was 74 journalists and media-support workers. As with many statistics regarding the violence in Mexico, the number of journalists and media workers killed varies depending on which murders the source counts.⁷

The imprecision of all the numbers associated with the drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico is further blurred by the grim fact that the DTOs have veered between publicizing their

⁴ Robert J. MacCoun and Peter Reuter, *Drug War Heresies: Learning from Other Times, Vices and Places* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Kevin Jack Riley, *Snow Job? The War Against International Cocaine Trafficking* (New Brunswick: Transactional Publishers, 1996).

⁵ See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Peña Nieto's Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico's New Security Policy against Organized Crime*, The Brookings Institution, February 2013.

⁶ Following the murder of a second journalist on the staff at *El Diario* newspaper in Ciudad Juárez, the editor published a plea to the DTOs to consider a truce after asking openly "what do you want of us?" in an editorial September 19, 2010. The Mexican government condemned the idea of a truce, although the editorial was published because the paper said that the authorities could not guarantee the safety of their colleagues.

⁷ Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*, Trans-Border Institute (TBI), February 2013. A revised tally is presented in this edition of TBI's annual report on drug violence. According to the authors, "this tally included journalists and media-support workers employed with a recognized news organization at the time of their deaths, as well as independent, free-lance, and former journalists and media-support workers."

brutal killings (sometimes by intimidating or manipulating media providers), and covering up the murders they commit. Some shootouts are simply not reported perhaps as a result of media self-censorship or because the bodies disappear.⁸ To publicize their handiwork, the DTOs sometimes display corpses in town centers or on roadsides as in Monterrey in May 2012 when 49 bodies were dumped near a major roadway. Sometimes victims are hung from bridges as in Nuevo Laredo in May 2012. Other times bodies are dissolved in acid or, more commonly, disposed of in anonymous mass graves. In 2011, large mass grave sites were uncovered in Tamaulipas and Durango. In late August 2010 in the border state of Tamaulipas, the bodies were found of 72 Central and South American migrants who had been recently massacred. According to a survivor, Los Zetas, possibly Mexico's most violent DTO, attempted to recruit the migrants to assist in moving drugs and killed them when they refused. (The Zetas are reported to be significantly involved in human smuggling.)⁹

There is also the fate of those who "disappear" or who have been reported missing. According to a tally reported by the Peña Nieto administration in February 2013, 26,121 Mexicans were reported missing over the course of the Calderón administration. The registry had been compiled under the Calderón government, but was never published. The new government said it will seek to verify all those registered.¹⁰

Mexico's Evolving Strategy

After winning the election by a very slim margin and coming to office in December 2006, President Calderón made an aggressive campaign against the DTOs the centerpiece of his administration's policy. He called the increased drug trafficking violence a threat to the Mexican state and sent thousands of military troops and federal police to combat the DTOs in drug trafficking "hot spots" throughout the country. The federal crackdown on the DTOs led by the well-regarded Mexican military was met with violent resistance from the trafficking organizations.

During the Calderón administration, the government had dramatic successes in capturing and arresting drug leaders, with the pace of removing mid- and high-level DTO leaders up sharply from prior administrations. Of the 37 most wanted cartel leaders that Mexico's government identified in 2009, 25 were either captured or killed during the course of President Calderón's term in office. However, of the dozen DTO leaders or kingpins captured by the Mexican government, reportedly none were effectively prosecuted in Mexico using police-gathered evidence or witness testimony.¹¹ Nevertheless, in a sign of increasingly close collaboration between Mexico and the United States, between 2007 and 2012 Mexico extradited to the United States a reported 587 suspects wanted on charges in the United States, a majority of them for drug trafficking and related crimes.¹²

⁸ Christopher Sherman, "Drug War Death Tolls a Guess Without Bodies," *Associated Press*, March 26, 2013.

⁹ Sofia Miselem, "Migrant Massacre Challenges Mexico Anti-Crime Strategy," *Agence France Presse*, August 31, 2010; "Drug Cartel Suspected in 72 Migrants' Deaths," *NPR: Morning Edition*, August 26, 2010; Tim Johnson, "Violent Mexican Drug Gang, Zetas, Taking Control of Migrant Smuggling," *Miami Herald*, August 12, 2011.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*, Latin America Report, Number 48, March 19, 2013.

¹¹ Nick Miroff and William Booth, "Calderon Leaving his Drug War at a Stalemate," *Washington Post*, November 28, 2012.

¹² Extraditions had increased under President Vicente Fox, Calderón's predecessor, whose government extradited 223 (continued...)

Many observers have noted the so-called “kingpin strategy,” of taking down top DTO leaders, which worked to fragment and help destroy the Cali and Medellín organizations in Colombia in the 1990s, has not been replicated as successfully in Mexico. They maintain that the implementation of the kingpin strategy in Mexico has created more instability and, at least in the near term, more violence.¹³ These analysts maintain that intense but unfocused enforcement efforts against the DTOs increased fragmentation and upset whatever equilibrium the organizations were attempting to establish by their displays of violent power.¹⁴ As a result, the violence in Mexico grew more extensive, more volatile, and less predictable.

Over the course of the Calderón administration, federal forces went into 12-13 states and large federal deployments became a hallmark of the government’s strategy.¹⁵ Communities that were overcome by drug trafficking-related violence, such as Monterrey, Nuevo León, successfully called for troops of the Mexican army and marines to be sent in to protect them. Despite government efforts, however, the militarized strategy was criticized for not reducing the violence, while sharply increasing human rights violations by the military, which was largely untrained in domestic policing.¹⁶

Although the degree of change in the security policies of the new Peña Nieto administration from its predecessor’s policies remains unclear,¹⁷ some continuity is apparent. Close U.S.-Mexico security coordination under the Mérida Initiative in programs such as police training and judicial reform appears to be continuing and some crime prevention programs focused on youth employment and community development are being expanded. Furthermore, use of the Mexican military to combat the DTOs in the near term is another apparent continuity with the Calderón strategy. At the beginning of his term, President Peña Nieto also announced some new policies—such as establishing a militarized police force or *gendarmarie* to combat the DTOs and focusing on violent crime reduction rather than taking down kingpins or interdicting drug shipments. Exactly how these programs and others will operate and be implemented remains to be seen.

(...continued)

people to the United States during his administration. However, that number more than doubled under President Calderón in tandem with closer cooperation structured under the Mérida Initiative. See, Tamara Audi and Nicholas Casey, “A Test of Drug War Teamwork—U.S. Awaits Mexican Response to Request for Extraditions of Major Cartel Suspect,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 2013.

¹³ See, for example, Shannon K. O’Neil, “Drug Cartel Fragmentation and Violence,” Council on Foreign Relations Blog, August 9, 2011.

¹⁴ Some studies have shown that violence tends to escalate after a government launches a major law enforcement initiative against a DTO or other organized crime group. See, for example, International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, *Effect of Drug Law Enforcement on Drug-Related Violence: Evidence from a Scientific Review*, 2010.

¹⁵ Alejandro Hope, *Peace Now? Mexican Security Policy after Felipe Calderón*, Inter-American Dialogue, Latin America Working Group, Working Paper, January 2013. According to this analyst, the Calderón government sent federal troops into 12 states. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Peña Nieto’s Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*. The ICG maintains there were more state deployments: “However, Calderón took the offensive to a much higher level, dispatching far more troops to fight cartels in all six border states and more than seven other states in the interior.”

¹⁶ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *Neither Rights nor Security: Killings, Torture, and Disappearances in Mexico’s “War on Drugs,”* November 2011; Catherine Daly, Kimberly Heinle, and David A. Shirk, *Armed with Impunity: Curbing Military Human Rights Abuses in Mexico*, Trans-Border Institute, Special Report, July 2012.

¹⁷ For more background on the new Peña Nieto government’s security strategy, see CRS Report R42917, *Mexico’s New Administration: Priorities and Key Issues in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

As violence continues at a high level and to reach more of Mexico's territory, some observers and policy analysts are continuing to raise concerns about the Mexican state's stability. The Calderón government strongly objected to the so-called "failed state" thesis that was put forward by some analysts in 2008 and 2009, which suggested that the Mexican government was no longer exercising sovereignty in all areas of the country.¹⁸ However, in early August 2010, when former President Calderón initiated a series of public meetings to discuss his counterdrug strategy, he described the violence perpetrated by the DTOs as "a challenge to the state, an attempt to replace the state."¹⁹ While some observers consider parts of Mexico lost to DTO control, this is definitely not the case for most of the country.²⁰

In September 2010, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations, said that the violence by the DTOs in Mexico may be "morphing into or making common cause with what we would call an insurgency."²¹ This characterization was quickly rejected by the Mexican government and revised by then-Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela, the Director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy Gil Kerlikowske, and later reportedly by President Barack Obama.²² It became clear that the Obama administration generally rejects the term "insurgency" to describe the violence of drug traffickers in Mexico and their objectives. However, many U.S. government officials and policy makers have concerns about the Mexican government's capacity to lower the violence in Mexico and control insurgent-like or terrorist tactics being employed by the DTOs.

Congressional Concerns

Mexico's stability is of critical importance to the United States and the nature and the intensity of the violence has been of particular concern to the U.S. Congress. Mexico shares a nearly 2,000-mile border with the United States and has close trade and demographic ties. In addition to U.S. concern about this strategic partner and close neighbor, policy makers have been concerned that the violence in Mexico could "spill over" into U.S. border states (or further inland) despite beefed up security measures. According to the 2011 *National Drug Threat Assessment* prepared by the

¹⁸ The potential for a rapid and sudden decline in Mexico because of the undermining influence of criminal gangs and DTOs was widely debated. See, for example, United States Joint Forces Command, "The Joint Operating Environment 2008: Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force," December 2008.

¹⁹ President Calderón's full statement at the security conference was, "This criminal behavior is what has changed, and become a challenge to the state, an attempt to replace the state." See Tracy Wilkinson and Ken Ellingwood, "Cartels Thrive Despite Calderón's Crackdown; Drug Gangs Have Expanded Their Power and Reach in both Mexico and the United States," *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2010.

²⁰ William Finnegan, "Silver or Lead," *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2010. Mexican crime expert, Edgardo Buscaglia, argues that about one-third of Mexican municipalities are controlled by organized crime. See, "Point Person: Our Q & A with Edgardo Buscaglia," *Dallas Morning News*, April 9, 2010.

²¹ "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2010. Transcript available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/22896/conversation_with_us_secretary_of_state_hillary_rodham_clinton.html.

²² Assistant Secretary of State Valenzuela and Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Kerlikowske made remarks at the annual Conference on the Americas qualifying what Secretary of State Clinton had said earlier in the day, September 8, 2010. President Obama was reported to have negated the comparison of Mexico to Colombia 20 years ago in comments he made to the Spanish language newspaper *La Opinión*. The White House did not provide a transcript of the President's remarks which were translated into Spanish by *La Opinión*. See "Mexico Drug War Not Comparable to Colombia: Obama," *Reuters*, September 10, 2010, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6885TH20100910>

U.S. Department of Justice, the potential harm of Mexico's criminal groups is formidable. Mexican DTOs and their affiliates "dominate the supply and wholesale distribution of most illicit drugs in the United States" and are present in more than 1,000 U.S. cities.²³

During the 111th and 112th Congresses, dozens of hearings were held dealing with the violence in Mexico, U.S. foreign assistance, and border security issues. Congressional concern heightened after the March 2010 killing of three individuals connected to the U.S. consulate in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and the murder of Jaime Zapata, a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, in February 2011, the first murder of a U.S. agent in Mexico in decades. Concern spiked again when two U.S. law enforcement agents and a Mexican Navy captain came under fire by Mexican Federal Police in late August 2012 with both U.S. officials injured in the ambush.²⁴ The 2012 incident raised questions about the training and vetting of Mexico's Federal Police, a major focus of U.S. support under the Mérida Initiative. Following a July 2010 car bombing allegedly set by a drug trafficking organization in Ciudad Juárez (killing four), additional car bombs have been exploded in border states and elsewhere. Occasional use of car bombs, grenades, and rocket launchers has raised significant concern that some Mexican drug traffickers may be adopting insurgent or terrorist techniques. Congress has expressed its concern over the escalating violence by enacting resolutions and considering legislation.²⁵ Members of the 113th Congress who are following events in Mexico are seeking to learn more about how the new Peña Nieto government will implement policies to address illicit drug trafficking and the heightened related violence in Mexico, and the implications for the United States.

Background on Drug Trafficking in Mexico

Drug trafficking organizations have operated in Mexico for more than a century. The DTOs can be described as global businesses with forward and backward linkages for managing supply and distribution in many countries. As businesses, they are concerned with bringing their product to market in the most efficient way in order to maximize their profits. The Mexican DTOs are the major wholesalers of illegal drugs in the United States and are increasingly gaining control of U.S. retail level distribution through alliances with U.S. gangs. Their operations, however, are markedly less violent in the United States than in Mexico despite their reported presence in more than 1,000 U.S. cities.²⁶ The DTOs use the tools of bribery and violence, which are complementary. Violence is used to discipline employees, enforce transactions, limit the entry of

²³ U.S. Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment: 2011*, August 2011, <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs44/44849/44849p.pdf>, hereinafter referred to as the NDTA. The NDTA 2011 estimated that the Mexican DTOs maintain drug distribution networks in 1,000 U.S. cities.

²⁴ Richard Faussett, "Mexico Under Siege; Mexico May be Losing War on Dirty Cops; President Calderon Vowed to Create a Trustworthy Federal Police. Now Citizens Scoff at the Notion," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2012; Randal C Archibold and Karla Zabudovsky, "Mexico Detains 12 Officers in Attack on Americans in Embassy Vehicle," *New York Times*, August 28, 2012; Michael Weissenstein and Olga R. Rodriguez, "Mexican Cops Detained in Shooting of US Government Employees that Highlights Police Problems," *Associated Press*, August 27, 2012.

²⁵ For more information on congressional action related to violence and terrorism-related concerns in Mexico, see CRS Report RS21049, *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, by Mark P. Sullivan and June S. Beittel.

²⁶ The NDTA, 2010, February 2010, states "Direct violence similar to the violence occurring among major DTOs in Mexico is rare in the United States." For a discussion of why the violence has not spread into the United States, see CRS Report R41075, *Southwest Border Violence: Issues in Identifying and Measuring Spillover Violence*, by Kristin M. Finklea.

competitors, and coerce. Bribery and corruption help neutralize government action against the DTOs, ensure impunity, and facilitate smooth operations.

The proceeds of drug sales (either laundered or as cash smuggled back to Mexico) are used in part to corrupt U.S. and Mexican border officials²⁷ and Mexican law enforcement, security forces, and public officials to either ignore DTO activities or to actively support and protect them. Mexican DTOs advance their operations through widespread corruption; when corruption fails to achieve cooperation and acquiescence, violence is the ready alternative. Police corruption has been so extensive that law enforcement officials corrupted by the DTOs sometimes carry out their violent assignments. Purges of municipal, state, and federal police have not contained the problem. Recent examples of suspected corruption in Mexico's Federal Police, (which were expanded from a force of 6,500 to 37,000 under the Calderón government and received training under the Mérida Initiative), includes two incidents in 2012. In June 2012 federal police officers shot and killed three of their colleagues at Mexico City's international airport. Reportedly, the officers had carried out the murders of their fellow officers at the bidding of a DTO. Following the ambush of two U.S. law enforcement officers and a colleague from the Mexican Navy in late August 2012, twelve Mexican Federal Police officers were arrested and charged with attempted murder.²⁸

Arrests of public officials accused of cooperating with the DTOs have not been followed by convictions. For example, in May 2009, federal authorities arrested 10 Mexican mayors and 18 other state and local officials in President Calderón's home state of Michoacán for alleged ties to drug trafficking organizations. All but one individual were subsequently released because their cases did not hold up in court.²⁹ In 2011, the former mayor of the resort city Cancún, Gregorio "Greg" Sanchez, was released 14 months after his arrest on drug trafficking and money laundering charges when his case collapsed in federal court.³⁰ Similarly, the former mayor of Tijuana, Jorge Hank Rhon, was released less than two weeks after his arrest in June 2011 on weapons and murder charges due to mistakes made in the arrest procedures.³¹ The corruption has taken place in states and localities governed by each of the three major political parties in Mexico, indicating that no party is immune.³²

The relationship of Mexico's drug traffickers to the government and to one another is now a rapidly evolving picture and any current snapshot (such as the one provided in this report) must be continually adjusted. In the early 20th century, Mexico was a source of marijuana and heroin to

²⁷ For further discussion of corruption of U.S. and Mexican officials charged with securing the border, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea.

²⁸ For a discussion of both incidents see: *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*. In addition, see Katherine Corcoran and Armando Montano, "Mexico City Airport Shooting Highlights Ongoing Problems with Drug Trafficking, Corruption," *Associated Press*, June 26, 2012 and Michael Weissenstein and Olga R. Rodriguez, "Mexican Cops Detained in Shooting of U.S. Government Employees that Highlights Police Problems," *Associated Press*, August 27, 2012.

²⁹ David Luhnow, "Questions Over Tape Face Mexico Politician," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2010. In the U.S. Department of State's 2011 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* it identifies the arrest of 38 officials and police in Michoacán in 2009, 37 of whom were released for lack of evidence.

³⁰ Tracy Wilkinson, "Ex-Mayor of Cancun Released as Case Appears to Collapse," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2011.

³¹ Trans-Border Institute (TBI), *Justice in Mexico, June 2011 News Report*.

³² Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, *Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.-Mexican Context*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute, Working Paper Series on U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation, April 2010, p. 11.

the United States, and by the 1940s, Mexican drug smugglers were notorious in the United States.³³ The growth and entrenchment of Mexico's drug trafficking networks occurred during a period of one-party rule in Mexico by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed for 71 years.³⁴ During that period, the government was centralized and hierarchical, and, to a large degree, it tolerated and protected some drug production and trafficking in certain regions of the country, even though the PRI government did not generally tolerate crime.³⁵ According to numerous accounts, for many years the Mexican government pursued an overall policy of accommodation. Under this system, arrests and eradication of drug crops took place, but due to the effects of widespread corruption the system was "characterized by a working relationship between Mexican authorities and drug lords" through the 1990s.³⁶

The stability of the system began to fray in the 1990s as Mexican political power decentralized and the push toward democratic pluralism began first at the local level and then nationally with the election of the National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox as president in 2000.³⁷ The process of democratization upended the equilibrium that had developed between state actors (such as the Federal Security Directorate that oversaw domestic security from 1947 to 1985) and organized crime. No longer were certain officials able to ensure the impunity of drug traffickers to the same degree and to regulate competition among Mexican DTOs for drug trafficking routes, or *plazas*. To a large extent, DTO violence directed at the government appears to be an attempt to re-establish impunity while the inter-cartel violence seems to be attempts to re-establish dominance over specific drug trafficking plazas. The intra-DTO violence (or violence inside the organizations) reflects reaction to suspected betrayals and the competition to succeed killed or arrested leaders.

Before this political development, an important transition in the role of Mexico in the international drug trade took place during the 1980s and early 1990s. As Colombian DTOs were forcibly broken up, the highly profitable traffic in cocaine to the United States was gradually taken over by Mexican traffickers. The traditional trafficking route used by the Colombians through the Caribbean was shut down by intense enforcement efforts of the U.S. government. As Colombian DTOs lost this route, they increasingly subcontracted the trafficking of cocaine produced in the Andean region to the Mexican DTOs, who they paid in cocaine rather than cash. These already strong organizations gradually took over the cocaine trafficking business, evolving from being mere couriers for the Colombians to being the wholesalers they are today. As Mexico's drug trafficking organizations rose to dominate the U.S. drug markets in the 1990s, the business became even more lucrative. This "raised the stakes," which encouraged the use of violence in Mexico to protect and promote market share. The violent struggle between DTOs over strategic routes and warehouses where drugs are consolidated before entering the United States reflects these higher stakes.

Today the major Mexican DTOs are polydrug, handling more than one type of drug although they may specialize in the production or trafficking of specific products. Mexico is a major producer

³³ Ibid. p. 4.

³⁴ For more on the political history of Mexico, see CRS Report RL32724, *Mexico and the 112th Congress*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

³⁵ Astorga and Shirk, *Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies*, p. 5.

³⁶ Francisco E. Gonzalez, "Mexico's Drug Wars Get Brutal," *Current History*, February 2009.

³⁷ Shannon O'Neil, "The Real War in Mexico: How Democracy Can Defeat the Drug Cartels," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009).

and supplier to the U.S. market of heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana and the principal transit country for cocaine sold in the United States.³⁸ The west coast state of Sinaloa (see map in **Figure 1**), which has a long coastline and difficult-to-access areas favorable for drug cultivation, is the heartland of Mexico's drug trade. Marijuana and poppy cultivation has flourished in this state for decades.³⁹ It has been the source of Mexico's most notorious and successful drug traffickers.

According to the U.S. State Department's *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, more than 90% of the cocaine that is seized in the United States has transited the Central America/Mexico corridor. In the United States, the availability of cocaine began to decline in 2009, which some authorities have attributed in part to an increase in law enforcement efforts in both Mexico and the United States. Coca production in Colombia has also declined, and there has been an increasing flow of Colombian cocaine to other regions such as West Africa and Europe. In 2011-2012, Mexico seized less than 2% of the cocaine that is estimated to traverse the country according to the *2013 INCSR*. For 2012, the amount seized was roughly three metric tons. Cultivation of opium poppy (from which heroin is derived) and marijuana doubled in Mexico between 2006 and 2011.⁴⁰ The U.S. government estimates that Mexico provides about 7% of the world's supply of heroin, with most of its supply going to the United States although domestic consumption of heroin inside Mexico has increased. Production of methamphetamine is also believed to be climbing, as suggested by the high number of meth laboratories that are destroyed each year by Mexican forces. According to the *2013 INCSR*, Mexican authorities seized 267 meth laboratories in 2012 up from 227 in 2011.⁴¹

Mexico's Major Drug Trafficking Organizations

The DTOs have been in constant flux in recent years.⁴² By some accounts, when President Calderón came to office in December 2006, there were four dominant DTOs: the Tijuana/Arellano Felix organization (AFO), the Sinaloa cartel, the Juárez/Vicente Carrillo Fuentes organization (CFO), and the Gulf cartel.

Since then, the more stable organizations that existed in the earlier years of the Calderón administration have fractured into many more groups. For a time, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), seven organizations were dominant. Those included Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Tijuana/AFO, Juárez/CFO, Beltrán Leyva, Gulf, and La Familia Michoacana.

³⁸ U.S. Department of State, *2011 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 2011.

³⁹ The region where Sinaloa comes together with the states of Chihuahua and Durango is a drug-growing area sometimes called Mexico's "Golden Triangle" after the productive area of Southeast Asia by the same name. In this region, a third of the population is estimated to make their living from the illicit drug trade. See Tim Johnson, "For Mexican Cartels, Marijuana is Still Gold," *San Jose Mercury News*, September 5, 2010.

⁴⁰ IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—Security, Mexico*, February 6, 2012. The report notes that one reason the illicit crops have increased in Mexico is that eradication by Mexican military has decreased over recent years because those forces have been deployed to combat organized crime.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 2013. The total amount of methamphetamine seized by Mexico's authorities in 2012 was 30 metric tons.

⁴² See Patrick Corcoran, "How Mexico's Underworld Became Violent," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, April 2, 2013. The article maintains that "...the activities and organization of the criminal groups operating in the clandestine industry have been in a state of constant flux. That flux, which continues today, lies at the heart of Mexico's violence."

However, many analysts suggest that those seven now seem to have fragmented to between 9 and as many as 20 major organizations. Today, two large “national” DTOs—Sinaloa and Los Zetas—appear to be preeminent. But the diversification into other crime, the ephemeral prominence of some new gangs and DTOs, and shifting alliances make it difficult to portray the DTO landscape. For instance in December 2012, Mexico’s new Attorney General, Jesus Murillo Karam, said that Mexico faced challenges from some 60 to 80 crime groups operating in the country whose proliferation he attributed to implementation of the kingpin strategy by the Calderón government.⁴³

Some major reconfigurations of the DTO line up have taken place. The Gulf cartel, based in northeastern Mexico, had a long history of dominance in terms of power and profits with the zenith of its power in the early 2000s. However, the Gulf cartel’s enforcers—Los Zetas, who were organized around Mexican military deserters—split to form a separate DTO and turned against their former employers. The well-established Sinaloa DTO, with roots in western Mexico, has fought brutally for increased control of routes through Chihuahua and Baja California with the goal of becoming the dominant DTO in the country. Sinaloa has a more decentralized structure of loosely linked smaller organizations, which has been susceptible to conflict when units break away. Nevertheless, the decentralized structure has enabled it to be quite adaptable in the highly competitive and unstable environment that now prevails.⁴⁴ Finally, La Familia Michoacana—a DTO based in the Pacific southwestern state of Michoacán and influential in surrounding states—split apart in early 2011 and has fought a bitter turf battle with its violent offshoot, the Knights Templar, that is expected to continue.

From open source research, there is more available information about the seven “traditional” DTOs (and their successors). Current information about the array of new regional and local crime groups is more difficult to assess. The seven organizations and their successors are still operating, both in conflict with one another and at times working in collaboration. A brief sketch of each of these groups, portrayed in **Figure 1** (the U.S. DEA map from January 2012), follows:

Tijuana/Arellano Felix Organization (AFO). One of the founders of modern Mexican DTOs, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, a former police officer from Sinaloa, created a network that included the Arellano Felix family, and numerous other DTO leaders such as Rafael Caro Quintero, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, and current fugitive Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. The seven “Arellano Felix” brothers and four sisters inherited the drug fiefdom (AFO) from their uncle, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, after his arrest in 1989 for the murder of DEA Special Agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena.⁴⁵

By the late 1990s and the early 2000s, this DTO, based in Tijuana, was one of the two dominant organizations in Mexico in competition with the more powerful Juárez organization. The AFO structure began to dissolve after several of its leaders were arrested. Of the Arellano Felix

⁴³ Patrick Corcoran, “Mexico Has 80 Drug Cartels: Attorney General,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, December 20, 2012.

⁴⁴ Oscar Becerra, “Traffic Report—Battling Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel,” *Jane’s Information Group*, May 7, 2010. The author describes the networked structure: “The Sinaloa Cartel is not a strictly vertical and hierarchical structure, but instead is a complex organization containing a number of semi-autonomous groups.”

⁴⁵ Special Agent Camarena was an undercover DEA agent working in Mexico who was kidnapped, tortured, and killed in 1985. The Felix Gallardo network broke up in the wake of the investigation of its role in the murder. The famous case and ensuing investigation is chronicled on a DEA website honoring Agent Camarena at http://www.justice.gov/dea/ongoing/red_ribbon/redribbon_history.html.

brothers, in 2002 Ramón was killed and Benjamin was later arrested. In October 2008, Eduardo Arellano, the last of the five brothers involved in the drug business, was apprehended in Tijuana.

A bloody battle for control broke out in 2008 when the AFO organization split into two factions. In the vacuum left by the arrests of the AFO's key players, other DTOs in the region attempted to assert control over the profitable Tijuana/Baja California-San Diego/California border plaza. The AFO suffered another blow when Eduardo Teodoro "El Teo" Garcia Simental, a former AFO lieutenant, aligned himself with the Sinaloa cartel, which led to a surge of violence in Tijuana.⁴⁶ Since the January 2010 arrest of Garcia Simental, violence in Tijuana has markedly decreased.⁴⁷ Some observers have claimed the decrease in violence is an important law enforcement success, while others suggest competing DTOs may have come to an agreement on the use of the drug trafficking route.⁴⁸

Fernando Sanchez Arellano (alias "El Ingeniero") is a nephew of the founding Arellano Felix brothers. According to several sources, he maintains leadership of the diminished AFO (also known as the Tijuana DTO). *STRATFOR* reports that he has worked out a deal with the dominant Sinaloa organization to pay a fee for the right to use the lucrative plaza once under the AFO's control.⁴⁹ Other analysts suggest the Tijuana leader is purposefully maintaining a low profile to reduce attention from the media and Mexican government while maintaining a steady business moving drugs North into California.⁵⁰

Sinaloa DTO. This organization retains the Sinaloa core that has descended from the Felix Gallardo network. Headed by the fugitive prison escapee and billionaire Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the Sinaloa DTO emerged as an effective leader in moving cocaine from South America to the United States. Early in 2008, a federation dominated by the Sinaloa cartel (which included the Beltrán Leyva organization and the Juárez cartel) broke apart. Sinaloa, still composed of a network of smaller organizations, has grown to be the dominant DTO operating in Mexico today, controlling by one estimate 45% of the drug trade in Mexico.⁵¹ In addition to Guzmán, top leadership of the DTO includes Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada García.⁵² Examining arrest data of

⁴⁶ This turf battle resulted in more than 400 deaths in the final quarter of 2008. See Viridian Rios and Gabriel Aguilera, "Keys to Reducing Violence in Mexico: Targeted Policing and Civic Engagement," *ReVista*, vol. XI, no. 2 (Winter 2012).

⁴⁷ Sandra Dibble, "Tijuana Violence Slows, Drops from Spotlight," *San Diego Union Tribune*, April 26, 2010. Following the January 12, 2010 arrest of Teodoro "El Teo" Garcia Simental, on February 8, 2010 his brother, Manuel, and their chief lieutenant Raydel Lopez Uriarte, were arrested. For more information, see testimony of Anthony P. Placido, Assistant Administrator for Intelligence, Drug Enforcement Administration and Kevin L. Perkins, Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, May 5, 2010.

⁴⁸ Interview with David Shirk, Director of the Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, May 13, 2010. For more background on the role of Tijuana authorities in the reduction of violence, see Rios and Aguilera, "Keys to Reducing Violence in Mexico."

⁴⁹ *STRATFOR*, "Mexican Drug Wars Update: Targeting the Most Violent Cartels," July 21, 2011.

⁵⁰ Patrick Corcoran, "A Survey of Mexico's Trafficking Networks," *In Sigh Crimet: Organized Crime in the Americas*, June 27, 2011.

⁵¹ "Outsmarted by Sinaloa: Why the Biggest Drug Gang Has Been Least Hit," *Economist*, January 7, 2010.

⁵² The son (Jesús Vicente Zambada) and brother (Jesús Zambada García) of Zambada García are in U.S. custody. The son (Jesús Vicente Zambada) of the Sinaloa cartel leader was arrested in March 2009 and extradited to the United States in 2010, and has alleged in U.S. federal court that he was ineligible for narcotics trafficking charges because of immunity he earned by being an informant for the DEA (a claim rejected by a Chicago Federal Judge in April 2012 in advance of his trial that was slated to begin in October 2012). The brother, Jesús Zambada García, who was arrested in Mexico in 2008, was extradited to the United States on April 3, 2012, and faces eight charges of drug trafficking and (continued...)

the Calderón antidrug effort, some analysts believe they detected a pattern of arrests demonstrating favor toward the Sinaloa DTO, whose members were not being arrested at the same rates as competing DTOs. Former President Calderón strongly denied every accusation of favoritism toward Sinaloa.⁵³ The Mexican military's July 2010 killing of Ignacio Coronel Villarreal (alias "El Nacho"), reportedly the third-highest leader overseeing Sinaloa operations in central Mexico, has given credence to the argument that Sinaloa has taken hits as serious as the others.

Sinaloa reportedly has a substantial presence in some 50 countries, including throughout the Americas, Europe, West Africa, and Southeast Asia.⁵⁴ Often described as the most powerful mafia organization in the Western Hemisphere, Sinaloa is also reported to be the most cohesive. In 2011, it expanded operations into Mexico City, and into Durango, Guerrero, and Michoacán states while continuing its push into territories in both Baja California and Chihuahua once controlled by the Tijuana and Juárez DTOs.

A focus on the capture of Sinaloa leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán was an increasing priority for both the U.S. government and the Calderón administration in its last months in office. The Sinaloa leader ranked number one on the Mexican authorities' list of 37 top narco-traffickers (of whom 25 were captured or killed by December 2012). Nevertheless, Mexican security forces continued to have near-misses in capturing Guzmán, such as the attempt in the resort area of Los Cabos in the Baja California peninsula in March 2012. Efforts to tighten the noose around members of his family have also been unsuccessful. In early June 2012, U.S. authorities sanctioned Guzmán's ex-wife and his son, Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar, under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act for their material support and involvement with the operations of the Sinaloa DTO. However, in an embarrassing case of mistaken identity, on June 23, 2012, Mexican authorities announced they had arrested El Chapo's son, a rising leader within the cartel, only to have it later revealed that their captive was not the son but another person entirely. The lawyers for the person being held in custody, Felix Beltrán León, claimed he was innocent and had no ties to the Sinaloa DTO.⁵⁵

Juárez/Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization. This DTO is led by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, who took over from his brother Amado, founder of the DTO, who died in 1997. Vicente oversaw the operations when the Juárez DTO was part of the Sinaloa federation, from which it split in 2008.⁵⁶ The Juárez DTO and its enforcement arm, La Línea, have ferociously fought their former Sinaloa ally to maintain their core territory, the Ciudad Juárez corridor abutting El Paso, TX.

(...continued)

one of involvement in organized crime. Edward Fox, "Mexican Drug Lord Fails to Prove He Was Informant," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, April 6, 2012; "Top Member of Sinaloa Cartel, "El Rey" Zambada, Extradited to United States," TBI, Justice in Mexico, *April 2012 News Report*.

⁵³ Ibid. See also John Burnett and Marisa Peñaloza, "Mexico's Drug War: A Rigged Fight," *NPR, All Things Considered*, May 18, 2010.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Ramsey, "Colombian Officials Arrest Money Launderer for 'Chapo' Guzman," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, August 11, 2011.

⁵⁵ TBI, Justice in Mexico, *June 2012 News Report*.

⁵⁶ Some analysts trace the origins of the split to a personal feud between "El Chapo" Guzmán of the Sinaloa DTO and former ally Vicente Carrillo Fuentes. In 2004, Guzmán allegedly ordered the killing of Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes, another of Vicente's brothers. Guzmán's son, Edgar, was killed in May 2008 allegedly on orders from Carrillo Fuentes. See Alfredo Corchado, "Juárez Drug Violence Not Likely To Go Away Soon, Authorities Say," *Dallas Morning News*, May 17, 2010.

Since 2008, this inter-DTO battle has raged, resulting in thousands of deaths in Ciudad Juárez, making the surrounding Mexican state of Chihuahua the deadliest in the country.⁵⁷ The Juárez DTO has reportedly been worn down by the conflict and resorted to other lucrative activities to finance its battle, including domestic drug sales in Ciudad Juárez (where rates of abuse are among the highest in Mexico). The Juárez DTO has battled for control of local drug markets with proxy street gangs. Los Aztecas, one of the larger gangs, is fighting for the Juárez organization against two gangs, the Artistas Asesinos and the Mexicales, representing the Sinaloa DTO.⁵⁸

The degree of decline this organization has suffered is contested. Some analysts believe it is a “spent force,” while others have identified a tenacity to hold on to parts of Ciudad Juárez and other cities in Chihuahua.⁵⁹ The DTO’s enforcement arm, the La Línea gang, suffered a major loss when leader José Antonio Acosta Hernández (alias “El Diego”) was arrested in late July 2011. He confessed to ordering more than 1,500 murders and was convicted of the March 2010 murder of the three people connected to the U.S. consulate in Juárez. After his extradition to the United States, he was convicted in U.S. federal court on charges of murder and drug trafficking and sentenced to four consecutive life sentences in April 2012. The case represents increasingly close cooperation between Mexican and U.S. authorities on bringing hyper-violent offenders to justice.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Molly Molloy, research librarian at New Mexico State University, keeps a tally of homicides as reported in the Juárez media and the official reports from the Chihuahua Attorney General. She and others have reported more than 3,000 deaths in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, and more than 10,000 deaths in the beleaguered city since January 2008. See Frontera List, at <http://groups.google.com/group/frontera-list> and more information about the list at <http://fronteralist.org/>.

⁵⁸ STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Cartels: Two Wars and a Look Southward,” December 17, 2009.

⁵⁹ Patrick Corcoran, “A Survey of Mexico’s Trafficking Networks,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, June 27, 2011; STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Wars Update: Targeting the Most Violent Cartels,” July 21, 2011.

⁶⁰ “Leader of La Línea Sentenced in Texas court for 2010 U.S. Consulate Murders in Ciudad Juárez,” TBI, Justice in Mexico, *April 2012 News Report*.

Figure 1. Map of DTO Areas of Dominant Influence in Mexico by DEA



Source: DEA, January 2012

Notes: The DEA uses the term “cartel” in place of DTO. Also, the DTO identified as the Knights Templar in the report text is labeled in the map key by its Spanish name, “Los Caballeros Templarios.”

Gulf DTO. The Gulf DTO is based in the border city of Matamoros in the northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. It arose in the bootlegging era of the 1920s. In the 1980s, its leader, Juan García Abrego, developed ties to Colombia's Cali cartel as well as to the Mexican Federal Police. His violent successor, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, successfully corrupted elite Mexican military forces sent to capture him. Those corrupted military personnel became known as Los Zetas and fused with the Gulf cartel. At the beginning of the 21st century, Gulf was considered one of the most powerful Mexican DTOs. Cárdenas was arrested by Mexican authorities in 2003, but he successfully ran his drug enterprise from prison.⁶¹ The violent struggle to succeed him did not begin until his extradition to the United States in early 2007. (In February 2010, Cárdenas was sentenced to serve 25 years in a U.S. prison.) Despite a difficult internal succession battle and successful law enforcement operations against it, the Gulf organization continues to successfully move drugs. On November 5, 2010, Osiel's brother, Antonio Ezequiel Cárdenas Guillén (alias Tony Tormenta), was killed in Matamoros in a gun battle with Mexican marines. He had risen to a top position in the Gulf DTO following his brother's extradition. His death set off renewed violence as the weakened Gulf DTO attempted to fight off the continued assault by its former allies, Los Zetas.⁶² In 2011, Gulf continued its battle with the Zetas for control over its former strongholds in Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Veracruz.⁶³ Although identified by some observers as a "national" cartel, its area of influence has become quite diminished (see **Figure 1**). In September 2012, Gulf leader Eduardo Costilla (alias "El Coss") was arrested in Tampico, Tamaulipas. Factions of the Gulf DTO have fought to take over the entire organization to re-unify its disparate "clans" under a single leadership.⁶⁴

Los Zetas. This group was originally composed of former elite airborne special force members of the Mexican Army who defected to the Gulf cartel and became their hired assassins.⁶⁵ In 2008, Los Zetas began to contract their services to other DTOs operating throughout the country, notably the Beltrán Leyva organization and the Juárez DTO.⁶⁶ Los Zetas split with the Gulf cartel in the period of late 2008 to 2010 (analysts disagree on the exact timing) to become an independent DTO. Since February 2010, Los Zetas and the Gulf cartel have been battling in Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and other Gulf territory for control of drug smuggling corridors. What is especially significant is that in order to fight Los Zetas, the Gulf cartel has allied itself with two former enemies—La Familia Michoacana (LFM) and the Sinaloa cartel—creating an environment of urban warfare with commando-style raids on state prisons, abduction of journalists, murder of police, and attacks on military posts. They have organized elaborate road

⁶¹ George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), pp. 72-73.

⁶² Nacha Cattán, "Killing of Top Mexico Drug Lord 'Tony Tormenta' May Boost Rival Zetas Cartel," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 8, 2010.

⁶³ Patrick Corcoran, "A Survey of Mexico's Trafficking Networks," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, June 27, 2011.

⁶⁴ For more on the recent evolution of the Gulf DTO, see STRATFOR, "Mexican Cartels: The Gulf Cartel," April 2, 2013; "Gulf Cartel," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, at <http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-mexico/gulf-cartel>

⁶⁵ Most reports indicate that Los 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. See CRS Report RL34215, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*, by Colleen W. Cook.

⁶⁶ Scott Stewart and Alex Posey, "Mexico: The War with the Cartels in 2009," *STRATFOR*, December 9, 2009; DEA maintains the split between Los Zetas and the Gulf DTO began in March 2008 at the same time there was growing evidence that Los Zetas had aligned themselves with the BLO. CRS consultation with the Drug Enforcement Administration, December 20, 2010.

blockades during their violent operations to prevent legitimate police from responding.⁶⁷ In 2010, the battle for territory between the Zetas and the Gulf-Sinaloa-La Familia alliance (a temporary alliance of convenience) increased casualties among the government's security forces.⁶⁸ Some observers argue that this killing does not suggest a tactic by the DTOs to target government officials, but rather an increase in inter-cartel rivalry.⁶⁹

Los Zetas gained power under the leadership of Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano.⁷⁰ The Zetas have expanded their operations to Central America to collaborate with their Guatemalan equivalent, Los Kaibiles, and with Central American gangs in an effort to take control of cocaine shipments from Guatemala to Mexico.⁷¹ In 2011, Los Zetas appeared to have the largest area of geographic influence in Mexico and to be growing stronger in Guatemala. However, the Zetas were targeted by both the Mexican and U.S. governments for increased enforcement in 2011 and 2012, and a number of important Zeta operatives were captured or killed. In October 2012, Mexican marines shot and killed Zeta leader Lazcano in the northern state of Coahuila, although his body was quickly stolen from a local funeral home. This blow to the organization was preceded by rumors of growing friction between Lazcano and another powerful Zeta, Miguel Angel Treviño Morales (also known as Z-40). Treviño reportedly leads the organization now although he may not command the loyalty of all Zeta cells.⁷² The Zetas are also believed to have achieved the most diversification into other criminal activities. (See section "DTO Fragmentation, Competition, and Diversification.") While they have been aggressively expansionist, some analysts have questioned if this DTO is responsible for the largest portion of the violent conflict in Mexico.⁷³

Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO). Until 2008, this syndicate was a part of the Sinaloa federation and controlled access to the U.S. border in Sonora state. The January 2008 arrest of Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, brother of the syndicate's leader, Arturo, and a leading lieutenant in the organization, is believed to have been abetted by "El Chapo" Guzmán, the top leader of the Sinaloa DTO. The loss of Alfredo assured the animosity between the two organizations. Despite resistance from the Sinaloa federation, the BLO successfully secured drug transport routes in the states of Sinaloa, Durango, Sonora, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Morelos. In addition, the BLO, like other dominant Mexican DTOs, is believed to have infiltrated the upper levels of the Mexican government to help maintain its strong presence and control.⁷⁴ The BLO has executed

⁶⁷ William Booth, "Drug War Violence Appears in Mexico's Northeast, Near Texas Border," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2010.

⁶⁸ "The War Is Mainly Between the Drug Cartels," *Latin American Security and Strategic Review*, April 2010.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ According to one account, Los Zetas are active throughout the Gulf Coast with centers of operation in Veracruz, the southern states of Tabasco, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas, and in the Pacific Coast states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, as well as Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. They are also gaining dominance in Mexico State and Hidalgo, which they are using to gain entree to Mexico City. See chapter "Emerging and New Narco Sects—Los Zetas and La Familia," in George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010.)

⁷¹ Steven S. Dudley, "Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras," in *Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Options for Confronting Organized Crime*, ed. Eric L. Olson, David A. Shirk, and Andrew Selee (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the University of San Diego, 2010).

⁷² For analysis of the possible restructuring of Los Zetas following Lazcano's death, see Samuel Logan, "The Zetas After Lazcano: Branded Barbarism," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, October 30, 2012.

⁷³ See, Geoffrey Ramsey, "Have the Zetas Replaced Sinaloa as Mexico's Most Powerful Cartel?," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, January 3, 2012.

⁷⁴ James C. McKinley, Jr. "Keeping Resident Close, and Maybe a Cartel Closer, Mexican Mayor's First Months in (continued...)"

uncooperative officials, and is believed to be responsible for the May 2008 assassination of acting federal police director Edgar Millan Gomez.⁷⁵ The organization has shown a high level of sophistication in its operations, forming a strategic alliance with Los Zetas to fight for important drug territory against the Gulf, Sinaloa, and La Familia DTOs. The BLO had long-standing links to Colombian sources, and control over multiple and varied routes into Mexico. Along with the Sinaloa DTO, it had also enjoyed a significant presence in southern Mexico.

The organization suffered a series of setbacks at the hands of the Mexican security forces beginning with the December 2009 killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva during a raid conducted by Mexican marines, and the arrest of Carlos Beltrán Leyva in January 2010. Some experts believe that the remaining Beltrán Leyva brother, Hector, is the acting head of the organization now that the three others have been arrested or killed. Gerardo Alvarez-Vazquez, who was arrested in April 2010, had been fighting Hector Beltrán Leyva for control of the DTO along with Edgar Valdez Villarreal (alias “La Barbie”), who was arrested in August 2010.⁷⁶

Valdez’s arrest was a major victory for the Mexican authorities and for then President Calderón’s drug strategy.⁷⁷ He reportedly was one of the rare Mexican-Americans who was a top leader of a Mexican DTO.⁷⁸ The power vacuum left by the death of Arturo Beltrán Leyva had led to major fighting among members of the BLO and contributed significantly to violence in the central region of the country such as the state of Morelos in early and mid-2010.⁷⁹ Following the killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, two new organizations have emerged: the South Pacific Cartel, reportedly led by Arturo’s brother Hector, and the Independent Cartel of Acapulco, which contains remnants of the old BLO that were loyal to Valdez (“La Barbie”). The capture of Valdez (who had a \$2 million reward for his arrest in both the United States and Mexico) may decrease the BLO’s importance, continue the internal power struggle, or tempt other DTOs to take control of the BLO routes.

La Familia Michoacana (LFM)/Knights Templar. This DTO, first known as LFM, acquired notoriety for its hyper-violent crimes in 2006, although it traces its roots back to the 1980s. Ironically, it started as a vigilante group to eradicate drug use in Mexico and particularly in Michoacán, where it is based. But as a DTO it has specialized in methamphetamine production and smuggling (reportedly for sale in the United States only) and is also a vigorous trafficker of marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.⁸⁰ LFM was known for its use of extreme, symbolic violence and a

(...continued)

Office Marked by Scandal, Twists,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 25, 2010.

⁷⁵ *STRATFOR*, “Mexico: The Cartel Turf War Intensifies,” May 9, 2008.

⁷⁶ Ivan Moreno, “Mexico City Area Shootout Leads to Arrest of Major Alleged Drug Trafficker,” *Associated Press*, April 23, 2010.

⁷⁷ The Mexican government’s strategy to remove high-value targets or kingpins has been especially productive since the end of 2009 when Arturo Beltrán Leyva was killed. That event was followed in 2010 by the arrest or attempted arrest and killing of several other key leaders or top lieutenants vying for leadership such as Edgar Valdez. At the close of 2010, the pace of the strategy to take out top leaders seemed to be increasing.

⁷⁸ Edgar Valdez is an American-born drug smuggler from Laredo, Texas and allegedly started his career in the United States dealing marijuana. His nickname is “La Barbie” because of his fair hair and eyes. Nicholas Casey and Jose de Cordoba, “Alleged Drug Kingpin Is Arrested in Mexico,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2010.

⁷⁹ “15 Suspected Drug Cartel Enforcers Captured in Mexico,” *EFE News Service*, April 24, 2010; Trans-Border Institute, Justice in Mexico, *February and March 2010 News Reports*.

⁸⁰ Finnegan, “Silver or Lead.” With regard to heroin, LFM has allowed independent traffickers to cultivate opium poppies and to produce heroin for a “tax” in Michoacán, according to a source at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City.

pseudo-ideological or religious justification for its existence. According to one study, the LFM represented “a hybrid fusion of criminal drug enterprise entity and Christian evangelical beliefs” combining social, criminal, and religious elements in one movement.⁸¹ LFM was known for leaving signs (“narcomantas”) on corpses and at crime scenes, and describing their actions as “divine justice.”⁸² LFM members have reportedly made donations of food, medical care, and schools to benefit the poor in order to project a “Robin Hood” image.⁸³ Once affiliated with Los Zetas (when the Gulf and Zetas DTOs were merged), the LFM turned to oppose Los Zetas. Declared Mexico’s most violent DTO in 2009 by Mexico’s then-attorney general, LFM used some of the ruthless techniques learned from the paramilitary Zetas.⁸⁴

In 2010, however, LFM played a less prominent role, and in November 2010, the LFM reportedly called for a truce with the Mexican government and announced it would disband.⁸⁵ In a December 10, 2010, gun battle with the Mexican Federal Police, the LFM’s spiritual leader Nazario Moreno González (alias “El Más Loco”) was killed, according to Mexican authorities.⁸⁶ In June 2011, LFM leader José de Jesús Méndez Vargas was arrested. A new organization that emerged in early 2011 calling itself the Knights Templar claims to be a successor or offshoot of LFM, and is led by charismatic former lieutenant, Servando Gomez (alias “La Tuta”).

The Knights Templar may replace the older organization with which it is now locked in competition. Like LFM, it claims to have a code of conduct and has published a 22-page booklet laying out its ethics.⁸⁷ The Knights Templar has emulated LFM’s supposed commitment to “social justice” and reportedly LFM’s penchant for diversification into crime such as extortion. According to some analysts, the Knights Templar engaged in combat with the remnants of the LFM throughout 2011, including clashes in the states of Michoacán, Mexico, Morelos, and Guerrero, and have been used as a proxy by the Sinaloa DTO in its battles with Los Zetas and affiliated gangs.⁸⁸

DTO Fragmentation, Competition, and Diversification

As stated earlier, the DTOs today are more fragmented, more violent, and more competitive than the larger and more stable organizations that President Calderón faced at the beginning of his administration.⁸⁹ Analysts disagree about the extent of this fragmentation and its importance, and whether the group of smaller organizations will be easier to dismantle. There is more agreement

⁸¹ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Cartel Evolution Revisited: Third Phase Cartel Potentials and Alternative Futures in Mexico,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 2010), p. 45.

⁸² Finnegan, “Silver or Lead.”

⁸³ Samuel Logan and John P. Sullivan, *Mexico’s Divine Justice*, ISN Security Watch, August 17, 2009.

⁸⁴ Sidney Weintraub and Duncan Wood, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S. Antinarcotics Efforts*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2010.

⁸⁵ STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Wars: Bloodiest Year to Date,” December 20, 2010.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Patterned After the Knights Templar, Drug Cartel Issues ‘Code of Conduct,’” *Fox News Latino*, July 20, 2011.

⁸⁸ STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug War Update: Indistinct Battle Lines,” April 16, 2012.

⁸⁹ Patrick Corcoran, “A Survey of Mexico’s Trafficking Networks,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, June 27, 2011.

that the environment is growing more violent and that the “violent free for all” is a relatively new development in Mexico.⁹⁰

Fragmentation that began in 2010 and accelerated in 2011 has redefined the “battlefield” and brought new actors, such as Los Zetas and the Knights Templar, to the fore. An array of smaller organizations are now active, including the Resistance and the Jalisco Cartel-New Generation, who have reportedly competed for territory in the coastal states of Nayarit, Colima, and Jalisco.⁹¹ Recently some analysts have identified Jalisco Cartel-New Generation as a “major” cartel. Although this group split off from a wing of the Sinaloa DTO (it had been loyal to “El Nacho” Coronel who was killed by Mexican authorities in July 2010), Jalisco Cartel-New Generation now opposes some former allies of Sinaloa such as the Knights Templar as well as fighting against its enemy, Los Zetas.⁹²

Contrary to the experience in Colombia with the sequential dismantling of the enormous Medellín and Cali cartels,⁹³ fragmentation in Mexico has been associated with escalating violence.⁹⁴ A “kingpin strategy” implemented by the Mexican government has “taken down” numerous top- and mid-level leaders in all the major DTOs, either through arrests or deaths in operations to detain them. However, this strategy with political decentralization has contributed to violent succession struggles, shifting alliances among the DTOs, a proliferation of new gangs and small DTOs, and the replacement of existing leaders and criminal groups by ones who are even more violent.⁹⁵ Analysts disagree about the extent of this fragmentation and its importance. Several analysts have observed that as the Mexican DTOs have fragmented and multiplied, violence has escalated to an all-time high.⁹⁶ Others analysts caution not to overstate the level of fragmentation. Many of these organizations and smaller gangs are new and it is premature to predict how they will fare or whether the resulting highly competitive group of smaller organizations will be easier to dismantle. The Calderón government, on the other hand, asserted that the removal of DTO leadership through government enforcement operations has not caused violence to spike.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Patrick Corcoran, “Mexico: Upstart Gangs Eat into Cartel Hegemony,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, August 4, 2011.

⁹¹ Patrick Corcoran, “Mexico: Upstart Gangs Eat into Cartel Hegemony,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, August 4, 2011.

⁹² See, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*, especially Appendix D: Main Cartels in Mexico. See also, STRATFOR, “Mexico Security Memo: The Death of a Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion Ally,” February 27, 2013; STRATFOR, “Mexican Cartels: Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion,” April 4, 2013; Patrick Corcoran, “Jalisco Cartel Promises Mexico Govt It Will Take Down Rival Gang,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, March 23, 2013.

⁹³ In Colombia's case, successfully targeting the huge and wealthy Medellín and Cali cartels and dismantling them meant that a number of smaller drug trafficking organizations replaced them (“cartelitos”). The smaller organizations have not been as violent and thus the government was seen to have reduced violence in the drug trade. Critical, however, were factors in Colombia that were not present in Mexico, such as the presence of guerilla insurgents and paramilitaries who became deeply involved in the illegal drug business. Some have argued that the Colombian cartels of the 1980s and 1990s were structured and managed very differently than their contemporary counterparts in Mexico. (See **Appendix**).

⁹⁴ O'Neil, “Drug Fragmentation and Violence.”

⁹⁵ STRATFOR, “Mexico's Drug Wars: Bloodiest Year to Date,” December 20, 2010; STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Wars Update: Targeting the Most Violent Cartels,” July 21, 2011.

⁹⁶ O'Neil, “Drug Cartel Fragmentation and Violence;” Eduardo Guerrero Guitiérrez, “La Raíz de La Violencia,” *Nexos en Línea*, June 1, 2011. Guerrero also argues that eliminating leaders has dispersed the violence.

⁹⁷ See Alejandro Poiré and Maria Teresa Martinez, “La Caída de los Capos No Multiplica la Violencia: El Caso de Nacho Coronel,” *Nexos en Línea*, May 1, 2011. (Alejandro Poiré and Maria Teresa Martinez were officials from the (continued...))

Another emerging factor has been the criminal diversification of the DTOs. In addition to selling illegal drugs, they have branched into other profitable crimes such as kidnapping, assassination for hire, auto theft, controlling prostitution, extortion, money-laundering, software piracy, resource theft, and human smuggling. The surge in violence due to inter- and intra-cartel conflict over lucrative drug smuggling routes has been accompanied by an increase in kidnapping for ransom and other crimes. According to recent estimates, kidnappings in Mexico have increased by 188% since 2007, armed robbery by 47%, and extortion by 101%.⁹⁸ Some believe diversification may be evidence of organizational vitality and growth. Others contend that diversification signals that U.S. and Mexican drug enforcement measures are cutting into profits from drug trafficking, or constitutes a response to shifting U.S. drug consumption patterns.⁹⁹ The growing public condemnation of the DTOs may also be stimulated by their diversification into street crime, which causes more harm to average Mexican civilians than intra- and inter-DTO violence related to conflicts over drug trafficking.

Because the DTOs have diversified, many analysts now refer to them as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), as organized crime groups, or as mafias.¹⁰⁰ Others maintain that much of their non-drug criminal activity is in service of the central drug trafficking business.¹⁰¹ Whatever the label, no one has an accurate way to assess how much of the DTOs' income is earned from their non-drug activities. Los Zetas are one of the most diversified DTOs. Their satellite businesses include the theft of petroleum from the state-owned oil company PEMEX, product piracy, and human smuggling, as well as extortion, money laundering, and robbery.¹⁰² In July 2011, the Obama Administration released a *Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime*, citing the Mexican DTOs as some of its target subjects.¹⁰³ On July 25, the White House issued an executive order that named four groups around the world that presented transnational organized crime threats to U.S. national security. Not surprisingly, Los Zetas were identified for their diverse criminal activities and their propensity to commit mass murder. Some analysts have questioned why Los Zetas were singled out, when Sinaloa and other Mexican DTOs are also known to be significantly involved in other forms of crime.¹⁰⁴

(...continued)

National Public Security Council at the time the article was written. Poiré was subsequently appointed Mexico's Minister of Interior in November 2011).

⁹⁸ Mária de la Luz González, "Delitos Aumentan en el País, Alertan," *El Universal*, August 23, 2011. This article cites data from México Evalúa that is available in Spanish at <http://www.mexicoevalua.org/>.

⁹⁹ Morris Panner, "Latin American Organized Crime's New Business Model," *ReVista*, vol. XI, no. 2 (Winter 2012). The author comments: "... the business is moving away from monolithic cartels toward a series of mercury-like mini-cartels. Whether diversification is a growth strategy or a survival strategy in the face of shifting narcotics consumption patterns, it is clear that organized crime is pursuing a larger, more extensive agenda."

¹⁰⁰ See for example, Eric L. Olson and Miguel R. Salazar, *A Profile of Mexico's Major Organized Crime Groups*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, February 17, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Often kidnapping and extortion are a mechanism to collect payment for drug deliveries, for example. Weapons trafficking and money laundering are obviously closely tied to drug trafficking. DEA officials suggested in an interview that about 80% of the DTOs income may come from drugs, and they continue to use "DTO" or "cartel" to identify the organizations. CRS interview with DEA officials on August 5, 2011.

¹⁰² William Booth, "Drug War Violence Appears in Mexico's Northeast, Near Texas Border," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2010; Ioan Grillo, "Special Report: Mexico's Zetas Rewrite Drug War in Blood," *Reuters*, May 23, 2012.

¹⁰³ President of the United States, *Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime*, July 19, 2011 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/Strategy_to_Combat_Transnational_Organized_Crime_July_2011.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Johnson, "Do U.S., Mexican Officials Favor One Cartel Over Another?," *Miami Herald*, August 24, 2011.

The current crime organization landscape is exceptionally fluid, yet several analysts are attempting to define it. For example, in Southern Pulse's publication *Beyond 2012*, Sam Logan and James Bosworth describe the increasing multiplication of groups:

The tendency for criminal groups in Mexico is toward small and local ... as the number of well-armed criminal groups jumps from the six significant groups we counted in 2006 ... to over 10 in 2012 with a steady growth of new groups to bring the total to possibly over 20 by the end of 2014.¹⁰⁵

Analyst Eric Olson of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars believes the DTOs are more accurately described as “organized crime groups” and notes that these groups are extremely local in character while engaged in diverse criminal activity. (Many of the actors have diversified beyond the transnational drug trade, as noted above.) Mexican political scientist Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez also describes fragmentation and has provided a very useful typology of different DTOs (see **Table 1**). He defines four types: National Cartels, Toll-taker Cartels, Regional Cartels, and Local Mafias. Guerrero identifies as many as 64 organizations across the country in the final category. Some of these groups do not participate in drug trafficking-related violence, but are only engaged in what he terms “mafia-ridden” violence. Guerrero attributes the proliferation of new criminal groups to a “non-selective arrest policy” by the Calderón government that has taken out kingpins and leaders and produced violent competition to replace those who have been arrested or killed.¹⁰⁶

Table 1. Drug Trafficking Organizations Typology

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	ORGANIZATIONS
National Cartels	Cartels control or maintain presence along routes of several drugs. They also operate important international routes to and from Mexico. These DTOs keep control of drug points of entry and exit in the country. However, they are interested in expanding their control of new points of exit along the northern border, and this is why they currently sustain disputes with other cartels to control these border localities. These DTOs are present in broad areas of the country and have sought to build upon the profits they receive from drug trafficking through diversifying their illegal activities towards human smuggling and oil and fuel theft.	Sinaloa, Los Zetas, and Gulf cartels (although Gulf has a significantly less important role than the other two).
“Toll Collector” Cartels	These are the cartels whose main income comes from toll fees received from the cartels and regional cartels that send drug shipments through their controlled municipalities along the northern border. Given that these cartels are largely confined to some border municipalities, they cannot diversify their illegal activities as actively as the national cartels. If these cartels eventually lose control of their respective border areas they will either intensify their diversification efforts to other business (such as extortion or kidnapping) or they will disappear.	Tijuana and Juárez cartels

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Logan and James Bosworth, *Beyond 2012*, Southern Pulse, 2012, <http://www.southernpulse.com>.

¹⁰⁶ Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez, *Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey*, 7th North American Forum, Washington, DC, October 2011 at [http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6716/NAF_2011_EG_\(Final\).pdf](http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6716/NAF_2011_EG_(Final).pdf).

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	ORGANIZATIONS
Regional Cartels	These DTOs keep limited control over segments of drug trafficking routes that pass through their territory. Like the toll collector cartels, the regional cartels play a secondary role in the drug trading business and receive small profits from it and have limited capabilities to diversify to other criminal businesses like human smuggling or oil and fuel theft.	The Knights Templar and South Pacific cartels
Local Mafias	The mafias are disbanded cells from fragmented national or regional cartels. These are locally based and their range can extend from a few contiguous localities to several states. Their business activities are mainly focused in drug distribution and dealing within their controlled municipalities, and they have extended their illegal business towards extortion, kidnapping and vehicle theft.	The Resistance; Jalisco Cartel–New Generation ^a ; Cártel del Charro; The Hands with Eyes; Los Incorregibles; La Empresa; Independent Cartel of Acapulco; and others.

Source: Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez, *Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey*, 7th North American Forum, Washington, DC, 2011.

Notes: Text modified in consultation with the author on May 21, 2012.

- a. As mentioned earlier in the text, some analysts have begun to identify Jalisco Cartel-New Generation as a major cartel and no longer a local mafia or crime group. See, Peña Nieto's *Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*, especially Appendix D: Main Cartels in Mexico.

A couple of generalizations can be made about the current DTO landscape. First, there is more competition and more violence. Second, few large actors remain except for the two dominant ones, Sinaloa and Los Zetas, which have become polarized rivals in their battle for supremacy. Sinaloa, based in the western part of the country, was present in some 17 states as of August 2011 according to one analysis. Los Zetas, which cover the eastern portion of the country, had operations in 21 states as of August 2011, giving them greater geographic presence.¹⁰⁷ The Zetas had the reputation for being the most violent, but the Sinaloa cartel, trying to deliver a devastating blow to their rivals, has emulated the newer DTO's most violent tactics. Both Sinaloa and Los Zetas have made grisly incursions into the home turf of their opponent, either directly or through proxies (smaller organizations which have affiliated with one side or the other at least temporarily).¹⁰⁸

Character and Scope of the Increased Violence

As the DTOs have fractured and more organizations vie for control of trafficking routes, the level of inter- and intra-cartel violence has spiked. Inter-DTO violence is used when the cartels fight one another to dominate trafficking routes. Besides inter-DTO violence (between the different organizations), there has been widespread violence within the organizations, as factions battle in succession struggles to replace fallen or arrested leaders. The succession battles are hastened by

¹⁰⁷ Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez, *Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey*.

¹⁰⁸ Olga Rodriguez, "Mexico Drug War's Latest Toll: 49 Headless Bodies," *Washington Times*, May 14, 2012; Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico Under Siege: Dozens of Bodies Found Dumped; Authorities Suspect a Drug Cartel, and Say Most of Victims Had Been Decapitated," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2012; Jo Tuckman, "Mexican Drug Cartel Massacres have Method in Their Brutal Madness," *Guardian*, May 14, 2012.

the drug war victories by the Mexican government. In describing the violence resulting from the elimination of a leader, one observer refers to “internal vacancy chains” that result when an organization is squeezed by the government and there is great uncertainty about how the leader will be replaced (either through internal succession or external replacement). In some cases, a weakened DTO will be attacked by other DTOs in a “feeding frenzy” until the uncertainty of succession is resolved.¹⁰⁹ Thus highly charged violence may result from asymmetric weakening of competitive organizations.¹¹⁰ Intra-DTO violence is used to assert leadership inside the cartel or to impose organizational discipline and loyalty. The violent response of the DTOs to the government’s aggressive security strategy is a third key element leading to escalation. Gun battles between government forces and the DTOs are regular occurrences. And with the expansion of democratic pluralism, DTOs are fighting the state to reassert their impunity from the justice system.

Drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico has been brutal, and, in an apparent contradiction, both widespread and relatively concentrated. However, since 2010 the violence has dispersed considerably to new areas and involved more municipalities. The violence, while still concentrated along drug trafficking routes and in a small percentage of Mexican municipalities, has spread to every state and flared in the northern border states. In 2011, the violence moved towards Mexico’s interior, exploding in such states as Veracruz (a Gulf state) and in Guerrero on Mexico’s southern Pacific coast. According to analysis by University of San Diego’s Trans-Border Institute (TBI), at the end of 2011 84% of Mexico’s municipalities have been affected in some way by organized crime violence (with only 16% violence free) and over time violence has spread to a larger number of municipalities.¹¹¹ There remains a debate about exactly how many have perished in the violence.

The Calderón government released data on homicides in Mexico linked to organized crime in January 2011 and January 2012.¹¹² In these two releases, the government reported that between December 2006 and September 2011 more than 47,500 killings were organized crime-related homicides. These official figures are about 15% to 25% higher than the tallies provided in some media reporting, such as that of the Mexican media outlet *Grupo Reforma*, which have been used by TBI to track violence in Mexico because the *Reforma* data has been released more consistently. The *Reforma* data are reported weekly and collected by a national network of newspaper correspondents spread across the country.¹¹³

While casualty estimates from the government and media sources have not been identical, they have reflected similar trends. All reports have shown the violence rising sharply since early 2007 and spreading to new parts of Mexico. This report gives preference to officially reported data. According to government data, in 2007 (the first full year of the Calderón government), there

¹⁰⁹ Phil Williams, “El Crimen Organizado y la Violencia en México: Una Perspectiva Comparativa,” *ISTOR: Revista de Historia Internacional*, 11th Year, Number 42, Fall 2010. Professor Williams argues that the leaders of the DTOs act like medieval barons, “engaged in constant power struggles and fluid alliances,” even as their businesses have fully exploited the opportunities of 21st century globalization.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Rios, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*, Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, March 2012.

¹¹² Mexican government data for 2007-2010 is available at <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/base-de-datos-de-fallecimientos/> and data for January through September 2011 is available at <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/temas%20relevantes/estadistica/estadisticas.asp>.

¹¹³ Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

were more than 2,800 organized crime-related homicides, which more than doubled in 2008. Between 2008 and 2009, the rate of increase was about 40%. Between 2009 and 2010, organized crime-related homicides grew by almost 60%. Finally the rate of increase started to come down between 2010 and 2011 (see **Figure 2**). The government's second data release in January 2012, only included data for the first three quarters of 2011 (January–September 2011), reporting a total of 12,903 homicides. Consequently, when measured against the same nine-month period in 2010, the number of organized crime killings grew by only 11% in 2011.

The Trans-Border Institute (TBI) has observed that Mexican government information has neither been easy to access nor reported regularly or consistently. To track the violence, TBI and others have turned to Mexican media reporting. Newspapers and other media organizations keep daily tallies of the killings that are considered a close approximation of the overall situation. TBI's Justice in Mexico project has used the data collected by the national Mexican newspaper *Reforma* to tabulate Mexico's drug trafficking violence over the past decade.

TBI has found that *Reforma* is generally more conservative and cautious about classifying a death as drug trafficking-related than are official sources and other media outlets.¹¹⁴ *Reforma's* classification of a homicide attributed to the drug trafficking organizations is based on criminal justice protocols and the presence at the crime scene of characteristics traditionally used by DTOs, such as high-caliber weapons, decapitations, or “narco” messages.¹¹⁵ The possibility that other criminals could carry out murders in a manner to make them appear to be those of the DTOs is one cause to question the accuracy of the figures. Further concerns are that authorities often fail to identify and fully investigate drug trafficking-related homicides, some DTOs attempt to eliminate all evidence of murders, and some leave confusing messages either accepting blame or trying to shift it to a rival. According to the *Reforma* data, there were 11,583 drug trafficking-related homicides in 2010, and according to the government database the total murders attributed to organized crime exceeded 15,270. The higher government figure may be due to a definition of organized crime which is broader than drug trafficking. But the trends in the data produced by *Reforma* closely correlate with those trends in the data released by the government.¹¹⁶

The two releases of aggregate data by the Mexican government task force in January 2011 and January 2012 had slightly different definitions. For the first release of data (January 2007–December 2010), the Mexican government labeled the information as “homicides allegedly linked to organized crime.” The second release of data (January 2011–September 2011) was defined as “homicides allegedly caused by criminal rivalry.”¹¹⁷ Like the *Reforma* data, there are a number of characteristics utilized by the government to identify such homicides. These homicides generally have not been fully investigated, so accuracy is always an issue. TBI has found that the government count was consistently about 24% greater than the *Reforma* count and that the media

¹¹⁴ TBI, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis from 2001-2009*, January 2010.

¹¹⁵ Angelica Duran-Martinez, Gayle Hazard, and Viridiana Rios, *2010 Mid-Year Report on Drug Violence in Mexico*, Trans-Border Institute, August 2010.

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of how the two sources compare, see Rios and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2010*, Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, February 2011; Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

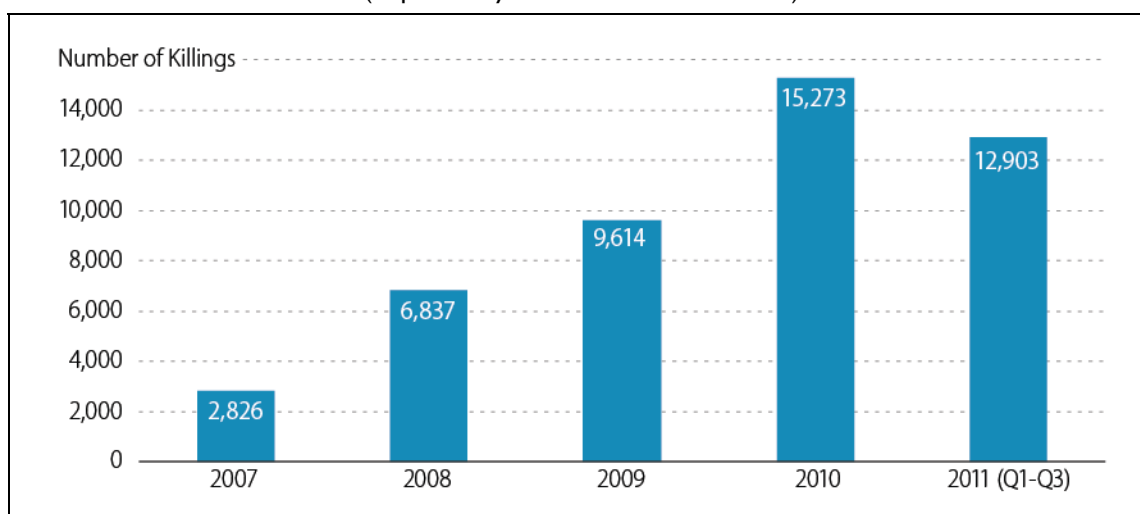
¹¹⁷ The January 2012 data release is further broken down in four categories: organized crime homicides (79%); Organized Crime-Government Clashes (2%); Organized Crime Direct Attack on Officials (6%); and Organized Crime Clashes (1.3%). For more details on what distinguishes these categories, see Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

company consistently underestimates organized crime homicides, but this has the advantage of reducing the frequency of “false positives.”

Because the Mexican government released data for only three quarters of 2011, there is no “official tally” for 2011. As shown in **Figure 2**, the government reported nearly 13,000 organized-crime related homicides for the first three quarters of the year. TBI has calculated the killings in the last three months of 2011, basing its projections on *Reforma*'s data for the last quarter of the year expanded by 24%. This estimate incorporates a decline in the level of homicides in the last quarter of 2011 observed in the *Reforma* data trends and therefore “provides what is probably a more precise estimate of the government’s final tally for 2011.”¹¹⁸

As shown in **Figure 3**, the TBI estimate for the entire year is slightly more than 16,400 organized crime-related homicides. The TBI data have been mapped and a geographic explanation of the violence will be addressed below. As noted above, violence did continue to rise in 2011, but far less sharply. TBI’s annual report for 2011 on the violence summarized the pace of organized crime related killings in 2011 as follows: “On average, for every day of 2011, 47 people were killed, three of whom were tortured, one of whom was decapitated, two of whom were women, and ten of whom were young people whose lives ended in organized-crime-related violence.”¹¹⁹

Figure 2. Organized Crime-Related Killings (2007-2011)
(Reported by the Mexican Government)

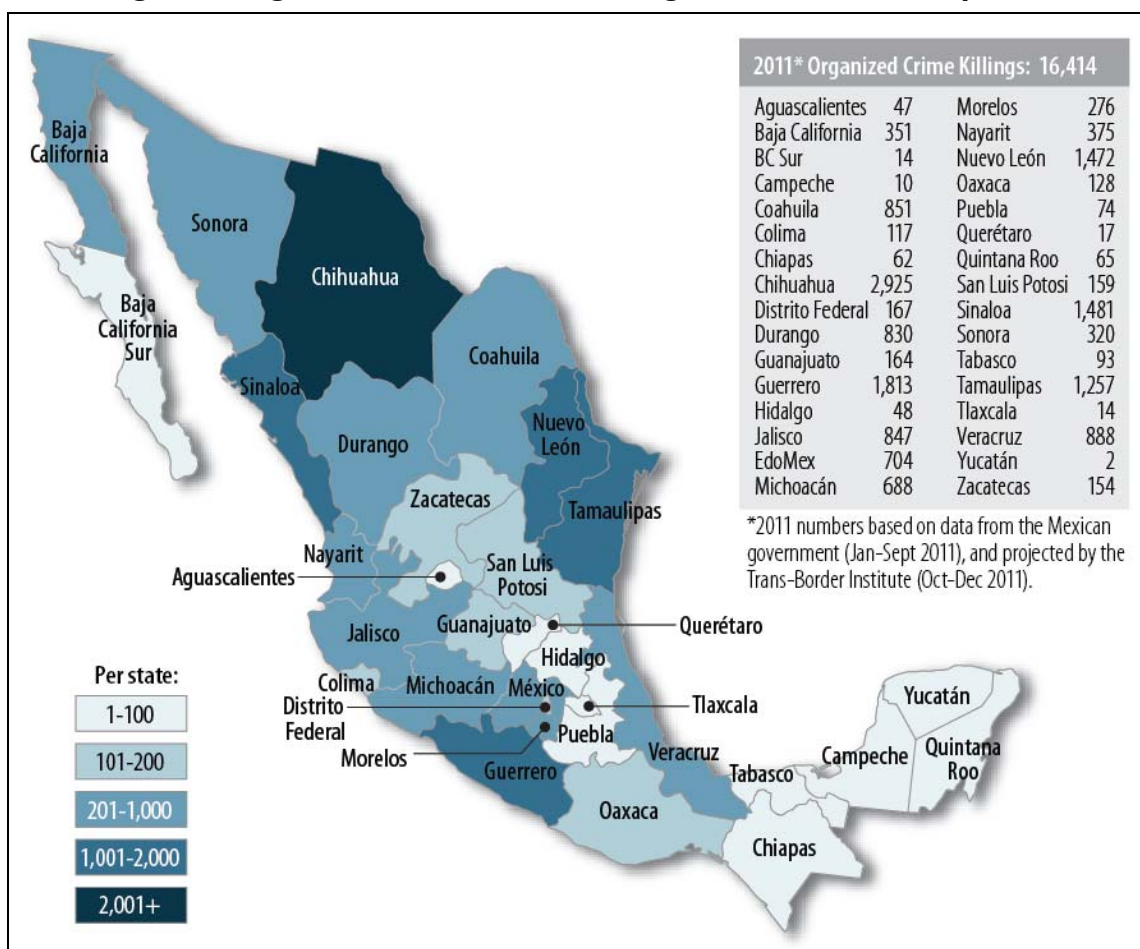


Source: Mexican government data for 2007-2010 is available at <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/base-de-datos-de-fallecimientos/> and data for January through September 2011 is available at <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/temas%20relevantes/estadistica/estadisticas.asp>.

Note: The Mexican government’s Attorney General’s office (PGR) released data only for the first three quarters of 2011 (January–September).

¹¹⁸ Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Figure 3. Organized Crime-Related Killings in Mexico in 2011 by State

Source: Map created by CRS using data from the Trans-Border Institute (TBI), University of San Diego.

Notes: Mexican government and TBI data drawn from presentation in Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*, Trans-Border Institute, March 2012.

There is some disagreement if the killings related to organized crime or drug trafficking in Mexico plateaued or began to decline in 2012.¹²⁰ One media outlet, *Milenio*, even recorded a slight increase in organized crime-related killings during the year over its estimate for 2011.¹²¹ After in-depth analysis of available data from multiple sources, TBI concludes that most sources recorded a decline in such killings in 2012. *Reforma*, for example, recorded 9,577 organized-crime-style homicides in 2012, (an approximate 21% decrease over their tally for 2011). The

¹²⁰ The Mexican government announced in early August 2012 that there had been a 7% decline in all homicides in Mexico in the first half of 2012, and an almost 15% decline in organized-crime related homicides. However, the government did not release any data to back these claims. See “Calderon Calls for Mexico to Stay the Course,” *LatinNews Daily Report*, August 3, 2012; “Calderón Afirma Que Homicidios Cayeron 7% en México en Primera Mitad de 2012,” *Univision*, August 2, 2012.

¹²¹ Molzahn, Rodriguez Ferreira, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*. See Figure 5: Comparison of All Homicide and Organized Crime Homicide Tallies, 1990 through 2012, which reflects data from *Milenio* and several other sources.

Mexican government did not release organized crime-related homicide data for 2012 with the Mexican National Security System refusing to release new monthly tallies after September of 2011.¹²² However, the Mexican National Security System did release a figure for total *intentional* homicides for 2012, and it was 8.5% lower than its estimate for 2011. TBI asserts that “organized-crime-style killings represented a major share of all homicides in Mexico,” after an analysis of several sources.¹²³ Furthermore, many analysts have projected that a decline in organized-crime-style killings in 2013 is likely to occur more slowly than the rapid rise in such killings between December 2006 and December 2011. Despite President Peña Nieto’s call for reducing homicides related to organized crime by as much as 50%, such a sharp decline is unlikely to take place in the immediate future. This is borne out by data from the first three months of 2013 which reflected monthly tallies of approximately 1,000 organized-crime-style homicides, close to monthly averages in recent years.¹²⁴

Casualty Estimates for Special Populations

The Trans-Border Institute has tracked violent crimes against journalists, mayors, and other special groups. Violent crimes targeting journalists, and high levels of impunity for perpetrators of those crimes, have caused Mexico to be ranked among the most dangerous places in the world to work as a journalist in recent years. In the first half of 2012, at least six journalists were slain in Mexico, several in the troubled state of Veracruz. As previously noted, according to TBI’s Justice in Mexico tally, ten journalists and “media support” workers were killed in 2012, and a total of 74 journalists and media support workers were killed in organized-crime-style homicides between 2006 and 2012.¹²⁵ Crime against journalists runs from harassment to murder, and often causes journalists to self-censor their work and news outlets to stop publishing or broadcasting stories on violent crime.

In response to the spike in journalist murders and criticism that the Mexican judiciary was not resolving such cases, the Calderón government took some steps in 2011 to improve security measures for journalists at risk of being victimized (frequently those include reporters who cover crime or government corruption beats). In April 2012, a law to enhance protection for journalists and human rights defenders passed both houses of the Mexican Congress. Nevertheless, media groups and other observers have expressed support for beleaguered Mexican media that are being pressured by the DTOs to not cover the violence. They have also criticized the Mexican government for not extending adequate protection. Organized crime is also reported to be targeting citizens who use social media to report on the violence. In some cities, social media such as Twitter have become an important news source because traditional news outlets have

¹²² Ibid. TBI notes that the Mexican National Security System (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP) in Spanish) “refused to release its data on organized-crime-style homicides beyond September 2011.”

¹²³ Ibid., p. 16.

¹²⁴ For tallies in 2013, see “EPN Backed by 50% of Mexicans,” *LatinNews Daily Report*, April 2, 2013. See also, Tracy Wilkinson and Cecilia Sanchez, “Mexico Government Downplays Deadly Violence: The Mexico Propaganda Campaign Has Some Success as Think Tanks and Newspapers Ignore Facts on the Ground and Promote Discussion of the Economy over Violence,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2013. Most analysts contend that violence levels will not change rapidly, and note that the Peña Nieto government has only been in place a short time.

¹²⁵ TBI’s Justice in Mexico tally published in its 2012 annual report on drug violence in Mexico broadened its criteria from data previously published in this report. The new TBI criteria includes “...journalists and media support workers employed with a recognized news organization at the time of their deaths, as well as independent, free-lance, and former journalists and media-support workers.” See TBI, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

been silenced by threats from reporting on violent crime. However, in 2011 and 2012 several social media providers including widely read bloggers were threatened and some were killed.¹²⁶

Pressure from organized crime is often greatest at the local level. According to TBI's tally, a total of 45 mayors and former mayors were victims of organized-crime-style homicides between 2006 and 2012. The number of mayors assassinated spiked in 2010, but was still high in 2012 with eight mayors and ex-mayors killed. In President Peña Nieto's first month in office (December 2012), a former mayor from the state of San Luis Potosí was killed becoming the first such killing in the new administration.¹²⁷

Another population hard hit by the violence is young people between 15 and 29 years of age. The Mexican newspaper *El Universal* reported that drug trafficking-related violence had become the leading cause of death for young people in recent years, growing 10-fold between 2007 and 2010.¹²⁸ Not all victims are known because of the widespread problem of disappearances. In February 2013, the Peña Nieto administration announced that more than 26,000 people had been reported missing during the Calderón administration. The register had been compiled by the Calderón government but not released publicly. The Peña Nieto administration announced it would seek to verify all those listed. The numbers reported even exceeded the more than 16,000 disappearances that had been counted by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission during the first five and half years of the Calderón government.¹²⁹

Locations of the Violence and Its Impact on Tourism and Business

As the violence in Mexico has sharply increased over the past several years, it has also shifted locations. Drug trafficking-related violence once highly concentrated near Mexico's northern border with the United States shifted geographically in 2011 and 2012 moving from northwestern and north-central Mexico to northeastern and central Mexico.¹³⁰ As it has spread to new locations, the fear of violence has closed businesses and had an impact on tourism. American investors in Mexico have grown concerned about the violence and businesses have sent home dependents or closed operations altogether in some cities. Small and medium-sized businesses have been particularly hard hit, without the resources to hire private security firms and provide for employee safety as have the larger businesses and multinational corporations.¹³¹ In 2011, the Mexican government published a report indicating that foreign direct investment (FDI) has continued to pour into some of the most violent states at levels exceeding the investment prior to 2006, but others argue that job-creating investment was moving into safer cities where drug trafficking-related violence was lower.¹³²

¹²⁶ Larisa Epatko, "Mexican Drug Cartels' New Target: Bloggers," *PBS Newshour*, October 13, 2011; Melissa Del Bosque, "Tweeting the Disappeared," *The Texas Observer*, April 2012.

¹²⁷ Molzahn, Rodriguez Ferreira, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

¹²⁸ Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

¹²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*.

¹³⁰ Molzahn, Rodriguez Ferreira, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

¹³¹ Dora Beszterczey and Shannon O'Neil, "Breaking the Cycle," *Americas Quarterly*, Winter 2011. This source notes that as many as 10,000 businesses have closed down in Ciudad Juárez alone, while the city's unemployment rate soared from "virtually zero" to 20% in the last three years.

¹³² Nacha Cattán, "Is Violence in Mexico Affecting Foreign Investment? No, Say Recent Reports," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 8, 2011; Secretaría de Economía, *Subsecretaría de la Inversión Extranjera Directa (IED) a Nivel Nacional y Subnacional: Seguridad y Otros Factores*, July 27, 2011.

In 2008, drug trafficking-related violence was concentrated in a few cities and states. About 60% of the killings took place in three cities: Tijuana (Baja California), Culiacán (Sinaloa), and highly contested Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua). By far, the largest number of drug trafficking-related deaths took place in Ciudad Juárez, a city of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants across the border from El Paso, TX. The Mexican border city is where the conflict between the Sinaloa and Juárez DTOs is most focused. (Mexico's National Public Security Council estimates that 36% of the drug trafficking-related deaths in Mexico's drug war from December 2006 through July 2010 could be attributed to the conflict centered in Ciudad Juárez.)¹³³ According to the U.S. State Department and media reports, some 3,100 people were killed in Ciudad Juárez in 2010 alone, making it one of the most violent cities in the world.¹³⁴ However, in 2011 total homicides in Ciudad Juárez declined to 1,933, still the most violent city in Mexico, but behind San Pedro Sula, Honduras, now estimated to be the city with the highest homicide rate in the world.¹³⁵ (This shift suggests the epicenter of drug trafficking-related violence may be moving into Central America. For more background, see CRS Report R41731, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*.)

Starting in 2009, the violence spread to new areas throughout the country for the usual reasons: changing alliances and competition between and within the DTOs, the succession struggles when leaders are taken down or eliminated, and expanding DTO efforts to corrupt and intimidate officials to permit the trade.¹³⁶ The intense government crackdown using army and navy forces and the Mexican Federal Police has provoked a violent response from the DTOs to communicate their lack of fear of the government. Meanwhile, Mexico's law enforcement and courts have been ineffective in investigating and prosecuting the perpetrators of violence, leaving the DTOs to continue their attacks free of legal consequences.

Violence spread from near the border in northern Mexico south to the states of Durango and Guerrero in 2009, with homicides doubling in both states.¹³⁷ As in 2009, violence in 2010 continued along the U.S./Mexico border, including the states of Chihuahua, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas (the latter two states being the locus of the 2010 conflict between the Zetas and the Gulf DTOs), and with notable increases in Sinaloa, Guerrero, Durango, and the state of Mexico.¹³⁸ In 2010, some of the Central Pacific states experienced a large increase in violent activity, including Jalisco and Nayarit. Violence in the Central Pacific states (including the state

¹³³ Mexican Federal Government, "Información Sobre el Fenómeno Delictivo en México," August 2010; David Shirk, "Mexican Government Reveals Distribution of Drug Violence," *Justice in Mexico* blog, Trans-Border Institute, <http://justiceinmexico.org/2010/08/28/>.

¹³⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Travel Warning: Mexico*, April 22, 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5440.html; Andrew Rice, "The End of America: Why Mexico's Pain is El Paso's Gain," *New York Times*, July 31, 2011.

¹³⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Travel Warning: Mexico*, February 8, 2012, at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5665.html; Seguridad, Justicia, y Paz, "San Pedro Sula La Ciudad Más Violenta del Mundo; Juárez, La Segunda," January 11, 2012, at <http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/sala-de-prensa/541-san-pedro-sula-la-ciudad-mas-violenta-del-mundo-juarez-la-segunda>. According to this Mexican NGO, the most violent city in the world was San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in 2011, with Ciudad Juárez second (although still the most violent in Mexico).

¹³⁶ The choice of "silver or lead" (either a bribe or a bullet) is forced on many government officials by Mexico's drug traffickers. See Finnegan, "Silver or Lead."

¹³⁷ TBI, *Justice in Mexico, January 2010 News Report*.

¹³⁸ Duran-Martinez, Hazard, and Rios, *2010 Mid-Year Report on Drug Violence in Mexico*.

of Mexico, Guerrero, Morelos, Jalisco, and Nayarit) has been attributed to the conflict between factions of the Beltrán Leyva organization, La Familia Michoacana, and the Sinaloa DTO.¹³⁹

The violence is highly concentrated along key drug routes and within a relatively few cities and towns. In August 2010, a Mexican government report on 28,000 homicides linked to organized crime (from December 2006 through July 2010), revealed that 80% of drug trafficking-related homicides occurred in 162 of Mexico's 2,456 municipalities (less than 7%).¹⁴⁰ Through additional analysis of municipal-level data in late 2010, analyst Eduardo Guerrero identified six clusters of the most violent municipalities.¹⁴¹ The 36 municipalities he classified as the most violent were located in five states (there were two high-violence zones in the border state of Chihuahua). Guerrero argued that if an effective anti-violence strategy targeted those zones, the drug trafficking-related violence could be reduced.¹⁴² According to recent analysis by the Trans-Border Institute, the worst violence in Mexico has continued to be located in less than 10% of Mexico's municipalities.¹⁴³

In 2011, the violence continued to grow and spread. While violence in Baja California and Chihuahua declined somewhat, it spiked in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo León, the northeastern border states (see **Figure 3**). The Gulf DTO struggled to dislodge the Zetas from Monterrey, Nuevo León, the major industrial and financial hub 140 miles from the Texas border, producing a near-paralyzing conflict that frightened business owners and destroyed the city's reputation as one of Mexico's safest cities.¹⁴⁴ The six border states with the United States continued to experience a majority of the violence. According to government data, Mexico's northern border states accounted for 44% of the homicides in 2011, down from 50% in 2010. Reductions in Tijuana and Juárez were offset by increases in Monterrey and elsewhere,¹⁴⁵ and violence dispersed south toward Mexico's interior—the populace center of the country. In other words, violence remained high in crucial transit regions near the border and along the coasts, but it dispersed to a greater number of cities and states. In 2011, violence in the coastal state of Sinaloa declined in comparison with the prior year, but increased in Guerrero and Michoacán further south. Jalisco, home to Mexico's second-largest city, Guadalajara, saw violence flare, and, in the latter half of 2011, Veracruz became a hot spot with incursions against Los Zetas in territory they had dominated. The discoveries of mass graves in Durango and Tamaulipas in the middle of the year added to the drug trafficking death tolls in those states.¹⁴⁶

While drug trafficking-related killings remain concentrated in a relatively few cities, the violence is spreading to more populated and economically important urban centers. Killings, kidnappings, and other violence have dramatically increased in Monterrey, Mexico's third-largest city. The resort city of Acapulco, a seaport in Guerrero state, experienced a sharp increase in violence and

¹³⁹ TBI, *Justice in Mexico, November 2010 News Report*.

¹⁴⁰ Mexican Federal Government, "Información Sobre el Fenómeno Delictivo en México," August 2010; David Shirk, "Mexican Government Reveals Distribution of Drug Violence," *Justice in Mexico* blog, Trans-Border Institute, <http://justiceinmexico.org/2010/08/28/>.

¹⁴¹ Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "Cómo Reducir La Violencia en México," *Nexos en Línea*, November 3, 2010.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ TBI, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

¹⁴⁴ Nik Steinberg, "The Monster and Monterrey: The Politics and Cartels of Mexico's Drug War," *The Nation*, May 25, 2011; David Luhn, "Expats Flee Drug War in Mexico's No. 3 City," *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2010.

¹⁴⁵ Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

¹⁴⁶ TBI, *Justice in Mexico: June 2011 News Report*.

was the second-most violent city in Mexico in 2011 and the most violent in 2012 (with a homicide rate of 148 per 100,000). Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city, saw increasing violence in 2011 and continued to experience incidents in 2012.¹⁴⁷ Finally, Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas state has again been immersed in conflict as Los Zetas defend their important stronghold in one of the busiest land ports handling U.S.-Mexico trade.¹⁴⁸

In 2012, the Trans-Border Institute maintained, after examining several sources, that violence either plateaued or declined. Similar to other years, TBI notes that violence diminished in some states (including Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua) while increasing in others, including those states located in the central and eastern border region and the Central Pacific coast. One interesting conclusion in TBI's analysis is that the geographic dispersion of the violence (defined as the number of cartel- or DTO-related deaths) may have diminished or narrowed from 2011 to 2012.¹⁴⁹

According to some estimates, the violence costs the country roughly one percentage point of annual economic growth.¹⁵⁰ However, Mexico's economy grew by 3.9% in 2011 and 2012¹⁵¹ and the government has argued that overall growth and foreign investment have not been harmed. In April 2012, the government vigorously denied the claim of an important national employers' federation (Coparmex) that violence and threats of violence caused 160,000 businesses to leave Mexico in 2011.¹⁵² Similarly, with regard to tourism the record is mixed. While the U.S. government has issued increasingly foreboding travel warnings and tourism has declined in the border region, more than 22 million tourists visited Mexico in 2011, breaking records set in 2008.¹⁵³ Some of this increase can be attributed to policies adopted by the Calderón government to make tourism more attractive to foreign visitors.

The government touted the decline in violence in Ciudad Juárez in 2011 as evidence that their law enforcement efforts and social reforms had worked. But another possible cause is that the rival Sinaloa DTO and Carillo Fuentes/Juárez DTO have come to some accommodation on use of the drug corridor. According to many assessments, the Sinaloa DTO has emerged as the most powerful DTO in Mexico.¹⁵⁴ It has successfully pushed into Baja California and Chihuahua, which were once controlled by the Tijuana and Juárez DTOs. Some analysts have speculated that Sinaloa's dominance may be the reason for a decline in violence in both border cities.¹⁵⁵

Recently, some analysts have identified Tijuana as an example of a qualified success in its reduction of violence. They maintain that Tijuana's significantly lower number of homicides resulted from an effective government strategy of building trust and communication between civil society and enforcement authorities, which was aided by a respected policing role for the military.

¹⁴⁷ For a vivid description of increasing violence in Guadalajara, see William Finnegan, "The Kingpins," *The New Yorker*, July 2, 2012.

¹⁴⁸ STRATFOR, "Mexico Security Memo: The Value of Nuevo Laredo," March 7, 2012.

¹⁴⁹ TBI, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

¹⁵⁰ David Luhnow, "Mexico Economy Withstands Drug War," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2011.

¹⁵¹ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Mexico*, March 2013.

¹⁵² "Mexico Denies that Firms Are Leaving Over Security," *LatinNews Daily*, April 5, 2012.

¹⁵³ Kenan Christiansen, "Tourism Up, Mexico Aims for Non-U.S. Visitors," *New York Times*, March 4, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, STRATFOR, "The Evolution of Mexican Drug Cartels' Areas of Influence," April 28, 2011; STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Wars Update: Targeting the Most Violent Cartels," July 21, 2011.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*; Guy Taylor, "Life Stirs Anew in 'Murder Capital' Juarez," *Washington Times*, May 27, 2012.

Furthermore, the DTOs operating in Tijuana were broken up but retained sufficient organizational coherence to order a reduction in violence in response to a well-executed and targeted “hot spot” policing effort.¹⁵⁶

Major tourist destinations, such as Acapulco, Cancún, Cuernavaca, Mazatlan, and Taxco, have been hit by violence, and the economically vital tourist industry has been affected. As noted above, tourism along the U.S.-Mexico border has also suffered a dramatic decline because of fears of violence. According to the U.S. State Department, foreign tourists have not been a DTO target. But there have been several incidents of Mexican tourists becoming victims. The State Department’s travel warning updated in February 2012 reported that the number of Americans murdered in Mexico rose from 35 in 2007 to 120 in 2011.¹⁵⁷

One consequence of the intense violence in many municipalities is the displacement of residents fleeing for safety. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated in December 2010 that 230,000 persons were displaced, roughly half of whom fled to the United States. The other estimated 115,000 were internally displaced persons inside Mexico.¹⁵⁸ According to the Monitoring Centre’s annual report covering 2011, about 140,000 people have been displaced by drug-cartel violence since 2007. The report criticizes the Mexican government for not initiating a program to recognize or assist this population.¹⁵⁹ However, in contrast to this finding, the United Nations has identified only 1,570 people as a “population of concern” inside Mexico as of January 2011.¹⁶⁰ In addition, many Mexican nationals fearing that they could be victims of the violence (including journalists and law enforcement officers) have sought asylum in the United States.¹⁶¹ According to the U.S. Department of Justice, there were 6,133 requests for asylum from Mexico in FY2011, about double the number of requests made in the prior year, and only 104 requests (1.7%) were granted.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ Rios and Aguilera, “Keys to Reducing Violence in Mexico: Targeted Policing and Civic Engagement.”

¹⁵⁷ The State Department does not identify which murders may be attributed to the drug trafficking-related violence or organized crime, although the recent travel warnings do describe the heightened risk caused by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) in different parts of the country. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Travel Warning: Mexico*, February 8, 2012, at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5665.html

¹⁵⁸ Norwegian Refugee Council—Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Briefing Paper on Forced Displacement in Mexico due to Drug Cartel Violence,” December 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Norwegian Refugee Council—Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Overview 2011: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence*, April 2012, at <http://www.unhcr.org/IDMC/IDMC-report.pdf>

¹⁶⁰ For further information, see profile of Mexico on the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e492706&submit=GO>

¹⁶¹ Patricia Giovine, “More Mexicans Fleeing the Drug War Seek U.S. Asylum,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 2011.

¹⁶² U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review, Office of Planning, Analysis, and Technology, Immigration Courts, FY2011 Asylum Statistics, at <http://www.justice.gov/eoir/efoia/FY11AsyStats-Current.pdf>

Mexico's Antidrug Strategy and Reaction¹⁶³

President Calderón's military-led crackdown on the drug trafficking organizations was at the center of his domestic policy, having launched his aggressive approach almost immediately after coming to office in December 2006. In the course of his campaign, he deployed 50,000 Mexican military forces—at its height in 2011 reportedly 96,000 troops were engaged—and thousands of federal police around the country to combat the DTOs.¹⁶⁴ A leading element of the strategy was to confront and dismantle the drug trafficking organizations by going after the high-value targets: the leadership of the major DTOs.

The DTOs fought back vigorously, refusing to allow law enforcement actions to take place and making an all-out effort to neutralize repressive measures. The DTOs also demonstrated an unanticipated resilience as their leadership was arrested or killed. Mexico's former Secretary of Public Security, Genaro Garcia Luna, and others acknowledged that removing the high-value targets or kingpins at the top of the organizations did not succeed in paralyzing the DTOs because in most cases the organizations simply transferred power to new and sometimes more violent leaders.¹⁶⁵

An additional complexity was that the drug organizations were adapting and transforming themselves from hierarchical and vertical organizations to become more multi-nodal and horizontal in their structure. Some of the DTOs adopted a more decentralized and networked model with independent cell-like structures that made it harder for law enforcement to dismantle.¹⁶⁶ As the Mexican military shifted resources to pursue leaders of the DTOs, the military appeared to have fewer resources to devote to older missions such as eradication efforts. This may have contributed to increases in the cultivation of opium and marijuana, and production of heroin and methamphetamine, which, unfortunately, increased the income for the DTOs.

¹⁶³ For a fuller discussion of the Calderón government's strategy see CRS Report RL32724, *Mexico and the 112th Congress*, by Clare Ribando Seelke. The report identifies a broad-based strategy that included (1) carrying out joint police-military operations to support local authorities and citizens; (2) increasing the operational and technical capacities of the state; (3) initiating legal and institutional reforms; (4) strengthening crime prevention and social programs; and (5) strengthening international cooperation (such as the Mérida Initiative and Beyond Mérida).

¹⁶⁴ Ken Ellingwood, "An Agony of Its Own; Some See a Colombian Parallel to Mexico's Drug Violence. But as the U.S. Considers Its Options, It's the Differences that Will Count," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2010; Randal C. Archibold, "Adding to Unease of a Drug War Alliance," *New York Times*, May 30, 2012; Claire O'Neill McCleskey, "Mexican Generals Charged with Drug Trafficking," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, August 1, 2012. The last article notes that the 50,000 troops deployed by President Calderón since 2006 were sent to 14 of Mexico's 32 states. See also, International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*. In this 2013 report, the authors state that in 2011 96,000 Mexican troops were engaged, roughly 40% of all active personnel.

¹⁶⁵ One former drug operative in Mexico described the dilemma in an interview. "Trying to stop the gangsters 'is like mowing the grass... You can cut it down. But it always grows back.'" See "Under the Volcano," *Economist*, October 16, 2010. See also Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, "The Long War of Genaro Garcia Luna," *New York Times*, July 13, 2008.

¹⁶⁶ The evolution is described by Luis Astorga and David Shirk as a move from centralized, hierarchical structures to "an increasingly multi-polar constellation of trafficking organizations with varying specializations and capacities in the late 1990s and 2000s." Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, *Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.-Mexican Context*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute, Working Paper Series on U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation, May 2010, p. 25. See also Juan Carlos Garzón, *Mafia & Co.: The Criminal Networks in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, June 2008. This evolution in the structure of criminal groups to new models is also described in CRS Report R41547, *Organized Crime: An Evolving Challenge for U.S. Law Enforcement*, by Jerome P. Bjelopera and Kristin M. Finklea.

In carrying out his antidrug strategy, President Calderón demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to collaborate with the United States, and the United States responded with new trust and respect for its Mexican partners. U.S.-Mexican security cooperation was structured upon the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral counterdrug and security effort first funded in 2008.¹⁶⁷ The initiative, as it was originally conceived by Presidents George W. Bush and Felipe Calderón, was to end with the FY2010 budget cycle. The focus evolved from providing hardware to Mexican security forces to modernizing and strengthening institutions of law enforcement and the judiciary. A successor to the Mérida Initiative—called “Beyond Mérida”—was introduced by the Obama administration in the FY2011 budget request. The “four pillars” of that current strategy are (1) disrupting organized crime groups; (2) institutionalizing the rule of law; (3) building a 21st-century border; and (4) building strong and resilient communities.

Following a brutal massacre of 15 youth at a party in Ciudad Juárez in January 2010, President Calderón made a series of visits to the besieged border city and announced that police and military action alone were insufficient to address Juárez’s problems. Within weeks, the Calderón administration released a plan, “Todos Somos Juárez,” to address social causes that sustain the drug trade such as unemployment and a weak education system, which paralleled Pillar 4 of the Beyond Mérida strategy.¹⁶⁸ In addition, the Calderón government capitalized on the sharing of U.S. intelligence and vigorously responded to extradition requests of suspects wanted by the United States.¹⁶⁹ The Calderón administration also initiated a major restructuring of the Mexican judicial system and successfully expanded and restructured the Mexican Federal Police. Some of the change enacted included increasing federal police pay, hiring better educated officers, and enacting procedures to vet and train officers to help combat corruption. Yet by the end of Calderón’s term, efforts to reform the Attorney General’s Ministerial Police lagged and steep challenges remained in cleaning up and reforming Mexico’s many municipal and state forces that number over 300,000 personnel.

The Mexican military was initially to be in the forefront of the government’s counterdrug campaign as an interim measure until enough police could be vetted, trained, and equipped to be given the lead in the public security function. Because the pace of police and justice reform was slow, the Calderón government retained the military in its lead role until the end of the President’s term. Persistent police corruption also slowed progress and was evident from the August 2010 purge of the federal police in which more than 3,000 officers were fired. On the other hand, four high-ranking army officers (three of them generals) were arrested for suspicion of drug trafficking and corruption in May 2012.¹⁷⁰ On July 31, 2012, a Mexican federal judge charged them (now three former officers and one active duty general) with criminal links to the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO). Included was retired army general Tomas Angeles Dauahare, who had served as Deputy Secretary of Defense under Calderón from 2006 to 2008.¹⁷¹ Some analysts

¹⁶⁷ For background on the Mérida Initiative and its successor Beyond Mérida, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea.

¹⁶⁸ Estrategia Todos Somos Juárez, <http://www.todosomosjuarez.gob.mx/estrategia/index.html>

¹⁶⁹ One of the earliest successes of the Calderón counterdrug strategy was the extradition of Osiel Cardenas Guillen (the notorious leader of the Gulf DTO) to the United States in January 2007. Extraditions have increased significantly under President Calderón. For example, in 2009, the Mexican government extradited a record 107 suspects to the United States, 94 in 2010, and 93 in 2011. For more background, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea

¹⁷⁰ Randal C. Archibold, “Mexico Holds 3 Generals Said to Aid Drug Cartels,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2012; Randal C. Archibold, “Adding to Unease of a Drug War Alliance,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2012.

¹⁷¹ Claire O’Neill McCleskey, “Mexican Generals Charged with Drug Trafficking,” *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime* (continued...)

suggested that the outcome of this sensitive case could affect the legacy of Calderón's security strategy.¹⁷² The military is highly esteemed in Mexico, but since being given a major role in the Calderón antidrug campaign it has been dogged by allegations of corruption and violations of human rights (charges most frequently directed toward the Mexican Army). However, supporters of the Calderón strategy maintained that the only viable option for the state to confront well-armed DTOs equipped with military-style weapons was to use the well-armed military.

Another challenge for the Calderón strategy and now for the government of President Peña Nieto has been a rise in drug abuse in Mexico, especially in border cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, and the gang warfare that broke out to gain control of the domestic drug trade.¹⁷³ Local drug dealing increased because drugs headed for the U.S. market were being stopped from going over the border. Gangs that are hired by the DTOs for protection and other "outsourced" services are paid in "product" (illegal drugs) and need to convert the drugs to cash. Fighting to control street corner sales, DTO-supplied gangs are killing each other in border cities and elsewhere. Unemployment, caused by the economic downturn and businesses fleeing the violence, has also provided ready recruits for the gangs, who are frequently hired by the DTOs to fight as their proxies. President Peña Nieto has emphasized his support for crime prevention strategies that include outreach to impoverished youth.

In order to improve intelligence sharing and increase U.S. support for Mexico's struggle against organized crime, binational cooperation in 2011 included the deployment of U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles to gather intelligence on DTO activities¹⁷⁴ and the opening of a compound to gather intelligence in northern Mexico.¹⁷⁵ The compound, reportedly staffed by DEA, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and civilian personnel from the Pentagon's Northern Command, was to be modeled on "fusion intelligence centers" operated by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁷⁶ How closely the United States and the new Peña Nieto government will collaborate on these efforts and other cooperative ventures remains to be determined.

Public Response

Polls taken during the Calderón administration indicated that many Mexicans believed the DTOs were winning the conflict and the government's programs had little impact on improving citizen security or reducing violence. For example, a survey conducted by Pew Research Center and published in late August 2011 found that less than half (45%) believed the government was

(...continued)

in the Americas, August 1, 2012; Randal C. Archibold, "Mexico: Former Defense Officials Are Accused of Aiding Traffickers," *New York Times*, August 2, 2012. The judge also charged members of the BLO including Hector Valdez (alias "La Barbie") who is thought to have implicated the army officials in his testimony.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Thousands of gang members in both the United States and Mexico serve the Mexican DTOs. In Ciudad Juárez there are an estimated 500 gangs with a combined membership of between 15,000 to 25,000 persons. Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "Cómo Reducir La Violencia en México."

¹⁷⁴ Ginger Thompson and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Drones Fly Deep in Mexico to Fight Drugs," *New York Times*, March 16, 2011.

¹⁷⁵ Ginger Thompson, "U.S. Widens Its Role in Battle Against Mexico's Drug Cartels," *New York Times*, August 7, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

making progress in the campaign against the DTOs.¹⁷⁷ However, the Pew study had some interesting additional findings. The Mexican public, while appalled at the violence, continued to back the use of the Mexican military as part of the Calderón government's antidrug campaign (83% of respondents). This apparent support for the military's role in the antidrug effort came despite a popular movement protesting abuses by the military, which gained ground in 2011 (see below). According to the Pew survey, a larger fraction said they would support American military assistance (38%) than in prior years, and nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated they welcomed U.S. assistance to train the Mexican police and the military.¹⁷⁸ A May 2012 poll conducted by the *Dallas Morning News* and the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* found that 64% of Mexican voters approved of the Mexican military taking a lead role in the fight against organized crime whereas only 21% said they thought the strategy was working.¹⁷⁹

President Calderón confronted the emergence of a peace movement led by Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, whose son was killed by drug gangs in Cuernavaca in March 2011. Sicilia, who heads the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, met several times with President Calderón. He organized a peace caravan across Mexico, led a peace caravan across the United States in September 2012, and held many other demonstrations in Mexico City. Sicilia urged President Calderón to abandon his military-led strategy, which he and some of his supporters maintained caused violence and human rights abuses by security forces. They proposed a new approach focused on combating poverty, inequality, and unemployment, which they maintained contributed to the rising violence.¹⁸⁰

The perceived failure of President Calderón's security strategy to win broad public support was certainly a factor in his party's loss of the presidency in 2012. Many observers suggested the Calderón approach had stimulated DTO rivalries and intra-DTO battles for succession thus increasing violence and the number of civilians caught in "drug war" crossfire. In addition, the operations of Mexico's security forces led to complaints of human rights violations that include forced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention.¹⁸¹ As a candidate of the PRI party which had ruled Mexico for decades prior to 2000, Enrique Peña Nieto pledged to make combating violent crime a priority. During his successful campaign and afterwards, Peña Nieto spoke about cutting violent crime by as much as 50% and that his efforts would be results driven. In his first months in office, however, President Peña Nieto focused on other reforms rather than security. Some critics argued his plans for security lacked definition and remained hazy after his first 100 days in office.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Pew Research Center, "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico," Press Release, August 31, 2011. The study can be accessed at <http://pewglobal.org/files/2011/08/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Mexico-Report-FINAL-August-31-2011.pdf>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. See also, Sara Miller Llana, "In Drug War, Mexico Warms to the U.S.," *Christian Science Monitor: Daily News Briefing*, September 2, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Alfredo Corchado, "Most Mexicans Want U.S. to Take a Bigger Role in Fighting Violence, Poll Finds," *Dallas Morning News*, May 13, 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Candace Vallantin, "Mexicans Campaign to End Drug War; Renowned Poet Puts Down his Pen to Focus on a Caravan For Peace," *Toronto Star*, June 7, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, *Neither Rights nor Security*; testimony from Hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, "Human Rights in Mexico," May 10, 2012; Catherine Daly, Kimberly Heinle, and David A. Shirk, *Armed with Impunity: Curbing Military Human Rights Abuses in Mexico*, Trans-Border Institute, Special Report, July 2012.

¹⁸² Richard Fausset, "A Traditionalist Shines Through Mexico's Fresh New Face," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2013.

In the meantime, press reports of increasing vigilantism or self-appointed self-defense groups have mushroomed in 2013 with the press citing the rise of such groups in the states of Veracruz, Guerrero, and Michoacán. The phenomena of rural self defense groups or community police in more remote indigenous areas have a long history in Mexico because of a lack of access to justice services in those territories. These new groups which have appeared in 2013 are claiming that local, state, and federal authorities are not adequately protecting their communities from organized crime threats and they have taken up arms in order to do the job. State governments have responded in various ways to this new “vigilante movement” with acceptance or toleration in some cases, denial in others, while some officials have criticized the new groups because they undermine legitimate government authority. In one instance in March 2013, federal authorities arrested 34 members of a self-defense group in Michoacán for their alleged ties to Jalisco Cartel-New Generation. The rise of these groups is a growing concern for the Peña Nieto government.¹⁸³

Trends and Outlook

Notwithstanding how the violence is characterized, a few trends are apparent. First, the drug-trafficking related violence continued to rise from December 2006 through December 2011. Many observers contend that during President Calderón’s six-year term there were more than 60,000 organized crime-related homicides, with another 26,000 Mexicans reported missing. In 2012, a number of sources registered a decrease of organized-crime-related killings over the prior year, although how significant a decline cannot be determined from available data. Nevertheless, the level of homicides is still quite elevated, and few analysts anticipate a steep reduction of Mexico’s violence level in the near term.

Second, the violence is concentrated in a few cities and towns, with 80% of the deaths concentrated in slightly under 7% of Mexico’s municipalities, according to Mexican government data released in August 2010.¹⁸⁴ According to the newer Mexican government data, violence in 2010 continued to be concentrated in relatively few cities, with over 70% of the violence in just 80 municipalities.¹⁸⁵ In 2011, violence dispersed to a greater number of cities. While the five most violent cities accounted for roughly 32% of the violence in 2010, they accounted for about 24% of the violence in 2011.¹⁸⁶ However, according to the Trans-Border Institute, the geographic dispersion of the violence decreased in 2012.

Third, with the caveat that the actual number of homicides is unknown and most homicides are never thoroughly investigated and many go unreported, it is fair to conclude that the violence is largely targeted at people with ties to the drug trafficking organizations because much of the violence is between and within the organizations. During the Calderón administration, the government maintained that more than 90% of the casualties (or those who died since President Calderón’s crackdown began in December 2006) were individuals involved with or linked in

¹⁸³ Felbab-Brown, *Peña Nieto’s Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico’s New Security Policy against Organized Crime*; TBI, “Vigilante Justice,” in *News Monitor March 2013*; Richard Fausset and Cecilia Sanchez, “Worry Grows over Mexico Vigilante Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Mexican Federal Government, “Información Sobre el Fenómeno Delictivo en México,” August 2010; David Shirk, “Mexican Government Reveals Distribution of Drug Violence,” *Justice in Mexico* blog, Trans-Border Institute, <http://justiceinmexico.org/2010/08/28/>.

¹⁸⁵ Ríos and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2010*.

¹⁸⁶ Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

some way to the criminal activities of the DTOs. Few of these drug trafficking-related homicides, however, were adequately investigated or prosecuted. Critics, however, have questioned this assertion and noted it does little to mitigate the growing alarm of the Mexican public about violent crime. The number of Mexican security forces (military and police) killed is believed to be approximately 6-7% of the total, although estimates vary. According to TBI, between 2008 to 2012, 2,539 police officers and 204 military personnel were victims of organized crime style homicides. TBI notes that local police are by far the most vulnerable. Some of the deaths of Mexican officials may involve individuals who at some time colluded with one DTO or another. Until recently, the Mexican government maintained that most of the victims are tied to the DTOs and suggested the extensive violence should be seen as a sign of success.

Fourth, the power of the DTOs is fluid and the boundaries of their operations change. Even the seven organizations that formerly dominated the landscape were only loosely geographically based. The conflict evolves as fighting between DTOs over drug plazas and corridors is exacerbated or resolved. Some DTOs have fragmented creating a proliferation of new groups, and this has generated more violence. But there is a debate if fragmentation represents a long-run weakening of the DTOs' influence and making them more susceptible to state penetration.¹⁸⁷

Fifth, while forecasting changes in the violence is speculative, many observers are concerned that high levels of violence may persist in the near term. The inputs from the United States that fuel the violence—high-powered guns and illicit profits—have not been significantly disrupted.¹⁸⁸ According to the U.S. government, nearly 100,000 guns which were seized by Mexican authorities between 2007 through 2011 have been turned over to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) for tracing. Of those, some 68,161 (68% of the total) were determined by the ATF to have come from the United States.¹⁸⁹

There is a lively debate about how large the annual profits from drug trafficking actually are and what fraction flows back to Mexico from the United States. Estimates of Mexican organizations' drug receipts vary among U.S. government agencies, ranging from \$22 billion (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) to \$19 billion to \$29 billion (U.S. Department of Homeland Security) and an even broader range of \$8 billion to \$25 billion (U.S. State Department).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Diana Villiers Negroponte, "Measuring Success in the Drug War: Criteria to Determine Progress in Mexico's Efforts to Defeat Narco-traffickers," Brookings Institution, October 19, 2010, at http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0525_mexico_drug_war_negroponte.aspx.

¹⁸⁸ For background on the problem of gun trafficking, see CRS Report R40733, *Gun Trafficking and the Southwest Border*, by Vivian S. Chu and William J. Krouse. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates between \$19 to \$29 billion generated by illicit drug sales in the United States flows back to Mexico each year. See DHS, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), *United States-Mexico Criminal Proceeds Study*, June 2010. Analysts have found it difficult to determine how much of these funds are transferred back to the Mexican DTOs through bulk cash flows and how much is laundered through other methods. Douglas Farah, "Money Laundering and Bulk Cash Smuggling: Challenges for the Mérida Initiative," in *Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Options for Confronting Organized Crime*, ed. Eric L. Olson, David A. Shirk, and Andrew Selee (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the University of San Diego, 2010).

¹⁸⁹ Pete Yost, "ATF: 68,000 Guns in Mexico Traced to U.S.," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2012. See also, Colby Goodman and Michael Marizco, *U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Mexico: New Data and Insights Illuminate Key Trends and Challenges*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute, Working Paper on U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation, September 2010. Analysts contest how many firearms the Mexican government has seized and if the sample of those submitted for tracing to the ATF is representative. The Mexican government and many others have maintained that the increased availability of high-powered weapons, often originating from the United States, provides the tools for more violence.

¹⁹⁰ Mollie Laffin-Rose, "'Organized Crime Laundered \$10 Bn in Mexico in FY2011,'" *In Sight Crime: Organized* (continued...)

Nongovernmental analysts have calculated considerably lower estimates. The Rand Corporation released a report in 2010 that estimated the amount of drug revenues flowing to Mexico's DTOs annually at \$6.6 billion.¹⁹¹ Independent scholar Alejandro Hope projects total export revenue for Mexico's drug trafficking organizations between \$4.7 billion to \$8.1 billion, with \$6.2 billion as the best estimate.¹⁹² In April 2012, Mexico's Ministry of Finance released a study that estimated total proceeds from organized crime laundered in Mexico in 2011 at approximately \$10 billion, with drug trafficking accounting for 41% of the laundered proceeds.¹⁹³ Seizures of illicit funds derived from drug trafficking have been low. Some estimate that \$20 billion to \$25 billion annually in bulk cash flows back to Mexico and its Colombian suppliers from drug sales in the United States. According to a 2010 analysis by the *Washington Post* of data from the U.S. and Mexican governments, only about 1% of this cash was recovered despite unprecedented efforts to seize more.¹⁹⁴

Regardless of the total, some analysts remain skeptical that clamping down on money laundering will be the magic bullet for reducing illicit trafficking in Mexico or its associated violence.¹⁹⁵ They argue that other strategies are needed to tackle the problem. But U.S. and Mexican government officials assert that one of the most effective ways to dismantle the DTOs is to reduce the criminal proceeds that fund their operations.¹⁹⁶ In March 2012, the Mexican Attorney General's office created a Specialized Unit for Financial Analysis to increase the government's capacity to prosecute financial crimes including money laundering. In the United States, bilateral cooperation on money laundering cases, including training for Mexican prosecutors, has increased.¹⁹⁷ The United States and Mexico formed a Bilateral Money Laundering Working Group to coordinate the investigation and prosecution of money laundering and bulk cash smuggling.¹⁹⁸

Sixth, cooperation between Mexico and the United States has markedly increased under the Mérida Initiative. The United States became more forthcoming in providing actionable intelligence to Mexican agencies during President Calderón's tenure. Mexico showed an

(...continued)

Crime in the Americas, April 20, 2012. This article has links to all the U.S. government studies; see also footnote number 169.

¹⁹¹ Beau Kilmer, Jonathan P. Caulkins, and Brittany M. Bond et al., *Drug Trafficking Revenues and Violence in Mexico: Would Legalizing Marijuana in California Help?*, RAND Corporation, Los Angeles, CA, 2010.

¹⁹² Eric L. Olson, *Considering New Strategies for Confronting Organized Crime in Mexico*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Mexico Institute, Washington, DC, March 2012.

¹⁹³ Mollie Laffin-Rose, "'Organized Crime Laundered \$10 Bn in Mexico in FY2011,'" *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, April 20, 2012.

¹⁹⁴ William Booth and Nick Miroff, "Stepped-up Efforts by U.S., Mexico Fail to Stem Flow of Drug Money South," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2010.

¹⁹⁵ See for example, Alejandro Hope, "Money Laundering and the Myth of the Ninja Accountant," *In Sight Crime: Organized Crime in the Americas*, October 11, 2011.

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, testimony from Hearing before the U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, "Money Laundering and Bulk Cash Smuggling along the Southwest Border," March 9, 2011. Anti-money laundering efforts including countering bulk cash smuggling are important elements of the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/ondcp/policy-and-research/swb_counternarcotics_strategy11.pdf.

¹⁹⁷ Joseph Palazzo, "U.S. in New Drug-Money Push," *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2010.

¹⁹⁸ For more background, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea.

increased willingness to base U.S. personnel in Mexico to provide operational support. Mexico also demonstrated an increased commitment to control its borders and announced an initiative in September 2010 to control money laundering and disrupt the flow of drug money.¹⁹⁹ Since 2001, the United States has applied financial sanctions to all the major DTOs in Mexico or individuals heading those DTOs (as well as several smaller organizations) under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.²⁰⁰ Between 2008 and April 2011, the U.S. government designated 271 individuals and 135 entities tied to the financial and commercial networks of Mexico's most wanted traffickers under the act.²⁰¹

The brutal violence associated with drug trafficking in Mexico appears to exceed the violence that is intrinsic to narcotics trafficking and organized crime in general. The attack on civil society has been particularly harsh for local government officials and journalists. Beyond the reports of journalists, mayors, and young people being killed described earlier, there have been reports of innocent bystanders increasingly being caught in the violence. On August 25, 2011, 52 people lost their lives in a casino fire allegedly ignited by Los Zetas, the highest number of Mexican civilians killed in a single incident since the beginning of the government's campaign against organized crime.²⁰² President Calderón decried the incident as the work of "true terrorists."²⁰³ Others have cited this incident as another example of organized crime's involvement in corruption and extortion.²⁰⁴

The use of car bombs, simultaneous attacks in different cities, and a couple of incidents of seemingly indiscriminate attacks on civilians (including the aforementioned casino fire) have raised concerns that the DTOs may be using tactics similar to those of insurgent groups or terrorists.²⁰⁵ The DTOs, however, appear to lack a discernible political goal or ideology, which is one element of a widely recognized definition of terrorism. The U.S. State Department, in its *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*, published in July 2012, maintains

No known international terrorist organization had an operational presence in Mexico and no terrorist group targeted U.S. citizens in or from Mexican territory. There was no evidence of ties between Mexican criminal organizations and terrorist groups, nor that the criminal organizations had political or territorial control, aside from seeking to protect and expand the impunity with which they conduct their criminal activity.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁹ Embassy of Mexico, "Fact Sheet—National Strategy for Preventing and Fighting Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism," September 2010.

²⁰⁰ The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) targets and blocks financial assets, subject to U.S. jurisdiction, of drug kingpins and related associates and entities. See CRS Report R41215, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counterdrug Programs*, coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke.

²⁰¹ Celina B. Realuyo, *It's All About the Money: Advancing Anti-Money Laundering Efforts in the U.S. and Mexico to Combat Transnational Organized Crime*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Mexico Institute, Washington, DC, May 2012. This report describes both U.S. and Mexican anti-money laundering efforts.

²⁰² Tracy Wilkinson, "As Fury Builds in Mexico, 5 Arrested in Casino Fire," *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 2011.

²⁰³ Dudley Althaus, "Calderón: Casino Killers 'Terrorists'," *Houston Chronicle*, August 27, 2011.

²⁰⁴ "Corruption, not terrorism? Extortion now suspected in casino deaths," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2011.

²⁰⁵ Mark A. R. Kleiman, Jonathan P. Caulkins, and Angela Hawken, *Drugs and Drug Policy: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2011); *Jane's Information Group*, "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—Central America and the Caribbean," February 16, 2011. Of note, some Members of Congress introduced legislation in the 112th Congress, (H.R. 1270, H.R. 4303), that would have directed the U.S. Secretary of State to designate certain Mexican DTOs as foreign terrorist organizations.

²⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*, July 31, 2012 at (continued...)

But the violence has affected the state of democracy in Mexico. For example, the human rights group Freedom House downgraded Mexico in its 2011 ranking as part of its annual evaluation of political rights and civil liberties worldwide. Freedom House ranks countries as free, partly free, or not free. In its *Freedom in the World 2011* report, Mexico was downgraded from “free” in 2010 to “partly free” in 2011 because of a decline in its political rights rating “due to the targeting of local officials by organized crime groups and the government’s inability to protect citizens’ rights in the face of criminal violence.”

For the foreseeable future, the Mexican government will have to deal with the DTOs and the violence that they generate. The DTOs are having a profound demoralizing and delegitimizing effect on local, state, and federal government in Mexico. It may take years of building stronger institutions before violence is markedly reduced. Notwithstanding the DTO violence, Mexico continues to have one of the lower homicide rates in the region, although the post-2006 escalation in drug trafficking-related deaths has pushed the national homicide rate significantly higher. From a nationwide homicide rate of 11 homicides per 100,000 in 2008, the national homicide rate rose to 14 per 100,000 in 2009.²⁰⁷ According to a U.N. global study on homicide published in 2011, Mexico’s homicide rate was 18 per 100,000 in 2010. The same study reporting national rates in the region for 2010 shows that Mexico’s overall homicide rate is far lower than those of Guatemala (41), El Salvador (66), and Honduras (82). In South America, Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela’s national homicide rates also significantly exceeded Mexico’s in recent years.²⁰⁸ In 2007, organized crime deaths in Mexico were the cause of slightly less than 32% of all intentional homicides, but by 2010 and 2011 organized crime homicides accounted for more than half of all intentional homicides.²⁰⁹ According to a review by the Trans-Border Institute of tallies from independent media organizations between 45% to 60% of all intentional homicides in Mexico in 2012 “bore characteristics typical of organized crime groups.”²¹⁰

To reduce the violence will require public support for the government’s policies. Thus far, the Mexican government’s efforts to markedly lower the violence have not shown results. Some observers criticized the Calderón government for adopting an aggressive approach (literally declaring war on the drug traffickers) without having a clear definition of success, without understanding the consequences of the policy, and without having the tools necessary to win.²¹¹ Elements of the government’s strategy in the Beyond Mérida program that are designed to reduce the violence, such as institutionalizing the rule of law, reforming the justice system, and completing economic and social development programs to combat crime, all have a long timeframe.²¹² It may take years or decades to build effective, efficient legal institutions in Mexico

(...continued)

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/index.htm>.

²⁰⁷ *Economist Intelligence Unit*, “Mexico Risk: Security Risk,” September 23, 2010.

²⁰⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide: Trends, Contexts, Data*, 2011 at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Homicide/Globa_study_on_homicide_2011_web.pdf. Rates have been rounded to present nearest whole number.

²⁰⁹ Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011*.

²¹⁰ Molzahn, Rodriquez Ferreira, and Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2012*.

²¹¹ See, for example, Jorge G. Castaneda, “What’s Spanish for Quagmire?,” *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2010.

²¹² The United States and Mexico are recognizing that reduction in violence must be a key goal of the Beyond Mérida strategy. For more on the Beyond Mérida strategy, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*.

that resist threats and bribery. Yet policy analysts believe these institutions are necessary before the DTOs can be reduced from a national security threat to a law and order problem.²¹³

Some observers in Mexico are advocating anti-violence programs modeled on successful strategies used in other Latin American cities, such as Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, or from programs in the United States.²¹⁴ Some analysts have called for a violence reduction strategy to be applied in the near term, while longer-term efforts to reform the police and justice system carry on simultaneously. Drug policy analyst Mark Kleiman and others have endorsed enforcement efforts that concentrate resources on the most violent organizations.²¹⁵ Such a targeted strategy would sequentially focus on groups based on their violence levels or violence behaviors. It would put incentives in place for gangs to reduce their use of violence to avoid the designation of being most violent. This strategy has risks associated with it including that such a policy might appear to favor one or more groups by focusing the government's efforts on a particular group (the most violent) or lead to greater disequilibrium among rival organizations.²¹⁶ However, some observers maintain that Calderón's non-selective or "undifferentiated" strategy stimulated drug war rivalries, invited succession battles, and produced a ratcheting up of the violence.

A new development has been significantly increased sharing of intelligence at the federal level by the United States with Mexico, which reflects greater U.S. confidence in Mexican law enforcement capacity and integrity. This development again raises the possibility that identifying and targeting DTO leaders for apprehension and investigation and successfully removing them can work to lower the violence. However, if the long-established pattern of ineffectual attacks and prosecution of DTO leaders continues, the intense violence is likely to endure. If a near-term solution to lowering the violence is not adopted, some communities may take matters into their own hands and resort to vigilante justice, as some already have done quite noticeably in early 2013.²¹⁷

As noted above, U.S.-Mexico security cooperation has increased significantly with the implementation of the Mérida Initiative, an administration program that Congress began funding in 2008. The newer Beyond Mérida strategy is increasingly focused on the challenges of bringing violence under control in Mexico. The increased use of intelligence-based security operations that

²¹³ See, for example, Shannon K. O'Neil, *Two Nations Indivisible: Mexico, the United States, and the Road Ahead* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), in the chapter "Mexico's Rising Insecurity."

²¹⁴ Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "Cómo Reducir La Violencia en México," *Nexos en Línea*, November 3, 2010. Guerrero cites the Boston program "Operation Ceasefire" and the Tri-Agency Resource Gang Enforcement Team (TARGET) of Orange County, California, as two examples of effective programs to reduce violence by applying the principle of concentrating enforcement efforts and reducing violence through credibly communicating to violent offenders that they will be prosecuted.

²¹⁵ Eric L. Olson, *Considering New Strategies for Confronting Organized Crime in Mexico*; Mark Kleiman, "Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars: Smarter Policies for Both Sides of the Border," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 5, September/October 2011.

²¹⁶ Guillermo Vásquez del Mercado Almada, "Five Ps for a Violence Reduction Strategy in Mexico (Part III)," *Small Wars Journal*, March 9, 2012. The author also endorses a violence reduction strategy, but cautions against "sequential" targeting. He backs a strategy with the following tactics: "a) aim for simultaneous rather than sequential targets; b) contain violence; and c) conquer high intensity crime zones."

²¹⁷ Richard Fausset and Cecilia Sanchez, "Worry Grows over Mexico Vigilante Movement," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2013. For more background, see also Nick Miroff and William Booth, "In Mexico, a Legal Breakdown Invites Brutal Justice," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2010; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Calderón's Caldron: Lessons from Mexico's Battle Against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Michoacán*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, September 2011. In the Brookings report, see section on "Mexico's Militias."

has led to taking down the top DTO leaders is now being expanded to disrupt the capacity of the entire organization—not just top leadership and their hired killers, but those in mid-level positions. According to one analyst, targeting the middle layer and removing those operatives if possible in a single sweep, can effectively hobble an organization because it makes it harder for the DTO to regenerate.²¹⁸

The goal of the Mexican government's counter-DTO strategy has been to reduce the extent and character of the DTOs' activity from a national security threat to a law and order problem and to transfer responsibility from military forces back to the police. While the DTOs have used terrorist tactics, they do not use them to the degree or with the same intentions as did narco traffickers in Colombia.²¹⁹ Mexico's challenge remains largely an organized crime or mafia problem, and the most important tools for managing it include long-term institutional reform and the replacement of a culture of illegality with one of rule of law and legality.

²¹⁸ Felbab-Brown, *Peña Nieto's Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico's New Security Policy against Organized Crime*. According to the author, taking out the middle layer "can also limit warfare among the DTOs since a DTO that has lost the middle layer has less capacity to resist a takeover."

²¹⁹ Ken Ellingwood, "Is Mexico a New Colombia? Mexicans May Have Cause to Bristle at U.S. Comparison," *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 2010. Also see **Appendix**.

Appendix. Comparing Mexico and Colombia

In remarks before the Council of Foreign Relations in September 2010, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton compared the upsurge in violence in Mexico to the situation in Colombia 20 years ago.²²⁰ The comparison to Colombia was quickly disavowed by the Mexican government (and reportedly by President Obama), but broadened the debate about the seriousness of the threat posed to Mexico's national security and democracy.

Some analysts employ the Colombia comparison to argue that the successes of Plan Colombia²²¹ offer appropriate prescriptions for Mexico. Other observers counter that Colombia two decades ago faced a very different challenge than Mexico faces today. The government of Colombia confronted an insurgency of armed guerrillas who were attempting to overthrow the Colombian government, while simultaneously facing a campaign of violence by its drug trafficking organizations. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and other armed groups in the country had the goal of replacing the Colombian state, which is significantly different from the goal of the DTOs of Mexico, which want impunity to traffic drugs and engage in other illicit activities for profit. While the FARC and other insurgents turned to drug trafficking to help finance their cause, their goal was to overthrow the sovereign state. At the height of their power, the FARC and other insurgents controlled more than a third of the country's municipalities.²²² The degree to which some of Mexico's municipalities are influenced by the DTOs is hard to determine. In Mexico, the goal of the traffickers is to corrupt the police and government at all levels to allow them to pursue illicit profits, but it is not to take control of the apparatus of the state. Thus, it remains a problem of criminality rather than a battle with insurgents or terrorists.

On the other hand, because some of the *characteristics* of the violence in Mexico—political assassinations, car bombs, extreme violence, and the increased killing of innocent bystanders—are similar to the tactics of political insurgents, some analysts have asserted that the violence goes beyond conventional organized crime behavior. These observers maintain that the violence is highly organized and exceptionally brutal, and therefore it is qualitatively different from criminal violence.²²³ Some policy analysts have described the Mexican criminal organizations as a “criminal insurgency.”²²⁴ John P. Sullivan at the Center for Advanced Studies in Terrorism describes how the response to the government's enforcement crackdown led to the evolution of the conflict and violence: “In Mexico, when faced with a crackdown, the cartels chose to battle

²²⁰ “A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2010. Transcript available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/22896/conversation_with_us_secretary_of_state_hillary_rodham_clinton.html.

²²¹ Plan Colombia is a U.S.-supported counterdrug and counterterrorism program that has operated for more than a decade in Colombia. For more background, see CRS Report RL32250, *Colombia: Background, U.S. Relations, and Congressional Interest*, by June S. Beittel.

²²² U.S. General Accounting Office, *Drug Control: Challenges in Implementing Plan Colombia*, Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director, International Affairs and Trade, GAO-01-76T, October 12, 2000.

²²³ For example, there have been near simultaneous actions against Mexico's military or police forces, coordinated attacks on different cities, cartel roadblocks throughout cities like Monterrey to prevent responders from reaching firefights or other hot spots, and kidnappings by cartel forces dressed in Mexican police or military uniforms or in close simulations of the official uniforms.

²²⁴ For other analysts using the terminology of “criminal insurgency” see Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal, *Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels and U.S. National Security*, Center for a New American Security, September 2010.

each other and the government to maintain a stake in the game. A high level of violence, impunity, and a criminal insurgency were thus an unintended side effect.”²²⁵

From another perspective, Professor Phil Williams argues that the violence is that of traditional organized crime, but taken to new depths or levels of intensity. He suggests that the Mexican drug trafficking-related violence grows out of a “perfect storm” of conditions. The situation in Mexico has precedents and parallels with the growth of criminal organizations in Italy, Russia, Albania, and elsewhere. In addition, there is a feature of “anomie” to Mexico’s violence—the homicidal violence has become a feature of everyday life leading to “a degeneration of rules and norms and the emergence of forms of behavior unconstrained by standard notions of what is acceptable.”²²⁶

The Mexican DTOs appear to have no ideology other than a ruthless pursuit of profit, but their corrupting influence and intimidation have challenged the state’s monopoly on the use of force and rule of law. In Mexico, the police and court system, historically weak and undercut by corruption, appear not equipped, organized, or managed to combat the drug organizations. Most arrests are never prosecuted. For example, the large numbers of arrests during the Calderón administration infrequently led to successful prosecutions. The rate of impunity (non prosecution) for murder in Mexico is 81% and higher for other types of crime.²²⁷ The violent response of the DTOs to the Calderón government’s antidrug campaign, similar to what was seen in smaller municipalities throughout Colombia, has intimidated local, state, and federal authorities. DTO profits, like those made by local FARC commanders in Colombia, are shared with government officials at all levels. Unlike the Colombian FARC, the Mexican traffickers do not seek to replace the government and provide services, but they are committed to manipulating it with bribery and violence to continue their illegal activities without interference.

Some observers argue that parts of the Mexican state have been “captured” similar to the control insurgents once had over large parts of Colombia. These analysts maintain that some states or localities in Mexico are under DTO control.²²⁸ For example, in Michoacán, the LFM organization controlled many local businesses through extortion (taxing businesses or charging them for security services). According to one estimate made in 2010, approximately 85% of legitimate businesses in Michoacán had some type of relationship with the LFM.²²⁹ Another study concerning DTO presence in Mexican local governments was released in late August 2010. That study, entitled “Municipal Government and Organized Crime,” prepared for a committee of the Mexican Senate, reportedly found that 195 Mexican municipalities (8% of the total) were completely under control of organized crime, while another 1,536 (63% of the total) were “infiltrated” by organized crime. The study concluded that a majority of Mexican municipalities had organized crime elements capable of controlling the illicit businesses of retail drug trafficking, cultivation and trafficking of drugs, kidnapping, and extortion.²³⁰ The study found that

²²⁵ John P. Sullivan, “Counter-supply and Counter-violence Approaches to Narcotics Trafficking,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 12, 2010), p. 186.

²²⁶ Williams, “El Crimen Organizada y la Violencia en Mexico.”

²²⁷ Mexico Evalúa, *Seguridad y Justicia Penal en los Estados: 25 Indicadores de Nuestra Debilidad Institucional*, March 2012.

²²⁸ For example, see William Finnegan, “Silver or Lead,” *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2010.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ “Measuring the Extent of Drug Cartel Control in Mexico,” *LatinNews Daily*, September 15, 2010. Ricardo Ravelo, “Los Cárteles Imponen Su Ley,” *Proceso*, October 24, 2010.

criminal structures operate with logistical support from corrupt municipal police and politicians.²³¹

Some analysts contend that Colombia's experience provides valuable lessons for Mexico.²³² The increasing training provided by Colombian security forces to Mexico's army and police in recent years demonstrates that there are operational lessons that Mexican authorities value.²³³ Others maintain that Mexico's situation is distinctly complex, which limits the relevance of Colombia as a model. Clearly, there are many lessons learned from studying the U.S. supported successes and failures in Colombia, but their application to Mexico are limited by the countries' very different histories and circumstances.

Author Contact Information

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

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² For example, Robert C. Bonner, "The New Cocaine Cowboys," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89 (July/August 2010). Bonner looks to an earlier era for lessons from Colombia, but asserts that "Virtually all the key lessons learned from the defeat of the Colombian cartels in the 1990s are applicable to the current battle against the Mexican cartels."

²³³ Juan Forero, "Colombia Stepping Up Anti-Drug Training of Mexico's Army, Police," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2011.