

Violence and Security in Mexico and Implications for the United States

Frequently Asked Questions

By David Shirk and Eric L. Olson

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Principal Observations

- Mexico is experiencing historic levels of violence and crime, despite ongoing cooperation and cooperation between the United States and Mexico.
- The Mérida Initiative – the framework for security cooperation between the United States and Mexico – has made some positive contributions to improving security in Mexico but these have been inadequate to resolve the deeply entrenched security problems both country faces.
- Mérida’s shortcomings can be traced to a strategy that has predominately focused on interdiction of illegal drugs, and capturing and extraditing high value criminal targets. Efforts to strengthen the justice system have made positive contributions, but complementary reforms of the police and the prison system have been largely ineffective and have undermined any advances in other parts of the government.
- Re-establishing state legitimacy, especially at the local and state level, is key. This will require a prolonged strategy to address corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and addressing many of the underlying social factors contributing to violence.
- Prioritizing violence reduction is essential to increase citizen confidence and restore their ability to engage with local authorities.
- Educating the U.S. consumer market, and better treatment options will reduce mortality rates, and potentially lead to decreased demand for the most dangerous illicit drugs such as fentanyl.
- Both countries should devise more effective strategies to curb firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico and increase money laundering efforts. While improved border inspections can have an impact, these programs are rarely successful without also challenging trafficking networks within the United States.

Mexico has experienced elevated levels of violent crime for more than a decade. The national murder rate rose dramatically from 8.1 in 2007 to 22.6 in 2012 (an average more than 55 people per day, or two people every hour).ⁱ After a brief lull in 2013-14, Mexico has seen a dramatic resurgence of violence, with homicides surging to record levels in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The preliminary figures reported by Mexico's National Public Security System increased to a record 34,000 victims in 2019, up from the previous peaks of 33,341 victims in 2018 and the 28,734 in 2017.ⁱⁱ As a result, there has been a substantial increase in Mexico's homicide rate to more than 30 murders per 100,000 in 2018, with a slightly higher rate expected when final figures for 2019 are reported.ⁱⁱⁱ A series of particularly violent acts in late-2019—including the massacre of nine dual U.S.-Mexican nationals (three women and six children)—has caused growing concern about the rule of law and security in Mexico.^{iv} This FAQ document provides brief explanations of these and related trends.

Q1: Why is Mexico experiencing a record number of homicides for a second year in a row? Is drug trafficking the main factor driving violence? How has organized crime evolved over the past 10 years?

A: There are numerous, complex factors that have contributed to Mexico's elevated levels of violence over the last decade. Many experts point to **structural factors** like unemployment, lack of adequate education, and social problems like domestic violence and substance abuse.^v Others emphasize **institutional factors** including deeply flawed police, judicial, and penitentiary institutions, which allow the vast majority of crimes to go unsolved.^{vi} Finally, there are **international factors** such as the demand for drugs in the United States and Europe, and the ready availability of powerful firearms.^{vii} Each of these require a long-term and focused approach to bring about positive change.

While clearly important, these larger systemic factors do not readily explain sharp variations in the level of violence from month-to-month or place-to-place. The more proximate contributing factors, in this regard, have to do with **recent developments and changes** that affect the strategic incentives, decisions, and actions of criminal actors.^{viii} Thus, understanding Mexico's recent violence requires attention to changing market conditions for illicit drugs, the unintended effects of law enforcement actions, the resulting strategic dynamics among organized crime groups, and also changes in government personnel and policy following Mexico's 2018 elections.

- 1) **Market shifts and innovations in the production of illicit drugs:** Changes in the market for illicit, psychotropic drugs (including the proliferation of synthetic drugs, like methamphetamine and fentanyl), have led to a restructuring of Mexican drug production and trafficking networks, resulting in newfound competition and violence. Recent research shows that the proliferation of fentanyl, for example, has greatly reduced the demand for and price of heroin, leading to an enormous loss in profitability for Mexican heroin producers in states like Guerrero and Nayarit and newfound opportunities for groups trafficking in synthetic drugs, like the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (*Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*).^{ix}

- 2) **The unintended consequences of counter-drug measures:** U.S. and Mexican law enforcement actions have had some unintended consequences that have exacerbated violence among Mexican organized crime groups. The policy of targeting high level leaders for arrest, known as the “kingpin strategy,” has long been questioned by security experts because it often fails to dismantle the mid-level organizational structures and ancillary support (including corrupt government officials and shady finance institutions) that allow organized crime groups to thrive in Mexico, and leads to newfound competition and violence. A relevant example was the takedown of Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, which has destabilized major drug trafficking organizations, contributing to a cycle of splintering, diversification, competition, and violence among organized crime groups.
- 3) **Changing strategic dynamics among organized crime groups:** The last few years have seen greater competition, splintering, and diversification among Mexico’s major organized crime groups, with various rival drug trafficking organization competing with the once-dominant Sinaloa Cartel. With the splintering of major organized crime groups traditionally dedicated to drug trafficking, there has been greater diversification into other types of illicit activities, as splinter groups and emergent criminal organizations seek profitability through extortion, kidnapping, robbery (including fuel theft), and local drug dealing. Compared to large scale, international drug trafficking operations, these less lucrative, more predatory forms of organized crime produce a much larger number of casualties, including both criminal actors and ordinary civilians.
- 4) **Changes in Mexican government and policy:** The recent governmental transition in Mexico has had disruptive effects on existing organized crime and corruption networks that often leads to greater violence. The modification of electoral schedules put an unprecedented number of Mexican federal, state, and local offices up for grabs in 2018, resulting in the largest turnover in public office in Mexico’s modern history later that year. At the subnational level, the country saw scores of political assassinations by organized crime groups attempting to intimidate and influence candidates for public office. At the federal level, the change in power led to a significant shift in counter-drug policy, with a greater emphasis on addressing the structural factors contributing to crime and reduced effort to take down drug kingpins.

Finally, official crime data suggests there is a significant rise in other kinds of violence not related, or indirectly related, to drug trafficking. According to the National Security System intra-family violence, sexual violence, violence against women and femicides, kidnapping and extortion are also on the rise and contributing to record violence in Mexico in 2019.

Q2: What are the key elements of the López Obrador administration’s approach to address insecurity? How has he proposed to deal with the current spike in homicides?

A: López Obrador inherited the presidency with the highest crime rate of any president in recent history, making security an area of urgent concern. On the campaign trail, in direct criticism of the militarized strategies employed by his predecessors, López Obrador promised a new, more benevolent approach that would invoke “hugs, not gunfights” (“*abrazos, no balazos*”). Notably,

he pledged to abandon the “kingpin strategy” of targeting top organized crime figures, which many experts agree has contributed to splintering, infighting, and violence among Mexico’s major organized crime groups. Instead, the López Obrador administration has overseen four major initiatives to address the country’s security situation.

- 1) Scholarships and Internships: First, emphasizing the need to reduce the socioeconomic pressures that drive young people into a life of drugs and crime, López Obrador has created a series of youth education and employment programs for the roughly 2.6 million Mexican youth aged 18-29 that are neither employed nor matriculated in school.
- 2) Public Security Secretariat: López Obrador resurrected a cabinet level secretariat for Public Security and Citizen Protection (*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública y Protección Ciudadana*, SSPPC), tasked with the challenging task of coordinating Mexico’s various civilian and military security operations.
- 3) National Guard: López Obrador has created a new National Guard, casting aside a decade-long effort to develop a federal level police agency with investigative capacity (the Federal Police). The National Guard has no criminal investigative capacity and has been used mainly for order maintenance, including recent deployments to the southern border to thwart Central American migrants, and lacks the training and orientation of a civilian law enforcement agency.
- 4) New Fiscalía: López Obrador also appointed the head of the autonomous General Prosecutor’s Office (*Fiscalía General de la República*, FGR) that was created five years prior to replace the Attorney General’s Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) and allow greater prosecutorial independence from the executive branch. Ostensibly, the new attorney general’s nine-year term will help to ensure some degree of autonomous oversight over the executive branch, at least beginning with López Obrador’s eventual successor in 2024.

Still, recent incidents in 2019 suggest that the López Obrador government’s security efforts are thus far inadequate. Notably, in October 2019, there were a series of shootouts between organized crime groups and Mexican security forces in the states of Sinaloa, Michoacán, and Guerrero. The first incident was a cartel ambush that killed 13 police officers on October 14 in Aguililla, Michoacán, the cradle of Mexican drug trafficking and hometown of CJNG leader Ruben “Nemesio” Oseguera Cervantes. The next day, 14 civilians and one Mexican military soldier were killed in the town of Tepochica in the municipality of Iguala, Michoacán, where 43 students were killed by an organized crime group at the behest of corrupt local Mexican government officials (and with federal police involvement) in 2014. Just a few day later, after the surprise capture of Ovidio Guzmán, one of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán’s sons, Sinaloa cartel gunmen took to the streets of Culiacán in protest and killed 13 people on October 17. Federal authorities capitulated to their demands, releasing Ovidio Guzmán to prevent further bloodshed. As a result, Mexican President Andres Manuel López Obrador is being widely criticized for allowing drug cartels to continue to operate with impunity.

Q3: What role is the United States playing?

A: As highly interdependent neighboring countries, the United States and Mexico share common interests. In this sense, what is bad for Mexico is bad for the United States, and vice versa. Moreover, while the vast majority of U.S. travelers in Mexico return home safely, recent events have brought renewed attention in the United States to the potential implications of Mexico's violence for the hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens who reside in Mexico, as well as the millions who visit each year as tourists. In this sense, the United States has a direct national security interest in the state of the rule of law in Mexico. In addition, because the United States is the top consumer of illicit drugs produced and trafficked in Mexico and the top source of illegal firearms and ammunition in Mexico, the United States has a shared responsibility to help quell Mexico's violence.

Security cooperation with Mexico therefore remains a top priority for the United States. In addition to specific assistance programs through the Merida Initiative (see below) the United States has continued engagement and partnership with Mexico's law enforcement agencies and military. This engagement includes training programs in the United States and Mexico; regular consultations between senior law enforcement and military leadership in both countries; signed cooperation agreements; intelligence and law enforcement information sharing; and concurrent exercises along the U.S. – Mexico border. Cooperation agreements to fight money laundering, firearms trafficking, and to combat human smuggling and trafficking are being implemented.

Q4: What does the Mérida Initiative do? How has it evolved since it was announced in 2007?

A: The Mérida Initiative provides a framework for U.S.-Mexico security cooperation dating back to 2007 when Presidents Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush signed an agreement in the city of Mérida, Yucatán in 2007. The agreement embodied the policy of "shared responsibility" where both countries agreed to work together to solve the common problems of insecurity and illegal drug trafficking. The U.S. made an initial commitment to provide \$1.4 billion in U.S. security and development assistance over 3 years – between Fiscal Years 2008 and 2010 and has provided approximately \$3.025 billion through FY2020.

The Mérida Initiative has evolved as each successive U.S. and Mexican Administration has sought to add its own specific emphasis while maintaining the framework of "shared responsibility." The initial phase (2007-2009) prioritized the transfer of equipment to enhance the detection of drugs and mobility of forces to confront criminal groups. The Obama Administration expanded the strategy to include four priorities, or "pillars:" (1) disrupting organized criminal groups, (2) institutionalizing the rule of law, (3) creating a 21st -century border, and (4) building strong and resilient communities.

The transition between the Calderon and Peña Nieto Administrations initially led to a slowdown in cooperation with the United States, but eventually resulted in a return to a focus on pursuing high valued criminal targets and completing the country's transition to an adversarial system of justice.

The arrival of the Trump Administration saw a refocusing of priorities to greater border control especially along the U.S.-Mexico border, but also along the Mexico-Guatemala border. While the Trump and Peña Nieto governments convened numerous senior-level meetings to further efforts to combat organized crime networks and drug trafficking organizations, ending illegal migration has taken precedence. Programs related to building resilient communities and implementing Mexico's justice reforms have continued but diminished in importance.

Regarding organized crime, Trump Administration priorities have been to target the entire business model of criminal organizations including a special focus on anti-money laundering efforts. Additionally, disrupting the opioid business, trafficking in pre-cursor chemicals for the manufacture of methamphetamines has been a strategic priority.

Finally, Mexico's current government headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), disavowed the Mérida Initiative and declared the "war on drugs" dead. He has promoted a policy described as "Hugs, not gun fights" as an alternative by deemphasizing the military's role in the strategy and giving priority to social programs. (See below for further discussion). Nevertheless, AMLO and Mexican security forces have continued to cooperate and collaborate with the United States on Trump Administration priorities and have stood up a military-style police force (National Guard) as a cornerstone of his security strategy.

Q5: Has U.S. assistance (Mérida Initiative) helped or hindered efforts to secure Mexico? Is more U.S. money needed to make the strategy a success?

A: Over the past twelve years, the United States has worked to bolster security and the rule of law in Mexico through a multi-billion dollar cooperation framework known as the "Mérida Initiative." Conceived under Presidents Bush and Calderón at a high level meeting in 2007, the Mérida Initiative has continued to function as the primary mechanism for addressing the shared security and rule of law priorities of three U.S. presidential administrations (both Democrat and Republican) and three Mexican presidential administrations (PAN, PRI, and MORENA). Indeed, cooperation remains ongoing despite President López Obrador's initial declaration that Mexico would no longer participate in the Mérida Initiative.

U.S. assistance has been instrumental in assisting Mexico's efforts to improve security. It has supported Mexico's transition to an adversarial system of criminal justice; it has provided technology to improve policing and investigative capacities; it has helped to identify and implement improvements to strengthen Mexico's penitentiary system; it has facilitated cooperation between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement; and it has helped increase Mexican border security for southbound inspections. Other successes include increased law enforcement and military-to-military cooperation and greater intelligence sharing. These improvements have led to a sharp increase in extraditions of Mexican criminal leaders to the United States, including the notorious Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

But ultimately, the debate about success or failure of the Mérida Initiative is a question of strategic priorities. If enhanced cooperation, extraditions, and interdiction of illegal drug shipments is the measure of success, then one can conclude the program has been somewhat successful. But if greater citizen security is the measure, then the answer is a resounding “No.” Violence and homicides are now at record levels, impunity for crimes committed remains extremely high with only about 2% resulting in prosecution and sentencing. Mexican trust in their authorities remains extremely low – only about 7% of crimes are reported to the authorities. Combating corruption, a priority of the AMLO government and a big part of his electoral mandate, continues in its infancy. Furthermore, significant U.S. investments since 2008 to professionalize the national police have yielded few tangible results in public safety, and that same Federal Police force is now being absorbed into another force – the National Guard – that is still unproven.

The success or failure of the Mérida Initiative rests less on the amount of money appropriated by Congress, and more on the adequacy of its strategic priorities. More money could dramatically increase what is currently being done but there is no reason to believe that these are the best ways to reduce violence, restore public confidence in law enforcement institutions, and put Mexico on the path to less corruption. Before debating amounts we need to ensure that the strategy is appropriate and realistic.

Q6: Are the current U.S. and Mexican strategies to improve security compatible with one another? If greater coordination is needed, how can this be achieved?

A: Throughout his presidential campaign, and again as President, AMLO has criticized the “war on drugs” and its reliance on the military to fight crime. He has also denounced the Merida Initiative as ineffective and has said he will discontinue it.

Yet, despite these statements, the United States and Mexico have continued to collaborate on practical and pragmatic security issues and efforts to combat organized crime. Training, well-coordinated exercises, information and intelligence sharing have continued. And Mexico appears willing to follow the U.S. lead on most immigration matters including accepting the presence of those seeking asylum in the United States – as outlined in the Migrant Protection Protocols or “Remain in Mexico” program– as well as, the emergency deployment of the newly formed National Guard to carry out border control functions on the Mexico-Guatemala border.

Nevertheless, there are some indications that previous efforts to coordinate security efforts have declined. Periodic bilateral meetings between senior security officials continue to occur but are less structured. The “Strategic Dialogue to Combat Organized Crime” initiated between the Trump and Peña Nieto Administrations has held no senior level meetings since the arrival of the AMLO Administration in late 2018. Dialogue at the “working group” level continues, but senior political leadership has been less engaged since AMLO took office.

Furthermore, while President Trump has expressed satisfaction with Mexican efforts to dramatically slow the flow of migrants and referred to AMLO as “the great new President of

Mexico” skepticism is also emerging about the viability of AMLO’s “hugs not gunfights” strategy. The violent armed conflict that erupted between Mexican security forces and criminal organizations stemmed from the capture of a criminal boss, Ovidio Guzman (see Q1 above) that ended in government forces releasing Guzman “to save lives” according to AMLO. This incident has raised questions about the viability of AMLO’s strategy. And as crime and homicides have increased, the president acknowledged in his “state of the nation report” in October and again in his New Year message, that there has been insufficient progress on security.

Q7: How significant is corruption as a factor in efforts to control organized crime? Is the López Obrador government adequately fighting corruption? What more can they do?

A: Corruption has been a pervasive problem in Mexico that long pre-dates the violence of the last decade. Nonetheless, corruption certainly plays a role in protecting organized criminal groups and allowing them to operate in specific territorial locations or “*plazas*.” Thus, violent conflicts between such groups are often related to their attempts to assert territorial control and access to such protection. Likewise, alongside outright bribes, threats of violence against Mexican government officials help to explain why corruption has been so pervasive in Mexico, from police to mayors to governors and even higher level officials. For example, an ongoing U.S. criminal case, the December 2019 indictment and arrest of Genaro García Luna, a cabinet-level security official from 2006-2012, suggests that corruption taints even the heads of some the country’s most important security agencies. Indeed, still unconfirmed allegations made during the trial of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán contributed to widespread suspicion that Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto was beholden to organized crime.

While corruption often constitutes a direct attempt to influence elected officials and government personnel who oversee counter-drug and other security operations, in recent years there also have been several high-profile examples of corruption involving self-dealing and money laundering. Notably, Mexican authorities charged former Veracruz governor Javier Duarte with embezzlement, money laundering, and ties to organized crime, only after fleeing his state in a government helicopter near the end of his term (2010–2016). Similarly, Quintana Roo governor Roberto Borge was arrested on embezzlement charges while boarding a flight from Panama City to Paris. Yet, even corrupt individuals are not held to account, and they rarely pay an appropriate price. Duarte, for example, received only a nine-year prison sentence and a roughly \$3,000 fine. Borge was ultimately sentenced with two years in prison.

During his campaign and over the first year of his term, López Obrador has made combatting corruption and abuse of power a key focal point of his administration. In an effort to reduce the sense of entitlement among Mexican government officials, López Obrador has cut his own salary by 60% (to around \$60,000 annually), and lowered those of other public servants and the judiciary (he also terminated the pensions of former Mexican presidents). Meanwhile, he has also worked to tackle corruption more directly, cracking down on fuel theft rings (*huachicoleros*) believed to involve high level PEMEX officials and private sector distributors.^x Importantly, the new federal Fiscalía (Attorney General) also appointed an anti-corruption prosecutor, Luz Mijangos Borja, who launched hundreds of new investigations immediately upon taking office,

including investigations of the Federal Electricity Commission, the national public health service (IMSS), key collaborators of the Peña Nieto administration and López Obrador's own energy czar Manuel Bartlett. One of the highest profile cases involves Emilio Lozoya Austin, the former head of PEMEX, who allegedly accepted bribes for infrastructure projects contracted to Odebrecht, the Brazilian firm that has been at the center of corruption scandals throughout Latin America. Whether more high-level officials from past administrations will be investigated and whether any of these investigations will ultimately produce real accountability remains in question. However, recent revelations of additional corruption cases have certainly generated frustration among the public in general and enormous pressure from Mexican civil society for the López Obrador administration to continue to seriously address the problem.

Q8: Is it important to reduce violence in Mexico? Why? How?

A: It is very important for the United States and Mexico to agree on strategic priorities. To date, the strategic priority has been dismantling criminal networks and disrupting the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. Reducing violence has not been a priority. Indeed, violence is variously seen as an inevitable by-product of counternarcotics efforts; not particularly troublesome because it involves criminals killing criminals; or, in some cases, a positive sign reflecting the desperation and increased competition among criminal groups as they lose control and power. In these cases, violence reduction is not understood as a strategic priority.

But uncontrolled violence is also a signal of the weakness and lack of integrity of the Mexican state. As in the case of Ovidio Guzman, discussed above, it suggests that the state may not have complete control of its territory, which can, in turn, undermine the legitimacy of the state. And when citizens do not view the state as legitimate and able to provide for the safety of its citizens, they can seek the protection of other armed groups – militias or gangs. It also undermines democratic institutions and the likelihood that the affected population will cooperate with law enforcement or security forces.

There are also a host of societal consequences over time on individuals experiencing chronic or persistent violence. Trust is broken down between citizens and the state, and between individuals and the community, or within a family. Exposure to violence among children – whether criminal or intrafamily – can cause long-term trauma that has broader social implications, is a leading indicator of future criminal behavior, and is a factor in decisions to migrate. Apart from the human costs, there is evidence that Mexico's decade-long security crisis has been a drag on growth, undermining investment, reducing labor market vitality, and contributing to a vicious cycle of socioeconomic-induced strife.^{xi}

Q9: In which areas has Mexico made progress in consolidating the rule of law and where should more be done? Is the United States adequately supporting efforts to improve governance and combat impunity in Mexico? What measurable achievements have there been under the

Mérida Initiative? What indicators are being used by the U.S. government to define success, and are they the right ones?

A: While the kingpin strategy has had negative unintended consequences, allowing violent actors—like Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquín Guzmán or CJNG head Ruben Oseguera—to operate with impunity is clearly not a desirable option. Experts have long advocated bolstering the capacity of Mexican law enforcement. What is urgently needed are better long-term, comprehensive criminal investigations to ensure successful prosecutions targeting not only drug kingpins, but all levels and branches of a criminal enterprise, including corrupt politicians and private sector money laundering operations. Doing so would help to address the problem of splinter groups vying for succession when a major kingpin is removed. International organizations and bilateral assistance programs should work closely with Mexico to help train police and prosecutors to conduct more effective and wide-reaching criminal investigations and prosecutions of criminal enterprises.

The United States has played an important role in helping Mexico to address these issues through the Mérida Initiative, which focuses on judicial sector strengthening, improved border enforcement, and community resilience in areas affected by violence. For example, as part of the Mérida Initiative, funding from the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supports oral litigation skill training, international exchanges, and moot court competitions for Mexican prosecutors, attorneys, law faculty, and law students. As a result of U.S.-sponsored trainings, for example, there has been a profound transformation taking place to help modernize some of Mexico’s largest and most influential law schools. U.S. funding also supports monitoring and evaluation of Mexico’s progress on judicial sector reform implementation, U.S. and Mexican cooperation to promote better criminal prosecutions in Mexico (and facilitate cross-border prosecutions and extraditions), as well as targeted interventions in highly violent communities.

Still, financial support for the Mérida Initiative has diminished in recent years, even as Mexico’s violence has ramped up. Moreover, there are areas that the Mérida Initiative alone cannot address, particularly when it comes to U.S. domestic law enforcement efforts to curb illicit drug distribution, firearms smuggling, and money laundering. In this regard, there is considerably more that can and should be done to enhance U.S.-Mexico security cooperation, and that can help the United States be a better neighbor to Mexico (and vice versa).

Q10: Has the United States adequately reduced the demand for illegal drugs and curbed firearms trafficking? What more should be done?

A: Demand for illegal drugs in the United States has remained among the highest in the world when calculated on a per capita basis. What has changed in recent years is the kinds of drugs Americans are consuming. Opioids generally, and synthetic opioids, like Fentanyl, and methamphetamines have become increasingly popular in the United States and contributed to a sky-rocketing overdose and death rate among users. Rather than decreasing demand for illegal

drugs, the shift has been primarily in the kinds of drugs American's seek – and these are more deadly and more addictive than ever.

The changing illicit drug market in the United States has significantly impacted criminal organizations in Mexico. To the extent fentanyl has replaced plant-based opioids, cultivation and processing of opium poppies into heroin for export has declined and, with it, the economic engine in many rural communities in Mexico. Furthermore, since fentanyl and the precursor chemicals used in the processing of methamphetamines generally come from Asia – and China, in particular – controlling seaports and routes to the United States border are a priority for traffickers while the logistics of cultivation and processing of opium poppies has declined.

The result has been an increase in the profitability of drug trafficking but a decrease in the number of people needed to work in the trafficking business. Fentanyl is many times more powerful than heroin, so dosages are much smaller, meaning that less logistics are needed. For example, a backpack full of fentanyl is the equivalent of a much larger shipment of heroin, cocaine, or cannabis. As a result, there is surplus labor and criminal networks are adapting to new business models and income flows. One such shift has been into the clandestine and illegal petroleum market resulting from the theft of petroleum products from the state-owned oil company (PEMEX). According to one report several billion dollars in petroleum products are stolen each year from PEMEX although, according to the company there was a 91% decrease in theft in 2019.

Firearms trafficking: Numerous studies in the United States and Mexico have found that roughly three-fourths of firearms confiscated in Mexico and traced by authorities came from the United States. Some were manufactured in the United States, others were assembled there, and others merely passed through. In any case, the volume of firearms trafficking to Mexico has remained relatively stable over the past 10 years.

Mexico has always placed disrupting the flow of firearms from the United States as one of its priorities. The issue reemerged on the bilateral agenda after the shoot-out in Culiacan in October and the killing of nine Mormons, including six children, last November. In response to this massacre, President López Obrador expressed his concern about the use of U.S. sourced firearms in the massacre. According to the Secretary for Security and Public Security, the weapons used in the tragedy were M-16 and AR-15 firearms manufactured in the United States.

Both countries agreed to take a series of immediate actions to “seal” the border of illegal firearms trafficking. The plan was dubbed “Operation Frozen” and includes increased use of technology and at border checkpoints – initially in five ports of entry between the U.S. and Mexico. The governments agreed to meet every 15 days to review the operation.

About the Authors

Dr. David Shirk is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of San Diego, a Global Fellow at the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and a visiting professor at the UCSD School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. He conducts research on Mexican politics, U.S.-Mexican relations, and law enforcement and security along the U.S.-Mexican border. He received his B.A. in International Studies at Lock Haven University, studying abroad in Mexico, Japan, and the USSR. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, and was fellow at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies from 1998-99 and 2001-2003. He currently directs a research initiative on the Cali-Baja region at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the UCSD School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. He also directs the "Justice in Mexico," a research initiative on criminal justice and the rule of law in Mexico.

Eric L. Olson is Director of Policy for the Seattle International Foundation and a Global Fellow with the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and Latin American Program. He is the former Deputy Director of the Latin American Program, and an expert on security and organized crime in Latin America and U.S. policy in the region. Based on extensive fieldwork, which has taken him from Mexico's borderlands to the back roads of Honduras, he has published widely and testified before Congress on topics ranging from the crisis in Central America's Northern Triangle to U.S. security cooperation with Mexico. In the past, Olson has worked on governance issues at the Organization of American States and was Advocacy Director for the Americas at Amnesty International.

Endnotes:

ⁱ While homicide is just one indicator of violent crime, it is the most consistently reported and arguably has the greatest societal impact.

ⁱⁱ Estimates for 2019 are based on preliminary national data reported by SNSP January through November, with an author's estimate for December. Final figures will be reported by SNSP in the coming weeks, and a separate dataset will be released in mid-2020 by INEGI, Mexico's national statistics agency. Other experts estimate the final tally to be in excess of 36,000 homicides. "2019 cerrará con 36,000 homicidios y solo 1 de cada 10 se castiga: reportes," *Expansión Política*, December 3, 2019. <https://politica.expansion.mx/mexico/2019/12/03/2019-cerrara-con-36-000-homicidios-y-solo-1-de-cada-10-se-castiga-reportes>

ⁱⁱⁱ By the calculations of the Justice in Mexico program, the homicide rate in 2019 increased to at least

^{iv} The families were members of the LeBarón family and an offshoot of the Mormon Church that had migrated to Mexico decades earlier, and appeared to be victims of criminal organizations operating in the Northern Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. The first attack targeted the vehicle carrying Rhonita Maria Miller (30), who was traveling with four of her children: Howard Jacob Miler (12), Krystal Bellaine Miller (10), and twin babies named Titus Alvin Miller and Tiana Gricel Miller (8 months old). The second attack targeted the vehicle carrying Christina Marie Langford (31) and her daughter Faith Marie Johnson (reportedly 7 or 8 months old), as well as Dawna Ray Langford (43) and her nine children: Trevor Harvey Langford (11), Rogan Jay Langford (2), and seven others. Langford, Johnson, and the two named boys were killed, while the others survived. Ryann Richardson, "They Knew That It Was Women and Children"; Families of Those Involved in Ambush Search for Answers," *St. George News*, November 5, 2019. <https://www.stgeorgeutah.com/news/archive/2019/11/05/arh-they-knew-that-it-was-women-and-children-families-of-those-involved-in-ambush-search-for-answers/#.XhxIDS3MwWo> (Accessed, January 13, 2019).

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