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Why Can't the US and Mexico Halt the Drugs-to-Guns Pipeline?

Last updated January 25, 2023

HIGHLIGHTS

TCOs prefer assault weapons, especially .50 caliber weapons capable of piercing military armor. No U.S. federal or state laws in the four border states ban these weapons completely.



Executive Summary

The shared border between the United States (U.S.) and Mexico runs nearly 2,000 miles long, creating the need for cooperation among the two countries to address violence and crime that spills across the border in both directions.

One driver of crime and violence is known as the drugs-to-guns pipeline. Guns and ammunition trafficked into Mexico from the U.S. are used by transnational crime organizations (TCOs) to protect their drug transportation hubs and routes along the U.S. southwest border and to defend plantation and manufacturing sites across Mexico. The firepower in the hands of TCOs makes it harder for Mexican and U.S. authorities to combat criminal activity, resulting in an increased flow of drugs into the U.S. and creating a vicious cycle of drugs-guns-drugs transactions.

Many of the drugs moving into the U.S. come from Mexico, including 90% of the deadly fentanyl, fueling a crisis of opioid overdose deaths. In Mexico, an estimated 70-90% of guns found at crime scenes are traced back to the U.S.

While the U.S. and Mexico are two of only three countries that have a constitutional right to bear arms, the gun laws in Mexico are far more restrictive. As a result, criminals acquire guns in the U.S. and move them into Mexico using the same transportation methods employed to move drugs north across the border. Decades of U.S.-Mexico joint efforts failed to disrupt the TCOs' drug pipeline and the TCOs have emerged stronger and more powerful, armed with weapons sourced from the U.S.

Drugs Flow from Mexico into the US

Mexican transnational crime organizations (TCOs) have well-established pipelines to move drugs from Mexico to the final consumer in the U.S. The DEA's 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment report stated, "Mexican TCOs are the greatest drug trafficking threat to the United States; they control most of the U.S. drug market and have established varied transportation routes, have advanced communications capabilities, and hold strong affiliations with criminal groups and gangs in the United States."^[1]

Drug trafficking feeds addiction and drug abuse in the U.S., and the DEA attributes most of the cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and fentanyl in the country to Mexican TCOs, who make these drugs readily available nationwide.^[2]

Historically, Mexican-based TCOs controlled the cultivation and importation of marijuana and heroin into the U.S., while Colombian cartels controlled cocaine. Over time, Mexican TCOs took over the transportation and distribution of Colombian cocaine: by the early 2000s, 66% of Columbian cocaine entered the U.S. via Mexico.^[3] Shipments of fentanyl and the precursor chemicals used to manufacture it are sent from China and enter North America mostly through Mexico, allowing TCOs to expand their domination of the illegal opioid market.^[4]

A 2022 report from Rand Corporation and the U.S. government stated that Mexico is now the "principal source" of illicit fentanyl in the U.S., whereas prior to 2019, as much as 80% of the supply was attributed to China.^[5] Bipartisan legislation introduced by U.S. senators in 2023 stated that 90% of fentanyl in the U.S. came across the southern border, and declared that Mexican cartels trafficking fentanyl into the country constitutes a national security threat.^[6]

Experts believe that abuse of prescription opioids set the stage for the current fentanyl crisis in the U.S.^[7] Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin, has flooded into the U.S. to devastating effect.^[8] Opioids, namely fentanyl, are the major cause of drug-related overdose deaths in the U.S., which have nearly quadrupled in the last decade.^[9]

Nearly 200 Americans died every day from fentanyl overdoses in 2021, a rate 25% higher than in 2020 and almost double the rate in 2019.^[10] Per the CDC, between 1999 and 2020, more than 564,000 people died from overdoses involving opioids.^[11] Annual drug overdose deaths in the U.S. surpassed 100,000 in 2021, at which point opioids were taking more American lives each year than firearms, motor vehicle crashes, suicides and homicides.^{[12] [13]}

Drug Overdoses by Synthetic Opioids

The rise in deaths from drug overdoses is increasingly driven by synthetic opioids.

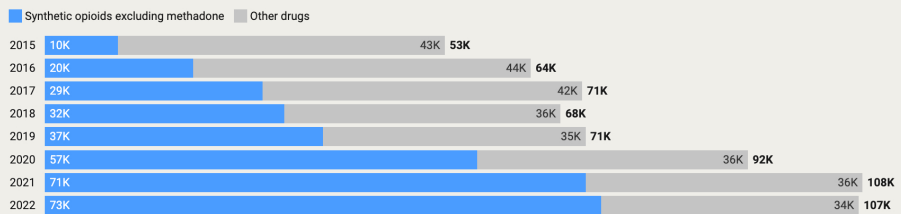


Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Source: CDC • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Synthetic opioids differ from plant-based opioids in that they are easier to transport, more addictive, and cheaper and faster to produce. Manufacturing heroin requires a lot of land and time to grow the opium poppies. Fentanyl, by contrast, is synthesized from chemicals and thus requires far fewer resources, giving it higher profit margins.^[14] ^[15] A DEA official noted in a 2017 public hearing that one kilogram of fentanyl purchased from China for \$3,000-5,000 could generate between \$6.6 million and \$10 million in revenue.^[16]

Anne Milgram, Administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in February 2023 that the Mexican Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels "pose the greatest criminal drug threat the United States has ever faced." According to Milgram:

"The Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco Cartel and their affiliates control the vast majority of the fentanyl global supply chain, from manufacture to distribution. The cartels are buying precursor chemicals in the People's Republic of China (PRC); transporting the precursor chemicals from the PRC to Mexico; using the precursor chemicals to mass produce fentanyl; pressing the fentanyl into fake prescription pills; and using cars, trucks, and other routes to transport the drugs from Mexico into the United States for distribution. It costs the cartels as little as 10 cents to produce a fentanyl-laced fake prescription pill that is sold in the United States for \$10 to \$30 per pill."^[17]

The lucrative trade enabled by selling fentanyl provides TCOs with the financial means to amass firearms, upgrade anti-detection technology and expand operations. The TCOs have consolidated distribution networks within the U.S. with the help of U.S.-based Mexican gangs to create a seamless pipeline for moving products.^[18]

Today, the Mexican TCOs have a global network similar to that of a large corporation, using their existing networks to expand cross-border operations to include human trafficking from Mexico into the U.S. as well as gun trafficking and money laundering from the U.S. into Mexico.^[19]

The drug trade is marked by extreme violence, which inextricably links the production and movement of drugs with the guns needed to protect that industry. Ioan Grillo, author of *Blood Gun Money: How America Arms Gangs and Cartels*, wrote, "The illegal narcotics trade is huge, worth an estimated \$150 billion a year in the United States alone... The gun black market claims a fraction of that worth but provides a tool that allows gangsters to control those drug profits."^[20]

While the violence in the U.S. is often associated with local drug sales and other criminal activity as a means to resolve disputes and maintain discipline, Congressional Research Service notes that the violence in Mexico has also "been dramatically punctuated by beheadings, public hangings of corpses, and murders of dozens of journalists and officials."^[21] A ranking of the 50 most violent cities in the world found that the top five were in Mexico.^[22]

Gun Laws in the US and Mexico

The United States and Mexico are two of just three countries worldwide that have a constitutional right to bear arms. However, gun rights in Mexico are restrictive and heavily regulated in comparison to the U.S.^[23] ^[24] Article 10 of the Mexican Constitution states: "The inhabitants of the United Mexican States have a right to arms in their homes, for security and legitimate defense, with the exception of arms prohibited by federal law and those reserved for the exclusive use of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Guard. Federal law will determine the cases, conditions, requirements, and places in which the carrying of arms will be authorized to the inhabitants."^[25]

The second amendment of the U.S. Constitution, by contrast, does not mention restrictions: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."^[26] Although U.S. gun laws are less restrictive, the right to bear arms is not without some limits, such as background checks and prohibitions on the sale of guns to people under age 18 and possession by convicted felons.^[27]

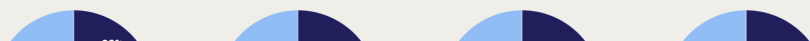
Mexican gun laws and regulatory authority fall under the federal government's administrative control, establishing one unified set of laws across the entire country.^[28] The U.S. has some federal gun laws that apply to everyone, but state gun laws vary widely across the country.^[29]

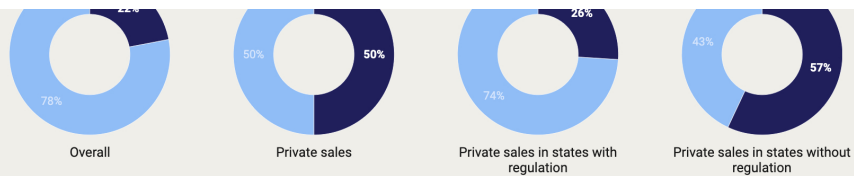
There is only one gun and ammunition store in all of Mexico, which is on an army base and run by the Mexican military.^[30] ^[31] The process for buying a gun in Mexico entails obtaining a letter from local authorities to prove a lack of a criminal record, then submitting a letter proving employment status and income. Applicants must pass a background check, then travel to Mexico City to visit the only authorized gun store in the country. After being fingerprinted, the person may then buy a gun.^[32] Receiving government approval to purchase a gun can take months.^[33] Guns are registered with the government, and people who want to carry a firearm for protection must demonstrate the need.^[34] Hunters and sport shooters must belong to a shooting club through which their purchase requests are submitted.^[35]

Firearms and Background Checks

In a survey about the purchase of their most recently acquired firearm, gun owners were asked: "As far as you know, as part of the transfer, did you undergo a background check?"

■ No ■ Yes





At the time of the survey, 15 states and D.C. had laws regulating private firearm sales. The authors concluded that "millions of U.S. adults continue to acquire guns without background checks, especially in states that do not regulate private firearm sales."

Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Source: Miller et al. (2017) • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

In the U.S., there are nearly 58,000 federally licensed firearms dealers and pawnbrokers.^[36] The basic buying process involves passing an instant background check and being over 18 years old or 21 years old, depending on the type of gun, although some states have added restrictions such as a waiting period and more extensive background checks.^[37] ^[38] ^[39]

There are loopholes to avoid background checks in many states, such as private or secondhand sales (as opposed to purchasing from a licensed dealer) and transfers of guns in the form of a gift.^[40] Researchers from Northeastern University and Harvard University estimated that 26% of gun owners who purchased via private sale in states that regulated private firearms sales made the purchase without undergoing a background check. That number jumped to 57% in states that did not regulate private sales. Overall, 22% of gun owners reported that they did not undergo a background check in their most recent firearm purchase.^[41]

As of May 2023, there was no federal ban on the purchase of assault weapons in the U.S.,^[42] nor are there in three of the four border states (Arizona, New Mexico and Texas).^[43] ^[44] ^[45] In California, assault weapons can only be sold to a licensed gun dealer, police or sheriff's department or the holder of a special weapons permit issued by the Department of Justice.^[46]

Guns Flow into Mexico from the United States

The history of firearms moving from the U.S. into Mexico dates back to Mexico's War of Independence against Spain, starting in 1810.^[47]

While Mexico's current restrictive gun laws make it difficult to acquire firearms legally in Mexico, TCOs need firepower to protect their drug profits.^[48] To get around the country's restrictions, an estimated 200,000-873,000 U.S. firearms are smuggled into the country each year.^[49] ^[50] Between 70% and 90% of guns found at crime scenes in Mexico came from the U.S. This influx of weapons fuels violence and crime in Mexico.^[51]

In 2020, the U.S. Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy "identified the trafficking of firearms from the U.S. into Mexico as a threat to the safety and security of both countries"^[52] because gun trafficking facilitates the illegal drug trade that endangers the lives of U.S. citizens.^[53]

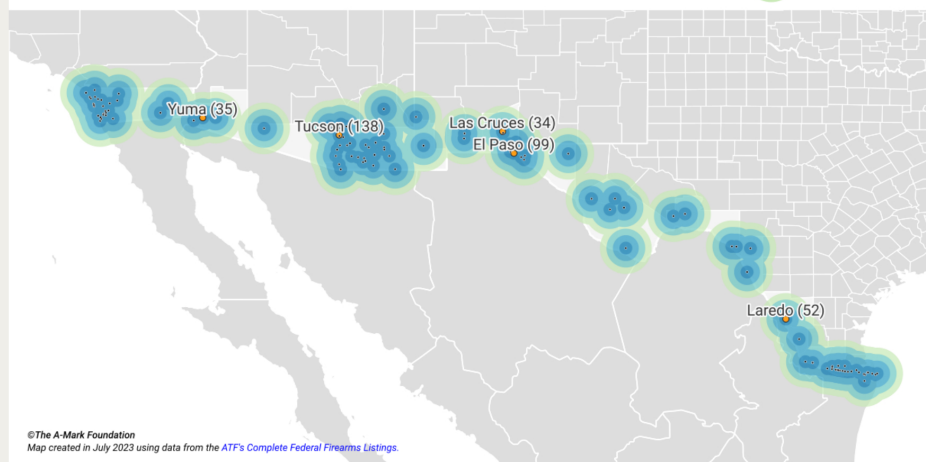
TCOs purchase guns in the U.S. using the proceeds from drug sales in the U.S. and move them into Mexico, leveraging the same pipeline of distribution networks and routes used to traffic drugs into the U.S.^[54] The United States Government Accountability Office reported that TCOs prefer .50 caliber rifles "because these rifles are powerful enough to disable a vehicle engine and penetrate vehicle or personal armor, posing a significant threat to Mexican security forces."^[55]

A 2013 University of San Diego study found that 46.7% of U.S. firearms dealers relied on TCOs' demand for firearms to stay in business.^[56] In 2016, data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) showed over 730 licensed firearm dealers in U.S. counties along the border with Mexico.^[57] In May 2023, there were 9,534 gun dealers and pawnbrokers with federal firearms licenses in the four states along the southern border, including approximately 800 dealers and pawnbrokers in U.S. counties that border Mexico.^[58]

Gun shops in US counties bordering Mexico

Counties bordering Mexico are home to approximately 800 dealers and pawnbrokers with a Federal Firearms License. Shown are cities with one or more gun shops.

● Cities with more than 30 gun shops ● 10-mile radius ● 20-mile radius ● 30-mile radius ● 40-mile radius



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Map created in July 2023 using data from the ATF's Complete Federal Firearms Listings.

Mexican authorities argue that gun manufacturers and firearms dealers in the U.S. are not only aware of the huge demand for guns in Mexico but are also major beneficiaries of that demand, to the tune of an estimated \$250 million annually.^[59] ^[60]

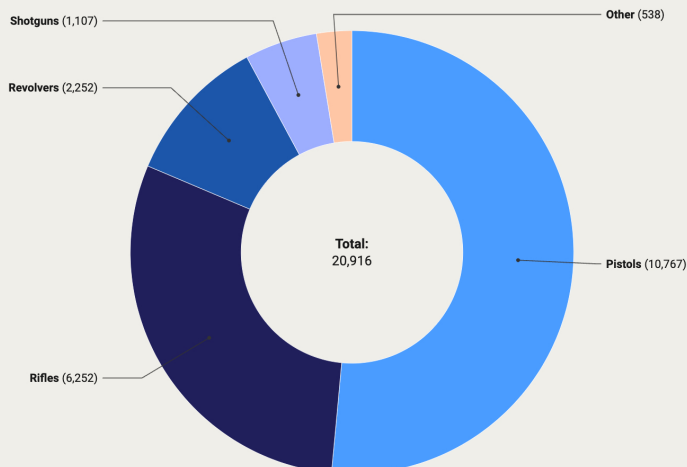
The Mexican government filed a \$10 billion civil lawsuit against several gun manufacturers in U.S. courts in 2021, stating that these companies "facilitate and encourage easy access by persons intent on murder, mayhem, or other crimes, including illegal purchasers who foreseeably traffic the guns into Mexico."^[61] The lawsuit was dismissed due to U.S. legal protections for gun manufacturers, but Mexico has appealed.^[62] ^[63]

On January 22, 2024, Judges Kayatta, Gelpi and Montecalvo of the US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, reversed the District Court's dismissal of the case, ruling that: "We agree that the [Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act] PLCAA's limitations on the

types of lawsuits that may be maintained in the United States apply to lawsuits initiated by foreign governments for harm suffered outside the United States. However, we also hold that Mexico's complaint plausibly alleges a type of claim that is statutorily exempt from the PLCAA's general prohibition."

Types of Firearms

Types of firearms seized in Mexico and traced by the ATF in 2021.



In 2021, there were 20,916 firearms recovered in Mexico and sent to the ATF for tracing; 67% were U.S.-sourced, 16% were from a non-U.S. manufacturer, and 16% were of unknown origin.

Source: ATF - Get the data - Created with Dataswapper

In 2021, ATF tracing of 20,916 firearms recovered in Mexico found that 67.5% were U.S.-sourced, meaning that the firearms that were either manufactured in the U.S. or legally imported into the U.S. by a federal firearms licensee. For the remaining weapons, 16.4% were of unknown origin and 16.1% were from a non-U.S. manufacturer without a known U.S. firearms importer (percentages are rounded).^[64] The ATF data only includes information on guns and ammunition confiscated by federal authorities and sent to ATF for tracing. It does not include tracing information on guns seized at the state level, guns that remain in circulation in Mexico and guns that have been trafficked via Mexico to neighboring countries in Central America.^[65] An estimated 49% of guns recovered from crime scenes in El Salvador originated in the U.S., along with 45% of guns recovered in Honduras and 29% in Guatemala.^[66]

The ATF has found that most firearms in Mexico originating in the U.S. were acquired in a state along the southern border and purchased through the secondary market, meaning from pawn shops, internet sales, private collectors, or person-to-person transactions.^[67]

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), however, found that TCOs in Mexico were mainly using straw purchases to obtain guns, which is when a buyer purchases a gun for someone who is prohibited by law from possessing one or does not want their name associated with the transaction.^[68]^[69]

Until President Joe Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act into law in June 2022, there were no federal laws strictly prohibiting firearms trafficking or straw purchases.^[70]^[71] Prior to 2022, other statutes such as 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(1)(A) willfully engaging in firearms business without a license and 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(6) knowingly making a false statement or presenting false identification in connection with a firearms purchase, were used to target arms trafficking and straw purchases.^[72] According to a spokesperson from the ATF in 2015, however, straw purchases were rarely prosecuted on their own because they can be difficult to prove and, if proven, judges rarely issued a severe punishment.^[73] Data from the Government Accountability Office shows that 112,000 firearm purchases were denied in FY 2017 due to false information being provided on a federal firearms license application leading to 12,700 investigations by the ATF but only 12 convictions.^[74]

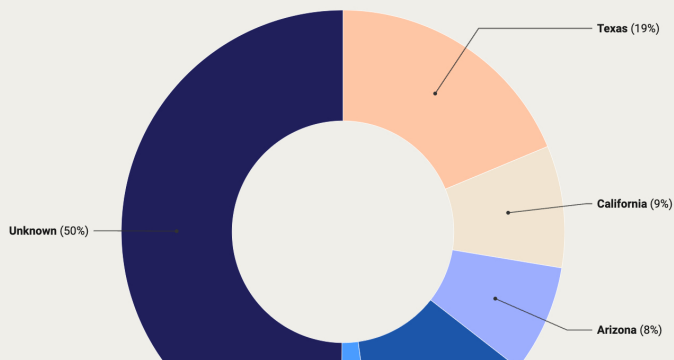
Two of the four southern border states, California and New Mexico, have closed what's known as the "gun show loophole" by requiring background checks for all sales at gun shows via state law.^[75] The other two states, Texas and Arizona, have no laws against the loophole, allowing private sales at gun shows to occur without background checks.^[76]

The ATF attempted to trace the initial purchaser of 56,162 U.S.-sourced guns recovered in Mexico between 2014 and 2018, with a 50% success rate. When looking at all the recovered guns, 19% came from Texas, 9% from California, 8% from Arizona and 12% from all other U.S. states. Considering just the guns for which the original purchase location was found, 37% were bought in Texas, 18% in California, 16% in Arizona, 25% in all the other states and 5% had foreign purchasers.^[77]

The U.S. Government Accountability Office stated that, "Trafficking of U.S.-sourced firearms into Mexico is a national security threat, as it facilitates the illegal drug trade and has been linked to organized crime."^[78]

Initial Purchaser of US-sourced Firearms

Firearms recovered in Mexico and traced by the ATF had an initial purchaser from:





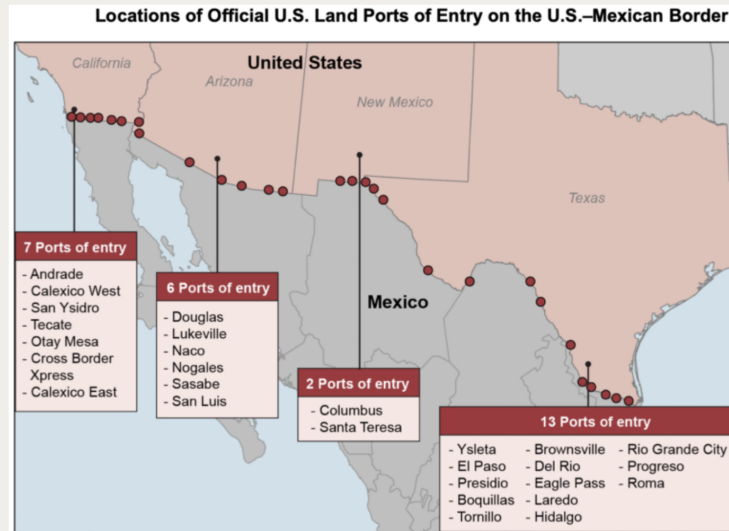
Data for ATF tracing of U.S.-sourced firearms recovered in Mexico between 2014 and 2018.
 Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Source: GOA • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Between 2018 and 2023, the Mexican army reportedly seized a number of U.S. military-grade weapons^[79] from the drug cartels, including: 221 fully automatic machine guns, 56 grenade launchers and 12 rocket launchers. In January 2024, after further reports of US military-grade weapons entering Mexico, Alicia Bárcena, Mexico's top diplomat, called for an urgent investigation into the matter.^[80]

US-Mexico Efforts to Combat TCOs in the 21st Century

President George W. Bush assumed office in 2001 with an understanding of the importance of relations with Mexico, having served as a former governor of Texas, one of the four U.S. states along the shared border.^[81] His first international trip was a visit to the President of Mexico, Vicente Fox, in part to discuss border issues such as illegal drug trafficking.^[82] President Fox arrived in Washington in early September of 2001 to continue their negotiations on trade, immigration, and fighting crime at the border. Before any legislation could be drafted based on this summit, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in New York City (9/11) changed the national conversation about border security.

The U.S. shares a 1,954-mile border with Mexico across terrains that are difficult to patrol, including deserts, mountains, beaches, canyons and the Rio Grande River.^[83] ^[84] ^[85] About 30% of the land on the U.S. side of the border is owned by the federal government while 70% is under state, tribal or private ownership.^[86] Border security tightened after 9/11 when the U.S. increased focus on stopping potential terrorists from entering via the southwest border, resulting in more inspectors and investigators at border stations, more aggressive border inspections, formalized entry requirements for all border crossings and the installation of fortified steel fences.^[87] ^[88] ^[89] ^[90] ^[91]



Mexico and the U.S. signed the Action Plan for Cooperation and Border Security in 2002, aiming to combat organized crime, human smuggling, drug trafficking and migrant deaths. This plan eventually resulted in tightened security on the Mexican side of the border as well.^[92] A bigger step occurred in 2008, when the U.S. and Mexico signed the first Letter of Agreement for the Mérida Initiative.^[93] This marked a shift towards shared responsibility for problems along the U.S.-Mexico border, recognizing both drug-related deaths in the U.S. and drug-related violence in Mexico.^[94] The U.S. was charged with addressing demand for drugs and the guns and cash being smuggled through its southern border, while Mexico pledged to address government corruption.^[95]

President Barack Obama expanded the Mérida Initiative's scope after taking office in 2009 by creating a four-pillar framework consisting of disrupting and dismantling crime organizations, institutionalizing the rule of law, taking a new approach to border security, and strengthening communities to reduce violence.^[96] ^[97] His approach garnered positive reactions from commentators who wanted to see more cooperation between the two countries, and criticism from those who thought the initiative should have retained its initial focus.^[98]

Via the Mérida Initiative, the U.S. spent \$3.5 billion from FY 2008 to FY 2021 to modernize the Mexican Army, combat TCOs and disrupt the pipeline of northbound drugs.^[99] The ATF and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) worked with their Mexican counterparts to improve firearm tracking, surveillance, and training.^[100] The DEA employed a "kingpin" strategy that focused on targeting the heads of TCOs in the hope of disrupting their operations. This strategy resulted in Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán's arrest in 2017 and transfer to the U.S. for sentencing.^[101]

The kingpin strategy, however, also led to fragmentation, localization and heightened intra-cartel violence, and ultimately did not disrupt TCOs pipelines. The cartels were able to overwhelm the Mexican Armed Forces with firepower and they sought retribution for fallen leaders.^[102] After El Chapo was extradited to the U.S., for example, 13 Mexican police officers died or went missing. El Chapo's four sons stepped into their father's shoes and built a fentanyl manufacturing and trafficking empire. In 2023, the U.S. put a \$10 million bounty on two of the sons for information that will lead to their arrest.^[103]

The DEA's tactics also backfired when agents let smaller crimes go with the intention of nailing a kingpin, such as in the Operation Fast and Furious scandal. In 2011, news broke that agents had allowed 2,000 guns to be trafficked into Mexico as part of the kingpin strategy; those guns were later used in crimes that included the murder of a Border Patrol agent.^[104]

Fragmentation of TCOs has led to the creation of local splinter groups, franchised affiliates and local criminal gangs that were loosely affiliated with larger TCOs.^[105] The resulting turf wars further incentivized TCOs to amass firepower and ammunition.^[106] Ultimately,

Mexico's Foreign Minister deemed the Mérida initiative to be a failure because violence, drug trafficking and drug abuse continued to rise. The number of homicides in Mexico quadrupled from 2007 to 2021, and drug overdoses in the U.S. also skyrocketed. ^[107]

The Obama Administration also formed the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy (SWBCNS) in 2009, which focused on the U.S. side of the border and worked in conjunction with the Mérida Initiative to stem the flow of drugs into the U.S. and the movement of illegal weapons and bulk cash from the U.S. into Mexico. ^[108] ICE and DHS jointly patrolled the border, conducted sting operations, and targeted entry points into the U.S., including tunnel detection. ^[109]

Even still, gun-related violence and deaths continued to rise across Mexico. According to a Congressional Research Services report, approximately 125,000-150,000 deaths in Mexico between 2006 and 2018 were attributed to organized crime, with an additional 73,000 people considered missing or disappeared. ^[110] Corruption in the Mexican government has also been cited by the U.S. government as a contributing factor to the increasing gun-related violence in Mexico this century, along with holes in U.S. border surveillance and inadequate agreements between the two countries for law enforcement operations. ^[111]

Within a month of taking office in 2017, President Donald Trump had issued two executive orders aimed at fighting TCOs and improving security at the southern border. ^[112] According to the Congressional Research Service, the Trump administration's priorities included "reducing synthetic drug production, improving border interdiction and port security, and combating money laundering." ^[113] Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected in 2018, was a vocal critic of the Mérida Initiative and reportedly unwilling to attempt negotiations with Trump to revise the agreement. U.S.-Mexican relations were further strained when the U.S. government arrested a former Mexican defense minister for drug trafficking in October 2020. ^[114]

Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. and Mexico renewed their collaboration by announcing the Bicentennial Framework in October 2021. ^[115] The new cooperation agreement set goals to reduce substance abuse and crime in communities in both nations, prevent transborder crime such as drug and human trafficking, and disrupt TCO networks. ^[116] In March 2023, a joint statement from Mexico and the U.S. announced phase II of the Bicentennial Framework, which set out to "increase cooperation to combat illicit fentanyl production, the trafficking of high-caliber weapons and ammunition into Mexico, and transnational organized crime." ^[117]

Conclusion

Efforts on the part of the CDC, Drug Enforcement Administration, and other federal agencies to reduce illegal substance usage and disrupt supply networks within the U.S. have not been successful. Nearly 200 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. ^[118] Disrupting with the aim of destroying the well-established TCOs' drug pipeline remains a necessity. With Mexican TCOs being the biggest synthetic opioid suppliers to the U.S., disrupting their operations across Mexico and in border towns is considered key to combating the opioid crisis. Unfortunately, two decades of joint efforts between Mexico and the U.S., which included military support, multiple federal agency support, and over \$3 billion via the Mérida Initiative, have failed. Not only has the Mexican Army (heavily supported by the U.S. armed forces) not been able to combat the TCOs, but the gun-related violence in Mexico continues unabated, illegal substance trade into the U.S. continues unhindered, and the TCOs have emerged as a direct threat to Mexican democracy.

To date, the majority of the joint efforts have focused on disrupting the illicit drug trade: production activities in Mexico or cross-border drug trafficking. Even though there is recognition of how guns from the U.S. contribute to drug trafficking, solutions focus on disrupting gun trafficking, not disrupting gun purchasing.

Defining the problem in terms of a pipeline is also contributing to the lack of effective resolution. A pipeline of drugs entering the U.S. and a pipeline of guns entering Mexico has allowed the U.S. to disregard how lax gun laws in the U.S. contribute to drug trafficking. Recognizing that drugs-guns-drugs is a cycle where guns are purchased with the proceeds of the drug trade with the sole purpose of protecting all aspects of the drug trade, which in turn allows undisrupted drug trade, forces us to acknowledge the role U.S. lax gun laws play in this unfolding crisis. In 2010, Mexican President Calderón implored the U.S. Congress to reinstate the ban on assault rifles and increase regulation of gun sales in the U.S. ^[119] and in 2021, the Mexican government filed a civil suit against U.S. gun manufacturers for the damage their products were causing in Mexico. ^[120]

Sidetracked by the Second Amendment flashpoint, the U.S. continues to develop impotent solutions to combat the TCOs and disrupt drug supplies. But today, the need is greater than simply combating drug trafficking. As things stand, the TCOs are a serious threat to Mexican democracy, and there is a growing threat of spillover violence in the U.S. Moreover, as these illegal weapons move south into Central America and the Caribbean, they fuel violence and even increase the flow of asylum seekers at the U.S. southern border. To date, the U.S. government has decided against labeling TCOs as terrorist organizations due to their lack of political ideology. Even still, the government must continue to seek an effective way to protect U.S. citizens from the growing threat of drugs and gun violence. ^[121] ^[122]

Cite This Page

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