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Criminal Drug Gangs in Mexico: Organizational Change, Violence, Governance, and Policy Responses

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Abstract

Mexico provides one of the most important contemporary case studies for understanding criminal drug gangs and organized drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). The country's criminal landscape has changed substantially over the past several decades: groups historically centred on trafficking illicit drugs have fragmented, diversified into multiple criminal markets, developed flexible networks, and competed over territory and access to legitimate economic and political structures. This transformation has been accompanied by severe violence, corruption, displacement, extortion, and institutional stress. Research suggests that violence cannot be explained by drug trafficking alone. Organizational fragmentation, competition among criminal groups, state enforcement strategies, local political economies, weak institutions, firearms availability, and the interaction between transnational drug markets and domestic criminal opportunities all contribute to observed patterns. The Mexican experience also illustrates a central paradox of enforcement: targeting senior criminal leaders can temporarily disrupt organizations but may, under some conditions, accelerate fragmentation and conflict among successor factions. This narrative review examines criminal drug gangs in Mexico as a socio-political and economic phenomenon rather than providing operational guidance for criminal activity. It reviews the historical evolution of Mexican DTOs, organizational structures, criminal-market diversification, violence and territorial control, corruption and governance, socioeconomic effects, state responses, international cooperation, and prevention strategies. Particular attention is given to the shift from relatively hierarchical trafficking organizations toward fragmented and networked forms of organized crime. The review argues that effective policy requires more than drug interdiction or leadership targeting: it requires strengthening justice institutions, reducing corruption, disrupting illicit financial flows, protecting communities, reducing recruitment opportunities, improving local governance, and addressing the transnational nature of firearms and drug markets.

Keywords: organized crime; drug trafficking organizations; criminal gangs; Mexico; cartels; violence; corruption; governance

1. Introduction

Criminal drug gangs are among the most consequential forms of organized crime in contemporary Mexico. The term 'cartel' is widely used in public discourse, but it can obscure the organizational diversity of the groups involved. Some organizations have historically displayed hierarchical characteristics; others operate through semi-autonomous cells, franchises, alliances, subcontracted actors, or fluid networks. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) emphasizes that organized criminal groups can range from hierarchical organizations to networked structures and business-like arrangements driven by illicit market opportunities [1].

Mexico is especially important because its geography, economy, political institutions, and relationship with the United States have made it a major node in transnational drug markets. The country has served as a source, transit location and production base for several illicit drugs, while Mexican criminal organizations have also diversified into extortion, kidnapping, migrant smuggling, fuel theft, illicit mining, counterfeit goods and other revenue-generating activities [2,3].

The contemporary security environment cannot be understood simply as a confrontation between the Mexican state and a small number of monolithic cartels. Over time, enforcement pressure, leadership arrests, internal disputes, market changes and territorial competition have contributed to fragmentation and the emergence of new factions [5,6]. The result is a complex criminal ecosystem in which large organizations coexist with local gangs, cells, brokers, corrupt officials and other illicit-market actors.

This article examines that ecosystem from a criminological and public-policy perspective. It deliberately avoids operational details that could facilitate criminal activity, including tactical instructions, trafficking routes, concealment methods, weapons acquisition, or evasion of law enforcement.

2. Review Approach

This narrative review draws on reports and analytical materials from UNODC, the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the World Bank and peer-reviewed research on organized crime, violence, political economy and drug trafficking in Mexico. Sources were selected to capture historical development, organizational transformation, violence, governance, economic effects and public-policy responses. The review emphasizes explanatory mechanisms and policy implications rather than operational descriptions of criminal conduct.

Because organized crime is inherently difficult to measure, available estimates should be interpreted cautiously. UNODC notes that the true extent of organized crime is unknown because many organized offences are hidden, underreported or only observed when they result in arrest or prosecution [8].

3. Historical Evolution of Criminal Drug Organizations in Mexico

3.1 From regional trafficking networks to major DTOs

Mexican drug-trafficking organizations developed over decades from regional networks involved in the cultivation, production and movement of illicit drugs. The evolution of the Sinaloa organization illustrates how a regional criminal network could develop into a major transnational trafficking organization [9]. The historical process involved relationships among traffickers, local political actors, corrupt officials, transport networks and international markets.

During the late twentieth century, Mexican organizations became increasingly important to the North American illicit drug market. Changes in international drug-trafficking patterns, including the disruption of established

cocaine routes through the Caribbean and the implementation of Plan Colombia, contributed to a greater role for Mexico as a transit corridor [5,6].

3.2 The post-2006 security environment

Mexico's security environment changed sharply after the federal government's intensified campaign against organized crime beginning in 2006. The deployment of military forces and increased efforts to arrest or kill senior criminal leaders produced important law-enforcement successes but also coincided with a period of substantial increases in violence [5,6].

Research on the violence surge emphasizes organizational fragmentation as one mechanism. When leaders were removed, organizations sometimes divided into competing factions, creating new disputes over territory, markets and succession [5,6]. This does not imply that enforcement caused all subsequent violence, but it demonstrates that enforcement interventions can alter the structure of criminal markets in ways that require careful assessment.

4. Organizational Structure of Mexican Criminal Groups

Mexican criminal organizations should not be treated as static organizations with a single command hierarchy. UNODC's typology identifies hierarchical, local-cultural, business-oriented and networked models of organized crime [1]. Mexico demonstrates elements of several of these models simultaneously.

Organizational characteristic	Description	Policy implication
Hierarchical organization	Centralized leadership and differentiated roles may exist in some groups or periods.	Leadership targeting can disrupt coordination but may also create succession struggles.
Networked structure	Semi-autonomous cells and alliances can operate with considerable flexibility.	Removing one node may have limited effect if networks can reorganize.
Local embeddedness	Criminal groups may rely on local relationships, coercion, corruption and community-level intermediaries.	Community protection and local institutional strengthening become essential.
Poly-crime diversification	Groups may earn revenue from multiple illicit activities rather than drugs alone.	Drug-only enforcement may leave major revenue streams intact.
Adaptive enterprise	Organizations respond to enforcement, market demand and competition.	Policies need continuous evaluation rather than assuming stable organizational behaviour.

5. Criminal-Market Diversification

One of the defining developments in Mexican organized crime has been diversification beyond conventional drug trafficking. CRS describes Mexican DTOs as increasingly diversified, with some groups becoming poly-crime organizations [2]. The exact mix differs by organization and region, but documented activities have included extortion, kidnapping, migrant smuggling, fuel theft, illegal mining and trade in counterfeit or illicit goods [2,3].

Diversification has important criminological consequences. It can increase the number of victims who have no connection to drug consumption. Small businesses, transport operators, agricultural producers, migrants and local communities can become targets of coercive criminal economies. Diversification can also create deeper penetration into legitimate markets and local governance.

The shift toward diversified criminal enterprise also complicates conventional drug-control metrics. A reduction in seizures of a particular drug does not necessarily mean that a criminal organization has lost its overall capacity. The organization may compensate through other illicit markets, alliances or decentralized structures.

6. Violence and Territorial Competition

Violence in Mexico is strongly associated with competition among criminal organizations, although the relationship varies geographically and over time. Economic research has found that episodes of increased conflict between DTOs can produce substantial local economic and social costs [6,7]. The World Bank has highlighted evidence that violence can reduce investment, alter employment decisions and affect access to credit and other economic activity [7].

Violence serves multiple possible functions within criminal markets: coercion of competitors, punishment of defectors, intimidation of communities, enforcement of illicit agreements and attempts to control territory. However, the use of violence can also be strategically counterproductive for criminal groups because it attracts state attention, raises costs and destabilizes local markets.

Importantly, the presence of organized crime does not imply uniform levels of violence. Some criminal environments may rely more heavily on corruption, accommodation or social embeddedness than overt violence. The balance between coercion and corruption can change according to the strength of state institutions, market competition and local political conditions [9].

7. Corruption, Governance and State Capacity

Corruption is a central component of the organized-crime problem because criminal markets require protection from enforcement and access to legitimate institutions. UNODC identifies corruption and money laundering as mechanisms that can conceal and protect organized criminal activity [8]. In Mexico, allegations and documented cases of corruption have involved multiple levels of government and law enforcement, although the scale and nature of corruption vary considerably by institution and locality.

Criminal governance can emerge where state authority is weak or contested. Criminal organizations may impose informal rules, collect illicit taxes, provide selective dispute resolution, or influence local economic and political activity. Such arrangements should not be confused with legitimate governance: they are generally backed by coercion and serve criminal economic interests. Nevertheless, they can become socially entrenched where communities experience weak or absent legitimate institutions.

Strengthening governance therefore requires more than increasing arrests. It includes professionalizing police services, protecting prosecutors and judges, improving case-management systems, reducing opportunities for bribery, strengthening financial transparency and ensuring accountability for abuses by both state and non-state actors.

8. Criminal Economies and Money Laundering

Drug trafficking generates financial proceeds that must be concealed, transferred or reinvested. This creates an interface between criminal organizations and legitimate financial and commercial systems. Mexico has developed national strategies against money laundering and terrorist financing, with international cooperation playing an important role [10].

Financial investigations can therefore complement conventional drug enforcement. Instead of focusing exclusively on seizures of drugs or arrests of street-level actors, authorities can investigate the ownership, movement and laundering of criminal proceeds. Such approaches require strong financial-intelligence capabilities, interagency cooperation, judicial oversight and safeguards against arbitrary confiscation.

An effective financial strategy should also recognize that criminal proceeds may be mixed with legitimate economic activity. Overly broad enforcement can harm legitimate businesses and communities if financial controls are poorly targeted. Evidence-based risk assessment is therefore essential.

9. Social and Economic Consequences

Impact domain	Mechanism	Potential consequence
Public health	Drug availability, substance use and violence-related trauma	Addiction, overdose, injury and pressure on health services.
Human security	Threats, coercion, kidnapping and displacement	Fear, reduced mobility and disruption of family life.
Business activity	Extortion, theft and uncertainty	Lower investment, business closure and altered employment decisions.
Education	Violence and insecurity affecting schools and families	Absenteeism, disrupted schooling and reduced opportunities for youth.
Governance	Corruption and intimidation	Reduced trust in institutions and weakened rule of law.
Migration	Criminal exploitation of vulnerable migrants	Abuse, extortion and increased risks along migration pathways.
Community cohesion	Competition, recruitment and displacement	Fragmentation of social networks and reduced collective efficacy.

10. Recruitment and Youth Vulnerability

Criminal organizations require a continuing supply of participants, intermediaries and support networks. Recruitment is therefore a social-policy issue as much as a law-enforcement issue. Young people facing school exclusion, unemployment, family instability, violence, weak social protection or limited economic opportunities may be disproportionately exposed to criminal recruitment, although vulnerability should never be interpreted as inevitability.

Prevention policies should therefore address the local conditions that increase exposure to organized crime. Evidence-informed approaches include educational retention, vocational opportunities, youth services, violence prevention, community organizations and targeted interventions in high-risk areas. These policies should be evaluated for actual reductions in victimization and recruitment rather than judged only by participation numbers.

11. The Mexican State's Response

Mexico has used a combination of military deployments, federal policing, intelligence operations, criminal investigations, financial controls, judicial measures and social programs to address organized crime. Institutional arrangements have changed substantially over time. The National Guard was created after the dissolution of the federal police, and in 2024 constitutional reforms placed the National Guard under the authority of the defense ministry [3].

Recent security policy under President Claudia Sheinbaum has emphasized intelligence gathering, police investigations and targeted interventions coordinated between federal and state authorities. A 2025 CRS assessment reported increased security cooperation with the United States and Mexican government claims of high-impact arrests, drug and weapons seizures, and a substantial decline in homicides, while noting that violent crime remained elevated in some states [3].

These developments should be evaluated using independent outcome measures. Arrest counts and seizure totals are activity measures, not direct measures of long-term security. Strong evaluation should examine homicide, extortion, kidnapping, victimization, community trust, prosecution outcomes, criminal-market displacement and institutional integrity.

12. The Effects of Leadership Targeting

Leadership targeting is a prominent component of counter-cartel policy. It can remove individuals responsible for serious crimes and disrupt organizational coordination. However, research on Mexico suggests that leadership removals can sometimes produce fragmentation and conflict as factions compete for succession and territory [5,6].

The policy implication is not that governments should avoid arresting dangerous leaders. Rather, leadership targeting should be integrated into a broader strategy that anticipates organizational adaptation. Arrests should be accompanied by investigations into financial networks, corruption, weapons flows, local criminal cells and replacement structures, while simultaneously protecting communities from retaliatory violence.

13. International and Bilateral Dimensions

Mexico's organized-crime problem is intrinsically transnational. The United States is the principal external market relevant to Mexican drug trafficking, while firearms trafficking from the United States into Mexico has been an important component of bilateral security discussions. Money flows, precursor chemicals, digital communications and migrant movements also cross borders.

U.S.-Mexico security cooperation has evolved through initiatives including the Mérida Initiative and the subsequent Bicentennial Framework. CRS reports that U.S. Congress appropriated approximately $3.6 billion for U.S.-Mexico security cooperation from fiscal years 2008 through 2023 [3]. Cooperation has periodically expanded and contracted in response to political differences, sovereignty concerns and changing security priorities.

International cooperation should be based on shared responsibility. Drug demand, firearms availability, money laundering, precursor supply, corruption and criminal justice capacity cannot be addressed by one country acting alone. Sustainable cooperation requires information sharing, judicial safeguards, financial investigations, border management, public-health interventions and respect for national sovereignty.

14. Human Rights and Rule-of-Law Considerations

Counter-organized-crime policies can create serious human-rights risks when military forces are used extensively for public security, when due-process protections are weakened, or when abuses by state agents are insufficiently investigated. CRS has noted concerns raised by human-rights organizations regarding transparency and safeguards associated with the increased use of the military in public security [3].

Human rights are not an obstacle to effective organized-crime policy; they are part of institutional effectiveness. Arbitrary detention, extrajudicial violence, torture or collective punishment can undermine public trust and reduce cooperation with authorities. Effective policing depends on evidence, lawful procedures, independent oversight and credible accountability.

15. Policy Options

Policy area	Recommended approach	Expected contribution
Targeted enforcement	Focus on serious offenders, networks and financial enablers rather than indiscriminate mass enforcement.	Reduces criminal capacity while limiting unnecessary community harm.
Financial investigation	Strengthen financial intelligence, asset tracing and lawful proceeds-of-crime recovery.	Raises the cost of organized criminal activity.
Institutional integrity	Professionalize police, prosecutors and courts; strengthen anti-corruption systems.	Improves legitimacy and conviction quality.
Community protection	Prioritize extortion, kidnapping and violence affecting civilians and businesses.	Directly improves human security.
Youth prevention	Invest in education, employment and targeted violence-prevention programs.	Reduces recruitment vulnerability.
International cooperation	Coordinate on drugs, firearms, money laundering and precursor controls.	Addresses cross-border drivers of criminal markets.
Public health	Expand evidence-based addiction treatment, prevention and overdose response.	Reduces harms associated with drug consumption.
Evaluation	Use independent measures of violence, victimization, institutional trust and criminal-market adaptation.	Prevents reliance on arrest/seizure counts alone.

16. Measurement and Research Challenges

Measuring criminal organizations is inherently difficult. UNODC notes that organized crime is substantially hidden and that conventional crime statistics capture only part of its activity [8]. Criminal organizations also adapt strategically to enforcement, meaning that observed changes in arrests or seizures may reflect displacement rather than genuine reductions in criminal capacity.

Future Mexican research should combine administrative data, victimization surveys, court records, financial intelligence, geospatial analysis, qualitative fieldwork and longitudinal measures of institutional performance. Researchers should distinguish between the presence of criminal groups, the intensity of criminal activity, the degree of territorial influence and the level of violence. These are related but not identical concepts.

17. Comparative Analytical Framework

Dimension	Traditional cartel model	Fragmented/networked model	Policy consequence
Structure	More centralized hierarchy	Multiple cells and shifting alliances	Network disruption requires more than leadership removal.
Revenue	Strong emphasis on drug trafficking	Diversified illicit markets	Financial enforcement must cover multiple sectors.

Territory	Control of strategic corridors/areas	Variable local influence	Local governance and community protection become critical.
Violence	Strategic use against rivals/state	Potentially more localized and competitive	Prevention must address local conflict dynamics.
State interaction	Corruption, evasion and confrontation	Multiple local interfaces	Institutional integrity is a central security tool.
Resilience	Depends on centralized leadership	Can survive loss of individual leaders	Policies should target capabilities and finances, not only personalities.

18. Discussion

Mexico's experience demonstrates that criminal drug gangs are adaptive organizations operating within wider political economies. Their persistence cannot be explained simply by the profitability of drugs. Criminal organizations survive because they can adapt to enforcement, exploit weaknesses in institutions, recruit personnel, diversify revenue, form alliances and interact with legitimate economic systems.

The fragmentation thesis is particularly important. A policy that successfully removes a senior leader may simultaneously create a succession struggle that increases short-term violence. This does not mean that enforcement is ineffective; it means that enforcement should be assessed as a system intervention with possible second-order effects [5,6].

Another central finding is that the drug-trafficking problem is not equivalent to the organized-crime problem. Even if drug markets change, diversified criminal groups may continue through extortion, smuggling, theft or other activities [2]. Policies therefore need to focus on criminal capabilities and institutional vulnerabilities as well as specific commodities.

Finally, the Mexican case reinforces the importance of public health. Drug policy that focuses solely on supply-side enforcement can overlook the demand and health dimensions of substance use. Prevention, treatment and harm-reduction approaches can reduce the market incentives that sustain illicit supply while improving health outcomes.

19. Limitations

This manuscript is a narrative review and does not constitute a systematic review or meta-analysis. Available information on criminal organizations is incomplete by nature, and official statistics may underrepresent hidden activity. Some evidence derives from policy reports rather than peer-reviewed studies. The organizational labels used in public discourse, including 'cartel' and 'gang', may also simplify complex and changing networks.

The manuscript intentionally avoids operational details that could facilitate criminal activity. It focuses instead on historical, criminological, governance, socioeconomic and policy dimensions.

20. Conclusions

Criminal drug gangs in Mexico have evolved from relatively identifiable trafficking organizations into increasingly diversified, fragmented and networked forms of organized crime. Their activities affect far more than illicit drug markets: they influence violence, corruption, local governance, migration, business activity and community security. The Mexican experience demonstrates that criminal organizations are adaptive and that

interventions can generate unintended effects when organizational fragmentation and local political economies are not considered.

An effective response should combine targeted and lawful enforcement with financial investigation, anti-corruption measures, institutional strengthening, community protection, youth prevention, public-health interventions and international cooperation. The central objective should be to reduce criminal capacity and victimization while strengthening legitimate institutions. Mexico's experience therefore provides an important case study for understanding the broader global challenge of transnational organized crime.

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