

Mexico: Crime situation, including organized crime; major criminal groups and cartels active in the country, their areas of control and influence, and alliances between them; ability and motivation of criminal groups to track and target individuals who relocate to Mérida, Mexico City, Campeche, and Monterrey; state protection available to victims, witnesses, and their family members (2022–August 2024) [MEX201993.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to the Government of Canada's travel advice on Mexico, crime rates, in particular those measuring violent crime, are "high" across the country, while the rates of arrest and detention "are low and don't deter criminal activity" (Canada 2024-07-29). Similarly, *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024*, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries," states that the chances of criminal actors "being caught by the authorities is slight" due to Mexico's "near-total impunity," with 97 percent of crimes going "unpunished" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 2, 6).

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), "an independent civil-society organization, headquartered in Geneva" (GI-TOC n.d.), writes in its 2023 crime index for Mexico that "[e]xtortion remains a significant concern in nearly all Mexican cities" (2023, 7). According to the *Mexico Peace Index (MPI) 2024* report by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an independent, non-partisan, and non-profit think tank based in Australia, organized crime continues to be "the main driver of homicides and gun violence" in the country (IEP 2024-05, ii, 2–3). The same source notes that the number of homicides linked to organized crime is estimated to have risen by 145 percent between 2015 and 2022, "from about 8,000 to about 20,000," while the number of homicides that are "not linked" to organized crime has "shown comparatively little change" (IEP 2024-05, 2–3). Citing data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) [1], the *MPI 2024* report indicates that in 2021, there were 3,753 "recorded incidents of cartel clashes that resulted in at least one death," and in 2022, that number fell to 2,248; in comparison, there were 160 recorded incidents in 2013 (IEP 2024-05, 39).

According to GI-TOC, the "expansion" of Mexico's human trafficking has been "facilitated" by an increase in criminal groups' territorial control across the country, "rampant" corruption, impunity, and "institutional weakness in Mexican law enforcement agencies" (2023, 3). The same source states that organized crime factions are "believed to be partly responsible for the uptick in disappearances witnessed in recent years" and that they play "crucial" roles in the transnational drug market, including by "engaging in proxy wars" between dominant groups (GI-TOC 2023, 5). GI-TOC writes that smaller criminal networks "emerged from crises of violence and tend to cooperate with larger mafia-style groups" and "[i]nternal fragmentation" amongst drug trafficking organizations in Mexico has resulted in "the creation of numerous loosely structured criminal networks" that are "difficult to track" (2023, 5). Similarly, an article by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an "independent" and "nonpartisan" US-based think tank and publisher on international affairs (CFR n.d.), notes that Mexican cartels are "in a constant state of flux," as they grow, splinter, forge new alliances, and fight each other for territory (CFR 2022-09-07).

2. Major Criminal Groups and Cartels

The *MPI 2024* report lists the following six criminal groups as the "most lethal" in Mexico, based on data from the UCDP indicating the "most total deaths" resulting from their clashes with one another or with other groups from 2004 to 2022:

- Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación, CJNG)
- Sinaloa Cartel (Cártel de Sinaloa)
- Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima, CSRL)
- La Familia Michoacana
- Juárez Cartel (Cártel de Juárez)
- Los Zetas Cartel (Cártel de Los Zetas) (IEP 2024-05, 40).

The same report adds that the CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel are "the country's two most powerful cartels" (IEP 2024-05, 2). Similarly, an article written by Ioan Grillo, a journalist and writer who has published books on drug cartels in Latin America (Grillo n.d.), lists the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel under "major transnational cartels," and categorizes the Gulf Cartel (Cartel del Golfo), Northeast Cartel (Cartel del Noreste), "Juárez Cartel / La Linea," and La Familia [Michoacana] as "powerful regional cartels" (Grillo 2024-01-03).

A report by the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) lists nine "major" criminal groups operating in Mexico:

- Tijuana Cartel/Arellano Félix Organization
- Sinaloa Cartel
- Juárez Cartel/Carrillo Fuentes Organization
- Gulf Cartel
- Los Zetas and Northeast Cartel
- Beltrán Leyva Organization
- La Familia Michoacana
- Los Rojos
- CJNG (US 2022-06-07, ii).

In an interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of criminology at the Université de Montréal who specializes in organized crime in Mexico described the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG as "big cartels," and added that they "are the only ones considered highly sophisticated with a lot of money, power, and resources," and that they "are a major safety concern" (Assistant Professor 2024-07-25). Additionally, the same source described the Gulf Cartel, Juárez Cartel, Northeast Cartel, and La Familia Michoacana as "relatively big" (Assistant Professor 2024-07-25).

For further information on the CJNG, including its activities, areas of operation and influence, and their ability to track and retaliate against their targets, see Response to Information Request MEX201603 of August 2023. For further information on Los Zetas Cartel, including its activities, areas of operation and influence, and their ability to track and retaliate against their targets, see Response to Information Request MEX200968 of March 2022.

2.1 Areas of Control and Influence

BTI 2024 states that "[p]erhaps the most important obstacle to governance is the widespread violence and ungovernability affecting almost all Mexican states (except Yucatán, Campeche and Aguascalientes), with local police and politics having been infiltrated by organized crime" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 29). According to the same source, "Guerrero, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Chihuahua and, more recently, Jalisco are all states where drug cartels are very strong or control most of the state" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 6).

The travel advice for Mexico published by the Australian government lists the following areas as "most affected" by drug and gang violence:

- Northern border states – Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas
- Pacific coast states – Colima, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit and Sinaloa
- Central region states – Guanajuato, Durango, San Luis Potosi and Zacatecas
- State of Mexico and the State of Veracruz on the Gulf coast
- Major cities along Mexico's border with the United States – Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Nogales, Piedras Negras and Reynosa. (Australia 2024-07-08)

A map of the areas of influence of the main cartels in Mexico is available in Grillo's article (2024-01-03). A map of the cartel territories and the areas they were contesting as of late 2021 is available in the report from the US CRS (US 2022-06-07, 10).

2.2 Alliances Between Criminal Groups and Cartels

Information on alliances between criminal groups and cartels in Mexico was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to a 2024 report by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the CJNG has "close family and marital ties" to Los Cuinis, a criminal group "whose members have been deeply entrenched in money laundering schemes," which "give them a money laundering advantage over other drug trafficking organizations" (US 2024-05-24, 15). *MPI 2024*, citing data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) [2], writes that Los Mezcales, a local criminal group in the state of Colima, formed a new alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel in 2022 after breaking off its alliance with the CJNG (IEP 2024-05, 30). The same source notes that an alliance of several criminal organizations called the United Cartels (Cárteles Unidos) is based in the state of Michoacán and includes the Knights Templar (Los Caballeros Templarios) and Los Viagras, and, further, that it is a rival of the CJNG (IEP 2024-05, 18).

3. Organized Crime Situation

3.1 Mérida, Yucatán

According to the *MPI 2024* report, Yucatán was the "most peaceful state" [3] in Mexico in 2023 "for the seventh consecutive year," followed by Tlaxcala, Chiapas, Durango, and Coahuila (IEP 2024-05, 2). The same source notes that "for the fifth year in a row, Yucatán had the lowest firearms crime rate in the country with just 0.5 incidents per 100,000 people" (IEP 2024-05, 47). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a research professor at the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, CIESAS), a graduate school in Mexico City, whose research includes Mexico's drug trafficking organizations, stated that Yucatán "has not been significantly affected" by organized crime violence (Research Professor 2024-08-07). However, the same source added that cartels keep a low profile in Yucatán, as it serves as a "sanctuary for families of cartel leaders" fleeing from organized crime conflict in other states (Research Professor 2024-08-07). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Assistant Professor, Mérida is "not of interest for major cartels," since the city does not have the criminal activities that major cartels would exploit (2024-07-25). However, the same source added that this does not make Mérida "impervious" to organized crime, and small, local criminal groups do exist (Assistant Professor 2024-07-25).

3.2 Mexico City

Information on the organized crime situation in Mexico City was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Assistant Professor, as the country's largest economy with numerous opportunities for money laundering, Mexico City is an "important hub for major cartels" (2024-07-25).

According to the *MPI 2024* report, Mexico City ranked 17th out of the 32 states in the country's "overall peacefulness score" (IEP 2024-05, 9). The same source indicates that 4 out of Mexico City's 16 boroughs were "among the municipalities with the lowest homicide rates" (IEP 2024-05, 33). *BTI 2024* reports that there are "major cartel activities and even cartel wars in Mexico City," such as conflict between the CJNG and Unión Tepito (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 6). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.3 Campeche, Campeche

Information on the organized crime situation in the city of Campeche was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Assistant Professor, while Campeche is "not of interest for major cartels," since it does not have the criminal activities that major cartels would exploit, small and locally based criminal groups do exist (2024-07-25).

The state of Campeche ranked 13th in the *MPI 2024* overall peace index, falling three places compared to *MPI 2022* (IEP 2024-05, 9). The same source adds that Campeche is a "relatively peaceful" state which spends at "above-average levels" per capita on its domestic security and judicial system, in contrast with other states like Baja California, Guanajuato, Nuevo León, and Chihuahua (IEP 2024-05, 61).

3.4 Monterrey, Nuevo León

According to the Assistant Professor, Monterrey is an "important hub for major cartels," and is the country's "most industrial" city with the presence of international firms, making it a "good" opportunity for laundering and reinvesting money (2024-07-25).

Nuevo León ranked 26th out of the 32 states in the *MPI 2024* (IEP 2024-05, 9). According to an article by Infobae, a Spanish-language online news source from Argentina (*The Washington Post* 2016-06-08), Nuevo León has historically been [translation] "key for criminal organizations," due to its shared border with the state of Texas and its advanced logistics infrastructure through a "dense network of roads and railways" (2024-07-24). The same article adds that the state capital Monterrey is a commercial and industrial hub that allows organized crime groups to [translation] "camouflage their operations under legitimate activities" and to launder money (Infobae 2024-07-24). InSight Crime, a think tank and media organization that studies organized crime in the Americas (InSight Crime n.d.), indicates that, according to data compiled by the Mexican NGO Causa en Común [4] using media reporting, the number of police officers killed in Nuevo León had "increased 143% between 2019 and 2022 amid a broader uptick in homicides, which overlap[ed] with the Northeast Cartel's expansion across the state" (InSight Crime 2023-09-07).

4. Ability and Motivation of Criminal Groups to Track and Target Individuals

Information on the ability of criminal groups to track and target individuals who relocate to other parts of Mexico was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the

time constraints of this Response.

For further information on the ability and motivations of organized crime groups to track and retaliate against individuals they target, including the profiles of individuals they target, see Response to Information Request MEX201601 of September 2023.

According to the Assistant Professor, organized crime groups "would need to have a presence" in Mexico City if they want to intimidate, bribe or corrupt "high profile individuals" working for the government such as policy makers and law enforcement authorities who can both "help or disrupt" cartel activities (2024-07-25).

According to *MPI 2024*, criminal groups "often target migrants that are found to have family in the United States in order to extract high ransoms, with lethal consequences for many of those that are unable to pay" (IEP 2024-05, 24). *BTI 2024* indicates that

the assassination of journalists by criminal organizations has persisted. ... A total of 59 of these cases have occurred during the four years of the current administration [of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, scheduled to be in office until 1 October 2024, when he will be replaced by Claudia Sheinbaum, who was elected in June 2024 (BBC 2024-06-03)]. Approximately 90% of these transgressions remain unpunished. In 2022, the highest number of journalist killings in a single year was recorded ... Reporting on certain topics, such as crime, drugs, and the nexus between politics and drug trafficking, is highly risky or even impossible in areas controlled by cartels. Self censorship is increasingly prevalent among newspapers, particularly in regions highly affected by organized crime and drug trafficking. (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 10–11)

The same source adds that "candidates and elected officials, as well as social activists," are "routinely assassinated," and in certain areas controlled by cartels, "many local elected officials and police agencies are under their command" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 14).

5. State Protection

GI-TOC reports that despite the signing of several international treaties related to fighting organized crime, Mexico's "legislative apparatus has significant structural deficiencies that hinder law enforcement authorities' ability to combat various forms of organized crime" (2023, 6). According to *BTI 2024*, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration pledged to diminish the influence of drug cartels through the implementation of social policies designed to benefit young people, "who are easy prey for criminal groups that provide an economic livelihood" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 6). However, the same source reports that the government "has continued to rely on the military to combat the drug cartels," has reduced resources for victims' organizations, and has "been ineffective in seeking information on the more than 100,000 people who have disappeared" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024, 37). Additionally, GI-TOC writes that "services made available and provided to victims" of organized crime "were inadequate" and that the government's crime prevention policies were "ineffective" due to limited law enforcement capacity and "a lack of comprehensive strategies" (2023, 7).

According to GI-TOC, "[c]orruption and collusion between criminal groups and state-embedded actors exacerbate criminal impunity," and initiatives to counter crime and reduce violence across the country have "not been successful" (2023, 6). The same source notes that the country's homicide rate "remains high, and cases of femicide, violence against journalists, and other crimes have increased," in addition to political violence becoming "common," with the threatening and assassination of political candidates by criminal groups (GI-TOC 2023, 6).

MPI 2024 states that Mexico's public spending in the justice system and domestic security sectors is "well below" the level of spending of its regional and international counterparts from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the country spent 0.65 percent of its GDP on the justice system and on domestic security in 2023, while member states of the OECD spent an average of 1.72 percent of their GDP and OECD Latin American countries

averaged 1.51 percent (IEP 2024-05, 61). With regards to mechanisms for protecting victims and witnesses of crime, GI-TOC writes that Mexico's measures "are lacking, with little attention paid to supporting victims of human rights violations, human trafficking and forced disappearances" (2023, 7). The same reports states that despite "efforts to prosecute traffickers and identify victims," the state "has failed to allocate sufficient funds to victim assistance" (GI-TOC 2023, 7).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is a project of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden that provides data on instances of "fatal organized violence" based on news media sources and data from NGOs (Uppsala University 2024-05-21).

[2] The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is a US-based non-profit organization that collects data on political violence and protest in various regions around the world (ACLED n.d.).

[3] The Mexico Peace Index (MPI) measures "peacefulness," based on "'the absence of violence or fear of violence,'" using five indicators (homicide, violent crime, organized crime, firearms crime, and fear of violence) (IEP 2024-05, 10). The report uses data published by the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SESNSP), and has "adjusted for underreporting" data for violent crime and organized crime using the National Survey of Victimization and Perceptions of Public Security (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública, ENVIPE) (IEP 2024-05, 10).

[4] Causa en Común is a Mexican NGO that studies and analyzes public policies with a particular focus on security and justice (Causa en Común n.d.).

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Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; *El Financiero*; *El País*; *El Universal*; Fuerza Informativa Azteca; International Crisis Group; Janes; Mexico – Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública; NarcoData; Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano; Transparency International; Washington Office on Latin America; The Yucatan Times.