



WARLIKE APPROACH

TO

DRUG POLICY

during AMLO's Administration: An assessment

1

Throughout the administration, the **war-oriented strategy** to combat the illicit drug market persisted as a fundamental component of Mexico's drug policy. **This approach not only continued but was notably intensified, deepening the militarization efforts.** Moreover, the **Bicentennial Agreement**—which sets forth commitments on drug and security issues between Mexico and the United States— while recognizing the need to address the humanitarian crisis resulting from the anti-drug efforts, primarily **focused its efforts on bolstering migration controls, extraditions, and the seizure of weapons and drugs.**

Findings

The data collected and analyzed by Elementa DDHH reveals that the **Armed Forces¹ continued to play a predominant role in the implementation of national drug policy, both in domestic operations and in fulfilling bilateral commitments.** The **primary focus of these efforts** was on **seizing drugs,**

¹ The armed forces are comprised of the army and air force, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA), and the navy, which is the Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR).

eradicating drug crops, dismantling synthetic drug laboratories, and securing arrests. However, these **actions did not form part of a comprehensive strategy** aimed at dismantling the extensive criminal networks that underpin the illicit drug market. Additionally, the increased militarization **did not lead to a decrease in violence rates;** rather, the high incidence of homicides and disappearances underscores the persistence of confrontational and war-oriented scenarios. Over the six-year term, these conditions expanded to other parts of the country, giving rise to new epicenters of violence.

Below, we present the most significant findings from our report “Prohibition under assessment: Mexico’s Drug Policy 2018–2024.”

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Shift in the war narrative, ongoing military presence

President AMLO did not reverse the trend of militarization; instead, he reshaped its narrative. Unlike former President Felipe Calderón, who initially declared a ‘war’ and then militarized, AMLO reversed this sequence by **first intensifying militarization and subsequently proclaiming the end of the ‘war.’ Thus, ‘officially’ “the ‘war’ no longer exists²”.** This statement underscores that the term ‘war’ was predominantly a rhetorical tool employed to justify the increased militarization ostensibly aimed at combating the illicit drug trade. Paradoxically, under President AMLO’s administration, pacification was equated with continuing militarization—not to wage war, but purportedly to achieve peace. However, this declaration serves primarily as a linguistic device to maintain a military-driven strategy against the illicit drug trade, where **pacification paradoxically implies ongoing militarization, not as a means of conflict but as a strategy for peace.**

² Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2019, January 30). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/Ugveq9

Actions that perpetuated the war strategy

The militarization agenda continued to advance through the establishment of the National Guard, the development of a legal framework supporting the involvement of the Armed Forces in public security tasks, and a military deployment that surpassed those of previous administrations.

In March 2019, the National Guard (NG) was inaugurated as a civilian entity under the *Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana* (Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection), effectively replacing the Federal Preventive Police. **Initially, the National Guard was predominantly staffed by personnel from the Ministry of Defense (SEDENA), comprising 77.3%³ of its members in 2019. By 2023, this proportion had escalated to 88.8%⁴.**

The **decree establishing the National Guard⁵** stipulated a five-year period during which the President could authorize the **deployment of the Armed Forces for public security tasks**. In 2020, a presidential executive order⁶ mandated their participation in these roles. These legal reforms not only legitimized the expanded role of the Armed Forces in public security but also cemented an ongoing process of militarization that military leaders had long

3 Government of Mexico. (2020). First Annual Report of the National Guard, 2019. dthx.short.gy/xo5ZG4

4 Centro ProDH. (2023). Military influence. The National Guard and the risks of renewed military prominence, p. 177

5 Ministry of the Interior. (2019, March 25). Article Five. Decree amending, supplementing, and repealing various provisions of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, regarding the National Guard. Official Gazette of the Federation. dthx.short.gy/NujuSw

6 Ministry of the Interior. (2020, May 11). Agreement by which the Permanent Armed Forces are deployed to carry out public security tasks in an extraordinary, regulated, audited, subordinate, and complementary manner. Official Gazette of the Federation. dthx.short.gy/vPB8wL

sought⁷. Subsequently, a constitutional amendment in 2022⁸ granted the President the authority to deploy the Armed Forces for law enforcement duties **through 2028**. This amendment also **transferred the control**, budget, administration, and direction of the National Guard **to the Ministry of Defense**, effectively stripping it from its civilian nature.

The escalation of militarization culminated in an unprecedented deployment of military personnel. **By December 2023, the combined forces of the National Guard and the Armed Forces totaled 286,494⁹, a historic figure. This number is starkly contrasted with the 54,980 Armed Forces personnel deployed in 2018 and the 49,650 in 2012¹⁰.**

The influence of the military and the corruption networks

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For years, the justification for the militarization of drug policy has centered on the endemic corruption within local police forces and their entanglements with organized crime. The prevailing official narrative asserts that the Armed Forces are insulated from such corruption due to their lesser exposure to organized crime groups compared to local police. This perspective posits that the Armed Forces' loyalty to the state remains beyond reproach. However, this view is challenged by documented instances of collusion between the Armed Forces and organized crime groups, casting doubt on the simplistic narrative of military incorruptibility.

7 Meza, A. M. (2022, September 6). Why does the leading anti-Calderon figure militarize, and what can be done about it? Letras Libres. dthx.short.gy/i8GmEa

8 Ministry of the Interior. (2022, November 18). DECREE amending the Fifth Transitional Article of the Decree that reforms, adds, and repeals various provisions of the Mexican Constitution, in matters pertaining to the National Guard. Official Gazette of the Federation. https://dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5671829&fecha=18/11/2022#gsc.tab=0

9 Government of Mexico. (2023, December 13). Security Report December 13, 2023. dthx.short.gy/KDKyPo

10 Information request to the Transparency Unit of the Ministry of Defense, Elementa DDHH. File number 22006760.

One notable case that underscores the complex relationship between the military and organized crime is that of General Salvador Cienfuegos, who was arrested in the United States in 2020. U.S. authorities accused him of collaborating with the Beltran Leyva cartel during his tenure as Minister of Defense under President Enrique Peña Nieto. Following his arrest, President AMLO vocally supported Cienfuegos, asserting that the military’s integrity was paramount and **“deserved protection because it is an essential institution for the Mexican State”¹¹.**

This incident casts a spotlight on the considerable political influence wielded by the military and **underscores the enduring, albeit problematic, nexus between the state and drug traffickers**—an arrangement that transcends administrations and weaves a web of macro-criminality involving high-ranking government officials and organized crime elements. Within this intricate network, distinguishing between the actors is challenging. Yet, in this particular instance, the most visible figure **was a central state actor**—a former Minister of Defense who played a pivotal role in shaping the drug war strategy of the previous administration.

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The detention of Salvador Cienfuegos significantly strained diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States. His subsequent release—orchestrated through significant diplomatic efforts by the Mexican Foreign Ministry, which persuaded the U.S. to drop the charges and allow his repatriation—led to a public discrediting of U.S. investigations. It also resulted in the passage of new legislation¹² that curtailed the operational capabilities of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Mexico. Upon his return to Mexico, Cienfuegos was released without facing any legal consequences.

In the wake of these events, President AMLO made several statements delineating the limits his administration was setting to curtail U.S. involvement and pressure in Mexico’s national security affairs. These declarations underscored a clear intent to assert greater sovereignty over national security policies.

11 Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2023, April 3). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/PmMHTA

12 Mundo LR. (2020, December 15). Mexico approves law removing immunity for DEA agents in the country. *La República*. dthx.short.gy/X7BoLu

“In the past, there was interference—a promiscuous relationship between the Mexican government and the United States government. Now, the relationship is different: it is based on cooperation, it is transparent and respectful of our independence and sovereignty. There is no longer any pressure; we do not accept it, nor do they dare to exert it anymore.¹³”

The Bicentennial Agreement and the ongoing fight against illegal drug trade

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“We are not subjected to any foreign government; we can make any decision as long as it is in our best interest.¹⁴”

—Andrés Manuel López Obrador

For decades, the bilateral agenda on drugs and security has been a pivotal influence on Mexico’s domestic policy. With the advent of President AMLO’s administration, there appeared to be an opportunity for reassessing this relationship. His campaign prominently featured calls for asserting Mexico’s sovereignty against the United States. Following the detention of Salvador

¹³ Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2024, February 9). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/f5IMOB

¹⁴ López Obrador. (2018, May 8). Dialogue for Peace and Justice. AMLO dthx.short.gy/SWd94b

Cienfuegos, Mexico enacted a new law¹⁵ that significantly curtailed the operational freedoms of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) within Mexican borders, stripping DEA agents of immunity and mandating the sharing of investigative information with Mexican authorities. This legislative move was interpreted as a strong declaration of sovereignty and indicated a possible shift in the dynamics of extraditing high-profile drug traffickers to the U.S. Amid this tense backdrop, the critical questions that emerge are: How has this rhetoric impacted Mexico’s bilateral relations with the United States? Moreover, **does it signify a substantive departure from the traditionally militarized approach to combating the illicit drug trade, or does it, in fact, perpetuate existing policies?**

For AMLO, the focus of bilateral cooperation needed to shift from resources for military equipment and training to developmental assistance: **“We seek cooperation focused on development, not on the use of force”¹⁶.** This led to the “Bicentennial Understanding on Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities between Mexico and the United States” (hereinafter the Bicentennial Agreement or BA), signed in October 2021. Acknowledging Mexico’s security and violence issues, this agreement proposes a new security approach that starkly contrasts with previous ones, which focused on the provision of weapons, equipment, and the training of security agencies.

The Bicentennial Agreement (BA) is designed to bolster institutional capacities to tackle the root causes of violence and criminality, foster community development, and enhance public health initiatives in both countries. It articulates three primary objectives: 1) **protecting** our citizens, 2) **preventing** cross-border crimes, and 3) **dismantling** criminal networks¹⁷. Each objective encompasses specific goals and action plans that detail the strategies for addressing the security challenges within the region¹⁸. For instance, the agreement seeks to strengthen institutions to reduce homicides and fight

15 Mundo LR. (2020, December 15). Mexico approves law removing immunity for DEA agents in the country. *La República*. dthx.short.gy/X7BoLu

16 Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2018, May 8). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/fp09mt

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2021, October 8). Joint Statement for the High-Level Security Dialogue between Mexico and the United States. dthx.short.gy/lx5d6r

18 Government of Mexico. (2021, October 8). Fact Sheet, Bicentennial Agreement on Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities between Mexico and the United States. dthx.short.gy/LE900y

impunity. It also recognizes the necessity of addressing the consumption of psychoactive substances from a new perspective and acknowledges that the traditional approach to countering the illicit drug trade has led to human rights violations, such as enforced disappearances. Notably, the BA does not include provisions for funding military equipment or training.

Although the exclusion of financial support for the military from the Bicentennial Agreement might suggest a departure from a militarized approach, there is no indication that such a strategy has been abandoned. Instead of transforming the security paradigm, this exclusion does not remove the military from the security agenda. As will be discussed later, the military continues to play a central role in fulfilling the commitments of the Bicentennial Agreement. Furthermore, the Armed Forces have received assistance outside the Agreement. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense allocated over 50 million dollars to the Mexican military and police forces¹⁹.

The result of not including military funding in the Bicentennial Agreement is that the militarized approach within the framework of bilateral cooperation is no longer subject to U.S. Congressional scrutiny regarding compliance with human rights commitments by both Mexico and the United States. Consequently, the new paradigm has diminished Congressional influence over Mexican policy²⁰ and shielded the Armed Forces from being held accountable for their involvement in the implementation of the domestic drug policy. In 2021, a source close to the Mexican Foreign Ministry stated: “The BA will be an agreement without strings attached, free from oversight or sanctions by the U.S. Congress. There will be no scrutiny from Capitol Hill, nor will we receive military equipment or direct support from the Pentagon.”²¹

The narrative surrounding the shift in security policy acknowledges the problems caused by past approaches. It asserts that the new strategies and proposed solutions represent a departure from previous agreements, such as the *Plan Mérida*. However, the measures implemented thus far have not

19 Brewer, S. e Isacson, A. (2021, February 9). Moving on from Military Cooperation. Violence Resource Project. dthx.short.gy/z2kyvl

20 Congressional Research Report. (2022, February 17). *New U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy: Issues for Congressional Consideration*.

21 Esquivel, J. (2021, October 2). Bicentennial Agreement. The new bilateral plan against drugs curbs U.S. espionage in Mexico. *Proceso*. dthx.short.gy/FZON8L



moved away from the prohibition model or its punitive and militaristic logic. In the following sections, we will contrast the narrative of the Bicentennial Agreement with its actual outcomes. At Elementa, we have analyzed several indicators to assess its actual effectiveness.

Before proceeding with the analysis, several clarifications are necessary. The indicators examined are not official; this information originates from documents leaked by the Guacamaya collective²², to which Elementa had access. In these documents, we observed comments made by U.S. officials on the indicators sent to the Mexican Ministry of National Defense for approval. Consequently, the indicators may have undergone modifications, new indicators may have been added, or some of those we observed may not have been approved during the negotiations. While the information we analyzed does not represent the totality of the indicators, it provides a snapshot of the topics and actions discussed during the negotiations to achieve the established goals and objectives. Despite the lack of transparency regarding which indicators were formally incorporated and the decision-making process behind their inclusion, the meetings to advance the BA between Mexico and the U.S. underscored the priority topics on the agenda: migration, extraditions, fentanyl trafficking, and arms trafficking.²³

Our analysis contrasts specific measures and indicators of the Bicentennial Agreement with the prevailing human rights situation in Mexico. At Elementa, we contend that the selection of these measures and indicators starkly highlights the human rights violations resulting from the ‘combat’ against the illicit drug trade pursued by both Mexico and the United States. Our objective is to critically evaluate the extent of the AMLO administration’s adherence to an agenda that, despite incorporating a more holistic approach to security, has continued to uphold the prohibition model and its warlike approach.

22 Distributed Denial of Secrets. (n.d.). Mexican Ministry of Defense. dthx.short.gy/UH42pW

23 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2024, February 7). Mexico and the United States reaffirm their commitment to migration and security issues. dthx.short.gy/L8bVVT

Bilateral Agreement's Compliance Report

Goal 1: Protecting our citizens

Area of Cooperation: Public Health ²⁴:

Objective 1

Promote **public policies for the treatment and support of individuals with psychoactive substance use disorders.**²

Measure / Responsible entity

Reduce **the rate of illicit drug consumption in Mexico**

Responsible Authority: Ministry of Health

Indicator

Rates of illegal drug use

Number of overdose deaths, including fentanyl-related cases

Current status

According to the Mexican Observatory on Mental Health and Drug Use, in 2022, the substances most frequently leading to treatment were Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) such as amphetamines, methamphetamines, ecstasy, or medical stimulants, accounting for 46.02% of cases, followed by alcohol at 24.6% and marijuana at 13.3%. ²⁵

²⁴ The analysis of these indicators is presented in Section III: Addressing the causes: Between stigma and institutional change in drug use treatment.

²⁵ Mexican Observatory of Mental Health and Drug Use. (2023, June 26). Fact Sheet. Context of the demand for illicit substances in 2022-2023 and actions the Government of Mexico has taken regarding mental health and addictions. dthx.short.gy/OYFOVs

Since 2018, there has been a significant increase in the demand for treatment due to fentanyl use. Reliable overdose statistics are not available. Furthermore, access to naloxone (a medication used to prevent fatal overdoses) remains limited due to its status as a controlled substance.

In Baja California alone, civil society organizations have reported responding **to over 800 overdoses in Tijuana over the past two years**. Verter, in collaboration with the University of California, San Diego, reported **that between June 2019 and May 31, 2021, they responded to 464 overdoses in Mexicali. In 2022, 410 cases were recorded, and in the first few months of 2023, 157 overdoses have been attended to in the state capital.**²⁶

Data from the Ministry of Health indicate a 405 percent increase in overdose deaths in Baja California from 2017 to 2022.²⁷ However, it is unclear how many of these deaths are attributable to fentanyl. Furthermore, local SEMEFO has identified that between 40 and 50 percent of persons experiencing homelessness test positive for fentanyl.²⁸

Objective 2

Comprehensive, community-based care to individuals with psychoactive substance use disorders to mitigate associated harms and promote recovery in both countries.

Measure / Responsible entity

Expand access to evidence-based treatment in Mexico, reduce recidivism, and improve the effectiveness of first responders in swiftly addressing the needs of drug users.

26 Goodman-Meza, D. (2022, March). Impact of an overdose reversal program in the context of a safe consumption site in Northern Mexico. Drug and Alcohol Dependence Reports, 2. dthx.short.gy/WF8qtt

27 Official Document SGS-DSS-VE-0293-2023 issued by the Ministry of Health via the National Transparency Portal.

28 Martínez, Y. (2023, March 23). Overdose deaths in Baja California increase by 405%. Pie de Página. dthx.short.gy/nzuafx

RE: National Commission Against Addiction

Indicator

Number of drug treatment Courts; number of individuals who successfully complete drug treatment programs.

Current status

There is no public policy based on harm reduction; the current indicator focuses exclusively on treatments aimed at overcoming withdrawal, resulting in a lack of community-based and comprehensive care by the State. Only individuals with problematic drug use receive attention, leaving other types of consumption unaddressed.

According to the Mexican Observatory on Mental Health and Drug Use, in 2022, 167,905 individuals²⁹ sought treatment for psychoactive substance use within the National Addiction Care Network. Private rehabilitation centers continue to manage the majority of facilities addressing problematic use, yet they operate without adequate oversight.

Emphasizing drug use treatment within the framework used by Drug Courts perpetuates the criminalization of users by applying criminal concepts to their situations, thereby conditioning the avoidance of prosecution on their compliance with medical treatment.

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29 Ibid. p. 1.

Area of cooperation: Support for safer communities

Objective 1

Strengthen and enhance violence prevention and community policing to foster peaceful communities

Measure / Responsible entity

Reduce the number of households in which at least one member was a victim of a crime in the past year

RE: Ministry of Interior

Indicator

- Number of households with at least one crime victim. ENVIPE (National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety)
- Enhancement of Local Communities' Perception of the Police

Current status

ENVIPE. 2023 -> In 2022, 27.4%³⁰ of households had at least one member who was a victim of a crime. In 2021, the percentage was 29%³¹.

In 2023, 74.6%³² of the people reported feeling that it was unsafe to live in their state due to crime.

³⁰ INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography). (2023). Press Release, National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Security (ENVIPE) 2023, p. 1.

³¹ The ENVIPE (National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Security) assesses crimes that directly impact victims or households, including: total vehicle theft, partial vehicle theft, home burglary, street or public transport robbery or assault, and other forms of theft not previously mentioned (such as pickpocketing, break-ins, cattle rustling, and other types of theft), fraud, extortion, verbal threats, injuries, and other miscellaneous crimes (such as kidnappings, sexual offenses, and other criminal acts). It does not account for drug trafficking, organized crime, fuel theft, or human trafficking. INEGI, Key Findings, ENVIPE 2022, p. 7.

³² INEGI (2023). ENVIPE 2023, p. 3

In 2022, the local municipal police and the traffic police were identified as the security-related authorities that inspire the least confidence, with 55.7% and 47.0% of the population, respectively.³³

Objective 2

Protection of human rights and vulnerable populations

Measure / Responsible entity

Resolve Cases of Enforced Disappearances

RE: National Search Commission/ Attorney General's Office

Indicator

Number of Resolved Disappearance Cases

Current status

As of February 2024, the National Registry of Missing and Disappeared Persons (RNPDNO) reports over 114,000 missing persons. During this administration, up to June 2023, more than 40,000³⁴ disappearances have been recorded, surpassing the numbers of previous administrations. There is no available data on resolved cases. In 2023, following the President's assertion that the RNPDNO was over-registered, a census of missing persons was conducted. The results indicated that over 15,000 individuals had been located. However, this census was not conducted in accordance with the standards and procedures outlined in the Unified Search Protocol. Families have reported that the names of their missing relatives were removed from the registry without their loved ones being found.

³³ INEGI. (2023). Percepción de confianza en las autoridades (Trust in authorities perception) ENVIPE.

³⁴ Martínez, C. (2023, June 1). An Analysis of Disappearances: One Person Missing Every Hour During AMLO's Administration. The Whereabouts of the Disappeared. dthx.short.gy/dSqATc

Area of cooperation: Reducing homicides and high-impact crimes

Objective 1

Strengthen security institutions to enable them to prevent and respond effectively.

Measure / Responsible entity

- Reduce the incidence of homicides
- Increase the number of convictions and thorough investigations of homicide cases
- Decrease the number of unresolved homicide cases and other related crimes.

Indicator

Number of homicide cases solved, convictions secured, and investigations concluded.

Current status

The homicide rate has decreased from 29 per 100,000 in 2019 to 25 per 100,000 in 2023. However, it remains significantly high compared to previous administrations.

Regarding the reporting of other crimes, it is important to consider the substantial underreporting. In 2022, only 10.9% of all crimes were reported, meaning that 92.4% of crimes were not investigated. Furthermore, 77.5% of reported crimes did not reach any conclusion, and only 1.2% of crimes resulted in a conviction³⁵.

Goal 2: Preventing cross-border crimes

Area of Cooperation: Reducing human trafficking and migrant smuggling

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Objective 1

Identify, target, and dismantle human trafficking and migrant smuggling organizations through comprehensive investigations, interdictions, and prosecutions.

Measure / Responsible entity

- Increase the number of investigations into human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases
- Expand the dismantling of human trafficking networks
- Increase the number of convictions of perpetrators involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling

RE: Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC) and the NG.

³⁵ INEGI (2023). ENVIPE 2023, p. 2.

Indicator

- Number of human trafficking and migrant smuggling investigations opened
- Number of human trafficking networks dismantled
- Number of convictions of perpetrators of human trafficking and migrant smuggling offenses

Current status

The stated objective of **prevention** within migration policy often manifests as the adoption of **a prosecutorial stance to migration** that is ostensibly aimed at dismantling networks involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

According to data provided by the Guacamaya collective, as of July 2022, the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) had ostensibly rescued 552,620 migrants across the regions spanning Mexico's northern and southern borders³⁶. This action aligns with the stipulations of the BA, under which Mexico's migration policy has notably shifted towards militarization. Traditionally, the rationale for deploying military forces domestically has been anchored in the 'war on drugs,' a campaign that has seen the Armed Forces engage in acts of violence and repression, often infringing upon the rights of various demographic groups. Currently, this militaristic approach has extended to encompass the realm of migration, transgressing the rights of people in the context of mobility, ostensibly under the guise of 'rescue' operations. However, the primary objective of both SEDENA and the National Guard appears to be the containment and deterrence of migration flows from the southern to the northern border. This shift has led to numerous human rights complaints lodged against members of these security forces, highlighting alleged abuses and transgressions in the context of migration³⁷.

³⁶ Information leaked by the Guacamaya collective. Summary of results from July 15 to July 21, 2022.

³⁷ National Human Rights Commission (CNDH). (2023, August). The National Human Rights Commission issues a Recommendation to the SSPC and the National Guard for serious human rights violations and excessive use of force against 12 individuals in a migration context and one Mexican national in Pijijiapan, Chiapas. CNDH. dthx.short.gy/ybA8RM

Goal 3: Dismantling criminal networks

Cooperation Area: Enhance extradition-related cooperation between the United States and Mexico

Objective 1

Enhance cooperation on extraditions to facilitate the timely prosecution of Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) members and high-priority offenses.

Measure / Responsible entity

Increase in the Extradition of Wanted Fugitives from Mexico to the United States.

RE: Attorney General's Office/ Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Indicator

Number of Extraditions of People at Large"

Current status

Despite President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) public stance of distancing his administration from the United States, research conducted by Elementa reveals that extradition trends from 2018 to 2023 have largely mirrored those of prior administrations. Throughout President López Obrador's term, there has been a consistent decrease in the rejection of

U.S. extradition requests for drug-related offenses, aligning with patterns observed in the previous administration. Importantly, there is no significant decrease in these rejections. During AMLO's tenure up to 2022, a total of 363 extraditions were approved, compared to 525 under the tenure of his predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto³⁸.

The continued adherence to a model of prohibition and persecution, characterized by the detention and extradition of high-profile narcotics traffickers, has precipitated cycles of violence wherein multiple actors, notably members of organized crime, systematically violate and transgress the human rights of extensive segments of the population.

One illustrative event is the 2019 arrest of Ovidio Guzmán, commonly referred to as the "Culiacanazo." This military operation intended to detain him incited an extremely violent retaliation by criminal factions, marked by significant human rights abuses. The situation escalated to the extent that the civilian population witnessed the effective seizure of the city by organized crime groups, compelling President López Obrador to order Guzmán's release in an attempt to mitigate further violence. In 2023, Guzmán was detained and extradited to the United States on charges of trafficking fentanyl, which again triggered a severe and violent backlash. Although this response did not escalate to the levels observed in 2019, it exposed the potential for recurring violence under similar circumstances³⁹.

In light of the marked increase in fentanyl seizures and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's denial of its production within Mexico, this section will critically examine the response of the armed forces to the challenges posed by the illicit drug market.

38 Public and press information systematized by Elementa.

39 González Díaz, M. (2023, January 6). Ovidio Guzmán: The wave of violence that struck Culiacán after the arrest of El Chapo's son. BBC News Mundo. [dthx.short.gy/pXVYhs](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-61811111)

In-depth review of the Armed Forces' strategies in combating the illicit drug trade

- **Deployment:**

In the context of the number of personnel deployed to combat organized crime groups, data from the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA), as disclosed in the morning presidential briefings⁴⁰, indicates that **since 2021, a significant portion of the forces—more than half from the Armed Forces and the National Guard—have been allocated to the National Public Security Strategy (ENSP). This strategy is specifically designed to disrupt criminal organizations. In 2023, of the total 286,494 members of the Armed Forces deployed, 60% (183,879) were dedicated to implementing the ENSP.**

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- **Volume of seizures:**

According to data obtained through transparency mechanisms⁴¹, **between December 1, 2018, and February 2024, the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) reported a total of 33,067 drug seizures. Significantly, 40.3% of these operations were concentrated in just three states: Guanajuato accounted for 16%, Baja California for 12.17%, and Sonora for 12.15%⁴².**

- **Substance Seizures from 2018 to 2023⁴³:**

The period saw a **decline in** the number of cannabis and poppy **plantations destroyed**, as well as a reduction in the quantities of cannabis and heroin seized. In contrast, **seizures of cocaine, methamphetamines, and fentanyl saw considerable increases**. There was also a notable rise in the destruction of laboratories producing synthetic drugs.

40 Government of Mexico. (2023, December 13). Security Report December 13, 2023. dthx.short.gy/JK9rIC

41 Information request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026424000557.

42 Information request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026424000557.

43 Information obtained and systematized by Elementa DDHH from Security Reports presented by SEDENA during morning briefings, which includes the information provided by all security forces combating the illicit drug trade in Mexico.

Transformation of the illegal drug market

What insights can be drawn from the patterns observed in seizure operations, the quantities of drugs confiscated, and the scale of crop destruction?

These metrics not only reflect operational outcomes but are intrinsically linked to broader political and economic factors that drive **the evolution of the market, often outpacing prohibitionist policies**. The increasing prevalence of substances such as fentanyl and methamphetamine signifies a significant shift within the illegal drug market. **In recent years, organized crime groups have pivoted towards the production of synthetic drugs - such as fentanyl and methamphetamine- which are more economically viable due to lower production and transportation costs**. This strategic shift has led to a decline in the cultivation of traditional narcotics like cannabis and poppy, evident from the reduced number of these crops being eradicated. Concurrently, there has been a noticeable decrease in the seizures of heroin and cannabis.

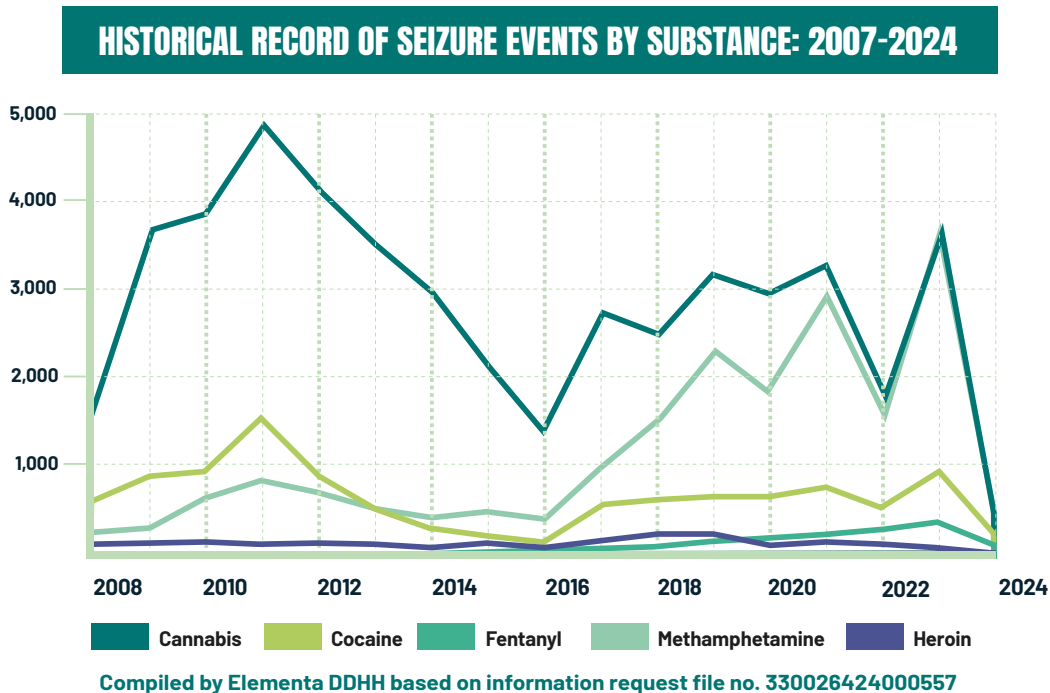
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Moreover, the regulation of **cannabis** across various states in the United States has a consequential impact on production in Mexico. Despite this shift, **the destruction of cannabis crops and continued seizures remain central to Mexico's strategy for addressing the illegal drug market**, and these actions are often highlighted as successful components of this approach. Examining the data from the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) on seizures of psychoactive substances from 2007 to 2024⁴⁴ reveals that **cannabis accounts for the largest share of seizure events, comprising 60.77% of all seizure operations**. This is followed by methamphetamine at 23.62%, cocaine at 13.43%, heroin at 1.20%, and fentanyl at 0.98%⁴⁵.

44 Information request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026424000557.

45 *Ibidem*.

The graphic below displays the number of operations categorized by the type of substance seized:



The predominant emphasis on “combat” strategies, particularly the eradication of plantations and seizure of cannabis, occurs amidst a global reassessment of cannabis’s legal status⁴⁶, recognition of its medicinal properties, and regulatory shifts in numerous countries.

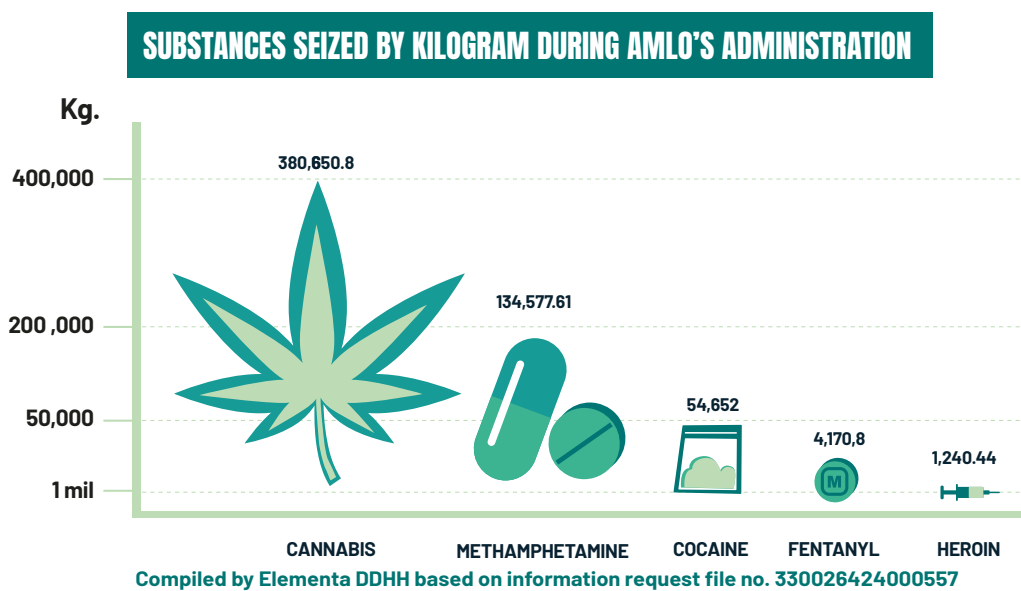
Additionally, the data highlights a **significant rise in methamphetamine seizures** during President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s administration. **A detailed analysis of the seizure events throughout his term shows that cannabis constitutes 47.16% of all incidents, with methamphetamine making up 38.78%⁴⁷.**

⁴⁶ This is evidenced by the series of debates that have taken place in recent years within the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs to remove cannabis from the most restrictive list.

⁴⁷ Information request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026424000557.

Fentanyl on the other hand, **has been included in seizure reports since 2013. Its production and distribution have evolved to include new forms such as pills and vials.** This development became notably recorded by the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) beginning in 2017⁴⁸, underscoring the complexity of quantifying and comparing seized substances. To accurately assess the predominant substances confiscated by SEDENA, it is insufficient to merely compare the total kilograms seized. An analysis of the **seizure data from 2018 to 2024, measured by kilograms⁴⁹, reveals that fentanyl comprises merely 0.72% of the total volume seized, marginally more than heroin, while cannabis accounts for 66.1%.**

The graphic below illustrates the seizure data mentioned above, spanning from 2018 to 2024:

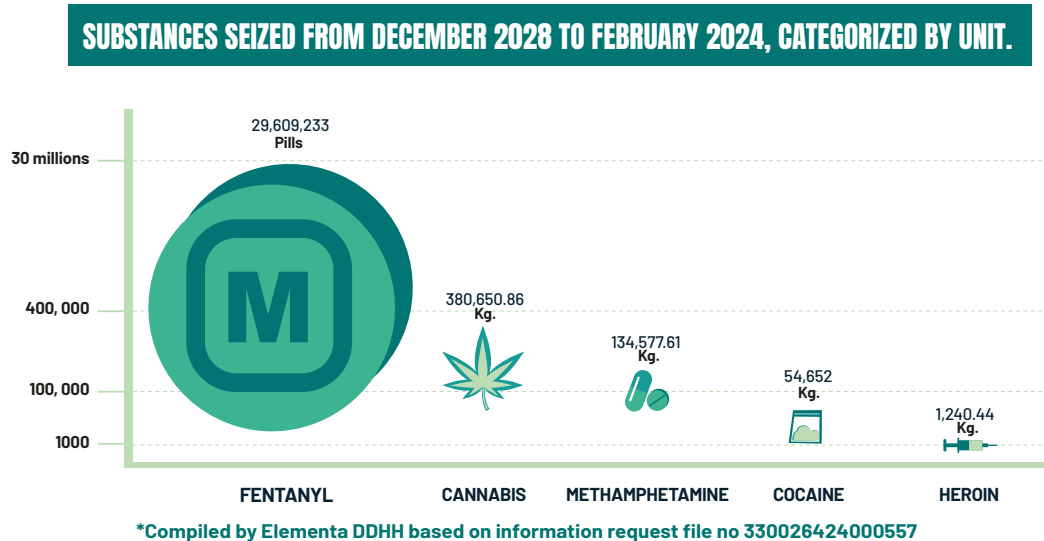


However, **a different perspective emerges when we compare fentanyl seizures, specifically in their most commonly seized form—pills—to the quantities of other substances measured in kilograms. This comparison reveals a reversal in the proportion of fentanyl seized, as depicted in the subsequent graph.**

48 *Ibidem.*

49 *Ibidem.*

The forthcoming graph details the substances seized from December 2028 to February 2024, categorized by unit:



In addressing the suppression of fentanyl production, the tenure has been marked by significant tensions between Mexico and the United States, stemming from U.S. demands for Mexico to intensify its efforts against the production and trafficking of this drug.

In 2022, the U.S. Federal Commission to Combat Synthetic Opioid Trafficking⁵⁰ issued a report⁵¹ identifying **Mexico as the main source of fentanyl entering and being consumed in the United States—a claim robustly contested by the Mexican government. Officials have repeatedly denied the assertion, stating, “We do not produce fentanyl here, nor do we consume it”⁵².** While the surge in fentanyl usage was initially more pronounced in the United States, **compelling evidence now demonstrates that the drug is also consumed in Mexico, albeit on a much smaller scale. This consumption is predominantly localized to the northern states of Baja California, Sonora, and Sinaloa⁵³.**

50 Stracqualursi, V. (2022, February 8). Mexico is the primary source of fentanyl trafficking to the U.S., according to a report. *CNN en Español*. dthx.short.gy/B3k0Br

51 Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking. (2022). Reports from the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, Final Report. *Rand*. dthx.short.gy/EyE8Fg

52 Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2023, March 9). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/6rIDyn

53 Cabrera, R., & Anguiano, D. (2023, September 26). Fentanyl in Mexico: An Ignored Crisis. *Gatopardo*. dthx.short.gy/bDBAEC

In relation to the denial of fentanyl production within Mexican borders, documents leaked by the Guacamaya collective from **SEDENA** reveal that this **institution had knowledge of active fentanyl laboratories as early as 2020**. A specific document, detailing the inner conflict within factions of the Pacific Cartel (also known as the Sinaloa Cartel) in Culiacán, dated March 17, 2020, and addressed to General Montealegre⁵⁴, **not only confirms the presence of fentanyl production facilities in the region but also acknowledges that the battle for control over these operations is a significant catalyst for violence. The dominion over this market is largely held by the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG)**⁵⁵.

Here is an excerpt from the report substantiating the aforementioned details:



Consideraciones

◆ Prevalece el riesgo de que se incremente la violencia por su competencia por el predominio en la producción de *crystal* y fentanilo.

Four months later, **on July 30, 2020**, in a detailed communication regarding the presence of clandestine fentanyl laboratories, transmitted by the Southeast Regional Intelligence Fusion Center (CERFISE)⁵⁶ to the National Intelligence Fusion Center (CENFI-CNI)⁵⁷, **SEDENA confirmed that fentanyl production is being conducted in the northern regions of the country**. The document further emphasized concerns regarding the potential import of chemical precursors that could facilitate the synthesis of this substance.

54 The documents reviewed do not disclose the General's full name.

55 Dalby, C. (2023, June 2). War between CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel over trafficking routes from Guatemala bleeds Chiapas. *Insight Crime*. dthx.short.gy/jNtfSY

56 One of the five regional centers established by SEDENA, as part of the Federal Government's Security Cabinet initiative, aimed at reducing violence, combating crime, and enhancing national security.

57 This center is responsible for coordinating and facilitating interagency cooperation among regional centers, consolidating information, and integrating intelligence units to identify and locate key generators of violence. It is operated by SEDENA and is affiliated with the National Intelligence Center (CNI).

The corresponding section of the document mentioned in the previous paragraph is shown below.



CERFISE.

COATZACOALCOS, VER.

PARA ATENCIÓN DEL C. GRAL. BRIG. D.E.M., JEFE. G.C.C.F.I.
(30 JULIO 2020)

ME PERMITO INFORMAR A ESA SUPERIORIDAD, EN RELACIÓN CON SU CORREO INSTITUCIONAL DE ESTA FECHA, REFERENTE EXISTENCIA DE LABORATORIOS CLANDESTINOS DE "FENTANILO", EN MÉXICO.

ANTECEDENTES.

EN LA REGIÓN SURESTE QUE COMPREN LOS ESTADOS DE CAMPECHE, CHIAPAS, OAXACA, QUINTANA ROO, TABASCO, VERACRUZ Y YUCATÁN, NO SE TIENE DOCUMENTADO LA EXISTENCIA DE LABORATORIOS CLANDESTINOS PARA LA PRODUCCIÓN DE "FENTANILO", COMO EN ALGUNOS REGISTRADOS EN LOS ESTADOS DEL NORTE DEL PAÍS.

POSTURA

SE TIENE CONOCIMIENTO QUE EN ESTOS LABORATORIOS CLANDESTINOS DONDE SE PRODUCE "EL FENTANILO", DROGA QUE CIRCULA EN EL MERCADO CONSIDERADA LA MAS MORTAL EN MÉXICO.

ASIMISMO, UN LABORATORIO CLANDESTINO EN LA REGIÓN DEL NOROESTE DEL PAÍS DONDE OPERA EL CARTEL DE SINALOA, PRODUCE EN PROMEDIO CADA SEMANA UNAS 20,000 DOSIS DE "FENTANILO" EN POLVO O PASTILLAS PARA EL MERCADO PRINCIPALMENTE ESTADOUNIDENSE, LO QUE GENERA UN MAYOR BENEFICIO ECONÓMICO PARA LA DELINCUENCIA ORGANIZADA.

ACTUALMENTE EL GOBIERNO FEDERAL EN LA REGIÓN SURESTE SE CUENTA CON EL PUERTO DE VERACRUZ COMO PUERTO DE ALTURA DONDE INGRESAN MILLONES DE TONELADAS DE IMPORTACIONES DE TODA CLASE DE PRODUCTOS, ADEMÁS DEL PROYECTO CORREDOR INTEROCEÁNICO DEL ISTMO DE TEHUANTEPEC (CIIT) PROYECTADO PARA EL AÑO 2023, QUE COMPRENDE LA REHABILITACIÓN DE LA VÍA DEL FERROCARRIL DEL ISTMO DE TEHUANTEPEC Y LA AMPLIACIÓN DE LOS PUERTOS DE COATZACOALCOS, VER. Y SALINA CRUZ, OAX., CONECTANDO LOS DOS OCÉANOS "EL PACIFICO Y CON EL ATLÁNTICO", "ASIA CON EUROPA", LO QUE CONLLEVA SE INTRODUCCIÓN DE MILLONES DE IMPORTACIONES PROVENIENTES DE CHINA, LO QUE PERMITIRÍA LA POSIBILIDAD LA INTRODUCCIÓN DE PRECURSORES QUÍMICOS DEL "FENTANILO" EN LA REGIÓN, LO AMPLIA LA POSIBILIDAD DE LOS CARTELES Y GRUPOS DE LA DELINCUENCIA ORGANIZADA QUE OPERAN EN LOS ESTADOS DEL SURESTE, ADOPTEN LA ELABORACIÓN DE ESTA DROGA CON EL ESTABLECIMIENTO DE LABORATORIOS CLANDESTINOS.

The document includes sections highlighted in yellow, translated here for clarity:

“It is understood that these clandestine laboratories produce ‘fentanyl,’ a substance currently circulating in the market and regarded as the most lethal drug in Mexico.”

Additionally, “A clandestine laboratory operated by the Sinaloa Cartel is reported to produce approximately 20,000 doses of ‘fentanyl,’ either in powder or pill form, on a weekly basis.”

“The introduction of millions of imports from China could facilitate the entry of fentanyl precursor chemicals into the region. This increases the likelihood that cartels and organized crime groups active in the southeastern states might engage in the production of this drug.”

27

Despite President López Obrador’s repeated public denials of fentanyl production within Mexico, substantial evidence exists that contradicts these assertions. The President’s refusal to acknowledge the existence of fentanyl production may stem from political considerations related to negotiations with the United States regarding the level of American agencies involvement in Mexico’s drug policy. However, this **lack of acknowledgment fails to recognize that neither prohibitionism, punitive enforcement, nor militaristic strategies effectively address the dynamics of the illicit drug market, the violence it engenders, or the economic and political empowerment of the criminal networks that underpin this market.**

It is critical to acknowledge that **current strategies predominantly focus on reducing drug supply, rather than dismantling the extensive macro-criminal networks that obtain substantial economic benefits from controlling this market.** Contrary to a market decline, the introduction of synthetic drugs has restructured the market dynamics, **injecting substantial capital due to decreased production and transportation costs. This shift has led to an escalation in violence, employed as a strategic mechanism to dominate market control.** Within this framework, various organized crime groups, often in collusion with authorities, have honed their strategies to tighten their grip on these lucrative markets.

Between 2019 and 2023, under the auspices of the “National Effort to Combat Drug Trafficking” involving multiple agencies such as SEDENA, SEMAR, NG, National Intelligence Center (CNI), and the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC), there were **74,654 drug-related arrests**⁵⁸ recorded. The lack of transparency in these records obscures the specific nature of the offenses, particularly how many of these arrests were for minor drug crimes. Nonetheless, the prevailing pattern of detentions indicates a systemic inclination toward imprisoning the most marginalized populations associated with the illicit drug trade. Furthermore, SEDENA alone reported **42,627**⁵⁹ **arrests** from 2018 to 2023, **with the highest concentrations in Baja California (5,340), Sonora (4,930), and Guanajuato (4,243).**

- **Emerging Epicenters of Violence**

“**[Mexico] is a peaceful country**⁶⁰.”

—Andrés Manuel López Obrador

58 Government of Mexico. (2023). 5th Government Report 2022-2023, Presidency of the Republic, p. 68. dthx.short.gy/fewpgk

59 Information request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026423002057.

60 Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2024, January 29). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/nxEUeF

Throughout the presidential term, we observed the emergence of new epicenters of violence. The persistence of high rates of disappearances and homicides has expanded into new territories. This period has also been marked by a consistently high lethality index maintained by the military, alongside ongoing human rights violations.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI)⁶¹, the year 2022 recorded 32,223 homicides in Mexico. This figure corresponds to a national homicide rate of 25 per 100,000 inhabitants, a decrease from the 29 per 100,000 observed in 2019. **While 2022 marked the lowest homicide rate within President López Obrador’s term, an alarming total of 142,421 homicides have been committed from December 2018 through December 2022⁶².**

From 2017 to 2022, annual homicide rates consistently remained above 30,000 victims⁶³. During 2022, the states most afflicted by this epidemic of violence included Guanajuato, the State of Mexico, Baja California, Michoacán, and Chihuahua⁶⁴. **In 2023, the most significant number of massacres, both by organized crime groups and governmental authorities, predominantly occurred in Guanajuato, Zacatecas, and Guerrero.⁶⁵**

Beyond merely assessing whether more homicides were reported or if there is a downward trend, the alarmingly high levels are a clear symptom that violence has not been reversed. Mexico is a country particularly fraught with violence against its youth. Throughout the administration, thousands of individuals, predominantly young people, have died as a result of the militaristic strategy to “combat” the illicit drug trade.

Under the guise of fighting a perceived enemy—drug trafficking—violence has not only escalated but intensified due to the fragmentation of criminal

61 INEGI, Homicide Deaths: January to December 2022.

62 Ferri, P. (2023, November 1). Mexico records more than 30,000 murders for the sixth consecutive year. *El País*. dthx.short.gy/5GAAVD

63 INEGI, *Op. Cit.*

64 Osorio Reyes, M. D. (2022). Atlas of Homicides. Mexico 2022. MUCD, p. 26.

65 States in Mexico with the Highest Number of Massacres in 2023. (2023, December 29). *El Economista*. dthx.short.gy/4FNKM7

groups⁶⁶—many of which are in collusion with authorities. In the face of confrontation, these groups often resort to or employ forms of extreme violence.

Part of the escalation in violence is evident in the significant increase in disappearances. Despite this, such incidents are not categorized among the most serious crimes resulting from violence in the security cabinet’s reports. **This oversight occurs within a context where the number of disappearances has spiralled, exceeding 114,673⁶⁷ missing persons.**

Nonetheless, the presidential narrative consistently claims a reduction in violence, stating, “We do not permit torture as was previously the case, we do not allow disappearances, the state does not forcibly disappear any individual, nor are massacres sanctioned as they once were⁶⁸.”

For years, **the practice of disappearing individuals in the context of the so-called “combat” against the illicit drug market has evolved into a mechanism that is both repressive and lucrative. Within the intersecting realms of criminal and state economies, disappearances are employed as a coercive tactic to assert control over individuals and territories.** Often, victims are abducted to be forcibly conscripted into the labor forces of organized crime. And disappearances have also served as a way to convey a message communicating a method of punishment that effectively erases an individual’s identity by concealing their whereabouts and remains⁶⁹. **During President López Obrador’s term, over 40,000 such cases have been documented,** with a notable prevalence in states such as Jalisco, Zacatecas, and various districts of Mexico City⁷⁰.

66 Out of Mexico’s 2,446 municipalities, at least 1,058 report the presence of one or more organized crime groups. As informed by *El Universal* through the Guacamaya Leaks, this information is illustrated in a map of organized crime in Mexico. *El Siglo de Torreón*. dthx.short.gy/nGsaS7

67 NPDNO. (2024) Public version. <https://versionpublicarnpdno.segob.gob.mx/Dashboard/ContextoGeneral>

68 Presidency of the Mexican Republic. (2023, June 1). Presidential morning press conference. dthx.short.gy/d8aLyE

69 González Villareal, R. (n.d.). Forced Disappearance in Mexico: From Repression to Profitability.

70 Tzuc, E. (2023, August 30). The New Epicenters of Disappearance. *A dónde van los desaparecidos*. dthx.short.gy/U7nGrn

Another metric for assessing violence is the army's lethality index, which SEDENA reports within its annual records⁷¹ of "aggressions"⁷². From 2019 through early 2024, the data indicate 1,275 aggressions, resulting in 973 deaths and 207 injuries among aggressors. This equates to a ratio of approximately four fatalities for every individual injured. The disparity in the use of force is starkly highlighted by the ratio of military fatalities to aggressor fatalities: **for every member of the armed forces killed, 12.4 aggressors were murdered.**

The cessation of the "war" as declared by President AMLO did not lead to an end of the warlike approach to combating drug trafficking, nor did it have as a consequence the demilitarization of Mexico or a shift in tactics used against the narcotics trade.

Furthermore, initiatives aimed at enhancing justice and combating corruption have not succeeded in dismantling the powerful criminal networks that control the drug market. The anticipated pacification has not led to a decrease in violence. Since its overt inception in 2006, and spanning nearly three presidential terms, the country has suffered from indiscriminate killings, increasing disappearances, and persistent human rights abuses. The outcomes of AMLO's term, and the narrative surrounding it, have failed to move beyond the warlike, prohibition-based framework. Continuing this strategy will increasingly hinder the ability to create conditions favorable for reparations, justice, the revelation of truth, the safeguarding of human rights, and the rebuilding of the societal fabric.

71 SEDENA. (2023). Aggressions Against Military Personnel 2007 to 2023. dthx.short.gy/r8WQHZ

72 Aggressions: This term refers to incidents where civilians attack government authorities with firearms, compelling the authorities to use their weapons in self-defense. Clashes: These are violent actions conducted exclusively between criminal groups using firearms. SEDENA, Information Request, Elementa DDHH. File number 330026423002056.



Translated by: Aline Cárdenas

The information presented is part of the study:

["Prohibition under assessment: Mexico's Drug Policy 2018-2024"](#)



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(Spanish only)

For more information:

Aurora Sánchez

Communication Strategist

aurora@elementaddhh.org