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Mexican Drug Cartels and Their Effects on Society

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Mexican Drug Cartels and Their Effect on Society

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Abstract

This paper addresses the rapidly growing threat of Mexican Drug Cartels that are operating globally. It covers the history of illicit goods and services and how drug cartels are the latest to take control of these practices. Nine different Mexican Drug Cartels are covered in depth as well as the three major drugs of distribution in today's market. The many threats that Mexican Drug Cartels bring to the Mexican and U.S. population are covered and many horrific examples are given to add context to the extent of the threat proposed by cartels. The numerous illicit businesses cartels have diversified into, as well as their means of success, are covered and expanded on. Possible solutions of Foreign Terrorist Designation for drug cartels and better border security by both the Mexican and U.S. government are presented to help curb the problem and bring back dignity to the citizens of Mexico and the future of society in the U.S.

Key Words: cartels, organized crime, trafficking, violence in Mexico, smuggling

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Introduction

The U.S. has had a long history with the distribution of illegal goods and services that has influenced society in both negative and positive ways. In most recent times, a wide variety of ever evolving Mexican Drug Cartels have captured that influence of problems faced by American and Mexican society. These cartels have become an exacerbating problem that is only gaining steam. The numerous different cartels throughout Mexico have had great success through quickly evolving methods, economic influence, diverse categories of crime, ruthless ways, political influence, and extreme financial gain that exceeds that of many governments; allowing them to become an ever-growing threat to society. These cartels have learned to capitalize on a vulnerable U.S. population that is in high demand of a long list of such drugs as fentanyl, heroin, and meth. With an ever-growing demand that is being met by an ever-growing supply, the system seems to be feeding off itself in a snowballing disaster of a drug addicted society of which criminals are using to build an empire as violence ravishes Mexico and the U.S. Not only has an extremely profitable business been built off supplying drugs, but also such services as the trafficking of human beings for a multitude of services such as sex and labor. On top of this, the smuggling of migrants across the U.S. border has now become a quickly profitable service that is provided by Mexican Drug Cartels as they exploit those in search of a better life. The effects of such lucrative business ran by cartels is bringing severe consequences to both Mexico and the U.S. in many ways including large scale violence while human rights atrocities are committed on a regular basis (Hanan, 2016).

History of Illicit Goods and Services in the U.S.

The distribution of illegal goods in the U.S. has been a problem for many years. The editors at history.com explain how “During the mid-1800s, Chinese immigrants arriving in

California introduced Americans to opium smoking; starting the trading, selling, and distribution of opium to spread throughout the region” (2019, para. 2). In 1920, the prohibition of alcohol brought about a strong black market for the product to be produced, imported, and distributed illegally allowing for criminal organizations to profit greatly while violence escalated as a byproduct until the ratification of the 21st amendment, which ended prohibition in 1933.

Furthermore, history.com explains how:

American Mafia families were caught smuggling and selling illicit drugs as early as the 1950s, in addition to gambling and other illegal activities. These organized groups paved the way for future drug cartels that focused on drugs for their revenue. (Editors, 2019 para. 8)

During this period, criminal organizations profited greatly from the production and distribution of illegal goods, activities, and services while growing in power. Despite the violence and criminal activity, criminal organizations would later use their illegal profits to add to the strong U.S. economy by starting such activities as gambling in the middle of the Nevada desert in a place that would later become known globally for its gambling, Las Vegas.

Rise of Cartels and Their Evolution

Just as the demand for illegal alcohol and drugs was met by a supply from criminal organizations in the early and mid 1900's, the pattern has continued in context to illegal drugs and services provided by cartels that operate globally. The illegal cocaine trade became a major moneymaking opportunity throughout the world in the late 1970's and the Medellin Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, began supplying and smuggling drugs (editors, 2019). With large demands to be met and an unforeseeable fortune waiting to be made “by the mid-1980s, the U.S.-Mexican border became the main transport route for cocaine, marijuana and other drugs into the United

States” (editors, 2019, para. 31). A system of production, movement, and distribution was formed with profitable opportunities to be taken advantage of at every level. Shirk and Wallman explain how Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, in the 1980’s, lead the Guadalajara Cartel to “acquire tremendous wealth through its pioneering efforts in transporting Columbian cocaine” (2015, p. 1357). The article continues to note that “The main trafficking organizations during this period were based in Guadalajara and the Gulf of Mexico and functioned as large umbrella outfits for various smugglers moving product into the United States” (Shirk & Wallman, 2015, p. 1357). The main drugs of focus during this period, because of confluence circumstances, would be cocaine, which was coming from Columbia; marijuana originating in Mexico; and heroin, also produced in Mexico (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). A raid on the marijuana growing operations of the Guadalajara Cartel by the DEA and Mexican authorities would lead to its fall as the Cartel’s top leaders would be arrested in the mid 1980’s (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). Conflicts among remaining leaders would later lead to the formation of three groups, the Juárez, Sinaloa, and Tijuana Cartels (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). From there the formation of Cartels exploded as they each fought to get a foot hold of territories to produce and smuggle drugs.

Today, Mexico is the hot bed for drug cartels who seek to take advantage of huge profits that come from supplying drugs and other lucrative services that have demand. A DEA report notes that current major cartels that continue to evolve throughout Mexico include but are not limited to: The Sinaloa Cartel, Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Los Zetas, Gulf Cartel, Tijuana Cartel/Arellano Félix Organization, Juarez Cartel/Carrillo Fuentes Organization, La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), and The Beltran Leyva Organization, with the CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel currently being at the top (Strategic Intelligence Section DEA, 2015). In a separate report, the DEA also notes that:

Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) are the greatest drug trafficking threat to the United States; they control most of the U.S. drug market and have established varied transportation routes, have advanced communications capabilities, and hold strong affiliations with criminal groups and gangs in the United States. (Strategic Intelligence Section DEA, 2021, p. 4).

These drug cartels have gained a strong hold on power throughout Mexico by way of force, corruption, and numerous other methods. ABC News in-depth (2020) notes that:

Cartels are gaining in strength and influence every year. It used to be that the upper hand was held by the security forces and by the police and the military and they could extort the bribes from the cartels. What we've seen in the last twenty years is some of the cartels have become much more powerful, so it becomes the cartels actually bullying and controlling elements of the security forces. (4:21)

These cartels continue to gain strength and size as they faction into other cartels while corrupting Mexico and the U.S. devastating its population and very foundations.

Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel has been arguably the most successful Drug Trafficking Organization in Mexico for some time now. After the fall of the Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980's, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera is credited for giving rise to the Sinaloa Cartel operating out of Culiacan Mexico (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). The words "is credited" are important here as Calderon explains to Rogan that "El Chapo has been built up to this mythical figure as the head of the Sinaloa Cartel and the main guy, that's not true at all. He was an operator for the Sinaloa Cartel but not the main operator" (2020, 28:44). He goes on to explain how El Mayo Zambada, which is El Chapo's compadre who is still out there has been the actual head of the Sinaloa Cartel since

the start (Rogan, 2020 29:25). He continues to talk of how there are several theories and that the Sinaloa Cartel cannot necessarily be linked to one group but more of a “federation of groups uniting and working in conjunction to put drugs into the United States” along with other things (Rogan, 2020, 29:10). Beittel (2020) writes of how El Chapo was arrested on 3 different occasions, escaping twice before being extradited to the U.S. where he was indicted and convicted by a federal jury in February 2019 (p. 19). From there, he would be sentenced to a life term in prison with an additional 30 years and “ordered to pay \$12.6 billion in forfeiture for being the principal leader of the Sinaloa Cartel and for 26 drug related charges, including a murder conspiracy” (Beittel, 2020, p. 19). After his arrest, the cartel seems to have found longevity and success through moving on to a horizontal structure as opposed hierarchical (Beittel, 2020). Beittel (2020) continues to describe how:

Sinaloa may operate with a more horizontal leadership structure than previously thought. Sinaloa operatives control certain territories, making up a decentralized network of bosses who conduct business and violence through alliances with each other and local gangs. Local gangs throughout the region specialize in specific operations and are then contracted by the Sinaloa DTO network. (p. 19)

This structure is an ever-changing process and “the shape of the cartel in the current landscape is evolving” (Beittel, 2020, p. 19) as new ways to stay at the top are adopted.

The Sinaloa Cartel controls territory in Mexico “particularly along the Pacific Coast in northwestern Mexico and near Mexico’s southern and northern borders” and maintains the most expansive international footprint of all the Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (Strategic Intelligence Section DEA, 2021, p. 66). On top of this, the Sinaloa Cartel has a strong presence in areas of influence through distribution hubs of major cities across the U.S. which they use to

partake in a vast amount of criminal activity (Strategic Intelligence Section DEA, 2021). As of now they remain the primary fentanyl threat to the U.S.

Los Zetas

While the height of Los Zetas Cartel was sometime around 2011-2012 and they are now less powerful and perhaps better known to be associated with Cartel Del Noreste (Strategic Intelligence Section DEA, 2021) it is highly necessary to talk about them as they have changed the way cartels operate from a violence and militaristic standpoint. Los Zetas originally started as somewhat of a protection squad for the Gulf Cartel in the late 1990's. Originally comprised of 31 special forces soldiers from the Mexican Military, Los Zetas took up an offer from the Gulf Cartel to leave the military and protect Gulf Cartel Leadership (Logan, 2012). According to Beittel, "Los Zetas originally consisted of former elite airborne special force members of the Mexican army who defected to the Gulf DTO and became its hired assassins" (2020, p. 22). These former members of the Special Forces arm of the Mexican Military known as Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales or GAFE (Valencia, 2014), had elite special training and knowledge and were able to pass this information on to other members of the organization to form a dominant and violent force in a way that "all of the new recruits were well equipped to build out a paramilitary narco-army to protect the boss and do his bidding" (Logan, 2012, para. 3). To further elaborate on the level of training these Cartel Hitmen have received, Valencia (2014) describes how:

The former GAFE members have all received specialized training in fields such as jungle, amphibious and urban combat from some of the best counterterrorism and counterinsurgency units in the globe. They have the ability to blend in and operate in foreign territories. Their role in the past was to protect security officials and important

buildings to assisting the government in dismantling drug cartels. It is evident that this unit has one of the most distinguished resumes in all of Mexico. (p. 3)

Los Zetas were ruthless, violent, and so well trained that no other organization, whether it be rival cartels or law enforcement, could counter their actions. Secret missions were led by these ruthless killers through cities and towns to execute rivals and “ensure that the Gulf Cartel became the most powerful drug trafficking organization in the Tamaulipas and along Mexico’s Gulf Coast” (Logan, 2012, para. 4).

Los Zetas would later abandon the Gulf Cartel as they realized their potential to form their own organization. Without caring about winning the hearts and minds of local populations as with other cartels, Los Zetas “are linked to a number of massacres, such as the 2011 firebombing of a casino in Monterrey that killed 53 people and the 2011 torture and mass execution of 193 migrants who were traveling through northern Mexico by bus” (Beittel, 2020, p. 23). The ruthless cartel is known to kill those who don’t pay extortion fees or decline to work for them while often targeting migrants (Beittel, 2020). Beittel continues to describe the violence when he talks of how “Los Zetas used intimidation as a strategy to maintain control of territory, making use of social media and public displays of bodies and body parts to send messages to frighten Mexican security forces, the local citizenry, and rival organizations” (2020, p. 23). Violence was their upper hand and “operations were often capped off with an unprecedented act of barbarism” (Logan, 2012, para. 5). Such an approach seemed to grant them great success through fear and rivals would have to expand upon recruiting and training while matching the ruthlessness and violence to counter that of Los Zetas as they made a name for themselves through brutality (Logan, 2012). Los Zetas leaders would eventually get overtaken by Mexican Military and the group would faction into Cartel Del Noreste (Beittel, 2020).

Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

In response to Los Zetas and their militaristic expertise that has converged with brutality through violence, the Sinaloa cartel brought on an enforcement group of their own. The Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (New Generation Cartel or CJNG) got its start in 2010 and were known as the MetaZetas or Zeta killers considering their role in battling Los Zetas (Jones, 2018). Jones (2018) talks of how “the CJNG appeared to be acting as an independent OCG in alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel effectively functioning like an armed wing as the Zetas had for the Gulf Cartel” (p. 21). In Veracruz during 2011, CJNG forces were sent to battle rival Zetas over control of lucrative ports in the region with the result being a massacre of 35 supposed Zeta rivals and years of massive violence to follow (Jones, 2018). It is reported by Jones (2018) that:

Authorities discovered a mass grave in March 2017 with 250 young peoples’ bodies. A week later, authorities found dozens more skulls in a separate site, leading the state Attorney General Jorge Winckler to call the state one big mass grave. (p. 21)

Such violent clashes began with Los Zetas. They are now being adopted by rival cartels in an effort to keep up and survive in the industry. The CJNG has since moved on from their birth in 2010 to the “funding and support of their self-defense forces in 2012, and the February 2013 split with the Sinaloa Cartel” (Jones, 2018, p. 21). Beittel (2020) explains how “the CJNG evidently has battled against its former partner, Sinaloa, in a number of regions and has been deemed by several authorities to be Mexico’s new most expansive cartel” (p. 20). According to Jones (2018), “it has become increasingly clear the CJNG was its own organization” (p. 23). He goes on to explain a situation in 2016 where two of El Chapo’s sons were kidnapped by members of the CJNG and their release was negotiated at the expense of trafficking corridors and money (Jones, 2018).

CJNG is led by Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera Ramos who spent significant time in U.S. prison in which he used to do recruiting for the organization. He went on to align with Los Cuinis, Which the DEA identified as the wealthiest organized crime group in Mexico and was led by El Menchos brother-in-law Abigael “El Cuini” Gonzalez Valencia until his arrest in 2015 (Jones, 2018). Operating out of the State of Jalisco and more specifically Guadalajara, the CJNG has a documented presence in 27 Mexican states and has alliances and small cells in all 32 states (Jones, 2018; Beittel, 2020). The CJNG is heavily militarized, possesses vast amounts of sophisticated weaponry, and has even begun to manufacture their own weapons (Jones, 2018). Jones (2018) adds that “the capacity to purchase/manufacture weapons that do not have to be smuggled from the US market is a fascinating new capability for Mexican organized crime leaving only trafficking of ammunition” (p. 25). Furthermore, such tactics as drones with attached explosives and even the downing of a Mexican military helicopter during a May 2015 direct confrontation shows how “the CJNG has proven itself ready to challenge the government directly” (Jones, 2018, p. 24). Calderon speaks to Rogan (2020) of how the way CJNG does things is very militaristic, and the organization is highly militarized while still adapting the hearts and minds approach to win over locals and gain power (34:40). They seem to want to exclude themselves from violence with locals and civilians while moving drugs and doing whatever necessary to counter rivals (Rogan, 2020). Calderon goes on “they have militaristic training camps where they recruit people, they take them there, and they’re being trained in guerilla warfare, and shooting, and apparently there is some SF guys from the U.S. that advise them” (Rogan, 2020, 36:09). “They have actually downed military helicopters in Guadalajara”, explains Calderon (Rogan, 2019, 41:40). He continues to talk of the evolution of simple cartel members to an actual cohesive paramilitary group while describing the CJNG (Rogan, 2020, 36:25). There

are even talks that the CJNG has purchased training from Israelis (Rogan, 2020; Jones, 2018). The CJNG is currently considered by many to be the upcoming premier cartel and is extremely powerful (Beittel, 2020; Rogan, 2019).

Gulf Cartel

Beittel (2020) explains how the Gulf Cartel has been around for a long time starting with bootlegging in the 1920's and moving on to dealing with Columbian cocaine into the 1980's. However, it wasn't until the early 2000's that the Gulf Cartel was considered one of the most powerful Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations as its violent leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, brought about Los Zetas from elite special forces military units to join the organization (Beittel, 2020). Cárdenas Guillén, now sits in a U.S. prison after being extradited to the U.S. in 2007 (Madureira, 2020). After Los Zetas decided they had enough authority to branch off and be their own criminal organization, the Gulf Cartel was left battling its former enforcement wing and has since split into several fragmented gangs (Beittel, 2020). Beittel (2020) also notes how there were other reasons that caused a fall out between the Gulf Cartel and their hitmen, Los Zetas. There is now even speculation that the Gulf Cartel has fragmented so much that it is no longer an entire entity but factions of its former factions (Beittel, 2020). The Gulf Cartel, and it's now many fragmented factions, operate directly across the U.S. border from Brownsville, Texas in the town of Matamoros, Tamaulipas and are expanding outwards as they bring violence through kidnapping, murder, extortion, and fuel theft to many parts of northeastern Mexico (beittel, 2020). Tamaulipas has been known for its smuggling of illicit goods with some reports going all the way back to the 1850's (Flores Pérez, 2013). Beittel (2020) writes of how "from 2014 through 2016, Tamaulipas state reported daily kidnappings, daytime shootings, and burned down bars and restaurants in towns and cities in many parts of the state" (p. 22).

Like many other cartels, the Gulf Cartel has always had long deep ties with political corruption (Flores Pérez, 2013) and their most recent leader, José Alfredo Cárdenas Martínez, has seemed to have maintained these ties. In 2018 and 2019, Cárdenas Martínez, who is the nephew of former leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, was arrested on charges of kidnapping only to be released a short time later (Madureira, 2022). Recently, Mexican authorities have detained Cárdenas Martínez once again. This time after being linked to an attack where 15 suspected rival cartel members were gunned down in Reynosa city (Madureira, 2020). Madureira (2020) goes on to note how this is the third time in four years Cárdenas has been detained and time will only tell if his deep-rooted political ties will set him free again. Beittel (2020) notes that:

Analysts have reported that the structures of both the Gulf DTO and Los Zetas have been decimated by federal action and combat between each other, and both groups now operate largely as fragmented cells that do not communicate with each other and often take on new names. (p. 22)

Like other cartels, human smuggling and drug trafficking are highly profitable businesses for Cárdenas' gang, which has known distribution hubs in Houston, Detroit, and Atlanta (Madureira, 2020).

Tijuana Cartel/Arellano Félix Organization

The Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), or Tijuana Cartel, is known to be somewhat of a tollgate organization as they control the highly sought-after area of Tijuana, Mexico on the U.S./Mexico border just across from San, Diego, California (Beittel, 2020). With this area being so highly sought after, the Tijuana Cartel is able to hold it hostage while charging other traffickers to move product through. This valuable location conjoins Baja California, which is in Mexico, with Southern California, which is in the United States. Beittel (2020) notes how

Tijuana has been ravished with violence off and on for decades as the AFO dominated the drug trade in the 1990's and early 2000's and "in 2008, Tijuana became one of the most violent cities in Mexico" due to the splitting of the cartel into factions, one of which was allied with the Sinaloa Cartel (p. 18). Furthermore, Tijuana recorded more than 100 murders per month in 2016 and lead all of Mexico in number of homicides in 2018 and 2019, Beittel (2020) notes. Calderon explains to Rogan while being interviewed that Tijuana is and has been one of the most dangerous places in the entire world (Rogan, 2020).

The organization gets its name from descending nieces and nephews of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, consisting of seven brothers and four sisters, who inherited the business after his arrest in 1989 for the murder of Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, an American DEA agent (Beittel, 2020). Félix Gallardo was the one of the previously spoken of founders of drug trafficking in Mexico and head of the Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980's. His fall led to the fractioning of the organization and giving rise to the Tijuana Cartel as his roots were already engrained in northeast Mexico (InSight Crime, 2018). As leaders of the drug trafficking organization have come and gone due to arrests and further fractioning, violence has continued to escalate as other cartels vision opportunity to gain control of the area. InSight Crime (2018) states:

Due to infighting, arrests and the deaths of many top leaders, the organization is a shell of what it was in the 1990s and early 2000s, when it was considered one of Mexico's most potent and violent criminal groups. Still the cartel continues to export narcotics and may be expanding its presence internationally. (para. 1)

It appears that Fernando "El Ingeniero" Sánchez Arellano, who is a nephew of one of the inheriting brothers of the organization, passed the AFO on to his mother following his 2010 arrest and cartels continue to battle for the area while "the AFO appears to have maintained

control of the plaza through an agreement between Sánchez Arellano and the Sinaloa DTO's leadership, with Sinaloa and other trafficking groups paying a fee to use the plaza" (Beittel, 2020, p. 18).

The AFO is currently headed by the previously mentioned mother of Sánchez Arellano, Enedina Arellano Félix aka "La Narcomami", an accountant and the sister of the original founding members (Beittel, 2020; InSight Crime, 2018). However, the CJNG is the latest cartel to make a move on Tijuana in an attempt to control the plaza. Some have analyzed that the CJNG and the remnants of the AFO are beginning to forge an alliance further attributing to the never-ending violence in Tijuana (Beittel, 2020).

Juarez Cartel/Carrillo Fuentes Organization

As previously mentioned, the fall of Miguel Ángel Felix Gallardo and the Guadalajara cartel led to the creation of three groups: The Sinaloa Cartel, Tijuana Cartel, and Juarez Cartel (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). As members of the Guadalajara Cartel branched off, Amado Carrillo Fuentes led the Juarez Cartel, which started in the 1980's and "controlled the smuggling corridors between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, TX" (Beittel, 2020, pg. 20). Being an extremely valuable corridor in and out of the United States for Columbian cocaine as well as Mexican grown marijuana, Carrillo Fuentes strategically allied with the Sinaloa Cartel to control half of all narcotics trafficking through Mexico (Beittel, 2020; Shirk & Wallman, 2015). Carrillo Fuentes supposedly died during plastic surgery in 1997 while trying to change his appearance by facial reconstruction and the organization was turned over to his brother Vicente Carrillo Fuentes (Shirk & Wallman, 2015). In 2014, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes was arrested, and the Juarez Cartel has splintered into many smaller groups with an unclear idea if the organization still exists under one unified leader (Shirk & Wallman, 2015; InSight Crime, 2020a).

In 2008, Juarez became one of the most dangerous cities in the world due to the fallout between the Juarez and Sinaloa Cartels (Beittel, 2020). Beittel (2020) continues to write stating that:

From 2008 to 2011, the Sinaloa DTO and the Juárez DTO fought a “turf war,” and Ciudad Juárez experienced a wave of violence with spikes in homicides, extortion, kidnapping, and theft—at one point reportedly experiencing 10 murders a day. From 2008 to 2012, the violence in Juárez cost about 10,000 lives. Reportedly, more than 15% of the population displaced by drug-related violence inside Mexico between 2006 and 2010 came from the border city, even though it had only slightly more than 1% of Mexico’s population. (p. 21)

Just across the border from El Paso, Texas, this turf war between cartels ravished the city of Juarez as incredible violence snowballed throughout. Bodies strung from bridges, decapitations, dismemberment, and daytime shootings were all familiar scenes. Beaubien (2008) notes how municipal police corruption was rampant, and locals were looking for ways to defend themselves as they went about their everyday lives. Mexican president Felipe Calderon took up an aggressive approach to the problem by sending “thousands of federal police and soldiers to confront the gangs” (Beaubien, 2008, para. 11). This led to an even greater escalation of violence. The Sinaloa Cartel eventually emerged victorious in this turf war scattering the Juarez Cartel into smaller groups (Beittel, 2020).

After the turf war, violence in Juarez dropped considerably and has continued to keep a steady pattern of escalation and de-escalation since then (Beittel, 2020; InSight Crime, 2020a). The Juarez Cartel is now known to be associated with La Línea, of which a clear leader is not known (InSight Crime, 2020a). InSight Crime (2020a) mentions that this group is linked to the

2019 gruesome murder of nine dual US-Mexican citizens consisting of women and children traveling in a van that were members of a cross-border Mormon community. Even through major splintering and the loss of a turf war, remnants of the Juarez Cartel still maintain a foothold in the area with a measure of control over police, politicians, and local gang enforcers while transporting heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana (InSight Crime, 2020a; Strategic Intelligence Section, 2020).

La Familia Michoacana

Operating out of Michoacana in the southern pacific part of Mexico, La Familia Michoacana (LFM) uses the common tactics of drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and racketeering to make large illicit profits (InSight Crime, 2020b). Michoacán has been known for its ties to drug trafficking for many years as the state is highly populated with poor farmers growing marijuana and poppy (InSight Crime, 2020b). Like the Sinaloa Cartel, LFM adopted somewhat of a hearts and minds approach in western Michoacán while becoming known for resolving public disputes in the community, providing employment, and doing social work (InSight Crime, 2020b). Beittel (2020) notes that, “LFM members reportedly made donations of food, medical care, schools, and other social services to benefit the poor in rural communities to project a populist “Robin Hood” image” (p. 25). LFM started in the 1980’s and would eventually align itself with Los Zetas before splintering from the group in 2006 announcing that they would operate independently (Beittel, 2020). Armed with the vicious military tactics learned from Los Zetas, LFM set out to protect Michoacán from drug traffickers and quickly became famous for extreme symbolic violence as well as a religious justification for its actions (Beittel, 2020). InSight Crime (2020b) notes that LFM was known for such things as using billboards and dramatic violence to communicate with their rivals as well as the public. In one case that made

international news, LFM dumped 5 severed heads on a nightclub dancefloor to announce their separation from Los Zetas and their official existence (InSight Crime, 2020b).

Leadership for LFM started with Nazario “El Más Loco” Moreno González who faked his own death in a 2010 shootout with police claiming that the body had been stolen (Beittel, 2020). It turns out Moreno González had set out to form the splinter cell Knights Templar and he was identified through fingerprints after being killed by federal police in a 2014 shootout (InSight Crime, 2020b). It is not exactly clear who oversees LFM today although it is thought that Hector Garcia “El Player”, controls most of the operations (InSight Crime, 2020b). Even though the Cartel is located some 600 plus miles from the U.S. border, InSight Crime (2020b) notes that:

When the Familia was at the height of its power, it was one of the most potent, bloody and powerful of Mexico’s criminal organizations, whose activities ranged from drug trafficking and kidnapping to extortion and racketeering. The Familia had international contacts for methamphetamine distribution, including in Holland, India, China and Bulgaria. Criminal groups based in the US, including in major cities like Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and Atlanta, conspired directly with the Familia for cocaine shipments, a development which surprised investigators, considering the group’s distance from the U.S. border. (para. 7)

The DEA Strategic Intelligence Section (2020) notes that LFM has significantly weakened in recent years although it still holds ties with the CJNG as well as a few other smaller cartels.

Los Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar)

The Knights Templar is a fragment cartel that splintered off from La Familia Michoacana in 2011 after the false death of the LFM leader. Michoacán would now be split between LFM

and the Knights Templar. The cartel displayed their existence through banners displayed in Michoacán that stated how they would be implementing the “altruistic activities that were previously performed by the Familia Michoacana” (InSight Crime, 2020c, para. 3). In a strange, twisted way, the Knights Templar Cartel has tied in narco-trafficking and violence throughout Mexico with religion. Chesnut (2018) writes that the Knights Templar of Michoacana:

developed a peculiar messianic ideology that blended Old Testament principles salient in Evangelical Protestantism, folk Catholicism, and a medieval European code of chivalry based on the original Knights Templar who protected Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem and did battle against Muslims for control of the Holy Land. (para. 3)

Chesnut (2018) continues to discuss how the cartel has taken up signature Christian symbols such as the Cross Patteé, which is the cross of the original Knights Templar, to appeal to the people of Michoacana, while taking into consideration Mexico has a high population of Catholics and Christians. A narco-trafficking organization disguised as a group out to defend the people of Michoacana from other violent cartels and crime, the Knights Templar has adopted such things as Roman warrior-type chain mail, helmets, and swords with the signature red cross to wear during rituals and special occasions such as the induction of new members (Chesnut, 2018; InSight Crime, 2020c). InSight Crime (2020c) also states how this type of portrayal reflects a persona of “Champions in the fight against materialism, injustice, and tyranny” (para. 4). Ironically, The Knights Templar Cartel operates under a code of conduct of which little is publicly known (Fox News, 2016). Such articles command the cartel members to: selflessly love and serve all of humanity; and understand that there is a God, a life created by him, an eternal truth and a divine purpose to serve God and mankind; along with others have been adopted by the cartel and Chesnut (2018) lays out How these Christian precepts are “designed to make cartel

members feel they are serving a larger purpose than the cultivation, manufacture, and sale of drugs, primarily methamphetamine and marijuana” (para. 3). This hypocrisy is grossly difficult to understand considering the gruesome violence, extortion, and narco-terroristic activities that this cartel is known to engage in, not to mention the death and destruction brought about by the drugs they distribute. InSight Crime (2020c) notes that this cartel, at the height of its reign, was estimated to have extorted 85 percent of local businesses in Michoacán for protection fees. The Knights Templar is also said to have moved heavily into the business of mining for iron ore from illegally operated mines (Beittel, 2020).

An advantage the Knights Templar Cartel shared with La Familia Michoacana is the location itself. Michoacana is home to the major port city of Puerto Lazaro Cardenas giving access to “cocaine shipments from South America as well as methamphetamine precursor from Asia, which the group either uses itself or sends north to the border with the United States” (InSight Crime, 2020c, para. 5). This location being so far from the border also leaves the Knights Templar Cartel having to negotiate with other cartels to move product north (InSight Crime, 2020c). The knights Templar also dealt with heavy pushback from a Michoacán self-defense group known as “autodefensa” who set out to rid Michoacán from violent criminal groups due to lack of effectiveness from Mexican law enforcement (Beittel, 2020). Beittel (2020) notes these armed citizens of the state took it upon themselves to target members of the Knights Templar.

Leadership of the Knights Templar Cartel started with Nazario Moreno González, the thought to be dead former leader of LFM, until his confirmed 2014 death (Beittel, 2020). A week after the death of Moreno González, another top leader named Enrique Plancarte was also killed leaving Servando “La Tuta” Gómez in charge until his capture (Beittel, 2020). La Tuta, was

known to like the attention of the media and his liking for this attention is said to have assisted with his downfall (Beittel, 2020; InSight Crime, 2020c). The power of The Knights Templar is said to have diminished greatly over the years since the capture of La Tuta and the port of Lázaro Cárdenas is said to have had a federal takeover ridding it of illicit cartel activity, which is likely a lie considering the extreme corruption of the Mexican government (InSight Crime, 2020c; Beittel, 2020). It is claimed that splinter groups of the cartel, such as Los Viagras, continue to battle other organizations such as CJNG for control over the area (InSight Crime, 2020c).

Beltran Leyva Organization

The Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO) started out as part of the Sinaloa Federation and was founded by Beltran Leyva brothers: Marcos, Arturo, Carlos, Alfredo, and Héctor (Beittel, 2020; Salazar & Olson, 2011). Sinaloa Cartel leader “El Chapo” Guzman and the Beltran Leyva Brothers came to know each other doing work as hitmen and transporters for the original Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980’s, and as time went on, they became closer through marriage and family ties (InSight Crime, 2020). A bloody war ensued following the split between BLO and the Sinaloa Cartel in 2008 after the arrest of BLO leader Alfredo Beltran Leyva (InSight Crime, 2021; Beittel, 2020). It has been reported that Sinaloa Cartel leader “El Chapo” Guzman provided intelligence to officials leading to the arrest of Alfredo and ever since, the cartels have been bitter rivals (Beittel, 2020). Following the 2009 killing of Arturo Beltran Leyva and the arrest of Carlos Beltran Leyva, Hector Beltran Leyva took what was left of BLO and started up the South Pacific Cartel which would later re-take the name Beltran Leyva Organization and thrive under Hector until his 2014 arrest (Beittel, 2020). According to InSight Crime (2021) Hector allied with Los Zetas for added protection against the Sinaloa Cartel during their bloody feud. Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez would take over the organization until being killed by

Mexican Marines in a shootout leaving BLO lacking leadership and going from one of Mexico's most powerful groups to a splintered and fractioned organization (InSight Crime, 2021).

BLO is no longer the powerful structure it once was and known splinter groups such as Guerreros Unidos and Los Rojos have risen while a few other small groups still claim loyalty to Beltran Leyva Organization (InSight Crime, 2021; Beittel, 2020). These splinter factions currently rely on other cartels such as CJNG, Juárez Cartel, and Los Zetas for drug trafficking across the U.S. Border (Beittel, 2020). InSight Crime (2021) reports that Los Rojos have become an "important splinter cell in the central and southeastern part of Mexico, especially in the state of Guerrero" (para. 15). The DEA reports that they are a heroin trafficking organization with ties to the U.S. and partake in extortion, homicides, kidnappings, and human trafficking as they fight with Guerreros Unidos over the heroin trade (InSight Crime, 2021).

Evolution of Cartel Distributed Drugs

Just as most things evolve with time, the demand for drugs has been no different. While it can be argued which came first, the supply or demand, what isn't arguable is that deadly drugs are becoming more readily available for consumers and more profitable for criminal organizations such as Mexican Drug Cartels. As previously mentioned, opium has been in the U.S. for well over 100 years and from there cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and other drugs became popular. While the illegal market for marijuana still exists, it is starting to die down as its legalization grows. Cocaine is still produced, imported, and distributed illegally by Cartels but today's largest profits in the drug category come from heroin, Fentanyl, and Meth.

Heroin

As previously stated, heroin has been smuggled across the U.S./Mexico border for many years. However, A Congressional Research Service report prepared for members and committees

of congress notes that, “Over the past several years, the nation has seen an uptick in the use of opioids, both prescription opioids and non-prescription opioids such as heroin” (Finklea, 2019, para. 1). Finklea (2019) goes on to state how:

Heroin seizures across the country, as well as those at the Southwest border, have generally increased over the past decade. Nationwide heroin seizures reached 7,979 kg in 2017, with 3,090 kg (39%) seized at the Southwest border. This is up from about 2,000 kg seized at the Southwest border a decade prior. Further, there has been an increase in federal arrests and sentences for heroin-related crimes. (para. 3)

Interestingly, many opioid addicts have come about due to long time use of pain pills, many of which were prescribed for chronic pain or post-surgery. With heroin being a cheaper alternative to get the same fix, cartels have taken advantage of this situation as they produce and distribute the drug throughout the United States to those in need. Dismukes (2018) states that, “When those who misused prescription opioids could no longer afford them or sought a more powerful drug to satisfy the intense cravings that accompany opioid use disorder, they began to turn more and more frequently to heroin” (para. 3). The same article goes on to explain that:

By 2014, 79% of the heroin seized and analyzed by the DEA was Mexican white powder. Mexican cartels, which had well-established transportation routes for marijuana and cocaine trafficking, now turned their focus toward the increasingly lucrative heroin trafficking business. The Mexican cartels began to coordinate trafficking with the South American heroin producers, and also began to produce their own white powder heroin. Today white powder heroin markets in the northeast are the largest and most lucrative and are dominated by the Mexican cartels. Mexican traffickers are the most prevalent

source for the heroin market in New Jersey, which, in turn, is the source of supply for most of the white powder heroin in North Carolina. (Dismukes, 2018, para. 5)

As can be seen by the given information, A quickly growing demand for opioids has been noticed and taken full advantage of by Mexican Drug Cartels as they seek to maximize profits while feeding off the vulnerable and addicted.

Fentanyl

Fentanyl is the biggest drug of concern in reference to the illegal drug market today. According to Rusin (2019) “in 2013, illicit fentanyl reemerged on American Soil and began its current and rapid ascent to the top of the illegal drug pyramid” (p. 6). Today, fentanyl is driving a true drug epidemic as well as national emergency in the U.S. as a powerful synthetic opioid that delivers an intense feeling of euphoria (Rusin, 2019). Like morphine but 50 to 100 times more potent, the Schedule II (highly addictive) prescription drug was developed to treat patients with severe pain stemming from disease, injury, or surgery (Rusin, 2019). The drug boomed in the 1990’s and 2000s as it earned a reputation to treat pain for extended periods of time when other opioids could not (Rusin, 20019). Naturally the demand for fentanyl, along with the potency and success with pain treatment, gave way to an illicit market that continues to grow today. One statistic that separates fentanyl from other opioids is its profitability. “An initial \$5,000 USD investment can bring returns of over \$1.5M USD” (Rusin, 2019, p. 4). The drug is often seen in pill form but has become more and more popular as “a widespread additive in almost every street drug from marijuana to cocaine” explains Rusin (2019, p. 4). Illicit fentanyl, which typically originates from China:

Possesses potency typically exceeding pharmaceutical grade fentanyl, minute doses (.25 mg—the equivalent of a few grains of salt) can be fatal. With over 500 lethal doses

contained in just one sugar packet, overdoses and deaths via over-consumption, over-mixing, and even inadvertent glancing contact continue to spike. (Rusin, 2019, p. 7)

The drug is most often found on the illegal market as an additive, with the user often not knowing it is there, which has led to a spike in overdose cases involving fentanyl. Rusin (2019) explains in the report covering fentanyl use that:

illicit fentanyl also found its way (mixed as an additive) into the myriad of other less potent street drugs; unsurprisingly, fentanyl overdoses and fatalities increased year after year. By the end of 2016, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and DEA stated the U.S. faced a fentanyl flood—responsible for approximately 20,000 deaths for the year; a 540 percent increase over just three years. This frightening trend combined with new and even more potent fentanyl derivatives (carfentanil—100 times stronger than fentanyl) hitting the street every few months drove the Trump administration to declare fentanyl a public health emergency in 2017. (p. 7)

Vulnerable men and women throughout the world's population are falling victim to this fentanyl crisis which only seems to be gaining steam.

Per the DEA's website, "Illicit fentanyl, primarily manufactured in foreign clandestine labs and smuggled into the United States through Mexico, is being distributed across the country and sold on the illegal drug market" ("Facts about Fentanyl", n.d., para. 2). Mexican drug cartels are playing the main role when it comes to supplying deadly illicit fentanyl to the U.S. population. Overdose cases grow daily, and the drug is getting harder and harder to distinguish as it is masked to be something else. Strupp (2021) explains how "Users and even many dealers don't know that fentanyl may be hidden inside pills, dyed blue and stamped to look like the

prescription pain pill oxycodone or OxyContin” (para. 6). Strupp (2021) goes on to say, “On the streets, the pills are known as "Mexican Oxy" or "M30s" because the cartels stamp one side with "30" and the other with an "M"” (Strupp, 2021, para. 6). Furthermore, the Department of Justice (2021) writes:

Mexican criminal drug networks are mass-producing illicit fentanyl and fentanyl-laced fake pills, using chemicals sourced largely from China, and are distributing these pills through U.S. criminal networks. These fake pills are designed to appear nearly identical to legitimate prescriptions such as Oxycontin®, Percocet®, Vicodin®, Adderall®, Xanax® and other medicines. Criminal drug networks are selling these pills through social media, e-commerce, the dark web and existing distribution networks. As a result, these fake pills are widely available. (para. 4)

This shows the role of Mexican Drug Cartels in the distribution of fentanyl throughout the U.S. to mass populations. With maximum profits being made off the drug, it has quickly become a prized money maker.

Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine has been a popular drug for some time now. Even with new drugs such as fentanyl beginning to gain popularity by both users and suppliers, the low price and high potency of methamphetamine has allowed it to remain a huge problem for the U.S. and a vulnerable population. Per the DEA National Drug Threat Assessment, “Most of the methamphetamine available in the United States is clandestinely produced in Mexico and smuggled across the Southwest Border” (Strategic Intelligence Section, 2021, p. 19). The DEA reports of how the west, Midwest, and southeast regions of the country have been the most vulnerable but in recent years the drugs popularity has pushed into such areas as the Northeast

(Strategic Intelligence Section, 2021). Consumption and overdose deaths continue to rise at rapid rates as Law Enforcement at the Federal, local, and State levels struggle to get a grasp on the down spiraling situation.

Mexican Drug Cartels rely heavily on the importation of methamphetamine pre-cursor chemicals primarily from such places as China and India (Strategic Intelligence Section, 2021). Most of these pre-cursor chemicals are heavily regulated within the United States. Due to such regulation, the DEA states regarding domestic meth production within the U.S. that, “Domestic producers have been unable to keep up with the quantity or quality of the lower cost methamphetamine produced on an industrial scale in Mexico” (Strategic Intelligence Section, 2021, p. 23). In Mexico, with access to such chemicals, meth can be processed in laboratories both big and small. “Chemical shipments are mislabeled at the origin, shipped to legitimate companies, and then diverted by the Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) and smuggled to the clandestine laboratories” (Strategic Intelligence Section, 2021, p. 20). After being smuggled across the border by various methods, meth gets distributed throughout the U.S. by way of gangs and traffickers alike while huge profits come back in return.

China’s Involvement

China plays a large role in the movement of drugs that enter the United States. Calderon states that “a lot of the people that are making or producing fentanyl in places like Mexico are from China setting up laboratories in Mexico” (Rogan, 2020, 40:00). Fashola and Greenwood (2021) write how “China remains the primary country of origin for illicit fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances trafficked into the United States” (p. 1). Pre-cursor chemicals are the focus of shipment to Mexico where they are then processed and put into pill form or added to other drugs (Fashola & Greenwood, 2021). With weak supervision of the chemical and pharmaceutical

industry in China, the process of deportation to other countries for processing has been made easy (Fashola & Greenwood, 2021). China has become a supplier of pre-cursor chemicals to Mexico, and Mexico has become a supplier of the finished product to the United States. Fashola and Greenwood (2021) explain how:

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) assesses Chinese traffickers have shifted from primarily manufacturing finished fentanyl to primarily exporting precursors to Mexican cartels, who manufacture illicit fentanyl and deliver the final product. U.S. law enforcement has seen a growing trend of Chinese nationals, in both Mexico and the United States, working with Mexican cartels. As Chinese suppliers coordinate more with international partners, the DEA is concerned that fentanyl production is becoming increasingly global and more difficult to track and control. (p. 1)

All the while, as the process of getting drugs into the U.S. expands around the globe, more and more actors are starting to get in on the profits and more and more criminal business opportunities are rising as a side effect. India has become a “prominent source country for Mexican drug trafficking organizations” (Fashola & Greenwood, 2021, p. 5) and with a need to show legitimate income for transactions involving money from Drugs, “Chinese brokers are laundering Mexican drug money through China’s financial system” (Fashola & Greenwood, 2021, p. 1). Dalby (2021) writes of how Chinese nationalists are using some of the most sophisticated money laundering tactics that have ever been seen while the Chinese government turns a blind eye. Many Chinese nationals own legitimate businesses in Mexico and use those businesses for money laundering activities (Dalby, 2021). Dalby (2021) goes on to give an example of how:

In late April, a US-based Chinese citizen, Gan Xianbing, was sentenced to 14 years in prison for running a scheme where money from Mexican criminal groups was picked up in Chicago, transferred to bank accounts in China and then ultimately sent back to Mexico. (para. 3)

With Gan being the most well-known example, there are many other instances of Chinese money launderers that are connected to Latin American criminal groups including the Sinaloa Cartel (Dalby, 2021).

Ellis (2011) writes how criminal ties between China and Latin America are in a state of expansion and have great implications for the United States. Ellis (2011) goes on to write how: First, the majority of ethnic Chinese being smuggled through Latin America, and a good portion of the synthetic drugs produced from precursor chemicals originating in the PRC, are destined for the United States. Second, expanding money laundering options involving Chinese banks and companies benefit Latin America-based transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) such as the Mexican cartels and Colombian BACRIM (that is, criminal bands), which the United States is directly combating. (p. 74)

Along with money laundering and drug trafficking, Ellis (2011) talks of arms trafficking, human trafficking, and trafficking in contraband goods as other criminal activities partaken in by Chinese criminals with Latin American criminal organizations.

Effects on Economy and Local Communities

Organized crime has had tremendous effects on economies in both positive and negative ways, as previously mentioned. Lyman (2019) talks of how gambling in Las Vegas, Nevada was started by mafioso such as Myer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel with money made by illegitimate criminal means, helping it to become the gambling mecca it is today. Lyman (2019) states that,

“Bugs and Meyer pioneered Las Vegas on behalf of East Coast organized crime interests, investing money from New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and other areas” (p. 382). In reference to both Lansky and Siegel, Lyman (2019) continues to write:

after Prohibition, he and Siegel cast their eyes farther afield to the West, the Sunbelt, and the Caribbean. In Miami, Lansky initiated the Gold Coast, with its hotels and casinos; in Cuba, he created Batista’s leisure empire; in Nevada and California, he used syndicate money to create a network of enterprises. (p. 380)

This is a clear prime example of how organized crime groups have taken money made off criminal means and used it to start legitimate businesses that brought millions of dollars to local economies and circulated more tax dollars. In this case, illegitimate money made during prohibition, was used to build hotels and casinos in such places as Miami and Cuba, as well as Nevada and California.

In the same way that the mafia built legitimate businesses with criminal money in the early and mid 1900’s. Cartels use money made through illegal activities to build businesses throughout Mexico that have significant positive effects on the Mexican economy. Calderon explains to Rogan (2020) that it is similar to the mob and Las Vegas in the 50’s and 60’s but “way more hardcore” (23:00). Calderon also explains that “Cartels aren’t just a drug fueled business, they also have money that is in property and legitimized businesses” (Rogan, 2019, 54:40). He goes on to explain how Cartels have taken drug money and diversified, giving examples of building such things as schools and hospitals (Rogan, 2019). He speaks of one instance where he was driving along a very bumpy highway that suddenly turns to smooth freshly done pavement in Sinaloa Mexico, a state that is famed for the Sinaloa Cartel. It is later explained that the good part of the highway is kept up with by the Cartel and the bad part is the

government funded highway (Rogan, 2019, 14:20). Calderon elaborates further when talking with Ryan when he explains how their ability to also make a living off their environment, is helping to fuel such cartels (Ryan, 2020). He goes on to explain how they have money within legitimate businesses while giving examples of tequila companies that have been linked to El Chapo's family and how they can make large amounts of money through these legitimate businesses that they have built with profits from criminal money (Ryan, 2020). More examples are provided when Calderon states while speaking with Rogan (2020):

They're putting their money in crypto currency, they are diversifying their money in actual companies, like legit companies, so they clean their money that way. Real estate, hotels, property on the U.S. side as they invest on the U.S. side of the border as well. So, money is not under a mattress or in giant stacks of cash in a room somewhere. (8:00)

Meza (2015) elaborates a little further on how Drug Cartels have sunk money into legitimate businesses in Mexico when he states that "As strange as it may seem, some of the most prominent drug traffickers in Sinaloa state, Mexico, are compliant taxpayers and employers registered in the national payroll tax" (para. 1). This is only possible with such people owning legitimate business. It could be argued these legitimate businesses help to boost local, state, and federal economies through tax dollars collected as well as employment of citizens. "In Sinaloa, the drug traffickers don't dodge taxes" (Meza, 2015, para. 5). According to Meza (2015), "at least 26 people and companies who have been identified by the United States for links to organized crime -- and whose property and assets have been seized by the US Treasury -- pay taxes despite being in Mexican prisons or having been extradited" (para. 2). The U.S. treasury department has identified such legitimate businesses that are tied to drug trafficking as "fishing,

real estate, farms, gas stations, construction, milk producers, art suppliers, kindergartens and much more” (Meza, 2015, para. 14). Meza (2015) explains in detail how:

Family members with names linked to drug trafficking like Zambada, Beltran Leyva, Muñoz, Guzman Loera or Esparragoza are found on the tax census, as well as the companies they own, which have been flagged by the United States. These businesses include milk producers, day care centers, water parks, gas stations, construction firms, clothing stores, ranches and more. (para. 3)

With the amount of tax revenue brought by such companies, it is easy to see how benefitting governments might turn a blind eye. Local authorities in and around Sinaloa, Mexico claim that they know nothing about this situation and that they are unfamiliar with if a certain person has drug ties or not (Meza, 2015). To shine light on the corruption that intertwines Cartels and the Mexican local, state, and federal government; Meza (2015) writes that:

There are at least 26 businesses and individuals whose assets and accounts are frozen in the United States for ties to organized crime. But in Sinaloa they haven't noticed. Gerardo Vargas Landeros is the number two in the Sinaloa government, similar to the Secretary of the Interior. Which is to say, he knows everything about the state. Everyone reports to him. But he swears this is not the case. So, he says when asked delicate questions about the ties between businesspeople and drug traffickers. "The majority of businesspeople that I know, and have dealt with as the general secretary of government, have no knowledge of any situation regarding ties to organized crime -- so far none," he said some months back at the government headquarters. (paras. 6-7)

Meza goes on to explain how 2 days later, news out of Los Angeles California came out that the U.S. had secured \$65 million that had been laundered for the Sinaloa Cartel by entrepreneur and

ex-president of the Chamber of Commerce in Sinaloa's capital city of Culiacan, Ignacio Muñoz Orozco "El Nacho" (Meza, 2015). It is worth noting regarding the arrest of El Chapo Guzman and Mexican government corruption, that his arrest did not come with the freezing of his assets (Meza, 2015).

In further examples of legitimate owned cartel business, regarding well-known resorts throughout popular tourist destinations such as Cancún, Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Cozumel and many more. Due to Cartels having ownership and involvement in such resorts, they are some of the safest places in Mexico that someone can be, and it is in the best interest of the Cartels to keep these resorts safe and open for tourism (Rogan, 2019). Calderon further explains regarding cartels "a lot of these people legitimized their money years back and a lot of the money in those resorts can probably be traced back to cartel interests (Rogan, 2019, 1:20:35). Zill and Bergman (n.d.) state that:

In Mexico, it is harder to determine the exact percentage of drug money flowing into the economy. Some regions like the rural areas around the city of Culiacan in Sinaloa state have been primarily dependent on poppy and marijuana production for decades. And resort areas have seen a sudden explosion in construction and real estate prices when the drug economy is booming. (para. 18)

These are all examples of how illegitimate Cartel money has gone to fund legitimate and illegitimate business throughout Mexico for many reasons including money laundering, all while adding to local economies much like the practices of Lansky and Siegel throughout the U.S. in the 1900's.

Influence on Locals

Calderon explains to Rogan (2019) how El Chapo Guzman, Leader of the Sinaloa Cartel and possibly the most infamous narco-trafficker in history, is like a Robin Hood type figure to many of the people of Sinaloa and how he has benefitted them in a lot of ways when he says:

Schools, careers (lawyers, doctors), all their careers paid for by the cartel. Immigration processes of people that want to come over here (United States), sponsorships and all that kind of stuff paid for on both sides of the border. This span of influence is how he kind of got to be who he was, he was always helping people and investing in people and these investments would pay him back later in the form of loyalty and services. (14:45)

The editors at History.com explain how Guzman escaped from a Mexican prison twice before finally being extradited to the U.S. and sentenced to life in prison on a slew of charges (2021). One of the biggest reasons the military could not get to El Chapo Guzman for so long is because “he had a human shield around him” (Rogan, 2019, 15:23) and practiced such things as using his cartel to buy Christmas gifts for local kids to win over the communities. He references El Chapo’s son when he says, “he gave out cars on Christmas” (Rogan, 2020, 1:03:57). Calderon references all the cartels of Mexico when he says, “a hearts and minds type approach is what makes some of these groups long lived” (Rogan, 2019, 15:53). With cartels doing so much to benefit local communities, there is a level of protection offered in return (Rogan, 2019). Describing the situation as “a mess”, Calderon talks of federal police going into a community with a federal uniform on, into a part of the community where the federal government doesn’t do anything for the people there. ABC News in-depth (2020) speaks of how “Especially the poor neighborhoods of Mexico, the cartels have a massive reach. They provide a lot of work for people and people refer to the cartel figures as Los Valientes or the brave ones” (5:18). The

churches and roads are made by the cartels, Christmas was brought to the community by the cartels, they have become the good guys in the eyes of many of the locals so the reaction to government employees is not always one of welcome (Rogan, 2020, 46:40). The cartels of Mexico have much to gain from such relationships with the locals and it should be noted that their intentions are rarely genuine.

Negative Economic Effects

There is no question that Drug Cartels promote crime, crime promotes danger, and danger drives people, along with businesses, out of town delivering a devastating blow to local economies. Hassett and Shapiro (2010) speak of how violent crime is directly linked to reduced investment in the areas they occur. On top of this, they impose large costs on communities through lower property values as well as higher insurance premiums (Hassett & Shapiro, 2010). It should be noted that “on average, a reduction in a given year of one homicide in a zip code causes a 1.5 percent increase in housing values in that same zip code the following year (Hassett & Shapiro, 2010, para. 16). More so, keeping violent crime under control in such areas brings about a strong burden on taxpayers as they must cover the costs of police personnel, operations, courts, jails, and prisons (Hassett & Shapiro, 2010). Coyne and Hall (2017) write about how “since the War on Drugs began more than 40 years ago, the U.S. government has spent more than \$1 trillion on interdiction policies. Spending on the war continues to cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$51 billion annually” (pp. 2-3).

While the legitimate business adventures partaken in by drug cartels certainly bring in tax revenue that would otherwise not exist to the countries of origin, on the contrary, millions of tax dollars are lost each year to the illegitimate dealings and operations that these cartels engage in. Billions of dollars in cash are driven out of the U.S. each year by way of the southern border

(Zill & Bergman, n.d.). From there the money is deposited into Mexican banks and invested in legitimate business (Zill & Bergman, n.d.). As the money makes its journey south, aiders such as suppliers and transporters are paid (tax free) large amounts of cash for their help (Zill & Bergman, n.d.). Also, once this illicit money finds its way back into the foreign country that generated it, “it is used to pay the salaries of shippers and processors, as well as the bribes that supplement the incomes of government officials on both sides of the border” (Zill & Bergman, n.d., para 7).

Diversification and Evolution of Criminal Activity

Drug cartels are most recognized for the obvious criminal activity that surrounds them, which is the production and distribution of illegal drugs. However, these criminal organizations have evolved and gone on to diversify their criminal portfolios as they exploit every money-making opportunity they can find. Many of the activities that drug cartels have a hand in nowadays, are extremely surprising. From human trafficking, human smuggling, to infiltrating the Avocado business, Mexican Drug Cartels aren't just about drugs anymore. Linthicum (2019) writes of how the cartels throughout Mexico have even diversified into controlling gold mines and even prices in supermarkets. These cartels have started to infiltrate any profitable industry that they can find to make money and bolster power (Suarez, 2021).

Avocados

As quite an unsuspecting element to the illicit markets of Mexican Drug Cartels, Linthicum (2019) writes of how the avocado business in Mexico has even become infiltrated by cartels as they exploit and prey on the farmers throughout Mexico who know such agriculture as a way of life. This multibillion-dollar avocado industry is headquartered in Michoacán state and has become a high value target for cartels and such a threat to locals that vigilante armies have

been formed to protect growers (Linthicum, 2019). These cartels “have been seizing farms and clearing protected woodlands to plant their own groves of what locals call green gold” (Linthicum, 2019, para. 5). Many criminal organizations are currently fighting over control over the avocado trade while they prey on orchard owners, laborers, and drivers used to ship avocados (Linthicum, 2019).

Linthicum (2019) describes a scenario where cartel members are clearing land with chainsaws while wielding automatic weapons do deter anyone that might question their motives. The area being described is protected from logging but with such great power held by cartels, this fact becomes irrelevant. Linthicum (2019) writes “When locals protested, explaining that the area was protected from logging, they were held at gunpoint and ordered to keep quiet” (para. 2). The intentions of the criminal group doing this type of logging all day and night, was to plant avocados, which are described by Linthicum (2019) as being potentially even more profitable than the drugs that the cartels are most famous for, such as marijuana, meth, fentanyl, and heroin.

As with the violence and criminality that came from the profitability of drugs, such is that of the now lucrative avocado industry. Linthicum (2019) writes “After seizing control of the forest in March, the Viagras, a criminal group in Mexico, announced a tax on residents who owned avocado trees, charging \$250 a hectare in protection fees” (para. 8). Vicious fighting that sent locals desperately seeking protection, eventually broke out between the Viagras and CJNG as they sought control over the same swaths of land (Linthicum 2019). Suarez (2021) writes of at least nine different cartels being in the Michoacán region as they fight for control over the avocado industry. Due to such violence and threats to the region, locals have responded with self-defense groups to protect themselves and their way of life all while risking being killed. Suarez (2021) quotes one of the Michoacán locals regarding joining a self-defense group stating

that “I’ve joined because we were tired of extortions, kidnappings, we were tired of working the entire year to pay (drug cartels) their fee” (para. 26). In somewhat of a strange representation of the governmental corruption that is associated with the Cartels, it should be noted that Manuel López Obrador has opposed these civilian armed protection groups (Suarez, 2021). Without help from the government, which is not in place, these civilians are left to fend for themselves while being opposed by the leaders that are supposed to protect them. Suarez (2021) goes on to write of how the locals have stated the government is hardly doing anything to curb the problem as the Cartels use intimidation to take over the market. Suarez (2021) quotes the same masked civilian saying:

They threatened us, kidnapped us, took our money, stole our cars, raped our women.

They did whatever they wanted. The government never supported us. Based on that, we decided to defend ourselves with our hands and guns. They didn't care if the avocado price was low or high; they wanted their fee twice a year: 50,000 pesos (\$2,500 U.S. dollars) per hectare. What we did? Defend ourselves. (para. 27)

The state of Michoacán and the avocado industry is being taken over and ravished by violent cartels as they extort hardworking Mexican citizens who have worked the industry for years.

In recent days, the U.S. has put bans on the importation of avocados from Mexico due to the increased Cartel activity and violence that surrounds the industry (Rouhandeh, 2022). More specifically, a U.S. safety inspector in Mexico was threatened with such violence (Rouhandeh, 2022). Rouhandeh (2022) explains how threats followed by bans have taken place in the past and this last one occurred just before the super bowl, perhaps the most profitable time of the year for the avocado market in Mexico. Mexican president Lopez Obrador claimed that the ban was politically motivated and was likely due to interests outside of the threats, as he slammed the

news coming out of the U.S. (Rouhandeh, 2022). Over the course of six weeks, such a ban would represent \$356 million in losses (Rouhandeh, 2022). The way that such a harmless and legal product would become the epitome of motivation for violence, danger, extortion, and corruption is somewhat hard to imagine. However, as previously mentioned Mexican Drug Cartels will sink their teeth into any profitable business that will attribute to their growth in power.

Human Smuggling/Trafficking and the Southwest Border

Amidst the political controversy surrounding the Southwest border and with little to no action being presented to gain ground on the problem, Mexican Drug Cartels have capitalized on those seeking out a better life as they attempt to cross into the United States. Once again, an illegal business that brings in huge profits has risen as thousands of desperate men, women, and children seek logical ways to improve the lives of their own as well as generations to follow. Meza (2021) states how, “In the last decade, drug cartels operating in Mexico have diversified their illicit business. One of the most profitable is irregular migration-the crossing of borders without the necessary documentation” (para. 26). Colton (2021) reports, “Criminal organizations reportedly made up to \$14 million dollars a day in February by trafficking women, children, and families across the U.S. -Mexico border” (para. 1). Unfortunately, due to lack of immigration reform and the unwillingness of United States politicians, along with their lack of sympathy towards those being exploited at the border, Mexican Drug Cartels have taken it over and are now the ones governing who will cross, where they will cross, and what price they will pay to do so. Greenfield et. al (2019) writes that:

Human smugglers provide migrants with a wide range of services, including transportation, lodging, and specialized knowledge to help migrants avoid arrest, extortion, and violence by evading detection or paying bribes and protection fees.

Migrants can choose to “pay as they go” and find the services they need for discrete sections of the route north (which may cost them very little in fees), or use “all-inclusive” or “end-to-end” packages that cover their travel from their point of origin to their final destination in the United States (such packages, by comparison, may cost them more than \$10,000). (p. 15)

The refusal of politicians to face the issue, has enabled smugglers, human traffickers, and other criminal actors, all embedded deep within drug cartels, to take full advantage of innocent men, women, and children (Colton, 2021, para. 10). Just as drugs have been a hot commodity that has been smuggled across the southwest border, human beings have become the latest extremely profitable option. Bensman (2021) demonstrates on the magnification of the issue when he talks of cartels requiring migrants to wear numbered, colored, and labeled wristbands like what would be seen at a water park or resort to show that they are paying customers. The problem has gotten so large that even the cartels are having trouble managing their human inventory (Bensman, 2021a). Prices according to Bensman (2021a) are \$2,500 for Mexican migrants; \$3,000 if the migrant is from Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, and Honduras; \$5,000 for Chinese migrants, while Russian and Arabs pay \$9,000. It is worthy of noting that these cartels are illegally importing people from all over the world into the United States without being vetted in any way shape or form creating a huge national security risk and possibly opening their selves up to assisting terrorism. Resendiz (2021) quotes an unnamed senior border patrol official saying:

Cartels or transnational criminal organizations are taking advantage of the situation that we’re in. They charge every single person that comes across that border he said. The cartels are so sophisticated that they’re constantly switching the entry points they chose

for migrant families, children, and single adults to illegally come into the country. (para. 13)

While border laws in Mexico and the U.S. are not always enforced by governments on either side, Mexican Drug Cartels have come up with their own set of rules for such crossings and they enforce them heavily, often at the threat of death. Greenfield et. al (2019) talks of how drug cartels charge a tax or *piso*, for migrants to cross the border at the point controlled by the cartel. From there they are given a *clave* or code to provide to other smugglers as they continue their journey through the U.S. to their destination. This *clave* indicates what human smuggling or drug trafficking organization they belong to or are traveling with (Greenfield et. al, 2019). Bensman (2021b) talks of a group of Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrants who paid up to \$12,000 of family borrowed money to cartels to be smuggled across the U.S. border, only to be caught by border patrol and returned to their place of origin with no hope of ever seeing the money again. Bensman (2021b) goes on to explain how these cartels advertise to migrants almost like salesmen selling travel packages with slave labor hidden on the other end to pay off fees. Creitz (2021) talks of how cartels are using teenagers on the U.S. side of the border to transport migrants from the southwest border to larger cities in Texas while paying them \$1,000 per head. Creitz (2021) goes on to talk of how these teenagers are cashing in on the opportunity as they make trips all day back and forth delivering migrants.

Many times, the business of human smuggling for drug cartels, begins at Mexico's southernmost border with Guatemala. Meza (2021) reports that "Mexico's National Human Rights Commission uncovered the massive phenomenon of the kidnapping of Central American migrants in the country in 2008, when it recorded 198 kidnappings and 9,857 victims from September 2008 to February 2009" (para. 29). Many of these migrants come from countries

south of Mexico such as Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, as well as others, as they look to pass through Mexico on their way to the United States. Often, somewhere along the way, these migrants are kidnapped and extorted by cartel members (Meza, 2021). Meza (2021) speaks of an instance where 162 migrants were rescued who had been kidnapped and left in a warehouse without food for 5 days just south of the Texas border in Camargo, Tamaulipas. There are numerous stories such as this one and Meza (2021) speaks of a ten-day span where a total of 697 kidnapped migrants had been rescued. Meza (2021) goes on to quote Nilda Garcia, a researcher at Texas A&M International University in Laredo who states “It is very difficult for these groups to pass up this profit, this opportunity to earn money with migrants. Kidnappings are one more layer of its structure” (para. 32).

In another scenario, Meza (2021) gives the account of an extremely poor farmer named César from Honduras, who decides to pursue the journey through Mexico and into the U.S. to reconcile with his brother and have a chance of leaving poverty. César speaks of how he gave his car as a first payment to the smuggler, known as a coyote, who would get him through Mexico. From there, he would owe a debt of roughly \$5,500 if he managed to cross. Along the way the smuggler was detained and César, along with others, were kidnapped by Los Zetas cartel. During this time, he speaks of beatings, rape, interrogation, and torture that involved himself as well as other women and children as family members were expected to pay their ransom. After all César had gone through, he considered himself lucky to be able to report to authorities and be sent back to Honduras as opposed to the alternative of being killed by his smugglers/kidnappers (Meza, 2021).

Drug trafficking and human smuggling are two criminal activities that Cartels have learned can complement each other quite nicely. Human smuggling can draw attention away

from drug trafficking while at the same time, migrants being smuggled can be used to move drugs across the border while receiving compensation in the form of a reduced fee (Greenfield et al., 2019). Burnett (2011) writes of migrants being captured by cartels along the U.S. border and forced to smuggle drugs. These migrants are recruited both voluntarily as well as forcefully as they are seen as a drug trafficking transportation mechanism (Burnett, 2021). Burnett (2021) quotes a migrant victim saying “They hit us, threw us on the ground, searched us and took our money, then they told us if we didn't smuggle drugs for them, they would kill us. They didn't give us any other option” (para. 4). Burnett (2011) quotes another young migrant named Fernando saying:

Oh yeah, they force you to work for them, and if you tell them you don't want to, they'll kill you. They'll use you as a lookout, or a kidnapper, or to carry drugs north. Some people who don't have family to help them join these gangs because it's the only way they can cross the river. I won't work for them — I won't ask the cartel for help. I ask God to help me. (para. 18)

Many of these migrants hoping to cross the border end up as unwilling drug mules. Once they are realized as trying to cross into the U.S. by cartels, they are forced to carry drugs along their journey (Burnett, 2011). Burnett (2011) quotes Montemayor regarding cartels forcing migrants to smuggle drugs by saying “They kind of feel like they don't have a choice because now they've been approached to do this, and you don't really want to say no to people who are committing such violent acts in Mexico” (para. 15). This issue of migrants being forced to carry drugs across the border has also caused a validity issue as the claim of forced smuggling is being used to evade being reprimanded by law enforcement after illegally crossing borders (Burnett, 2011). Forget (2021) also notes how drug trafficking and human smuggling are often seen together as

smuggled women and children are often used to move drugs across the border providing great potential to increase profits. Furthermore, Forget (2021) explains that drugs are often used by traffickers as a means of control or bait for their victims and often women and children are even forced into addiction.

Sex trafficking is another form of human trafficking that cartels have become deeply involved in. With migrants having debts to pay to cartels for being smuggled across the border and little legitimate money to do so, this leaves them with having to pay such debt through labor often in the form of sexual acts to paying clients. This owed debt that bonds them to the cartels and traffickers is known as debt bondage (Bensman, 2021a). Bensman (2021a) elaborates further saying that the cartels have the information on where the migrants are going and even information on their family members. If these debts are not paid off through the form of money, labor, prostitution, or other services, cartels know where to find them and will also go after their families. The brutal services that debt bondage forces vulnerable people into often involve young children both male and female who are forced to offer services to clients that often involve tourists. In many cases, once an older age is reached, they are pushed into other duties such as drug smuggling and even sicario (hitman) duties that consist of murder (Balderas, 2016).

Gasoline and oil

Petroleum is another lucrative market that Mexican Drug Cartels are starting to become increasingly involved in. According to Jones (2019), to make up for losses due to state crack downs on the drug trade, the fuel business has significantly gained cartel attention. Jones (2019) states that, “Fuel theft is a concern for Mexico’s economic and political stability” (pg. 1). With threats to pipelines and processing facilities by Mexican Drug Cartels, Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), Mexico’s state oil company, is greatly challenged by this new illegal practice as it

continues to bring loss of product, violence, and corruption while the illicit market grows (Jones, 2019). Such criminal activity includes siphoning oil and the building of illicit pipelines with fleets of cartel owned tankers that have driven out legitimate refinery and distribution operations, leading to great losses for legitimate oil companies (Jones, 2019). In 2008 alone, PEMEX took a loss of roughly \$720 million USD to petroleum theft (Jones, 2019). The corruption involved in this illicit market runs quite deep and becomes quite complex as it pertains to cartels, government officials, and large segments of the PEMEX network that are occupied by oil thieves (Jones, 2019). Cartels have infiltrated the PEMEX company in large part through bribery and extortion in an enormous power grab. The U.S./Mexico border is the hot bed for the market as it is rich with deposits of both petroleum and natural gas and the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas were some of the first to get started in the illicit market, according to Jones (2019). Jones (2019) elaborates by saying:

The narco/petro-gangsters exploit cross-border black and grey markets for oil and derivatives to gain direct profit and revenue but perhaps more importantly as a vehicle for money laundering to cleanse proceeds from other illicit businesses such as drugs and human trafficking. Conveniently, they can exploit many of the pre-existing illicit networks and smuggling circuits, drug trafficking routes, and facilitating gangs. (pp. 5-6)

Several methods are used to steal oil that include bribery of workers, robbing oil tankers, and even construction of their own underground pipelines as the proceeds go towards funding their cartel wars and provide key opportunities for money laundering (Jones, 2019).

Ruthless Violence

One of the most alarming aspects of Mexican Drug Cartels is the extreme violence they are willing to partake in. The gruesomeness of this violence has become normalized to the extent

that it is almost expected. The use of such ruthless violence is one of many things that all Mexican Drug Cartels have in common. There are literally no limits when it comes to how far they are willing to go to get their point across and achieve their goal profiting off illicit business. The killing of men, women, and children of all ages from babies to the elderly is not off limits. Decapitation, body dismemberment, bodies hanging from bridges in public areas, and body parts disposed of in public places are just a few examples of such grotesque practices that are used. Anyone who is in their way whether it be rival cartel members, victims of mistaken identity, or civilians in the wrong place at the wrong time, are susceptible to this ruthless violence.

In 2019, three SUVs filled with women and children traveling to a wedding in the state of Chihuahua fell victim to cartel violence. According to Rodriguez and Gonzalez (2019), while driving from Bavispe to LaBaron, their vehicles were ambushed from behind and riddled with gunfire in a violent shooting attack. Three mothers and six young children were killed in a gruesome scene that left one vehicle completely engulfed in flames after it exploded (Rodriguez & Gonzalez, 2019). Four other children were injured, and eight others were found hiding in the bushes with several having bullet wounds and other injuries and the children killed ranged anywhere from four-month-old twins to 10 years old (Rodriguez & Gonzalez, 2019). Chappel (2019) notes that:

In one spot, authorities found a burned-out Chevrolet Tahoe with five bodies and multiple bullet holes. Farther down the road, they found two Chevy Suburbans with more bodies.

In what the family calls a small miracle, several children survived the assault, including a 7-month-old girl. (para. 19)

The members were part of a Mormon community known as La Mora, and many of the victims were related to the Benjamin LeBaron, who was an anti-crime activist and was killed in 2009

(Rodriguez & Gonzalez, 2019). Although the killings are thought to be a case of mistaken identity, doubts have been raised, especially with the Benjamin LeBaron connection and considering the first vehicle was fired upon several miles up the road before the other two vehicles were contacted in a scene that stretched for miles (Rodriguez & Gonzalez, 2019). Chappel (2019) states that, “The large Mormon community lives in an area just south of Arizona where rival cartels are currently at war, fighting to secure smuggling routes close to the U.S. border” (para. 11). These cartel members gruesomely took the innocent life of 9 women and children while leaving others injured with no arrests made in what is considered just another day in Mexico.

In 2019, Ovidio Guzman, the son of “El Chapo” Guzman, was captured by authorities in Culiacán by Mexican security forces. Guzman had been indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice on charges of trafficking cocaine, marijuana, and meth (Grillo, 2019). After word spread around Culiacán about the detainment, heavily armed members of the Sinaloa Cartel rode in and took to the streets in a violent show of force to free Ovidio Guzman. Johnson (2019) writes of:

An unmarked white truck with a heavy machine gun mounted on the tray cruising an empty street. Reports followed of buses torched and blocking major streets, of columns of smoke interrupting air traffic, of a prison break that freed 50 inmates, and of the deaths of one civilian, one soldier, and several gunmen. (para. 3)

The Sinaloa Cartel and the Mexican security forces would battle it out through an urban warfare environment that brought fear to the citizens of Culiacán. In a display of power, the Sinaloa Cartel has over the Mexican government, they were opposing the arrest of Ovidio Guzman through violence and force with no limits on where they would stop to complete their objective of setting him free. Grillo (2019) describes the scene saying:

Cartel gunmen were everywhere. They openly drove in trucks with mounted machine guns, blockaded streets flashing their Kalashnikovs and burned trucks unleashing plumes of smoke like it was a scene in Syria. They took control of the strategic points in the metro area, shut down the airport, roads, and government buildings and exchanged fire with security forces for hours, leaving at least eight people dead. In contrast, everyone else had to act like ghosts, hiding behind locked doors, not daring to step outside. (para. 2)

Hours after this war between cartel hitmen and the Mexican Government began, Ovidio Guzman was released under orders of Mexico's federal government. This decision handed the Sinaloa Cartel and organized crime all over the world a huge victory in a giant display of weakness by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Grillo, 2019; Johnson, 2019). Johnson (2019) notes that:

At his daily press conference on the morning of October 18, López Obrador clarified that his security cabinet made the decision to release Guzmán and that the president supported the decision. López Obrador was clear that his cabinet made the decision in response to the threat to the lives of civilians, and of the soldiers involved in the operation. (para. 5)

Johnson (2019) goes on to note how this insurgency of the Sinaloa Cartel drew comparisons to that of Syria by many political commentators and security experts. Decisions such as this one to release criminals at the demand of other criminals, reassures the cartels and the people of Mexico that cartels call the shots and hold the upper hand in cities such as Culiacán.

Balderas (2016) describes the story of a young woman who was enslaved for 7 years by Los Zetas and The Gulf Cartel. Daniela, which is not her real name, was abducted at 22 and was put through some of the most gruesome experiences a human being can have. She attended a

meeting in 2008, along with 15 other women, where they expected to be evaluated for a loan and all 15 of the women at the meeting near the Honduras border, were kidnapped (Balderas, 2016).

The young women would be smuggled through Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and finally Mexico Stopping in brothels along the way for sexual exploitation. Daniela would reach her destination of Nuevo Laredo, just a “stone’s throw from Texas” (Balderas, 2016, para. 15).

Daniela describes early in the story how she was forced to watch “five young women bound to pillars, surrounded by men who had paid a lot of money not just to rape them, but to torture and perhaps kill them as well” (Balderas, 2016). She goes on to describe how she was deliberately confused about the time and date by her captors, and if she asked questions to clients to try and figure it out, she was badly beaten (Balderas, 2016). Balderas (2016) quotes Daniela again saying “There was no radio, no TV, no newspapers, nothing. I slept in one of their houses, they took me to the clients to do ugly things, they took the money, and then they took me back to sleep” (para. 10).

Perhaps the most heart wrenching memory that Balderas (2016) records from Daniela, is that of a boy she thought of as a brother whom she met when he was 12 as they both worked at the Danash table dance club in Nuevo Laredo. The boy worked the club as a busboy, messenger, lookout, and DJ while also being rented out to clients of whom many were U.S. tourists looking for sex with children (Balderas, 2016). Daniela’s job was “to dance, drink, and get high with clients, and fulfill a quota of six sexual services a night in the cubicles of the club” (para. 18). The two were good friends and often talked about freedom as they encouraged and helped each other survive (Balderas, 2016). Eventually, after the boy developed digestive problems preventing him from working, he and Daniela were taken into the mountains where Daniela was handed a gun and ordered to kill him (Balderas, 2016). After refusing to do it, the gun was

handed to the boy, and he was ordered to kill Daniela. The boy refused and was then hung from a tree where they began to cut him and eventually kill him (Balderas, 2016). Balderas (2016) writes how the entire scene was a test for Daniela to see if she could be transformed from a sex slave to a hitman, and when she failed, she was given drug smuggling duties.

Daniela goes on to describe to Balderas (2016) such things as being shown videos of the torture and murder that was done to those who tried to escape and having a chip stuck in her foot for tracking purposes. She continues with stories of clients paying to torture and kill kidnapped people, body parts being fed to exotic animals such as lions, and one experience where she was locked in a van for hours to be sexually assaulted by cartel members and almost dying (Balderas, 2016). Balderas (2016) notes that Daniela does not elaborate on how she was able to escape her situation and get to freedom but will only say that someone had risked their life to save her.

Daniela insists that she wants to share her story to bring awareness to what is happening to the young girls who are disappearing around the border as well as “lots of the girls working the sex trade in narco areas” (Balderas, 2016, para. 4). The Mexican government recorded that 20,203 men and 7,435 women had been missing or disappeared in 2015 (Balderas, 2016). As the reasons for their abduction vary, many are taken into sexual slavery leading human rights groups to lambast authorities for not doing more (Balderas, 2016). Balderas (2016) also states that “68 U.S. members of Congress signed a letter addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry on the ongoing human rights crisis in Mexico” (para. 7). Sexual violence of young men and women such as Daniela is one of the most alarming aspects of Mexican Drug Cartels.

Cartel hitmen, or sicarios, are common to all Mexican drug Cartels. Sicarios are people who kidnap, torture, and kill under the orders of cartels (Castillo, 2015). In Mexico, the term disappearing someone is used to describe the process of “kidnapping, torturing, killing, and

disposing of the body in a place where no one will ever find it” (Castillo, 2015, para. 9). Sicarios are paid well to do these actions and specialize in doing so. Castillo (2015) notes how some of these sicarios have standards, such as not killing women and children, whereas many do not. Many have common jobs such as raising cattle or working as ranchers and do not necessarily consider themselves drug traffickers or professional killers despite their employment of doing just that (Castillo, 2015). Disappearing an individual often involves going to the target’s home early in the morning while everyone is asleep but can also be done in public places (Castillo, 2015). Castillo (2015) goes on to note such things as belonging to a rival gang, giving information to rivals, being considered a security risk for any reason, and even being kidnapped for ransom, all being reasons for disappearing someone. Victims may be taken to remote places such as safe houses where they are isolated far from civilization and tortured for information (Castillo, 2015).

Such things as beatings, waterboarding, electric shocks to the testicles and soles of the feet are described to get information out of someone, and once that information is received, the victim is killed (Castillo, 2015). The bodies of victim’s are then buried, burned, dumped in the ocean, dissolved with acid, or dumped in a public area to send a message to rival cartels or law enforcement. Calderon explains to Rogan (2019) about a sicario nicknamed the stew maker. The stew maker “was a guy who worked for the Sinaloa Cartel in Tijuana, and he would get rid of bodies using caustic soda” (Rogan, 2019, 42:28). Calderon goes on to explain to Rogan (2019) that caustic soda is a chemical mixture that can be bought inside hardware stores that will dissolve bodies into basically nothing disposing of all bones and DNA and leaving no trace behind. Calderon continues to explain how the stew maker would get dozens of bodies every

night and dispose of them using the chemicals (Rogan, 2019). CBS Interactive (2022) reports that:

According to the Tamaulipas state forensic service, over the years, officials have found more than a dozen cartel extermination sites — where the remains of some of Mexico's nearly 100,000 missing were obliterated. The largest such site was yet another border setting near the mouth of the Rio Grande called the dungeon, in territory controlled by the Gulf cartel. (para. 16)

Such practices as this leaves Mexican families relentlessly searching for disappeared family members with no realistic opportunity to ever have closure on their disappearance. Sicarios are often ruthless individuals with little knowledge of what a successful life outside of the business of killing might look like. In a rather somber aspect of the life of a sicario, Castillo (2015) interviews a 29-year-old that has spent a long-time disappearing people for cartels who speaks of his childhood dreams of education and travel. Unfortunately, lack of opportunity in Mexico took the young man down a deep dark path where he now makes his money in one of the darkest ways imaginable, killing human beings (Castillo, 2015).

One of the most grotesque practices by Mexican Drug Cartels is the public display of bodies and body parts to establish fear, give warnings, and project power. As previously spoken of, things such as dumping severed heads on club dance floors and the hanging of bodies from public bridges throughout busy metropolitan cities, are all too common. The Courier Journal (2021) states that “Mexico's notorious drug cartels appear to have resumed some of its bloodiest tactics, after nine half-naked and tortured bodies recently were found hanging from a bridge on a federal highway in the Mexican state of Zacatecas” (para. 1). Displays such as this have been used for a long time and Calderon talks with Rogan (2019) about the practice of bodies that have

been strung from bridges in Tijuana for the public to see. The Courier Journal goes on to note that “The jarring image of bodies hanging from bridges in different states has happened so frequently and for so many years that security experts say citizens have almost become accustomed to seeing the cartels' ultraviolent tactics” (para. 10). Such images appear all throughout Mexico as cartel violence goes unchecked by authorities.

Dismemberment of bodies by Mexican Drug Cartels is another disturbing element of the violence that grips Mexico. SBG San Antonio (2017) writes about a “Mexican Cartel assassin who dismembered a six-year-old girl with an axe and forced her parents to watch as she died” (para. 1). SBG San Antonio reports that:

Marciano Millan Vasquez was sentenced Wednesday in federal court to three consecutive life sentences. The 34-year-old Los Zetas drug cartel member was convicted on a number of counts including murder, conspiracy and drug charges. Authorities say Vasquez killed at least 29 people in Northern Mexico between 2009 and 2015 when he was arrested here in San Antonio while living under a fake name. (paras. 2-3)

Hastings (2013) speaks of how the press is even at high risk for such brutal violence as journalists are often killed for reporting on such violence. Hastings (2013) goes on to report that Mexico is the fourth most dangerous country in the world for reporters behind Syria, Somalia, and Pakistan. Journalists vanishing, members of their families being brutally murdered, being butchered and thrown in the middle of busy streets, and even being decapitated or shot in the head on video while sending out a warning for fellow journalists, are all things spoken of by Hastings (2013). Journalists just like the everyday citizens of Mexico are terrified of what might happen to them if they cross a cartel (Hastings, 2013).

Curbing the Problem

Mexican drug cartels have been able to take advantage of a demand for illicit services through violent/illegal activity for a long time now and the threat continues to grow at an out-of-control pace. Since these cartels generally operate out of Mexico, it only makes sense to secure the border that separates the United States from Mexico. Since control over the southwest border has not been established by the United States, Mexican Drug Cartels have stepped up to take control. They decide who crosses, where they will cross, what they will bring with them, and how much they will pay to cross. Hale (2021) describes how the understaffed and overwhelmed U.S. border patrol has had to abandon certain checkpoints to tend to others leaving opportunity for large flows of illegal crossings and can no longer contain the wave of migrants trying to enter the country illegally. Hale (2021) goes on to say that “the abandonment of these checkpoints is unprecedented and demonstrates the fact that the U.S. has effectively lost control of the U.S. - Mexico border” (para. 3). U.S. Border and Customs Protection (2022) reported 1,734,686 southwest land border encounters in 2021. The real number may never be known as the previous number only represents the encountered. What is known is the U.S. and Mexico’s lack of urgency to gain control of the situation has allowed for cartels to make a fortune. Hale (2021) writes about a caravan of migrants arriving at the border from numerous other countries other than just Mexico saying, “Mexican transnational criminal organizations are undoubtedly responsible for the movement of this caravan” (para. 4). Hale (2021) goes on saying:

The fact that buses are being used to transport these migrants speaks to an organized effort that required the development of a strategic plan composed of many parts. One part of the plan was the orderly movement of thousands of people across all of Mexico. A more important aspect of the planning included the foresight to simultaneously open

other critical pathways to the smuggling network, especially those operating through the Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas-Laredo, Texas corridor, while distracted federal authorities responded to the Haitian crisis in Del Rio. (para. 5)

Transnational criminal organizations in Mexico are capitalizing on abandon checkpoints and many of the other wide-open places on the southwest border shipping fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and other drugs into the country (Hale, 2021). Hale (2021) continues to report that “the border is open and untold numbers of migrants and drugs are entering the U.S. every day in unquantifiable numbers” (para. 8). The United States taking back control of its own border only makes sense. While it doesn’t solve the entirety of the problems presented by Mexican Drug Cartels, it delivers a big blow to their blatant use of the southwest border to advance their business of trafficking drugs and people while making millions of dollars. Combining border security with immigration reform to accommodate the millions of people looking to come to the United States to achieve the American dream while not being exploited through sex and labor trafficking, takes away the ability of the cartels to use the border as their personal human/drug trafficking corridor into the United States.

Hanen (2015) writes of giving Mexican Drug Cartels a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation. Such a designation was written by congress to adapt to an everchanging terrorist landscape and must meet three statutory criteria:

- 1) the organization must be foreign; 2) the organization must engage in terrorist activity or retain the ability to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and 3) the terrorist activity or terrorism of the organization must threaten the safety of U.S. nationals or the United States. (Hanen, 2015, p. 190).

Hanen (2015) suggests Mexican Drug Cartels meet these criteria considering they are based out of Mexico, fall under multiple subsections for a terrorist activity statute, and have assassinated U.S. citizens including law enforcement officials. Hanen (2015) goes on to list several things that make Mexican Drug Cartels FTO's including kidnapping, murder, and extortion. If such a designation was given, prosecutors would be allowed to criminally charge "anyone who is found to provide criminal support to these organizations" (Hanen, 2015, p. 193). Also, an FTO designation "would require financial institutions that are aware of the presence of cartel assets in their banks to freeze those assets and report them to the Secretary of State" (Hanen, 2015, p. 193). The FTO designation will also "allow government agencies to prevent persons who are representatives or members of an FTO from entering the U.S. if the person is an alien" (Hanen, 2015, p. 194). Lastly Hanen (2015) states an FTO designation would "stigmatize these groups and highlight their brutal activities to the international community because nations across the globe monitor the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations" (pg. 195). Such a designation would be another tool the U.S. can provide to curb the problems brought on by Mexican Drug Cartels.

Conclusion

The United States has had a long history with organized crime and the illegal distribution of illicit goods and services. Accounts of drug distribution in the 1800's, illegal alcohol during prohibition in the 1920's, and the movement of cocaine from Columbia through Mexico into the U.S. are just a few of those examples. These illegal activities have always brought about dangerous aspects as criminals go to extreme measures to keep their illicit business up and running.

Mexican Drug Cartels are the latest, alarmingly violent, and dangerous criminal organizations to participate in these practices. The many different drug cartels throughout Mexico are unleashing a national crisis for the United States in the form of drugs such as heroin, methamphetamine, and fentanyl with foreign countries such as China starting to play a significant role. Ruthless drug cartels are achieving great success through quickly evolving methods, economic influence, diverse categories of crime, ruthless ways, political influence, and extreme financial gain. The people of Mexico live in a state of fear as these cartels have gained so much power that even local, state, and federal governments often bow to their demands. Outside of drug trafficking, cartels are diversifying into such areas as gasoline and oil theft and even the avocado industry. Human sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and human smuggling have all become highly profitable businesses for cartels as they exploit young men, women, and children through a porous U.S./Mexico border of which is ran largely under cartel control. Extortion of local populations and turf wars between cartels strike fear in locals as extreme violence plays out throughout their communities. Such images as bodies strung from bridges and body parts on public display as a warning to others are not out of the ordinary. Journalist and the media are often silenced when it comes to reporting on such violence due to fear of being disappeared.

Both the Mexican and United States government have done a poor job of addressing drug cartels and the problem is growing out of control. A couple of immediate things that can be done to stop the rapid power grab these cartels are seeking and achieving, is to take back control of the U.S./Mexico border and designate Mexican Drug Cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. These two strategies could be the first steps to freeing the people of Mexico who live in fear of

cartel violence, shutting down major human trafficking businesses that operate globally, and finally curbing the drug pandemic that grips the vulnerable U.S. population.

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