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U.S. Security Assistance and the Costs of Mexico's Drug War, 2008–2021

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Cover photo: A soldier stands guard by a charred vehicle after it was set on fire in Cointzio, Michoacán state, Mexico, Feb. 22, 2026, following the death of the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Nemesio Oseguera, also known as "El Mencho." (AP Photo/Armando Solis, File)

About

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Summary

From 2008 through 2021, the United States provided Mexico with $3.3 billion in security and development assistance through the Mérida Initiative, which was replaced by the Bicentennial Framework in 2021. This aid sought to counter the growing power of Mexico's drug trafficking organizations, the accompanying surge in violence, and the increasing erosion of state capacity. U.S. intervention in Mexico's counternarcotics efforts long predates the Mérida Initiative. Since the 1970s, Washington has supplied Mexico with various forms of assistance intended to compel adherence to a punitive, prohibitionist drug control regime—one aimed at reducing the flow of narcotics into the U.S., including marijuana and heroin historically sourced from Mexico. Over subsequent decades, these enforcement-oriented frameworks contributed to state disenfranchisement, heightened instability, and the consolidation of the cartels' power. Despite these effects, debate within the U.S. over the appropriate level and form of military engagement against Mexican criminal organizations remains active and unresolved among policymakers.

The following pages put a description of U.S. security assistance into conversation with the broader costs of Mexico's drug war during the Mérida Initiative period. Although some scholars and policymakers question the extent to which Mexico's drug-related violence constitutes a "war," this paper underscores the profound pressures this conflict has placed on Mexican institutions—pressures comparable to those experienced during national mobilization for conventional warfare. U.S. security assistance constituted only one component of Mexico's drug war and cannot be said to be responsible for its costs. Nonetheless, the Mérida Initiative became an important bolster of the militarized strategy adopted during this period and therefore warrants evaluation alongside the broader costs of that strategy. The U.S.' role as a major consumer market for illicit drugs, its longstanding influence in shaping Mexico's prohibitionist enforcement strategies, and the substantial aid it has provided to support Mexico's security apparatus have collectively bound Washington to the trajectory of the drug war.

We argue that the cumulative costs of this conflict have been substantial: manifest in widespread deaths, disappearances, significant economic burdens, the proliferation of U.S. firearms in Mexico, and the erosion of state authority across wide regions of the country. Recent estimates indicate that the total homicides since 2006 have exceeded 460,000.[1] Civilians have borne the overwhelming share of this violence: massacres, kidnappings, and targeted killings have become widespread. More than 130,000 people have been reported missing, though these figures are contested at multiple levels of the Mexican government.

1 Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, February 23). *Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels.* https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels.

Introduction

On January 26, 2026, gunmen killed eleven people following a soccer match in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, located in central Mexico. Large parts of Guanajuato have become territory contested by rival drug trafficking organizations; the state recorded the highest number of homicides in Mexico last year amid a turf war between the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel.[2] Four days later, in the western state of Sinaloa, the Mexican federal government deployed 1,600 troops after attacks on state legislators, expanding an already visible military presence in cartel-dominated areas.[3] These federal forces—among them 90 members of the Army Special Forces Corps—were airlifted into Culiacán and Mazatlán, Sinaloa's largest cities, where they reinforced local authorities, secured medical facilities, and joined ongoing search operations for abducted mining engineers. The events should be seen as part of a longstanding pattern increasingly difficult to describe as routine criminality: rival armed groups contesting territory, civilian casualties mounting, and mobilization of the Mexican military. Scholars and policymakers continue to debate whether Mexico's drug-related violence constitutes a "war" or a criminal justice crisis. Whatever terminology one prefers, the scale of territorial competition, force deployment, institutional strain, and human casualties increasingly resembles a protracted internal armed conflict—even a conventional war—rather than a conventional law enforcement problem. Moreover, the state's intensified response has provoked increasingly brutal retaliation from criminal organizations, which have shifted from transactional aims to territorial ambitions.

From 2008 until its replacement by the Bicentennial Framework in 2021, the U.S. provided Mexico with roughly $3.3 billion in security and development assistance through the Mérida Initiative (often referred to as "Plan Mérida").[4] The massive aid package directed funding toward security force equipment and training, as well as efforts to strengthen judicial and law enforcement institutions. It bears repeating that U.S. intervention in Mexico's counternarcotics efforts long predates the Mérida Initiative. Since the 1970s, Washington has supplied Mexico with various forms of assistance intended to compel adherence to a punitive, prohibitionist drug control regime—one aimed at reducing U.S. access to narcotics by targeting supply chains, including marijuana and heroin historically sourced from Mexico, and later, by attempting to disrupt the transit of cocaine through Mexican territory.

2 Nicas, J. (2026, January 26). Gunmen Kill 11 After Soccer Match in Mexico. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/26/world/americas/mexico-shooting-salamanca-cartels.html.

3 MND Staff, (2026, January 30). Government Deploys 1,600 Troops to Sinaloa Following Attack on Legislators. *Mexico News Daily*. https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/government-deploys-1600-troops/.

4 Ribando Seelke, C. (updated: 2021, September 20). *Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, FY2008-2021*. Congressional Research Service. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF10578/IF10578.21.pdf

Over subsequent decades, these enforcement-oriented frameworks arguably contributed to state disenfranchisement, heightened instability, and the consolidation of the cartels' power in Mexico.[5] Militarized enforcement, a hallmark of Mérida, contributed to patterns of violence as kingpin-targeting strategies inadvertently fueled intra-cartel conflict and human rights abuses, undermining public trust and state legitimacy.

Despite significant effort and investment around the Mérida Initiative and varying approaches to public security across administrations in Mexico and the U.S., crime rates in Mexico and drug consumption in the U.S. continue to rise. The experience of the Mérida Initiative demonstrates that tactical successes in interdiction and kingpin targeting did not translate into durable reductions in violence, trafficking, or institutional corruption in Mexico, nor did they significantly curb drug-related harm in the U.S.

Debate in the U.S. over the appropriate scope of military action against Mexican criminal organizations remains unresolved. Many policymakers on the political right continue to advocate for aggressive measures, including the alarming possibility of unilateral cross-border strikes. Drug-related security rhetoric has also shaped a range of adjacent policy issues. Concerns about narcotics trafficking have increasingly been linked to migration enforcement, leading policymakers to frame unauthorized migration as a security threat connected to transnational criminal networks. Similar logics have influenced trade relations, where border management and security measures are often justified as necessary components of efforts to combat organized crime. Mexico has intensified enforcement along its southern border in line with U.S. priorities, amid implicit tariff threats linked to drugs and migration.[6] Under these pressures, Mexican President Sheinbaum has made concessions to Washington to avoid economic retaliation. While these moves have temporarily eased tensions with the Trump administration, their domestic political consequences remain uncertain. If cooperation with the U.S. is seen as undermining Mexican sovereignty or if opposition actors revive allegations of governing-party collusion with organized crime, Sheinbaum risks losing nationalist support and deepening civil-military tensions over expanded U.S. influence.[7] Given these dynamics, it is essential to assess the full costs of U.S. assistance in Mexico's drug war.

The significant escalation of violence in Mexico during the years of the Mérida Initiative makes the period from 2008 to 2021 particularly well-suited for assessing both the evolution of bilateral security cooperation and the broader consequences of Mexico's militarized counternarcotics

5 See: Teague, A. (2025). *Policing on Drugs: The United States, Mexico, and the Origins of the Modern Drug War* Oxford University Press; Bartilow, H. (2019). *Drug War Pathologies: Embedded Corporatism and U.S. Drug Enforcement in the Americas.* University of North Carolina Press.

6 Reuters. (2025, July 14). *US must do its part on security, Mexican president says after tariff threat.* https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-must-do-its-part-security-mexican-president-says-after-tariff-threat-2025-07-14/; Madry, K. (2025, January 10). Mexico Will Find a Way to Avoid US Tariffs, Minister Says. *Reuters.* https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-going-find-way-avoid-us-tariffs-minister-says-2025-01-10/.

7 MND Staff. (2025, August 4). Sheinbaum Pushes Back on Claims of Strained US Security Relations: Monday's Mañanera Recapped. *Mexico News Daily*. https://mexiconewsdaily.com/politics/sheinbaum-pushes-back-claims-strained-us-security-relations-mondays-mananera-recapped/.

strategy. This paper does not argue that U.S. security assistance caused the human, economic, or institutional costs of Mexico's drug war, nor does it attempt to isolate the independent causal effect of the Mérida Initiative from the many domestic and international factors that shaped the conflict. Rather, it examines how U.S. security assistance became embedded within and reinforced Mexico's broader militarized counternarcotics strategy and evaluates the costs associated with that strategy during the Mérida period. Moreover, the U.S.' role as a major consumer market for illicit drugs, its longstanding influence in shaping Mexico's prohibitionist enforcement strategies, and the substantial aid it has provided to support Mexico's security apparatus have collectively bound Washington to the trajectory of the drug war.

Although U.S. security assistance represented only one component of Mexico's broader security effort, it became sufficiently integrated into Mexico's militarized counternarcotics strategy that its role should be evaluated alongside the broader dynamics and costs of the conflict. Once external funding, training, and intelligence become integrated into a state's warfighting capacity, they cease to be peripheral inputs and instead become constitutive elements of the conflict's structure, incentives, and escalation patterns. Although U.S. assistance represented only a fraction of Mexico's total security spending, its strategic significance cannot be measured solely by its financial scale. Through training, equipment, intelligence, and political support, the Mérida Initiative reinforced the militarized approach adopted by successive Mexican administrations. The paper argues that the cumulative costs of this conflict have been substantial, including immense human suffering, significant economic burdens, and the erosion of state authority across wide regions of the country. Many of these costs stemmed from the overall trajectory of Mexico's drug war, but U.S. security assistance helped reinforce the militarized policy framework through which they unfolded. In doing so, it highlights the profound strains drug violence has imposed on Mexican institutions—strains comparable to those generated by national mobilization for conventional warfare.

U.S. Security Assistance to Mexico: A History

U.S. drug control and security assistance to Mexico originated in the 1970s, but it was not until the twenty-first century—especially with the launch of the Mérida Initiative in 2008—that bilateral aid reached a scale capable of significantly shaping public safety outcomes. During the Cold War and immediate post–Cold War years, cooperation focused primarily on narcotics interdiction, crop eradication, and intelligence sharing. These efforts unfolded within a law-enforcement framework rather than a war-fighting paradigm, and the scope of collaboration remained limited. The earliest major joint undertaking, Operation Condor (1975–1978)[8], targeted marijuana and opium poppy cultivation in Mexico's primary drug-producing region, the so-called

8 Not to be confused with Operation Condor (1975-1983), a U.S.-backed campaign of coordinated repression carried out by military regimes in the Southern Cone of South America.

Golden Triangle of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. Mexico deployed military units to the region, while the U.S. provided aerial reconnaissance, technical equipment, communications support, and training.[9] Although the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) served as the U.S. lead agency, Mexican forces on the ground sometimes employed militarized tactics. U.S. involvement, however, was deliberately kept at the level of logistical and intelligence assistance rather than fully integrated operational engagement. One notable exception was the 1985 murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, which eventually led to Operation Leyenda, at the time, the DEA's largest international investigation. Camarena was abducted, tortured, and killed in Guadalajara by operatives linked to the Guadalajara Cartel, an event that exposed the depth of cartel penetration into Mexican political and security institutions. The murder triggered a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Mexico relations and prompted the multi-year Operation Leyenda that identified and prosecuted senior cartel figures, including Rafael Caro Quintero. In its aftermath, Washington intensified pressure on Mexico through expanded counternarcotics cooperation and certification requirements, while Mexican authorities undertook limited institutional reforms amid heightened scrutiny of corruption within law enforcement.[10]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as trafficking routes originating in South America increasingly shifted through Mexico due to intensified interdiction in the Caribbean Sea and through South Florida, U.S. counternarcotics assistance remained relatively consistent. Annual aid typically stayed below $100 million, channeled through discrete and compartmentalized programs rather than any comprehensive security framework.[11] Cooperation certainly existed during this period, but it was episodic and politically constrained. Persistent mutual distrust limited the depth and continuity of operational collaboration. The foundations of U.S.–Mexico drug control cooperation were laid in the 1970s and developed incrementally over subsequent decades. By the late 1980s, sustained U.S. counternarcotics efforts in the Caribbean and along the U.S.-Mexico border had disrupted established trafficking routes, prompting Colombian traffickers to increasingly rely on Mexican groups to move cocaine northward. During the 1990s, major drug trafficking organizations, including the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels, consolidated their power, initially operating as junior partners to more powerful Colombian drug trafficking organizations rather than dominant trafficking networks in their own right. As U.S. interdiction efforts in the Caribbean and South Florida disrupted established routes, Colombian traffickers increasingly relied on Mexican groups to move cocaine across the U.S.-Mexico border, compensating them first in cash and later in product, which allowed Mexican drug trafficking organizations to expand their operational autonomy and financial base. By the late 1990s, these groups had evolved from

9 Fernández-Velázquez, J. A. (2018, June 13). La Operación Cóndor en los Altos de Sinaloa: La Labor del Estado Durante los Primeros Años de la Campaña Antidroga. *Redalyc*. https://www.redalyc.org/journal/461/46158062004/.

10 Grant, W. (2012, February 7). Mexico Drugs: How One DEA Killing Began a Brutal War. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-16920870.

11 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2007, August 17). *Drug Control: U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts, but Tons of Illicit Drugs Continue to Flow into the United States*, GAO-08-1018. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-07-1018.

logistical partners into vertically integrated criminal enterprises, exercising greater control over trafficking corridors and beginning to compete more directly for territory and market share.[12]

By the turn of the century, several forces converged to heighten U.S. concern: a severe opioid epidemic at home emanating from prescription drug addiction, expanded border security priorities following the September 11 attacks, and Mexico's increasingly central role in the hemispheric drug trade. These developments created a sense of urgency around strengthening Mexico's capacity to confront the growing power of its drug trafficking organizations.

By the mid-2000s, Mexico's internal security environment was deteriorating rapidly. After several years of relative decline, national homicide rates began to rise sharply. Drug-related violence escalated even further after president Felipe Calderón deployed federal troops against the cartels in 2006, a strategy that contributed to greater fragmentation and territorial competition among organized criminal groups.[13] These dynamics set the stage for the launch of the Mérida Initiative in 2008. Representing an unprecedented level of formalized U.S.–Mexico security cooperation, Mérida marked a decisive turn toward a militarized counternarcotics strategy. The initiative also provided assistance for civilian law enforcement and institutional reform, solidifying Washington's commitment to supporting Mexico's fight against increasingly powerful and volatile criminal organizations.

The shift to Plan Mérida drew on earlier precedents in Colombia, where militarized drug enforcement had produced mixed results. In 1999, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango and U.S. president Bill Clinton launched Plan Colombia, a large-scale and long-term security cooperation program designed to bolster the Colombian state by weakening drug cartels and left-wing insurgent groups. For some policymakers, the results were impressive. Homicide rates in Colombia fell dramatically—by more than 53% between 2000 and 2016—while kidnappings declined by 94% over the same period.[14] Government forces also regained territorial presence, weakening major insurgent groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and disrupting key trafficking networks. By 2007, Colombian authorities reported exercising full or partial control over 90% of national territory, up from about 70% in 2003, reflecting improved state control and public security in previously contested regions.[15]

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12 Beittel, J. S. (2022, June 7). *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*. Congressional Research Service, R41576. CRS. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41576.

13 Flores Martínez, I. & Phillips, M. (2022). The Perfect Storm: An Analysis of the Processes That Increase Lethal Violence in Mexico after 2006. *Trends in Organized Crime* (25)58-83, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8076438/; Espinosa, V. & Rubin, D. B. (2015, February). Did the Military Interventions in the Mexican Drug War Increase Violence? *The American Statistician* 69(1):17-27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591907.

14 Beittel, J. S. (2019, November 29). *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations*. Congressional Research Service, R43813.https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20191129_R43813_384d3a6e05644224f9639f218f382a72cc70ea57.html#Content.

15 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2008, October). *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance,* GAO-09-71. https://www.gao.gov/assets/a282521.html.

However, the downsides were perhaps more damning. Plan Colombia was associated with significant human rights abuses, including the "false positives" scandal in which Colombian military units killed thousands of civilians and falsely presented them as combatants to inflate body counts, so as to indicate their progress.[16] At the same time, aerial eradication campaigns and military pressure contributed to displacement, environmental damage, and the geographic displacement of coca cultivation to neighboring countries rather than its long-term elimination, a classic example of the "balloon effect." Nonetheless, Plan Colombia became a model for subsequent U.S. counternarcotics and state-strengthening initiatives across Latin America, including the Mérida Initiative.

The Mérida Initiative

Conceived during the administrations of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and President George W. Bush (2001-2009), the Mérida Initiative responded to sharp increases in drug-related violence in Mexico and represented a significant expansion of U.S. assistance compared to the more limited counternarcotics cooperation of earlier decades.

Between 2008 and 2021, the $3.3 billion in Mérida Initiative resources were directed—largely through U.S.-managed procurement and in-kind transfers—toward helicopters, aircraft, communications systems, inspection technologies, and efforts to strengthen judicial and law enforcement institutions. Between FY2008 and FY2010, the U.S. Congress appropriated $1.5 billion for the Mérida Initiative, making it one of the largest foreign assistance packages in the history of U.S.-Mexico relations.[17] Early funding concentrated heavily on training and equipping the Mexican military and police. According to the State Department, most of the initial funds went toward equipment and capabilities intended to bolster Mexico's interdiction and counterdrug operations.[18] Data from the Security Assistance Monitor indicate that at least $560 million in U.S. aircraft and helicopter deliveries were provided to Mexico during the early and mid-2010s, consistent with Mérida priorities.[19] In July 2010, supplemental appropriations increased total Mérida Initiative funding to nearly $1.8 billion, reflecting Congress's commitment to deepening bilateral cooperation as violence continued to surge.[20] Following this initial surge, annual funding levels declined and stabilized throughout the 2010s, while the initiative's

16 Shifter, M. (2012, July 18). Plan Colombia: A Retrospective. *Americas Quarterly*. https://www.americasquarterly.org/fulltextarticle/plan-colombia-a-retrospective/.

17 Ribando Seelke, C. (2025, December 11). *Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation*. Congressional Research Service, IF10578. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10578.

18 Bureau of Public Affairs, Department of State, Office of Electronic Information. (2008, August 6). The Mérida Initiative. *U.S. Department of State,* https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/scp/2008/107912.htm.

19 Security Assistance Monitor. (2026, April 29). Deliveries Detail Table. *Center for International Policy.* https://public.tableau.com/shared/65JNFNX5P?:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link&:embed=y (filtered for Mexico; aircraft, military aircraft, and helicopter deliveries; 2010-2017).

20 Seelke, C. & Finklea, K. (2010). *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*. Congressional Research Service. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA528272.

scope broadened beyond equipment and interdiction toward institutional reform, rule-of-law development, and community-based violence protection.

The program evolved gradually with changing U.S. and Mexican presidential leadership. While the Bush administration's implementation emphasized interdiction and military-style capacity building, the administration of Barack Obama subsequently broadened the program's scope. During the Obama administration, Plan Mérida broadened to include institution-building, justice reform, and community-based violence prevention—shifting U.S.–Mexico cooperation toward a more comprehensive security and rule-of-law approach.[21] It was reorganized around four pillars: targeting criminal networks, strengthening institutions, modernizing border controls, and fostering resilient communities. This redesign signaled a move away from a strictly militarized model toward a more holistic vision of security. During Donald Trump's first term, the initiative continued at reduced levels but became increasingly overshadowed by tensions over migration and shifting U.S. policy priorities. Bilateral security cooperation was further strained in 2020 following the U.S. arrest of former Mexican Defense Minister Salvador Cienfuegos on drug trafficking charges, an episode that exposed underlying frictions in the partnership and contributed to the initiative's eventual replacement in 2021.[22]

Yet, despite these expanded aims and sizable investments in Mexican security, U.S. audits and independent analyses later questioned whether the initiative meaningfully reduced violence or curtailed illicit markets, even as criminal groups adapted and spread nationwide.[23] Evaluations by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that, while Mérida-funded programs improved certain tactical capabilities—such as aviation assets, training, and information sharing—U.S. agencies lacked consistent metrics to assess overall progress, and illicit drug flows into the U.S. continued at significant levels despite years of assistance.[24] Similarly, assessments by the Congressional Research Service and policy analysts noted that, as a result of intensified enforcement efforts and the targeting of cartel leadership under militarized security strategies, drug trafficking organizations became more fragmented and geographically dispersed over time, expanding into new regions and diversifying into activities such as fuel theft, extortion, and human trafficking, rather than being decisively weakened.

For their part, Mexican political leaders grew increasingly wary of the initiative. During the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), cooperation under the Mérida Initiative continued, but Mexican officials increasingly emphasized judicial reform and crime prevention while limiting U.S. involvement in sensitive law enforcement and intelligence activities,

21 O'Neil, S. (2012, December). *Refocusing U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation.* Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/reports/refocusing-us-mexico-security-cooperation.
22 Seelke. (2010). *Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation.*
23 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2023, September 12). *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress*, GAO-23-103795. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-103795.
24 U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2023, January). *Southwest Border Security: Additional Actions Needed to Better Assess Fentanyl Smuggling Risks and Improve Data Collection*, GAO-23-103795. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-103795.

reflecting growing concerns over sovereignty and a desire to rebalance the partnership.[25] President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (2018-2024) repeatedly argued that Mérida had failed to deliver security improvements and emphasized that it had prioritized militarized enforcement without addressing the underlying social drivers of violence.[26] In response, Lopez Obrador advanced an "*abrazos, no balazos*" ("hugs, not bullets") strategy centered on social programs, youth employment, and addressing root causes of criminal recruitment.[27] However, despite this rhetorical shift, his administration ultimately expanded the role of the armed forces in public security, creating the National Guard in 2019 and later placing it under the authority of the Secretariat of National Defense in 2022 while continuing to rely heavily on military deployments for law enforcement tasks by the end of his *sexenio* (six-year presidential term).[28] The result was less a departure from militarization than a reconfiguration of it, as security policy continued to depend on military institutions even as its stated strategy emphasized social intervention.[29] Rising violence, domestic political pressure, and lack of immediate alternatives kept more militarized policing at the forefront of the government's objectives.

It should also be noted that available government data on U.S. security assistance to Mexico reveals several inconsistencies and limitations that complicate precise measurement of the relationship between Mérida Initiative aid and Mexican militarization. Despite these ambiguities, the broader trend indicates sustained U.S. investment in military and security capabilities, including aviation assets, training, and equipment, rather than a clear shift away from militarized forms of assistance. In this sense, even where the data is incomplete or uneven, it reinforces the conclusion that U.S. assistance consistently supported and reinforced militarized approaches to bilateral security cooperation.

Outside of, and in conjunction with Plan Mérida, the U.S. military and other government agencies increased their training and equipping of Mexican military and police during this period. U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) has played an increasingly important role in facilitating military-to-military cooperation with Mexico, primarily through training, joint exercises, and capacity-building efforts. Bilateral exercises such as the AMALGAM EAGLE series have focused on improving coordination, intelligence sharing, and joint responses to illicit trafficking,

25 Seelke, C. & Finklea, K. (2015). *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*. Congressional Research Service. https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/765713-1.pdf.

26 Domínguez, P. (2020, November 18). SRE: Iniciativa Mérida Ya Quedó Sin Efecto. *Milenio*. https://www.milenio.com/politica/sre-iniciativa-merida-ya-quedo-sin-efecto.

27 Beittel, J. S. (2022, June 7). *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*, R41576. Congressional Research Service. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41576.

28 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022, September 9). *Mexico: Transfer of National Guard to Defense Ministry a Setback to Public Security Grounded in Human Rights,* Press Release. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/mexico-transfer-national-guard-defence-ministry-setback-public-security; Human Rights Watch. (2023). *World Report 2023: Mexico.* https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/mexico.

29 International Crisis Group. (2020, May 4). *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, Report No. 80. https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/080-mexicos-everyday-war-guerrero-and-trials-peace.

while other NORTHCOM partnerships have provided training to Mexican forces in specialized capabilities such as counter-cartel operations and tactical planning.[30] At the same time, U.S. Marine Corps units under NORTHCOM have conducted recurring joint exercises with Mexican naval infantry, designed to enhance interoperability and amphibious operational capabilities under agreements dating back to 2008.[31] Beyond NORTHCOM, other U.S. agencies have expanded their involvement in Mexico's security landscape. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) has funded training programs for Mexican authorities targeting drug production, interdiction, and forensic capability, including support for dismantling synthetic drug laboratories and enhancing investigative capabilities.[32] Meanwhile, the Department of Defense and National Guard have supported U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Border Patrol operations through surveillance, intelligence, and infrastructure support along the U.S.-Mexico border, contributing to a broader, integrated enforcement architecture. Although many aspects of this cooperation remain opaque, the cumulative effect has been a steady expansion of U.S. involvement in training, equipping, and operational coordination with Mexican security forces beyond the formal structure of the Mérida Initiative.

Though they have not expanded at the same rate as U.S. aid figures, the Mexican government's military expenditures have also risen relatively rapidly, particularly following the escalation of cartel violence after 2006. Mexico's military spending as a share of GDP hovered around 0.4-0.5% in the late 2000s, but increased to approximately 0.7% by 2020, marking a notable upward shift from its historical low of roughly 0.3% in 2006.[33] In absolute terms, defense spending also expanded significantly, reaching more than $16 billion by the mid-2020s, reflecting sustained investment in personnel, equipment, and operational capacity—far exceeding the scale of U.S. security assistance provided under initiatives such as Mérida.[34] This increase coincided with the Mexican government's growing reliance on the armed forces for domestic security tasks, as military units were routinely deployed to conduct policing functions in regions affected by organized crime. The institutionalization of this trend culminated in the creation of the National Guard in 2019, a force composed largely of military personnel and placed under military command, which by the early 2020s had grown to more than 100,000 members.[35] While

30 U.S. Northern Command. (2017, July 12). *NORAD, USNORTHCOM and the Mexican Air Force Successfully Accomplish Objectives in AMALGAM EAGLE 17.* https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1456404/norad-usnorthcom-and-the-mexican-air-force-successfully-accomplish-objectives-i/.

31 U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command. (2025, March 22). U.S. Marines Conduct Routine Training with Mexican Navy and Marines. https://www.marforcom.marines.mil/News/Announcement/Article/4123338/us-marines-conduct-routine-training-with-mexican-navy-and-marines/.

32 Gottesdiener, L., Eisenhammer, S. & Pamuk, H. (2025, February 13). Trump's Foreign Aid Freeze Stops Anti-Fentanyl Work in Mexico. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trumps-foreign-aid-freeze-stops-anti-fentanyl-work-mexico-2025-02-13.

33 World Bank, World Development Indicators. (2026, March 22). *Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Mexico*. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=MX.

34 Trading Economics. (2026, March 22). *Mexico Military Expenditure*. https://tradingeconomics.com/mexico/military-expenditure.

35 Leofrigio, M. (2022, October 9). The Mexican National Guard: A Solution to Ensure Security or a Strong Escalation in the Process of Militarization? *Small Wars Journal*. https://smallwarsjournal.com/2022/10/09/mexican-national-guard-solution-ensure-security-or-strong-escalation-process/.

Mexico's overall military spending remains low relative to global averages, its steady growth—and increasing integration with domestic law enforcement—reflects a broader shift toward the militarization of public security in response to cartel violence.

Ultimately, drug violence has pushed Mexican institutions to their limits, imposing pressures rivaling those of full-scale wartime mobilization. The accumulated toll of this conflict is immense, marked by deep human suffering, heavy economic strain, and the hollowing out of state control across large parts of the country, which the paper will explore in the following section.

Costs of the Drug War in Mexico

The Human Toll

The human toll of the Mexican state's drug war was substantial, amplified by escalating homicide rates from violent crime. While the drug war has also contributed to broader public health consequences, including drug overdose deaths in the United States, this analysis focuses on the human cost of violence and militarized counternarcotics efforts within Mexico. Estimates suggest that between roughly 125,000 and 150,000 people were killed in organized crime-related violence between 2006 and 2018, placing it among the world's deadliest conflict zones during that period.[36] A 2026 report by the Council on Foreign Relations, citing data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), indicates that the total homicides in Mexico since 2006 have exceeded 460,000, a reflection of the persistence and scale of violence.[37] Civilians have borne the overwhelming share of this violence: massacres, kidnappings, and targeted killings have become widespread. Separately, more than 130,000 people have been reported missing in Mexico, though Mexican government officials have disputed the accuracy of these figures.[38] Both criminal organizations and state security forces have been implicated in disappearances, although responsibility for many cases remains undetermined. See Figures 1 and 2 for an overview of homicide trends in Mexico from 2000 to 2020.

Estimates of cumulative homicides in Mexico differ across sources and reporting periods. A 2025 study by Das and colleagues placed the total at more than 360,000 homicides since

36 International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2017). *The Armed Conflict Survey 2017.* https://www.iiss.org/press/2017/acs-2017/; The Organization for World Peace. (accessed 2026, April 30). *Mexican Drug War.* https://theowp.org/crisis_index/mexican-drug-war-2.

37 Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, February 23). *Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels.* https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels.

38 Lopez, O. (2026, February 16). Disappearances in Mexico Surge by 200% over 10 Years. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/16/mexico-disappearances-increase; McDonnell, P. & Sánchez Vidal, C. (2026, April 6). Mexico Says Only About One-Third of 130,000 People Listed As Disappeared Can Be Confirmed as Missing. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2026-04-06/mexico-says-only-about-one-third-of-130-000-people-listed-as-disappeared-can-be-confirmed-as-missing.

2006.[39] A more recent 2026 report by the Council on Foreign Relations, drawing on UNODC data, indicates that the number has exceeded 463,000.[40] Figure 1, adapted from the research of Das and colleagues published in 2025, illustrates homicide rates in Mexico between 2000 and 2020 rather than cumulative homicide totals. Figure 1 shows a sharp increase in homicide rates following the escalation of the drug war in 2006, as the figures reported by Das and colleagues show a more than threefold increase in rates between 2006 and 2020.

Figure 1: Homicide Rates in Mexico, 2000-2020[41]



Beyond direct conflict-related killings, the drug war has also seen persistently high rates of femicide, which have become one of the most visible manifestations of the country's broader security crisis. Reported femicides increased from 427 in 2015 to 1,004 in 2021, representing a 135% increase.[42] The prevalence of gender-based killings underscores the climate of impunity that has deepened amid the state's militarized approach to public security. Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicate that Mexico's homicide rate remains significantly above both global and regional averages.[43] Many of these homicides are inflicted by firearms

39 Abhery Das, Eileen Lee, Devoja Ganguli, and Tim A. Bruckner, "The Mexican Drug War: Homicides and Deaths of Despair, 2000-2020," *Public Health* 240 (March 2025): 217-22, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0033350625000320.

40 Council on Foreign Relations, "Mexico's Long War"; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "International Homicide Victims," *UNODC Data Portal*, 2025, https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims.

41 Homicide trends in Mexico 2000-2020. Figure 1 graphs created using Anthropic, Claude [Generative AI chat], 2026, July, and derived from graphs in Das et al. (2025) The Mexican Drug War, 217-22.

42 Institute for Economics & Peace, *Mexico Peace Index 2022* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2022),https://www.visionofhumanity.org/understanding-the-dynamics-of-femicide-of-mexico

43 Mattiace, T. (2025, February 19). *Double Injustice: How Mexico's Criminal Justice System Fails Victims and the Accused.* Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/02/19/double-injustice/how-mexicos-criminal-justice-system-fails-victims-and-accused.

trafficked from the United States, which remain a principal source of weapons used by Mexican criminal organizations.[44] The conflict has also imposed sustained costs on Mexico's security forces. Although military fatalities represent a smaller share of total deaths, soldiers and marines have been repeatedly deployed into high-risk domestic policing roles, exposing them to prolonged operational stress and combat-like conditions.

At the same time, the expansion of military involvement in public security has been accompanied by a sharp rise in allegations of human rights abuses. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch report widespread abuses by security forces, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances, particularly during periods of large-scale military deployment.[45] These trends have unfolded alongside a worsening security environment shaped by cartel fragmentation. As major criminal organizations splintered, localized conflicts across multiple states overwhelmed local law enforcement and were answered by repeated federal military interventions, which in turn further entrenched the use of military force in domestic policing. Together, these dynamics have transformed large parts of Mexico into zones of chronic insecurity, where the cumulative human costs increasingly resemble those of protracted armed conflict.

The human toll also extends to a generation of young people who find themselves ensnarled in the illicit economy. Cartels rely heavily on youth labor, with estimates suggesting that criminal groups collectively recruit and employ tens of thousands of minors annually.[46] Adolescents are particularly vulnerable: studies show that youth as young as 12 are targeted for recruitment, especially in areas stricken by poverty, weak state presence, and elevated school dropout rates.[47] In some regions, the expansion of cartel activity has been linked to increased school dropout rates, as drug trafficking organizations create labor demand for young men as lookouts, couriers, and enforcers, effectively competing with formal education systems.[48] The illicit labor market is growing, as evidenced by this dynamic. By 2022, Mexican cartels employed between 160,000 and 185,000 individuals total, requiring continuous recruitment—approximately 350 new members per week—to sustain operations amid arrests and conflict-related losses.[49]

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44 Ieva Jusionyte, *Exit Wounds: How America's Guns Fuel Violence across the Border* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024).

45 Amnesty International. *Mexico 2024/25.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/mexico/report-mexico/; Human Rights Watch. (2023). *World Report 2023: Mexico.* https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/mexico.

46 Pearson, T. (2025, February 27). How to Actually Stop Mexico's Cartels Without Terrorist Labels. *International Policy Center.* https://internationalpolicy.org/publications/how-to-actually-stop-mexicos-cartels-without-terrorist-labels/; Lee, E. (2024, April 13). Drug Cartel Recruitment. *The Borgen Project.* https://borgenproject.org/drug-cartel-recruitment/.

47 Olivares, G. (2020). *Education and Violence in Mexico.* (master's thesis, Stanford University), https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/ice/monograph/olivares_greta_final_ma_paper_2020.pdf.

48 Rodriguez Hurtado, I. (2024, February). El Chapo's Guns and Schools: Mexican Drug Traffickers, Homicides, and School Dropout. *Econ that Matters.* https://www.econthatmatters.com/2024/02/el-chapos-guns-and-schools-mexican-drug-traffickers-homicides-and-school-dropout/.

49 Prieto-Curiel, R., Campedelli, G. M. & Hope, A. (2023). Reducing Cartel Recruitment Is the Only Way to Lower Violence in Mexico. *Science.* https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adh2888.

Recruitment practices range from economic inducement to coercion, with cartels exploiting social marginalization, lack of employment opportunities, and limited access to education.[50] The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which violence, underdevelopment, and criminal labor markets erode human capital formation, leaving many young people with few viable alternatives outside the drug trade.

Economic Toll

Several analyses confirm that drug-related violence from 2008-2021 materially damaged Mexico's economic productivity. Evidence indicates that rising drug-related violence has had significant negative effects on manufacturing output, employment, and capacity utilization, indicating a direct contraction in industrial activity. A doubling of homicide rates was associated with roughly an 8% decline in plant-level output and a 5% decline in employment, demonstrating the measurable economic costs of insecurity.[51] Beyond these microeconomic effects, the aggregate cost of violence is staggering. One study suggests that violence imposed an economic burden of approximately $192.6 billion in 2021 alone—equivalent to about 14.6% of Mexico's GDP—with more recent assessments placing the total closer to 18% of GDP, or roughly $230-250 billion annually.[52] The drug war also poses a major macroeconomic constraint on growth and development. This burden is transmitted through multiple channels. Violence discourages domestic and foreign investment, as firms face heightened uncertainty and elevated operating costs. The violence also distorted labor markets by proportionally reducing blue-collar employment and driving workers out of the formal sector, further constraining production capacity. These findings suggest that drug-related violence suppressed output in the short term and undermined Mexico's long-run industrial development by weakening productivity, labor participation, and growth of domestic manufacturing capabilities.[53]

Moreover, evidence indicates that the escalation of drug-related violence generated severe instability in key industrial regions, particularly in border states such as Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León. Violence eroded local economic activity by undermining investor confidence and increasing the costs of doing business, with cities like Ciudad Juárez—where over 3,100 people were murdered in 2010 alone—becoming emblematic of the economic paralysis caused by cartel conflict.[54] As violence intensified following the militarization of counternarcotics efforts,

50 Zepeda Gil, R. (2024, May 31). Mexican Government Failing to Provide Decent Jobs for Vulnerable Youth, Leaving the Door Open to Cartel Recruitment. *Oxford Department of International Development*. https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/blog/mexican-government-failing-provide-decent-jobs-vulnerable-youth-leaving-door-open-cartel.

51 Utar, H. (2025). Firms and Labor in Times of Violence: Evidence from the Mexican Drug War. *The World Bank Economic Review* 39(3): 632-662, https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhae037.

52 Cervantes, A., et al. (2023). Estimating the Economic Impact of Interpersonal Violence in Mexico in 2021: Projecting Three Hypothetical Scenarios for 2030. *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública*. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9976230/; Cota, I. (2023, September 21). From Chickens to Cabs: Drug Cartels Expand Across the Mexican Economy. *El País*. https://english.elpais.com/economy-and-business/2023-09-21/from-lemons-to-cabs-drug-cartels-expand-across-the-mexican-economy.html.

53 Utar, H. (2025). Firms and Labor in Times of Violence.

54 Valencia, N. (2010, December 15). Ciudad Juárez on Pace to Become World's Most Violent City. *CNN*. https://

killings linked to organized crime rose sharply, reaching more than 45,000 deaths by September 2011, while spreading geographically across northern industrial corridors and border regions.[55] Although aggregate indicators such as foreign direct investment remained relatively stable at the national level, these figures often masked significant localized disruptions. As analysts note, the economic effects of violence were unevenly distributed, with border states and smaller firms bearing disproportionate costs.[56] The drug war did not uniformly suppress economic growth but instead produced regionally concentrated economic damage, thus reinforcing inequality and undermining development in areas most exposed to cartel violence.

State Capacity

By the late 2010s and into the early 2020s, institutional weaknesses became even more apparent as impunity soared and public security reforms struggled to keep pace with rising violence. Despite improvements in certain security force capabilities supported by U.S. assistance, capacity gains were uneven and often did not extend to Mexico's justice system. Reports show that impunity for violent crimes reached roughly 94.8% by 2021, while broader data suggest that over 90% of crimes in Mexico go unreported or unpunished, reflecting deep judicial and administrative deficiencies that limited the state's ability to investigate, prosecute, and deter organized crime.[57] Mexico's conviction rates remain exceptionally low, with only a small fraction of reported crimes resulting in sentencing, underscoring systemic weaknesses in case-building, forensic capacity, and prosecutorial performance. For example, national survey data indicate that only about 6-7% of crimes lead to an investigation, and an even smaller share result in a judicial resolution.[58] These shortcomings are evident at each stage of the justice process, from initial reporting and evidence collection to prosecution and adjudication. These deficiencies are particularly acute at the subnational level, where the fragmentation of policing authority undermines capacity. Mexico has more than 1,800 municipal police forces, many of which are under-resourced, poorly trained, and highly vulnerable to corruption or coercion by criminal organizations.[59] This institutional fragmentation produces significant variation in enforcement capacity across municipalities and creates coordination problems between local, state, and federal authorities. In practice, this often results in "patchwork sovereignty," where the effectiveness of law enforcement depends heavily on local conditions rather than national

www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/12/15/mexico.juarez.homicides/index.html.

55 Correa-Cabrera, G. (2013). Violence and FDI in Mexico: The Economic Impact of the 'War against Drugs.' *Voices of Mexico*, 96: 17-22, http://www.revistascisan.unam.mx/Voices/pdfs/9604.pdf.

56 Correa-Cabrera, G. (2013). Violence and FDI in Mexico.

57 Aron Lee, C. (2023). The Institutional Deficiencies Which Cause Mexico's 95% Impunity Rate. *Mexican Law Review* 15(2): 81-94, https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-05782023000100081; Aguilar Peláez, E. (2023, April 5). Impunity in Mexico: 93% of Crimes Go Unreported. *Global Press Journal*. https://globalpressjournal.com/americas/mexico/impunity-mexico-93-crimes-go-unreported/index.html.

58 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). (2022). *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE) 2022.* https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/envipe/2022/#documentacion.

59 International Crisis Group. (2023, June 23). *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*. Latin America Report No. 99. International Crisis Group. https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/099-mexicos-forgotten-mayors.pdf.

standards. Moreover, surveys of police institutions consistently find low levels of public trust and high perceptions of corruption, further weakening cooperation between citizens and authorities—an essential component of effective policing and intelligence gathering.[60]

Judicial and policing institutions have struggled to absorb the pressures generated by escalating violence. High levels of pretrial detention—often used as a substitute for effective investigation—reflect both case backlogs and prosecutorial capacity. As of 2025, roughly 40% of Mexico's prison population consisted of pretrial detainees, highlighting systemic inefficiencies in case processing and due process protections.[61] At the local level, municipal police forces have proven particularly vulnerable: many are underfunded, poorly trained, and susceptible to coercion or corruption, creating openings for criminal organizations to infiltrate or co-opt local governance structures. These weaknesses contributed to the federal government's decision to create the National Guard in 2019, effectively transferring core public security functions to a force heavily composed of military personnel. By 2023, more than 70% of National Guard personnel had prior military service, revealing the extent to which Mexico has relied on the armed forces to compensate for weak civilian institutions.[62] While intended to restore order, this shift also signaled the state's limited confidence in civilian law enforcement institutions and led to the government doubling down on a militarized approach instead of shifting focus to civilian police reform and capacity building.[63]

At the territorial level, these institutional gaps have translated into uneven or contested state authority. In some regions, criminal groups exercise *de facto* control over territory, regulating economic activity, coercing local populations, and influencing political processes. Empirical studies show that organized criminal groups have systematically targeted local officials–particularly mayors and candidates—as part of efforts to capture or influence municipal governments, with assassination patterns closely tied to territorial competition and criminal governance strategies.[64] This erosion in territorial governance is both a cause and consequence of violence. As cartel fragmentation intensified following kingpin-targeting strategies, localized conflicts multiplied, overwhelming already fragile institutions. In turn, weakened institutions proved unable to contain or deter violence, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which violence degrades state capacity, and diminished state capacity enables further violence. The cumulative

60 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). (2025). *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE) 2025*. https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/envipe/2025/.

61 Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. (2025). *World Prison Brief: Mexico*. University of London. https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/mexico.

62 Zidan, N. (2024, October 8). Militarising Peace: Mexico's National Guard Now Under Military Command. *The Organization for World Peace*. https://theowp.org/militarising-peace-mexicos-national-guard-now-under-military-command/.

63 International Crisis Group. (2020, May 4). *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*. Latin America Report No. 80. International Crisis Group. https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/080-mexicos-everyday-war-guerrero.pdf.

64 Gutiérrez-Romero, R. & Iturbe, N. (2024, November). Causes and Electoral Consequences of Political Assassinations: The Role of Organized Crime in Mexico. *Political Geograph* 115: 103206, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103206.

effects of sustained insecurity, institutional erosion, and expanding criminal networks significantly diminished Mexico's effective state capacity across security, governance, and public service domains during the 2008-2021 period of the Mérida Initiative. Rather than consolidating state authority, the drug war has in many areas produced a hybrid governance landscape, in which state and non-state actors coexist, compete, and at times collude in the provision—or denial—of order. This dynamic not only constrains the ability to enforce law and deliver services but also reshapes citizen-state relations, eroding legitimacy and reinforcing long-term governance deficits.

Conclusion: Prospects for Future Reform and Cooperation

In some ways, Mérida Initiative funding came at a high cost for the Mexican government, and it offers several critical lessons for evaluating U.S. drug policy toward Mexico in the future. Many of these costs were rooted in the broader trajectory of Mexico's drug war rather than U.S. assistance alone, but the Mérida Initiative helped reinforce and sustain the militarized policy approach through which these consequences unfolded. Although conceived as a shared-responsibility framework to strengthen institutions, combat organized crime, and reduce cross-border drug flows, both governments repeatedly failed to meet their own commitments—Mexico struggled to curb corruption, while the U.S. made limited progress in addressing drug demand or stemming firearms and bulk cash trafficking southward. Over time, observers noted that the initiative's widening agenda, especially after the shift to its four-pillar strategy in 2011, was not matched by adequate funding or consistent political will, contributing to fragmented implementation and limited on-the-ground impact. Despite more than $3.3 billion in U.S. assistance, Mexico's homicide rate more than tripled between 2006 and 2020, and drug overdose deaths in the U.S. continued to surge—evidence that Mérida did not achieve its core security or public-health aims.

In the years after Plan Mérida, from safely behind multibillion-dollar border security infrastructure, U.S. policymakers have monitored the situation closely. Leveraging issues such as tariffs, migration enforcement, and security cooperation in its negotiations with Mexico, the U.S. government pushes Mexico to attempt to destroy the cartels once and for all, even while American addicts are the source of the narcotics industry and U.S.-sourced firearms are used to perpetrate much of the violence. Among the most significant developments is the administration of President Donald Trump labeling several Mexican drug trafficking organizations as foreign terrorist organizations, which opens different avenues for military engagement in Mexico.[65] This occurs as the 2026 revision of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), the successor to the North American Free Trade Agreement, looms large. Since

65 Rubio, M. (2026, February 20). Terrorist Designations of International Cartels, press statement. *U.S. Department of State.* https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designations-of-international-cartels/.

last year, pressure from the Trump administration has prompted Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum to offer tangible security concessions aimed at insulating Mexico from economic retaliation. Mexico has expedited the transfer of several high-profile imprisoned traffickers into U.S. custody under expanded extradition agreements and deepened intelligence-sharing mechanisms between Mexican security forces and U.S. agencies.[66] Mexico has also permitted increased bilateral coordination, including limited unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) surveillance over cartel-dominated regions and enhanced joint efforts along key trafficking corridors.[67] More recently, U.S. intelligence purportedly led to Mexican security forces capturing and killing Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho," leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), one of the most powerful cartels in Mexico.[68] A victory, on the one hand, but on the other, an eruption of violence across more than 10 states—including road blockades, arson attacks, and coordinated assaults on security forces—signaling that instability and insecurity loom ahead.[69]

These failures underscore the need for future policy frameworks, such as the Bicentennial Framework, to reduce reliance on militarized strategies, improve accountability and evaluation metrics, and meaningfully address structural drivers on both sides of the border, including corruption, impunity, arms trafficking, and expanding U.S. drug demand. However, at present, very little remains publicized about the contours of the program. In December 2025, the second administration of President Trump articulated a more militaristic strategy toward Latin America in the National Security Strategy, a "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine prioritizing U.S. power projection and a firmer stance against rogue regimes and criminals.[70] This has manifested in Venezuela and increasingly so in Ecuador, where the implications of Washington's expanded security posture are already becoming visible.

In Venezuela, the Trump administration's January 2026 military intervention—culminating in the capture of Nicolás Maduro following months of U.S. troop buildup and offshore airstrikes—marks a dramatic escalation of U.S. force as an instrument of regional governance. The operation, justified on grounds of narco-terrorism and framed as a decisive assertion of hemispheric dominance, effectively replaced diplomatic and multilateral approaches with unilateral regime change. A similar logic is emerging in Ecuador, though under different political conditions. Ecuador has undergone a sharp deterioration in security—record homicide rates, surging narco-

66 Mora, D. (2026, January 21). Mexico Seeks to Placate White House with Mass Criminal Transfer. *International Crisis Group*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/alr/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/mexico-seeks-placate-white-house-mass-criminal-transfer.

67 Reuters. (2025, February 19). U.S. Drone Flights over Mexican Territory Are Part of a Collaboration, Mexican President Says. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-drone-flights-over-mexican-territory-are-part-collaboration-mexican-president-2025-02-19/.

68 Abi-Habib, M. (2026, February 23). Mexico Killed 'El Mencho.' What's Next for the Drug Cartel He Led? *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/23/world/americas/el-mencho-killed-mexico-cartel.html.

69 Buschschlüter, V. & Mitchell, O. (2026, February 23). Cartel Henchmen Unleash Violence After Top Drug Lord Killed in Mexico. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c795qgejzpxo.

70 The White House. (2025, November). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

trafficking activity, and escalating violence tied to transnational criminal groups—prompting President Daniel Noboa to adopt an increasingly militarized internal security doctrine. In early 2026, Quito invited expanded U.S. military cooperation, resulting in new joint operations targeting organizations labeled as narco-terrorist threats. Taken together, the U.S. posture in both countries reflects a resurgence of hard security doctrine that reinforces the very patterns and failures of militarized drug control the Bicentennial Framework claims to move beyond.

This report's findings echo other research by the Costs of War project in the context of the post-9/11 wars, which has likewise shown how U.S. security assistance in the name of counterterrorism has played a role in contributing to and intensifying the violence of global conflicts.[71]

Policy Recommendations

Moving forward, a more effective U.S.–Mexico (and by extension, U.S.-Latin America) security framework will require a fundamental recalibration away from enforcement-dominant, militarized approaches toward a genuinely binational strategy that addresses the full political economy of the drug trade. First, both governments must meaningfully rebalance their priorities toward demand reduction and public health, particularly on the U.S. side of the border. While synthetic opioid overdose deaths in the U.S. have declined since their 2023 peak, overdose remains the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 44, and fentanyl continues to drive a substantial share of mortality and criminal profits. The Mérida Initiative explicitly framed drug demand as a shared responsibility, yet U.S. investments remained overwhelmingly weighted toward supply-side enforcement rather than treatment access, harm reduction, or prevention.

Second, a restructured framework must confront the southbound flow of firearms and illicit finance from the U.S., both of which materially fuel cartel power and violence in Mexico. Tracing data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) indicate that over two-thirds—and likely more than 70% —of firearms recovered at Mexican crime scenes and successfully traced originate in the U.S., a figure that understates the problem given the large share of weapons with indeterminate origin.[72] At the same time, it is estimated that $19–29 billion in illicit drug proceeds move from the U.S. into Mexico each year, often through bulk cash smuggling, trade-based money laundering, and transnational financial networks that remain comparatively under-prioritized in bilateral cooperation.[73] Absent sustained U.S. efforts

71 Stephanie Savell, *The Costs of United States' Post-9/11 "Security Assistance": How Counterterrorism Intensified Conflict in Burkina Faso and Around the World* (Providence, RI: Costs of War, Watson School of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, March 4, 2021), https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/paper/costs-united-states-post-911-security-assistance-how-counterterrorism-intensified-conflict.

72 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. (2024). *Firearms Trace Data: Mexico, 2018-2023*. U.S. Department of Justice. https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-mexico-2018-2023.

73 Wayne, E., Farfán-Méndez, C., Felbab-Brown, V. & Fernández de Castro, R. (2019, April 29). Tariffs Won't Solve U.S.-Mexico Drug Crime. *Brookings Institution*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tariffs-wont-solve-u-s-mexico-drug-crime/.

to regulate gun markets, enhance southbound inspections, and disrupt financial laundering networks, Mexican enforcement actions alone will continue to have a limited strategic effect.

Third, future cooperation frameworks must be anchored in clear metrics, transparency, and independent evaluation. One of the central shortcomings of Mérida was the lack of consistent, jointly agreed benchmarks for success beyond arrest counts, seizures, or training outputs—metrics that obscured rising homicide rates, persistent impunity, and cartel fragmentation. Institutionalized mechanisms for financial disclosure, program-level evaluation, and public reporting would improve accountability on both sides of the border and help ensure that resources are aligned with demonstrable outcomes rather than political signaling. Bilateral cooperation on illicit finance should be elevated from a supporting role to a central pillar. Joint financial intelligence sharing, coordinated money laundering investigations, rules-based information exchange, and cross-border prosecutions targeting cartel financial networks offer one of the most promising avenues for weakening organized crime without exacerbating violence or human rights abuses

Mexican security policy must continue to pivot away from militarization and toward institution-building, particularly by strengthening civilian policing, prosecutorial capacity, and judicial independence. Despite expanded military deployments under Mérida and its successors, Mexico's homicide rates reached historic highs between 2016 and 2019, and impunity for violent crime remains above 90% nationwide, underscoring the limits of coercive force absent functional justice institutions. Investments in investigative policing, forensic capacity, and prosecutorial effectiveness—paired with robust anti-corruption safeguards—are more closely associated with long-term security gains than continued reliance on the armed forces. In sum, when taken together, the lessons of the Mérida Initiative suggest that future success will depend less on the scale of resources committed than on whether those resources are aligned with a coherent, binational strategy that addresses the structural drivers of the drug economy—demand, arms, finance, and institutional weakness—on both sides of the border.



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