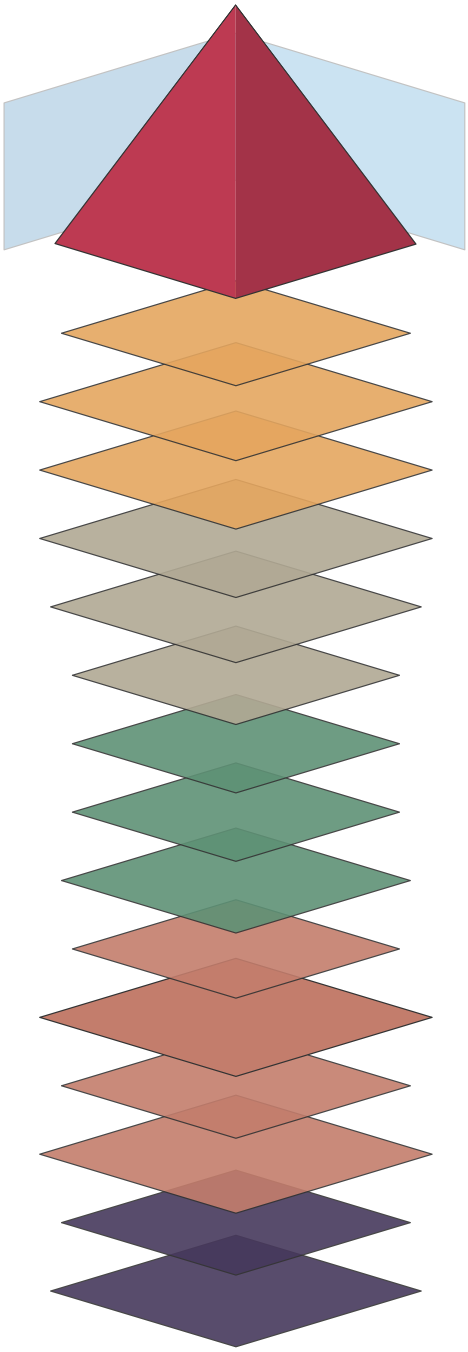
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

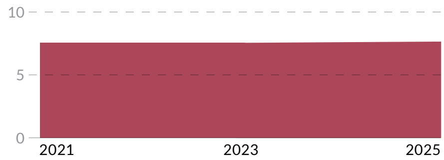
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

MEXICO



7.68 ↗0.12
CRIMINALITY SCORE

3rd of 193 countries -
2nd of 35 American countries -
1st of 8 Central American countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	8.27	↗0.13
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	9.00	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	9.00	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	9.00	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	8.50	0.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	7.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	7.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	7.50	↗0.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	8.00	↗0.50
HEROIN TRADE	7.50	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	9.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	8.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	9.00	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	8.00	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.50	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	7.10	↗0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	9.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	8.50	↘0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.50	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	4.00	↗0.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6.50	↗0.50

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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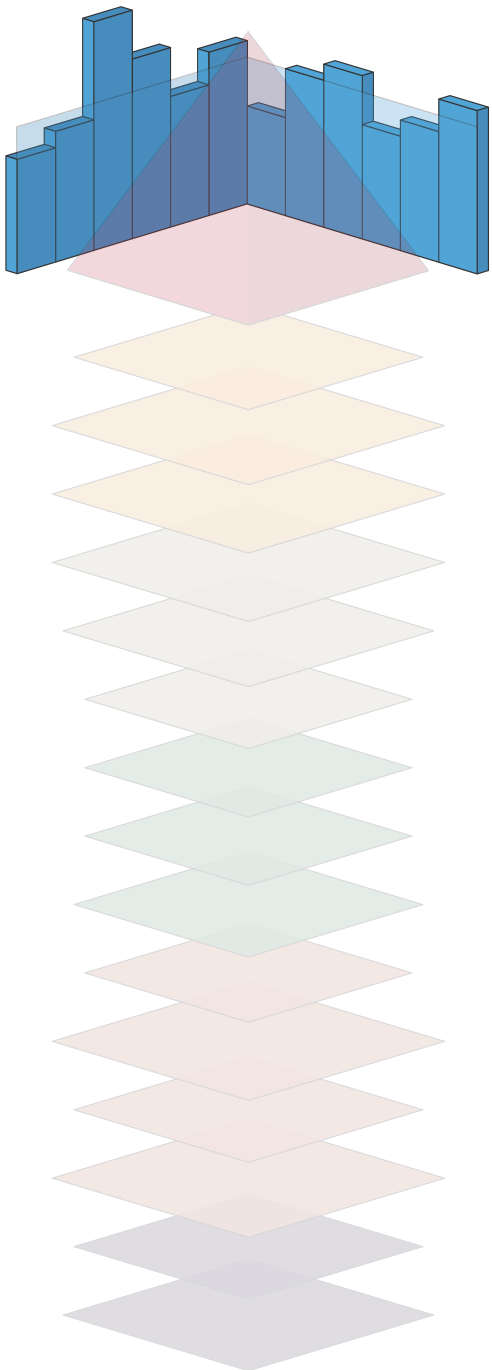
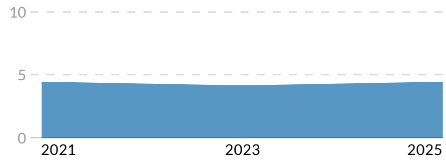
MEXICO



4.50 ↗0.29
RESILIENCE SCORE

111th of 193 countries ↗13
23rd of 35 American countries ↗2
3rd of 8 Central American countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**3.50**	↗0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**4.00**	↗1.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**7.00**	↗0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**5.50**	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**4.00**	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**5.00**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**3.00**	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**4.50**	↗0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**5.00**	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**3.50**	0.00
PREVENTION	**4.00**	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	**5.00**	↗1.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Mexico remains a significant hub for human trafficking, fuelled by economic disparities, violence, migration and weak institutional frameworks. The southern states, including Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero, have the highest prevalence, with indigenous populations often subjected to forced labour in agriculture, domestic work and the maquila (manufacturing) industry – consisting of foreign factories producing goods often for export. Kidnapping for forced labour is an emerging issue. Sexual exploitation is widespread, particularly in tourist centres like Cancún, Los Cabos and Playa del Carmen, where sex tourism drives demand. Criminal organizations, including the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel, have been increasingly involved in the human trafficking market. They have also diversified their operations, turning greater attention to online sexual exploitation and labour trafficking, though human trafficking remains a secondary activity. Despite an updated legal framework, enforcement remains weak and only a small percentage of cases reach judicial resolution. The issue is exacerbated by transnational links, as migrants from Southeast Asia, Africa and Central America are trafficked through Mexico towards the US.

Mexico's geographical position makes it a critical transit point for human smuggling. Migrants from Central America, Africa and Asia rely on smugglers to facilitate border crossings, often at great personal risk. Criminal organizations impose territorial fees on smugglers and exploit vulnerable migrants, forcing them into labour or criminal activities in exchange for passage. The recent tightening of US immigration policies has pushed migrants into more dangerous routes, increasing reliance on smuggling networks. Smuggling hotspots include Tijuana, Sonora, Coahuila, Veracruz and Tamaulipas, where corrupt authorities facilitate crossings. Despite enforcement efforts, human smuggling remains a profitable and deeply entrenched market.

Extortion is a pervasive crime in Mexico, affecting businesses, agriculture, unions and public officials. The CJNG, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel dominate this market, but smaller groups and individuals also engage in extortion by falsely claiming cartel affiliation. Agricultural sectors, particularly avocado and fishing industries, are heavily impacted. Urban centres such as Mexico City, Monterrey and Guadalajara face increasing digital and phone-based extortion. Despite law enforcement efforts, underreporting is common due to fear of retaliation.

TRADE

The illegal arms trade in Mexico is fuelled by weapons smuggled from the US, with key entry points in Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez and Manzanillo. Cartels rely on firearms for territorial control, with preferred weapons including Barrett .50 calibre rifles and AK-47s. The possession of unregistered firearms is widespread in Mexico, with estimates suggesting that over 13 million such weapons are in circulation. Corrupt officials facilitate smuggling, and former security personnel sometimes participate in the trade. Despite recent legal actions against US gun manufacturers, arms trafficking continues to drive violence in Mexico, contributing to high homicide rates. Moreover, the arms trafficking market is closely connected to drug trafficking networks and criminal groups engaged in human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and armed robbery. Criminal groups employ highly specialized techniques for smuggling weapons across the border, with drug trafficking networks being their main clients. These groups also use 'ant trade' movements, smuggling weapons on a small scale to avoid detection.

Counterfeit goods represent a significant illicit market, with organized crime groups and corrupt customs officials facilitating entry. High-demand counterfeit products include tobacco, alcohol, clothing and pharmaceuticals. Tepito in Mexico City and markets in Jalisco and Monterrey serve as key distribution centres. The counterfeit goods industry generates billions in revenue, which contributes to expanding cartel power and is closely linked to money laundering. This market is fuelled by local demand, with a considerable share of the population buying counterfeit products such as footwear, clothing and medicines. The smuggling of excise goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, is well-established, with organized crime groups operating independently of financial intermediaries. Free trade zones and corruption facilitate this market. The illicit trade in excise goods remains a major source of revenue for criminal organizations, particularly along the southern border.

ENVIRONMENT

Illegal logging in Mexico is driven by organized crime groups that control communal lands and extort forest communities. These groups, including drug cartels, exploit the timber trade to fund operations and launder money, targeting valuable species. Regions like the Sierra Madre mountains have seen expanded criminal control over both legal and illegal activities, exacerbating environmental and governance challenges. High-value timber, including rosewood and mahogany, is trafficked for export. Mexico serves as a source and transit country for regional flora products, with significant trafficking to China and the US.

The rise in avocado demand has exacerbated deforestation, with cartels converting forests into plantations. Weak institutional enforcement and corruption hinder efforts to combat illegal logging. The fauna trafficking market is rapidly becoming one of the most robust illegal markets globally, with Mexico playing a pivotal role due to its vast biodiversity, strategic geographical location and accessible communication channels with various countries. Additionally, the trafficking of wild species, particularly jaguars, parrots, reptiles and sea cucumbers from Mexico to China is a significant and growing market, exacerbating threats to Mexican biodiversity. Organized criminal groups, state actors and civilians are heavily involved in animal trafficking networks. These networks are responsible for the extraction, distribution and sale of exotic species, driving some of them this to the brink of extinction. Corrupt officials issue fraudulent documentation to facilitate trade. The use of social media has expanded access to illegal wildlife markets, while seizures remain minimal. Cartels have increasingly entered the wildlife trade, using it for money laundering and status symbols.

Illegal trafficking of gasoline and diesel has become a serious issue in Mexico. Fuel theft, known as huachicol, is a major criminal enterprise, with criminal groups tapping into oil pipelines and hijacking fuel shipments. Despite crackdowns, fuel theft costs Mexico billions annually. The illegal fuel trade has also led to increased violence, particularly in states like Guanajuato and Puebla. Illegal gold and mercury mining are significant criminal activities, with criminal groups extorting mining operations and engaging in illicit exports. The involvement of organized crime in mining and fuel theft further destabilizes local economies. Drug cartels have gained a leading role within the non-renewable resource crimes market, seizing control over gangs involved in fuel theft or engaging in the mining sector by charging fees, forcing companies to use their services or directly exploiting mines. The Serra Gorda region relies heavily on mercury mining despite environmental concerns, with plans to phase it out by 2032 under the Minamata Convention unlikely to end illegal activity.

DRUGS

Mexico remains a primary heroin supplier to the US, with the Sinaloa Cartel dominating the market. Poppy cultivation has declined due to the rise of synthetic opioids like fentanyl, but heroin remains a significant drug trade component. The destruction of poppy fields and law enforcement seizures have limited impact. However, despite increased enforcement, heroin trafficking persists, with smugglers adapting to tighter border controls by using concealed transportation methods and alternative smuggling routes. Cocaine remains a lucrative trade for Mexican cartels, primarily serving as a transit route for Colombian and Ecuadorian cocaine bound for the US. The CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel control major distribution networks. Increased coca cultivation in Guerrero and Michoacán suggests Mexico is emerging as a minor producer. High levels of corruption facilitate cocaine smuggling. Cocaine trafficking operations involve sophisticated smuggling techniques, including concealed compartments in vehicles and the use of maritime routes. Overall, the impact of cocaine trade within Mexico is significant, fuelling corruption, violence and crime, contributing to thousands of homicides annually. Mexico has a long history of cannabis production, but legalization in the US has reduced its profitability. Organized crime groups continue to control cultivation and distribution, particularly in rural areas, though demand has shifted towards synthetic drugs. Cannabis remains a domestic market staple, with legal reforms impacting the illicit trade structure.

Synthetic drug production, particularly methamphetamine and fentanyl, remains extremely pervasive. Mexico is a leading fentanyl supplier to the US, with clandestine labs producing vast quantities. Cartels source precursor chemicals from China and India. The profitability of synthetic drugs surpasses that of traditional narcotics, and seizures have increased, though production remains high. Fentanyl and methamphetamine production is often conducted in remote rural laboratories, where authorities face challenges in detection and dismantling. The environmental impact of synthetic drug production is severe, with chemical waste contaminating land and water sources. Cartels continually refine production techniques, making synthetic drugs increasingly potent and addictive, exacerbating the social impact of drug abuse in Mexico and the US.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime is rising in Mexico, with ransomware attacks being a prevalent form of crime. Criminal organizations exploit digital platforms to break into security systems and steal sensitive data. Various actors are involved in executing cyber-dependent crimes in Mexico, including individual hackers and cybercriminals with specialized computer knowledge, as well as organized crime groups that leverage technology for illicit activities. Investigations into cybercrimes, including cyberattacks, have been carried out, with Mexico City, Jalisco and the State of Mexico having the highest incidence. Cyber-dependent crimes like hacking and malware attacks significantly impact financial markets, causing financial losses, data breaches and economic disruptions. Operational disruptions also occur due to these cyber-attacks, temporarily affecting banks and public sector institutions' activities. Cryptocurrencies are widely used to obscure illicit transactions. One notable group involved in these activities are the ciberburreros, mainly young people who are recruited by organized crime to massively acquire cryptocurrencies. Law enforcement capabilities remain limited, and under-reporting of cybercrime is common.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

The market for financial crimes in Mexico is highly consolidated, representing a significant threat to organizations, governments and individuals. These crimes, including fraud and tax evasion, are deeply embedded in Mexico's economy, facilitated by corrupt officials and financial institutions. Organized crime groups, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, are heavily involved in these activities. However, various actors, such as corrupt government officials, entrepreneurs and private sector organizations, exploit their positions to commit fraud and other financial crimes. Scammers and common criminals engage in schemes such as debt collection scams, Ponzi schemes and fake prizes. The financial intelligence unit has increased efforts to track illicit transactions, but enforcement remains inconsistent. Cartels use real estate, shell companies and trade-based laundering to legitimize profits. Customs fraud and tax evasion further contribute to the financial crime landscape.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mexico's criminal landscape is dominated by powerful mafia-style groups, primarily drug cartels that have evolved into multi-faceted criminal organizations. The Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG exert influence nationwide, engaging in drug trafficking, extortion, human trafficking, illicit fuel sales and robbery. These groups maintain hierarchical structures with distinct leadership factions, including the CJNG's centralized command under Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes and the Sinaloa Cartel's decentralized power blocs. Recent arrests, such as the capture of Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada in 2024, have triggered violent power struggles within the Sinaloa Cartel. Similarly, the Gulf Cartel has expanded operations into US waters, engaging in drug trafficking, human smuggling and illegal fishing. Extortion is rampant, with at least 30 of Mexico's 32 states affected. Symbols of narco culture, such as tactical uniforms and social media propaganda, reinforce the identity and influence of these groups. Cartels employ a vast workforce – comparable to Mexico's largest corporations – highlighting their deep-rooted societal presence. Additionally, cartel control over certain prisons underscores their extensive reach within the state apparatus. Beyond hierarchical cartels, Mexico hosts flexible criminal networks that operate primarily in financial crimes, such as money laundering and embezzlement. These networks often involve collusion between private-sector actors and government officials. Notable cases include the 'Estafa Maestra' scandal, which exposed systemic corruption through fraudulent government contracts. These criminal networks operate primarily in major urban centres like Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey, focusing on white-collar crimes rather than violent activities. Nonetheless, their economic impact is substantial, eroding trust in financial and governmental institutions. Corruption within Mexico's government facilitates the entrenchment of organized crime. Municipal governments, with limited resources and capacity, are particularly susceptible to criminal infiltration. Many law enforcement agencies in Mexico are infiltrated by organised crime, making it difficult to combat the influence of cartels. Corruption at various levels of government has allowed cartels to operate with relative impunity, often receiving protection or even direct assistance. At the state level, governors from regions like Tamaulipas and Sinaloa have faced allegations of cartel ties. At the federal level, high-profile cases such as Genaro García Luna's conviction for colluding with the Sinaloa Cartel illustrate systemic corruption. Financial crimes within public administration remain a significant issue. The Segalmex scandal, involving billions of pesos in irregular transactions, underscores the pervasiveness of fraud within state institutions. Leaks such as the Panama Papers have also revealed widespread tax evasion by Mexican elites, further highlighting the blurred lines between legitimate governance and criminal activity.

Although Mexico's organized crime is primarily domestic, foreign actors have begun establishing criminal networks. Colombian groups operate in major cities, engaging in home invasions and fraud. The Chinese diaspora has been linked to financial crimes, particularly predatory lending schemes via smartphone applications. Additionally, Chinese operatives have been implicated in the trafficking of totoaba maw, a lucrative black-market wildlife trade connected to the Sinaloa Cartel. Transnational criminal organizations such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) have attempted to penetrate Mexico but remain marginal. Meanwhile, international criminal groups, including Russian-speaking smuggling networks, have reportedly become active along the Mexico–US border, driven by increased migrant flows from regions such as Russia and Central Asia. Mexico's private sector plays a complex role in organized crime, particularly in financial crimes and illicit resource extraction. Investigations, such as those from the Panama and Paradise Papers, have exposed prominent Mexican entrepreneurs involved in money laundering through offshore tax havens. The mining sector, in particular, is deeply entangled with organized crime. Cartels, including Los Zetas and the Caballeros Templarios, extort mining companies and, in some cases, directly control mining operations. During President López Obrador's administration, corruption scandals linked to high-profile figures, including his son, have raised concerns over corporate–government collusion. Despite these revelations, few legal actions have been taken against business elites. Mining companies often admit to cooperating with criminal groups for operational security, further illustrating the normalization of cartel influence in Mexico's economic sectors.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Mexico's political landscape remains heavily influenced by organized crime, with criminal groups exercising significant control over political institutions. Although the government has taken a strong public stance against organized crime, including ongoing operations and military interventions, challenges persist. The increasing militarization of public security, particularly under the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has seen the military assume a dominant role in law enforcement, raising concerns over human rights abuses and democratic governance. Opposition parties highlight the need for policies beyond direct confrontation, advocating for long-term solutions to address root causes. However, organized crime continues to influence elections through voter intimidation, campaign financing and violence against political figures. The fragility of democratic institutions is evident in cases of high-level corruption, such as the Ayotzinapa case and the conviction of former officials for cartel affiliations.

Despite efforts to combat corruption, including the presence of the national anti-corruption system, Mexico continues to struggle with widespread impunity and a lack of transparency. The national anti-corruption system has faced political resistance and underfunding, undermining its effectiveness. Investigative journalism and civil society play key roles in exposing corruption, but journalists and activists face threats, with Mexico ranking among the most dangerous countries for the press. Government opacity remains a significant issue, exemplified by the withholding of public information under the pretext of national security. Mechanisms such as CompraNet provide some transparency in public procurement, yet corruption persists in contracting processes. The dissolution of autonomous oversight agencies threatens further setbacks in accountability. Although international organizations provide recommendations for improving governance, compliance remains weak.

Mexico is a signatory to multiple international agreements against organized crime, including the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Extradition treaties, particularly with the US, have led to the transfer of high-profile criminals. Furthermore, Mexico collaborates with regional counterparts, particularly with the US on human smuggling and drug trafficking through various initiatives, including law enforcement partnerships, information sharing and joint task forces. However, challenges in implementation and coordination persist, as seen in cases where Mexico was not informed about major law enforcement actions, such as the capture of cartel leaders abroad. The fight against fentanyl trafficking remains a priority in US–Mexico relations, with both countries enhancing enforcement efforts. Mexico's lawsuit against US gun manufacturers also reflects regional concerns over arms trafficking.

Mexico has an extensive legal framework addressing organized crime, including a federal law against organized crime. Recent reforms have expanded protections against labour exploitation and human trafficking. However, enforcement remains a challenge due to systemic corruption and inefficiencies within the judiciary. The government has taken steps to strengthen customs regulations, but organized crime continues to exploit weaknesses in enforcement. Cybercrime legislation remains fragmented, and Mexico has yet to adopt the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, limiting international cooperation in this area. Intellectual property enforcement is another weak point, with high rates of counterfeiting and piracy.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Mexico's judiciary includes specialized units dedicated to organized crime prosecution, yet the system faces severe challenges due to corruption, inefficiency and political influence. The specialized prosecutor's office against organized crime leads investigations into criminal networks, but its effectiveness is hampered by a lack of resources and widespread impunity. The judiciary's budget has been significantly reduced, limiting its capacity to address organized crime effectively. The judicial reform allowing the election of judges has sparked concerns over potential cartel influence. Corruption and bribery within prisons remain widespread, with criminal organizations maintaining influence inside facilities. Although some prisons have achieved accreditation under international standards, conditions remain dire, with overcrowding, corruption and cartel influence undermining rehabilitation efforts. Organized crime groups maintain control over several penitentiaries, using them as operational bases.

Mexico's law enforcement agencies include specialized units targeting organized crime, yet their effectiveness is hindered by corruption and inadequate oversight. Although military involvement in law enforcement has expanded, public trust in police remains low due to allegations of abuse and criminal collusion. In particular, the national guard, created to address security challenges, has seen increased militarization, raising concerns over human rights violations. Intelligence-sharing programmes with international partners, particularly the US, have enhanced cross-border enforcement efforts, yet significant gaps remain. Community policing initiatives have shown some success in certain regions, but their scalability is uncertain.

Mexico's borders remain highly vulnerable to organized crime, with drug trafficking, human smuggling and arms trafficking being persistent challenges. The US–Mexico border is a major focal point for drug interdiction efforts, while the southern border remains porous, facilitating irregular migration and illicit trade. Customs corruption further exacerbates security risks. Maritime ports, particularly along the Pacific coast, have become key trafficking hubs for precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production. Recent seizures indicate an escalation in cartel activities in these regions. The discovery of smuggling tunnels and the use of drones for cross-border trafficking highlight the evolving tactics of criminal organizations.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Mexico's anti-money laundering framework includes stringent financial regulations and participation in international oversight bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force. Nevertheless, its compliance with anti-money laundering standards remains inconsistent. The financial intelligence unit plays a crucial role in tracking illicit financial flows, but corruption and lack of enforcement weaken its impact. Although Mexico has avoided the Financial Action Task Force's high-risk classification, the US continues to identify Mexico as a primary concern for money laundering, particularly due to its ties to drug cartels. Legislative reforms have strengthened financial oversight, but illicit financial flows remain significant.

The economic regulatory environment presents both opportunities and risks for legal businesses. Corruption and organized crime infiltration in industries such as mining, agriculture and transportation distort market dynamics. Cartels exert control over certain supply chains, imposing unofficial taxes and extorting businesses. Efforts to promote regulatory transparency have been undermined by political favouritism and weak institutional enforcement. Despite these challenges, Mexico has undertaken initiatives to support small and medium-sized enterprises through regulatory reforms and economic stimulus programmes. However, the infiltration of criminal actors into legal markets continues to pose significant obstacles to economic stability. Furthermore, high levels of distrust in the public sector, fuelled by corruption and impunity, drive many Mexicans to evade taxes and operate in the informal sector.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Mexico lacks a comprehensive institutional strategy for victim and witness protection. The general law for victims mandates state support, yet implementation is weak due to insufficient funding and political will. Programmes designed to protect individuals involved in criminal proceedings face budgetary constraints and operational inefficiencies. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in providing legal and psychological assistance. Witness protection programmes face significant challenges, with many witnesses being removed due to resource constraints or security concerns.

Prevention efforts have focused on addressing the root causes of organized crime, such as poverty and lack of opportunities. The national public security strategy emphasizes prevention, yet results have been limited. Although some efforts have been made to address human trafficking and environmental crimes, enforcement gaps persist. Militarized policing strategies have led to human rights violations, undermining public trust. Community policing initiatives have emerged as an alternative, yet they often operate outside formal legal frameworks. Government welfare programmes aim to prevent cartel recruitment among vulnerable youth, yet their effectiveness remains uncertain.

Non-state actors, including civil society organizations and investigative journalists, play a crucial role in documenting organized crime and advocating for policy reforms. However, they face increasing government restrictions and security threats. Mexico remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with frequent attacks on media professionals. Government officials have been implicated in nearly half of the reported cases of violence against journalists, highlighting the risks faced by those reporting on corruption and crime. Despite these challenges, civil society organizations continue to push for greater transparency and accountability. Human rights defenders and grassroots movements remain active, though they frequently encounter government resistance and threats from criminal groups. The government's relationship with NGOs is often adversarial, with recent efforts to restrict funding and limit their operational scope. Attacks on journalists, activists and political candidates are also a critical issue, with formal protection mechanisms often failing to prevent violence. Nonetheless, the new administration appears to be less confrontational towards non-state actors than its predecessor.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.