

'El Chapo' Guzman's reign is finally at an end — here's how he compares to Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar

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Skye Gould/Samantha Lee/Business Insider

- Over the past 50 years, two criminal groups have dominated the global drug trade: the Medellin and Sinaloa cartels.
- Each has been led by a commanding figure: Medellin's Pablo Escobar and Sinaloa's Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.
- Their reigns have come to an end, but their reputations for decadence and cruelty endure.







Since the late 1970s, two men have emerged as the most powerful and most dangerous drug lords.

Pablo Escobar, a farmer's son from rural Colombia, and Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, a product of Mexico's rugged Sierra Madre mountains, delivered immeasurable amounts of cocaine and other drugs to the world before their reigns came to an end - Escobar's in 1993 [on a dingy Medellin rooftop](#) and now Guzman's after he was [convicted in a New York court](#) and almost certainly faces a life sentence in [one of the US's toughest prisons](#).

As they climbed to the top, Escobar and Guzman amassed obscene amounts of wealth and exposed the world to shocking horrors.

Escobar's Medellin cartel and Guzman's Sinaloa cartel dealt in different products, faced different competition, and supplied different markets, but looking at them side by side gives an idea of their power and their reach.

Pablo Escobar vs. El Chapo

| | Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria  | Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera  |
|---------------|--|--|
| Alias | El Patrón, Don Pablo, King of Cocaine | El Chapo, Shorty, El Rapido |
| Nationality | Colombia  | Mexico  |
| Cartel | Medellín cartel | Sinaloa cartel |
| Reign | Early 1980s — 1993 | 1989 — 2019 |
| Drugs | Cocaine | Marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, crystal methamphetamine |
| Crimes | Drug trafficking and smuggling, assassinations, bombings, bribery, racketeering, money laundering | Drug trafficking and smuggling, murder, money laundering |
| Rivals | Cali cartel, Los Pepes, Colombian government, and US government | Los Zetas, Gulf cartel, Juárez cartel, Tijuana cartel, Beltran-Leyva cartel, Jalisco New Generation cartel, US and Mexican governments |
| Cocaine Trade |  |  |

Source: US Drug Enforcement Administration; "A Narco History," by Carmen Boullosa, Mike Wallace; "Killing Pablo," by Mark Bowden; Stratfor

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[Pablo Escobar](#)

Born into a modest farming family near Medellin in northern Colombia, Escobar started his career with petty crime but soon graduated to smuggling and eventually began carting shipments of marijuana.

By the late '70s, he and several associates began trafficking cocaine out of Colombia, which remains [the biggest cocaine producer](#), and by the early '80s, their Medellin cartel - which included a [Hitler-obsessed megalomaniac](#) and [an American](#)

[pilot](#) - was shipping hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of cocaine to the voracious US market.

Escobar's income is hard to measure, but it's believed he was raking in [\\$420 million a week](#) by the mid-80s - roughly \$22 billion a year. By the end of that decade, he was supplying [80% of the world's cocaine](#) and smuggling 15 tons of it into the US every day.

[Sebastian Marroquin/Sins of my Father](#)

He [spent lavishly](#) on himself and his family and was a patron of local causes, building apartments and soccer fields, and handing out cash to the poor. These acts won him popular support and bolstered his image as a man of the people.

"Pablo was earning so much that each year we would write off 10% of the money because the rats would eat it in storage or it would be damaged by water or lost," Escobar's brother Roberto [wrote in a 2009 book](#).

Escobar's empire attracted the attention of the Colombian government, which attempted to shut it down. Clashes between the government and drug traffickers unleashed a yearslong wave of violence in Colombia.

"Sins of My Father"

The Colombian government, with US assistance, deployed a special force to bring Escobar down, though [that force was badly bloodied](#) in its first encounter with the cartel. By mid-1991, the government's campaign forced Escobar to negotiate a deal that allowed him to lock himself up in [a jail of his own design](#) in the highlands near Medellin.

By the middle of 1992, evidence that Escobar was conducting cartel activity from his prison compelled the government to try to apprehend him. Instead, Escobar fled the prison and went on the run.

During this time, he and his family traveled from hideout to hideout, never staying in the same place for more than two days. At one point, Escobar [torched \\$2 million in cash](#) to keep his family warm.

He eventually began hiding out on his own but stayed in touch with his family, avoiding authorities' efforts to track him down with his communications. On December 2, 1993, [his luck ran out](#). Colombian security forces - believed to be working with Los Pepes, a vigilante group that was also tracking him - converged on the Medellin home where he was staying.

Colombian Government Photo

When they burst through the door, Escobar scrambled onto the rooftop. Like many details of his life, [it's unclear who fired the shot](#) that killed the most powerful and most dangerous drug lord.

Escobar's death led to the dissolution of his cartel, but his criminal empire has had a lasting effect on Colombia. Its main rival, the Cali cartel, took over in the years afterward, [learning from Escobar's missteps](#). But the Cali cartel fell in the mid-90s, leading to a kind of [evolution in the country's criminal underworld](#).

In recent years, Escobar's top hitman has been released from jail and become something of a [right-wing political activist](#) in Colombia. Escobar's son, who has decried the media for "[glorifying](#)" criminals like his father, and widow were [recently charged with money laundering](#) in Argentina.

Former Colombian President Cesar Gaviria, who oversaw Escobar's downfall, has told the world to [not to fight drugs](#) with the harsh measures he used, and the country's current president, Ivan Duque, took more concrete steps last month to break with the past, presiding over [the demolition of Escobar's home in Medellin](#).

[Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman](#)

Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.REUTERS/Edgard Garrido

Guzman was not the first drug baron to emerge from the Sierra Madre mountains of the state of Sinaloa in northwestern Mexico, but the cartel named for the state rose to global standing under his watch.

As the head of the Sinaloa cartel, Guzman [oversaw](#) marijuana and poppy cultivation throughout Mexico and drew on South American suppliers to sate appetites in the US, Europe, and Asia. At its peak, the cartel had a presence in [24 of Mexico's 32 states](#) and in as many as 50 countries, including [an extensive network](#) in the US.

At one point, the cartel reportedly [controlled 35%](#) of the cocaine produced in Colombia and, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, [supplied 80%](#) of the heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and meth flowing into the Chicago region each year.

The Sinaloa cartel is also believed to have an immense international footprint. The cartel's activity [has been reported](#) in Australia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. The cartel or people tied to it have appeared [in West](#) and [North Africa](#).

Business Insider/Andy Kiersz

In 1993, not long after reaching Sinaloa's upper ranks, Guzman fled to Guatemala after a [shootout with rivals in Guadalajara](#), Mexico, killed a Catholic cardinal. He was caught in the Central American country and locked up in a Mexican prison.

He escaped in 2001, purportedly sneaking out while [hiding in a laundry cart](#). That escape was [reportedly arranged](#) through state-security personnel working for Guzman, underscoring his alleged expansive ties to the government. (A high-ranking security official at the prison was from Sinaloa and later became Guzman's right-hand man in the cartel.)

He was on the run for 13 years before he was caught in Mazatlan, Mexico, on Sinaloa's coast, in February 2014. After a 17-month stint in jail - during which he continued [his managerial duties](#) - he escaped again in [spectacular fashion](#).

According to one report, cartel henchmen dug a tunnel under the prison only to come up under the wrong section. Undetected and undeterred, [they simply dug another tunnel](#), allowing Guzman to slip out and ride a modified motorcycle a half-mile to a partially constructed house near the prison.

Mexican officials on July 12, 2015, look into the entrance of an escape tunnel used by Guzman. Attorney General's Office

After six months on the run, Guzman was [recaptured in early January 2016](#) in Los Mochis, a city in Sinaloa not far from where he was born.

While he was back in the same jail from which he had escaped six months earlier, Guzman's legal team filed multiple appeals, and Guzman himself reportedly made overtures about [cutting a deal with US authorities](#). His wife [decried his treatment](#) in jail.

Worries of another escape [persisted](#), reportedly prompting authorities to [move him to another prison](#) closer to the US border.

The Mexican government [approved Guzman's extradition](#) to US courts in Texas and California in late May 2016, and his lawyers [responded with more appeals](#).

Mexico's interior minister tweeted this image purporting to show "El Chapo" Guzmán in jail. [Twitter/@osoriochong](#)

But in the waning hours of President Barack Obama's term, Guzman was shuttled out of jail near Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and onto a plane, emerging on Long Island, where US authorities took him to Manhattan and locked him up in one of the US's most secure facilities.

He spent more than a year under heavy guard and in near total isolation before his trial began in November 2018.

During the three-month trial in Brooklyn - he was carted back and forth from his cell during the proceedings - [prosecutors displayed evidence](#) of a sprawling criminal

organization that moved massive amounts of drugs, corrupted police and politicians at every level, and meted out brutal violence against rivals and bystanders.

A cavalcade of [witnesses took the stand](#), including [a Colombian narco scion and the son and brother](#) of Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, a powerful and shadowy figure who was Guzman's peer at the top of the cartel.

Guzman was convicted on all counts in mid-February and will be sentenced in June. It's likely he will receive a life term to be served at ADX Florence, a maximum-security prison in Colorado called the "[Alcatraz of the Rockies](#)."

Guzman is escorted to a helicopter by soldiers during his extradition in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on January 19, 2017. Mexico's Attorney General's Office/Handout via REUTERS

Guzman has proven to be resilient and crafty, but his conviction in the US would seem to mark the end of the 61-year-old's long career, with US officials turning their [attention to the \\$14 billion they say he stashed away](#).

Back in Mexico, the Sinaloa cartel weathered turmoil in the months after Guzman's arrest. Rivals challenged the control of Guzman's sons and Zambada, who reportedly joined forces to take over the organization.

Armed men [attacked Guzman's mother's home](#), which is in the kingpin's hometown in Sinaloa. The sons themselves also came under fire, with at least [one kidnapped](#) in August 2016 and [released unharmed days later](#).

In February 2017, Guzman's sons were [ambushed by gunmen](#) they said were working for Damaso Lopez Nunez, the former security official turned cartel member who rose to be their father's right-hand man.

Guzman arrives at Long Island MacArthur Airport in New York after his extradition. Reuters

Guzman's sons and Zambada appear to have fended off challengers, who included rival cartels and factions led by Guzman's brother and by Lopez and his son, Damaso Lopez Serrano. (Both have been [captured](#) and are in the US; the elder Lopez testified against Guzman.)

Violence in Mexico has [risen for several years](#), and some regions saw spikes in the months after Guzman's arrest, purportedly from fighting to fill the vacuum he left.

Nationwide, violence continues to rise, but in Sinaloa, the trend has [reversed](#); that change has been attributed to renewed stability within the Sinaloa cartel, which now may be lashing out at rivals.

Less than two weeks after Guzman's conviction, Lopez's brother [was gunned down](#) in Sinaloa, and in Guadalajara - home turf of the Sinaloa cartel's main rival, the Jalisco New Generation cartel - numerous "[narcomantas](#)" have appeared, warning of a "[cleansing](#)." The banners were attributed to Zambada.

A Mexican marine looks at the body of a gunman next to a vehicle after a gun fight in Culiacan, Mexico, on February 7, 2017. (AP Photo/Rashide Frias)

"The Sinaloa cartel is conducting a retribution against Damaso's relatives for the attempted assassination of Mayo and Chapo's sons," said Mike Vigil, former chief of international operations for the DEA. "The other thing too is that the Sinaloa cartel is trying to basically wipe out the Jalisco New Generation cartel."

The Sinaloa cartel has never had the hierarchical structure of many of its competitors, functioning more like a federation of groups, overseen by Guzman and Zambada, who is thought to be about 70 years old. It remains powerful, but it and other [large drug-trafficking groups](#) like it may soon be things of the past.

"Zambada is not in good health ... so I think his days are numbered," Vigil said. "Chapo Guzman's sons really have never gotten their hands dirty. They were just thrust into the upper ranks of the cartel."

With Zambada gone and Guzman's inexperienced sons alone at the top, "then you're going to see the Sinaloa cartel diminish in terms of stature and in terms of capabilities," Vigil added. "And [it] will definitely fracture ... [and] have forces within that will break off."

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