

Mexico's most-wanted: A guide to the drug cartels

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ReutersCartel boss Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán made two jail breaks before he was extradited to the US

More than 200,000 people have been killed or have disappeared since Mexico's government declared war on organised crime in December 2006.

The military offensive has led to the destruction of some drug gangs, splits within others and the emergence of new groups.

With widespread corruption and impunity exacerbating Mexico's problems, there is no end in sight to the violence.

Which are the most powerful cartels today? And who is behind them?

The Sinaloa cartel

Founded in the late 1980s, the Sinaloa cartel headed by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán has long been considered Mexico's most powerful criminal organisation.

Having outfought several rival groups, the Sinaloa cartel dominates much of north-west Mexico and makes billions of dollars from trafficking illicit narcotics to the United States, Europe and Asia.

However, the cartel's future is uncertain after Guzmán was recaptured in 2016 following [two daring prison breaks](#). He [was extradited to the US](#) in January 2017 and now awaits trial in New York.

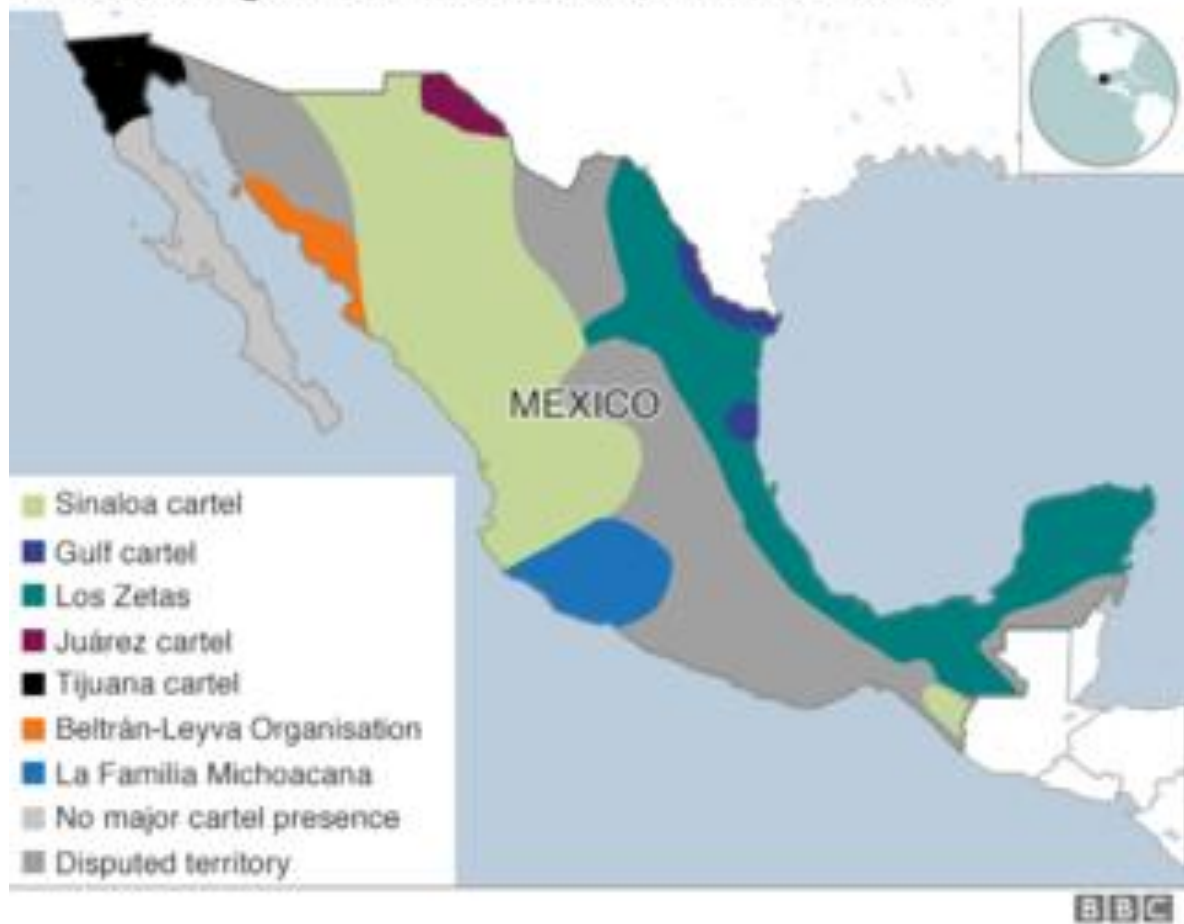
The Jalisco New Generation

Sinaloa's strongest competitor is its former armed wing, the Jalisco New Generation cartel. Formed around 2010, the Jalisco cartel has expanded rapidly and aggressively across Mexico and is now challenging Sinaloa for control of strategic areas, including Tijuana and the port of Manzanillo.

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- [Can Mexico save its journalists?](#)
- [The Mexican doctor rehydrating the dead](#)

The Jalisco cartel is blamed for a series of attacks on security forces and public officials, including downing an army helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade in 2015. Mexico's Attorney General Raul Cervantes declared it the nation's largest criminal organisation in 2017.

Mexican drug cartels' main areas of influence 2010



Mexican drug cartels' main areas of influence 2017



What happened after El Chapo's arrest?

Guzmán's latest arrest created a split within the Sinaloa cartel, fuelling rising violence in the region.

On one side were Guzmán's sons, Iván Archivaldo and Jesús Alfredo. On the other side, his former associate Dámaso López Núñez, alias "El Licenciado", and his son Dámaso López Serrano.



AFP Dámaso López Nuñez after his arrest in May 2016

Guzmán's sons were kidnapped at a restaurant in Puerto Vallarta in 2016 but released days later. López Nuñez was among the suspected culprits. Guzmán's sons also accused him of leading them into a near-fatal ambush in February 2017.

López Nuñez was arrested in Mexico City in May 2016 and López Serrano - who used to brag about his lavish lifestyle on Instagram - turned himself in at the US border in July 2017.

Guzmán's sons are believed to have assumed control of the cartel. His older brother Aureliano is another influential figure vying for control, while Fausto Isidro Meza Flores, alias "Chapo Isidro", has emerged as one of the cartel's powerful local adversaries.

Who are Mexico's most wanted?



DEA Large police rewards are on offer for information about Rafael Caro Quintero and Ismael Zambada

Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, an elusive veteran who ran the Sinaloa cartel alongside Guzmán, is one of the Mexican government's primary objectives.

Aged 69, Zambada is nearing retirement but is said to retain strong influence behind the scenes. Mexico offers a 30m peso (£1.2m) reward for information leading to his capture.

Ruben Oseguera, alias "El Mencho", the head of the Jalisco New Generation cartel, is another of Mexico's most wanted kingpins. A former police officer and avocado vendor, he is the subject of a 2m peso (£82,000) state bounty.

Rafael Caro Quintero, the founder of the now-defunct Guadalajara cartel, is the US Drug Enforcement Administration's most wanted fugitive.

Convicted of the abduction, torture and murder of DEA agent Enrique Camarena in 1985, he served 28 years of a 40-year sentence in Mexico before being released after a court [ruled he should have been tried in a state rather than a federal court](#).

The US state department offers rewards of up to \$20m (£14m) for information on Caro Quintero, and up to \$5m each for Zambada or Oseguera.

What happened to Mexico's other major players?

In eastern Mexico, the Gulf cartel and their fearsome former allies Los Zetas have been weakened by killings and arrests of top leaders, leading to splits within both groups.



Getty Images The story of "El Chapo" and his prison escapes has been the subject of multiple films and TV series

In western Michoacán state, the pseudo-religious Knights Templar and La Familia cartels have been largely vanquished by vigilante groups, although the region remains contested by their remnants and several newer gangs.

To the north, the once mighty Juárez, Tijuana and Beltrán-Leyva cartels have all been weakened by Sinaloa cartel offensives.

How has the criminal landscape changed?

Mexico's criminal landscape has grown more fragmented since then-President Felipe Calderón sent the army to combat the cartels in December 2006.



Getty Images A military helicopter flies over Michoacan State

The government succeeded in capturing or killing the leaders of the biggest cartels, but this led to many smaller and often more violent gangs springing up in their place.

Without the capacity for transnational drug trafficking, these gangs deal in kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, illegal logging and mining, and stealing oil from government pipelines.

Are things better or worse than they were?

The level of violence dropped after the election of President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012, but it has shot up dramatically in the last two years, with 2017 on course to be the worst year on record.

Activists and journalists are routinely murdered, while corruption and impunity remain rampant.

The legalisation of marijuana in parts of the US has driven Mexico's cartels to push harder drugs like methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid.

This has fuelled an epidemic north of the border, with [provisional figures from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggesting that more than 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016](#), up 21% from the previous year.

How violent are the cartels?

Mexico's cartels are notorious for their extreme violence. Beheadings and torture have become commonplace over the past decade.



Getty Images A protester highlighting the dangers journalists face in Mexico

Victims are sometimes hung from bridges or dissolved in barrels of acid. Some cartels post graphic execution videos on social media to intimidate their enemies.

How many people have died?

[Mexico registered more than 200,000 murders from January 2007 to December 2016](#), according to government records. More than 30,000 people are classified as having disappeared in that same timeframe.

[2017 was the most violent year](#) in two decades, with more than 25,000 murders, official figures suggest.

The final figures for the year are expected to be published in July 2018.