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Mexico's drug cartels: Is Canada next?

They're already 'the greatest organized crime threat to the U.S.'

by [Katie Engelhart](#) on Monday, June 7, 2010 11:23am - [27 Comments](#)



Shaul Schwarz / Getty Images

When councilman Beto O'Rourke looks out the 10th-floor window of the El Paso, Texas, city hall, he sees a fence: "a big, ugly, Berlin-style fence. It's disgusting." The structure separates dusty El Paso from its proximal sister city: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is, by all accounts, under siege. More than 850 people were killed in the northern Chihuahua city this year, nearly all of them in drug cartel-related violence. "Juárez has become the deadliest city in the world," O'Rourke insists. "It's a crazy, f--ked up situation."

In response, the Obama administration announced last week that it will send 1,200 National Guard troops to patrol along the southwest border—this just weeks after Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano agreed to dispatch aerial drones to prowl the Texas skies. Four decades after the U.S. launched its "war on drugs," battle lines are hardening. But the new initiatives may be a case of too little, too late. While most eyes have been focused on the violence in Mexico—some 23,000 people have died since 2006 as drug cartels vie for control in places such as Juárez and Tijuana along the U.S. border, battling each other and the Mexican authorities who are trying to stamp them out—there has already been a more dire development: the push by cartels into the United States itself.

Certainly what has been happening in places like Juárez is distressing. There is more infighting among the omnipotent drug cartels. Killings have become more brazen: more likely to target civilians and Americans. The talk in Juárez earlier this month was about a young bridegroom who was abducted at gunpoint, in broad daylight, as he walked his new bride out of their wedding ceremony to the sound of a church organ. His mutilated body was found later, when a passerby noticed a foul smell coming from an abandoned pick-up truck with Texas licence plates.

But despite the fact that more than 50,000 pedestrians cross between El Paso and Juárez each day—families and city streets are said to flow across country lines—El Paso itself has remained remarkably immune to the bloodshed. "This year, we've only had one murder," El Paso policeman Darrel Petry boasted to *Macleans*. Of course, that's because once the narcos make it across the border, there's no reason to stick around. "Once you get over," shrugs O'Rourke, "you are immediately on the U.S. interstate system."

In the last few years, those highways have been put to good use. The cartels, say police, are on the move. From El Paso, traffickers take the I-20 east to Atlanta, which has become a hub for drug transfers. Or they go west on the I-10 to Phoenix—where cartel-related violence has earned the Arizona city a new title: "Kidnapping Capital of the U.S." Other times, Juárez wholesalers follow the I-55, up from Missouri and on to Chicago, where they bunker down in middle-class suburbs. From there, shipments are split up and parcelled out—increasingly to cells in places like New York, New Jersey, Washington, B.C. and Ontario.

"What we're seeing is a rise in Mexican drug trafficking organizations [DTOs]," Rusty Payne of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency told *Macleans*, "in more and more places where you wouldn't expect it." In 2009, the Department of Justice declared Mexican cartels to be the "greatest organized crime threat to the United States." Today, they have a presence in 230 U.S. cities (up from 50 in 2006), from Little Rock, Ark., to Anchorage, Alaska.

Back in El Paso, a popular first stop on the interstate, O'Rourke is waiting for the U.S. troops to arrive. It's not certain when that will happen, but the day will undoubtedly be celebrated by the border-state governors and senators who have, for years, been demanding a heightened military response to the cartels. But O'Rourke sounds weary. After just five years in office, the 37-year-old already has a tendency to sound fatalistic: "You just can't build a fence high enough."

In 2006, the Mexican government declared war on the cartels. Days after winning the presidency, the stern-faced, Harvard-educated Felipe Calderón took a historic first stand—brushing aside Mexico's corrupt police, and dispatching some 45,000 soldiers to Mexican streets. He also opened his doors to U.S. military commanders, who George W. Bush eagerly allowed to step in and train Mexican forces. Meant to quell the bloodshed, the militarization only fanned it. "Almost to the day, the violence skyrocketed," says Walter McKay, a former Vancouver drug cop and now director of the Center for Professional Certification of Police Agencies in Mexico City. Today, "it's spreading like a cancer."

It wasn't like this when Colombia was king. In the 1990s, Bogotá's Cali and Medellín gangs were the main U.S. suppliers. The Mexicans were just the middlemen: paid a fixed amount by Colombian growers—up to \$2,000 per kilo of cocaine—to shuttle drugs into the U.S. But in the late '90s, Mexican drug families began pushing for more control. Soon, they came to a "payment-in-product" arrangement, which replaced the fixed fee with a chunk of Colombian cocaine that they could traffic independently. What held the arrangement together, explains McKay, was that it was effectively state-sponsored. Government turned a blind eye to the cartels, he says; they, in turn, were able to operate a disciplined territorial system, with low-level drug families controlling traffic in small squares of land, parcelled out by the cartels. There was no need for violence, adds Bruce Bagley, chair of the department of international studies at the University of Miami: territory was respected, and "you could do business as long as you didn't kill anybody in the street."

Around that time, president Bill Clinton—channelling Richard Nixon, who was the first to use the term "war on drugs" in 1971—turned his attention to choking off Colombian production, committing \$1.3 billion in 2000. In a way, it worked; soon, the major Colombian cartels were decapitated. But the "war" did not stop coca production in Bogotá—and Colombian cocaine remained available to the Mexican cartels. But that same year, Mexicans went to the polls and, for the first time since the 1910 revolution, elected the opposition. The state-supported drug trade collapsed, and the already power-hungry cartels leapt to fill the void. The situation in Mexico worsened, McKay says: the cartels swelled, then started fighting amongst themselves. Some formed paramilitary wings, made up of thugs armed with U.S. semi-automatics. For the first time, the cartels stopped being "cartels" at all; they were now competitive parties in a free and lucrative market.

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[Bill Harris](#) · 5 hours ago

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None of these strategies has a chance of helping the situation, because none of them addresses the cause of the problem, which is prohibition, not drugs. Drugs don't cause crime and violence, only prohibition does that. If drugs caused violence, wherever you have a drug, you would have violence. Aspirin is a drug. Where is the aspirin violence? U.S. demand for Mexican beer doesn't cause cartel turf wars, because it's not prohibited. Prohibitionists would have you believe that God was unwise when He created the psychoactive plants and designed humanity's wiring and plumbing to be sensitive to them. Lack of liberty is the cause of the plague on society, not drugs. Liberty to garden and share nature's bounty will cure society's sickness. Don't reform prohibition, just repeal it.

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ColdStanding · 5 hours ago

-1

How the heck does prohibition get attributed as the cause of the problem? This is only a proximate cause. Consumption of drugs is much closer to being the actual cause of the problem. The Consumptionist want to end prohibition, not out of a desire reduce the casualties of prohibition, but so that they can freely consume drugs. This would be and already is a disaster for society. It is mentacide.

Why won't the Consumptionist start organizing for reduced consumption? Surely this will greatly reduce the demand and thereby the transfer of money to the enemies of civilization. Oh, wait, the new social contract of Western society is to bailout those that fail to regulate themselves.

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quite a difference · 3 hours ago

+2

One thing to note when comparing the border fence to the Berlin Wall.

The Berlin Wall was to keep communist's citizens from escaping.

The Border Fence is to keep non-citizen's from invading.

Big difference.

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ColdStanding · 3 hours ago

-1

What metric are you proposing to measure it's success or failure by? My calculation, tonnes of narcotics consumed per capita yoy, would mark it an Epic Fail.

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Dwain Cleveland · 1 hour ago

-1

Dummies that take drugs need to have an unlimited supply provided to them for free. If they kill themselves - oh well. The smart ones will figure it out - the ones that don't aren't worth saving. Hard truths are still truths. Don't hand me a load of all the gooey, humanist crap about saving the addicts. Addicts save themselves or they don't. I hate it for them - but truth is truth.

Take the profit out drugs and the violence goes away as well. All the other fixes are so much horse-crap. People kill other people over drug territories for the money. Cartels controlling the drug trade is all about the money. De-criminalize drugs - make them a tracked commodity at pennies a dose and track who buys. You know if someone with children is endangering those children. You know how much the addict is consuming. Simple.

You can't legislate morality. Hasn't worked once in all human history. There is no "War On Drugs". Like "governmental humanity" it's an oxymoron.

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ColdStanding · 6 minutes ago

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What is the status of our own government's efforts to eliminate home grown versions of drug cartels? It seems to me some motorcycle gangs are allowed to operate with impunity when it is widely known that they are a major artery of the drug distribution infrastructure.

Why are they allowed to flout the law? What connections do they have? Are we looking at a similiary situation to Mexico - state sponsered drug distribution, before a change in government broke the system down? If not state sponsered, per se, then state blind eye by not enforcing the law.

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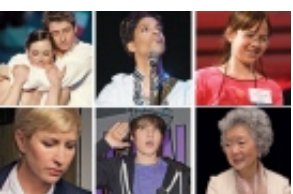
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