

U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation Following "El Chapo" Guzmán's Escape

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The escape of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán on July 11, 2015, from a maximum security federal prison near Mexico City stunned Mexico. The mechanics of the escape—through a mile-long tunnel accessed by a shower stall in his cell—has added to the lore of the notorious drug trafficker who heads Mexico's dominant Sinaloa drug trafficking organization (DTO). Guzmán's escape for a second time—he escaped from another Mexican prison in 2001—has underscored the weakness of Mexico's criminal justice system and the entrenched corruption in the country. Despite this incident, and human rights concerns that have resulted in a [loss of some \\$5.5 million in U.S. assistance](#), U.S.-Mexican security cooperation continues. Mexico [extradited 13 high-profile criminals](#) to the United States in September 2015. Then, acting on U.S. intelligence, Mexican marines reportedly [came close to recapturing Guzmán](#) in mid-October in the northwestern Sierra Madre mountains.

Sinaloa

"El Chapo" Guzmán is credited with leading the Sinaloa DTO as it became the dominant criminal syndicate in Mexico, controlling roughly 40% to 60% of the [country's drug trade](#). Although some contend that Sinaloa has suffered significant fragmentation like other criminal groups in Mexico, others maintain that it remained Mexico's most cohesive DTO even after Guzmán's capture in February 2014.

The Sinaloa DTO is known for trafficking cocaine, but moves all types of illicit drugs, including heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana, to cities throughout the United States. It has met the rising demand in the United States for heroin, which is popular as a cheaper substitute for prescription opioids to which many are addicted. In recent years, the reported number of overdoses and deaths linked to heroin [has risen significantly](#).

Known as an innovator, Guzmán embraced novel drug trafficking techniques, such as tunnels, catapults, submarines, and semi-submersibles, to move narcotics from South America or produced in Mexico to the United States. Reportedly, he ordered the construction of some [170 tunnels to smuggle](#) drugs across the U.S.-Mexico border or to evade authorities.

Many analysts have speculated about Guzmán's future plans and potential whereabouts if he is not recaptured quickly or at all. Mexico has [arrested at least 20 officials](#) allegedly complicit in the escape, posted a reward of some \$3.8 million for information leading to his capture, and stepped up coordination with Guatemalan and U.S. authorities to prevent his escape across Mexico's southern border. Some maintain that Guzmán may be [harder to track now](#) that the Mexican government [arrested the pilot](#) who allegedly transported him following his prison escape and then came close to recapturing him in Mexico in mid-October.

Kingpin Strategy

The capture of Guzmán in February 2014 was widely seen as evidence of continued U.S. intelligence assistance and cooperation with Mexico's security forces after the Peña Nieto government's [initial preference to limit U.S. involvement](#) in law enforcement operations. It symbolized the capstone of Peña Nieto's "kingpin" strategy, which began under the previous government of Felipe Calderón and focused on taking out the top and mid-level leadership of Mexico's largest criminal gangs. According to the Mexican government, [93 of the 122](#) top criminal targets identified by the Peña Nieto government had been arrested or killed during law enforcement operations as of May 2015. Few of those criminals have been successfully prosecuted, which observers point to as a key weakness in the strategy.

U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation

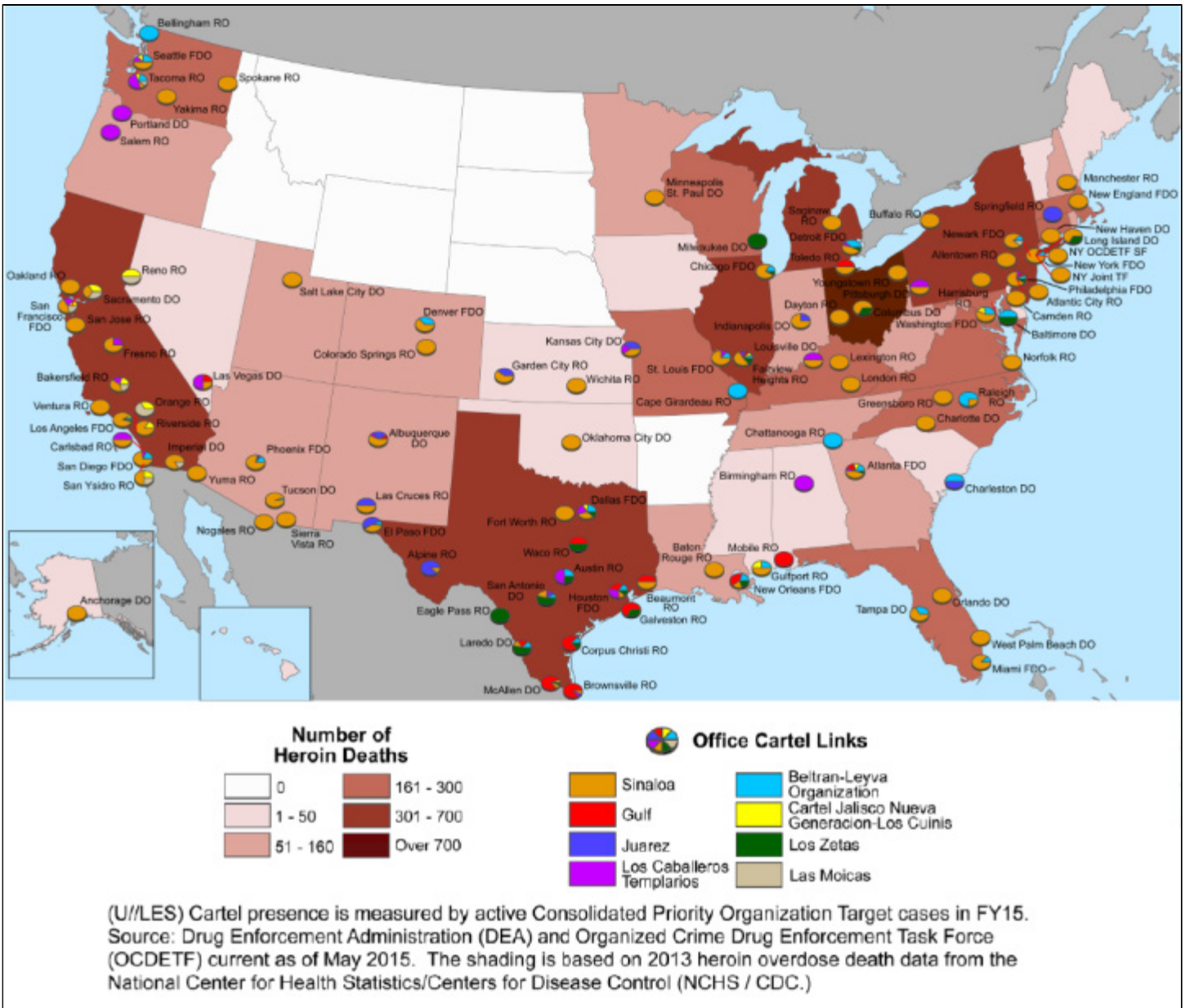
Experts are weighing in about the potential impact of Guzmán's escape on Mexico's security strategy, Peña Nieto's political future, and U.S.-Mexican security cooperation more broadly. Some experts are concerned that his escape could [set back progress](#) that had been made in the past few years in developing trust and closer collaboration. Increased U.S. concerns about corruption and impunity for human rights abuses in Mexico and Mexican mistrust of U.S. motives could hinder some bilateral efforts. Nevertheless, shared concerns about the threat posed to both countries by organized crime may help both governments overcome those differences. In an [October 19, 2015](#), briefing, a spokesperson said that although the State Department was "unable to confirm and report to Congress that Mexico fully met all of the [human rights] criteria in the Fiscal Year 2014 appropriation legislation... [it continues] to strongly support Mexico's ongoing efforts to reform its law enforcement and justice systems."

Guzmán's escape appears to have changed the Mexican government's position on extraditions. Previously, the Mexican government had maintained that it was [unlikely to grant any U.S. extradition request for Guzmán](#) (where he faces multiple charges) until he had served his time in Mexico. Possibly due to Mexican opposition, the U.S. Department of Justice reportedly did not submit a [formal extradition request for Guzmán until June 2015](#). Following the escape, Mexico has decided to [promptly extradite Guzmán](#) if and when he is recaptured and extradited a number of other high-level drug traffickers.

The escape may prompt the U.S. and Mexican governments to reexamine the adequacy of Mexico's criminal justice system and anti-corruption efforts. Improving Mexico's prison system has been one goal of the Mérida Initiative, a bilateral rule of law partnership between Mexico and the United States for which the U.S. Congress appropriated \$2.3 billion between FY2008 and FY2014. Guzmán escaped from a [maximum security prison that had been certified](#), with Mérida Initiative assistance, by the American Correctional Association. His escape suggests that prison installations and protocols alone may not be enough to prevent criminal groups from penetrating a system if prison authorities remain susceptible to corruption. Congress may therefore seek to reexamine how the Mérida Initiative could be leveraged to encourage Mexican officials to more forcefully root out official corruption. For more information, see CRS Report R41576, [Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations](#) and CRS Report R41349, [U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond](#).

Figure 1. Areas of Influence of Major Mexican Cartels with 2013 Heroin Deaths by State

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Intelligence Report



Source: DEA, May 2015

Notes: For more background, see [United States: Areas of Influence of Major Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations](#) on U.S. DEA website.