

Heroin Production in Mexico and U.S. Policy

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The recent rise in heroin use in the United States has raised concerns among U.S. policymakers that more may need to be done to address opium poppy cultivation and heroin production at their foreign sources. The number of individuals in the United States aged 12 or older currently using heroin (435,000 in 2014) has [nearly tripled since 2002](#). Additionally, U.S. [heroin overdose death rates have more than tripled since 2010](#). [According to the State Department](#): "Unless countries that are sources of production put resources towards fighting these illicit crops and those responsible for their spread, heroin and opioids will continue to fuel corruption, lawlessness, and public health crises worldwide."

Role of Mexico as a U.S. Illicit Drug Supplier

Mexico is the main supplier to the U.S. market of heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana. Most heroin consumed in the United States is produced from opium poppies grown in Mexico. The opium poppies are processed in Mexico into heroin, trafficked by Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), and distributed by the TCOs or their affiliates in the United States. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) also has identified Mexico as the [primary supplier of fentanyl](#), a synthetic opioid stronger than heroin that has been linked to increasing numbers of overdoses in the United States. In addition, Mexico remains a major transit country for cocaine arriving in the United States.

In recent years, the [increasing availability](#) of Mexican-produced heroin in the United States, including in states east of the Mississippi River where Colombian-produced heroin used to predominate, has been of particular concern. In 2014, Mexico cultivated approximately 17,000 hectares of opium poppy—an increase of 59% compared to the roughly 10,500 hectares cultivated in 2012. Cultivation has been described as concentrated along the hilly, western regions of the country, including the states of Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Durango. Poppy is mostly grown in small peasant tracts of land that are typically unsuitable for commercial agriculture. Opium production has surged in Mexico as marijuana cultivation has fallen.

An [estimated 42 metric tons of heroin](#) were produced in Mexico in 2014, representing an increase of more than 60% compared to 2013, according to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. [The accuracy of those figures](#)

is questioned by some, and the DEA itself has [noted the challenges](#) it has in collecting and verifying certain data. Nevertheless, the amount of heroin seized by U.S. law enforcement agencies along the southwest border more than doubled from 2010 to 2014.

Drug Crop Eradication and Interdiction in Mexico

The Mexican military has been involved in drug crop eradication efforts since the 1930s, primarily through manual eradication. Mexico [reports](#) that it eradicated 47% more hectares of poppy in 2014 than in 2013; figures for 2015 are not yet available. Mexico's eradication reports are not independently verified. However, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime is working with the Mexican government to update its crop yield estimates.

Mexico has not traditionally invested in alternative development to complement its eradication program even though opium is produced in states such as Guerrero, in which [few licit livelihoods exist](#) and [violence has escalated](#) as crime groups have vied for control of heroin production. Some observers maintain that recent [decreases in marijuana earnings](#) due to increased competition from U.S. producers have prompted more TCOs to switch to producing and trafficking heroin and methamphetamine. A 2016 State Department [report](#) predicts that opium cultivation will continue to increase "especially without the presence of a holistic alternative development program."

Although Mexico has made arresting drug kingpins a top priority, it has traditionally not seized large quantities of U.S.-bound drugs. In a [2014 report](#), the State Department asserted that less than 2% of the cocaine estimated to transit Mexico was seized by Mexican authorities. According to Mexico's Attorney General's office, Mexico did [increase its seizures of opium](#) gum by 400% in 2014 over the previous year.

Combating Heroin Production and Trafficking: A Focus for U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation?

U.S.-Mexican efforts to improve security and the rule of law in Mexico have increased as a result of the Mérida Initiative, a partnership developed by the George W. Bush and Calderón governments for which the U.S. Congress provided nearly \$2.5 billion from FY2008 to FY2015 (see CRS Report R41349, [U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond](#)). Bilateral efforts and U.S. assistance programming have not focused on crop eradication, although U.S. training and equipment provided for Mexico's customs academy, federal and state law enforcement academies, and military have included courses on interdiction. In response to rising heroin production in Mexico, the State Department has offered Mexico assistance with drug crop eradication and interdiction through the Mérida Initiative. The governments are developing a bilateral plan to stop heroin and fentanyl production and trafficking. Corruption, limited capacity, budget constraints, and periodic challenges in the U.S. relationship with Mexico's army may limit the potential of eradication programs.

The FY2017 budget request includes \$129 million for the Mérida Initiative, a reduction from the \$139 million provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 ([P.L. 114-113](#)). With bilateral aid to Mexico declining, Congress is likely to debate the proper focus for U.S. assistance programs as it considers this year's budget request and continues oversight of existing Mérida Initiative programs. In 2015, some Members of Congress asked Mexico to intensify its eradication and interdiction efforts and said that they would seek [direct additional U.S. assistance to support antidrug efforts through pillar one of the Mérida Initiative](#). Some oppose that position, given competing priorities for scarce budget resources. Other congressional priorities for aid to Mexico have included helping Mexico increase immigration enforcement along its southern border and strengthen its weak criminal justice system.