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Transnational Crime Issues: Heroin Production, Fentanyl Trafficking, and U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation

Introduction

The domestic opioid epidemic in the United States is raising questions among policymakers about how to address foreign sources of opioids—particularly the cultivation of opium poppy, production of heroin, and clandestine manufacture or diversion of fentanyl (a synthetic opioid) and fentanyl analogues at their foreign sources.

Global Context

Heroin is a highly addictive and internationally controlled narcotic processed from morphine and extracted from certain types of opium poppy plants. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), global opium poppy cultivation surged higher in 2017 than in any year since 2000, largely due to increased cultivation in Afghanistan. Mexico's opium poppy cultivation, while having risen between 2013 and 2017, represents less than 10% of global opium poppy cultivation.

Although heroin sourced from Southwest and Southeast Asia can be found in the United States, Latin America has featured as the main source of U.S.-consumed heroin in recent decades. Until recently, Colombia and, to a much lesser extent, Guatemala supplied the U.S. market. Since 2013, the majority of U.S.-seized heroin has originated in Mexico. Mexican-sourced heroin now accounts for more than 90% of the total weight of U.S.-seized heroin analyzed in the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA's) Heroin Signature Program.

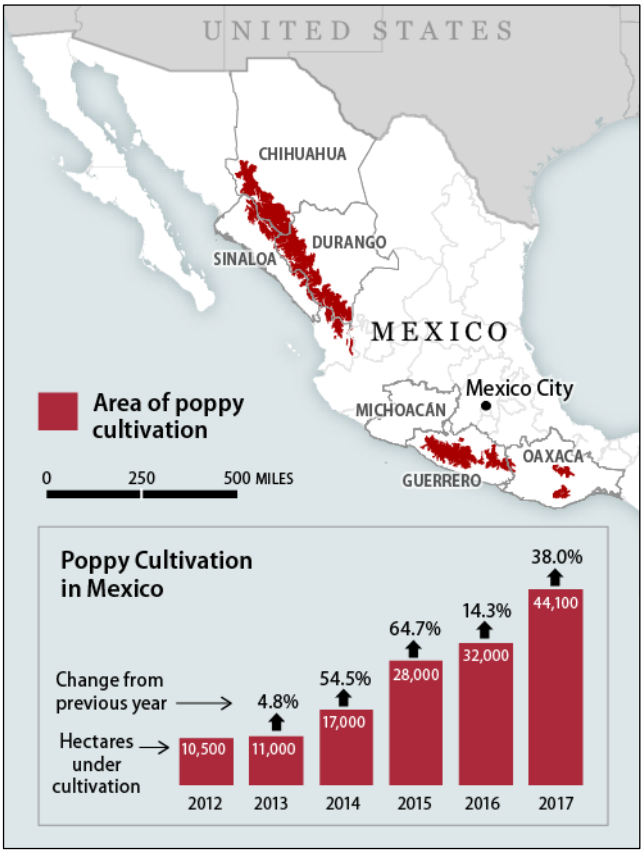
Heroin Production in Mexico

According to the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), 44,100 hectares of opium poppy were cultivated in Mexico in 2017—up from 32,000 in 2016, a 38% increase (see **Figure 1**). Cultivation is concentrated in the hilly, western regions of the country, in two primary zones: the southwestern states of Guerrero (and to a much lesser extent Oaxaca) and the tri-border or "golden triangle" region of Durango, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua. Mexican farmers may be cultivating multiple harvests of opium poppy each year. Some states, such as Sinaloa and Guerrero, lack access to licit livelihood alternatives and suffer from escalating levels of violence, as crime groups vie for control of heroin production.

According to ONDCP estimates, heroin production also has surged in Mexico. An estimated 111 metric tons of potential pure heroin were produced in Mexico in 2017, up 37% from 81 metric tons in 2016, although heroin production estimates are difficult to determine precisely.

From 2010 to 2015, the amount of heroin seized by U.S. law enforcement agencies along the southwest border more than doubled, according to data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Seizures declined in FY2016 and again in FY2017 but are trending upward. By July 2018 (with two months left in the fiscal year), the amount of heroin seized in FY2018 had exceeded the annual total for FY2017 of 3,925 kilograms (kg).

Figure 1. Poppy Cultivation in Mexico, 2011-2017



Source: Graphic created by CRS using data from the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Map generated by Hannah Fischer using data from the U.S. government (2017); U.S. Department of State (2017); Esri (2014); and DeLorme (2014).

Eradication and Interdiction in Mexico

According to the website of Mexico's defense ministry, 28,750 hectares of poppy were eradicated in 2017 (up from 22,235 hectares in 2016). The Mexican military has conducted eradication since the 1930s, primarily manually. High levels of violence in many opium-producing states, as well as historic ties between drug trafficking kingpins and local farmers, can present challenges for manual eradication.

Mexican navy and federal police forces have prioritized detaining and arresting top drug kingpins and securing urban areas, but neither they, nor Mexican customs officials, generally have seized large quantities of drugs. According to Mexican defense ministry data, reported seizures of opium gum declined from 1,238 kg in 2015 to 228 kg in 2016, before rising to 462 kg in 2017. Heroin seizures also declined from 422 kg in 2015 to 318 kg in 2016, before rising to 347 kg in 2017. The number of clandestine drug labs detected and destroyed fell from 185 in 2015 to 112 in 2016 and 97 in 2017.

Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogues

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is significantly more potent than heroin and approved for limited medical use as a painkiller and anesthetic. Linked to the ongoing opioid overdose epidemic in the United States, fentanyl and fentanyl-related substances, including fentanyl analogues, have become increasingly available, according to the 2017 *National Drug Threat Assessment*. Clandestine-produced fentanyl, as well as most illicit fentanyl precursor chemicals and fentanyl analogues, primarily are sourced from China and smuggled into the United States through Mexico, Canada, or direct mail. In addition to Mexico serving as a transshipment point for Chinese fentanyl, DEA suspects labs in Mexico may use precursor chemicals smuggled over the border from the United States to produce fentanyl.

The United States is spearheading a wide range of efforts to curb the uptick in fentanyl use and fentanyl-related trafficking, including greater cooperation with Mexico on fentanyl and fentanyl precursor seizures, engagement with China to schedule fentanyl analogues for drug control, including carfentanil. Internationally, the United States successfully requested that two key precursor chemicals used in the production of fentanyl—ANPP and NPP—be placed under international control. The challenge of halting the flow of synthetic opioids to the United States remains substantial, however, as their potency means they can be shipped in small packages, which are difficult to track.

Combating Opioids: What Role for U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation?

U.S.-Mexican efforts to improve security and the rule of law in Mexico have increased under the Mérida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexican partnership for which the U.S. Congress provided nearly $2.9 billion from FY2008 to FY2018. Mérida Initiative funds support bilateral and trilateral (with Canada) efforts to increase cooperation to combat heroin and fentanyl production and trafficking. Recent efforts aim to

- improve Mexico's data on opium poppy eradication and heroin production through collaboration with UNODC;
- provide specialized training and personal protective equipment to Mexican personnel for interdicting drugs (such as fentanyl) and dismantling drug labs;
- upgrade Mexico's national drug control system to better track the flow of chemical precursors;
- train all canines provided through the Mérida Initiative in fentanyl detection; and
- work with Canada through the North American Drug Dialogue (last held on December 1, 2017) to develop common assessments of the opioid threat, regulate and classify fentanyl and its chemical precursors, and share best practices.

Although disagreements exist, including the amount of U.S.-bound opioids that are sourced or transit through Mexico, bilateral cooperation has yielded some results. During 2017, the State Department reported that U.S. training and equipment helped Mexican officials seize 2,000 fentanyl pills and 1.5 kilos of precursor chemicals used to make fentanyl at airports. Apart from the Mérida Initiative, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) also is authorized to provide counterdrug assistance through defense appropriations. DOD counternarcotics support to Mexico totaled about $59 million in FY2017.

Other Policy Issues

In addition to bolstering domestic efforts to address opioid demand, Congress has held hearings on Mexico's role in heroin production and trafficking, introduced several resolutions on the trafficking of illicit fentanyl from Mexico and China, and considered multiple bills to address the import of illicit opioids and analogues into the United States. As Congress reviews recent efforts and considers additional options, possible issues may include

- the U.S. role in or responsibility for supporting foreign efforts to reduce opioid supply and address the social and economic consequences of U.S. demand in foreign source and transit countries—including in Mexico;
- the extent to which competition among criminal groups vying to satisfy U.S. opioid demand has fueled record violence in Mexico;
- the extent to which fentanyl and fentanyl-related trafficking may affect Mexican opium poppy cultivation and the illicit opioids market in the United States;
- whether tension in U.S.-Mexican relations over trade and immigration issues affects prospects for future bilateral cooperation to address heroin production and trafficking; and,
- how current bilateral efforts may be impacted by the policies put in place by Mexico's President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Some of López Obrador's top advisers have proposed some drug policy reforms, including decriminalizing opium poppy cultivation, which U.S. officials likely would oppose.

For background, see CRS In Focus IF10578, *Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

Source material, legislative research, and further policy analysis are available upon request.

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