

Sinaloa Cartel

OVERVIEW

AS OF MAY 2026

The Sinaloa Cartel is one of Mexico's most powerful cartels and is responsible for producing and trafficking a significant portion of the narcotics that enter the United States. The group formed in the 1980s after the Guadalajara Cartel fractured.

The factional nature of the Sinaloa Cartel has led to violent power struggles and territorial disputes throughout Sinaloa and in other parts of Mexico. The cartel has three primary factions: Los Chapitos, led by the sons of detained Sinaloa Cartel founder Joaquin Guzman Lopez, a.k.a. "El Chapo"; Los Mayos, led by the son of detained Ismael Zambada Garcia, a.k.a. "El Mayo"; and El Guano, led by Aureliano Guzman Loera, a.k.a. "El Guano."

The Sinaloa Cartel generates billions of dollars annually from drug trafficking and also profits from extortion; fuel and mineral theft; kidnapping; migrant smuggling; prostitution; and weapons and wildlife trafficking. The factions share smuggling routes, corrupt contacts, access to illicit chemical suppliers, and money-laundering networks, but they do not share profits or a unified chain of command.

Operating Area

Based in Sinaloa, Mexico; operates throughout Mexico and in more than 40 other countries

Members

Unknown; probably in the thousands

Tactics And Targets

The Sinaloa Cartel protects its revenue-generating operations through threats and violence, including kidnappings, extortion, and murder, targeting rival cartels; civilians; journalists; and Mexican Government officials and law enforcement and military personnel. Sinaloa Cartel members use a variety of small arms, weaponized and surveillance UAS, and explosives to defend smuggling routes and territory.

The Sinaloa Cartel smuggles large quantities of cocaine, fentanyl, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine into the United States using plaza bosses along the US-Mexico border. The cartel also produces fentanyl and methamphetamine, importing the majority of the precursor chemicals from suppliers in China and India.



Sinaloa Cartel *(continued)*

OVERVIEW *(continued)*

Terrorist Group Designation

The US State Department designated the Sinaloa Cartel as a foreign terrorist organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity in February 2025. In April 2009, US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned the Sinaloa Cartel pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.

NOTABLE ATTACKS

September 2024

Sinaloa, Mexico

Los Chapitos and Los Mayos begin fighting each other, triggering a series of armed attacks, blockades, and murders in Sinaloa after US law enforcement arrested Los Mayos faction leader Ismael Zambada Garcia, a.k.a. El Mayo, in El Paso, Texas.

5 January 2023

Culiacan, Mexico

Sinaloa Cartel members attack Mexican security forces at Culiacan International Airport and at a military air base to retaliate for Mexican forces arresting El Chapo's son, Ovidio Guzman Lopez. Guzman is later extradited to the United States.

17 October 2019

Culiacan, Mexico

Sinaloa Cartel members kill 13 people amid an hours-long battle to retaliate for Mexican forces arresting Guzman, who is released to stop the fighting.

