

## **Mexican criminal groups: the present-day situation and societal attitude**

**Научный руководитель – Мельникова Надежда Владимировна**

***Кузнецов Александр Сергеевич***

*Студент (бакалавр)*

Московский государственный университет имени М.В.Ломоносова, Факультет глобальных процессов, Образовательная программа «Глобальные политические процессы и дипломатия», Москва, Россия

*E-mail: goldsasha07@mail.ru*

The largest representatives of Mexican organized crime are a number of drug cartels. Two groups came to dominate the others: The Sinaloa cartel and the more centralized and violent Jalisco Nuevo Generacion cartel (CJNG) [5]. These cartels, in particular, have already gone beyond a local criminal group, becoming a transnational criminal (or terrorist, as it is recognized in the United States) group. CJNG has a multibillion-dollar portfolio of assets and annually brings almost the same losses to the state [7]. The number of murders, gun attacks, and assassinations of politicians is constantly growing in the country (over the past 10 years, the national homicide rate has risen by 55%, from 15 to 23 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, with over 300,000 people murdered during that period) [9]. A new outbreak of violence is associated with the murder in February 2026 of the leader of CJNG, El Mencho. This cartel engages in open clashes with the government, including using the forces of a private military army. At the moment, at least 25 employees of the National Guard of Mexico are already known to have been killed [1].

It is important to note that the large transnational criminal groups in Mexico, represented by cartels, have gone beyond selling only synthetic and other types of drugs. These criminal groups terrorize the local population, who often do not have the means not only to protect themselves, but also to satisfy basic needs, and can fall into slavery. Slaves are also exported by large cartels. It is connected to the disappearance of almost 12,000 people in Mexico at the beginning of 2026 [7]. Cartels are also involved in oil smuggling and theft [2]. All these factors make them more stable and necessary in the criminal world due to the wide range of goods sold. Cartels are being integrated into many business areas. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will also be held in Mexico, has opened up new business areas for these criminal groups, including tourism and similar services [4]. These facts allow us to talk about the evolution of drug cartels as institutions. They are turning from regional criminal groups into multinational corporations with a wide range of services, their branches, and most importantly, aimed solely at making financial profits.

The public's reaction is also mixed. Cartels, of course, are condemned by people with stable social status, citizens with high incomes and high moral principles. But the economic situation in the country forces the poor population to work for criminal gangs. In Mexico, about 30% of the country's population lives below the national poverty line, and the average daily income is less than the World Bank's established level [10]. Currently, up to 185 thousand people are involved in the cartel's structures [8].

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There are also a number of individual factors that affect the social vulnerability of the population to cartels. The first is the excessive financing of private security units, which employs almost 900 thousand people. There are about 397 thousand police officers in the country. This creates a situation in which two institutions of public protection are being formed [3]. However, the private option is only available to the rich and only works for them. These factors do not protect the poor from the influence of cartels. The cultural factor is also important. The romanticization of the criminal lifestyle and the deterioration of attitudes towards drug use leads to the spread of ideas among the young population about the normalization of cartels [6]. Even if this factor is the least significant, it has its impact.

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