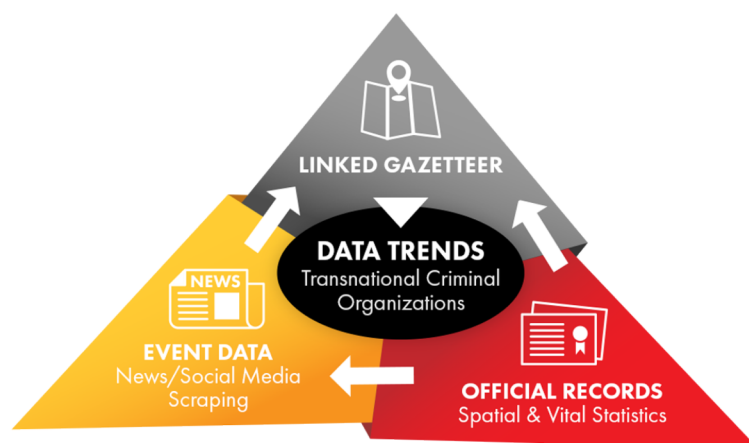## OVERVIEW

Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) and related actors pose significant threats to homeland security. Mexico and the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) serve as operational centers and conduits—by air, land, and sea—for TCOs' illicit goods and activities reaching the United States. In recent years, TCOs have increasingly embraced new violent practices and advanced strategies to circumvent homeland security. Crimes include murder, trafficking and smuggling of drugs, weapons, humans, as well as corruption, financial crimes, and illicit procurement of materials and technology. The growth in criminal density and geographical expansion of TCOs across Mexico and the Northern Triangle produce great instability in the region along the United States' southern border.

As TCOs form more sophisticated networks and means of transnational operation, it is necessary to consider ways to better exploit data sources to assist forward-deployed border security operations. Enhancing data collection, integration, analysis, and information sharing capabilities is necessary to keep pace with the rapidly changing dynamics of TCOs' activities.

TRIANGULATING INFORMATION, BUILDING TOOLS.

Currently, the Geospatial Research Unit (GRU) at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is leading a joint research project with partnering DHS Centers of Excellence, the Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis Center (CINA) and the Center for Acceleration Operational Efficiency (CAOE), to develop a multi-pronged approach to triangulate open source information about TCOs, including major Cartels and gangs (e.g. MS-13), operating in Mexico and the Northern Triangle. The purpose is to use open-source information to build a holistic and accurate understanding of TCOs' activities in Mexico and the Northern Triangle for analyses and operational decision-making.

To accomplish this, project teams are employing innovative collection and analysis strategies to develop a better understanding of the spaces of violence and instability in Mexico and Northern Triangle countries.

The effort includes exploitation of foreign government documents, automatic geocoded information extraction from news articles, scraping of social media to feed a linked gazetteer, and explainable deep learning techniques to identify and visualize subtle trends a human analyst could miss using traditional analytical methods. The overall goal of the project is to provide new open source tools to the U.S. Government that protect confidential sources and increase international and domestic information sharing in the tracking of TCOs.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS OF THIS BRIEF

- Major cartel fragmentation has led to increasingly adaptable, agile, and competitively violent criminal organizations.

- The geographical expansion of cartels has led to greater territorial contestation over drug plazas, trafficking routes, and illicit markets.

- Seeking greater profit, cartels are diversifying and increasing in criminal density through criminal activities like extortion, kidnapping, and money laundering.

START ▶▶▶
NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR THE
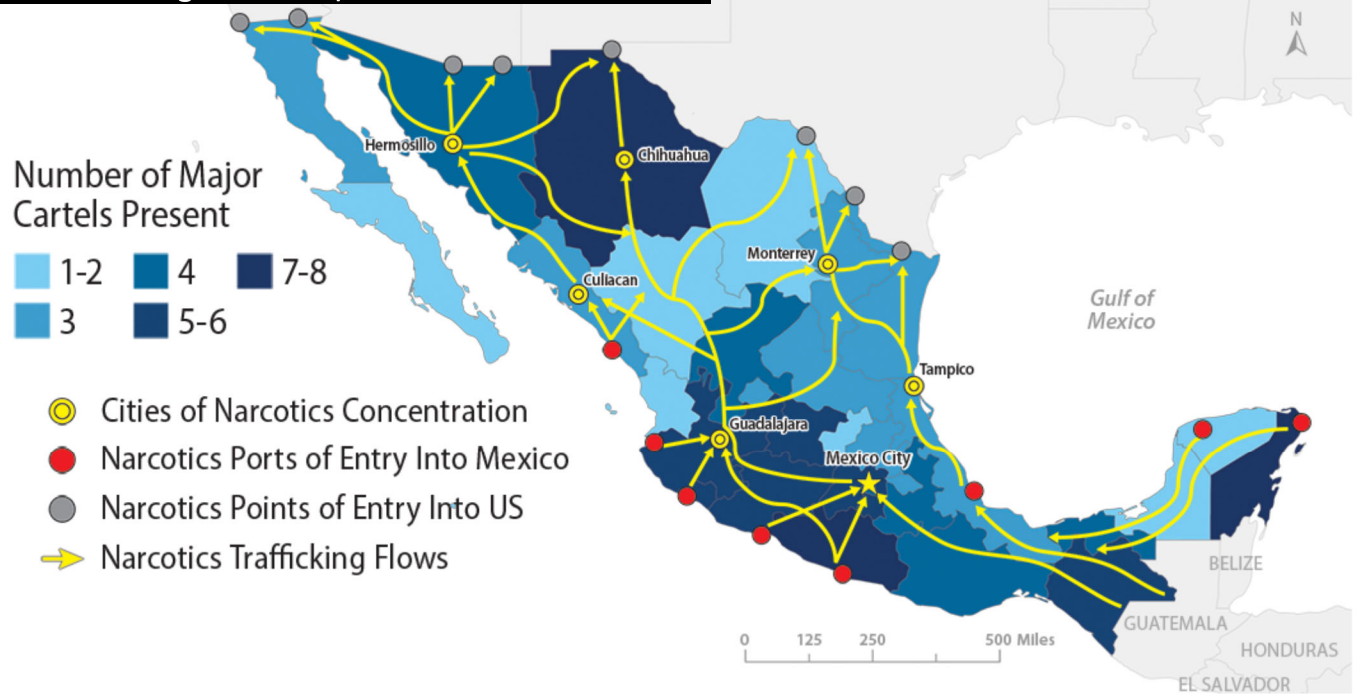**STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM**

CAOE | CENTER FOR ACCELERATING OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY
A DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis
A DHS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Narcotics Trafficking Flows and Operational Zones in Mexico

Number of Major Cartels Present
- 1-2
- 3
- 4
- 5-6
- 7-8

⊙ Cities of Narcotics Concentration
🔴 Narcotics Ports of Entry Into Mexico
⚫ Narcotics Points of Entry Into US
➡ Narcotics Trafficking Flows

The increase and spread of cartel violence and activity in Mexico is indicative of three dynamic changes.

First, older major cartels have fragmented which has led to increasingly adaptable, more agile, and competitively violent criminal organizations. As new criminal organizations and cartels, like the infamous Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (Jalisco New Generation Cartel [CJNG]), grow and consolidate power, they are increasingly competing for established drug plazas (growing spaces and trafficking routes) and creating new drug plazas.

Second, and relatedly, cartel fragmentation has created the circumstances for the geographical expansion of cartels, which has led to greater territorial contestation over drug plazas. Territorial control of drug plazas is essential for the two primary goals of cartels: perpetuation and profit. As a greater number of cartels and criminal organizations compete for territory, violent inter- and intra-cartel conflict and conflict with the Mexican state continue to intensify.

Third, cartels are diversifying and increasing in criminal density which connects everyday Mexican people to cartel violence and activity at even greater levels than before. Mexican cartels expanding and seeking greater profit turn to other criminal activities like extortion, kidnapping, money laundering, and fuel theft, to fill their billion dollar coffers.

While violent homicides continue to rise to record numbers and the brutality of cartel activities -- including homicide, kidnapping, theft, and extortion -- increases, the quantity of narcotics smuggled into the United States remains stable. In fact, it is now estimated that 90 percent of the illicit drugs entering the United States pass through Mexico (and the Central American Isthmus) with little signs of slowing.

As such, tracking cartels' violent and non-violent activities provides a better understanding of the spaces of violence and instability they create. This produces increased situational awareness across Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries. Specifically, combining various open-sources of data yields higher fidelity data collection and location intelligence that strengthens planning and operations.

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About the Centers of Excellence Network

The COE network is an extended consortium of hundreds of universities conducting groundbreaking research to address homeland security challenges. Sponsored by the Office of University Programs, the COEs work closely with the homeland security community to develop customer-driven, innovative tools and technologies to solve real-world challenges.