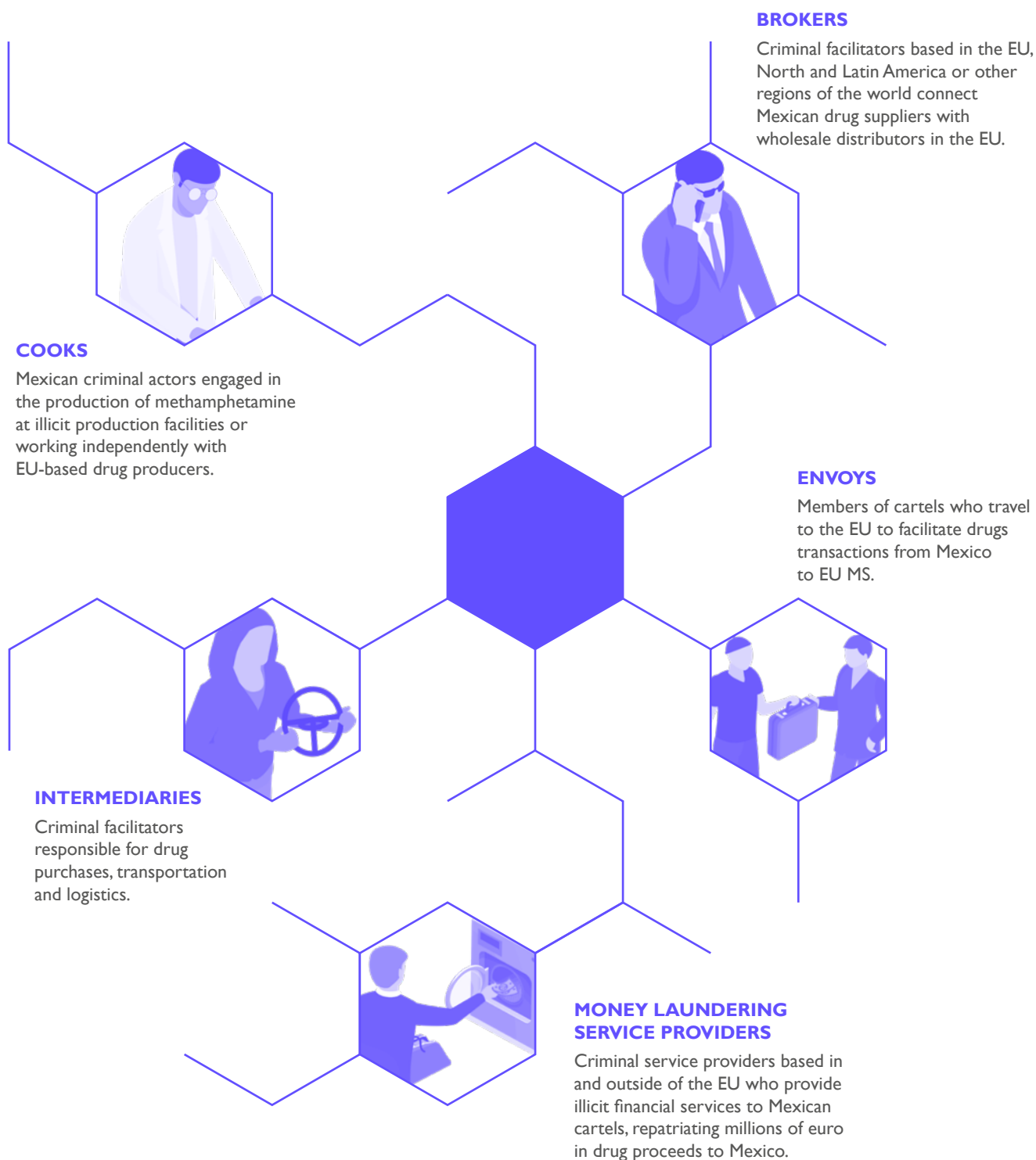




**COMPLEXITIES
AND CONVENIENCES
IN THE INTERNATIONAL
DRUG TRADE:**

the involvement of Mexican
criminal actors in the
EU drug market

The EU drug landscape is populated by a diverse range of criminal actors involved in the production, trafficking and distribution of a variety of illicit substances. These actors benefit from a number of criminal enablers and facilitators in their operations. In recent years, seizures of **methamphetamine and cocaine** linked to **Mexican criminal actors** have emerged as a prominent feature of the EU drug landscape. Mexican criminal actors and EU-based criminal networks have been working together to traffic both of these illicit drug types from Latin America to the EU. They have also been cooperating to produce methamphetamine and cocaine hydrochloride (HCl) in some EU Member States (EU MS).



In the United States, the influence of Mexican cartels over the drug trade is deeply entrenched; they are heavily involved in trafficking fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and cannabis. The Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) – the most violent and powerful Mexican criminal organisations – consolidated control over drug corridors from Mexico and expanded their activities within the US. Mexican cartels have a history of establishing drug trafficking hubs, strong criminal partnerships, and using violence to gain control over the territory where they operate.

In the first initiative of this kind, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Europol engaged in a transatlantic cooperation to issue a joint strategic product with the aim of expanding the intelligence picture on the involvement of Mexican criminal actors in the EU drug market.

METHAMPHETAMINE AND COCAINE TRAFFICKING TO THE EU: THE LOGISTICS

Mexican cartels are known to cooperate with EU-based criminal networks to traffic both methamphetamine and cocaine to EU ports for further distribution in and outside of EU MS. Recent seizures of methamphetamine trafficked from Mexico to the EU include the interception of 2.5 tonnes of methamphetamine in Spain in 2021, 1.5 tonnes of methamphetamine trafficked through Croatia to Slovakia in 2020 and 1.9 tonnes of methamphetamine seized in Rotterdam in 2019. It is likely that most of the methamphetamine trafficked from Mexico to the EU only transits the EU on the way to more profitable markets in Oceania and Asia given the higher wholesale and retail prices of methamphetamine in those regions.¹

In addition to the trafficking of methamphetamine, Mexican cartels are also involved in smuggling large consignments of cocaine to the EU. In February 2020, Italian law enforcement authorities uncovered a drug trafficking operation run by the Sinaloa Cartel, where cartel members and their EU-based associates were trafficking drugs into and throughout the EU. For this operation in particular, the cartel was planning to establish cocaine smuggling routes from Colombia to airports in southern Italy using private jets. Another law enforcement operation, which concluded in 2021, revealed that a criminal network based in Spain worked with the Beltrán Leyva

¹ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol 2022, EU Drug Market Report: Methamphetamine, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/methamphetamine_en

Organisation to traffic 1.3 tonnes of cocaine and 2.5 tonnes of methamphetamine to Spain, concealed in blocks of cellular thermal concrete.²

Working together with their EU counterparts, Mexican cartels generally use maritime shipments and air cargo for smuggling larger quantities of drugs from Latin America to the EU. Concealment within legal commodities is the most frequently used method to smuggle large drug consignments. Most often, drugs are concealed in food, construction materials and equipment as well as other commodities, such as water filters and wooden doorframes.

Once the drugs are received at EU entry points, local criminal networks cooperating with the Mexican cartels are responsible for moving the drug loads to their final destinations. Ferries and overland transportation via vehicles with hidden compartments and tractor-trailers are most common. For smaller, retail amounts, post and parcel services are also used for smuggling drugs from Mexico to EU MS.

METHAMPHETAMINE PRODUCTION AND COCAINE CONVERSION LABORATORIES: THE ACTORS AND THEIR METHODS

On numerous occasions, Mexican criminal actors have been apprehended at methamphetamine production sites in the EU.

In 2019, Dutch Police dismantled three illicit methamphetamine manufacturing laboratories in which Mexican and other Latin American suspects were apprehended. Mexican criminal involvement was also suspected in two other cases that year. In 2019, the Federal Police in Belgium dismantled one illicit methamphetamine laboratory in which three Mexican suspects and a Colombian suspect were apprehended. In 2020, Dutch law enforcement reported nine additional dismantled methamphetamine production facilities in which Mexican, Colombian and Dominican nationals were arrested.³

Mexican laboratory specialists operating in the EU use unique production methods and are involved in particular stages of methamphetamine production. By using specific chemical

2 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol 2022, EU Drug Market Report: Cocaine, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/cocaine_en

3 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol 2022, EU Drug Market Report: Methamphetamine, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/methamphetamine_en

substances, they are able to recycle and reduce chemical waste generated during the production cycle, ultimately achieving increased profits and higher yields of a very potent end product. These Mexican “cooks” are important for the EU-based methamphetamine production sites because of their unique knowledge and ability to produce larger and more profitable crystals of methamphetamine.

While the direct affiliation of Mexican suspects apprehended at methamphetamine manufacturing sites to specific Mexican criminal groups is not always clear, some cases point to links with Mexican cartels. In the case of joint methamphetamine manufacturing with Dutch drug producers, the leadership of Dutch and Mexican cartels allegedly arrange Mexican laboratory technicians for the Dutch production facilities by either commissioning Mexican “cooks” who are already in the EU or by arranging their travel to the EU from Latin America.⁴ In some other cases, it may be that Dutch criminal networks approach Mexican lab technicians independently. These lab technicians work as freelancers and may be connected with Dutch criminal networks through brokers.

Some indications have pointed to Mexican criminal groups being involved in the operation of cocaine conversion laboratories on the territory of the EU.⁵

CORRUPTING INFLUENCE, INFILTRATION AND PARALLEL FINANCIAL SYSTEM

In order to facilitate their drug trafficking operations and ensure that they remain under the radar of law enforcement, Mexican criminal groups and their EU-based criminal partners turn to a series of enablers. Both Mexican cartels and EU-based drug trafficking networks **corrupt** officials in the public and private sectors to increase the likelihood of successfully smuggling drug consignments through transportation hubs in both Latin America and the EU.

Legal business structures are exploited in drug trafficking operations, both in cocaine and methamphetamine trafficking from Latin America to the EU. Companies enable the smuggling of drugs to EU MS and obscure trafficking from law enforcement.

4 Dienst Landelijke Informatieorganisatie (Dutch Police) 2022, De narcostand van Nederland, Fenomeenbeeld drugs 2021, accessible at <https://www.politie.nl/nieuws/2022/april/26/drugscriminaliteit-verwevenheid-onder--en-bovenwereld-groter-dan-gedacht.html>

5 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol 2022, EU Drug Market Report: Cocaine, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/cocaine_en

EU-based traffickers and Mexican cartels infiltrate existing businesses and set up new front or shell companies, at times with the help of individuals (strawmen) who knowingly or unknowingly conceal a criminal's true identity. In order to protect their equities and avoid detection from law enforcement, drug traffickers frequently infiltrate and execute their criminal operations using multiple companies, which further obfuscates their illicit activities. Drug traffickers infiltrate transportation and trade companies in order to conceal the drug shipments via air cargo, maritime vessels or over land using vehicles and tractor-trailers.

Mexican cartels involved in drug trafficking to and in the EU use **illicit financial services** provided by criminal service providers based in and outside of the EU, repatriating millions of euro in drug proceeds to Mexico.⁶ Money launderers servicing Mexican cartels use a variety of techniques for the facilitation of illicit finances, including the use of cryptocurrencies, trade-based money laundering and underground banking systems.⁷ Drug proceeds obtained are also laundered through the criminal infiltration of companies, where illicit funds are moved through a range of different jurisdictions.

OUTLOOK: JOINT EFFORTS ON ALL SIDES

Cooperation between Mexican criminal actors and EU-based criminal networks may continue to develop. Such cooperation may take the form of Mexican drug producers sharing expertise with their EU-based counterparts, supporting the establishment of EU-based production laboratories, and reinvesting drug proceeds obtained from the EU methamphetamine and cocaine trade into new, profitable criminal opportunities. Additionally, Mexican cartels may attempt to set up methamphetamine production laboratories and cocaine extraction sites outside of the traditional manufacturing sites in the EU.

Mexican criminal groups may also attempt to broaden the portfolio of drugs trafficked to the EU by either trafficking them to the EU drug market or by assisting in the production of those drugs, like fentanyl, in the EU. The discovery of fentanyl production facilities and fentanyl analogues in the EU, together with some seizures of fentanyl and related precursors in some EU MS, raises concerns over the development of a fentanyl market in

6 Europol and DEA information

7 DEA information

the EU.⁸ However, there are currently no concrete indications that Mexican cartels are cooperating with EU-based criminal networks to traffic or produce fentanyl for the EU consumer market.

An increased presence of Mexican cartels in the EU could result in increased violence, and increased profits for Mexican cartels and the EU-based criminal networks working with them. Europol and the DEA will continue to monitor and share information on the involvement of Mexican criminal actors in the methamphetamine and cocaine markets in the EU, as well as any warning signs that may point to additional drug trafficking or other illicit activities.

8 Europol 2021, EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) 2021, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report>; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol 2022, EU Drug Market Report: Methamphetamine, accessible at https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets/methamphetamine_en

Europol and the DEA are closely cooperating in the fight against global drugs trafficking.

This note is the result of systematic and continuous exchange of operational and strategic information.

Europol-DEA public document

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