

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *Introduction*

### **Focus**

This story examines Mexico's campaign against the drug cartels and how this drug war is affecting Mexico as well as its North American neighbours: the United States and Canada.

Since 2006 the Mexican government has been locked in a violent battle with its drug traffickers. Shortly after his election in 2006, President Felipe Calderón moved his troops into areas of Mexico long controlled by criminals, the members of what are usually referred to as drug cartels.

The criminals behind the cartels are drug traffickers. Originally they worked with drug suppliers from Colombia, moving their product through Mexico and across the border into the United States, with some of it eventually making its way into Canada. Beginning in the 1990s, two major cartels, one on the east coast and one on the west, controlled much of this business. Thanks to a combination of threats and bribery, local police and officials mostly overlooked the drug trade.

Initially, Calderón's campaign had positive results. Several drug lords were captured and jailed, and millions of dollars' worth of drugs was seized. The general public was enthusiastic about the action. The military, seen as the one uncorrupted authority in the nation, were national heroes.

By 2012, however, the campaign has resulted in some unpleasant

consequences. The number of cartels has actually mushroomed as the victories over the original ones created opportunities for new criminal groups to fill the vacuum. Turf wars among the cartels have increased both in frequency and level of violence. The cartels have expanded their activities to include crimes like kidnapping, extortion, and human smuggling. They have maintained their influence over the areas in which they operate, and now regularly use murder as their principal means of intimidation. Where they are powerful, no one—police, mayors, or even state governors—is safe. And the army has seen its public reputation badly tarnished by a long series of human rights abuses.

In just a few months Mexico will elect a new president. The election is seen by many as a referendum on the drug war—a war that so far has claimed about 50 000 lives. Three months before the July 1, 2012, election, the ruling party is trailing the opposition in the polls. The drug war is at a crossroads; how it will be conducted after July 1 is unclear. What is certain, however, is that this is a war with no winners—and with Mexico as the loser.

### **To Consider**

In 2009 former Mexican president Vicente Fox attended a gala in Calgary. Speaking with reporters, he said that any Canadian or American who used drugs shipped through his country—cocaine, cannabis, methamphetamines, or heroin—was partly responsible for the drug violence in Mexico (in 2009 Canadians are believed to have used 14 tonnes of cocaine alone).

Do you agree with Fox's statement? Why or why not? If you do agree, what steps do you think Canada might take to acknowledge this responsibility?

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## Video Review

### Pre-viewing Discussion

Mexico is in the Canadian news surprisingly often. In 2010 alone there were 23 000 stories in the Canadian media about Mexico. The trend has continued in 2011 and 2012.

What kinds of stories have you heard about Mexico? Have you been there yourself on holiday or do you have family or friends who have visited? Is your opinion of Mexico positive or negative? Would you like to visit or revisit the country? Why or why not? Would media reports of drug-related violence in Mexico influence your decision to travel there?

### Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, answer the questions in the spaces provided.

1. How many Canadian tourists visit Mexico each year?

---

2. When did the Mexican government declare war on the drug cartels?

- 
3. Who are Los Zetas?

- 
4. Briefly describe some of the tactics Los Zetas employ in their war with the Mexican government.

- 
5. Why do marines hunting drug cartel members routinely wear masks?

- 
6. What is the most common route used to take drugs into Mexico? What is the most common route for guns?

- 
7. How long does it usually take to cross the border from Mexico into the United States? From the United States into Mexico?

- 
8. Briefly describe how Mayor Mauricio Fernandez ensures that the laws are enforced in the city of San Pedro.

- 
9. How many people have been killed in the six years since the drug wars began?
-

## Post-viewing Questions

1. Has your opinion of Mexico and whether or not you would like to visit the country changed in any way after watching the video?

---

---

---

2. If you were a resident of San Pedro, how would you feel about the mayor's methods for responding to the threats of drug cartels?

---

---

---

3. Purchasing guns in the U.S. areas bordering Mexico is fairly simple and straightforward. What responsibility, if any, does the U.S. have to restrict the sale of guns likely to end up in the hands of drug cartel members?

---

---

---

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *Mexico in Crisis: Drug Cartels*

### Did you know . . .

The term *cartel* is routinely used to describe the gangs that control the drug trade in Mexico, but it is actually a misnomer. A cartel is a group of organizations that work together to control the manufacturing or distribution of a product in order to keep prices and profits high. Mexico's drug cartels are actually as much in conflict with one another as they are at war with the government. Because the term is in common usage, we will also use it in this *News in Review* guide.

### Focus for Reading

As you read this section of the guide, answer the following questions in your notebook.

1. Why were the drug cartels originally formed?
2. Which politicians have taken serious action against the cartels? With what results?
3. How have the cartels changed since the drug war began?
4. What tactics do the cartels use to enforce their authority in the regions where they operate?

### The Conflict Begins

For several decades, Mexico has been an important player in the manufacture and international distribution of illegal drugs. Long a producer of both heroin and marijuana, in the 1980s Mexico became a leading distributor of cocaine produced in Colombia. The distribution routes normally used by Colombian traffickers in Florida and the Caribbean to access U.S. market were increasingly subject to intense police scrutiny. Colombians turned to Mexican gangs to take their product across the U.S. border by land. They often paid for these services in kind—up to 50 per cent of each shipment—making the Mexican drug gangs both distributors and traffickers.

Two particular gangs, or drug cartels, took the lead in the Mexican drug business during these years. They were the Sinaloa Federation, based on Mexico's west coast, and the Gulf cartel, operating from Gulf of Mexico coast in the northeastern part of the country.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico was ruled by one political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI for the most part turned a blind eye to drug smuggling. Many of its leaders had an "arrangement" with the various cartels, and in return for bribes and political contributions ignored the activities of the various gangs.

But in 2000 the right-of-centre National Action Party (PAN) came to power under the leadership of Vicente Fox. In an attempt to lessen political corruption, the new government began a campaign against the major cartels. Soon after his election, Fox sent troops into the border city of Nuevo Laredo to fight the cartels. During his presidency, several prominent members of the cartel leadership were arrested.

### The War Years

The Mexican drug war really began in 2006, with the election of Felipe Calderón of PAN as president. It was at that time that levels of violent crime began to rise. Nearly 1 800 people were killed in cartel-related crimes in 2006. For 2011 the total is estimated at about 17 000. Some 50 000 people have been killed since 2006.

During Fox's presidency new cartels were forming. The gangs began to fight among themselves to extend their territorial control. At least 90 per cent of Mexico's murder victims are believed to be people associated with the cartels. One reason the fight for territory became so significant was domestic. Originally most cartel activity was dedicated to supplying drugs to the U.S. market. But by 2006 Mexicans' own demand for illegal drugs was increasing at about 20 per cent per year.

## FYI

How powerful are the cartels? In the state of Durango, one cartel arranged for 14 of its incarcerated members to be released overnight from their jail so they could murder 18 rival gang members at a party in a neighbouring state. They returned to their prison after the murders and, of course, to protection from revenge by the rival gang.

## Digging Deeper

For more on the Mexican drug cartels go to the CBC website at [www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2011/08/28/f-mexico-drug-cartels.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2011/08/28/f-mexico-drug-cartels.html).

Despite government crackdown efforts the cartels have managed to retain control of some of the country's major states and cities. Especially in those states bordering the U.S.—Chihuahua, Coahuila, Sonora, Baja California, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas—levels of cartel influence and the resulting violence remain extremely high.

The cartels no longer devote themselves solely to drugs. Many have expanded to include kidnapping, extortion, and human smuggling among their illegal activities.

Gun running is also a major activity. Relaxed gun-control policies in the United States have made it easy for the cartels to purchase sophisticated weaponry for smuggling into Mexico. As a result, the cartels are often a match for the authorities in gun battles.

Where they are active, the cartels often exert influence over the police, the military, the justice system, and politicians. Sometimes they use bribes to subvert the system; other times they intimidate with violence. Many police and government officials have been killed as examples to others. Lately journalists who publicize cartel activities have also become favourite targets.

## The Big Three

There are many major and minor players among the cartels, but three in particular are deserving of mention.

## Follow-up

1. With a partner, compare your answers with the questions in the Focus for Reading. Help each other complete any missing information.
2. How effective do you think the Mexican government's war on the drug cartels has been since it began in 2000?
3. What are the main reasons for the continued influence of drug cartels in Mexican society today?
4. What steps do you think would be required for the Mexican government to achieve victory over the drug cartels?

First is the Sinaloa Federation, headed by Joaquin “El Chapo (Shorty)” Guzman Loera, one of the world's richest men, worth more than USD\$1-billion.

Sinaloa is Mexico's largest producer of methamphetamines and a major grower of marijuana (government officials recently uncovered a 2 120 hectare marijuana plantation in Baja California). It remains most active on the west coast. This cartel is known for bribery of public officials as its major tactic. Many also believe it has bought favours from the government by providing evidence against some of its rival cartels. It operates in 16 Mexican states.

One of those rivals is Los Zetas, widely known as the most brutal of all the cartels. It is an offshoot of the Gulf cartel made up of ex-members of the Mexican Special Forces and operates mostly on the Gulf coast. Beheadings, arson, torture, and bombings are just some of the methods they have used in the past. It now operates in at least 17 states.

Until 2010, Los Zetas were the armed wing of the Gulf cartel, centered in the northern state of Tamaulipas. The Gulf cartel has been weakened by arrests and infighting among its leaders, as well as turf wars with Los Zetas. But it remains a significant player in the drug traffic along the Texas border.

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *Mexico in Crisis: The Response of Two Presidents*

### Quote

Bernardo León, a legal adviser to the government, summed up the situation: “In Mexico the law is an aspiration, not the norm. We made many laws to look good, not to obey them. There is no public condemnation of lawbreakers” (*The Economist*, November 18, 2006).

### Focus for Reading

In your notebook, organize your notes on this section under the following headings:

- Roadblocks for the government in the war against drugs
- Government action and successes under President Vicente Fox (2000–06)
- New problems under Fox
- Government action and successes under President Felipe Calderón (2006–12)
- New problems under Calderón

### Politicians, Police, the War on Drugs

Drug cartels were active in Mexico for decades before the Mexican government began to take them seriously in 2000. But a concerted attempt to deal with the social and economic impact of cartel activity had to await the election of Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN).

Fox inherited a situation in which the cartels had infiltrated all levels of government—municipal, state, and federal. Officials, bribed or provided with “product,” were content to ignore the cartels. Most of their activities involved smuggling drugs into the United States, the country that really drove the demand for illegal drugs, especially methamphetamines and cocaine.

The various Mexican police forces were a special problem. Policing in Mexico is still largely a local responsibility. As a result, there are about 400 000 police officers scattered across hundreds of different forces and jurisdictions. A 2006 study reported that, on average, they had six years of schooling and only two weeks of training before becoming officers. Pay averaged USD\$370 a month, and 35 per cent of them admitted to using drugs. About 40 per cent leave the police each year for other jobs. In the most violent regions, many actively work in support of the drug cartels.

Mexican police are not trained as an investigative force. Federally, criminal

investigation in Mexico is the work of the office of the Attorney General. At the state level, it is the responsibility of the AG’s counterparts there. The system is notoriously inefficient. As a result, about 75 per cent of crimes are never reported. Of those that are reported, fewer than 10 per cent are ever prosecuted successfully.

### A New Approach

After being elected president of Mexico in 2000, Vicente Fox was determined to change the government’s way of fighting the drug cartels. He began by creating a new national police force, the Federal Investigations Agency (AFI), modelled after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States.

Fox also began using the army to enforce the law and deal with the increasingly violent activities of drug cartels. One of the most notable examples of this approach was in the city of Nuevo Laredo on the border with Texas. The city was without a police chief for some time after two were murdered in 2005. More than once troops were sent to patrol the city and make arrests; on occasion they were also used to search vehicles at border crossings to and from the U.S.

Fox’s efforts did result in the capture of several cartel leaders and the seizure of record amounts of drugs. The government also extradited about 50 suspected drug traffickers to the U.S.—something it had

been reluctant to do in the past.

With success came new problems. By weakening some cartels the government created opportunities for the expansion of others. As well, the demand for illegal drugs in Mexico was growing. Turf wars broke out among the gangs, resulting in frequent violence in recent years. And the cartels have turned to other kinds of crime, especially kidnapping and extortion, as further sources of illegal income. By 2005, nearing the end of his six-year presidency, Fox referred to the fight against the cartels as the mother of all wars.

### **The Mexican Drug War**

The election of Felipe Calderón in 2006 is considered to be the real start of what is now referred to as the Mexican Drug War. Immediately after his election, Calderón expanded the use of the military, sending troops into Michoacan, Tijuana, and Acapulco. In the areas considered most corrupt, the troops immediately disarmed the police and then tested their weapons for ballistic evidence that they might have been used in committing cartel-related crimes.

The level of violence, however, continues to rise. In 2005 there were 1 600 murders linked to organized crime, and by 2006 the number was 2 200. By 2011 the total had risen to more than 14 000. In all, approximately 50 000 people were killed between 2006 and 2011 in cartel-driven violence. According to the government, at least 90 per cent of those killed were gang members or associates, with the remainder being innocent victims or bystanders.

### **Follow-up**

1. With a partner, review the notes you made on the information in this section based on the headings in the Focus for Reading. Help each other complete any missing information.
2. Based on the information in this guide and what you have seen in the video, what advice would you give to Mexico's next president on how to deal with the drug cartels? Are there changes you feel he or she could make to make the drug war more effective and possibly even win it?

Yet another effect of the drug war has been a large increase in the number of smaller organized crime groups. One estimate by a leading academic placed the number of such groups in 2007 at 11; by 2010 that estimate had risen to 114. Predicting the future activities of all these groups poses a major challenge to the government.

In Mexico 2012 is a presidential election year. Under the country's constitution, the president may serve only one six-year term and is barred from seeking re-election. This means that Mexicans will be selecting a new president who will inherit the drug war his two predecessors have fought but failed to win. Many believe that the election will be a referendum on the drug war begun by Fox and pursued by Calderón, both of whom represent PAN. Mexicans are tired of the violence and appalled by the number of human rights abuses that have been attributed to the military in their actions against the cartels. Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) currently holds a 10-point lead in the opinion polls over his two major opponents, Andres Lopez Manuel Obrador of the left-leaning PRD (Democratic Revolution Party), who narrowly lost to Calderón in 2006, and Josefina Vazquez Mota of PAN, the first woman in Mexican history to run for president from one of the three main parties. The outcome of the contest—and the future direction of Mexico's drug war—will be determined on Election Day, July 1, 2012.

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *Canada and the World Respond*

### Quote

The British magazine *The Economist* (November 18, 2006) identified a fundamental reason for the growth of the cartels: “The violence in Mexico is in large part a result of the continuing failure of drug policy in the United States. Over the past decade the locus of power in the drug trade, as in so many other businesses, has moved closer to the final consumer. That means it has shifted from Colombia to Mexico, which is now the gateway for up to 90 per cent of cocaine entering the United States, as well as ever-increasing amounts of marijuana and methamphetamine.”

This section of the guide is divided into two parts. The first part looks at how Mexico’s allies are helping or hindering it in its war against the drug cartels. The second part looks at recent recommendations—international and Canadian—on how to approach the problems associated with drug abuse. Create an organizer in your notebook and answer the following questions as you read the article:

- Why is the United States such an important factor in Mexico’s war against drugs?
- What role is the United States playing in the Mexican war against drugs?
- How is Canada involving itself in the drug war?
- How would the Global Commission on Drug Policy like to see countries deal with the problems caused by illegal drugs?
- What does a recent Canadian study contribute to the discussion of the war on drugs?

The rise of the drug cartels is not solely attributable to conditions in Mexico itself. Although organized crime in the country has diversified in recent years, illegal drugs remain the major source of their income. And the bulk of those drugs are not being sold in Mexico.

### Drugs and the United States

A “war on drugs” has been a feature of United States policy for presidents of both the Republican and Democratic parties since Richard Nixon (1969–1974), who first used the term. Under George H.W. Bush (1989–1993), the country even appointed a drug czar to lead its fight against the use of illegal drugs. An Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) is currently charged with overseeing the fight. But while the country has some of the toughest drug abuse legislation in the world—with mandatory sentences common in many states—the use of illegal drugs has continued to rise.

In 2009 the administration of Barack Obama stopped using the term *war on drugs* to describe its policies. It remains committed, however, to keeping the use of all drugs illegal. This policy seems to have the support of the majority of Americans. A recent referendum in California—which shares a border with Mexico and is considered one of the most liberal states when it comes to drug use—turned down a proposal to legalize marijuana.

### Assisting Mexico with Its Drug War

The United States has tried to assist Mexico in its fight against the cartels. In 2008, the Mérida Initiative became a security arrangement joining the U.S., Mexico, and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras in a fight against drug trafficking, organized crime, and money laundering. Much of the U.S. assistance is financial—\$300-million to Mexico and \$65-million to Central America in 2008—but it also includes special equipment, police training, and shared intelligence.

The United States is also looking for ways to keep U.S. guns out of the hands of the Mexican cartels. Guns are easy to obtain legally in the U.S., and the cartels are good at smuggling them into Mexico. In 2009 and 2010, at least 70 per cent of the guns captured by Mexican authorities could be traced back to the U.S. Recently, a report by three U.S. senators has called for a new plan to prevent the illegal export of firearms to Mexico.

### Digging Deeper

For more on the new defence agreement, go to [www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/03/27/pol-defence-summit-tuesday.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/03/27/pol-defence-summit-tuesday.html).

Canada has also joined the battle. On March 26–27, 2012, a meeting in Ottawa of the Canadian, U.S., and Mexican defence ministers established a new co-operative framework to confront a variety of threats to North America. Specifically targeted were the problems caused by Mexico’s drug cartels.

### The Global Commission on Drug Policy

Meanwhile an international commission has called for an end to the war on drugs. The Global Commission on Drug Policy (GCDP) was formed to explore ways in which national policies on illegal drugs could be improved to better deal with the problems the use of drugs causes.

The commission ([www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/what-we-do/](http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/what-we-do/)) has three main goals:

- review the basic assumption, effectiveness, and consequences of the “war on drugs” approach
- evaluate the risks and benefits of different national responses to the drug problem
- develop actionable, evidence-based recommendations for constructive legal and drug-policy reform

The commission urges that drug abuse be treated as a health issue rather

than a criminal problem. This approach has been endorsed by a recent report (available at [www.openmedicine.ca/article/view/501/455](http://www.openmedicine.ca/article/view/501/455)) prepared by the Chief Medical Health Officers of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia, along with a professor of medicine at the University of British Columbia.

The authors argue that the federal government should do away with mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes and “use scientific evidence to create drug policies that work” (*The Globe and Mail*, March 28, 2012). The authors also argue that almost all resources aimed at controlling drug use now go into policing, and that there is little evidence that shows this has any effect in lowering drug use.

The paper points out that there is increasing evidence that focusing on social programs, including counselling and treatment programs, reduces the serious problems linked to drug use. Other approaches, such as government regulation of the sale of soft drugs like marijuana, could eliminate many of the social problems caused by the use of that drug.

### Follow-up

1. With a partner, compare the information in your organizer. Help each other complete any missing information.
2. In this article we have two approaches to dealing with drugs: making them illegal, stopping them at the source, and charging their users with a criminal offence; or legalizing the distribution of “soft” drugs and treating the use of other drugs as a health problem. What do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages of each approach? Do both approaches have a role to play in our policies on drugs? Which one should be our main focus as Canadians?

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *The Canadian Connection*

### Reading Prompt

Before reading this section, write down some words or phrases that would express your impressions of Mexico—both positive and negative.

For the most part, Canadians think of Mexico as a land of fun and sun and as a place to spend a winter holiday away from the cold. In 2010 about 1.6 million of us visited the country.

Despite its popularity with tourists, Canadians seem to have a fairly poor impression of Mexico. A 2010 survey conducted by Leger Marketing reported that only 39 per cent of Canadians had a favourable view of Mexico; 47 per cent had a negative view ([www.focal.ca/publications/focalpoint/474-july-2011-armony-and-jedwab](http://www.focal.ca/publications/focalpoint/474-july-2011-armony-and-jedwab)).

Media coverage of Mexico is often cited as a main reason for this negative image of the country among Canadians. 2010 was a banner year for stories about Mexico in the Canadian media. About 23 000 stories were published, but only 20 per cent of them showed the country in a favourable light.

### Very Scary?

Consider this example of media coverage, from a January 24, 2012, article in the *National Post* (<http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/01/24/canadians-flock-to-mexico-despite-ongoing-drug-war/>):

“Here are three things you may not know about Mexico.

“1) They have a city that’s deadlier than all of Afghanistan.

“Ciudad Juarez, a city on the Rio Grande just south of El Paso, Texas, is overrun by drug cartels trying to wipe each other out by spilling blood. In December, the city surpassed 10 000 homicides in four

years. That’s more than the number of civilians killed in the war in Afghanistan over the same time period.

“2) You can fly there, but you shouldn’t drive there.

“Crossing the border to Mexico from the U.S. isn’t the same as crossing into the U.S. from Canada after a day of shopping. Much of the violence in Mexico is concentrated along the American border, where the drug war runs rampant.

“3) Cruise ships sit among drug cartels.

“Tourists and their cruise ships flock to the state of Sinaloa because it’s home to Mazatlan, a beach-side resort town. But the state is also home to the world’s most infamous drug lord, Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman, whose nickname means ‘Shorty’ due to his diminutive size.”

Add to this the warning from the Canadian government on the Department of Foreign Affairs website:

“OFFICIAL WARNING: Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to the border areas between Mexico and the United States, due to continuously high levels of violence linked to organized crime in those areas.

“Canadians should avoid crossing Mexico’s northern border by land and should do so only if it is absolutely necessary, after making appropriate arrangements to ensure their personal safety. Shootouts, attacks, and illegal roadblocks may occur at any time. Criminals especially target SUVs

## Quote

Gordon Kendall was one of two Canadians believed to have been involved in the drug trade who were killed in the resort town of Puerto Vallarta in 2009. Kendall's father has some advice for anyone hoping to profit by dealing with Mexican drug cartels. "After what we've gone through and not having the chance to say our goodbyes to Gordon and [Gordon's friend] Jeff, I would say get your ducks in a row before you go down there. Say your goodbyes because there's a very good chance your family is going to hear on TV of your demise" ([www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/03/05/bc-mexico-gangs.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/03/05/bc-mexico-gangs.html)).

and full-size pickup trucks for theft and carjacking along highways in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Sonora, and Sinaloa.

Travellers should also avoid travelling by land to or through these border states and should do so only if it is absolutely necessary, and after making appropriate arrangements to ensure their personal safety" ([www.voyage.gc.ca/countries\\_pays/report\\_rapport-eng.asp?id=184000](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/report_rapport-eng.asp?id=184000)).

## Just the Facts, Please

Countering this type of publicity is a story in the January 25, 2012, issue of *The Globe and Mail*. It reported that this winter, with at least one million Canadian tourists in the country, two Canadians visiting Mexico were murdered and another five reported being assaulted. In 2010—the year that 1.6-million Canadians visited—six murders and 50 assaults were reported, a low number that would be hard to match in many other countries.

Tourists certainly seem to believe they are safe in Mexico's resorts. In 2009 (October 12), *Maclean's* reported that tourists are not targets in the Mexican drug wars—and that they realize that. A survey taken in March 2012 on the Mexican Riviera reported that 100 per cent of tourists felt safe within their resorts; 96 per cent felt safe on tours.

Mexico is home to about 50 000

permanent expatriate Canadian residents, mainly retirees. Some 8 000 of them live in Ajijic, on Lake Chapala, about a 30-minute drive from Guadalajara, Mexico's fifth-largest city. It is believed to be the largest concentration of expatriate Canadians in the world. They are all pleased to point out that their community is actually safer than the city of Toronto.

Mexico is also Canada's third-largest trading partner, with about \$20-billion per year in two-way trade. Mexico is home to the foreign operations of about 2 500 Canadian corporations and a focus for the expansion of Canadian economic ties with the nations of Latin America.

## The Drug Connection

Do illegal drugs from Mexico come into Canada? They do, with most of the traffic believed to be from the United States across the border between Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario. Much of that traffic is in cocaine.

Recently some British Columbia gangsters have started dealing with the Mexican cartels, and five of them have been killed between 2007 and 2012. Increasingly B.C. gang members seem to be trying to cut out the middlemen (distributors in the United States) and deal directly with their Mexican sources. A kilogram of cocaine from a U.S. supplier costs a B.C. dealer about \$20 000. That same kilogram is about \$8 000 to \$10 000 in Mexico.

## Follow-up

1. With a partner, review the list of words or phrases that expressed your impressions of Mexico that you made before reading this section. Did reading it change or confirm your impressions? Discuss your responses with your partner.
2. Based on what you have read in this section, is Mexico a safe destination for Canadian tourists? What steps should tourists to Mexico take to ensure their personal safety?

# THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO

## *Activity: How to Deal with Drugs*

How to deal with drug abuse remains a major problem for Mexicans and Canadians alike. Mexico's drug war may be especially violent, but drug abuse takes its toll on Canadian society as well.

In the Canada and the World Respond section, we read about a serious movement to have governments look at drug abuse as a health issue rather than a problem for the police and the justice system, and to treat drug abusers as people suffering from an illness, rather than as criminals. Supporters of this idea like to point to the example of Portugal. In 2001 the country decriminalized drug use and began treating addicts rather than punishing them. Restricted drug use has not been legalized, but users are not arrested. Instead they are forced to appear before special addiction panels that recommend treatment based on each case's specifics. The number of addicts in Portugal has declined by 50 per cent since the 1990s.

### **Your Task**

1. Should Canada adopt a drug policy similar to that of Portugal?

As a class, brainstorm the pros and cons for Canadians of decriminalizing drug use in conjunction with expanded treatment for addicts. Once you have developed your lists, vote to determine an overall recommendation for or against a new policy.

2. Would decriminalization of drugs help to alleviate the drug wars in Mexico?

Again, as a class brainstorm the pros and cons of Mexico's decriminalizing drug use among its own population. Would this have an effect on the government's ongoing conflict with the drug cartels? Would either side be weakened or strengthened by such a policy? Hold a second class vote to determine a recommendation for or against decriminalization.