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Mexico has surpassed the US as the country whose authorities have seized the largest amounts of synthetic drugs, in large part a result of a major crackdown in the US in recent years on the illicit production of drugs like ecstasy and methamphetamines. This trend is documented in reports published this year by Europol and the UN. Even though production of synthetic drugs has declined in the US, demand continues high, which is why Mexican producers—led primarily by the Sinaloa cartel—continue their high output. But the availability of large quantities of methamphetamine has also increased usage in Mexico, particularly in western cities like Guadalajara, according to recent studies.

The shift in production of synthetic drugs to Mexico was a natural progression because the Sinaloa cartel was already involved in this business. The drug-trafficking organization, led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, consolidated its position in recent years as the top source of methamphetamines by crushing its only competition, the Tijuana cartel. At the same time, the arrest of its top leaders, Benjamín Arellano Félix (SourceMex, Sept. 27, 2006) and Eduardo Ramon Arellano Félix (SourceMex, Nov. 5, 2008), weakened the Tijuana cartel.

By gaining control of Baja California, the Sinaloa cartel also took control of all operations in Tijuana, and that city has become the major gateway for shipments of methamphetamines into California. Recent statistics from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) unit indicate that more than 40% of all seizures of methamphetamines in fiscal year 2012 occurred in San Ysidro, just across the border from Tijuana. CPB officers confiscated 5,566 pounds of methamphetamines at the site in fiscal 2012, twice as much as they did in 2010. The increase has occurred throughout the border, with total methamphetamine confiscations surpassing 13,000 pounds in fiscal 2012, also twice as high as 2010.

"[Tijuana-San Ysidro] is the gem for traffickers," said Gary Hill, assistant special agent in charge of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in San Diego, told the Associated Press. "It's the greatest place for these guys to cross because there are so many opportunities."

Sinaloa cartel controls market
José Luis León, an expert on drug trafficking at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City, estimates that the Sinaloa cartel now controls about 80% of the methamphetamine shipments to the US as well as a large share of the sales of the synthetic drug in Europe and Asia.

"This organization is a truly global enterprise, for both its markets and its products exhibit a high degree of diversification," León wrote in a study published by the Mexican security think tank Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia (CASEDE). North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia stand out among its markets. Marijuana, cocaine, opiates, and methamphetamines are prominent among its products."

Partly because of pressure from the US and the European Union (EU), the Mexican government has moved aggressively to intercept shipments of methamphetamines and destroy laboratories
that manufacture synthetic drugs. Even though these operations represent the tip of the iceberg, they have made a dent in the US production of synthetic drugs. During this time, the Sinaloa cartel, along with the Zetas and the Colima cartel, were actively expanding their methamphetamine-trafficking operations in the US and were more than happy to fill the void. Some argue that the availability of cheaper imports of methamphetamines contributed directly to the reduction in drug labs in the US.

"Thanks to the penetration of Mexican cartels in this market, the number of local meth labs seized [in the US] went down from 10,212 to 5,846 between 2003 and 2006," the study said.

In a report published in January 2013, Europol—a law-enforcement agency affiliated with the EU—reported that 45 tons of synthetic drugs were seized at the global level in 2010, with nearly one-third of the confiscations of methamphetamines and ecstasy taking place in Mexico. The report noted that the Zetas have also become a player in the trafficking of synthetic drugs, along with the Sinaloa cartel.

The Europol report also said Mexico is quickly becoming a top producer and exporter of the synthetic drug ecstasy. "Mexico could be rapidly becoming a producer of ecstasy, as evidenced by the 2,500 liters of saffrole (a tree extract used to produce ecstasy) that were seized at the Mexico City airport in 2011," said the agency, which is based in The Hague in the Netherlands.

Still, Europol said methamphetamines remain the most popular synthetic drug, and its use globally is surpassed only by marijuana.

A second report issued by a multinational agency in 2013 also noted that Mexico had surpassed the US as the country where the most amphetamines were seized. The UN’s World Drug Report 2013, released in Vienna in June of this year, said Mexico confiscated 31 tons of artificial stimulants in 2011, compared with only 13 tons in 2010. In contrast, US authorities seized 23 tons of methamphetamines and other similar products in 2011.

The report said consumption of synthetic drugs has remained stable in traditional markets like the US, but an increase was noted in the developing economies in Asia. "The confiscations and the levels of consumption are increasing, and thus production is expanding and new markets are being created," said the UN report.

The study, produced by UN Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), said seizures of methamphetamines globally reached a record 123 tons in 2011, an increase of about 66% from the 74 tons confiscated in 2010. The report said amphetamines are now the fastest-growing illicit drugs in the world. In 2012, synthetic narcotics surpassed heroin and cocaine to become the second-most-used illegal substances on the planet after marijuana.

The UN report said Mexico is also fast becoming the principal source of heroin in the Americas. Mexico’s capacity to produce heroin is now 30 times higher than Colombia’s, which was traditionally the principal source of the drug in this hemisphere. The report says Mexico had a potential to produce 250 tons of dry opium in 2011, compared with eight tons for Colombia.

Although the Europol and UN reports contain statistics that are already two or three years old, the Mexican government’s efforts to curb production and trafficking of synthetic drugs have remained strong since that time. A US State Department report in March of this year said the Mexican government destroyed 958 synthetic-drug labs during former President Felipe Calderón’s
administration (2006-2012), compared with 145 during the government of ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006). In 2012 alone, Mexico confiscated and destroyed 267 labs, compared with 227 in 2011, said the US report.

The efforts continue during the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto. In June of this year, the Mexican Army raided a ranch in Jalisco, near Guadalajara, and seized what they claimed was 15 tons of methamphetamines. Gen. Gilberto Hernández Andreu, who led the bust, said the facility included 15 reactors to cook drugs.

"Certainly [the operation] is a big blow to whoever was the owner of the shipments and the lab," Antonio Mazzitelli, the regional representative for the UNODC for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, said in an interview with the US news organization National Public Radio (NPR).

**Increased domestic consumption a concern in Mexico**

It is no coincidence that the recent large bust took place in Jalisco because western Mexico has become a hotbed of production for synthetic drugs. This situation is becoming a problem in Mexico, since the large availability of synthetic drugs in the western states has led to increased consumption in the region. A recent report from the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) said methamphetamine usage has increased significantly in Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Jalisco, three states where the production of the drug is concentrated. Usage has especially increased among students in middle and high schools.

The survey, Encuesta Escolar de Adicciones 2012, conducted among secondary students in Jalisco, found increased usage in the Guadalajara metropolitan area, comprising the city of Guadalajara and the nearby communities of Tlaquepaque, Tonalá, and Zapopan.

"Specialists ... at the Consejo Estatal contra las Adicciones en Jalisco (CECAJ) have warned that the production of a certain drug increases its availability locally," said the Guadalajara daily newspaper El Informador. "This factor tends to boost the growth in consumption."

The survey found only two drugs with increased consumption in the state: methamphetamines and marijuana.

A separate study by the la Secretaría de Salud (SSA) said drug consumption doubled nationally between 2002 and 2011. Citing the 2011 national survey on addictions (Encuesta Nacional de Adicciones 2011), Health Secretary Mercedes Juan López confirmed that drug use among secondary students increased significantly between 2009 and 2011. The survey said marijuana remained the most popular drug, but the list made no mention of methamphetamines and other synthetic drugs. Juan López also noted that the use of marijuana among high school students in Mexico City increased significantly during the three-year period.