



September 2023

# U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO

## State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-103795](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2008, the U.S. has provided over \$3 billion in assistance to Mexico to address crime and violence and enhance the country's rule of law. Two cooperative arrangements between the U.S. and Mexico have guided most of this assistance: the Mérida Initiative (2008-2021) and the Bicentennial Framework (late 2021-present).

GAO was asked to assess the results of U.S. assistance to Mexico. This report examines 1) how, if at all, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico have changed since 2008, 2) challenges State/INL and USAID identified achieving results and project-level results each agency reported, and 3) the extent to which State/INL has addressed key elements critical to assess progress toward Bicentennial Framework goals. GAO reviewed State and USAID documents and data, interviewed officials from State, USAID, Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security in Washington, D.C., and conducted fieldwork and interviewed U.S. and Government of Mexico officials in Mexico.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations related to assessing progress, including that State, in consultation with USAID, identifies projects to achieve results, outlines performance indicators used to gauge progress, and establishes plans to assess goals. State agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-103795](#). For more information, contact Chelsea Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or [KenneyC@gao.gov](mailto:KenneyC@gao.gov).

September 2023

# U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO

## State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress

### What GAO Found

Since 2008, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico have generally focused on promoting the rule of law and countering the drug trade. In 2021, the U.S. and Mexico agreed to the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Bicentennial Framework), which expands the scope of the Mérida Initiative by adding new U.S. commitments to reduce drug demand in the United States and the flow of illegal firearms from the U.S. to Mexico.

The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are the lead U.S. agencies for implementing U.S. assistance to Mexico. Both agencies have reported project-level results of assistance despite numerous challenges. Among these challenges, according to the agencies, are political corruption and impunity in Mexico and a growing U.S. drug demand that fuels transnational criminal organizations. State/INL project results include developing forensic investigation capabilities in Mexico, and USAID results include providing at-risk youth with educational opportunities.

State/INL has addressed two of five key elements GAO previously identified as important to assessing progress by defining desired results and establishing a hierarchy of goals and objectives. However, for the Bicentennial Framework, State/INL has not 1) identified the specific projects designed to achieve their goals, 2) outlined which milestones and performance indicators should be used to gauge results, or 3) established monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress toward their goals. State/INL officials said the bureau has not yet begun to assess progress toward the shared goals of the Bicentennial Framework because it is currently negotiating with the Mexican government on a set of performance indicators, which is one of three key elements critical to assess progress. Without incorporating all key elements for assessing progress, the U.S. government cannot demonstrate that it is achieving its goals in Mexico and that its investments, at over \$3 billion since 2008, have been spent effectively.

### GAO's Analysis of State's Actions Addressing Key Elements for Assessing Progress toward Shared Bicentennial Framework Goals

Key Element	Description	GAO overall assessment
<b>Desired results</b>	The end state that the strategy aims to achieve	✓
<b>Hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives</b>	The logical links among the strategy's goals and objectives.	✓
<b>Activities to achieve results</b>	Planned steps and activities to achieve the results	✗
<b>Milestones and performance indicators</b>	Priorities, milestones, and performance indicators to gauge results.	✗
<b>Monitoring and evaluation plans</b>	Plans to assess progress toward achieving goals.	✗

Legend: ✓ - Addressed key element. ✗ - Has not fully addressed key element. We reviewed State Department planning and strategy documents for assistance to Mexico. We determined State addressed a key element if it took actions to incorporate the elements critical to assess progress into planning or strategy documents. We determined State had not fully addressed a key element if it had not taken actions critical to assess progress.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State actions and GAO's key elements relevant to assessment of progress toward strategic goals.

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## Abbreviations

ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
DevResults	State/INL monitoring database
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
Framework	Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities
State	Department of State
State/INL	State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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September 12, 2023

Congressional Requesters

Mexico is a key trading partner of the United States, with over \$780 billion in imports and exports exchanged between the two countries in 2022. As close trading partners with a shared border, both countries have a strong interest in each other's security. The United States has provided over \$3 billion in assistance since 2008 to address transnational organized crime and violence in Mexico, enhance the country's rule of law, and reduce drug trafficking to the United States. Two bilateral cooperative arrangements between the United States and Mexico have guided most of this assistance: the Mérida Initiative from 2008 to 2021 and the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Framework), which replaced the Mérida Initiative in late 2021 and remains in effect.

The Framework includes provisions covering the United States' contributions to addressing Mexico's security challenges. Specifically, the United States relies on Mexico to help manage cross-border crime and migrant smuggling, and Mexico relies on the United States to disrupt the flow of firearms into Mexico and decrease the U.S. demand for drugs. Firearms from the United States fuel violence in Mexico. In 2021, we reported that about 70 percent of firearms seized in Mexico from 2014 through 2018 and submitted for tracing originated in the United States.<sup>1</sup> We have also reported that in recent years, U.S. drug misuse and deaths have increased.<sup>2</sup> Criminal organizations in Mexico supply most of the cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and illicitly manufactured fentanyl smuggled into the United States, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy.<sup>3</sup> The Office also reported that in the last several years, hundreds of thousands of Americans have died of drug overdoses, with more than 66 percent of these deaths involving synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. Moreover, according to the most recent provisional data

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis*, [GAO-21-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2021). GAO, *Drug Misuse: Sustained National Efforts Are Necessary for Prevention, Response, and Recovery*, [GAO-20-474](#), (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 26, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>[GAO-20-474](#).

<sup>3</sup>The White House Executive Office of the President's Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy 2022*.

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available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics, there were over 100,000 overdose deaths in the 12-month period ending in January 2023.

Despite ongoing security assistance, the security situation in Mexico has significantly worsened over the last 15 years. From 2007 to 2021, the homicide rate in Mexico more than tripled to one of the highest national homicide rates in the world, from eight homicides per 100,000 people to 28 per 100,000 people, according to the United Nations. Meanwhile, Mexico has extremely low rates of prosecution for all crimes, according to the 2022 State Department Human Rights Report on Mexico.

Our prior reports have identified weaknesses in State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) monitoring of U.S. assistance to Mexico and managing program risk for U.S. assistance to Mexico, as well as challenges addressing firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico and the rise of U.S. drug demand.<sup>4</sup> In March 2021, we added drug misuse to GAO's High-Risk List because national rates of drug misuse have increased and drug use represents a serious risk to public health.<sup>5</sup> For a list of related reports, see the GAO Related Products at the end of the report.

You asked us to review the results of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. This report examines (1) how, if at all, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and Framework have changed since 2008; (2) any challenges State/INL and USAID identified when implementing U.S. assistance to Mexico, and the results reported by State/INL and USAID at the project level; and (3) the extent to which State/INL has addressed key elements critical to assess progress toward the Framework's strategic goals.

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Could Improve Its Monitoring of Mérida Initiative Projects*, [GAO-20-388](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2020). GAO, *U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State and USAID Should Strengthen Risk Management for Programs under the Mérida Initiative*, [GAO-21-335](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2021). GAO, *Illicit Opioids: While Greater Attention Given to Combating Synthetic Opioids, Agencies Need to Better Assess their Efforts*, [GAO-18-205](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2018). [GAO-21-322](#).

<sup>5</sup>See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021).

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We focused on U.S. assistance to Mexico from 2008 through 2021, building on our prior reviews of the Mérida Initiative.<sup>6</sup> We selected State and USAID because they are the lead agencies responsible for implementing the foreign assistance aspects of the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. While we describe other agencies' U.S. domestic actions related to U.S. drug demand, we did not evaluate those agencies' actions, such as U.S. government commitments to reduce drug demand in the United States. For our third objective, we focused on the Framework because it is the current bilateral cooperative arrangement between Mexico and the United States, and will guide U.S. assistance to Mexico moving forward.

For our three objectives, we reviewed documents and funding data on projects from 2014 through 2021 from State and USAID. For our third objective, we compared U.S. government strategies and plans for assistance to Mexico against key elements that GAO has identified for assessing the results of strategic objectives.<sup>7</sup> We interviewed officials from State, USAID, and the Departments of Justice (DOJ), Defense (DOD) and Homeland Security (DHS) located both in Washington, D.C. and Mexico City. We conducted fieldwork and interviewed Government of Mexico officials in Mexico. We took steps to assess the reliability of the data, including reviewing data collection and verification procedures. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. Appendix I provides additional details of our overall scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2019 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>6</sup>We suspended the audit in April 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and resumed the audit in June 2022.

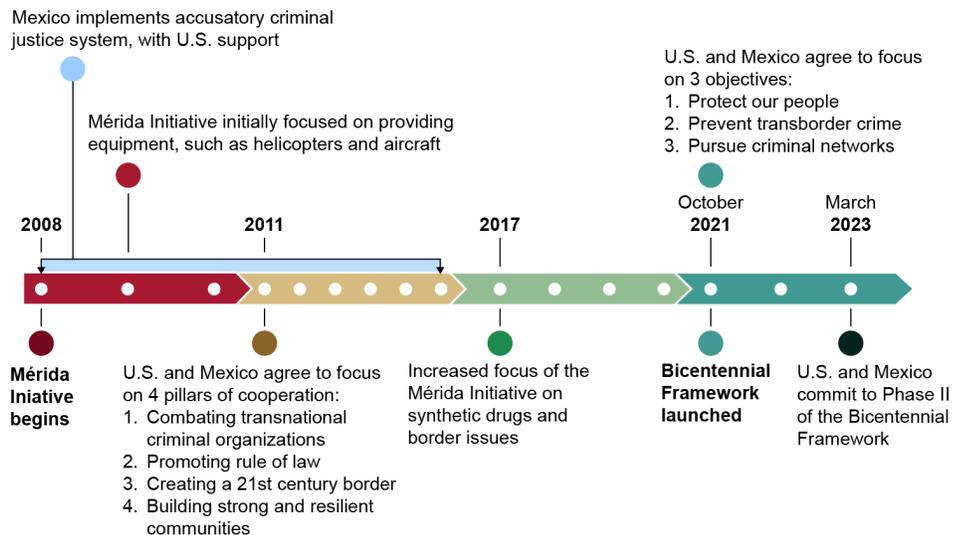
<sup>7</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C., July 12, 2018).

# Background

## Mérida Initiative and the Framework

The United States and Mexico designed the Mérida Initiative and the Framework to address their shared goals, such as reducing transnational crime, promoting the rule of law in Mexico, and reducing drug trafficking to the United States.<sup>8</sup> During the early years of the Mérida Initiative, much of the U.S. funding was for equipment to support Mexican federal security forces, including helicopters and other aircraft. In 2008, Mexico began a transition to an accusatory criminal justice system, and the United States provided support to Mexico as this system was adopted across Mexico from 2008 through 2016, including providing training to judicial officials and equipping courtrooms. In its later years, the Mérida Initiative increased its focus on synthetic drugs and border security issues. (See figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Key Priorities of U.S. Assistance to Mexico, 2008-2022**



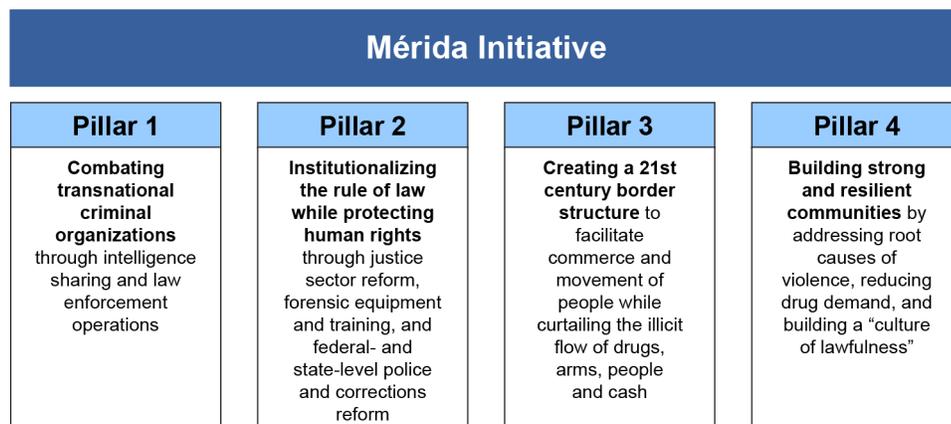
Source: GAO analysis of State Department and White House documents. | GAO-23-103795

Note: Mexico implemented an accusatory criminal justice system with U.S. support from 2008 to 2016. State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement and the U.S. Agency for International Development continue to provide support to strengthen justice institutions and processes.

<sup>8</sup>We use the term "shared goals" to refer to common goals between the U.S. and Mexico, as set forth in the Mérida Initiative and the Framework.

In 2011, Mexico and the United States expanded the scope of their efforts beyond a focus on equipment and material support, and agreed to a four goal (or pillar) strategy, as shown in figure 2. The four pillars remained the overarching goals for the Mérida Initiative until 2021.

**Figure 2: Mérida Initiative Pillars 2011-2021**



Source: The Mérida Initiative. | GAO-23-103795

Note: The Mérida Initiative was the bilateral cooperative arrangement for U.S. assistance to Mexico from 2008 to 2021. The U.S. and Mexico agreed to the four pillars in 2011.

A White House executive order issued in 2017 prompted an increase in focus of State/INL activities under the Mérida Initiative on countering transnational criminal organizations' illicit activities, such as drug production and the cross-border movement of drugs, cash, and weapons.<sup>9</sup> The executive order was issued in response to a rise in deaths from drug abuse, as well as a rise in violent crime related to drugs.

In October 2021, the U.S. and Mexican governments launched the Framework, which replaced the Mérida Initiative as a new guiding framework for shared security cooperation. According to State officials, the United States and Mexico developed the Framework in part because the López Obrador administration criticized the Mérida Initiative as ineffective and inconsistent with his administration's approaches.<sup>10</sup> As a

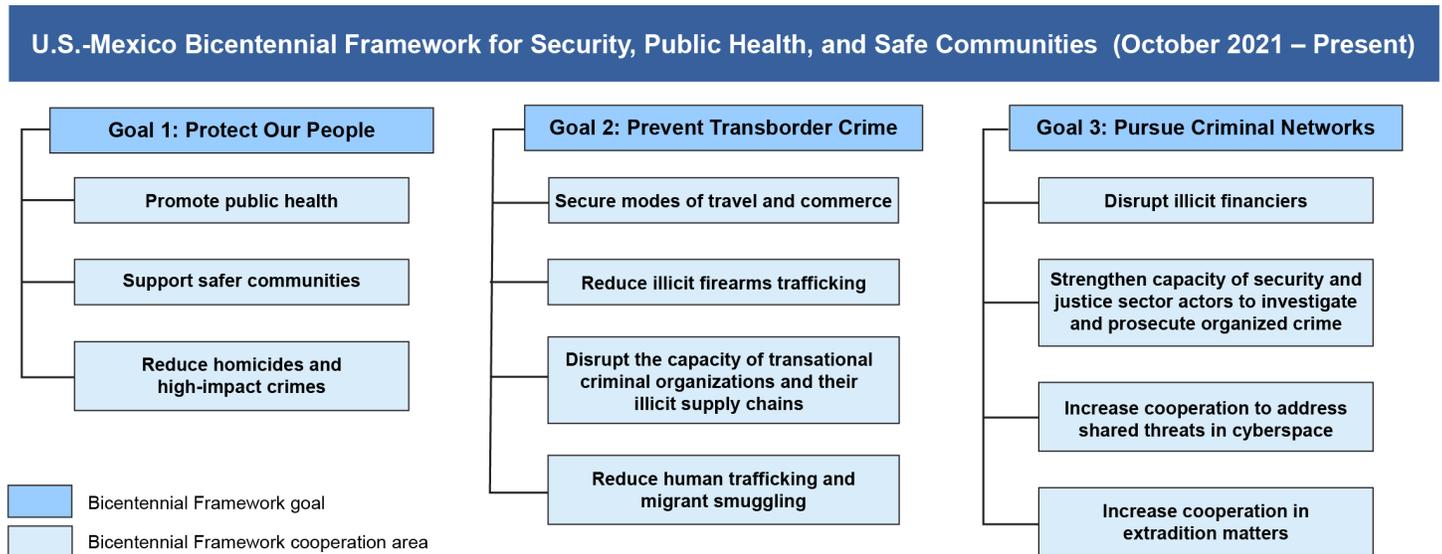
<sup>9</sup>Exec. Order No. 13773, *Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking*, 82 Fed. Reg. 10691 (Feb. 14, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected President of Mexico in 2018, and his term in office runs until 2024.

result, Mexico reduced the scope of security cooperation with the United States at the federal level. In 2022, State also described challenges under the Mérida Initiative, including changing political dynamics, pauses in efficiency due to election cycles, and challenges for sustainability due to resource scarcity.<sup>11</sup>

The Framework has three overarching goals: 1) Protect Our People; 2) Prevent Transborder Crime; and 3) Pursue Criminal Networks, with areas for cooperation under each goal (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Goals and Cooperation Areas of the Bicentennial Framework**



Source: The Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities. | GAO-23-103795

## U.S. Agencies' Roles and Responsibilities

According to State officials, the Secretary of State is responsible, and has delegated authority to State/INL, for coordinating all U.S. government assistance supporting international efforts to combat illicit narcotics production or trafficking in Mexico. State directs its security assistance to Mexico in coordination with executive branch agencies and in consultation with Congress. As part of State's role, State/INL has taken the lead in assessing progress and reporting results of U.S. assistance through programs such as the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. The

<sup>11</sup>Department of State, *Report to Congress on a Review of Programs, Projects, or Activities Implemented as Part of the Mérida Initiative*, 2022.

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U.S. government's Integrated Country Strategy for Mexico, State/INL's Mexico Country Plan, and USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategy are the primary U.S. strategy and planning documents for U.S. assistance to Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

State/INL and USAID are the lead agencies for developing programming for U.S. assistance to Mexico, first through the Mérida Initiative and its replacement, the Framework. In these roles, State/INL and USAID work with Government of Mexico officials to outline project plans, as well as mutual objectives, and desired results.<sup>13</sup> State/INL and USAID-funded projects are implemented by a wide range of organizations, including DOJ, DHS, DOD, contractors, and nongovernmental organizations.

Currently, to support the goals of the Framework, State/INL organizes its activities around five lines of effort while USAID organizes its activities around one development objective, as shown in table 1.<sup>14</sup> State/INL did not explicitly connect each line of effort to specific Framework goals. According to USAID officials, the development objective on impunity and violence reduction supports Goal 1 of the Framework. State/INL and USAID programs can support multiple lines of effort or development objectives.

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<sup>12</sup>Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Mexico*, March 29, 2022. Department of State, *Mexico Country Plan: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2019-2023*. USAID, *Mexico Country Development Cooperation Strategy*, September 2020-2025.

<sup>13</sup>Although agencies use different terms to describe their assistance, including programs, projects, and activities, we use "programs" to refer to broad areas of effort, such as State/INL lines of effort and USAID development objectives. We use "projects" to refer to assistance funded by U.S. agencies that are implemented directly by U.S. agencies or through awards made to project implementers, which includes contractors and grantees. In general, the term "project" refers to a set of activities that are designated and executed over a timeframe to achieve a specific aim.

<sup>14</sup>Currently, USAID has a second development objective for Mexico on climate resilient economic growth that is not part of the goals of the Framework. Prior to September 2020, USAID organized its Mérida Initiative work under four development objectives.

**Table 1: State/INL Lines of Effort and USAID Development Objectives for Assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and Bicentennial Framework**

State/INL Lines of Effort	USAID Development Objectives (Prior to September 2020)	USAID Development Objective (September 2020-2025)
Advance Criminal Justice	Rule of Law	Impunity and Violence Reduced in Targeted Regions
Secure Borders and Ports	Human Rights	—
Counternarcotics	Crime and Violence Prevention	—
Professionalize Police	Transparency and Accountability	—
Disrupt Illicit Finance	—	—

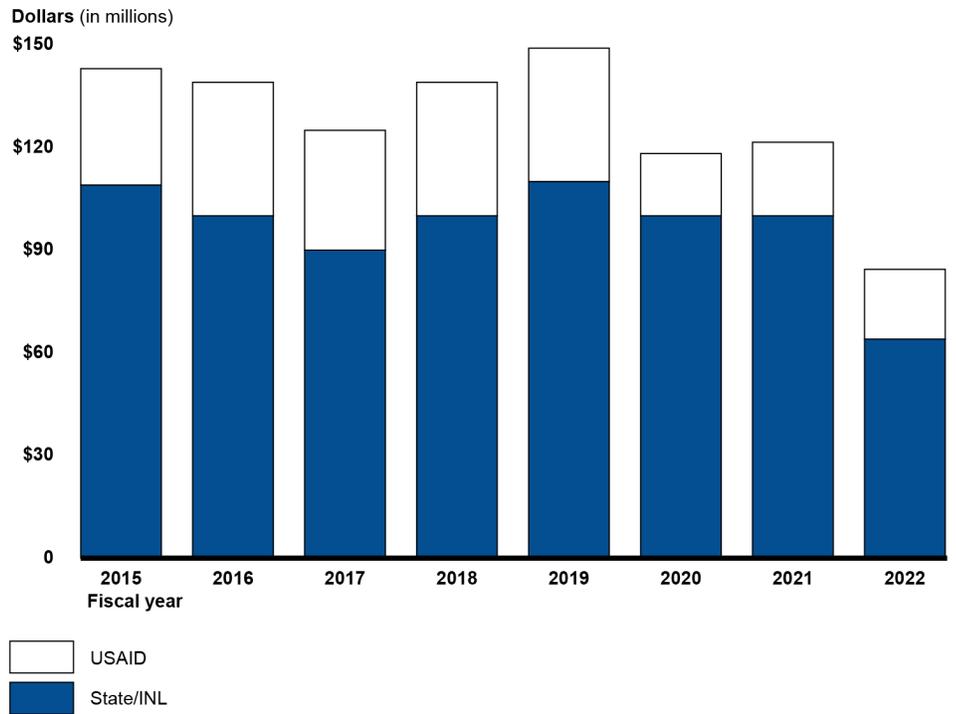
Legend: — = No data

Source: State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Department (INL) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). | GAO-23-103795

### State and USAID Funding and Programs for U.S. Assistance to Mexico

From fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2022, State/INL allocated about \$374 million and USAID allocated about \$99 million for programs under the Mérida Initiative and the Framework, according to data provided by the agencies. As shown in figure 4, this is a decrease from fiscal years 2015 through 2018, when State/INL allocated about \$399 million and USAID allocated about \$147 million.

**Figure 4: State/INL and USAID Funding Allocated for the Mérida Initiative and Bicentennial Framework, Fiscal Year 2015 through 2022**



Source: State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Department (State/INL) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). | GAO-23-103795

State/INL programs have focused on providing training and assistance to Mexican officials from the justice sector, border security, military, and law enforcement. This assistance includes equipment for forensic laboratories, drug detection, and border surveillance. USAID programs have focused on engaging with Mexican government institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector to promote the rule of law and trust in government, prevent crime and violence, and advance human rights.

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## U.S. Assistance to Mexico Has Focused on Similar Goals Since 2008, with Recent Emphasis on U.S. Domestic Commitments

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### U.S. Assistance to Mexico Remains Focused on Promoting Rule of Law and Countering the Drug Trade

U.S. assistance to Mexico has focused on similar goals since 2008, with the Framework continuing many of the shared security goals established by the Mérida Initiative. U.S. assistance under both the Mérida Initiative and the Framework has prioritized promoting the rule of law; reducing crime, violence, and impunity; and combating the drug trade and transnational criminal organizations.<sup>15</sup>

State/INL and USAID officials said that their programs in support of the Framework remain largely the same as under the Mérida Initiative, because ongoing projects support shared security goals that have remained consistent. According to USAID officials, many of their activities that started under the new Country Development Cooperation Strategy in 2020 align with the goals and actions included in the Framework. USAID officials said that many ongoing projects are multi-year efforts that began under the Mérida Initiative and will continue to advance shared security goals defined in the Framework.

The Framework does not include USAID's efforts under the Mérida Initiative to fight corruption and increase transparency in Mexico.<sup>16</sup> According to USAID officials, USAID has continued its programs to increase transparency and business integrity in Mexico as part of the

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<sup>15</sup>We define the term "impunity" as freedom from punishment for something that has been done that is illegal.

<sup>16</sup>The Framework addresses corruption under one of its joint objectives "Build the capacity to investigate and prosecute financial crimes, related corruption, and transnational criminal organizations." However, this joint objective is specific to illicit finance, which is under State's purview, not USAID's.

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U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement,<sup>17</sup> but not to meet the Framework’s goals.

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### The Framework Adds U.S. Domestic Commitments to Reduce Drug Demand and Firearms Trafficking

According to State/INL officials, the Framework is designed to be a whole-of-government effort for both the U.S. and Mexican governments to establish joint goals and objectives based on shared responsibilities on both sides of the border. While the Mérida Initiative focused on U.S. and Mexican efforts within Mexico, the Framework expands the scope of the Initiative by adding new U.S. domestic commitments to reduce U.S. drug demand and the flow of illegal firearms from the U.S. to Mexico. The United States is working to address these challenges, as we have previously reported.<sup>18</sup>

### Reduce Drug Demand in the United States and Mexico

Specifically, under its first goal (“Protect Our People”), the Framework introduces two new joint public health objectives for both countries to reduce domestic drug demand.<sup>19</sup> (See text box.) As part of this effort, both countries committed to developing a bilingual, binational public

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<sup>17</sup>The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which substituted replaced the North America Free Trade Agreement, entered into force on July 1, 2020. Congress adopted legislation implementing its provisions in January 2020. See Pub. L. No. 116-113, 134 Stat. 11 (Jan. 29, 2020).

<sup>18</sup>[GAO-21-322](#), [GAO-20-474](#), [GAO-18-205](#). GAO, *Substance Use Disorder: Reliable Data Needed for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant Program*, [GAO-21-58](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>Reducing drug demand within the U.S. and reducing firearms trafficking from the U.S. into Mexico are U.S. domestic priorities and are not led by State/INL or USAID. See White House statement for details on these efforts.

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awareness prevention campaign describing the dangers of synthetic drugs, including fentanyl, according to a White House statement.<sup>20</sup>

**Bicentennial Framework Goal 1: Protect Our People**

Bicentennial Framework Cooperation Area 1.1: Public Health

Joint objective 1.1.1: Promote evidence-based public health policy to address substance use disorders and associated harms.

Joint objective 1.1.2: Provide comprehensive, community-based care for people with substance use disorders to reduce the associated harm and promote recovery in both countries.

Source: Department of State, Action Plan for the Bicentennial Framework. | GAO-23-103795.

State/INL funds a variety of programs in Mexico to support these joint public health objectives, including developing alternatives to incarceration for drug-related crimes, such as drug treatment courts.<sup>21</sup>

Multiple U.S. agencies, including the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, Health and Human Services, Defense, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and the Veterans Administration are involved in addressing the U.S. drug use epidemic. The 2022 National Drug Control Strategy instructs federal agencies to prioritize actions that will save lives, provide necessary medical care, pursue drug traffickers' profits, and make better use of data to guide their efforts.<sup>22</sup> The 2022 Strategy focuses on a broad range of work in these areas: prevention and early intervention, harm reduction, substance use disorder treatment, recovery, domestic supply reduction, international supply reduction, criminal justice and public safety, and data and research.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>According to the White House, the first step is for the United States and Mexico to convene a binational panel of experts to share information and best practices on evidence-based substance use and overdose prevention campaigns among U.S. and Mexican public health experts.

<sup>21</sup>Drug treatment courts offer rehabilitation services and other non-punitive alternatives for drug offenders who would otherwise face time in prison.

<sup>22</sup>White House Executive Office of the President, National Drug Control Policy, 2022.

<sup>23</sup>GAO has reported on some of these issues and programs and included them on its High-Risk List. <https://www.gao.gov/highrisk/drug-misuse>.

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Reduce Firearms Trafficked from U.S. to Mexico

Under its second goal (“Prevent Transborder Crime”), the Framework introduces three joint objectives related to decreasing the trafficking of U.S.-originated firearms into Mexico. (See text box.)

**Bicentennial Framework Goal 2: Prevent Transborder Crime**

Bicentennial Framework Cooperation Area 2.2: Reduce illicit firearms trafficking

Joint objective 2.2.1: Increase efforts to reduce the illicit trafficking of firearms, ammunition, and explosive devices.

Joint objective 2.2.2: Increase bilateral information sharing on illicit firearms trafficking.

Joint objective 2.2.3: Increase investigative and prosecutorial capacity to address illicit firearms trafficking.

Source: Department of State, Action Plan for the Bicentennial Framework. | GAO-23-103795.

As part of their efforts to stem the flow of firearms from the United States to Mexico, in January 2022 both countries launched the Bicentennial Framework Binational Group Against Arms Smuggling, which includes security and law enforcement agencies from both countries. The group’s main goals are to seize more weapons involved in illicit firearms trafficking and to enact penalties for arms smugglers in the United States and Mexico. The group committed to increase extraditions between both countries, speed up case processing, strengthen patrols on the border, work together to modernize border inspection technology, and improve information sharing.

A provision of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act established new prohibitions against straw purchases of firearms and firearm trafficking.<sup>24</sup> According to U.S. officials, this recent provision has significantly increased firearms trafficking investigations with a nexus to Mexico, as well as firearms and ammunitions seizures. The United States and Mexico also committed to host a series of public outreach events across their shared border to increase awareness of weapons trafficking enforcement.

In 2023, the United States and Mexico, at times with Canada, held a number of senior-level meetings to discuss their strategies and

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<sup>24</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-159. § 12004, 136 Stat. 1326 (2022). Straw purchases are unlawful firearms purchases by third parties.

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commitments to addressing the illicit fentanyl trade and firearms trafficking. For more details, see app. II.

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**Political and Security  
Challenges Limited  
U.S.-Funded Efforts,  
but Agencies  
Reported Project-  
Level Results**

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**State/INL and USAID  
Reported Facing  
Challenges That Limit  
Their Ability to Implement  
Projects and Achieve  
Goals**

State/INL and USAID officials said they face a number of political, security, capacity, and U.S. domestic challenges that limit their ability to implement projects across Mexico. Despite these challenges, State and USAID continue to work throughout many regions of Mexico.

**Results are Easier to Achieve and Measure at the State and Municipal Level**

According to State/INL officials, results of U.S.-funded projects are often easier to achieve and measure at the state and municipal level, rather than the national level. State/INL encourages states to replicate other states' successful projects, but this requires local partners who have both the political will and the resources to engage. Some examples of local-level successes for both State and USAID include:

- State/INL: The state of Guanajuato used State/INL assistance to expand its forensics capabilities, according to State/INL officials. State/INL considers Guanajuato's forensic facilities as a "center of excellence" in which other Mexican states can observe and learn from their forensics capabilities. Mexican federal officials and officials from other states have traveled to Guanajuato to receive training on forensics, including ballistics. State/INL officials said they regularly invite colleagues to Guanajuato to share information and experiences and discuss programming that has led to positive outcomes.
- USAID: USAID has supported a "civic justice model" in the states of Michoacán and Nuevo Leon. According to USAID, this model aims to proactively and transparently solve community conflicts, address root causes of violence at the individual level, and prevent the escalation of violence. The pilots in Michoacán and Nuevo Leon have led to the adoption of a National Civic Justice Model in 2019, according to USAID. USAID is currently working closely with other states and municipalities to roll out the model in other parts of the country.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) documents and interviews.

Mexican political challenges U.S. agency officials identified include:

- **Reduced security cooperation with the Mexican federal government:** The López Obrador administration, which took office in late 2018, reduced security cooperation with the United States at the federal level. This limited some programs, according to U.S. officials. For example, in 2019 Mexico eliminated its federal civilian security agency, the Federal Police, and replaced it with a new agency, the National Guard. According to U.S. officials, cooperation with the National Guard has been limited in comparison to its predecessor, which had received significant support, training, equipment, and canine units throughout the Mérida Initiative. For example, U.S. officials worked closely with the Federal Police on border operations, pilot training, and drug seizures. U.S. officials also noted that the cooperation from the Mexican Federal Attorney General Office has decreased under this administration. State/INL and USAID officials noted that they work with officials at the Mexican state level because doing so is critical to their work in Mexico. For example, in addition to federal-level engagement, State/INL and USAID officials said they work at the state level to reduce impunity for many high-impact crimes, because most crimes fall under state jurisdiction.
- **Lack of engagement with some Mexican states:** Some states have been unable or unwilling to receive U.S. assistance, according to State/INL officials. In addition, reluctance to collaborate among Mexican government partners could continue to limit programs in those locations. For example, U.S. officials said they have been unable to implement training programs in some states because of state governments' unwillingness to engage.
- **Impunity and political corruption:** High levels of impunity and corruption in Mexico impede the rule of law and limit potential partnerships for State/INL and USAID. For example, State's 2022 human rights report stated that some Mexican government officials were complicit with international organized criminal groups, but these officials were rarely prosecuted or convicted.<sup>25</sup> Impunity, including extremely low rates of prosecution, remain a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses and corruption. For example, according to the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 93 percent of all crimes in Mexico went unreported in 2021. In addition, a Congressional Research Service report from May

<sup>25</sup>United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mexico, 2023*.

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2019 identified corruption as a problem at all levels of the Mexican government.<sup>26</sup>

Security challenges U.S. agency officials identified include:

- **Security challenges in some Mexican states:** Although State/INL conducts programming in all 32 Mexican states, high levels of insecurity in some Mexican states limit U.S. agencies' ability to implement programs. Due to dangerous conditions in some areas of Mexico, U.S. government officials may not travel after dark and may not travel on certain highways. Despite the security challenges, some of the states deemed least secure in State Department travel advisories, such as Guerrero and Tamaulipas, are those that the Government of Mexico and the U.S. government prioritized under the Framework, in part because of their insecurity, according to State/INL.<sup>27</sup> State/INL identified these states as areas to prioritize assistance, in part because these states have expressed a willingness to collaborate and a commitment to make and sustain investments in programming. USAID officials said they currently do not have programs in the states of Guerrero and Tamaulipas due to insecurity in these states and what they perceive as greater opportunities for impact in other states with USAID assistance. See figure 5 for a map of Mexican states with State Department travel advisories and the 12 Bicentennial Framework Priority States.

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<sup>26</sup>Congressional Research Service, *Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations*, May 2, 2019.

<sup>27</sup>According to State/INL officials, when considering which Mexican states should be Bicentennial Framework Priority States, State/INL considers a state's overall security situation, ability to meet basic resource commitments and investments to ensure program success, willingness and durability of commitment to collaborate with State/INL over a certain period, human rights vetting, and ability and commitment to sustain program investments over the long term.

**Figure 5: Map of Bicentennial Framework Priority States in Mexico and Travel Advisories Issued by the State Department**



Source: GAO analysis of State information (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-103795

Capacity challenges U.S. agency officials identified include:

- Resource and capacity constraints among Mexican state and municipal governments:** Some Mexican state and municipal governments that partner with State/INL and USAID to implement projects lack the funding, resources, technical skills, or expertise needed to invest in and sustain the results of U.S. assistance programs after U.S. funding ends. Consequently, State/INL and USAID officials said that U.S. assistance focuses on states that can meet resource commitments and investments. USAID has also partnered with the Mexican private sector to leverage local resources and promote sustainability. State/INL and USAID officials also noted that the United States focuses assistance in locations that already have demonstrated a commitment to advancing shared priorities. For example, State/INL officials said the bureau will not provide assistance to forensic labs in states that do not have sufficient resources to sustain capabilities or effectively use equipment.

U.S. domestic challenges that U.S. officials identified include:

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- **Illicit drug demand from the U.S.:** Continuing high U.S. demand for drugs contributes to transnational criminal organizations' activities by providing lucrative markets for drugs. These organizations' activities fuel continued violence and insecurity in Mexico. According to data from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, fentanyl is involved in more deaths of Americans under 50 than any other cause of death.
  - **Firearms trafficking:** The flow of firearms from the United States to Mexico continues to generate insecurity, crime, and violence within Mexico. We reported that the U.S. and Mexican governments have acknowledged the threat posed by the trafficking of firearms from the United States to transnational criminal organizations in Mexico. We also reported the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) found that 70 percent of firearms recovered in Mexico and traced by the U.S. government from 2014 through 2018 originated in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

The United States is working to address challenges related to drug demand and firearms trafficking, as we have previously reported.<sup>29</sup>

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## State/INL Reported Project-Level Results Across its Five Lines of Effort

Despite these challenges, State/INL has reported project-level results across its five priority lines of effort established under the Mérida Initiative and continued under the Framework. State/INL project-level results include<sup>30</sup>:

**Advance criminal justice:** Encompassed 69 active projects with funding of \$129.6 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. State/INL criminal justice projects are intended to help Mexico's transition to a new accusatory justice system, increase prosecutions, and reduce corruption, among other things. Assisting Mexico's transition to an accusatory justice system has been a significant undertaking since 2008 and has been a priority for State/INL, as reflected in the relatively high dollar amount (\$129.6 million) this line of effort received from fiscal year 2019 through

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<sup>28</sup>GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis*, [GAO-21-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2021).

<sup>29</sup>[GAO-21-322](#), [GAO-20-474](#), [GAO-18-205](#). GAO, *Substance Use Disorder: Reliable Data Needed for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant Program*, [GAO-21-58](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2020).

<sup>30</sup>The project numbers and funding amounts are for State/INL projects active from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021, grouped by line of effort. State/INL project data also categorized 57 projects with funding of about \$91 million as related to multiple lines of effort.

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fiscal year 2021. For example, State/INL provided support for the transition to an accusatory justice system, providing training on criminal justice reforms, addressing firearms trafficking, and developing forensic investigation capabilities in Mexico as noted below.

- Criminal justice reforms: DOJ implemented a State/INL program that assists Mexico with the transition to the accusatory justice system through trainings provided to prosecutors and judges. DOJ officials said this training covers litigation skills, interviewing victims of trafficking, and reacting to active attacks or violent situations. According to DOJ officials, DOJ has trained 3,000 Mexican prosecutors in basic courtroom proceedings. A 2022 State/INL report to Congress notes that State/INL equipped 335 courtrooms with technology to support oral trials in 26 of Mexico's 32 states.<sup>31</sup>
- Firearms trafficking: To identify and prosecute gun traffickers, ATF officials said they provide firearms-related training to Mexican officials in explosive disposal, post-blast crime scene analysis, eTrace firearm tracing software, firearms trafficking, and firearm serial number restoration. State/INL officials said their database shows that from July to December 2021 that ATF has provided eTrace training to 216 participants, and eight Mexican agencies have access to the eTrace system. ATF also provides the Mexican government with U.S. bomb technicians and investigators to assist Mexican officials with their efforts. According to ATF's most recent data, nearly 21,000 firearms recovered in Mexico in 2021 were submitted to ATF for tracing. State/INL officials said their database shows that 474 U.S. firearms cases were referred to U.S.-based ATF offices for investigation in 2021 because of Mexican eTrace submissions.
- Forensic lab accreditation and training: A State/INL database reports that DOJ provided support to develop forensic investigation capabilities and supported the accreditation of 114 forensic labs from 2019 to 2021. The database also reports that DOJ trained 4,205 forensic specialists from 2019 to 2021.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>United States Department of State, *Report to Congress on A Review of Programs, Projects, or Activities Implemented as Part of the Mérida Initiative Sec. 7019(e) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022* (Div. K, P.L. 117- 103) and House Report 117-84, 2022.

<sup>32</sup>Forensic lab accreditation is based on assessment of an agency's technical qualifications and competence for conducting specific testing, calibration, and/or inspection activities.

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- **Canines:** State/INL officials also said they provided canines and training for handlers to Mexican agencies to assist with criminal investigations, such as locating disappeared persons and intervening in illicit drug distribution. State/INL officials said their database shows that State/INL donated canines helped Mexican officials locate 197 bodies and skeletons from 2018 to 2021. Mexican Attorney General officials stated that the trained canines have increased the efficiency of their criminal investigations and led to more positive outcomes.

**Secure borders and ports:** Encompassed 29 active projects with funding of \$45.5 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. State/INL projects aim to build Mexico's capacity to secure its borders and ports of entry against the transit of illicit goods and irregular migration. State/INL officials said they focus on securing Mexico's northern and southern borders, as well as other efforts, such as identifying criminal actors traveling with migrant groups near the border or detecting suspicious individuals or items at ports of entry. State/INL officials also said they provided equipment, such as full body scanners used at airports and canines, and training for border and port officials.

- **Non-intrusive inspection equipment and telecommunications equipment:** State/INL officials said they have provided non-intrusive inspection equipment to Mexican government agencies, including body scanners and vehicle scanners. With support from State/INL and DHS, all migration checkpoints and several airports in Mexico share automated, real-time biometric passenger information with DHS. State/INL reports that this allows the U.S. and Mexico to better understand migration trends, disrupt high-priority drug traffickers and identify U.S. fugitives. Mexican Navy officials said that the scanning equipment provided by the United States gives them the capability to scan about 60 percent of incoming containers. They added that U.S.-provided radio communication equipment was pivotal in a recent seizure of five tons of cocaine along the coast of Colima. Mexican immigration officials said that U.S. assistance has improved humanitarian assistance provided to migrants in Mexico. State/INL officials said their database shows that from 2019 to 2021, the Mexican Navy and Mexican immigration officials assisted more than 40,000 foreigners using telecommunications equipment provided by State/INL.
- **Training:** State/INL has also supported trainings to assist Mexican officials at borders, airports and seaports. This training includes canine handling, operating equipment, and developing procedures to improve work efficiency. For example, U.S. Customs and Border Protection deploys U.S. officials to train local Mexican officials at

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transportation hubs, such as airports. Another program trains officials how to identify human smuggling and intercede.

**Counternarcotics:** Encompassed 83 active projects with funding of \$39.8 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. State/INL projects aim to improve Mexico’s capacity to reduce the production and trafficking of illicit drugs from Mexico to the United States. State/INL projects have helped law enforcement detect and seize illicit drugs and precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production. State/INL-funded projects have also provided training, canines for counternarcotics units, non-intrusive inspection equipment, and assistance with fighting the illicit fentanyl trade.

- Drug seizures: According to State/INL officials, their database shows that Mexican security forces seized 24,667 kilograms of cocaine, 273 kilograms of heroin, 22,408 kilograms of methamphetamine, 3,434 kilograms of chemical precursors, and 367 kilograms and 865,337 pills of fentanyl from 2018-2021 with the support of non-intrusive inspection equipment and canines donated by State/INL.
- Fentanyl: According to State’s June 2022 report on U.S. assistance to Mexico, Mexican security forces increased fentanyl seizures by 520 percent since December 2018, seizing 564 kilograms of fentanyl between 2016 and 2018 compared to 3,497 kilograms between 2019 and 2021. Mexican forensic labs use State/INL-donated specialized equipment to determine the chemical compounds of seized drugs and better understand production trends. Figure 6 shows 12 kilograms of fentanyl seized during a search warrant in Monterrey in the state of Nuevo Leon.

**Figure 6: Fentanyl Seized in Nuevo Leon**



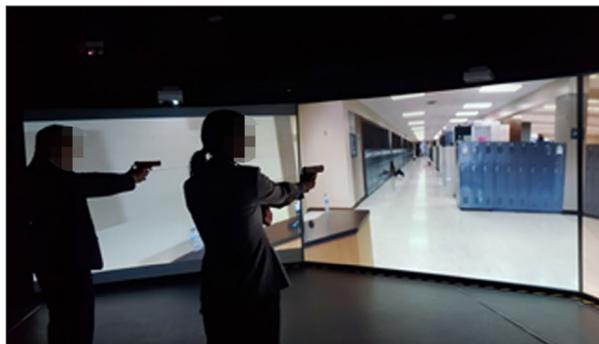
Source: Department of State: Bureau of International Narcotics & Law Enforcement. | GAO-23-103795

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**Professionalize the police:** Encompassed 37 active projects with funding of \$34.6 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. State/INL projects aim to improve Mexico’s law enforcement capabilities while ensuring respect for human rights. For example, State/INL has provided trainings for police officers and prison officials, support for police and prison accreditations, and related equipment.<sup>33</sup>

- **Police training and accreditation:** State/INL has supported police trainings and accreditation. According to State’s June 2022 report on U.S. assistance to Mexico, by the end of 2021, 48 law enforcement agencies in Mexico had achieved international accreditation with State/INL support. One of the academy’s police commanders stated that accreditation was crucial in improving and standardizing their training. State/INL’s database also reported that it partnered with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime to implement a program that trained 6,860 Mexican police officers on responding to victims of gender-based violence from 2019 to 2021.
- **Police equipment:** State/INL provided specialized training equipment to police academies, including a driving simulator and interactive police simulators (see fig. 7). State/INL officials said their database shows that from 2020 to 2021, Mexican officials across ten states logged almost 3,000 hours of training on driving and shooting simulators donated by State/INL.

**Figure 7: State/INL-Provided Police Training Simulator**



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-103795

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<sup>33</sup>Law enforcement agency accreditation, including for police officers and prison officials, is a self-initiated process of adopting and maintaining standardized policies and procedures.

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- Prison accreditation, training and equipment: With State/INL support, 96 prisons in Mexico achieved international accreditation, which aims to raise standards and institutional proficiency, according to a 2022 State report to Congress.<sup>34</sup> State/INL reports that its prison support focused on the professionalization of correctional officers at prisons. State/INL officials said their database shows that from 2020 to 2021 State/INL provided training for 535 correctional officers on “standards protecting the human rights of individuals in custody.” State/INL provided the Otumba Prison a canine unit, technical equipment such as cellphone-detecting devices, and support with an international accreditation process. Figure 8 shows a training exercise with a prison canine unit.

**Figure 8: Mexican Government Security Officials Demonstrate Prison Canine Unit Capabilities**



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-103795

**Disrupt illicit finance:** Encompassed 10 active projects with funding of \$6.7 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. State/INL provided equipment and supported training and capacity-building efforts for Mexican government investigators and prosecutors pursuing financial crimes of transnational criminal organizations.

State/INL has supported Mexico’s Financial Intelligence Unit by providing technology and equipment, such as servers, computers, printers, and software. Mexican intelligence officials said that U.S. assistance has helped Mexico identify criminal groups involved in money laundering, such as the Sinaloa and Nuevo Generación Cartels. For example,

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<sup>34</sup>According to State officials, accreditation correlates to reduced crime rates, improved criminal justice processes, and respect for human rights.

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Mexico's Financial Intelligence Unit officials said they uncovered a money-laundering criminal network and then cut off their access to funds.

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## USAID Reported Project-Level Results Across its Development Objectives

USAID has reported project-level results across its development objectives under the Mérida Initiative and continued under the Framework.<sup>35</sup> USAID project-level results include:

**Rule of law:** Encompassed four projects with funding of \$104.6 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. USAID projects supported efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Mexico's criminal justice systems. For example, USAID officials noted they provided technical support to advance criminal justice reform and strengthen victims' rights, especially women victims of violence.

- **Criminal justice reform:** USAID projects supported the consolidation of the accusatory justice system across Mexico through technical assistance for state-level criminal justice institutions, which handle over 96 percent of all criminal cases. According to USAID officials, since 2020 this work has focused on Attorney General Offices and courts in eight states, and on Public Defenders' Offices and Women's Justice Centers in five states. One project in collaboration with 19 universities in 18 states reported that it provided education to 614 criminal justice officials focused on human rights, gender, lawfulness, and managing partnerships with local authorities.
- **Victim's rights and gender-based violence:** After Mexican federal authorities adopted USAID-developed standards for new Women's Justice Centers, these centers now focus on care, services, and follow-up for individual cases of gender-based violence, according to USAID officials. In five states, USAID is expanding the use of strategies to pay victims back for actual expenses incurred by victims of crime. One project reported that it helped establish 20 Women's Justice Centers. The goals of these centers are to provide a full range of support and services for women, including access to representatives from the state ministries of social development and employment, and other medical, legal, and social services. Figure 9 shows an annual meeting of Women's Justice Centers.

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<sup>35</sup>The project numbers and funding amounts are for USAID projects active during the fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2021 period, grouped by USAID development objective. USAID project data also categorized five projects with funding of about \$44.4 million as "crosscutting," or relevant for multiple development objectives. USAID organized its project data under the four development objectives that were in place prior to September 2020 under the Mérida Initiative.

**Figure 9: Annual Meeting of Women’s Justice Centers**



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development. | GAO-23-103795

**Human rights:** Encompassed 12 projects with funding of \$69.5 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. USAID projects aimed to improve the Mexican government’s capacity to prevent, investigate, and prosecute human rights abuses, while strengthening civil society to engage on human rights issues. Projects in this portfolio included human rights training and forensics equipment and training.

- Human rights training: USAID reports that one program provided human rights training to 61 judicial personnel, 158 human right defenders, 261 Mexican officials, and 65 human rights organizations to help them design, implement, and evaluate effective public policies to prevent and respond to human rights violations.
- Forensic labs: USAID has provided forensic technical assistance and specialized forensic technology to help identify unidentified remains of victims of violent crime and forced disappearances. According to Mexican officials, identifying victims helps law enforcement authorities build stronger cases and provide better evidence for prosecution and conviction. USAID reported that one of its supported forensic labs has identified 30 missing or disappeared people. Figure 10 shows lab staff working on identifying bone fragments.

**Figure 10: Regional Center for Human Identification Employees Demonstrate Bone Fragments Identification**



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-103795

**Crime and violence prevention:** Encompassed 15 projects with funding of \$60.4 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. USAID projects supported efforts to prevent crime and violence with partners from local government, civil society, the private sector, and academia. Projects include crime prevention programs, education, technical assistance, and training for youth, government officials, and community members.

- **Youth programs:** These programs aim to prevent crime and violence and recidivism among at-risk youth through psychosocial treatment, education, and vocational opportunities. USAID is funding reintegration programs at a youth detention center in the State of Mexico designed to reduce recidivism rates by providing rehabilitation during incarceration. The reintegration program provides youth in detention centers with education, job training, psychological and health support, as well as job placement to reduce recidivism. According to the center's director, the program has had only one repeat offender out of the center's 150 to 200 current residents. Figure 11 shows a therapy session as part of a youth crime and violence program.

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**Figure 11: Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Program**



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development. | GAO-23-103795

- Training for government officials: One project supported the Mexican government in improving the national crime and violence prevention policy through training, including training on crime and violence prevention. The project also focused on strategies to prevent gender-based violence and improve civic justice. The project reported that 2,952 individuals received training, including 1,123 individuals spanning 320 different public agencies.

**Transparency and accountability.** Encompassed 18 projects with funding of \$52.8 million from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021. USAID officials said that the Mexican government requested this assistance during the Mérida Initiative, but as noted earlier USAID’s transparency portfolio currently falls under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, rather than the Framework. USAID transparency and accountability projects worked to reduce corruption and impunity at the federal and state levels.

- USAID-funded projects have provided training and technical support for Mexico’s National and Sub-National Anti-Corruption System to develop and coordinate anti-corruption policies across jurisdictions in Mexico. One project reported that it has trained 34,502 government officials on anti-corruption measures.
- One project offered training on government fraud auditing to help state auditors detect and investigate corruption and collect evidence to initiate administrative and criminal procedures.

## State Has Defined Desired Results, but Not the Activities, Performance Indicators, and Plans Critical to Assess Progress

State implements the United States' foreign assistance strategies, including cooperative arrangements such as the Mérida Initiative and the Framework, and reports to Congress on the performance of these strategies. We have previously reported that effective foreign assistance strategies address key elements to clearly identify goals, objectives, and a means for assessing progress in achieving them.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, our prior work has found that effective strategies identify and describe (1) desired results, (2) a hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives, (3) activities (such as projects) to achieve results, (4) milestones and performance indicators, and (5) plans for monitoring and evaluation. At the highest level, an effective strategy could be a description of an ideal end state, followed by a logical hierarchy of major goals, subordinate objectives, and specific activities to achieve results. Ideally, a strategy addresses the priorities, milestones, and measures critical to assess performance, as well as plans to monitor and evaluate progress. Our prior work has shown that strategies that do not consistently incorporate these key elements may limit the ability to specify and assess common goals, objectives, and mutually reinforcing results. Table 2 summarizes our analysis of the extent to which State/INL's actions address the key elements that we identified for assessing progress toward the strategic goals of the Framework.

**Table 2: GAO's Analysis of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) Actions to Address Key Elements for Assessing Progress toward Goals of the Bicentennial Framework**

Key Element	Description	GAO analysis of State's actions
Desired results	The end state that the strategy aims to achieve.	✓
Hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives	The logical links among the strategy's goals and objectives.	✓
Activities to achieve results	Planned steps and activities to achieve the results.	✗
Milestones and performance indicators	Priorities, milestones, and performance measures to gauge results, such as performance indicators.	✗
Monitoring and evaluation plans	Plans to assess progress toward achieving goals.	✗

Legend: ✓ - Addressed key element. ✗ - Has not fully addressed key element.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State actions and GAO's key elements relevant to assessment of progress toward strategic goals. | GAO-23-103795

Note: We reviewed State Department planning and strategy documents for assistance to Mexico. We determined State addressed a key element if it took actions to incorporate the elements critical to assess progress into planning or strategy documents. We determined State had not fully addressed a key element if it had not taken actions critical to assess progress.

<sup>36</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

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## State/INL Has Defined the Framework's Desired Results and Hierarchy of Goals and Objectives

### State/INL Defined Desired Results

State/INL has addressed two of five elements that are key for assessing progress toward the Framework's broad strategic goals.

Establishing the desired results of a foreign assistance strategy is critical so all stakeholders know what the strategy aims to achieve, and can guide efforts under the strategy. In its January 2022 Action Plan for the Framework, State/INL outlined the Framework's desired results.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, the desired results are to protect U.S. and Mexican citizens, prevent transborder crime, and pursue criminal networks. For example, as stated in the Action Plan for the Framework, the ideal end state of security assistance is to stop criminal groups that smuggle illicit drugs and weapons, engage in migrant smuggling, and exploit individuals through human trafficking.

### State/INL Defined a Hierarchy of Goals and Subordinate Objectives

Establishing a hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives can link the strategy's highest-level goals to its more detailed objectives. The January 2022 Action Plan established a hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives, which describes three overarching goals and eleven cooperation areas that support the goals. The cooperation areas include reducing illicit firearms trafficking, reducing homicides and high-impact crimes, and disrupting transnational criminal organizations and their illicit supply chains. For example, under the broad goal of preventing transborder crime, the action plan established a joint objective to disrupt and dismantle narcotics production. These cooperation areas represent intermediate goals and measures to show progress toward desired results. When goals and outcomes may take years to achieve, subordinate objectives can provide agencies information on interim results.

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<sup>37</sup>Department of State, *Summary of the Action Plan for U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities*, January 31, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/summary-of-the-action-plan-for-u-s-mexico-bicentennial-framework-for-security-public-health-and-safe-communities>

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State/INL Has Not Established Projects, Performance Indicators and Plans to Assess Progress toward Shared Goals

State/INL has not addressed three of five key elements critical for assessing progress toward the Framework’s broad strategic goals. Specifically, State/INL has not addressed:

- how U.S.-funded projects will help achieve results toward shared security goals,
- which milestones and performance indicators should be used to gauge results, and
- plans to assess progress toward achieving the Framework’s goals.

State/INL Has Not Identified Projects Needed to Achieve Results

While the Framework established strategic goals and objectives, State/INL has not specifically identified projects to help achieve these objectives. State/INL funds numerous projects that address its five lines of effort. However, State/INL has not identified the specific projects designed to achieve the goals and objectives of the Framework. State/INL has developed “change maps” for some projects that describe how an individual project contributes to broad goals, including subordinate objectives of the Framework, but State/INL has not developed change maps for all projects. Additionally, while these change maps outline a way to connect progress for some projects to broader goals, they do not outline a top-down approach to identify which subset of projects contribute to the broad goals of the Framework.

State/INL’s annual report to Congress describes some of its activities and achievements in Mexico.<sup>38</sup> The report describes State/INL and USAID projects and related data, but does not outline how these projects will help achieve the broader goals of the Framework. U.S. agencies should identify projects designed to achieve a strategy’s results and subordinate objectives so that agencies can identify which specific U.S.-supported projects are helping achieve the strategy’s goals and objectives.

State/INL Has Not Established Milestones and Performance Indicators to Assess Progress toward Broad Goals

State/INL has not outlined which milestones and performance indicators should be used to gauge results toward shared goals of the Framework. State/INL collects data in a database on more than 1,000 project-level and countrywide performance and context indicators to collect information on State/INL projects, but these data are not organized to gauge progress toward achieving the Framework’s goals or objectives. Rather, the database includes information at the project level, such as the number of people trained or number of forensic labs accredited. State/INL also

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<sup>38</sup>Department of State, *Report to Congress on a Review of Programs, Projects, or Activities Implemented as Part of the Mérida Initiative*, June 2022

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outlines performance indicators in the 2019-2023 Country Plan for Mexico and 2022 Integrated Country Strategy, but these indicators are not linked to the goals and objectives of the Framework.

Further, State/INL's database does not include data on milestones, baselines, or targets for many performance indicators. State/INL's Country Plan for Mexico also does not set baselines for 30 percent of performance indicators, and does not set targets for 40 percent of performance measures. We reviewed the Integrated Country Strategy for Mexico, which establishes performance indicators for State/INL activities, but does not consistently set baselines or targets for the indicators. State/INL officials noted that it is challenging to set baselines and targets because there may not be sufficient information available to establish baselines for new processes. State/INL officials noted it is easier to set targets for project-level outputs, as opposed to program-level outcomes.

Setting baselines can help State/INL determine the current condition they are seeking to change, and setting targets can help State/INL determine what they are attempting to achieve and gauge progress toward those outcomes. Establishing milestones and performance indicators, which include baselines and targets, are critical to help U.S. agencies gauge results of strategies, such as the Framework. Without milestones and performance indicators for the Framework, U.S. agencies cannot clearly assess progress toward strategic goals.

#### State/INL Has Not Established Monitoring and Evaluation Plans

Establishing monitoring and evaluation plans is critical to assess progress toward goals. State/INL has not established monitoring and evaluation plans to assess the shared goals of the Framework. State/INL and USAID use the Mexico Integrated Country Strategy as a whole-of-country U.S. government strategy, but the strategy does not contain monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress. The current State/INL Mexico Country Plan (2019-2023) discusses the goals of the Mérida Initiative, but not the current shared goals or monitoring and evaluation plans, because State drafted the Country Plan before the Framework. State/INL officials told us they are in the process of updating the Country Plan to better reflect the Framework, but they did not indicate timeframes for this update or whether the update would include monitoring and evaluation plans. Without monitoring and evaluation plans, U.S. agencies have no systematic process to pull together data and information to measure progress toward a strategy's goals.

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## State/INL Has Not Established a Process to Assess the Framework due to Challenges Finalizing Indicators with Mexico

### State/INL is Negotiating Shared Performance Indicators Critical to Assess Progress of the Framework

State/INL officials told us the bureau has not yet established a process to assess progress toward the shared goals of the Framework because it is currently negotiating with the Mexican government on a set of indicators that both governments would use to jointly assess progress. Regardless, it is unclear to what extent a joint approach may incorporate all key elements we have identified as critical to assess progress toward shared goals. The process of developing and agreeing on performance indicators with Mexico has been challenging, according to State/INL officials. These negotiations have been ongoing since the start of the framework in October 2021, but as of May 2023, the United States and Mexico had not reached an agreement. Additionally, the López Obrador administration's term ends in 2024, and even if negotiations are completed prior, State/INL may need to renegotiate a shared approach with the next Mexican administration. Further, if negotiations do not progress or are unsuccessful, State/INL could address the remaining key elements without reaching agreement with Mexico.

### State/INL Did Not Develop a Process to Assess Progress of the Mérida Initiative

Despite over 10 years of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative, State did not develop a process to assess its progress toward the initiative's goals and objectives. State/INL reported that from 2008 to 2014, the department developed indicators and collected data to record the specific outputs of assistance, such as the amount of equipment provided and the number of trainings provided, but not the broader goals. In 2015, State/INL and the Mexican government agreed to develop a results framework and a set of indicators to improve bilateral measurement of the outcomes of the Mérida Initiative; however, State officials noted this was a one-time effort and the indicators were not modified or updated after 2015. In December 2018, López Obrador took office as president of Mexico, creating new challenges for the Mérida Initiative. State/INL officials noted that the López Obrador Administration considered the Mérida Initiative to be a failure, which led to the initiative's end, including efforts to assess progress.

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The key elements we identified for assessing progress would enhance State/INL's ability to build on successes and make corrections where needed. By assessing progress toward the desired results of the Framework, State/INL officials would be better positioned to expand on successes and adjust less successful approaches. Without fully addressing the three remaining key elements for assessing the Framework's progress, the U.S. government cannot be assured that it is achieving its security goals in Mexico and that its investments, at over \$3 billion since 2008, are being spent effectively.

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## Conclusions

A strong partnership between Mexico and the United States is vital for both countries' safety and prosperity. Mexico and the United States have a long history of partnership and cooperation and rely on each other to address their shared concerns, including illegal drug and firearms trafficking. Since 2008, the United States has provided over \$3 billion in assistance to Mexico, chiefly through the Mérida Initiative and its replacement, the Bicentennial Framework.

Despite U.S. assistance, Mexico's security situation has worsened significantly since 2007, and the country's murder rate has more than tripled. State/INL and USAID officials said that while the Mérida Initiative helped strengthen Mexican institutions, violence and corruption persist in Mexico. U.S. firearms trafficked into Mexico, along with the U.S.'s high demand for illegal drugs, contribute to security and drug crises on both sides of the border. For example, criminal organizations in Mexico supply most of the fentanyl smuggled into the United States, which has led to a sharp increase in U.S. drug deaths.

State officials said they have had difficulties measuring the effectiveness of U.S. assistance in Mexico, in part because State/INL experienced challenges negotiating shared performance indicators with Mexico. In particular, State/INL has not clearly identified what projects will contribute toward the goals of the Framework or what performance indicators will be used to measure progress, and they have not developed monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress. Regardless of negotiations with Mexico, State/INL is responsible for assessing the progress of the Framework. Without addressing the key elements to assess progress, the U.S. government cannot demonstrate that it is achieving its goals in Mexico, or that its investments over the last 16 years have been effective.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations to the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL identifies the projects needed to achieve results and assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL identifies the milestones and performance indicators that will be used to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL develops monitoring and evaluation plans critical to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. (Recommendation 3)

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of State, Justice, Homeland Security, Defense, and USAID for review and comment. We received written comments from State and USAID, reprinted in appendixes III and IV and summarized below. DOJ and DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. DOD told us that they had no comments on the draft report.

In their comments, State agreed with our recommendations. With regard to recommendation 1, State noted that State/INL and USAID regularly consult to identify the projects needed to achieve results related to the Bicentennial Framework's goals and objectives. They added that the Assistant Secretary for State/INL will assess progress in consultation with USAID, other relevant U.S. agencies, and the Government of Mexico.

With regard to recommendation 2, State noted that State/INL, in consultation with USAID, will identify the milestones and performance indicators to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. With regard to recommendation 3, State noted that State/INL, in consultation with USAID, will develop monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

In their written comments, USAID noted that it will continue to conduct monitoring and evaluation of activities supporting the Framework in

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consultation with State. USAID also noted that it will seek opportunities to leverage its monitoring and evaluation practices to help State assess progress toward the Framework's goals.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Administrator of USAID, and the Attorney General of the United States. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2964 or [KenneyC@gao.gov](mailto:KenneyC@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.



Chelsea Kenney  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Gary C. Peters  
Chairman  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Ron Johnson  
Ranking Member  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Michael McCaul  
Chairman  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joaquin Castro  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope and Methodology

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This report examines the results of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Framework). This report examines (1) how, if at all, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and Framework have changed since 2008; (2) the challenges the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) identified when implementing U.S. assistance to Mexico, and the results reported by State/INL and USAID at the project level; and (3) the extent to which State/INL has addressed key elements critical to assess progress toward Framework goals.

To address these objectives, we reviewed State/INL and USAID data and documents related to U.S. assistance to Mexico. We also interviewed officials from State/INL, USAID, and the Departments of Justice (DOJ), Defense (DOD) and Homeland Security (DHS) who were located in Washington, D.C. and Mexico City. We conducted fieldwork and interviewed Government of Mexico officials in Mexico.

To determine how, if at all, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and Framework have changed since 2008, we reviewed these two U.S. cooperative arrangements with Mexico, building on our prior reports.<sup>1</sup> We focused on State/INL and USAID because they are the lead agencies responsible for implementing the foreign assistance aspects of the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. We reviewed the goals and objectives of both arrangements as well as State/INL, USAID, and White House statements on these arrangements. We interviewed State and USAID officials regarding their implementation of programs to support the goals of these arrangements. We also reviewed the National Drug Control Strategy for information on domestic actions that U.S. agencies should prioritize to address domestic drug demand.<sup>2</sup> Further, we reviewed U.S. agencies' documents and statements related to addressing firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico. While we describe other agencies' U.S. domestic actions related to U.S. drug demand, we did not evaluate those agencies' actions. The information on foreign law

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<sup>1</sup>We suspended the audit in April 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and resumed the audit in June 2022.

<sup>2</sup>The White House Executive Office of the President's Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy 2002*.

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in this report is not the product of GAO's original analysis, but is derived from interviews and secondary sources.

To determine the challenges State/INL and USAID reported facing when implementing U.S. assistance to Mexico and the results reported by State/INL and USAID at the project level, we met with State/INL and USAID officials in Washington, D.C. and in Mexico to discuss their projects under the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. We also met with Government of Mexico officials in Mexico to discuss their efforts related to these projects as well as challenges in implementing projects. Specifically, we traveled to various locations in Mexico, including the states of Coahuila, Guanajuato, and Nuevo Leon to observe projects and interview Mexican officials on their coordination with the U.S. government. We worked with State/INL and USAID officials to select locations that would be representative of key programming under the Mérida Initiative and the Framework. We reviewed State/INL and USAID data on the number and types of projects these agencies fund under State/INL's lines of efforts and USAID's development objectives. We also reviewed data from State/INL and USAID on project results from fiscal years 2014 through 2021, including State/INL data in the agency's DevResults database, used for collecting information on project results. We also reviewed reports submitted by USAID project implementers that described the projects' activities and results.

To determine the extent to which State/INL has addressed key elements for assessing progress toward the strategic goals of the Framework, we assessed State/INL planning and strategy documents for Mexico against key elements that GAO previously identified.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, we reviewed the Framework's Action Plan, State/INL Mexico Country Plan, and Integrated Country Strategy for Mexico.<sup>4</sup> We also reviewed the content in DevResults. We focused on the Framework because it is the current cooperative arrangement between Mexico and the United States, and will guide U.S. assistance to Mexico moving forward. Our prior work has shown that effective strategies clearly identify goals and objectives and a means for assessing progress in achieving them. Therefore, our prior

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<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Department of State, *Summary of the Action Plan for U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities*, January 31, 2022. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Mexico*, March 29, 2022. Department of State, *Mexico Country Plan: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs*, 2019-2023.

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work has called for agencies to develop strategies that identify and describe (1) desired results, (2) a hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives, (3) activities (such as projects) to achieve results, (4) milestones and indicators, and (5) plans for monitoring and evaluation. Strategies that do not consistently incorporate key elements related to assessing progress may limit agencies' ability to specify and assess common goals and objectives and mutually reinforcing results. We compared the extent to which current State/INL planning and strategy documents for Mexico address key elements for assessing progress of the Framework. We determined State/INL addressed a key element if it took actions to incorporate the elements critical to assess progress into strategy or planning documents. We determined State/INL had not fully addressed a key element if it had not taken actions necessary to assess progress.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2019 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

# Appendix II: The U.S. and Mexico have Held Several High-Level Meetings on Fentanyl and Firearms

In 2023, the U.S. and Mexico, at times with Canada, held a number of senior-level meetings to discuss their strategies and commitments to addressing the illicit fentanyl trade and firearms trafficking. In these meetings, the United States and Mexico committed to increasing cooperation and information sharing on fentanyl and firearms.

**Table 3: Senior Level United States and Mexico Meetings on Fentanyl and Firearms in 2023**

Date	Description of Meeting
January 9-10, 2023	U.S. President Joe Biden, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau directed the formation of a senior-level Trilateral Fentanyl Committee to guide priority actions to address the illicit fentanyl threat facing North America.
March 9, 2023	U.S. and Mexican delegations committed to launching the second phase of the Bicentennial Framework to further increase cooperation to combat illicit fentanyl production, the trafficking of high-caliber weapons and ammunition into Mexico, and transnational organized crime. The two sides discussed a program to improve U.S. and Mexican interagency coordination and bilateral sharing of criminal intelligence to target key nodes in the synthetic drug supply chain. Mexico and the U.S. will also begin a new comprehensive binational public health campaign to prevent and reduce the risks of consuming fentanyl and other drugs.
March 28, 2023	Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs traveled to Mexico City to open the U.S.-Mexico Synthetic Drug Conference and meet with the bureau's partners in justice and law enforcement.
April 13, 2023	U.S. and Mexican delegations (led by the U.S. Homeland Security Advisor) met to review shared security priorities under the Bicentennial Framework and discuss new collaborative efforts to counter fentanyl trafficking and consumption and combat arms trafficking across North America. The United States and Mexico committed to continue joint work to dismantle the fentanyl supply chain and the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel on both sides of the border.

Source: White House Press Statements and Fact Sheets. | GAO-23-103795

# Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State  
*Comptroller*  
Washington, DC 20520

August 18, 2023

Jason Bair  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Bair:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress" GAO Job Code 103795.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. A. Walsh".

James A. Walsh

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc: GAO – Chelsa Kenney  
INL – Lisa A. Johnson (Acting)  
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on Draft GAO Report

**U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO: State Department Should Take Steps to  
Assess Overall Progress**

**(GAO-23-103795SU, GAO Code 103795)**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report, U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress. We appreciate the extensive work of the GAO engagement team, and the findings that will help the Department of State achieve greater impact in the delivery of assistance to Mexico.

**Recommendation 1:** The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL identifies the projects needed to achieve results and assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

**The Department concurs with the recommendation.**

**Response (INL):** INL and USAID regularly consult to identify the projects needed to achieve results related to foreign assistance goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework. The Assistant Secretary for INL will assess progress in consultation with USAID, other relevant U.S. agencies, and the Government of Mexico.

**Recommendation 2:** The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL identifies the milestones and performance indicators that will be used to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

**The Department concurs with the recommendation.**

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**Response (INL):** INL, in consultation with USAID, will identify the milestones and performance indicators to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

**Recommendation 3:** The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, should ensure the Assistant Secretary for INL develops monitoring and evaluation plans needed to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

**The Department concurs with the recommendation.**

**Response (INL):** INL, in consultation with USAID, will develop monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress toward the goals and objectives of the Bicentennial Framework.

# Appendix IV: Comments from the United States Agency for International Development



August 16, 2023

Chelsa Kenney  
Director, International Affairs and Trade  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20226

Re: U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress (GAO-23-103795SU)

Dear Ms. Kenney:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report produced by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress (GAO-23-103795SU).

Through its foreign assistance to Mexico, USAID is committed to advancing the security and prosperity of both the United States and Mexico. USAID's assistance and strategic relationships inform and advance bilateral engagements including the Bicentennial Framework, as well as the High-Level Economic Dialogue and North American Leaders' Summit. As described in this report, the Bicentennial Framework establishes shared priorities with the Government of Mexico. USAID supports the shared goals of safe communities, human rights, and reduced impunity defined by the U.S. and Mexican governments in the Framework, and USAID contributes to these goals under its Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for Mexico. USAID administers its activities using rigorous monitoring, learning, and evaluation standards and systems. USAID assistance is advancing its strategic objectives in targeted areas to the benefit of both our countries, as highlighted in this report.

I am transmitting this letter and the enclosed comments from USAID for inclusion in GAO's final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the complete and thorough evaluation of U.S. assistance under the

Merida Initiative and Bicentennial Framework.

Sincerely,

*Colleen R. Allen*  
Colleen R. Allen

Assistant Administrator  
Bureau for Management

Enclosure: a/s

**COMMENTS BY THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE DRAFT REPORT PRODUCED BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) TITLED, *U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO: STATE DEPARTMENT SHOULD TAKE STEPS TO ASSESS OVERALL PROGRESS* (GAO-23-103795SU)**

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to thank the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) for the opportunity to respond to this draft report. We appreciate the extensive work of the GAO engagement team to support the U.S. government to achieve greater effectiveness in assessing the results of its assistance to Mexico under the Merida Initiative and Bicentennial Framework.

As the GAO's report describes, USAID has proudly supported shared bilateral objectives under both the previous Merida Initiative and the current Bicentennial Framework. The Bicentennial Framework serves as a mechanism for the Governments of Mexico and the United States to coordinate shared security goals. USAID, through implementation of activities under its Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for Mexico (specifically, CDCS Development Objective 1: Impunity and Violence Reduced in Target Regions) contributes to achievement of these goals. USAID also contributes data and analysis generated through our monitoring and evaluation systems and practices, which are in line with Agency standards and leading practices. This includes USAID's strategy-level Performance Management Plan, which outlines USAID's learning priorities and questions, context, and performance monitoring efforts (including indicator data collection and analysis, surveys, and qualitative monitoring), and ongoing and planned independent evaluations. It also includes activity-level Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plans developed by USAID implementers and approved by USAID staff. These activity-level MEL plans help USAID and its partners produce data on the scale and reach of USAID's activities and lay the groundwork for measuring medium- and long-term outcomes stemming from those results.

Regarding selection of indicators to assess U.S. foreign assistance programs (and as noted in USAID's unpublished technical comments), USAID considers the national homicide rate to be a context indicator because this national statistic is affected by a myriad of factors outside the control of the U.S. government, including regional trends in cross-border crime, economic and political phenomena, and partner government efforts, among others. As the GAO's report notes, USAID focuses its programs on specific geographic areas (often those with high crime rates) and/or specific demographic groups (e.g. high-risk youth). As such, the national-level homicide rate would not be an appropriate metric for assessing the effectiveness of USAID's efforts in support of the Bicentennial Framework. Going forward, USAID will continue to pursue robust monitoring and evaluation of activities supporting the Bicentennial Framework in consultation with the Department of State. USAID also will seek opportunities to bring to bear our monitoring and evaluation practices—and the evidence they generate—to inform intra-U.S. government monitoring and evaluation efforts, as well as bilateral negotiations on tracking progress toward Bicentennial Framework goals.

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# Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

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## GAO Contact

Chelsa Kenney, (202) 512-2964 or [KenneyC@gao.gov](mailto:KenneyC@gao.gov).

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## Staff

### Acknowledgments:

In addition to the contact named above, Cheryl Goodman (Assistant Director), Jon Fremont (Analyst in Charge), Teresa Heger, Andrew Altobello, Larissa Barrett, Mark Dowling, Pamela Davidson, Patrick Hickey, William Tedrick, and Christopher Keblitis made key contributions to this report.

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# GAO Related Products

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*GAO, Illicit Opioids: While Greater Attention Given to Combating Synthetic Opioids, Agencies Need to Better Assess their Efforts, [GAO-18-205](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2018).*

*GAO, U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State Department Could Improve Its Monitoring of Mérida Initiative Projects, [GAO-20-388](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2020).*

*GAO, Drug Misuse: Sustained National Efforts Are Necessary for Prevention, Response, and Recovery, [GAO-20-474](#), (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 26, 2020).*

*GAO, Substance Use Disorder: Reliable Data Needed for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant Program, [GAO-21-58](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2020).*

*GAO, Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis, [GAO-21-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2021).*

*GAO, U.S. Assistance to Mexico: State and USAID Should Strengthen Risk Management for Programs under the Mérida Initiative, [GAO-21-335](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2021).*

*GAO, High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021).*

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