



## New Threat to Mexico's Drug Cartels: Rehab Centers

New America Media, News analysis, Louis E.V. Nevaer, Posted: Sep 12, 2009 [NT Review it on NewsTrust](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

When gunmen stormed a drug rehab center in northern Mexico, lined up addicts against the wall and shot them execution-style, Mexico's drug cartels sent a powerful message to drug addicts working the streets as retail drug suppliers: You are in this for life.

Mexico's strategy in decriminalizing possession of small quantities of marijuana, cocaine, heroine and other drugs is an effort to address the growing problem of drug addiction in Mexico – and to address the multitudes of petty drug addicts who form a vast distribution network feeding a growing drug addiction problem. In Mexico, as everywhere, drug users become drug dealers to support their habit.

While the number of drug users in Mexico, estimated at 450,000 (as reported in the [New York Times](#) is insignificant compared to the U.S., where there were more than 20 million [drug users in 2006](#), Mexico wants to avoid the social problems of the United States, where there are 46 times as many habitual drug users.

"Mexico's decision to decriminalize possession of small amounts for personal use is a way of making it possible for drug addicts to not fear the police or health system, step forward and seek the help they need," said Jose Romero, a health care provider. "We want people to come in off the streets and not fear that they will be arrested if they have drugs on them."

Rather than coddling addicts, however, Mexico's laws toughen penalties for repeat offenders. If caught with drugs, a person is not arrested, but police record his or her name, address and telephone number. This information is sent to the Health Ministry, which contacts the person and informs him or her of the treatment options closest to their residence. Repeat offenders are ordered to report to rehab, and failure to do so can result in their arrest. Those arrested, however, now face mandatory prison time, which has been increased across the board.

Mexican addicts, in essence, are being given several opportunities to clean themselves up before facing jail time. This stands in sharp contrast to the United States, where [800,000 arrests are made annually for marijuana possession alone](#). "The decision by the Mexican government to decriminalize the consumption of small amounts of drugs constitutes a step in the right direction after decades of failed policy," Juan Carlos Hidalgo, the Cato Institute's project coordinator for Latin America, told the New York Times. "It is in line with efforts by other Latin American leaders and governments who are increasingly skeptical of [Washington's prohibitionist drug policies](#)."

But what may be sound public policy is a challenge to the power drug cartels wield in Mexico.

Not unlike gangs or the Mafia, Mexican drug cartels see decriminalization of possession of small quantities of drugs – marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamines – as part of the Mexican government's effort to channel drug addicts into rehab in order to undermine the vast network that supplies drugs to habitual drug users, who also act as the eyes and ears on the street. This provides crucial information to drug cartel leaders on military, police and other law enforcement activity in towns large and small throughout their territories.

The decriminalization of possession of drugs for personal use has sparked interest in rehab centers, such as Ciudad Juarez's El Aliviane, where the massacre took place. The incident demonstrated the "challenge" drug cartels face: defections from their own members who want to get clean, and the opportunity to "hunt down" members of rival drug cartels.

"We're witnessing the extermination of the Juárez cartel," Alfredo Quijano, editor of the newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez and an authority on the war between the entrenched Juárez cartel and the rival Sinaloa cartel, told reporters. ["The Linea, or Juárez cartel, is down to its last line of defense."](#)

Infuriated Juarez leaders executed many members of the Juarez cartel who defected and who sought medical treatment for their addiction. In doing so they are attempting to terrorize other members into submission. It is a new twist in the ongoing rivalries between the cartels – and in the intensifying campaign by Mexican President Felipe Calderon to break the drug cartels once and for all.

LAUNCH A  
WEB SITE  
FOR YOUR  
BUSINESS.  
SIGN UP  
TODAY  
AND  
SAVE 50%.

[Find Out More](#)

YAHOO!  
SMALL BUSINESS

"One common fear among drug addicts who deal drugs is that their suppliers higher up will find out about their desires to come clean," Jose Romero said. "To become clean is to break free of the drug cartels. That could cost them their lives."

Mexico's efforts are a bold step, one that has caught the interest of American policymakers. "We will take a watchful attitude. It is clearly in the authority of the government of Mexico to pass these laws," U.S. drug czar Gil Kerlikowske told [Reuters](#) during a visit of border governors to the northern Mexican city of Monterrey. For some time, dissatisfaction with draconian drug laws has been growing in the United States. "I do think we're incarcerating people for dealing drugs who perhaps should not be incarcerated because they're dealing drugs to support a habit and not to make a profit," Wyoming's Public Defender Ken Koski told [the Caspar Star Tribune](#) about drug abuse in the nation's least populated state.

Other countries are also closely following developments in Mexico; Argentina, for one, passed a law decriminalizing drug possession weeks after the Mexican Congress acted.

This is not to say Mexico's laws are perfect. Possession is decriminalized, but not the sale or transport. A similar flaw characterized California's medical marijuana law (See: [The New Yorker](#)). It may no longer be illegal to grow marijuana or operate a dispensary for users, but state law is silent on how marijuana gets from the growers to the retailers.

And there are those who see Mexico's new law as turning every rehab center into a target for rival gangs seeking to purge their own members or their enemies trying to quit a habit. "My basic interpretation of what happened is that it is part of the back-and-forth series of massacres between the Cartel de Juárez/Aztecas and Chapo – similar to massacres between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq," Howard Campbell, an authority on Mexican drug cartels told the [Dallas Morning News](#). "The rehab places in that area are filled with Aztecas, so it would seem to be enemies of the Aztecas who did it."

It is too early to tell how things will unfold, but as events in Ciudad Juarez demonstrate, decriminalizing drugs has opened a new challenge for the drug cartels as they seek to preserve their hold on their members, many of whom now see a way back into healthy and life-affirming lives.

*Louis Nevaer is a contributor to NAM whose new book, "Managing Hispanic and Latino Employees, will be published in December 2009.*

#### Related Articles:

[The Traffic of Black Gold on the U.S.-Mexico Border](#)

[Holder Visits South L.A.](#)

[Mexico Rejects Dialogue with Drug Cartel](#)

[A City Under Siege](#)

[Is Mexico's War on Drugs Unconstitutional?](#)

Page 1 of 1

[Return to Normal Version](#)  
[Send Page to Friend](#)  
[Subscribe to NAM Newsletters](#)

Share / Save

bookmark this on Delicious

be the first to bookmark this page!

**Get up  
to four  
Weeks  
Free**  
on local and  
national  
newspaper  
delivery

Start home  
delivery today



"Advertisements on our website do not necessarily reflect the views or mission of New America Media, our affiliates or our funders."