

Mexican Drug Cartels Infiltrate Suburban America

Drug cartels from Mexico are embedding some of their most trusted agents inside the United States. Officials warn the new focus is on middle-class suburbs in the Midwest, South, and Northeast.

Drug Enforcement Administration statistics suggest a heightened cartel presence increasing from 230 American communities to more than 1,200 in 2011. Experts say the increase is partly due to better reporting.

Until recently, supply operatives used unaffiliated middlemen to smuggle cocaine, marijuana and heroin, and rarely ventured beyond the border. Now an investigation from the Associated Press shows evidence that groups are sending members into at least nine non-border states.

Authorities say the new strategy could make the cartels harder to remove. Danny Porter, chief prosecutor in Gwinnett County, Ga., told the Associated Press that he has tried to entice dozens of suspected cartel members to cooperate with American authorities. Nearly all declined. Some laughed in his face.

"They say, 'We are more scared of them [the cartels] than we are of you. We talk and they'll boil our family in acid,'" Porter said. "Their families are essentially hostages."

In Mexico, there's been a staggering number of cartel-related killings—more than 50,000—including their signature beheadings.

"It's probably the most serious threat the United States has faced from organized crime," said Jack Riley, head of the DEA's Chicago office.

He also argues that the cartels are responsible for Chicago's disturbingly high murder rate. Chicago is the murder capital of the United States.