

The Pits: Violence in Michoacán Over Control of Avocado Trade

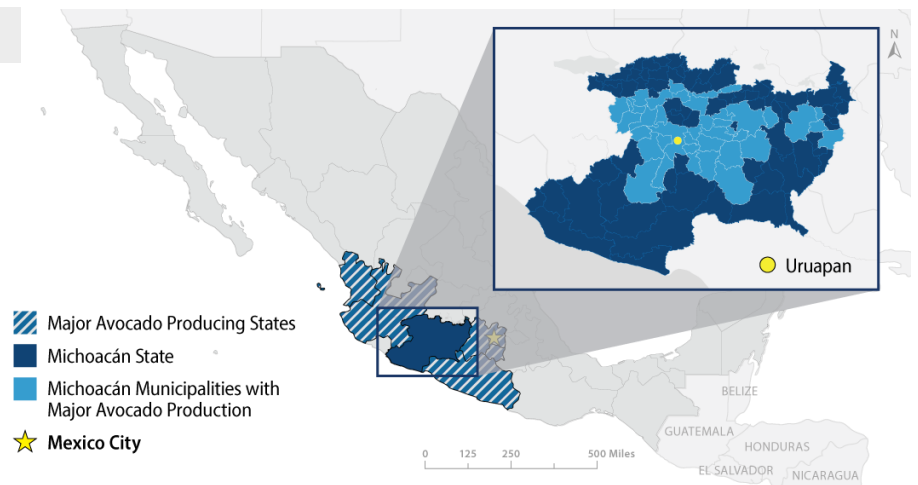
OVERVIEW

Avocados are native to central Mexico with major production located in the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Mexico, Nayarit, Morelos, and Guerrero. In 2019, a record 2.1 billion pounds of avocados were exported from Mexico into the United States with sales of about \$2.5 billion. The incredible success of avocados has brought wealth, employment, and opportunity to poorer rural areas of central Mexico, especially the state of Michoacán which produces more than 1.5 million metric tons of avocados yearly (80 percent of Mexican avocado production).

Due to its altitude, climate, and soil, Michoacán is the epicenter of the “green gold rush” in Mexico. Avocado suppliers, export factories, foreign investors, and plantation workers all intermingle in the city of Uruapan—the heart of Michoacán’s avocado economy—where the success and wealth of avocado production is visible in designer homes, newly paved roads, and major development.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

- A “green gold rush” is happening in central Mexico, as avocado production has become increasingly lucrative for cartels to exploit as part of their criminal diversification strategy.
- CJNG is competing violently with the Nueva Familia Michoacana, Tepalcatepec Cartel, and Zicurián Cartel to dominate this growing criminal economy in Michoacán state, the world’s top avocado producing area.
- CJNG exercises extortion schemes against avocado producers, and those who fail to make payments may be kidnapped or killed.



CARTEL EXPLOITATION

However, the successes of the avocado economy over time has resulted in a deadly second order consequence: cartel exploitation. Drawn by the wealth and incredible opportunity to profit, Mexican cartels brought increasing insecurity and violence to the region. Organized crime began to infiltrate avocado production about 20 years ago with the Gulf Cartel sending in Los Zetas to protect narco-trafficking routes tangential to avocado producing areas. However, cartels began to violently exploit avocado producers when newer cartels, like La Familia Michoacán and *Los Caballeros Templarios* (The Knights Templar), demanded a share of profits through extortion about 10 years later. Today, an even more violent and deadly exploitation is occurring as a result of a territorial war between competing criminal organizations all hoping to profit from Michoacán’s newest wave of the green gold rush.

The *Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel* (Jalisco New Generation Cartel [CJNG]), Nueva Familia Michoacana, the Tepalcatepec Cartel, and the Zicuirán Cartel are all involved in an ongoing territorial war over access to the profitable avocado trade. Competition to earn criminal profits from avocado production has become increasingly violent, especially with the entrance of CJNG into Uruapan. Last year, CJNG massacred 19 members of the Viagras (armed wing of the Nueva Familia Michoacana) and displayed their bodies alongside the following narco-message in the city center:

“Lovely people, carry on with your routines. Be patriotic and kill a Viagra”

The atrocity garnered international attention as the link between cartel violence and avocado production became clear. Even a call to boycott so-called “blood avocados” from Mexico emerged in the international culinary world (to little avail). While these macabre acts of violence and the increasing number of stolen avocado shipments (at least four truckloads of avocados per day) continue to make front page news the often less visible violence and insecurity of extortion faced by everyday Mexicans in Michoacán is largely overlooked.

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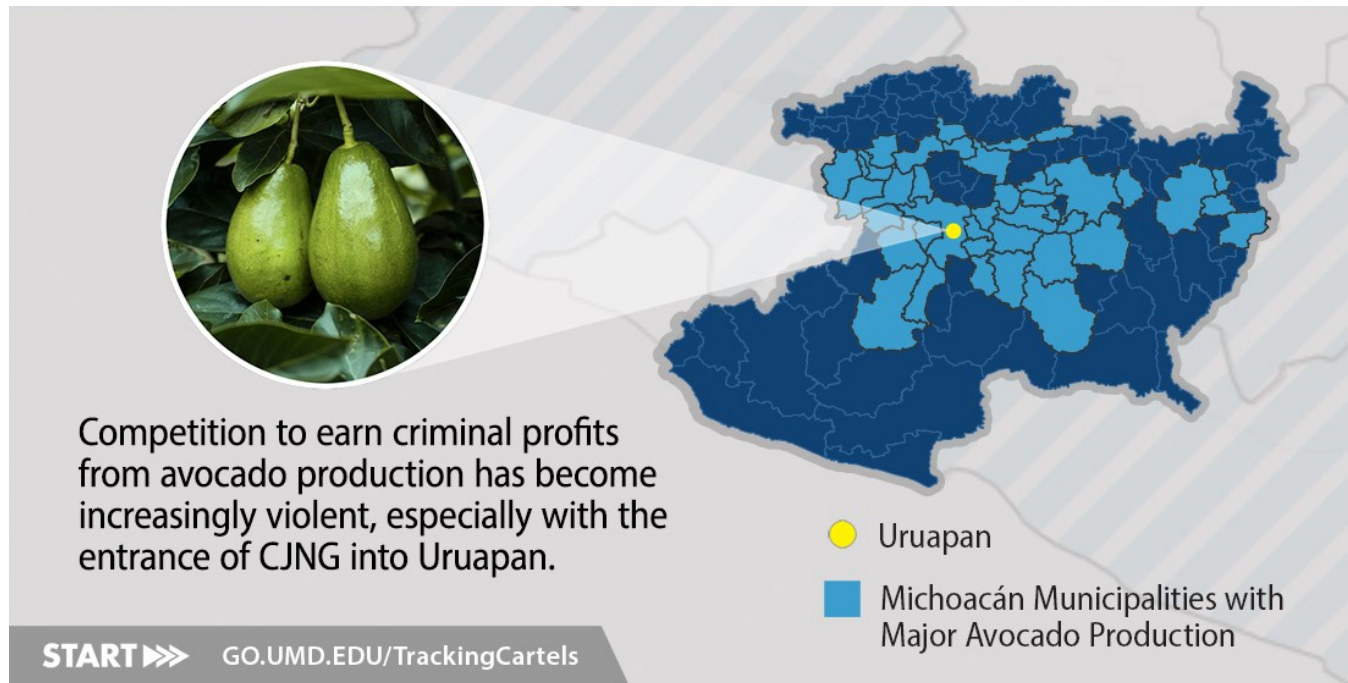
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EXTORTION

Extortion has become a seminal way in which cartels in Michoacán, and across Mexico, earn profit and terrorize avocado producers and workers. In Mexico, extortion is generally associated with the threat or use of violence by TCOs and abuses of power by corrupt arms of the state (e.g., public officials and police officers) to demand extra-legal payments in return for providing services, whether rhetorical or realized. It is the highest reported crime in 14 of Mexico's 32 states. Extortion serves not only as a way to earn money but also as a way to assert authority. Extortion of avocado producers and workers has become a daily economic practice in Michoacán.



Extortion of avocado producers is commonly experienced in the form of 'rents' (*la derecho de piso* or *la renta*) whereby TCO and cartel extortionists collect compulsory payments under the pretense of protection (from other TCOs and gangs). If a producer is located in the operational zone of a dominant cartel these "protection fees" are charged monthly and often calculated according to the number of hectares cultivated or kilograms exported by the specific producer. If a producer is in an area where multiple cartels are competing they are often subject to multiple extortive practices. Those who do not pay, or cannot pay, are subject to more extreme forms of violence and even targeted for death until the protective fees are paid. CJNG is particularly adept at extorting avocado producers as its infamous violent reputation propagates across Mexico.

As the avocado boom in the United States continues, cartels like CJNG will continue to have incentives to extort avocado producers and exploit the avocado market. Increasingly, CJNG and other cartels are heading out into the forests of Michoacán with axes, chainsaws, and machine guns to establish their own growing fields, not for narcotics, but for avocados. Seizing land, deforesting, planting, and cultivating their own groves of avocados allows for even greater manipulation and exploitation of the avocado market. Criminal violence in Mexico is not limited to illicit markets but has encroached upon licit markets as well. In Michoacán's case, the blurring and blending of licit and illicit economies make it highly difficult to see where criminal organized violence begins and avocado production ends.

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About the Centers of Excellence Network

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