

Cartel Members, Numbers, Associates

Group	What can reasonably be said
All Mexican cartel personnel	A 2022 academic estimate put the combined cartel population at 160,000–185,000 . This is personnel, not an army of fighters.
Sinaloa Cartel	Tens of thousands of members, associates and facilitators worldwide, according to the U.S. Defense Department.
CJNG	15,000–20,000 members , according to the Defense Department's 2026 report.
Gulf Cartel	Unknown. Its fragmentation into rival factions makes a reliable count particularly difficult. It has significant trafficking routes into the Rio Grande Valley.
Armed/cartel fighters	No reliable nationwide number. The 160,000–185,000 estimate should not be interpreted as 160,000–185,000 armed combatants.
Associated gangs	No reliable nationwide total. Cartels use local gangs, contractors, smugglers, recruiters and other affiliates in different places.
Civilian supporters	No credible national headcount. This category is especially difficult because it can include voluntary collaborators, people paid for individual tasks, businesses providing services, and people acting under threats or coercion.

The distinction matters because the cartel structure is more like a **large criminal network** than a conventional military. The DEA describes cartels as having networks of members, affiliates and facilitators involved in activities ranging from trafficking and money laundering to human smuggling and extortion.

For the **Rio Grande Valley specifically**, the Gulf Cartel is the most directly relevant organization in the sources I checked. The Defense Department says its factions control significant trafficking routes into the RGV, but explicitly lists its membership as **unknown**.

And there is a current example of the network extending into the Valley: federal prosecutors in September 2026 charged a person they allege was an active Gulf Cartel member who had

worked in Reynosa and was encountered near Mission, Texas. Those allegations remain allegations unless proven in court.

Bottom line: We can estimate the *overall cartel population* in Mexico, but we cannot responsibly turn that into a number of armed fighters or civilian supporters. Doing so would give a false impression of the actual fighting capacity of the cartels.

There are undoubtedly U.S.-based cartel associates and facilitators numbering at least in the *thousands* across various criminal networks, but the total cannot currently be measured reliably at this time.

Source: <https://www.investing.com/news/world-news/exclusiveus-revokes-visas-of-over-50-mexican-politicians-in-new-drug-war-front-4285920>

Just the tip of the “ICEberg”