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Criminals turn college campuses into recruitment hubs, recruiting chemistry students in Mexico with big paydays.

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By Natalie Kitroeff and Paulina Villegas
Reporting from Culiacán in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, the stronghold of the Sinaloa Cartel and a hub of fentanyl production

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The cartel recruiter slipped onto campus disguised as a janitor and then zeroed in on his target: a sophomore chemistry student.

The recruiter explained that the cartel was staffing up for a project, and that he'd heard good things about the young man.

"'You're good at what you do,'" the student recalled the recruiter saying. "'You decide if you're interested.'"

In their quest to build fentanyl empires, Mexican criminal groups are turning to an unusual talent pool: not hit men or corrupt police officers, but chemistry students studying at Mexican universities.

People who make fentanyl in cartel labs, who are called cooks, told The New York Times that they needed workers with advanced knowledge of chemistry to help make the drug stronger and "get more people hooked," as one cook put it.

The cartels also have a more ambitious goal: to synthesize the chemical compounds, known as precursors, that are essential to making fentanyl, freeing them from having to import those raw materials from China.

If they succeed, U.S. officials say, it would represent a terrifying new phase in the fentanyl crisis, in which Mexican cartels have more control than ever over one of the deadliest drugs in recent history.

“It would make us the kings of Mexico,” said one chemistry student who has been cooking fentanyl for six months.



Chemicals used to produce fentanyl on the floor of a drug cartel safe house in Culiacán, Sinaloa. Daniele Volpe for The New York Times

The Times interviewed seven fentanyl cooks, three chemistry students, two high-ranking operatives and a high-level recruiter. All of them work for the Sinaloa Cartel, which the U.S. government says is largely responsible for the fentanyl pouring over the southern border.

Those affiliated with the cartel put themselves in danger just by talking to The Times, and spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. Their accounts matched those of American Embassy officials who track cartel activities, including the role students are playing in cartel operations and how they are producing fentanyl. Times reporters spoke to a chemistry professor, who said the recruitment of his students was common.

The students said they had different jobs within the criminal group. Sometimes, they said, they run experiments to strengthen the drug or to create precursors. Other times, they say, they supervise or work alongside the cooks and assistants who produce fentanyl in bulk.

It’s unclear how widespread the recruitment of students has become, but the pursuit of trained chemists seems to have been influenced in part by the coronavirus pandemic.

A 2020 Mexican intelligence assessment, leaked by a hacker group, found that the Sinaloa Cartel appeared to be recruiting chemistry professors to develop fentanyl precursor chemicals after the pandemic slowed supply chains.

American law enforcement officials also said that many young chemists had been swept up in arrests at Mexican fentanyl labs in recent years. The arrested chemists told the authorities that they had been working on developing precursors and making the drug stronger, according to the officials.

A chemistry professor at a university in Sinaloa State said he knew that some students enrolled in chemistry classes just to become more familiar with skills needed to cook synthetic drugs. The professor, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisals, said he had identified students who fit that profile by their questions and reactions during his lectures.

“Sometimes when I am teaching them synthesis of pharmaceutical drugs, they openly ask me, ‘Hey, professor, when are you teaching us how to synthesize cocaine and other things?’” he said.

Eager to preserve cooperation on migration, the Biden administration avoided publicly urging Mexico to do more to dismantle the cartels. President-elect Donald J. Trump has promised a more aggressive approach, threatening to deploy the U.S. military to battle the criminals, and vowing last month to issue a 25 percent tariff on Mexican goods if the country doesn't stop the flow of drugs and migrants across the border.

In response to the tariff threat, Mexico's new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, said that "international collaboration" was needed to prevent the shipment of precursors to Mexico from "Asian countries."

But as the cartels gain greater control of the fentanyl supply chain, U.S. officials say, it will become more difficult for law enforcement in both countries to stop the industrialized production of synthetic opioids in Mexico.

The cartels "know we are now focused on the illicit trafficking of these precursor chemicals around the world," said Todd Robinson, the State Department's assistant secretary of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Those efforts are driving the cartels "to try to bring this thing in-house," Mr. Robinson said. "The practical result of that is their ability to more easily and quickly transfer those drugs to the United States."

Mass producing fentanyl can be relatively straightforward if cartels are just mixing up imported precursors, experts said, because it's easy to find instructions for producing the drug using those chemicals.

But trying to synthesize the precursors from scratch is a much more difficult process that requires a broader array of chemical techniques and skills, said James DeFrancesco, a forensic science professor at Loyola University Chicago who worked as a forensic chemist at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for 18 years.

The process is also dangerous. Cooks and students said that even though they wore gas masks and hazmat suits, the risks they face are many: toxic exposure to the lethal drug, accidental explosions, mistakes that enrage their armed and extremely violent bosses.

Yet the work pays more than many legal jobs in chemistry, and that's often enough of a sell. The second-year student said the recruiter who visited the campus had offered him $800 up front, plus a monthly salary of $800 — twice as much as the average pay for chemists formally employed in Mexico, according to government data.

The 19-year-old, raised in one of the poorest parts of Sinaloa, said he had chosen to study chemistry because his father had cancer and he wanted to help find a cure.

"I want to help people, not kill them," he said. The idea of making a product that would lead to mass death made him sick — and yet the treatment his father needed was impossible for the family to afford.

He told the recruiter he was interested, and five days later he was picked up by cartel members, blindfolded and driven to a clandestine lab hidden in the mountains, he said.

The Recruiter

Before the Sinaloa Cartel ever approaches a recruit, it scouts out its prospect.

A 21-year-old former student who dropped out of school this year to work for the cartel cooking fentanyl and developing precursors. Daniele Volpe for The New York Times

The ideal candidate is someone who has both classroom knowledge and street smarts, a go-getter who won't blanch at the idea of producing a lethal drug and, above all, someone discreet, said one recruiter in an interview.

In months of searching, he said, he's found three students who now work for him developing precursors. Many young people just don't meet his standards.

"Some are lazy, some aren't bright, some talk too much," said the recruiter, a lanky middle-aged man with square glasses, who has worked for the cartel for 10 years. He described himself as a fix-it man, focused on improving quality and output in the fentanyl business.

To identify potential candidates, the cartel does a round of outreach with friends, acquaintances and colleagues, the recruiter said, then talks to the targets' families, their friends, even people they play soccer with — all to learn whether they'd be open to doing this kind of work. If the recruiter finds someone particularly promising, he might offer to cover the student's tuition cost.

"We are a company; what a company does is invest in their best people," he said.

When the cartel began mass-producing fentanyl about a decade ago, the recruiter said, it relied on uneducated cooks from the countryside who could easily get their hands on what people in the business call "recipes" for making the drug.

Compared to methamphetamine, a drug that requires more advanced equipment and expertise to manufacture at scale, fentanyl is straightforward to produce if precursor chemicals are available.

"It takes four steps," said one longtime cook, laying out the process with the simplicity that might be found on the back of a box of cake mix. "You shake it up, mix it, dry it, wash it with acetone."

But things got more complicated in recent years. China moved to restrict the export of fentanyl precursors, Mexico cracked down on imports of the chemicals and the coronavirus pandemic gummed up supply chains so that those ingredients became harder to find.

The recruiter and all three students interviewed said they hadn't successfully produced precursors yet.

"We are close, but it's not easy," said one former student, a 21-year-old who started working in a lab this year. Baby-faced and bright-eyed, the student had dropped out of school to work for the cartel. "We need to keep doing tests and more tests."

But the recruiter said the students had been helpful in one key respect: making the fentanyl even more potent.

A first-year chemistry student was lured into working for the cartel by a relative who belonged to the criminal group and said she could help out her mother with a higher salary making fentanyl. Daniele Volpe for The New York Times

Student No. 1

About a year ago, a relative approached a first-year chemistry student with a proposal: Wouldn't she love to make real money as a fentanyl cook?

In an interview, the student said her relative had worked for the Sinaloa Cartel for years and knew exactly what to say to lure the young woman, the eldest of five siblings. Her mother was raising the children alone, cleaning houses 12 hours a day.

The cartel offered the student $1,000 as a signing bonus, the woman said. She was terrified, but she said yes. The lab where she works is about an hour's flight from Sinaloa's capital, on the small aircraft the cartel uses to transport cooks to work. Her bosses told her that her job was to manufacture more powerful fentanyl, she said.

The fentanyl coming out of Mexico has often been of low purity, a problem the recruiter attributes to the desperate rush to satisfy Americans' appetite for the synthetic opioid.

"There was such an explosion of demand that many people just wanted to earn money, and those manufacturers just made whatever without caring about quality," the recruiter said. But in a competitive market, he said, the cartel can win over more clients with a stronger drug.

The first-year student said she had experimented with all manner of concoctions to increase fentanyl's potency, including mixing it with animal anesthetics. But none of her attempts at producing fentanyl precursors have worked.

"You're starting from a blank page," she said. "How do we create something we didn't invent?"

The sophomore chemistry student at a cartel stash house in Sinaloa State. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Student No. 2

When he first arrived at work, the sophomore chemistry student who had been recruited on campus had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. He said the lab was in the mountains, in the midst of trees and covered by a tarp that had been painted to look like foliage, so it couldn't be seen from a helicopter.

After three days of work, he said, one of the men in charge told him that he wasn't there to make fentanyl. He was the newest member of a research and development lab, where everyone was working to figure out how to make precursors from scratch. He said he immediately started worrying about inadvertently causing an explosion.

"They don't tell you how to do it — they say, 'These are the products, you're going to make them with this, it could go wrong, but that's why you're studying,'" he said.

The sophomore works with six others, three students from his class in university, and three older men who are not trained chemists. The work is a lot riskier than what he does in school, when he has time to attend.

"Here, if they don't like what you produce, they can make you disappear," he said.

A cartel boss recently visited the lab to praise his work, the student said, telling him that if he was able to help produce precursors successfully, the group would give him a house or a car, whatever he wanted.

The sophomore told them what he needed most was money for his dad. He kept his day job a secret from his father.

"When he asks questions, I lie and say I'm working at a company," the sophomore said. "I think if he knew, he wouldn't accept the money."

Natalie Kitroeff is the Mexico City bureau chief for The Times, leading coverage of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. More about Natalie Kitroeff

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