

# From Online to Offline: Mexican Cartels' Recruitment Tactics Through Social Media

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## THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Cartels rely on an **extraordinarily high recruitment rate** to sustain sizable, decentralized operations, cumulatively making them **the country's fifth largest employer and top recruiter**.

This massive personnel pool conducts drug smuggling in Mexico and the U.S., where drug-related violence and addiction put millions at risk and pose a **significant national security threat**.

### COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Unlike ISIS, whose ideological orientation made it easy to spot, **cartels lack a unified, distinct digital fingerprint**—their enterprises are more business-like than political or religious, making them notoriously difficult to identify online.

Even where platforms prohibit such use, efforts by companies to stop organized-crime groups have been characterized as **insufficient**.



## HOW CARTELS RECRUIT ONLINE

### EXPLICIT JOB ADS

Posts operate like job advertisements, offering good pay, lodging, food, and an opportunity to improve one's position in life, often paired with photos of trucks, planes, and mountains to make cartel life look exciting and legitimate.

### ROMANTICIZED LIFESTYLE

Posts depict exotic pets, guns, high-speed boat chases, and expensive jewelry, driving young viewers to seek out the "glorious" lifestyle—even without a direct call to join.

*"Around half of the recruitment instances that are found are people approaching cartel posters saying, how do I join?"*

— Meta employee

### SIGNAL CODES (CJNG)

🐓 Rooster emoji: alludes to former CJNG head "El Mencho"

🥷 Ninja emoji: signifies *sicarios*, hired hitmen

#4L "#4letras" / "#4l" hashtag signals CJNG allegiance

### CARTELS AS "BENEVOLENT"

In mainstream society, cartels are viewed as violent, negative forces, in both their recruiting and their regular interactions with people. To combat this narrative, cartels have produced propaganda designed to depict themselves as charitable and benevolent. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, cartels associated with CJNG and the Sinaloa cartel filmed themselves handing out "care packages" to ordinary people.

## WHY IT HASN'T STOPPED

### MODERATION FAILURES

AI moderation struggles to distinguish nefarious from innocuous posts given cartels' ambiguous emojis, music, and imagery—compounded by a shortage of human moderators fluent in regional dialects and slang, who report poor working conditions.

Even blanket government bans on recruitment accounts are rarely comprehensive. Banned accounts simply **reappear under new names**.

### ENGAGEMENT-OPTIMIZED ALGORITHMS

Platforms predict engagement by matching users to others with similar profiles. A post can go viral unpredictably, and only after it is amplified does harmful content usually get flagged and demoted.



## Policy Recommendations

- ### 1 Enhance Platform Moderation

Improve AI and machine-learning filtering with better computer vision and LLMs, complemented by more human moderators fluent in regional dialects and slang, working under better conditions.
- ### 2 Change Recommendation Algorithms

Pressure platforms to move away from "engagement optimization," shifting content ranking toward long-form, journalistic text so users engage with factual news rather than cartel propaganda.
- ### 3 Invest in Mexican Development

Facilitate multilateral development and foreign investment in economically disadvantaged regions, addressing the poverty that drives young people toward cartel labor.