

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-103795](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2008, the U.S. has provided over \$3 billion in assistance to Mexico to address crime and violence and enhance the country's rule of law. Two cooperative arrangements between the U.S. and Mexico have guided most of this assistance: the Mérida Initiative (2008-2021) and the Bicentennial Framework (late 2021-present).

GAO was asked to assess the results of U.S. assistance to Mexico. This report examines 1) how, if at all, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico have changed since 2008, 2) challenges State/INL and USAID identified achieving results and project-level results each agency reported, and 3) the extent to which State/INL has addressed key elements critical to assess progress toward Bicentennial Framework goals. GAO reviewed State and USAID documents and data, interviewed officials from State, USAID, Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security in Washington, D.C., and conducted fieldwork and interviewed U.S. and Government of Mexico officials in Mexico.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations related to assessing progress, including that State, in consultation with USAID, identifies projects to achieve results, outlines performance indicators used to gauge progress, and establishes plans to assess goals. State agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-103795](#). For more information, contact Chelsea Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or KenneyC@gao.gov.

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U.S. ASSISTANCE TO MEXICO

State Department Should Take Steps to Assess Overall Progress

What GAO Found

Since 2008, the goals of U.S. assistance to Mexico have generally focused on promoting the rule of law and countering the drug trade. In 2021, the U.S. and Mexico agreed to the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Bicentennial Framework), which expands the scope of the Mérida Initiative by adding new U.S. commitments to reduce drug demand in the United States and the flow of illegal firearms from the U.S. to Mexico.

The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State/INL) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are the lead U.S. agencies for implementing U.S. assistance to Mexico. Both agencies have reported project-level results of assistance despite numerous challenges. Among these challenges, according to the agencies, are political corruption and impunity in Mexico and a growing U.S. drug demand that fuels transnational criminal organizations. State/INL project results include developing forensic investigation capabilities in Mexico, and USAID results include providing at-risk youth with educational opportunities.

State/INL has addressed two of five key elements GAO previously identified as important to assessing progress by defining desired results and establishing a hierarchy of goals and objectives. However, for the Bicentennial Framework, State/INL has not 1) identified the specific projects designed to achieve their goals, 2) outlined which milestones and performance indicators should be used to gauge results, or 3) established monitoring and evaluation plans to assess progress toward their goals. State/INL officials said the bureau has not yet begun to assess progress toward the shared goals of the Bicentennial Framework because it is currently negotiating with the Mexican government on a set of performance indicators, which is one of three key elements critical to assess progress. Without incorporating all key elements for assessing progress, the U.S. government cannot demonstrate that it is achieving its goals in Mexico and that its investments, at over \$3 billion since 2008, have been spent effectively.

GAO's Analysis of State's Actions Addressing Key Elements for Assessing Progress toward Shared Bicentennial Framework Goals

Key Element	Description	GAO overall assessment
Desired results	The end state that the strategy aims to achieve	✓
Hierarchy of goals and subordinate objectives	The logical links among the strategy's goals and objectives.	✓
Activities to achieve results	Planned steps and activities to achieve the results	✗
Milestones and performance indicators	Priorities, milestones, and performance indicators to gauge results.	✗
Monitoring and evaluation plans	Plans to assess progress toward achieving goals.	✗

Legend: ✓ - Addressed key element. ✗ - Has not fully addressed key element. We reviewed State Department planning and strategy documents for assistance to Mexico. We determined State addressed a key element if it took actions to incorporate the elements critical to assess progress into planning or strategy documents. We determined State had not fully addressed a key element if it had not taken actions critical to assess progress.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State actions and GAO's key elements relevant to assessment of progress toward strategic goals.