



NCITE Project Summary

Disrupting Cartels and Transnational Criminal Organizations for Maximizing the Counter Network Division Workforce:

Lessons from Dismantling Foreign Terrorist Organizations

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Gina Ligon (Principal Investigator/PI), NCITE Director

Sam Hunter (co-PI), NCITE Director of Academic Contributions

Austin Doctor (co-PI), NCITE Director of Strategic Initiatives

Ajmal Aziz, DHS Science and Technology Program Manager

This project addresses the Increase in cartel and transnational criminal organization (TCO) designations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations/Specially Designated Global Terrorists and the resulting need for DHS to rapidly operationalize new authorities. Researchers will map the TCO ecosystem, analyze legal and operational authorities, maximize the counter network workforce through site visits and working groups, and produce tools and forecasts for operators. Methods include leveraging open-source low-cost information to derive insights, comparative analyses between cartels and known FTOs, leadership/talent profiling, ecosystem network mapping, and engagement at U.S. Southern and Northern Borders. Expected outputs include an authorities toolkit, biweekly threat forecasts, ecosystem and decision frameworks, talent profiles, and assessments of tactical innovation and special operations capacity. The work aims to sharpen DHS decision-making, accelerate joint action, and improve disruption of TCO networks across theaters of operation.

Impact Statement

Enables DHS operators (Customs and Border Protection - National Targeting Center, Homeland Security Investigations, Office of Intelligence and Analysis) to translate new authorities into coordinated investigations, interdictions, and intelligence sharing to more effectively disrupt cartel/TCO networks at and beyond U.S. borders.




Policy Impact

- Executive Order 14157, “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists” (Jan. 20, 2025): The project’s authorities analysis and toolkit help DHS components apply FTO/SDGT authorities (e.g., material support) consistently across missions.
- Executive Order 14159, “Protecting the American People Against Invasion” (Jan. 20, 2025): The joint planning templates and information-sharing workflows support establishment and operation of nationwide Homeland Security Task Forces and their command-and-control needs.
- Department of Justice, “Total Elimination of Cartels and Transnational Criminal Organizations” (Jan. 2025):

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND DISCLAIMER

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 ncite.unomaha.edu
 ncite@unomaha.edu
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Findings on leadership vulnerabilities, indicators, and charging options guide prosecution prioritization and interagency case building.

- Office of National Drug Control Policy, Drug Policy Priorities (Apr. 3, 2025): Ecosystem mapping and biweekly supply-chain scans inform federal priorities to disrupt illicit drug markets and upstream cartel enablers.

Potential End Users with Operational Impact

DHS Office of Customs & Border Protection – National Targeting Center, Counter Network Division	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) – Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate
DHS Office of Intelligence & Analysis – Homeland Threat Actors Branch	Homeland Security Task Force – Intel Fusion Cell
National Counterterrorism Center – Counter Narcotics	Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – Joint Terrorism Task Forces
Department of Justice (DOJ) – National Security Division	U.S. Secret Service – National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC)

Expected Findings and Outputs

- Clear mapping of TCO supply, distribution, and partnership networks, with key influence nodes and legitimate/illicit revenue linkages highlighted for disruption.
- An actionable decision framework and “dictionary” of variables that predicts when TCOs partner, disengage, or escalate to violence—and how those choices affect profits, attrition, and territorial control.
- Talent profiles identifying mission-critical roles and succession patterns in TCOs that reveal vulnerabilities and metrics for measuring network degradation.
- Comparative assessment showing where TCOs mirror or differ from FTOs (e.g., ISIS) in tactical innovation and special operations capacity, yielding early-warning indicators for DHS.

NCITE Strategic Priority

Actors — The project directly advances understanding of who leads and sustains criminal organizations (leadership, talent structures, and network ties) as well as their tactical innovation (special operations, technical learning).

NCITE Operational Area of Excellence

Law Enforcement Partnerships — Delivers SME working groups, site visits, and shared toolkits that standardize cross-agency practice and speed translation of research into field operations.

Methodology

18-month effort combining a forecasting system using open-source information, analysis and operator-focused toolkit of authorities, site visits at the southern and northern border with four subject matter expert working groups, cartel entrepreneurial ecosystem and network mapping of designated TCOs and linked actors, historiometric and qualitative coding to profile prominent functional roles, and comparative analysis using prior FTO cases to benchmark tactical innovation and special-operations capacity.

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