NCITE Project Summary
Organizational Psychology of Homeland Threat Actors

September 2025

Sam Hunter (PI), University of Nebraska at Omaha
Gina Ligon (Co-PI), University of Nebraska at Omaha

This project examines how Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)–designated cartels are organized and how their structures compare to organizations linked to U.S. mass-casualty violence. The team will refine an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled content-analysis tool and a validated codebook to process large, open-source corpora on violent events, then compare organizational features across cartels and U.S. mass-casualty-linked groups. The work will utilize an AI-assisted tool and further conduct comparative analyses. Expected takeaways include which organizational variables predict severity of violence, how cartel "entrepreneurial ecosystems" foster malevolent innovation, and where cartels diverge from other violent extremist threats. The impact is practical guidance and translational products for DHS operators (especially Customs and Border Protection, Homeland Security Investigations, and National Counterterrorism Center partners) to better detect, prioritize, and disrupt cartel networks.

Impact Statement
Provides DHS components with validated, plain-language indicators of cartel organizational structure and innovation pathways to improve targeting, interdiction, and intelligence collection against emerging cartel threats at and beyond U.S. borders.

Policy Impact
- Executive Order 14159, "Protecting the American People Against Invasion" (Jan. 20, 2025): By establishing Homeland Security Task Forces to dismantle cartels/TCOs, this order is supported by the project's comparative indicators that help Homeland Security Task Forces and DHS prioritize cartel-linked networks.

- Executive Order 14157, "Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists" (Jan. 20, 2025): Findings offer analytic evidence to support designation processes under 8 U.S.C. §1189, and to prepare DHS operational responses.

- Executive Order 14287, "Protecting American Communities from Criminal Aliens" (Apr. 28, 2025): Organizational indicators and innovation patterns from this research can guide DHS and DOJ enforcement prioritization where cartel presence drives public-safety risk.

- DOJ Memorandum, "Total Elimination of Cartels and Transnational Criminal Organizations" (Feb. 5, 2025): The project's translation products and metrics support DOJ and DHS strategy execution by identifying leverage points in cartel structures.

- DHS Directive 139-08, "Artificial Intelligence Use and Acquisition" (Jan. 15, 2025): The project's AI testing, human-in-the-loop validation, and prohibited-use safeguards inform component-level implementation for mission-enhancing, human-centered AI.

ncite.unomaha.edu
ncite@unomaha.edu
NCITE

End User Offices with Direct Operational Impact

DHS Science and Technology Directorate	National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) – Counter Narcotics
Homeland Security Task Force (HSTF) Intel Fusion Cell	Customs and Border Protection – National Targeting Center
Customs and Border Protection – Counter Network Division (CND)	Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)
Southern Border Intelligence Center (SBIC)	

Expected Findings and Outputs

- A set of organizational predictors (e.g., leadership structure, network cohesion, resource flows) that correlate with incident severity and operational tempo across cartels and U.S. mass-casualty-linked organizations.

- Evaluation of cartel "entrepreneurial ecosystems" and their role in rapid malevolent innovation (e.g., tactic, technique, and procedure adaptation, cross-border logistics), with features distinct from other extremist threats.

- Validated AI-assisted coding workflows that match or exceed human reliability on targeted variables while retaining human oversight for edge cases.

- Practical, plain-language indicators and case illustrations for operators to detect divergence points where cartel structures demand tailored countermeasures.

NCITE Strategic Priority

Actors — Directly advances understanding of who threatens the U.S. by revealing how FTO-designated cartels are structured and how their organizational dynamics compare to other homeland threat actors.

NCITE Operational Area of Excellence

Technology and Innovation — Demonstrates and validates an AI-enabled analytic tool and codebook that translates complex data into operator-ready insights.

Methodology

Four-phase design: (1) refine and validate a custom AI content-analysis tool; (2) update an extensive codebook by selecting variables from prior mass-casualty work and adding cartel-specific variables; (3) conduct AI-assisted coding with human validation/spot checks for quality; (4) compare organizational structures of FTO-designated cartels with U.S. mass-casualty-linked groups via cross-case analyses. Data are open-source event reports and case materials. Sampling focuses on FTO-designated cartels and comparable U.S. cases.

Please visit the NCITE website for more information on the project at ncite.unomaha.edu

NCITE
A DHS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

ncite.unomaha.edu
ncite@unomaha.edu
NCITE