

Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

Measures to prevent the
proliferation of drug cartels in
South America



Forum	Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
Issue:	Measures to prevent the proliferation of drug cartels in South America
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Introduction

The global drug trafficking market is estimated to be worth up to 652 billion US \$, surpassing the total gdp of many of the countries most directly involved. Those most harmed by this trade are developing countries, particularly politically fragile ones. Drug Cartels and Trafficking organisations are often linked to high crime rates, as they use violence or the threat of violence to ensure obedience amongst their employees, to maintain a reputation, and especially as an aspect of competition for clients and territory with rival cartels. Due to its climate, South America is well suited for the cultivation of many drugs, enabled by the political instability and corruption that often plagues national governments. Furthermore, its proximity to the United States, one of the largest drug consumers in the world, provides an advantage as it is able to reach consumers in a much easier manner than cartels across the pacific or atlantic.

Definition of Key Terms

Drug Cartels

A drug cartel is a criminal organisation focussed around supplying drug trafficking organisations both nationally and internationally. While these can be loose agreements, they can also be massive enterprises that battle for dominance and control of trade routes, such as the Mendellín Cartel or the Sinaloa Cartel

Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs)

Drug Trafficking Organisations produce, transport and/or distribute large amounts of illicit drugs, often across international borders, to supply smaller scale organisations in countries where the climate or conditions are unfit for drug cultivation

Illicit Drugs



Illicit drugs are drugs that are illegal in a particular country, some of the most common being Cannabis, Cocaine, Opioids, and Methamphetamines. There are varying degrees of legality of certain drugs, such as Cocaine, which is legal in the United States for medical use, and complete legality in Mexico to cultivate, possess, and transport, however not to sell. Furthermore, cannabis is tolerated in countries such as the Netherlands, and legal in countries such as Uruguay, however holds exceptions such as the forbidden sale to foreigners.

‘War on Drugs’

The War on Drugs is a military, economic, social and political initiative by the US federal government, created to reduce the illegal drug trade in the country. Seeing as the majority of illicit drugs enter the United States from the latin america, notably Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia, the initiative (aimed at reducing the production, consumption and distribution of drugs) often includes interference or aid with foreign governments struggling with drug trafficking or cartels.

Opiates

Opiates are a type of drug found in opium poppy plants, with a variety of effects such as pain relief. Hence why they are primarily used medically as anaesthetics, under names such as Morphine, Vicodin, or Oxycodone. However, they are also used recreationally, either in its medical form sold “under the counter” (without a valid prescription) or as Heroin, an extremely addictive drug which can create a dependency within its users after trying it only once. In 2014, an estimated 13-20 million people used Opiates recreationally.

Methamphetamines

Methamphetamines are a stimulant that affects the Central Nervous System (CNS). It reduces appetite, increases activity and talkativeness, and gives a sense of happiness. Because the ‘high’ starts and fades quickly, people often experience a crash that can leave them wanting more, leaving them very vulnerable to dependency. Colloquial names include (crystal) meth, speed, or ice.

Balloon Effect

The ‘balloon effect’ is a popular analogy regarding drug transport and suppression, particularly in South America. The analogy refers to a balloon being pushed in one area, moving the air to another part of a balloon, rather than reducing the air in the balloon all together. If law enforcement attempts to focus its attention on drug production and trade in



one area, drug routes and cultivation processes will grow elsewhere, in response to the lack of access from the targeted area, and comparative availability in an area with less resistance. A popular example of this would be the focus on suppressing Marijuana production in Mexico, which caused production to flourish in Colombia.

General Overview

Drug Cartels are dangerous for a variety of reasons; aside from the fact that they provide illicit drugs to the population with little way to control it, the means of transportation, cultivation, and trade are plagued with violence and illegality. Furthermore, cartels are often also involved in extortion of businesses, law enforcement or government officials, kidnapping for ransom, intimidation, murder, and prostitution rings or sex trafficking.

Government involvement

Drug violence can force the government to spend more resources on law enforcement, leaving other areas, such as sustainable development or education, underfunded. This creates a vicious cycle that traps nations in poverty and violence, and often attempts to suppress drug trafficking in one country, such as in Colombia throughout the 21st century, push the violence and trade more north to other countries such as Mexico, known as the balloon effect.

Kingpin strategy

The kingpin strategy has been a popular strategy used throughout the war on drugs, with notable successes such as the arrest of Pablo Escobar, resulting in the eventual diminishing in influence of the Medellín Cartel. The strategy works by attempting to dismantle leaders of cartels, hoping the organisation falls apart without them. However, rather than causing the collapse of the cartel, in reality it leads to fractioning within the organisation, resulting in extreme violence due to opposing claims of leadership. These unforeseen consequences are often almost worse, and the kingpin strategy is seen as beneficial largely for media and publicity purposes. While the arrest of the leader of the Sinaloa cartel 'El Chapo' (Who's real name is Joaquín Guzmán Loera) was deemed a huge success, the leadership vacuum that was created in a cartel that was so influential has generated spikes of violence both within and amongst organisations. Battles for dominance with up-and-coming cartels such as the New Generation Jalisco Cartel, as well as internal struggles for leadership between one of El Chapo's sons and his former right hand man have increased instability in the region. In reality, the Kingpin strategy doesn't deal with the underlying causes and effects of drug cartels. Aside from that, placing so much importance on one



leader creates a myth around one person, that leads to admiration, copycats, and a sense of “untouchability”, seen in particularly following Guzmán highly publicized escape from a maximum security jail.

Corruption at a governmental level

Corruption through intimidation or payoffs has long been seen as a given for the drug trafficking industry, and Guzmán’s recent trial in the US highlighted just how deep-rooted this corruption was. Starting in the late 1980s, the chief of Mexico City’s Federal Police accepted bribes and one of El Chapo’s main Colombian suppliers admitted to bribing everyone from Journalists to Tax Officials in Colombia, stating that “It’s impossible to be the leader of a drug cartel in Colombia without having corruption [...] they go hand in hand”. Furthermore, one of Guzmán’s former chiefs was ready to reveal two former Mexican presidents who had accepted bribes from the Sinaloa cartel. Within Venezuela, the state plays such a large part in drug trafficking due to corruption that it is nicknamed *Cartel de los Soles* or “Cartel of the Suns” an umbrella term for the network of communications and illicit operations amongst the military, private, and governmental sectors. Bolivia is often overlooked when regarding drug trafficking, however as a major producer of Coca, the plant used to make cocaine, and corruption in Bolivia is so widespread it is seen as an accepted part of life in the country. Especially amongst sectors such as the judiciary, police, and public administration.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC is an organisation within the United Nations founded in 1997, merging the preceding United Nations Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention. The UNODC aims to aid member states to control the trafficking, production, and distribution of illicit drugs, as well as aid in international trafficking situations. The organisation is based both in the field, helping member states’ ability to control drug trafficking, and in research and analytical aspects, increasing the knowledge and understanding of the drug trade while simultaneously helping states implement drug control programs. Aside from drug control, the UNODC also helps with drug-related crime and social issues, in particular organized crime, corruption, drug abuse and health, and terrorism prevention.

Mexico

Mexico is one of the largest drug suppliers in the world, as one of the two countries to share a border with the United States, allowing them to transport drugs across land. The



country grows marijuana itself, as well as transporting opiates and other hard drugs from further south. Violence is rampant as turf wars between cartels is common and the homicide rates in Mexico are much higher than the global average of 6.7 murders per 100,000 people, at 21.5 murders per 100,000 people. Cities such as Tijuana, a major connection point for drug trafficking across the border due to its proximity to the airport and the city of San Diego make it a particularly targeted area for cartel influence, and was recently named “Mexico’s most murderous city”, as over 2,000 homicides took place in 2018. While Afghanistan is the global leader in Poppy production for opiates, Mexico is increasing its production to meet american demand, and a steep rise in heroin users has created an opioid crisis that some dub a humanitarian crisis for the US.

United States of America

The US is heavily involved in the drug trafficking industry in south america, as it has led the ‘war on drugs’ in an attempt to prevent illicit drugs from entering their country. However, America leads as the world’s largest user of illegal drugs, generating a large demand that South America seeks to fill

Colombia

Colombia is the world’s largest producer and cultivator of coca, the plant used to make cocaine. According to the UNODC, approximately 169,000 hectares of land are used in Colombia for coca production, made possible due to the lack of state control. The organisation further says that an estimated 106,000 Colombian farmers live off coca farming. Colombian authorities have attempted to curb coca production by spraying chemicals over coca farms to forcibly destroy the crops, however due to its abundance this tends to affect poor farming families more than the trafficking or production industry itself.

Venezuela

Political instability has plagued all aspects of Venezuela for several years now, and Maduro’s essentially martial rule is fighting against self-elected Guaidó for influence. Analysts have speculated that most of the top commanders in the Venezuelan military are involved in drug trafficking and corruption, which is allowing the upper class to be catered to. The ‘cartel of the suns’, the name given to the semi-cartel run by Venezuelan authorities shows how the country is essentially a “mafia state” as political analysts have started to call it. Due to the political instability, people looking to flee the country are often used as mules, where the transportation of cocaine from Venezuela to the US is the payment for transportation.



Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)

The CND was established in 1946 by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to aid the process of drug control and legislation in member states. In 1991, the General Assembly enabled the CND to function as the main governing body of the UNODC with two main areas; “a normative segment for discharging treaty-based and normative functions, and an operational segment for exercising the role as the governing body of the UNODC”. There has been criticism in the past on the bureaucratic nature of the commission - the issue of drugs covered is a multidisciplinary topic covering health, development and human rights, however the CND rarely coordinates with other UN bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), or the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Other Latinamerican countries

While Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela are some of South America’s main producers of drugs, most latinamerican countries including Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil have a lucrative drug trade that can not be undermined, and there has been speculation that particularly in Peru, the drug trade could flourish due to the balloon effect placing pressure on other regions.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
June 1971	Nixon announces the “war on drugs”
1946	CND Founded
1969	Nixon temporarily closes the US-Mexico border to combat marijuana entering the US, with little success
1973	The DEA (Drug enforcement administration) is founded in the US
1993	Colombian police with help from the US track down and kill Pablo Escobar, dismantling the Mandellín cartel, causing traffickers in cali to rise in power
2000-2015	“Plan Colombia”, partnership between Colombia and the US to combat drug trafficking
2015	“El Chapo” escapes a top security jail through a tunnel in his cell
2017	El Chapo extradited to San Diego for trial after being recaptured in 2016



UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- United Nations convention against transnational organised crime and the protocols thereto, 12 December 2000
- Promoting alternative development as a development-oriented drug control strategy, 2019, (CND/RES/62/3)
- Report of the Secretary-General on illicit cross-border trafficking and movement, 19 October 2012, (S/2012/777)
- International Cooperation against the world drug problem, 18 December 2014 (A/RES/69/201)
- Drug control and related crime prevention assistance for countries emerging from conflict, 21 July 2004 (E/RES/2004/39)
- Contribution of the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to the high-level review of the implementation of the Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem, to be conducted by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2014, 6 December 2013 (UNODC/ED/2014/01)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There have been many attempts to solve the issue of drug cartels in South America, due to the devastating political, social, economic and even environmental impact that they have. However, it is often a lack of communication between different focusses that results in its failure.

The War on Drugs has been initiated by the United States, however as was previously mentioned, it is a difficult one to control due to the underlying persistent requirements of supply and demand. Often aggressive means are sought out such as burning coca or poppy fields, however this has very limited success and harms poor farmers rather than large cartels. In the late 20th Century, the United States aggressively targeted cocaine routes between Colombia and the United States, that were passing through the Caribbean Islands, however this only resulted in the cartels switching their routes to travel across land, through central America. This particularly affected Guatemala and Honduras, who were already politically very weak, and the small middle American countries became extremely violent, resulting in hundreds of refugees fleeing north to seek refuge in the United States.



The Kingpin strategy has been famous throughout the war on drugs however as governments attempt to dismantle leaders of cartels rather than causing its collapse, it leads to fractioning within the organisation, resulting in extreme violence due to opposing claims of leadership.

In 1999, President Clinton backed the Colombian president Pastrana's *Plan Colombia*, an aggressive agenda to curb drug cultivation and trafficking, pledging \$7.3 billion to the country. Amongst others, the program focused on aggressive eradication efforts, encouraging disarmament of guerrillas, and incentivising farmers to grow other crops. While plan colombia had limited success in that it reduced both coca and poppy cultivation, the balloon effect hugely boosted the industry northward in Mexico, preventing the plan from having much overall success. While in theory that plan was relatively realistic, it failed to recognise the political factor of the Colombia's civil unrest, and that the drug trade was intertwined with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - Guerrilla and Terrorist movement).

A longstanding possibility that many countries have been considering is the decriminalisation of drugs. The new president of Mexico, Obrador, has proposed a 5-year plan to decriminalise illegal drugs, which offers users treatment rather than punishment, by "redirecting the resources currently destined to combat their transfer and apply them in programs - massive, but personalised - of reinsertion and detoxification". This programme tackles the demand of drugs, as it allows for people at risk or already with a dependency to receive help, however it is less likely to be effective with drugs such as marijuana which is very popular recreationally in all areas of the Americas.

Possible Solutions

Decriminalisation and Legalisation are both very popular arguments, and the positive effects in countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, and Portugal can clearly be seen. However these nations are fundamentally more peaceful than South America, and have enjoyed political stability for decades. While the hope is that legalisation will cripple drug cartels, the implications of legalising drugs such as heroin have to be considered, and it can not be assumed that the illicit drug trafficking industry will simply dissolve. By decriminalising drugs, the trade becomes regulated, cultivators sell to certified buyers with much lower risk of violence and the overall price reduces as the clandestine aspects of the illegal drug trade - bribery, small scale transport, and elaborate schemes to secretly transport drugs across international borders - is no longer necessary. Furthermore, the legal drug industry could reduce the rate of unemployment, as well as bringing in revenue through taxation.



Another possible solution would be alternative development programs, that seems like the most sustainable one so far, due to the fact that it tackles the underlying issues of drug demand, as well as why people enter the trafficking industry. The resolution by the Commission on Narcotic Control 62/3 shows very well how through education and alternative development, people can be prompted to stay away from the trafficking industry by providing different prospects.

As the largest global consumer of illegal drugs, the United States needs to take some responsibility for the prominence of the drug trade in South America. To some extent, drugs are glorified in American culture through music and films, in part due to its 'mysterious' nature. Some states have decriminalised drugs such as marijuana, and there has been a massive movement towards the entire country legalising the practice, due to the success of doing so in other countries. The opposition to legalisation is the fear that it will become a gateway drug to harder drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamines, potentially ruining someone's life. However in nations where marijuana has been legal for a long time, people have argued that it is not seen as "special" in the way the United States views it, and that it is almost on par with tobacco.

When regarding possible solutions, the reality of corruption must also be addressed. Pouring money into nations where high-ranking government officials will use it for personal use will not do much to end the trade, and it is a complicated issue that can not be ignored, as corruption plays a fundamental role in the drug trafficking industry. Possibilities include sending in UN peacekeepers, aiding to stabilize currency in countries such as Venezuela where hyperinflation is a large issue for wages, or offering pardons to officers who come clean about their actions.

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Appendices

Appendix I

This video on youtube by Vox excellently explains the balloon effect and how drug trafficking routes for cocaine were formed, as well as how it affects the people of South America. <https://youtu.be/tWcV94G4rRI>

Appendix II

https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/organised-crime/UNITED_NATIONS_CONVENTION_AGAINST_TRANSNATIONAL_ORGANIZED_CRIME_AND_THE_PROTOCOLS_THERETO.pdf

Appendix III



This video demonstrates how the sinaloa cartel functioned under el Chapo, as well as providing an insight on the trafficking world and demonstrating how the kingpin strategy was employed and its effects. <https://youtu.be/v394vC23HW0>

Appendix IV

Figure 2. 2015 Map of DTO Areas of Dominant Influence Developed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration



Source: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), April 2015.

Appendix

V



