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POLICY / MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION

How the war on drugs perpetuates violence in Latin America

by **German Lopez**

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Mexican soldiers navigate through an opium poppy field. [Pedro Pardo / AFP via Getty Images](#)

The latest news out of Mexico is horrifying. Forty-three college students are likely dead after they were allegedly handed over to drug gangs by a mayor who feared the students would protest during a speech by his politically ambitious wife. Before the students' suspected remains were found, officials exhumed multiple mass graves and concluded

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parts of Latin America. And in many cases, the problems can be linked back to the war on drugs. Here's a primer on the issue.

What is the war on drugs?



A Mexican soldier navigates through an opium poppy field. (Pedro Pardo / AFP via Getty Images)

The war on drugs is an international effort to eradicate the supply and demand for illegal substances, ranging from the relatively benign marijuana to much more dangerous drugs like crack cocaine. The prohibition of these substances is tied to various international treaties, which require participants to work together to stop international drug trafficking and limit and even criminalize the possession, use, trade, and distribution of drugs outside of medical and scientific purposes within their own borders.

Most countries around the world willingly signed onto the war on drugs over the past century, but the US has been the effort's biggest international backer since the 1970s. Particularly in Latin America, the US has supplied military supplies, training, and intelligence through multibillion-dollar programs like the Merida Initiative in Mexico and Plan Colombia.

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the flow of drugs into the US and other developed countries, where most of the demand exists for illicit substances, shows no signs of slowing, with illegal drug prices as low as ever and US drug use actually up in the past couple decades.

After so much death, drug cartels and other criminal organizations are still able to cash into the black market and finance their violent operations around the world. How is this possible? There are two key factors perpetuating drug-related violence in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

1) The illicit drug market makes criminals enormously wealthy and powerful

The black market for illicit drugs enables criminal organizations' violent acts by providing them with a massive source of revenue that pays for hitmen, guns, and bribes. The market also creates an incentive for criminal organizations to compete through violence, since so much money is at stake.

The team at Information Is Beautiful charted just how valuable illegal drugs are compared to other crops, based on rough estimates gleaned from UN data for traditional cash crops and illicit substances.



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Information Is Beautiful

Sanho Tree, drug policy expert at the Institute for Policy Studies, said the high prices are made possible by drug prohibition. These drugs cost pennies by the dose to produce, but their value is increased through the supply chain to reflect the risk of losing a harvest to drug-busting government officials or rival criminal organizations.

The inflated cost creates a huge financial incentive for criminal organizations to get into the business of drugs, no matter the risks. They might lose some of their product along the way, but any product that makes it through is immensely profitable.

Criminal groups would likely take up other activities — human trafficking, kidnapping, gun smuggling, extortion — if the drug market didn't exist. But experts argue drugs are uniquely profitable and empower criminal organizations in a way no other market can.

“It's way easier to make \$100,000 to \$200,000 off the smuggling of a couple kilos of cocaine, heroin, or whatever it might be than it is to make the same amount of money kidnapping someone and getting ransom for them,” said Isaac Campos, a drug historian at the University of Cincinnati. “Humans are much more difficult to transport, keep captive, and deal with than a couple kilos of cocaine.”

2) Many Latin American institutions are too weak to deal with drug traffickers



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Federal police guard an alleged member of a drug cartel in Tepacatepec, Mexico. (Alfredo Estrella / AFP via Getty Images)

Criminal justice institutions in Latin America are generally weak — they lack proper funding and training, they serve largely impoverished populations, and they're often overseen by politicians who are much more interested in lining their own pockets and preserving their own power base than putting an end to poverty and violence. When this vulnerability meets wealthy drug cartels and other criminal groups, it's easy for corruption to seep in.

Drug traffickers often deploy the threat of “plata o plomo” (“silver or lead”) to tell public officials that they need to either take a bribe or a bullet. In developed countries, strong criminal justice systems make such threats less likely to occur and succeed. But in Mexico, Colombia, and other hubs of trafficking activity, these threats work.

The war on drugs “magnifies and exacerbates” institutional weaknesses, said John Walsh, drug policy expert at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). While the drug war isn't the cause of such issues, “magnifying problems that are already so huge is a big deal.”

The combination of both factors creates a cycle of violence



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Graves in the city of Juarez, Mexico, which has been roiled by drug-related violence in recent years.
(Richard Ellis / Getty Images News)

The combination of weak government institutions and empowered cartels creates a vicious cycle in Latin American countries. Drug traffickers become more powerful when they take advantage of the local government, and the government becomes less trusted and, as a result, even weaker when it submits to criminal groups.

Democratic gains in Mexico since the 1990s, Campos said, are “really being undermined now by all this violence and with the Mexican state militarizing the whole country.”

And anti-drug operations can actually make the whole situation more unstable and volatile. When international law enforcement sweeps in and hits cartels and their leadership, it “unleashes power struggles within an organization or amongst rivals,” said Tree of the Institute for Policy Studies. “You end up with younger lieutenants who think with their testosterone more than their brains.”

The operations sometimes cause cartels to move to other countries instead of actually eliminating them. As John Lyons at the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) in 2012, US-backed counternarcotic operations in Colombia merely displaced drug traffickers. Since the insatiable international demand for drugs remained even after Colombian crops were destroyed, traffickers opted to move to more vulnerable neighboring countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru, rather than close shop altogether.

[The child migrant crisis](#) over the summer similarly [exemplified](#) the unintended consequences of the war on drugs. Anti-drug efforts in Colombia and Mexico increased some trafficking activity in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The new trafficking activity in these three countries strengthened local gangs and cartel branches, making them more capable of violence and extortion. In the face of such violence, terrified Central American families sent their children north to try to find refuge in the US.

Potential fixes are complicated, but ending the drug war could help



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People in Acapulco, Mexico, stand by a burnt-out car near a shopping center in which 15 decapitated bodies were found. (Katie Orlinsky / Getty Images News)

Experts caution that, first and foremost, Latin American countries will need to take on serious reforms and economic investments to make government organizations much more capable of dealing with violence and corruption. “There is no substitute for building a healthy society,” Tree said.

Ending the modern incarnation of the drug war — through the decriminalization or legalization of all drugs — could help as well. “It has to be helpful to reduce that income to criminal enterprises,” Walsh of WOLA said. “And that makes the challenge of reforming institutions, including police and judicial systems, more manageable.”

But ending drug prohibition across Latin America alone would likely not be enough, since most of the demand for illicit drugs comes from the US and other developed countries. To that end, drug policy experts say legalizing or decriminalizing drugs in the US and Europe may actually do more to stop illegal drug trafficking in Latin America than doing the same in Mexico, Colombia, or any other country in the region.

Supporters of the war on drugs, particularly those in law enforcement, argue that the recent struggles and failures of the war on drugs aren’t a reason to give up. They point to the successful killings and arrests of drug kingpins like Joaquin “El Chapo”

Guzman, who headed the powerful Sinaloa cartel in Mexico, as proof the drug war can be won and drug cartels can be beaten back with the proper time and resources. (A Drug Enforcement Administration spokesperson in 2013 went so far as to compare the drug war to the fight against cancer when he said, “We haven’t cured cancer or prevented poverty. There are a lot of things that haven’t been prevented, but that doesn’t mean you stop trying to wage the good fight.”)

There is also considerable disagreement among policy experts for how to phase out the

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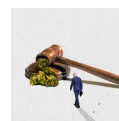


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