

Forum: General Assembly 1 (Beginner)

Issue: Addressing drug addiction and the narcotics trade in Central and South America

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Introduction



Figure 1: 2020 Drug trafficking routes in Central America

Drug addiction and the narcotics trade in South America pose a multifaceted and exceedingly complex challenge to the health, security, and economic stability of the region. For the last few decades, South America has been a major hub for illegal substance production and trafficking, especially in the case of cocaine and cannabis. Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia are major producers of these drugs, while Ecuador is a major transit point for international networks that transport drugs. The direct visible effects of drug addiction can be seen in much of the region's years of death and years lived with disability. In a recent paper, published in *Lancet Psychiatry*, serious harm exists in substance use; Cocaine is the major focus of prevention programs since it

tends to be much more widely used, leading to significant disorders. Also, while still low compared to global averages, opioid use has been elevating concerns in particular places: Brazil now displayed a visible uptick in associated medical issues. Among responses is PAHO's initiatives looking to enhance the policies of substance use disorders while providing technical support to several countries along the way. The drug trade has continued to be a source of violence and instability; comprehensive strategies are greatly needed that integrate health initiatives along with security arrangements and social support. In the forthcoming pages of this report, we will approach the current drug addiction and narcotics trade in South America, covering the problems and possible solutions to attenuate their effects.

Key Terminology

Addiction

A chronic, relapsing disease characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite serious adverse consequences, and by long-lasting changes in the brain.

Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

The most severe form of substance use disorder, associated with compulsive or uncontrolled use of one or more substances

Opioid/ Opiate

A term that designates all compounds, natural and synthetic, that bind to and activate any of the opioid receptors.

Refers to opioids derived from the naturally occurring alkaloid compounds produced in the opium poppy, including morphine and codeine

Relapse

The recurrence of symptoms after a period of sobriety or drug use cessation.

Medication for Addiction Treatment (MAT)

Medications specifically indicated for and prescribed to treat substance use disorders, such as buprenorphine for opioid use disorder

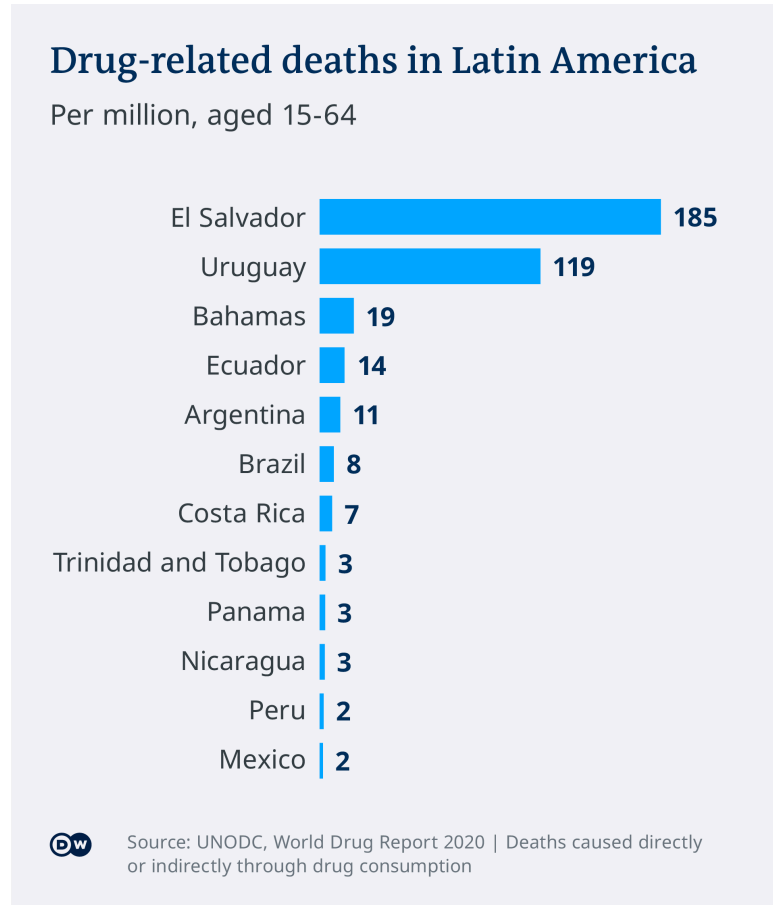
Detoxification (Detox)

The process of gradually removing a substance from the body with the help of medical professionals to minimize withdrawal symptoms

Background

Introduction

Drug addiction and the trade of narcotics have long been considered problems in South American and Central American history. Considering the rise of the South American drug cartels especially during the 1980s, their role within the drug trade shifted from being local distributors of narcotics to having full control of the trade routes within the region becoming responsible for the increase uptake in North American and Central American Countries. This change was caused by the U.S. crackdowns on Mexican drug traffickers, which opened the doors for South Americans to take advantage of. Colombia, with its Medellín and Cali cartels, controlled the cocaine trade thanks to U.S. demand and a revived interest in coca supplies in Bolivia and Peru. Historically, the coca leaf has been used for many centuries in Andean traditional medicine and rituals. However, in modern times, the cocaine trade transformed this into a world illicit industry. This is due to the coca leaf's addictive properties, which floods the brain's reward system with dopamine by blocking its reuptake, creating intense euphoria and reinforcing drug-seeking behavior through long-lasting changes in brain circuits that regulate pleasure and motivation. As a result, the Medellín cartel, one of the most notorious gangs in the region, which was headed by Pablo Escobar, who is known for a reign of violence and complete domination of the cocaine trade, took advantage of the coca leaf's addictive nature which lead to the establishment of drug trade routes within the region. Following Escobar's death in 1993, the Cali cartel briefly took control, but its leaders were extradited to the U.S., which resulted in the fragmentation of the Colombian drug trade. The following information will dive into the economic, political, social, and environmental aspects of the drug trade issue.



Economic aspects

The illicit drug trade has continued to garner revenue for organized crime, from the wholesale price of cocaine, which is highly inflated as the illicit merchandise is smuggled out of Colombia into the U.S., worth about \$1,000 per kilogram on the average in Colombia while going over \$30,000 in America. However, this helps feed corruption in local economies since profits enable the syndicates to cause trafficking networks to expand even further. Although the drug trade generates income, it also promotes economic unsettlement through thus causing corruption and competition for legitimate means of generating income. In Central America, the drug trade's influence can distort local economies, leading to uneven development and social inequality. This instability discourages foreign investment and hampers economic growth.

Political aspects

Drug trafficking corrupts state institutions, thus weakening governance and the rule of law. This is evidenced in Central America, where organized crime has permeated state institutions and hindered their ability to resist trafficking adequately. Special focuses must also be given to the issue of corruption in law-enforcement agencies in Mexico, which is one of the key blocks to any effective action against the cartels. Such an issue strains international relations, especially between the U.S. and Latin American countries. Divergent positions on drug policy and drug law enforcement create tensions that have included heated disputes between the U.S. and Colombia in the past. The U.S. has been pressuring countries to implement stricter drug enforcement policies, whereas some Latin American countries are trying to push for a more flexible policy which includes, among other things, decriminalization.

Social aspects

The social impacts of the drug trade in South America and Central America are profound and multifaceted, affecting public health, community stability, and social cohesion. Drug addiction is a major public health issue, with cocaine use becoming very prevalent in the Americas region. In South America, countries like Colombia and Brazil have witnessed the impacts of drug-related usage with above-average rates of drug-related disorders. The drug trade also fuels violence and crime, particularly in Central America, as recent studies observed that drug-related homicides are among the highest in the world. Furthermore, the drug trade disrupts social structures, exacerbating issues such as family instability, youth vulnerability, and migration. For instance economic instability provides an opportunity for recruiters to traffic young people and to recruit them into cartels disrupting existing social structures. Additionally, the violence associated with drug trafficking contributes to migration and displacement, as individuals flee their homes to escape violence, leading to social and economic challenges in both their home countries and destination countries which is shown from the ongoing border crisis between the U.S and Mexico. Data highlights the severity of these impacts, with cocaine use being a significant public health concern and Central America reporting some of the highest homicide rates globally, such as El Salvador's rate of about 52 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020.

Environmental aspects

Drug traffickers have contributed to deforestation through the clearing of land to grow drugs and for laundering drug money through land purchases. In Central America, this has resulted in considerable forest loss, especially in protected areas due to increased farming presence in forests. Concerningly, coca cultivation with herbicides and other chemicals has wreaked even more havoc on the environment destroying local ecosystems and displacing animals in the area. The drug trade, beyond deforestation, has worsened climate change by promoting unsustainable land practices, damaged biodiversity, and consequently affected local communities that rely on natural resources for their livelihood.

Major Parties Involved

Mexico

- **Involvement:** Mexico is a fundamental transit country for the United States considering the drugs which are coming through it, while a great number of powerful cartels such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels have dragged Mexico into a cycle of instability and poverty; these traffickers traffic various kinds of drugs-from cocaine, heroin, to meth.
- **Stance:** The Mexican government has implemented various strategies to combat drug trafficking, including military operations and cooperation with the U.S. However, corruption and violence remain significant challenges.
- **Implications:** Mexico's cartels play a crucial role in the global narcotics trade, and their activities have profound implications for regional security and stability.

Colombia:

- **Involvement:** Colombia is a major producer of cocaine, with groups like the Urabeños involved in drug trafficking. Historically, the Medellín and Cali cartels dominated the cocaine trade, and while their influence has waned, new groups continue to emerge.

- **Stance:** The Colombian government has been combating drug trafficking through military and negotiating activities with insurgents ravaging the countryside. Coca cultivation and cocaine production still remain out there.
- **Implications:** Colombia's producing capacity as a number one in cocaine goes quite a long way to maintain the world cocaine routes since they all pass through Central America to North America.

United States:

- **Involvement:** Drugs produced in South and Central America are consumed in large quantities by the U.S. market. The U.S. has also taken steps to stop drugs from coming into their country. An example of this effort is the Merida Initiative with Mexico.
- **Stance:** The U.S. government emphasizes supply reduction and interdiction efforts but has also begun to focus on demand reduction and public health approaches to address addiction.
- **Implications:** U.S. demand drives much of the narcotics trade, and its policies significantly influence regional dynamics. Efforts to address addiction as a public health issue could reduce demand and impact trafficking patterns.

Central American Countries (e.g., Panama, Belize, Guatemala):

- **Involvement:** Drugs from South America traveling to North America pass through these nations. Drugs are moved through Panama by the Urabeños, as well as local trafficking operations through Belize and Guatemala.
- **Stance:** Central American governments face challenges in combating drug trafficking due to limited resources and corruption. They have sought international support to enhance their capabilities.
- **Implications:** The role of Central America as a transit region significantly impacts regional security and stability, with drug trafficking contributing to violence and instability. Strengthening security efforts within the region can reduce the flow of drugs through the region.

Pan American Health Organization (PAHO):

- **Involvement:** PAHO has implemented various initiatives to improve substance use disorders policies and provide technical for countries like Colombia, Costa Rica, and

Panama. Their initiatives train health workers while upgrading the countries' capabilities regarding public health and social care.

- Stance: PAHO aims to improve health and well-being in the Americas by addressing public health challenges, including substance use disorders.
- Implications: PAHO's work helps shift the focus from criminalization to public health approaches, which can reduce stigma and improve access to treatment for those affected by drug addiction.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime(UNODC):

- Involvement: Technical assistance and advisory services are mainly provided to Central America and Mexico by UNODC in an attempt to tackle drug trafficking and organized crime. Such initiatives include the SICA-UNODC Mechanism that coordinates policy enhancement and supports UN conventions implementation.
- Stance: The UNODC works to address the world's drug problem through international cooperation and assistance to countries in their efforts to combat drug trafficking and related crimes.
- Implications: UNODC's efforts help strengthen regional cooperation and institutional capacity, which are crucial for effective drug control strategies.

European Union:

- Involvement: The European Union has become involved via programs such as COPOLAD III, which aims to enhance cooperation with Latin American and Caribbean countries on drug policies, discussions on alternative development, better access to services in health, and measures against drug trafficking and money laundering.
- Stance: The EU emphasizes a comprehensive approach that includes both law enforcement and public health strategies.
- Implications: EU involvement helps leverage international cooperation and resources to address the global nature of drug trafficking.

Timeline of Events

| Date | Description/Note |
|------|------------------|
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|-----------------------------|---|
| Early 1920s to 1930s | Cocaine begins to be seen as dangerous and is banned by the U.S. government. Early drug regulations in Latin America are influenced by European and North American theories, often targeting Indigenous practices related to psychoactive substances |
| Late 1980s | Mexican cartels become more involved in cocaine distribution, receiving payment in product rather than cash |
| 1990s | U.S.-Colombia relations are strained over drug trafficking, with the U.S. pushing for supply reduction |
| 1993 | Pablo Escobar's death marks a shift in the Colombian cartels' dominance |
| Early 2000s | Distribution networks shift from the Caribbean to the U.S.-Mexico border, with Mexican cartels becoming major player |
| 2010s | Central America becomes a key transit point due to high levels of corruption and instability |
| 2012 | The Cartagena summit leads to the Organization of American States (OAS) analyzing current drug policies and exploring alternatives. |
| 2015 | Jamaica decriminalizes the limited possession of marijuana and legalizes home cultivation for personal medicinal consumption and spiritual purposes. Chile legalizes marijuana for medicinal purposes, and Colombia approves a law legalizing marijuana for medical and scientific purposes |
| 2016 | The U.S. Alliance for Prosperity aims to address root causes of drug trade in Central America |
| Present | Ongoing debates over drug legalization and decriminalization continue in Latin America, with countries like Colombia exploring flexibilities around coca and marijuana regulations |

Previous Attempts/Solutions

Regional security and law enforcement initiatives

Regional security and law enforcement initiatives have been a benchmark of the strategies to combat drug use and trade in the southern and central parts of America. As an example, the UNODC Regional Program for Central America was launched under the Central America Integration System, SICA, to assist in Coordinated Efforts Against Drug Trafficking in 2009. Technical assistance in the form of specialized prosecution units and the coordination of regional policies was provided under this initiative. The key parts included the SICA-UNODC Mechanism (Santo Domingo Pact), designed to improve the coordination of policies between Central America and the Caribbean, promote analysis of organized crime trends, and implement UN conventions on drugs as well as corruption. The other was the establishment of a Regional Network of Prosecutors Against Organized Crime. The Maritime Security Centre was set up in Panama and dedicated to the interception of drug trafficking via maritime routes. However, corruptions and a lack of total resources still hampered continued success despite efforts; consequently, violence remains high in the pockets of trafficking. Another major move was the Interdiction Efforts Backed by the United States (Andean Initiative) during the 1990s. The U.S.-backed program offered military assistance and added training on counter-narcotics efforts into Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia to disrupt coca and poppy production. However, the initiative failed to curb long-term production due to the "balloon effect," where coca cultivation increased due to displacement effects, and smaller, more violent trafficking groups emerged.

Public health campaigns

Public health and harm reduction approaches have been utilized to address addiction. A UNODC-led project, the Central American Treatment and Rehabilitation Network, sought to create regional networks for the treatment of drug addiction and social reintegration. Due to the underfunding and fragmented health systems, such progress has been slow, yet this laid the groundwork for policies that could potentially support harm reduction in the future. Some countries, such as Colombia and Uruguay, have shifted toward regulated drug markets and public health strategies, for instance, decriminalization of personal use and expansion of addiction treatment. Early evidence suggests reduced stigma and better access to treatment, but systemic violence linked to trafficking persists.

“Mano Dura” policies

Militarized "Mano Dura" policies were introduced by Central American governments. They employ measures of extreme anti-gang laws, such as mass incarcerating suspected gang members. However, these measures have caused vicious crime conditions, and in their turn, they have backfired, continuous strengthening of gang networks, and an increased level of violence: in fact, the homicide rate keeps on very well in Honduras and El Salvador, still still high in world affairs.

International UN conventions on drug trade

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961):

This treaty is an international agreement that controls activities involving specific narcotic drugs, including their cultivation, production, supply, trade, and transport. It established a system of regulations for medical and scientific uses of these substances and created the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) to oversee compliance. The treaty has been amended, notably in 1972, and has been ratified by most countries worldwide, including those in South America.

Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971):

This treaty regulates substances such as LSD, MDMA, and other psychoactive pharmaceuticals. It complements the Single Convention by extending control to a broader range of substances

United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988)

Known as the Vienna Convention, this treaty aims to combat the illicit trafficking of drugs by requiring countries to criminalize certain activities related to drug trafficking and to cooperate internationally to prevent such trafficking

South American Agreement on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (ASEP)

This regional agreement facilitates cooperation among South American countries to combat drug trafficking. It involves coordinating measures, exchanging information, and organizing training programs to enhance drug control efforts

Potential Solutions

To effectively address the complex issues of drug addiction and narcotics trade in South and Central America, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Shifting focus toward public health strategies through the implementation of means such as expanding access to addiction treatment and implementing harm reduction programs. Economic development initiatives could also play a crucial role by providing alternative livelihoods and addressing underlying social issues considering the fact that poverty and social inequality are root causes of the drug trade problem. Additionally, legal and policy reforms might be explored to adapt to changing global perspectives on drug control, allowing for more flexible and effective responses to the evolving nature of the drug trade.

Strengthened regional and security cooperation could further interrupt trafficking; international support, with its funding, could provide for training, infrastructure, and technology, further supporting these efforts. In addition, this could constitute part of a greater strategy towards reducing the incentives for drug production and trafficking by addressing demand in the consumer countries and providing alternative crop programs to farmers. Alternative crop programs will incentivize community members to provide greater service to the country as those educated by said programs will better understand the detriments of the drug problem and will understand the greater benefit of growing crops over drugs. The role of community involvement and social programs to build resilience against drug violence and allow people to live without resorting to drug use or trafficking should be considered as well.

Ultimately, the effectiveness lies in collaboration within a multi-stakeholder framework to develop options that best respond to the distinctive regional needs of local communities, governments, international organizations, and civil society, while sustaining a constant dialogue focused on both immediate and long-term needs. Building a comprehensive and inclusive framework is a path toward combating drug trafficking while promoting and supporting the social and economic development of the region. To be effective, this framework must be adaptable to operate in an emerging situation while keeping it fluent with the rapidly changing scene regarding drug abuse and drug promotion.

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