

# Drug Trafficking

## History of the Current Situation

### Central America Drug Trafficking routes



Latin America has been the center of the drug trafficking debate for most recent part of world history. Given the location of many Latin American nations the climate makes producing illegal drugs easier in many nations. Corruption has also fueled the spread of illegal drugs and drug trafficking networks. Many Latin American governments struggle to maintain effective control within their boundaries in order to

prevent drug trafficking and the cultivation of drugs. Drug trafficking has increased in more recent decades as the popularity and desire for illegal drugs has increased. Supply of many illegal drugs have increased also in part to the production becoming cheaper for the manufacturer. Drug trafficking in the US become a large issue even before the 19th century with the smuggling of opium, marijuana, and cocaine.<sup>1</sup> There have been many well-known cartels in much of South America and Latin America. Some include the mafia, Pablo Escobar and The Medellín cartel, the Cali cartel, Manuel Noriega and his involvement in Panama shipping cocaine into the US, and most recently El Chapo in Mexico. Even though many of the leaders have been captured, prosecuted or killed by authorities, drug trafficking remains an issue throughout the Americas.

Drug trafficking is just as big of a problem, if not bigger, in countries outside of the United States. Drug trafficking and the illicit drug trade help promote corruption and thrives in corrupt environments, leading to the corruption of many national and local governments throughout the region. Countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Panama, and Venezuela have all faced similar issues in trying to combat the drug trade. Many of the main issues when seeking to solve drug trafficking include governmental corruption, the drug trade's societal effects, deaths caused by traffickers, the reduction of the drug supply, and the relationship between these issues and the correctional system.

## Government Corruption

A major source of corruption is from the traffickers negotiating deals with governments for them to back off of them and let them continue. For example, during Pablo Escobar's time as the leader of the

<sup>1</sup> "History of Drug Trafficking." *History*. <https://www.history.com/topics/history-of-drug-trafficking>.

Medellín cartel he would constantly be in contact with either the president or another member of the cabinet to guarantee that his operation could continue under certain terms.<sup>2</sup> Escobar wasn't the only one negotiating with governments while trafficking many others have followed his lead. In Mexico, more recently, drug cartels have begun funding electoral campaigns in order to have government officials who are unlikely to seek to punish them or curtail the drug trade.<sup>3</sup> But corruption from the trade is not limited to just bribes to elected government officials, with police officers often targeted with bribes to ignore the illicit drug trade.<sup>4</sup> Government corruption is not limited to one area along the path of the drug trade, it exists where drugs are cultivated, where they are synthesized, the areas through which they are transited, and in the places where they are sold.

### **Lack of Punishment**

The recent lack of punishment for traffickers has led to many deaths and many left missing. Violence and robberies have become great concerns of citizens in regions. This lack of punishment for traffickers has allowed many to continue their operations and continuing their shipping of drugs across borders. Law enforcement does not possess the manpower to cover each boarder and to catch every smuggler but there have been efforts made to alleviate the issue. Not punishing repeat drug offenders allows others to believe that they will not be caught either. Impunity for drug trafficking and violence related to the drug trade is particularly notable in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (also known as the Northern Triangle).<sup>5</sup>

### **Legislation**

There has been legislation proposed worldwide to prohibit the sale and possession of illegal drugs. In some cases, the legislation has worked, and in some it has failed to make any progress. In October of 2009 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported major declines in production of heroin and cocaine worldwide.<sup>6</sup> This was a huge milestone in the fight to end drug trafficking globally. However, in more recent years legislation is becoming tougher to pass and government officials are stricter about what is included in a piece of legislation. In several countries in the Americas, such as Uruguay, the United States and Canada, there have been recent pushes to legalize drugs such as marijuana. More lucrative drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, are not currently seeing a push for legalization.

## **Cost to Society**

The cost of protecting civilians and ensuring the control of drug trafficking is high. Since 2002 the cost to society has been totaled at approximately \$180.9 billion. This cost which is divided between various costs like health care and productivity losses according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. This cost to society has also impacted many divisions of governmental security forces such as the DEA, FBI, and CIA, which is divided between various costs like health care and productivity

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<sup>2</sup> "20 Years After Pablo: The Evolution of Colombia's Drug Trade." *Insight Crime*.

<https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/20-years-after-pablo-the-evolution-of-colombias-drug-trade/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Mexico drug cartel's grip on politicians and police revealed in Texas court files." *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/10/mexico-drug-cartels-grip-on-politicians-and-police-revealed-in-texas-court-files>.

<sup>4</sup> "Cop accused of drug trafficking tired to get money to run for office, officials say." *CNN*.

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/23/us/texas-cop-drug-trafficking-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Central America's Violent Northern Triangle." *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle>.

<sup>6</sup> "Successful fight against Drug Trafficking, Transnational Organized Crime Requires Interlocking National, Regional, International Strategies, Third Committee Told." *United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2009/gashc3948.doc.htm>.

losses according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Once large quantities of illegal drugs reach an area the desire for the specific drug rises which may lead to more deaths or illness.<sup>7</sup>

### **Protection for civilians**

In many cases civilians, mainly innocent bystanders, are victims of the drug traffickers. Drug traffickers will do anything to make themselves known to the country's citizens and the government leaders. Police forces are available in some countries to provide support and protection to the civilians. However, many countries cannot afford the necessary protection for the citizens leaving many unprotected and vulnerable. Other countries can offer support to others who are dealing with more severe cases of drug trafficking and violence but it is not as common. In extreme cases civilians will begin to cooperate with the traffickers if they guarantee their safety when the government will not or cannot. That can lead to increased tension between the traffickers and the local police force. Therefore, protecting civilians before the traffickers get too violent is essential when considering the many costs to society.

### **Allocation of funds to government agencies**

The loss of funds due to drug trafficking impacts American Agencies such as the DEA and the FBI. Decreasing funding to valuable drug prevention agencies will take a country out of the fight against illegal drug trafficking almost entirely. Funding key agencies allows a country to guarantee that illegal drug traffickers are being monitored and the flow of illegal drugs are being halted in a specific country. Therefore, by cutting the funds to key agencies opposing drug trafficking, countries are putting themselves at risk of traffickers of illegal drugs taking control of their country through immense violence. Additionally, the drug trade promotes the creation of a black market for illicit drugs, weapons and even everyday items. In Colombia drug cartels have created a black market for explosives which they use to illegally mine gold.<sup>8</sup> An expansive and developed black market allows criminal groups to acquire arms and avoid paying taxes, costing many governments vital tax revenue that could be spent on policing programs, improving correctional and judicial systems, or rehabilitation programs.

## **Deaths due to Trafficking**

### **Civilian Deaths**

Civilian deaths are increasing as the flow of illegal drugs increases in a country. Deaths are caused by traffickers becoming violent in an effort to seize control of a city or town. Civilians are not typically the intended target of drug traffickers but may be targeted to send a message to government officials. Civilian deaths matter because many are not involved with the trafficking or supplying of illegal drugs and are simply caught in the crossfire between warring cartels or security forces. Countries have made efforts to try and limit the number of civilian deaths but have had little success. Mexico, for example, is dealing with the most civilian deaths ever due to the cartels and the flow of illegal drugs.<sup>9</sup> Mexico's efforts to tackle the drug trade and its violence has been hampered by corruption among federal and local security forces as well as terrible prison conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> "Problems Caused by Drug Trafficking." *AZCentral*. <https://healthyliving.azcentral.com/problems-caused-by-drug-trafficking-12532597.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Dirty gold is the new cocaine in Colombia—and it's just as bloody." *Miami Herald*.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/colombia/article194188034.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Mexico's bloody drug war is killing more people than ever." *Los Angeles Times*. <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-murders-20170721-story.html>.

## Deaths of Government officials

Assassinations of government officials is becoming less of an issue in the fight against drug trafficking, but it is still a major threat from drug traffickers. For example, during Pablo Escobar's reign of drug trafficking in the early 1990s there were multiple assassination attempts on then-President Virgilio Barco Vargas. No recent government leaders have been met by assassins but others in law enforcement and local government have. Police officers and border officers have been involved in violent combat with traffickers resulting in many deaths for both sides. Therefore, the need to protect any and all involved in fighting drug trafficking is essential for any success in stopping the flow of illegal drugs.

## Supply Reduction

### The Supply and Demand Problem

Most of the illicit drugs found in the United States come from countries in Central and South America.<sup>10</sup> However, a majority of the drugs come from Mexico, specifically marijuana, meth, cocaine and heroin.<sup>11</sup> By identifying the source of the smuggling of drugs agencies like the DEA can better target suspected smugglers and seize the drugs before they enter the United States.<sup>12</sup> While trying to stop drug flows through Central America and Mexico and drug cultivation throughout the Americas are important to tackling drug trafficking, it is arguably more important to try and reduce the

demand for illicit drugs in the United States and Canada. As long as a demand exists, drugs will continue to be produced and trafficked, meaning that the negative externalities associated with drug trafficking will continue to exist. This is not to say that the demand for illicit drugs will ever be reduced to nothing, but efforts must be taken to reduce it in order to reduce the drug trade.

### Regional body Reduction of Supply

With the source of the supply of the illegal drugs known there should be regional agencies set up to work together to ensure the drugs don't travel across into other countries. Reduction measures

proposed by the OAS has been hemispherical supply reduction. This strategy would allow countries within the same hemisphere to work together to reduce the supply of illegal drugs from flowing throughout the hemispherical region.

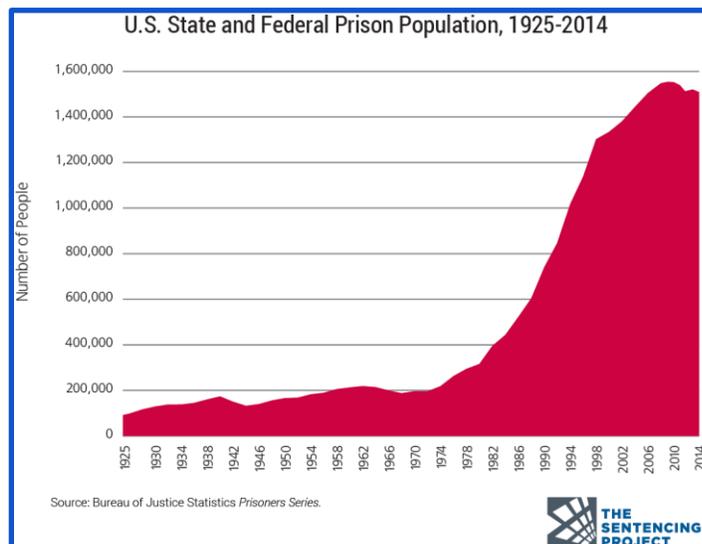
## Impacts to the Correctional System

<sup>10</sup> "The drug addiction pipeline: who supplies drugs to America?" *The Recovery Village*.

<https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/drug-addiction/who-supplies-drugs-america/#gref>.

<sup>11</sup> "Drug trafficking by the numbers." *The Recovery Village*. <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/drug-addiction/drug-trafficking-by-the-numbers/#gref>.

<sup>12</sup> "Informing America's Policy on Illegal Drugs: What We Don't Know Keeps Hurting Us." *The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine*. <https://www.nap.edu/read/10021/chapter/7#138>.



## Overcrowding in Jails

As of 2013, 27.6 percent of drug offenders were imprisoned for marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin.<sup>13</sup> The number of inmates in prison has risen approximately 790 percent since 1980. Today the number of inmates locked up in federal prisons is 215,000 inmates. Given the sharp rise in inmates in prison has led to increasing inmates across the country. The large increase in inmates can be credited to the creation of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. Overcrowding jails has caused the living conditions of all inmates to become poor. Since the imprisonment rate of drug offenders has increased steadily the conditions in many federal prisons have declined. Prisons are overloading cells and dealing with unsanitary facilities.<sup>14</sup> As a result of mass overpopulation inmates receive less time in the cafeteria or in the recreation facilities. Overcrowding also leads to violence among inmates. Inmates get into disputes with each other with guard intervention during free times. Many times, the guards trying to intervene in altercations are assaulted by inmates.

Poor prison conditions are not limited to the United States, with Brazil and Mexico also noted for deplorable conditions. Investigators from Human Rights Watch found in one prison they went to there were 60 men to each cell, with only 6 beds; hardly enough floor space to fit all 60 of them.<sup>15</sup> From December 2014 to June 2016 the number of prisoners increased by 17%, while prison capacity decreased. Overcrowded prisons make it easier for diseases to spread and also contributes to violence between prisoners and drug gangs. Across Brazil's prisons, 40% of inmates are awaiting trial, not having been convicted of a crime, but stuck in an overburdened prison system. At the Anisio Jobim complex, which has the capacity for 590 inmates, despite housing 2,230 inmates, a massacre in 2017 saw 60 people die.<sup>16</sup> The situation in Mexico is not much better. When government officials inspected 130 prisons 95 lacked adequate guards and staff and 104 did not keep inmates convicted of crimes separate of those awaiting trial.<sup>17</sup> Incarceration in Mexico and overburdened court systems have allowed prisons to fall under the control of drug cartels and other gangs, serving as a vital recruiting network for these criminal organizations.<sup>18</sup> A report from Mexico's National Human Rights Commission found that 54% of Mexico's prisons are effectively run by drug cartels.<sup>19</sup> While it is important to imprison criminals, mismanaged and overburdened prison systems run the risk of empower criminal organizations and starting a deadly cycle of violence.

## Increasing cost of correctional institutions

A sharp increase in prisoners in American jails and prisons has driven the cost of running the facilities up than in previous decades. Imprisoning more criminals does not directly raise revenue to states as desired. It lowers revenue due to the lack of governmental funding and a need to hire and

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<sup>13</sup> "Just How Much The War on Drugs Impacts Our Overcrowded Prisons, In One Chart." *Huffington Post*. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/10/war-on-drugs-prisons-infographic\\_n\\_4914884.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/10/war-on-drugs-prisons-infographic_n_4914884.html).

<sup>14</sup> "Overcrowding in Federal Prisons Harms Inmates, Guards: GAO Report." *Huffington Post*. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/14/prison-overcrowding-report\\_n\\_1883919.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/14/prison-overcrowding-report_n_1883919.html).

<sup>15</sup> "Prison conditions Worsen in Brazil." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/08/prison-conditions-worsen-brazil>.

<sup>16</sup> "Brazil's overcrowded prisons experience massacres 'almost daily'." *ABC News*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-03/brazils-notorious-prisons-built-to-annihilate-torture-and-kill/8158518>.

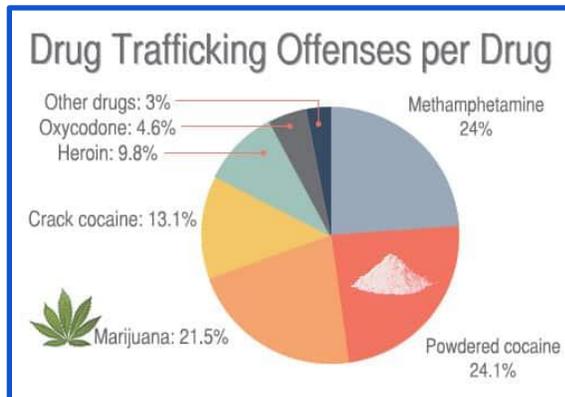
<sup>17</sup> "Report: Most Mexican prisons overcrowded, dirty, dangerous." *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/7b1f29a8cf0f4ad89e772e6ca473f029>.

<sup>18</sup> "Murders, corruption and crime: The hell of Mexican prisons." *The Journal*. <http://www.thejournal.ie/mexican-prisons-3418092-Jun2017/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Drug cartels 'rule half o Mexico's prisons,' new report reveals." *El País*. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/04/14/inenglish/1460640287\\_474129.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/04/14/inenglish/1460640287_474129.html).

pay more corrections officers to watch over the prisons. As the federal prison population soared, spending ballooned 595 percent between 1980 and 2013 without delivering a convincing public safety return.<sup>20</sup> In 2009, the DEA alone made 30,567 drug-related arrests, many of who ended up in federal penitentiaries across the United States. This does not include the more than 1.5 million other drug-related arrests at the state level, ranging from possession to trafficking, reports the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

## Case Study



### Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel

Beginning in the early 1980's the trafficking of cocaine began to rise to levels that had never been seen before. The leader of Colombia's largest cartel, The Medellín cartel, was Pablo Escobar.<sup>21</sup> Pablo's rise in the trafficking scene came with increasing violence towards the Colombian Government officials and local police forces. At the height of cocaine trafficking in Colombia, Pablo and the Medellín cartel were making approximately \$420 million USD a week in revenue. Making the cartel the richest in the world at the time. With millions of

dollars in revenue came countless acts of violence from the cartel in efforts to keep cocaine flowing out of Colombia, through Central America and onto the United States, Canada and Western Europe.

In a joint effort the Colombian police force and the United States DEA led an all-out manhunt for Pablo Escobar. The two groups were able to shut down most of the cartel's cocaine laboratories. The United States DEA located top Sicarios of Escobar to gain valuable information about Escobar himself and the inner workings of the cartel. The Medellín cartel was met with its inevitable end in 1993 when the cartel leaders were shot by Colombian military forces. The rapid and bloody rise and fall of the Medellín cartel shows the dangers of drug trafficking to everyday citizens and the difficulties of subduing successful drug cartels.

## Questions to consider

- How does the limiting of supply impact the flow of illicit drugs?
- Can other UN organizations be used to further contain the spread of drugs?
- Can a nation's policy impact how trafficking is controlled?
- Will eliminating corruption stop the flow of drugs completely?
- Have current pieces of legislation proven to be effective?

<sup>20</sup> "More Imprisonment Does Not Reduce State Drug Problems." *PEW*. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2018/03/more-imprisonment-does-not-reduce-state-drug-problems>.

<sup>21</sup> "The Colombian Cartels." *PBS*. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/business/inside/colombian.html>.