

## Some Comments on Drug-Fueled Violence in Latin America

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The underestimation of drug-fueled crime and violence is often as revealing as its exaggeration. The blood that drugs have spilled throughout Latin America has seeped so thoroughly into the region's states and societies that it cannot always be seen.

Drug capitalism and its attendant violence is vertical as well as horizontal: a nearly seamless sliding scale characterizes availability to Latin America's long tail of socio-economic sectors. Economic and political violence show drugs' horizontal reach across social classes, regions and countries, while other forms of violence reveal a vertical dimension of the phenomenon. The psycho-pharmacological link between narcotics and violence, for instance, helps account for the particular depravity of many drug-fueled crimes like public bus massacres and ritualized decapitations—psychic forms of violence that are ends in themselves (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

As with most consumer markets, youth and the middle class are the biggest growth sectors on the demand side of the drug trade. "Fusion" drugs tearing through schools around the region include *jarra loca*, a mixture of hard liquors like vodka with pharmaceuticals; *merla*, the combination of cocaine or crack with cannabis; and heroin doctored with the animal tranquilizer Xylazine, which supposedly protracts heroin's effects. The drugs are most destructive at the lowest income rung. Glue remains the cheapest and most physiologically damaging drug among the poor, along with *pasta básica*, made at cut-rate prices with a highly toxic and addictive recipe of caffeine, cocaine alkaloids, amphetamines and bicarbonate of soda.

Alcohol is a drug of choice for all social sectors, of course, from upscale *whiskerías* brothels on city outskirts to binge drinking in the inner cities. Although not new—warnings

about alcohol were a staple of eighteenth-century gazettes—social workers in many countries remark on its increasing tendency to be consumed in anti-social or aggressive contexts. When part of the recruitment for gangs and vigilante groups, alcohol and drugs directly incite violent acts such as initiation rites to a member's first killings. Anthropological studies of alcohol consumption (see Heath 1994) also note significantly different results of drinking's context: when part of social rituals, it leads to far less alcoholism than when done in isolation or through peer pressure.

Part of the difficulty of curbing drug-related crime and violence comes from the difficulty of quantifying it. Some of the most comprehensive statistical studies of regional crime—compiled by agencies like the Justice Studies Center of the Americas (CEJA) and the Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD)—find evidence for correlations between drug use and crime, but cannot definitively conclude how much criminal activity is caused directly by drug consumption itself. A great deal is also caused by the decay brought about by drugs (such as abandoned properties used as shooting galleries) or to externalities (such as other forms of violence used by traffickers—see Lederman, Loayza and Fajnzylber 2002). Uncertainty, as a result, characterizes nationally reported rates of drug crime.

According to crime reports compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, there has been a gradual but persistent upward trend in drug-related crimes over the past decade. With the exceptions of Peru and Paraguay, every country in Latin America has reported increases from 2000 through 2008. But definitions, methodology, and collection of drug-related statistics vary too greatly, and reports are provided too sporadically to create meaningful long-term regional comparisons.

The creation of violence observatories in several Latin American countries has been an important step toward an understanding of the links among drug abuse, certain kinds of crime, and violence. The Central American <[www.ocavi.com](http://www.ocavi.com)>, Honduran <[www.iudpas.org](http://www.iudpas.org)>, and Venezuelan <[www.observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve](http://www.observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve)> violence observatories do an invaluable job of specifying the role of drugs in violence and criminal justice, from fear of drug dealers to incarceration rates for possession. Their documentation of suicide, manslaughter, and other forms of violence also helps capture the broader but often unseen social destruction of drug abuse. But statistically replicable correlation tests of drugs with specific crimes are more limited unless carried out preemptively as part of the criminal justice process. Based on one such study in Chile, for example, that country's chief of police could verify that an "increase in drug use among criminals" is one of the "primary problems" of law enforcement, citing the fact that, in 2006, 73.3 percent of criminal detainees "had high levels of drugs in their urine" at the time of detention. "Of them, 86.9 percent had cocaine or *pasta básica*, 55.1 percent had marijuana, and 5.5 percent had opiates, methamphetamines, or amphetamines." (Blanco and Bernales, 5)

But the way crime is reported in most countries shows why most numbers are inherently indeterminate. Though countries such as El Salvador have unified institutional crime reporting, in many countries the numbers vary among prosecutors, police, morgue, and the judiciary. At the morgue in San Pedro Sula, an epicenter of gang activity in Honduras, medical technicians and police detectives complain about a lack of biological or toxicology equipment, which often prevents them from determining corpses' drug levels. With bodies strewn about—about six are brought in on an average night, some of them mutilated beyond recognition—not

much beyond external bullet wounds makes it into autopsy reports.

Then, there is significant drug use within the criminal justice system itself. In one of Honduras's rare police-wide drug tests, for example, in 2006 a fifth of the force tested positive. For street officers at the front line, giving in to drugs often has less to do with fear and corruption than with simple self-medication: many take the easily available drugs to ease the mind-numbing tasks, professional pressures, and physical endurance of their jobs. One police officer in Mexico City told me that his most violent abuse, as well as his most generous acts—which he considered to be equally high points of his work—happened when he was high. In Bolivia, the Support and Citizen Cooperation Patrol (PAC: *Patrulla de Auxilio y Cooperación Ciudadana*) was formed to improve handling of youth delinquency and drug addiction, but, often with the collusion of other units, has been accused of abusing those it is sent out to help. Security agency psychologists, among the most under-appreciated officials in Latin America, attribute most of these drug-related abuses, violent acts, and disciplinary infractions to work-induced mental disorder.

As has been well documented, the vast majority of drug arrests are for low-level couriers and dealers (see Youngers in this issue of *LASA Forum*). Nearly half of Argentina's federal court docket is filled with low-level drug charges, for example, almost all of which are less serious than unresolved cases of corruption (Rodríguez and Sued 2005). Caught up in the criminal justice system's slow grind, many of those detainees languish in prisons, where a combination of human indignity and state inefficiency create a welcoming environment for drug abuse and trafficking. In many prisons, the areas that tend to be less rife with drugs are the women's sections, even though most detainees have

been couriers. In the Barrio Inglés prison on Honduras's Caribbean coast, one women prisoner remarked to me resignedly that she had no idea who was taking care of her three pre-teen sons. In her predicament, as with countless others, drug abuse brings concepts of cultural, social, and economic violence into stark relief.

While most people recognize the personal impact of drug violence, blame is usually directed elsewhere. Residents in the largely middle-class San José District of Zapote in Costa Rica, for example, told me that their streets "were calm for decades" until intrusion by drug users from other neighborhoods. In Bolivia, officials across the board blame drug gangs from Peru. In Argentina, provincial officials criticize the national government for not staunching the flow of drugs into their jurisdictions. Other people, other neighborhoods, other provinces, and other countries: a nearly universal view of narcotics as an alien invasion encourages "zero tolerance" crackdowns and sweeps that, without adequate social services or judicial reforms, often only accelerate the cycle of violence.

Much of the blame and much of the violence is directed toward youth. Over 80,000 Latin American minors are killed violently each year, and murder is the second cause of death for the 15-to 25-year age group. All of the stresses of urban living, employment, income, and family that many studies highlight are only amplified for youth as they see those tensions stretch out into the future ahead of them (see Obot and Saxena 2005). In Nuevo Horizonte and other desolate fringes of Venezuela's Federal District, teenagers commend drugs for helping stave off both isolation and each other. Even those with watchful parents talk about getting either paranoid or gregarious, usually on *bazuko* (*pasta básica*), which, they say, is better than the usual state of boredom. At a 2009

community security meeting in Bogotá's low-income Ciudad Bolívar municipality, several teenagers discussed the appeal of easily available marijuana and other drugs to smooth out life's rough edges. Such consumption is often ignored when it is individual and self-destructive, but when done as a group it often becomes a point of obsession for police, who regularly estimate that nine out of ten gang members consume marijuana and cocaine. Such estimates are seldom tested, however, and there is little consensus of what constitutes a gang.

If drugs shatter Latin America's most vulnerable sectors through violence, then those are the pieces that need to be picked up first. Traditional laws and reactions seem only to disperse drugs through space and time: bicycle glue is easily bought downtown when it is banned in residential areas, for example, and people stock up early on alcohol when nighttime sales are limited. Often prodded by international organizations from above and grassroots groups from below, though, such official responses are giving way to more proactive and holistic ones. Many are based on prevention, such as identifying at-risk youth; citizen action, such as the creation of community justice fora; and smarter law enforcement, such as the mapping of drug-dealing "hot spots."

Coordination of criminal justice, social, and other services has been another priority. Many cities are placing social workers in schools, for example, and new drug treatment courts help monitor long-term treatment. In Argentina, provinces such as Buenos Aires and La Rioja combine school attendance, parent support, and employment training into single anti-drug youth programs. Most new initiatives also focus on the local level. In Chile, delegates of the police-backed Drug Use and Sales Dealing Prevention group confront neighborhood level drug use and sales.

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The Inter-American Development Bank is forming a regional anti-violence network to support and replicate promising local initiatives, while the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) of the Organization of American States funds the EU-LAC Drug Treatment City Partnership, which helps municipal governments in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean coordinate policy and experience. Following epidemiological public health models, other programs address violence as an epidemic through the work of on-site activists—such as ex-gang members—who become “violence interrupters,” intervening in violent turf battles and cycles of vengeance. Other anti-violence public-health initiatives include Salud y Vida en las Américas (SAVIA), which provides seed money for community, youth-oriented prevention programs in seven Latin American countries.

All such efforts face formidable challenges, such as getting criminal justice and social service agencies to really work together, or saving pilot programs from being swallowed up by dysfunctional state structures. But as they start to show concrete results, these programs are gradually acquiring institutional roots and external support. Adam Blackwell, CICAD’s Secretary for Multidimensional Security, told me in a phone interview this past February that one of the biggest successes of regional anti-drug efforts has been the “greater political acceptance that there needs to be a new approach.” Tapping into community energy and growing commitments, such new approaches are the best way to help pull citizens out of a drug stupor that has numbed them and their democracies.

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