

Mexico and the United States: Neighbors Confront Drug Trafficking

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Introduction

Bilateral cooperation between the United States and Mexico has become a hallmark of inter-American relations in recent years. The summit between the two countries' presidents in February this year exemplifies the ongoing efforts of both countries to address matters of mutual concern. From trade to drug trafficking and energy to economic development, there are many issues that are important to the governments of the U.S. and Mexico. As President Fox declared prior to the U.S.-Mexico summit, however, "the most pressing issue between [the U.S. and Mexico] is drug trafficking and drug consumption" (Sanchez, 2001).

Across the globe, nations such as the United States and Mexico have forged partnerships to address the problems associated with illegal drugs. The complexity of the worldwide drug market and the vast resources available to narcotic producers and traffickers requires afflicted countries to collaborate if a successful end to the campaign against drugs is to be achieved. There are, perhaps, no two bordering nations that are more immersed in the drug campaign than the U.S. and Mexico, and leaders in both countries realize the debilitating effects of drugs – the former as a principal consumer and the latter as a primary supplier and transporter. Though current trends indicate that the illicit drug market in the U.S. is as vibrant as ever, recent efforts produce hope that these trends may soon reverse.

In the U.S.-Mexico experience, there are relevant lessons for countries engaged in cooperative counternarcotics efforts. The primary lesson learned is that the illegal drug market has metastasized at the cost of thousands of lost lives and billions of dollars. A second lesson is that bilateral and multilateral efforts are key in the crusade against drugs. Drawing on these lessons, this article will describe the nature of drug trafficking from Mexico to the U.S., discuss recent initiatives to curb the drug flow, and identify promising strategies to combat the drug problem experienced by both countries. Drug Trafficking between Mexico and the United States

Nature of Mexican drug trafficking

The costs that the illegal drug trade imposes on the United States have been estimated at a staggering \$70 billion each year (S. 89, 2001). Mexican drug traffickers are the primary transporters of the major narcotics imported into the U.S. The 2,000 mile shared border between Mexico and the U.S. is the entry point for a large percentage of these drugs. During FY 2000, 89 million automobiles, 4.5 million trucks, and 293 million people entered the U.S. from Mexico. Each of these modes of transportation have been used by drug traffickers to ship their goods across the border. For example, a tractor-trailer transporting legitimate cargo may also contain hidden bales of marijuana; a legal immigrant might carry concealed parcels of heroin through a border checkpoint; or a passenger car may contain bags of cocaine in a tire or other secret compartments. In addition, traffickers have smuggled drugs into the U.S. on aircraft, high-speed "go-fast" boats, and cargo ships. Whatever the method, traffickers have employed numerous and diverse conventions to avoid detection of transported drugs (see *National Drug Control Strategy* [2000] for related information).

Mexican traffickers have been successful in their efforts. Joseph Keefe (2000) of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), one of the principal drug enforcement agencies in the U.S., reported that approximately half of the cocaine available in the U.S. enters the country along the U.S.-Mexico border. Keefe also noted that the majority of marijuana and a significant portion of heroin consumed in the U.S. emanates from Mexico. Additionally, he indicated that Mexican drug organizations have established methamphetamine laboratories that have been estimated to produce 85 percent of the methamphetamine available in the U.S. Overall, Mexican drug traffickers have become a significant supply source for most of the major drugs consumed in the United States.

History of drug trafficking from Mexico

In the past, drug organizations in Mexico were predominately involved in cultivating marijuana and opium – a precursor to heroin. Over the past decade, however, Mexican drug organizations secured a prominent position in the cocaine market that was formerly dominated by Colombian drug cartels, and opened the doors for Mexican groups to dominate the drug trafficking market. In the late 1980s, Mexican traffickers were middlemen for the Colombian cartels. Traffickers would receive shipments of cocaine in northern Mexico, smuggle the drugs across the border, and leave stashes in specified locations where Colombian distributors would retrieve the cocaine and transport it to destinations across the U.S. In 1989, traffickers who were annoyed at delinquent service payments from Colombian suppliers retained shipments of cocaine in extortion until payments were made.

During the same year, in a stroke of good fortune for U.S. law enforcement, a massive stockpile of these shipments amounting to over forty thousand pounds of cocaine was discovered in an industrial warehouse in the vicinity of Los Angeles, California. This pivotal event forced the hand of the Colombian drug barons and led to a business arrangement that presently gives the Mexican traffickers as much as half of all the cocaine that they transport.

The shifting role of Mexican drug trafficking groups in the U.S. from subcontracted transporters of cocaine to urban-based distributors occurred somewhat rapidly in the early 1990s. Prior to this transformation, the distribution of drugs in the U.S. resembled a cottage industry, with loosely organized "mom and pop" distribution franchises in urban enclaves with large Mexican populations from Los Angeles to Chicago. When the Colombian cartels were toppled after significant law enforcement efforts in 1995 and 1996, the void was soon filled by Mexican traffickers who were eager to capitalize on the potential drug profits. Within a few short years, Mexican traffickers emerged as the primary couriers of cocaine for the robust U.S. drug market.

Additionally, Mexican drug organizations have infiltrated the expanding methamphetamine market. A DEA report (2001) noted that narcotics groups from Mexico now dominate this market in the U.S., which formerly was run exclusively by American based gangs and illicit trafficking groups. Methamphetamine, unlike other drugs distributed by Mexican traffickers, is produced in simple laboratories with readily-available precursor chemicals. Mexican drug organizations, the DEA report continues, have established labs throughout Mexico and California, in addition to super-labs that are able to produce hundreds of pounds of methamphetamine in a week. Furthermore, the report revealed, "it is now not uncommon to find hundreds of major methamphetamine traffickers from Mexico . . . established in Boise, Des Moines, and Omaha, and other cities in America's heartland, where there has been an explosion of methamphetamine use."

Characteristics of Mexican drug trafficking groups

Organizational structure

Mexican traffickers carry out their craft with proven ability and professionalism. The most prominent trafficking organizations control the drug trade across broad tracts of northern Mexico surrounding Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and along the northeastern Gulf. These Mexico-based trafficking groups include the Juarez cartel, the Arellano-Felix Brothers organization, the Caro-Quintero organization, and the Amezcua-Contreras organization. A major trafficking group might contain 200 or more members in the Mexico base, with hundreds of additional members throughout the organization's network. Although these groups operate independently, they have created a loose partnership called the *Federation*, in order to establish a greater degree of security and profitability. A recent estimate suggests the annual income accrued by these organizations is in the tens of billions of dollars. In comparison, the entire country of Mexico had an estimated nominal GDP of \$557 billion last year.

Clearly, there are huge financial incentives for drug organizations in Mexico to protect and maintain their trade. As a consequence, they have been successful at corrupting or killing some of the law enforcement officers and public officials who might otherwise have impeded their operations. Under this canopy, trafficking groups have developed a well-structured network of organizations that exhibits centralized decision processes, secure command and control centers, compartmentalization, and integrated work roles. The impenetrability of these organizations by law enforcement is clear – while the drug lords have been identified and are known to virtually all of the major law enforcement departments throughout the U.S., they continue to avoid arrest and extradition (Ledwith, 2000).

With a well-established base in Mexico, drug organizations have expanded their operations in the U.S. Traditionally, traffickers operated primarily along the West Coast. However, they have now penetrated major cities on both coasts and in the mid-West. Traffickers typically transport drug shipments to various urban venues across the U.S. and turn the shipments over to entrenched Dominican and Colombian distribution networks. These bulk transactions often elude the surveillance of law enforcement officers, as transfers are carefully choreographed to avoid detection. Exchanges might take several days, and may be as uncomplicated as the switching of drivers between two vehicles – one containing drugs and the other containing money. To remain discrete, traffickers often blend into an ethnic community and disguise themselves against the backdrop of day-to-day urban commerce.

In the interest of advancing their business, traffickers will frequently establish partnerships with legitimate cargo transporters and conceal their drugs amidst legal goods. Traffickers also utilize advanced technologies in their operations – often receiving encrypted messages from their superiors via fax, phone, computer, or pager (Ledwith, 2000). Mexican traffickers employ professionals such as lawyers and accountants in their illicit operations, and rank high in terms of their overall professionalism in comparison to other organized crime groups in the U.S.

Illicit activities

While other organized crime groups based in the United States are involved in a variety of illicit activities, Mexican trafficking organizations work almost exclusively in the drug market. They are not diversified in terms of other illegal trades, and any other activities that they engage in are primarily to further the business of trafficking. A recent survey of transnational organized crime in the U.S. for the United Nations focused on the characteristics and operations of several groups – La Cosa Nostra, Russians, Asian gangs, and Mexican drug organizations (see report briefs for LCN, Russians, and Asian gangs at: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/international/un_activities.html). Of these groups, only the Mexican drug organizations are restricted to a principle trade. The other groups' activities are opportunity-driven. In other words, they engage in whatever opportune illicit venture exists at a given time and place. For example, the Wah Ching – an Asian organized crime ring based in California – have been linked to a plethora of illicit activities including counterfeiting, forgery, bank fraud, insurance scams, money laundering, armed robbery, home invasions, vehicle theft and trafficking, trafficking in women, prostitution, drug trafficking, kidnaping, extortion, and software piracy, to name a few.

In contrast, the same survey found that the criminal activities of Mexican drug organizations in the U.S. were mainly limited to drug trafficking and

manufacturing, money laundering, and robbery. These and other activities that Mexican drug organizations might engage in are almost exclusively done to support or sustain their trafficking operations. The survey also found that drug trafficking and money laundering were the primary offenses by Mexican traffickers who were arrested and prosecuted in the U.S. over the past three years.

Violence

Drug organizations operate with great audacity and disregard for life and law in Mexico. The breadth and severity of criminal activities by the same trafficking organizations is significantly greater in Mexico than in the U.S., and are often accompanied by more violence. A report by a U.S. Government interagency working group published in December 2000 reveals the degree of violence exhibited by Mexican criminal organizations. The report indicated:

Drug violence has been particularly noxious – from the 1993 killing of the Archbishop in Guadalajara, gunned down in crossfire between rival drug-trafficking groups, to killings of law enforcement officers, to small-scale massacres in vendettas by one drug trafficking or criminal group against another (*International Crime Threat Assessment*, 2000).

A recent high-profile example of this violence is the murder of Tijuana's chief of police last year, which is believed to have been the consequence of a turf-battle between two feuding drug cartels. Ironically, the chief was assassinated just two days after the President of Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo, visited Tijuana to rally against organized crime and its associated violence.

More recently, in February 2001, a massacre in a small village in the state of Sinaloa – infamously known as the birthplace of Mexican drug trafficking – left 12 men and boys dead. The killings are suspected to be the work of a drug gang fighting over territory in a state that has over 200 drug gangs and which has witnessed more than 150 murders in a period of less than three months, "many of [which were] mob-style assassinations," the *Washington Post* reported (Jordan, 2001).

The violence exhibited by drug organizations in Mexico was confirmed in the previously-mentioned survey on transnational organized crime. Respondents to the survey indicated that Mexican drug trafficking groups engage in a significant degree of violence (ranked at a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10) in the areas of making use of violence generally, engaging in violent behavior within the group (i.e., discipline, power struggles, etc.), and using violence against other crime groups to settle disputes or compete for territory or markets. Mexican drug organizations also use violence as a means to remove officials who hinder their business. South of the U.S.-Mexico border, the violence used to achieve these objectives has been characterized as brazen and extreme, particularly among the chief drug trafficking organizations and in cities along the northern border including Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez.

Power to corrupt

The enormous wealth that Mexican drug organizations have accrued through their operations have provided them with means to corrupt. The organized crime survey revealed that Mexican traffickers have a significant ability to influence others with money. There are numerous incidents of corruption reported among public and law enforcement officials in Mexico. Drug corruption is not limited, however, to the south side of the U.S.-Mexico border. Officials in the U.S. have also been charged with participating in the illicit drug market. Drug-related convictions against U.S. law enforcement officials in the past have pertained to such activities as "waiving drug-laden vehicles through Ports of Entry in exchange for money, coordinating the movement of drugs across the border, using their official positions to transport drugs past checkpoints without being suspected, and disclosing drug intelligence information" (McCraw, 2000). In the state of Arizona recently, a task force led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation resulted in the conviction of fifteen law enforcement officers and a judge on drug corruption charges (McCraw, 2000).

Corruption on both sides of the border has greatly facilitated the growth and spread of Mexican drug trafficking groups in the United States and has confounded law enforcement efforts to obstruct them. Official corruption is systemic south of the border and opportunistic on the American side, flaring up locally through a profiteering border guard or customs inspector at the major border ports of entry. In the past, malfeasant American agents have succumbed to massive bribes, taking as much as fifty thousand dollars to ignore a particular car or truck.

The risk of interdiction is greatly reduced once the trafficker has successfully entered the United States, so money and exploitation is concentrated where the risk is greatest - the border. Each corrupt American official adds immeasurably to the aggregate ability of the Mexican drug trafficking groups to set up shop in distant cities throughout the United States.

Though isolated incidents of corruption have occurred in the U.S., the degree of corruption is not equivalent to that found in Mexico. One reason is the deterrence to corrupt created by the decentralized organizational structure of the law enforcement system in the U.S. For example, a drug trafficker smuggling a shipment of cocaine into the U.S. would have to bribe each of the many police departments whose venues he must cross to deliver his shipment to its final destination. In contrast, a drug organization transporting a shipment of drugs through Mexico to the border finds it somewhat easier to solicit the protective services of corrupt military or police forces, and is thereby able to move massive amounts of drugs through a particular region.

The power of Mexico's drug organizations to corrupt was recently manifest in the prison escape of drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman in January 2001. Guzman allegedly bought his way out of prison by offering bribes to prison guards, who facilitated his escape. In response, Mexican officials ordered the arrest of numerous prison personnel. Though this is a single incident, it portrays the problem of corruption with which Mexico is presently coping.

Penetration of the U.S. drug market

Mexican traffickers traditionally operate more discretely in the United States than in Mexico, as acts of violence draw undue attention to their activities. In the U.S., trafficking groups exist in the shadows and tend not to show rivalrous displays of territoriality or intragroup violence as they do in Mexico. Rather, Mexican drug traffickers in the U.S. have been found to collaborate with what otherwise might be rival groups, including Colombian and Dominican drug traffickers, La Cosa Nostra, and other criminal organizations. In some instances, these groups have helped Mexican drug traffickers also infiltrate the legitimate economy of the U.S. Major hub cities for trafficking groups include Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, and Houston. With penetration into the Canadian drug market as well, Mexican traffickers have established a presence throughout much of North America.

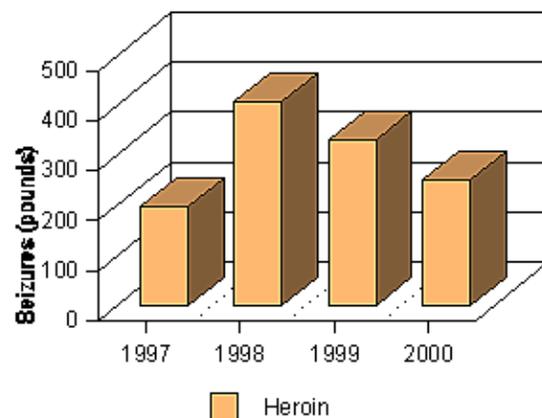
In the mid-1980s, an upsurge in federal drug enforcement pressures in south Florida upon Colombian cocaine importation routes and distribution networks caused the South American cocaine cartels to seek other major ports of call. As a result, massive amounts of cocaine began to be moved across the Southwest Border where it had been smuggled into the U.S. in lesser quantities for over a decade.

For the famous smuggling families of northern Mexico, retooling their networks to handle the increased flow of cocaine was a relatively easy matter. *Plazas*, a hierarchal system of payoffs and kickbacks to government officials for the license to commit crime (Poppa, 1990), were in place all along the border. Regional police and military commandants from Tijuana to Matamoros established mutually profitable relationships with particular drug traffickers or families. Chosen traffickers became the *plaza holders*. Some plaza holders have names familiar to those with academic or enforcement interests in Mexican drug trafficking – Amado Carrillo-Fuentes, Jesus Amezcua-Contreras, Garcia Abrego, and Ramon Arrellano-Felix are the most recognized in this notorious group. Plaza holders were crucial to the stability and success of the Mexican drug trade and acted as a nexus between border smuggling activity and corrupt Mexican officials.

With this clandestine network in place, traffickers were well-situated to infiltrate the U.S. market with their drugs. A prominent example of the penetration of the U.S. drug market by these trafficking groups is the former cocaine smuggling enterprise of Rafael Munoz Talavera. For almost twenty years, Munoz ran the plaza in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, one of the busiest official ports of entry along the Southwest Border. In 1988, Munoz brokered an agreement with the Medellin and Cali cartels of Colombia to transport a half million kilos of cocaine to Los Angeles. Over an eighteen-month period, Munoz smuggled a quarter million kilos of Colombian cocaine across the border into El Paso, Texas, assisted by his two brothers and brother-in-law, Rafael Aguilar, who was a former commandant with the *Direccion Federal de Seguridad* – Mexico's internal security police force. A half dozen or more cars crossed daily, Monday through Friday, each with at least two hundred kilos stashed in their trunks.

Munoz's clan did not lose a single parcel of cocaine during hundreds of border crossings. Their unblemished smuggling record was the result of corruption, however, not luck. According to witness testimony in the Drug Enforcement Administration's investigation of the Juarez cartel, Munoz had at least two to three American border agents on the payroll (DEA, 1992).

Figure A: Heroin Seizures Along U.S.-Mexico Border



Initiatives to Combat Drug Trafficking

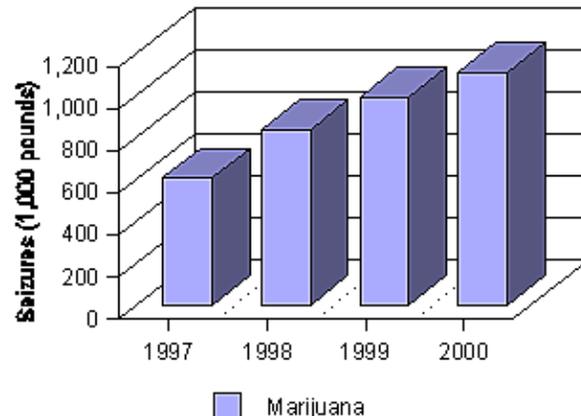
Efforts by the United States

The U.S. response to drug trafficking along the Southwest border has involved collaborative efforts among five main federal departments – the Departments of Justice, Defense, State, Treasury, and Transportation – and numerous other government agencies. Areas of drug-control have included "drug interdiction, anti-money laundering, drug and immigration enforcement, prosecutions, counter-drug support, and counter-drug cooperation with Mexico" (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000). The U.S. Government spent approximately \$1.5 billion on international drug control efforts during Fiscal Year 2000 (U.S. Department of State, 2000).

With respect to drug control generally, the U.S. allocated \$18.5 billion in FY 2000 to various priorities outlined in the *National Drug Control Budget*. This budget funds a wide spectrum of programs from treating addicts to extraditing kingpins. Particularly, allocations fund drug control efforts such as law enforcement training, anti-drug media campaigns, treatment and prevention research, substance abuse programs, drug courts, and drug-interdiction technologies.

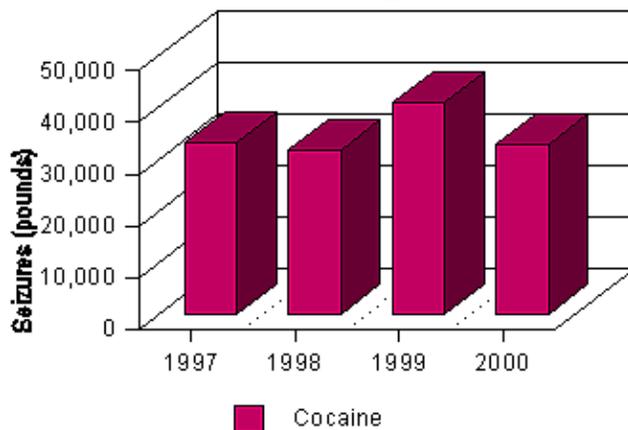
Numerous departments and agencies through all layers of government are the recipients of anti-drug funding to pursue these diverse objectives. Many successes have been recorded as a result of these initiatives. U.S. Customs, for example, routinely intercepts significant quantities of illicit drugs during their operations. In February 2001, a single seizure at a border check-point in San Diego netted nearly 9,000 pounds of marijuana that was concealed in a truckload of papayas (Bond, 2001). As Figures A, B, and C reveal, the amount of drugs seized along the U.S.-Mexico border has been substantial over the past four years (U.S. Customs, 2001).

Figure B: Marijuana Seizures Along U.S.-Mexico Border



Often there is jurisdictional overlap between competing

Figure C: Cocaine Seizures Along U.S.-Mexico Border



departments and agencies in the U.S. that are involved in counternarcotics activities. Recent initiatives, however, have brought these offices together to create a strategic and collaborative response to the drug problems facing America. Some of these strategic alliances involve schools working with local law enforcement officers to educate children about the dangers of using drugs. Other partnerships entail counterintelligence cooperation between departments to eradicate drug sources. Whatever the organization or community group involved, they are a viable network of anti-drug interests working together to reverse the drug abuse trend in the United States.

The Drug Enforcement Administration is a principal component of one of these networks that target illicit drug producers and distributors. Over half of the major operations coordinated by the DEA between 1997 and 2000 focused on organizations that traffic drugs from or through Mexico to the U.S. These operations have hampered the efforts of traffickers and, in some cases, have entirely dismantled major drug rings. Statistics from some of these operations (DEA, 2001) are indicated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Drug Enforcement Administration Major Operations Targeting Mexican Drug Organizations

Operation	Date concluded	Drug(s) targeted	Amount of drugs seized	Currency seized	Number of persons arrested
Operation Tar Pit	March 2000	Black tar heroin	41 pounds	not reported	Approx. 200
Operation Impunity	September 1999	Cocaine Marijuana	12,434 kg 6,177 pounds	\$19 million	123
Operation Limelight	August 1997	Cocaine Marijuana	4,000 kg 11,000 pounds	\$7 million	48
Operation Reciprocity	August 1997	Cocaine Marijuana	7.4 tons 2,700 pounds	\$11 million	40
Operation META	December 1997	Methamphetamine Cocaine Marijuana	133 pounds 1,100 kg 1,765 pounds	not reported	121

A recent successful operation, known as Operation Impunity, targeted the powerful Amado Carrillo-Fuentes Organization based in Juarez, Mexico. Operation Impunity was the offspring of two other domestic drug trafficking investigations, Operations Limelight and Reciprocity, both of which targeted independent distribution cells of the AFCO in Los Angeles and New York, respectively. Operation Reciprocity stands as a prime example of a successful federal and state partnership in developing a long term strategy to attack international drug trafficking organizations operating in the United States.

Operation Reciprocity began in 1996 in the aftermath of two highway drug interdiction seizures of marijuana and currency by the Texas Department of Public Safety. As a result of these seizures, aggressive DEA investigation led to wiretaps in Houston and New York that eventually led to the dismantling of import and distribution establishments in these locales, in addition to an overland transportation network based in Michigan.

After Operation Reciprocity, DEA case agents who were working on the Operation Impunity investigation sought the assistance of the New Jersey State Police to interdict New York bound shipments of cocaine dispatched by the ACFO. Since this collaboration began, Federal efforts to combat international drug trafficking from Mexico have continued to be strongly supported by highway drug interdiction programs nationwide. Participants in these programs include state troopers and highway patrol officers who are trained by the DEA's El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Drug Interdiction Assistance Program (DIAP). As was manifest in Operation Reciprocity and numerous other investigations, seizures of bulk shipments of drugs on highways produces invaluable information for investigations aimed at major drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia.

Highway drug interdiction as a critical support to federal drug enforcement has not existed without controversy, however. In recent years, it has come under unrelenting criticism from civil libertarian and political action groups condemning the apparent discriminatory treatment of minorities (Fuentes &

Guidetti, 2000). Recognizing that using race to conduct highway drug interdiction is both indefensible and unconstitutional, consensus among federal drug enforcement agencies is needed to preserve crucial programs that thwart the encroachment of Mexican drug cartels into the U.S.

Efforts by Mexico

Shortly into his administration, President Vicente Fox declared, "I am confirming an all-out war on pernicious criminal mafias"(Walker, 2001). So far, he has witnessed a respectable degree of success – approximately two thousand drug trafficking arrests have occurred during the first three months of his presidency (Jordan, 2001). Likewise, 2000 was a banner year for Mexico in terms of anti-drug initiatives. Between 1999 and 2000, the U.S. Department of State (2001) indicated that law enforcement and military officials in Mexico reported an increase in seizures and destruction of marijuana (37 percent increase), heroin (17 percent increase), and methamphetamine (78 percent increase), although there was a 31 percent decrease in seizures and destruction of cocaine. Additionally, in response to increased domestic drug consumption, the Government of Mexico appointed a drug czar in June 2000 to oversee efforts to reduce demand (DOS, 2001).

The U.S. and Mexico have recently developed a strong partnership, which has resulted in several significant accomplishments in the fight against drugs. In January 2000, for instance, a cooperative effort between the Mexican Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard resulted in the seizure of approximately 2.25 metric tons of cocaine from a fishing boat off of Mexico's coast (Foley, 2000). The Government of Mexico has also provided valuable support in counternarcotics operations such as Operation Impunity. A recent cooperative investigation between the FBI and Mexican officials brought about a lengthy indictment against Vicente Carrillo-Fuentes, the reputed leader of the powerful Carrillo-Fuentes Organization. The investigation, called Operation Plaza Sweep, entailed the documentation of seventeen murders and disclosed the location of burial sites of CFO victims (McCraw, 2000).

In addition to counternarcotics efforts, anti-corruption is also a declared priority for the new administration in Mexico. A task force called the Interdepartmental Commission for Transparency and the Fight against Corruption has been created and will meet regularly to discuss problems associated with corruption in Mexico's government and identify solutions for ridding agencies of corrupt practices. These and other initiatives by the Government of Mexico reveal the desire by authorities to bring down the drug cartels in their country.

Promising Strategies for the Future

Although there have been significant investments by governments on both sides of the border, drugs continue to flow into the U.S. in massive quantities. A former head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation announced that, according to his commission on federal law enforcement, anti-drug initiatives have not yet had a significant impact. He declared, "despite a record number of seizures and a flood of legislation, the Commission is not aware of any evidence that the flow of narcotics into the United States has been reduced" (Lynch, 2001). The U.S. General Accounting Office confirmed this in a 1998 report on Mexican drug trafficking and in a follow-up report in 1999. GAO (1998) revealed, "despite U.S. and Mexican counternarcotics efforts, the flow of illegal drugs into the United States from Mexico has not significantly diminished." Leaders of both countries remain optimistic, however, that success is in sight. Bilateral agreements recently made by Mexico and the U.S. yield promise, and represent increased desire on both sides of the border to overcome the drug problem.

The following strategies have been recommended for addressing the issue of drug trafficking between the U.S. and Mexico.

Improved coordination among U.S. agencies

Over fifty U.S. agencies have been linked to counternarcotics efforts (Murphy, Davis, Liston, Thaler, & Webb, 2000). Administering and coordinating the efforts of these numerous and independent groups is a monumental task. Although the Office of National Drug Control Policy was established to direct drug programs and centralize counternarcotics initiatives, agencies often work independently. The GAO listed several shortcomings of drug control efforts by U.S. agencies, including "problems involving competing priorities, interagency rivalries, lack of operational coordination, inadequate staffing of joint interagency task forces, and lack of oversight" (GAO, 1998). In order to ensure an effective, unilateral policy toward Mexico and drug control, it is recommended that units in U.S. agencies involved in anti-drug initiatives abandon parochial interests and make greater efforts to collaborate with their counterparts in other agencies.

Institution-building in Mexico

Effective institutions are a critical component of successful anti-drug campaigns. Examining drug markets in the context of government institutional reform is one approach to resolving drug-related issues. Frank Cilluffo (2000) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded:

Part of the solution is strengthening the domestic legal institutions and social organizations in the afflicted countries . . . Without strong judicial systems, effective law enforcement and prosecution of criminals and terrorists is impossible. Without strong social organizations that promote democracy and combat corruption, effective change is impossible.

The law enforcement system in Mexico is particularly in need of strengthening. The inadequate salaries of law enforcement officers and public officials in contrast to the enormous assets available to Mexico's drug organizations creates an enticing environment for corruption among police officers and officials alike.

Gomez-Cespedes (1999) of the Centre for International Crime Prevention illuminates another cause of Mexico's police problem. She reveals:

In practice, Mexican police forces were created not to protect but to control the population, and they were granted permission to repress, steal, and extort bribes in exchange for loyalty to whoever was in authority. Now, . . . the police are being forced to reconsider their previous operations and adjust to more community-oriented policing.

Although police units in Mexico have a reputation for corrupt and unethical practices, recent reform initiatives have targeted improving the integrity and effectiveness of law enforcement. A new federal unit called the Federal Prevention Police (PFP) was implemented in 1999 and is responsible for enforcing against "terrorism, smuggling, kidnapping, arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and protection of federal installations such as airports, ports, highways, and borders" (DOS, 2001). With new organizations such as this in place, there is hope that institutional reform in Mexico will bring improved results in the drug campaign.

Sustained bilateral and multilateral cooperation

Cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico in the anti-drug campaign has been manifested in various forms, including law enforcement training, cooperative investigations and military aid. A U.S. Department of State report (2001) indicated that twelve fugitives were extradited by Mexico to the U. S. during 2000 with 51 more in custody awaiting extradition; more than 500 judges from Mexico took part in conferences and various training programs sponsored by the U.S. over the past three years, and; approximately 4,000 students in Mexico completed law enforcement-related courses sponsored by the U.S. Each of these cooperative ventures reveals an increase in the degree of U.S.-Mexico collaboration in law enforcement matters.

A central component of bilateral counternarcotics cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico is the High Level Contact Group for Drug Control, or HLCCG. This entity was created in 1996 to facilitate collaboration between authorities in the U.S. and Mexico in the anti-drug campaign. The HLCCG brings together counterparts from both countries to discuss the many aspects of the illicit drug market and formulate an effective response. In a recent meeting in Washington, D.C., HLCCG participants reviewed progress in achieving performance goals outlined in the strategy, including progress in areas such as demand reduction, firearms tracing, training, and precursor chemical control (*Daily Washington File*, 1999). Cooperative ventures like the HLCCG are an important aspect of drug initiatives in that they raise awareness among key figures and facilitate communication between counterparts. The *U.S.-Mexico Binational Drug Strategy* is one of the acclaimed products of this venture.

Mexico's former Secretary of Foreign Relations emphasized the importance of maintaining mutual respect for the legal authority of both countries in bilateral cooperative efforts. She proposed:

Mexico and the United States share the will to launch a frontal attack on both drug trafficking and drug traffickers. We must therefore join forces to combat them effectively, working shoulder to shoulder, and extolling the virtues of a cooperation agreed upon and regulated by our respective legal frameworks (Macias, 2000).

To be sure, U.S. intervention in Mexico's affairs with regard to drug trafficking have not been without controversy. It would appear that in order to assure greater success in the drug war, the relevant agencies in both countries must continue to work together with mutual respect and understanding.

Demand reduction

At least 14.8 million Americans – roughly 5% of the U.S. population – reported using drugs in 1999 (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2000). Additionally, during the same year Americans spent approximately \$63.2 billion on drugs overall (ONDCP, 2000), implying that each drug user in the U.S. spent over \$4,200 on drugs on average in 1999. Clearly, there is a significant demand for drugs in the U.S.

A good portion of the U.S. drug intervention effort has focused on reducing supply. Recent initiatives, however, have acknowledged the importance of demand-reduction efforts as well. Legislation introduced so far in 2001 in the U.S. Congress proposes funding for various demand-oriented initiatives including drug treatment programs, prevention initiatives, and treatment research projects. Bills with titles such as "Drug-Free America Act of 2001," "Drug Abuse Education, Prevention, and Treatment Act of 2001," and "Drug Abuse Treatment on Demand Assistance Act" reflect an increased emphasis on treatment interventions. Through this and similar legislation, the U.S. Government is establishing a network of programs, offices, and other entities to combat the drug consumption problem in America.

It is incumbent upon the U.S. and similar drug-consuming countries to engage themselves in the battle against drugs on both fronts – demand reduction and supply eradication – with commensurate resources and concern. Fuentes and Kelly (1999) concluded, "[the tendency] to promote . . . law enforcement sting operations, raids, and investigations while treatment facilities and anti-drug use campaigns in American cities remain comparatively underfunded is simply poor policy." And, indeed, evidence suggests that U.S. drug enforcement efforts will be futile unless demand reduction initiatives are an integral part of the national strategy.

Conclusion

With respect to the illegal drug problem throughout the world, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently declared, "If the international community is to deserve its name, it must respond to this challenge" (Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, 2000). The U.S.-Mexico bilateral response to the illicit drug market affecting both countries has been commendable, though the need for improvement is clear. Leaders in both countries have acknowledged that measures to reduce demand are a critical component of their drug strategies. They also recognize the importance of open, respectful cooperation in combating the criminal syndicates that produce and transport narcotics. Mexico and the U.S. are both making progress in many areas, albeit sometimes limited. It is hoped that both will continue to benefit through cooperative initiatives that were established in recent years. The drug epidemic affects an increasing number of communities around the world. Reversing this trend will require sustained,

collaborative efforts across borders in every hemisphere. To this end, the U.S.-Mexico bilateral campaign against drugs perseveres.

Opinions or points of view expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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